Flexitime
A guide to good practice

A definition of flexitime

Formal flexitime schemes divide the day into core times and flexible times. The flexible periods allow employees some freedom to vary their starting and finishing time, while they are expected to be at work in the nominated core periods. Hours are recorded, and over the course of a set accounting period (usually four weeks) individuals must roughly balance their actual hours worked with their total contracted hours. Schemes usually allow a small number of credit or debit hours to be carried over into the next accounting period. In most cases, these credit hours may be converted into extra leave.

(IDS Study 725 Flexitime Schemes; IDS, 2002)

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Foreword

The Flexible Employment Options (FEO) Project has over the last few years been investigating the impact of introducing flexible working arrangements in the Higher Education sector. This was achieved through piloting different ways of working at four higher education institutions (HEIs) - the University of Birmingham, Canterbury Christ Church University College, De Montfort University and Staffordshire University. Employees across a variety of departments were offered a range of flexible working options during 2002/3, and the effects were monitored and evaluated. A summary project report was distributed to all HEIs in England in December 2003, and the results were disseminated at a series of national events. Feedback from these events indicated that HR and other staff would like more information on how specific flexible options can be implemented effectively, and case studies of current use.

This guide has been written to provide support and information for managers within the HE sector who are considering introducing flexitime, formalizing informal flexible hours arrangements, or extending existing traditional formal schemes. The background research for this guide can be found in 'Flexitime in Higher Education - an FEO Project report'.

Other guides available are:

Job share

Homeworking

For more information visit **www.staffs.ac.uk/feo**

Background

Why flexitime?

Flexitime is one of the most usual ways of allowing employees to vary the standard 9-5 office day. A feature of this type of flexible working is that there are some parts that are common agreement and some that can be individually adapted.   It is very popular and highly valued by those who use it, and once employees have worked flexitime they would not go back to set hours, and it is one of the benefits potential applicants look for from a new employer. Its popularity stems from the control it gives individual employees to vary their own hours on a daily basis according to personal need. It is the option most requested by employees, and although is particularly useful for carers is in fact highly valued by all staff.

The concept was first introduced by a manufacturing company in Germany in the late 1960s. Employees at the large out of town company headquarters were queuing to clock on and off, and struggling with traffic congestion. Inevitably some people were leaving early to beat the queues. By giving people a range of times to arrive and depart, most of these problems were alleviated. The idea spread quickly and by the late 1970's "flexitime" could be found all over Europe, not only in the private sector but in local government and other public services too. In the last 20 years this rate of growth has slowed as other flexible working options have become more widely available, but still one in ten employees in the UK are covered by a flexitime scheme (IDS Study 725, 2002). Flexitime is as popular ever, particularly in the public sector, where over the last few years organisations have been adapting and expanding away from the more traditionally structured schemes. It remains one of the best ways to give employees control to manage their own work/life balance issues.

Flexitime in Higher Education

There is very little data generally on flexible working in the HE sector, but the figures for flexitime include the following -

FEO Research Questionnaire, autumn 2004: Out of 64 HEIs responding – 44% had formal policies; 48% had some form of informal way of varying hours; some had both; a few of the formal policies also cover academic & research staff.

Mapping Equality and Diversity Initiatives in HE, Coventry University, 2003 - Out of 87 HEIs responding - 66% offer flexitime.

FEO Project pilot scheme, 2001-2003: Out of 502 respondents from 4 institutions - 82% agreed they valued or would value being able to vary their hours on a daily basis.

FEO Project Audit, 2001: Out of 49 HEIs responding —37% had formal policies on flexitime; if informal practice is included this rises to 78%

These figures suggest around 40% of HEIs offer a formal policy on flexitime, but a much greater percentage offer a variety of informal practices. Most of the formal schemes only cover clerical staff, but a few offer flexible working times to a much wider range of staff groups. It is generally recommended that for clarity, fairness and transparency, formal policies should be used rather than informal practices however flexible they may seem.

