

Can flexible working practices improve productivity and long term value?

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When I think of how successful businesses can remain relevant, profitable, and productive over the long term, I use the following simple equation:

Customer satisfaction + Staff engagement = Strong and sustainable profits

Any business that delivers on the first two criteria inevitably generates strong profits that benefit all their stakeholders. Too often though, all the focus is on the profit element of the equation. Yes, that may deliver short term results, but in the medium term if businesses don't adequately focus on their customers and staff, they will probably not survive into the long term.

The focus of this article is on the staffing part of the equation and the positive effect that delivering a flexible work environment can have.

Flexible working is defined as working arrangements that allow employees to vary the amount, timing, or location of their work, usually to the mutual benefit of both the individual and organisation. Specifically, this can cover a wide range of working arrangements, including part-time working, job-sharing, flexitime, compressed and annualised hours, term-time-only working, working from home and mobile working.

Many businesses do offer some forms of informal flexibility without necessarily realising that it counts as a form of flexible working. As a result, they don't gain the full potential of investing in flexible working practices in a strategic way.

I remember in my youth, when I had a summer job in a local factory, having to clock in at 9am and then clock out at 5pm in order to ensure that at the end of the week my brown paper pay packet had the right amount of £ sterling in it. If I ever forgot to push my card into the slot next to the clock, then I knew my pay would be reduced for the period not recorded.

Even if you go back to just pre-Covid, many businesses and in particular offices, would insist on a 9 to 5 working day with some leaders being very uncomfortable with the working from home concept. The concern expressed was always 'how do you know that they're not just walking the dog or pottering about in the garden...'

The lack of trust may have been justified in some instances, but any leader who has to rely on 9 to 5 rule to be sure their team is productive is a poor leader. Being in the office 9 to 5 does not automatically deliver productivity, and it has the negative impact of clearly indicating that the staff can not be trusted. How can you build an engaged workforce if people aren't trusted?

Whilst there had been some adoption of flexible working, it was the Covid-19 restrictions that forced significant changes in those businesses that had no choice but to work from home.

In some ways this was a huge flexible working experiment where not only did we test our technological capacity to work from home but also our productive capacity. Leaders were forced to trust their teams in terms of what they were doing during the day and rely on the output that was being delivered.

A parent with childcare responsibilities had the flexibility to better shape their working day to balance home life with work life and yes in most instances this meant they became more productive not less. Leaders had to focus more on output, rather than perceived inputs which previously had been viewed purely through the lens of seeing the staff at their work desk in the office.

So, for me flexibility in this context means having the ability to work from home when it suits both business and employee whilst also having access to shared meeting space when creative and collaborative work are required. The balance between the two is determined by what is most effective in delivering the desired outputs and as a result the greater trust placed in the individual generates much higher satisfaction and engagement levels. This will always be the biggest driver of productivity.

Flexibility of hours worked can also help the business during busy and quiet periods as well as the individual member of staff and their personal circumstances. Schemes such as the ability to buy and sell holidays can be very well received by most staff.

We are starting to see increased opportunity for job sharing. Where the nature of the work allows this is a highly successful way to recruit in a very competitive employment market and experience shows that in most cases it can deliver greater productivity. A 4-day working week is being trialled in various companies in the UK and early results suggest that the output is equal to what was being achieved in 5 days.

Forbes magazine said “People are not going to return to work the way they have in the past, flexibility is the new norm and expectation from employees—we’re going to see this trend continue in the months ahead.”

The evidence supports this. Research from CareerBuilder revealed that jobs allowing employees to work remotely received seven times more applications. [According to a study](#) conducted by Manpower Group Solutions, nearly 40% of global candidates report that workplace flexibility is among the top three factors they consider.

Flexible work helps attract top talent, but it also makes employees more productive. In the [Gartner 2021 Digital Worker Experience Survey](#), 43% of respondents said that flexible working hours helped them achieve more productivity, and 30% of those surveyed said that less or no time commuting allowed them to be more productive.

Striking the right balance is always key but the Covid-19 restrictions have clearly taught us that workforce flexibility delivers greater staff engagement and in turn greater productivity. In my view, ‘9 to 5’ is now just a great song by Dolly Parton and no longer an effective working practice.

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