The basic elements of a typical scheme

Bandwidth - the time between the earliest start time allowed and the latest finish time. Typically, a standard scheme allows work to start at 8am and finish by 6pm.   In some cases this is extended to a 7.30 am or 7am start and a 6.30pm or 7pm finish.

Core time - times when employees must be at work.   There are typically two chunks of core time either side of lunch – often 10am to 12pm and 2pm to 4pm. Sometimes core time starts at 9.30am and there is a shorter, more prescriptive lunch break.

Flexible periods - those other than core time, when employees can choose to work or not within the rules. Typically these are 8am to 10am; 12pm to 2pm; and 4pm to 6pm.

Accounting time - the period over which the total contractual hours should be worked. Typically this is set to four weeks.

Flexi leave - any credit hours built up over the accounting time taken in half or full days. Typically this is limited to one day or two half days in any one accounting period.

Credit and debit - the limits to which hours owed to the employee or the organisation can be built up and carried over to the next accounting period. Credit is usually more than debit, as it is generally harder to make up hours rather than work over normal contractual hours. Typically this is set somewhere between 8 to 10 hours credit and 4 to 7 hours debit. Any surplus is usually lost, and it is up to the individual to manage their hours within the parameters.

Potential benefits and issues for employers

Benefits of offering flexitime –

- Very flexible and contractually simple.

- The core hours ensure periods of cover for an office when managers know that most employees will be in.

- The control over beginning and end of the working day increases staff morale and productivity, as employees are able to achieve a better fit between the needs of the workplace and their personal needs.

- Due to this, absenteeism is lowered as employees can arrange their hours to suit travel, childcare, appointments and so on, or use a half/ full day of flexi leave.

- In addition the concept of "lateness" is eliminated.

- Improved morale and productivity often leads to improved customer service as well as the general atmosphere at work.

"Most employees want just a little flexibility to control their lives, with the opportunity to vary their hours slightly on a daily basis according to their own preference."
(FEO Project Pilot Scheme, 2003)

- Potentially low cost. The extra cost of monitoring and management time is usually found to be minimal.

- Office coverage can be extended if there are team members who prefer an early start or conversely those who prefer to stay later at the end of the day.

- Communication and team work may improve as employees discuss their hours and workloads more regularly to ensure office coverage.

- Some offices have found that telephone calls become concentrated in core hours, leaving quieter times for more sustained work.

- Employees may be more willing to work longer hours to cover particularly busy times, knowing that they will get the time back at a later date as flexi leave -   this can help reduce overtime costs or the cost of employing casual staff.

- There may be more support to plan work and achieve targets, and this can help to accommodate peaks and troughs in workflow reducing idle time.

- Can help employees to remain full-time rather than request part-time.

- Helps employees to feel valued, as having flexitime signals that the organisation is supportive of employees need to balance personal and work issues.

- Can help with recruitment and retention because of its popularity with staff, and thus giving a competitive advantage.

Issues that may arise –

- Potential difficulties of office cover outside core hours.

- People are coming and going over a longer period at the beginning and end of the day and some may find this disruptive, thus flexitime may require a new way of thinking.

- The perceived risk that some employees may come in early but not start work properly until others arrive – this should not be an issue if employees are working to objectives.

- Arranging meetings may be more complicated, and some long-standing regular meetings may have to be altered.

- Customers ringing outside core hours may not reach the particular member of staff they wish to speak to.

- Some management time will be spent checking timesheets and booking flexi leave but this is minimal if a shared spreadsheet is used.

- Small teams may find it more difficult to arrange for flexi leave, but can often work more closely together and be more flexible in other ways than larger teams.

- Consistently heavy workloads may mean employees readily accumulate credit, but find it difficult to book flexi leave.

- There may be times when employees choose to work but there is little for them to do, and making the balance between employee use of flexitime and workloads harder to achieve. This means that expectations should be managed at the outset, and objective setting used.

- Many managers find it hard to deal with exceptions and like the certainty of a standard more rigid working day to work with, and find employees coming and going in the flexible periods including lunchtime difficult to cope with - training and support from mentors and HR can help reduce this.

Potential benefits and issues for employees

Benefits of using flexitime –

- Being trusted and given control over working hours is empowering. Hours can be adjusted to suit personal need, either starting earlier in the day or later.

- Hours can be arranged to suit commuting times, so the problems of traveling in the "rush hour" can be eased, or hours altered to suit the use of public transport. Employees are no longer "late".

- Staff can stay late or work slightly longer hours knowing they get the time back.

- Flexi leave enables employees to build up a small amount of time to accommodate occasional appointments without using holiday or work time.

- Accumulated hours can be used to take an extra day or half day of "holiday".

- Hours can be adjusted to achieve a better fit with childcare times, other caring responsibilities, a partner's working hours, voluntary work or hobbies.

- Dental and other appointments can more easily be arranged around work.

- Time owed to the organisation can be made up at a later date, so there is less stress when dealing with emergencies.

- Might mean being able to stay full-time rather than request reduced hours.

- Generally reduced stress levels and increased morale as people enjoy their work more, and are more supportive of an organisation which values them.

Issues that may arise –

- Where workloads are high there is a need to be careful of how much credit is built up in an accounting period —employees could lose it.

- Core times may still not allow enough flexibility particularly where there is a need to fit in with school times.

- Core times may not allow someone who starts early to finish early without working longer than a standard day.

- Some roles may not be suitable for flexible start and finish times.

- There is a need to record lunch times and other short breaks.   Some may resent what may be seen as heavier monitoring.

- If the scheme is limited to certain groups of employees this might create division and discontent.

- There may be peer group or management pressure to vary hours to fit with colleagues or the organisation rather than personal ones.

Preparation - what do we need to do first?

There are some key questions that need to be answered and key actions that should be undertaken before a flexitime scheme is designed or introduced.

- As an institution, be clear why you want to introduce flexitime for the first time or encourage its wider use. Support from senior management is important, but so is support from middle and line managers who have staff who will potentially be using flexitime and will therefore be dealing with it on a day to day basis. If the idea of flexible working is very new and there is little use even informally, then there may be cultural change issues to address. Employees and managers may need help to adjust to the changes flexible working will bring.

- The Trade Unions should be involved at the earliest possible stage in order to gain their support and commitment. They can assist in the promotion and communication process. All the major trade unions are supportive of flexible working at a national level.

- Flexitime tends to be aimed at administrative and clerical workers, or other office based staff, although it has been extended successfully to junior managers, scientists, engineers, technicians and other laboratory workers. Choice for those in other roles within an institution may be via other forms of flexible working, such a shifts, self-rostering, or annualized hours. In most HEIs academic staff, researchers and senior

management are on more open contracts that allow a flexible approach for achieving business objectives, and for this reason are not usually included in flexitime polices. Where contracts do specify hours then flexitime may be of some use. However open contracts do leave these staff groups vulnerable to long hours and heavy workloads with little scope for reconciling this other than their own time management skills.

- Preparation might also include looking at some of the flexible working hours and flexitime policies available on the internet. In addition the research report by the FEO Project Team that has been produced alongside this guide has useful background information on flexitime, and some fuller case studies of use in higher education institutions.

Considering the following questions can also be helpful in preparing to implement flexitime from an organizational perspective –

Where are you starting from?

Do the organisation, employees, and managers have experience of flexible options either formally or informally? If so where and who for?

Does your organisation already have flexitime? Is it formal or informal?

If formal, does the old policy need revising?

Do some departments already operate an informal system or some form of TOIL (Time Off in Lieu)?

Will this form of working be entirely new to some or all employees and managers?

Who will prepare a new policy?

Does the new policy need to allow for other forms of flexible working or flexible hours options, such as seasonal hours, annualized hours, compressed or staggered hours? Sometimes a current policy will have flexible hours in the title but in fact only refer to flexitime and not other options that can come under the heading of flexible hours.

Does the scheme have to be the same for all staff? Will there be one institution wide scheme or will departments be allowed to choose their own? Will the policy have strictly defined limits or be more open? The flexitime scheme should potentially be open to as many employees as possible to promote fairness and equality, but there will need to be a policy framework to identify legal and operational issues without being too restrictive.

Who will be able to use flexitime? It could be open to all employees, and then left to departments to decide the details of the scheme and who within their operational requirements could make use of it. Senior managers and academic staff are not usually covered by flexitime schemes as their contracts, and terms and conditions of employment, can be different to those of other employees, although this varies from institution to institution. In other roles, particularly in facilities management areas, options such as shifts, self-rostering teams, staggered hours, annualized hours and seasonal hours may be more useful options. Services where there are customer service points, reception desks or where there are a high number of telephone calls will need more careful consideration as to the use of flexitime. It may still be possible to allow employees some control over arrival and departure times, or allow other flexibility.

Part-time employees should now be included within a flexitime scheme, as the European Part-time Workers Directive requires parity with full-time employees.

All new schemes need to be communicated well to succeed, and flexitime is no exception. HR may need to set aside time to talk through with interested departments how flexitime works and is implemented. Also the operation of the scheme may be need to be promoted and explained more carefully to departments who are reluctant to introduce the scheme but whose employees are keen to use flexitime.

Finally, allow for future expansion, especially if the institution is considering work/life balance in general as an issue concerning all employees. Flexitime is only one means of enabling employees to achieve a better fit between work and their personal lives, and should be considered as part of an overall approach to the subject.

Design - what do we need to consider when designing a scheme?

There are a number of areas to be taken into account when designing a flexitime scheme and it is crucial to spend time getting the detail correct before the policy is launched.

The use and limits of all the basic elements of the scheme will need to be defined – bandwidth, core time, flexible periods, accounting time, flexi leave and the credit and debit limits. Extended and more flexible variations to flexitime are discussed in "Taking it further".

The following points should help you decide on these -

• When looking at bandwidth and core time the pattern of the department work and workloads should be the priority, particularly office and telephone cover and any customer service points.   In addition existing working patterns of staff may influence the detail of the flexitime scheme.

• If the proposal is for a bandwidth starting and finishing outside of normally accepted hours check for health and safety issues, including security and building access.

• Consider legal and contractual issues including the legal requirement for a 30 minute break if working over 6 hours.

- Decide on who needs to authorize flexi leave, and check office coverage. Generally managers should check that employee choices are not achieved at the expense of other employees or business objectives.

- For annual leave, sickness, and other authorized absence a standard day needs to be defined. This would depend on the contractual length of day currently in use. From this can be calculated a standard half day for flexi leave purposes.

- Part-time staff will need a standard day and half day calculated for their particular number of hours. Specifying a general working pattern or some core hours may also be useful.

- A decision should be made about time off for hospital and dental appointments, particularly if this will differ from original procedures, or for employees who will not be covered by the flexitime scheme. For fairness and equity it should be the same for all staff.

- There may be a need to decide about time claimed for business travel under flexitime.

- Although the credit and debit limits are fixed, it may be necessary to vary this when operational demand or sickness prevent credit being taken or debt made good at the end of the accounting period. This should be to a specified maximum at any one time within an accounting period. Depending on department workloads, some consideration may still need to be given to overtime payments, or "banking" the hours owed to employees for use at a quieter time of year.

- It is important to decide about any overtime if this has been an issue in the past. Any discussion should include trade unions. Some consideration needs to be given to how any overtime, if it is to be available, is to be recorded and paid.

- Lastly provision should be made for how any abuses of the system will be dealt with within the current disciplinary procedures. In the end such flexible options as flexitime are concessions, not rights, and as such can be withdrawn.

Questions for departments or teams to consider

- When is there necessary contact with customers or other team members?

- Will the team/department need to ensure that the office is staffed during certain times e.g. at the start of the "normal" office day or at lunchtime?

- Are there certain times in the year when workloads are particularly high or employees need to stay late/ work at weekends?

- Are there any existing flexible arrangements to be taken into consideration i.e. job share, homeworking, part-time working, term-time or seasonal hours?

- Are there employees who like to be in early or particularly late?

- Do you have team members who need to fit their working day to suit other patterns, such as school hours, or a partner's shifts?

- Are there any small, physically isolated parts of the department that may find flexitime difficult to operate?

- If there are job roles that cannot be offered flexitime, are there other ways to offer some flexibility?

- Overall see the introduction of flexitime as a development opportunity to support more team working, with the self management of hours and arrangement of office cover, consistent with the peaks and troughs of customer demand.

How is this all going to be recorded?

With flexitime there is a need to provide a fair, open, and visible recording system. Individuals should be responsible for recording their own hours, and any method chosen should allow for team planning and checking by line managers. An efficient time recording system is essential if flexitime is to be successful, and allow for transparency and accountability. The whole issue of monitoring and recording hours can be difficult, and the culture and attitude within an organisation can influence this. In some cases not having to "clock on" is seen as a status symbol and suddenly having to record hours may lead to a feeling of lack of status and trust. Most employees will not see it this way, but will take the view that they are being trusted to record

their own hours as a means of regulating their working time and perhaps gaining some flexi leave. The main focus is on monitoring hours worked not start and finish times.

While many schemes work well with a manual record countersigned by line managers, or an electronic "timesheet" set up on a spreadsheet, there are increasing numbers of time and attendance software options available, as a brief search on the Internet will confirm. Some newer systems make use of smart cards to combine security and time monitoring. The choice depends on the size of the department, how it is organised and staff access to computing facilities. There are basically three types and the pros and cons of each type are laid out below.

Clock (time and attendance system)

Pros	Cons
Centralised	Expensive initial outlay and maintenance
No individual filling in or changing so can be more secure and less open to abuse	Can promote aura of mistrust particularly in view of UK work culture and not clocking on seen as status
Useful for very large numbers	Can induce "clockwatching"
Can see patterns of use.	Employees cannot easily plan ahead and check their hours
Can have reporting facility and keep track of credit/debit/leave etc	Not useful or necessary for small departments and teams
More systems on the market	Much less personal - some can resent the amount of monitoring as it is more overt than a personalised timesheet.
New smart card systems	Not directly under employee control and difficult to correct.
	More difficult for teams to plan ahead

Paper

Pros	Cons
Relatively cheap depending on numbers and costs of printing	Relies on /needs manual calculation
Simple	Can get lost
Gives individuals control	Bulky, uses paper resources
Generates aura of trust as staff keep track of their own comings and goings	Harder for supervisor to check or see patterns of use, plan work loads etc
Can see where corrected	Can be expensive for large numbers and costs of printing;
Easy to keep control of, collect in etc.	More difficult for individual employees or teams to plan ahead

Electronic spreadsheet

Pros	Cons
Generates aura of trust as staff keep track of their own working time	Needs regular access to a PC and an account.
Cheap and easy to use	No automatic checking of leave or reporting facility
Can be centrally held on open access for line manager to check;	Annual leave and other information need to be recorded separately
Automatic calculation of debit/credit and allows easier forward planning	Difficult to cross check individuals in a team unless all are on one large spreadsheet
Can be individual or team based	

Most departments and teams find that an electronic spreadsheet held in open access does the job cheaply and well. It generates an atmosphere of trust and gives both control and responsibility to the staff in addition to enabling easier forward planning for teams and individuals. Although it may not give the range of statistics and calculations that a time and attendance system does, it allows for quicker monitoring by line managers who can check that core times or peak hours/days are being covered. Higher education institutions usually have a high level of communication technology available already for staff and in addition have small diverse departments and teams where a full time and attendance system would be cumbersome and not cost effective. If employees already have access to computing facilities for emailing purposes, then it is also the cheapest solution.

A note about TOIL and Flexi leave

Sometimes credited hours are referred to as TOIL (Time off in Lieu), but this term is more widely used as the term for compensation when overtime has been worked and reward is in time back not overtime pay. Here employees agree informally with managers to take time off to make up for extra hours worked. The terms of TOIL can be widely variable and are at a line manager's discretion. This is very different to the additional time worked in a'flexitime system where an employee might choose to work a few extra hours for personal reasons, cover busy times or to finish a piece of work. It is therefore clearer if everyone working flexitime uses the term "flexi leave" or similar, and not TOIL.

Implementation - how do we put it into practice?

As with any policy, there are some general principles of good practice that should be followed during implementation.

- Once the preparation stage has been completed, and the desired system has been designed, it will need to be communicated clearly to all staff involved, and a date set for the system to start. The relevant policy or policies need to be already in place.

- If this way of working is very new to the organisation or department then a pilot group could be used to iron out any problems.

- Remember time may be needed to use up any credit/debit from any informal scheme or TOIL system, or a means of carry over devised.

- The chosen method of recording needs to be in place.

- All employees continue to work their contractual hours but, within certain limits, will be allowed to vary their hours on a daily basis. This should remain subject to operational needs and the agreement of the relevant manager.

- Flexi leave should only be taken if an individual has accrued the necessary hours and must be authorized in advance by the relevant line

manager, although there may be exceptions to this particularly around emergencies.

- Credit well beyond the standard day when attending site visits, attending a meeting or training session would need to be authorized by the line manager.

- Employees may need training in filling out timesheets and reminders to do so on a regular basis. As previously discussed, an open electronic database using spreadsheets can allow staff to plan ahead. Remind staff that all employees working over 6 hours must record a 30 minute rest break during each day. Where employees have not experienced flexitime before they may need more guidance on what they can and cannot do.

- Time may need to be put aside by Personnel to talk to line managers who are new to flexitime through the first few weeks/months, perhaps through specific briefings or training.

- Remember there will be new employees to add to the scheme and to be introduced to work planning. Also the needs of existing staff may change over time, or the work undertaken by the team/ department may change.

- Line managers will need to check that not too many hours over are being worked, or too much debit is accumulated. They will also need to check that adequate cover is being maintained or that the same employees are not, for instance, always booking flexi leave on a Friday

afternoon.   It should be seen as an extension of the planning that takes place around holidays and other leave.

- As with any new system there should be regular reviews, perhaps at a department meeting to deal with any issues arising and check that all is running smoothly. At the very least a yearly review should take place.

"I have worked in flexi-hours environment in the past. I feel they benefit and motivate staff. Different people work better in mornings or evenings and they should be given the opportunity to achieve their best."

"... office has to be covered 9.00 - 5.00 Monday - Friday... The team works well to cover holidays, flexi days and illnesses."
(FEO Project Pilot Scheme, 2003)

Taking it further

As mentioned in the introduction, flexitime has been around for 30 years now, and over the years as organisations and employees have become comfortable and confident with using the traditional schemes so they have introduced even more flexibility. There is no set pattern for flexitime, but many variations around the same theme.

No core hours -

This is where only a bandwidth is set, and no core times are specified. Staff can come and go at a time that suits them, provided the times are recorded and a 30 minute break is taken if staff are working more than 6 hours in one day. This scheme does require staff to work more closely together to cover workloads, including telephones and other customer issues. Such areas as holidays, flexi leave and meetings also need to be planned and communicated well.

HE example – A flexitime scheme with a bandwidth of 7am – 7pm with no core hours was piloted by the Financial Services Department at Staffordshire University during the FEO Project pilot scheme. It is still going on 2 years later and consideration is being given to introducing it across the institution. Employees and managers currently working this way are very positive and would not work any other way. New employees have had no problem fitting in with the scheme.

Long accounting period -

This allows staff to plan their hours over a longer period of time and goes some way to even out the busy periods with slacker ones. It allows for more flexi leave as well as higher levels of credit and debit. As well as being more in line with the pattern of working in HE, this can help parents work a seasonal "flexitime" and save hours to take flexi leave in the school holidays and half terms, if compatible with workloads.

HE example - At the University of York, while the bandwidth and core hours are fairly standard, the accounting period is 12 weeks. The limits for both credit and debit are 32 hours and up to three Flexi leave day equivalents in any accounting period reflect this.
(IDS study 725)

Combining with other forms of flexible work –

There is no reason why flexitime cannot be combined with other flexible working options such as part-time hours, term-time hours, seasonal hours and so on. It is not particularly suitable for those who work compressed hours, where long days are already scheduled, or for staggered hours. Flexitime could still be used to provide flexibility in start and finish times although to a lesser degree.

HE example – At De Montfort University, again as part of the FEO Project pilot scheme, the Registry operated a mixture of options including flexitime as the staff chose the patterns that most suited their circumstances. Neither the staff themselves nor the manager found this a problem as long as the hours were recorded. Regular team meetings are used to plan work and deal with any issues.

Tailor-made -

Flexitime could be combined with homeworking so that an employee leaving at 3 or 3.30pm to collect children from school could continue working from home.

Part-time staff –

As mentioned earlier in the guide, there is no reason why part-time staff cannot fill in a timesheet like full-time colleagues, once a standard day is calculated. This standard day would be the same as is used to calculate annual leave and sick leave. A general pattern of working should be agreed for that particular role, and then employees can be allowed some flexibility in start and finish times and accrue flexi leave in the normal way. In fact there may be grounds for discrimination under the European Part-time Workers Directive if they are not included.

HE example - Part-time employees at Staffordshire University have been included in the flexitime scheme for many years.

Maintaining departmental choice -

If the organisation wished to maintain a more formal approach to flexitime then perhaps departments could choose between two or three set schemes.

HE example – At Aston University there is choice of two schemes. The bandwidth is the same in both cases, 7.30am to 6.30pm, but in one there is a longer flexible period for lunch, 12pm – 2.30pm, and in the other there is an earlier finish time – 3.30pm instead of 4pm. (JNCHES Work/life Balance in HE guidelines)

Alternatively, an organisational scheme could be left open so that managers can choose to modify it to suit particular operating needs. At most institutions there is no compulsion for departments to join the flexitime scheme - it is left for managers to decide whether or not it is the best way to provide flexibility for staff within the work roles and business needs. However this approach does need consideration at the planning and policy design stage to ensure the maintenance of clarity and fairness for all employees.

HE example – At the University of York the flexitime policy has been in place since 1996, however departments choose whether or not to take part and even now new departments are taking up the policy for the first time. For instance the library has recently piloted flexitime, has now broadened it to include most staff, and is piloting flexitime for part-time staff. Over the years some have combined flexitime with other options, and some are changing to more school friendly hours depending on staff need.

Use where there are customer service points —

Very rarely are employees solely employed in a front facing customer role. Often a role combines duties, and even where customer service is the main focus of work, periods on a customer service point are often timetabled. In other cases working hours are often longer than the opening hours of the service point and it still may be possible to offer some form of flexitime. It other cases other flexibility such options as shift work or the self roostering of shifts, may be more appropriate.

Weekend working -

Where an office is open for longer than a standard 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, timesheets could allow for a longer working day and for time on a Saturday or Sunday to be recorded. Often University libraries fall into this category and need a slightly adapted version of traditional flexitime.

Banking hours –

This could be useful for departments or teams that have particularly heavy times of the year such as the preparation for awards or admissions perhaps needing evening or weekend working. A standard accounting period of 4 weeks could be retained, but staff could be allowed to build up more credit than the normal flexitime scheme would allow. This time would then be taken at specified quieter times of the year, or as allowed by the line manager. Employees may be more inclined or prepared to work longer hours when the organisation needs them as they will be able to get the time back later in the year. If the hours needed to achieve workloads are not excessive this may be better than paying overtime or employing casual staff. However this banking system would be difficult to operate where workloads are high and hours regularly longer than contractual hours all year round. Alternatives such as Annualized hours or Seasonal hours could also be considered.

Recognized local additions/ amendments -

Flexibility allows managers to adapt a scheme to their particular requirements, while maintaining its integrity.

Example - In some departments at the University of York although the core times remain, a system of "pop outs" has been developed to allow managers to authorize time off during these"times." This allows for mid morning or afternoon appointments.

Key success factors – how can we make flexitime a success?

- There may be a need to manage change and deal with employee and management expectations. This will depend on how familiar the institution is with flexible working and flexitime. If there is informal and formal flexitime being used then both managers and employees will be used to the idea of some degree of individual choice and control. If they are all new to the idea of moving away form rigid hours then they need to be well prepared for the changes that flexible working hours will bring.

- All issues need to be discussed fully with trade unions and employee groups, especially where overtime is an issue. Everyone to be affected at all levels needs to feel involved so that they know what the changes are all about, feel committed to the changes, know what action they need to take, and feel part of the organisation.

- Let a new scheme "bed in". Contrary to popular fears, employees are not in and out like "yo-yos". Most people work to a routine, arriving and leaving at times that suit them to get the work done, and building up a little time to have the occasional half/ full day of flexi leave. Any major changes to the routine can usually be communicated in advance so that the team is aware of what's going on and cover planned. Emergencies are no more likely to arise than before, and in fact phoning in "sick" and short term absence is usually replaced with planned absences within the flexitime system, and if necessary hours made up at a later date within the accounting period.

- Except for emergencies and small variations to the start and end of the day, other use of flexitime and certainly flexi leave needs to arranged in conjunction with the line manager so that office cover can be organized.

- Regular planning meetings allow staff to plan their own and their team's workloads alongside their use of flexitime. Everyone generally knows where everyone is going to be and when, and it is not all left to the line manager. Line managers need to facilitate planning, check the hours are being recorded correctly and authorize flexi leave. They also need to keep an eye on the overall picture of the pattern of time off so that not all staff are regularly taking Friday afternoons or Monday mornings when workloads may still be high. The department may have natural lulls, but with more and more busy the whole time, flexi leave and holidays need more careful monitoring.

- Managers should watch workloads and the build up of credit. In areas where overtime was common, the use of flexitime can be inhibited as heavy workloads mean that employees readily accumulate hours but cannot book flexi leave. A requirement for extra hours on a long term basis can indicate a resourcing issue for the team or department. As well as inhibiting the use of flexitime, such long hours can adversely affect employees' health and ability to work, increasing stress and fatigue which in turn lower morale and productivity.

- Seasonal swings in workload that come outside the normal accounting period could be dealt with using a more flexible flexitime scheme than the traditional kind, such as a longer accounting period, or combined

with other flexible working options, such as seasonal hours, annualised hours, and term-time working.

- Some employees may want to use flexitime to start later. However for many higher institutions parking is a problem for late arrivals. Successfully managing this gives a major morale boost, as well as saving some parents child minding fees.

- If staff can start early in the day there needs to be some provision for them to leave after they have worked a standard day. If for instance an employee starts at 7am, and the afternoon core hours are from 2-4, the employee would have to take a long lunch break, or regularly work a long day and claim back the time later.

- Some staff may wish to fit some or all of their time around school hours, and may sometimes wish to finish at 3 or 3.30pm. Some may be able to continue at home, others may be able to come back later. There may need to be a team discussion about such circumstances – perhaps someone else may regularly like to start later, or a part-time member of staff work afternoons. The ideal would be for teams and departments to work together to provide solutions.

- Where teams work confidently together to achieve objectives, there could be some consideration of having no core hours but giving employees the responsibility of ensuring office cover as a team.

- Ultimately, flexitime measures when people are there not how productive they are, and the scheme needs to be linked with good management and use of objectives and targets. Success of the scheme will ultimately reflect the trust managers and line managers have in employees, and this in turn influences the trust employees have in mangers.

- There may need to be consideration of the broader strategy of work/life balance and flexible working to make sure they all complement each other, for instance part-time work, term-time work and job share. Flexitime works best as part of an integrated approach to work/life balance and as one of a number of options on offer.

- The business objectives remain a priority – it is alright to say "no" sometimes or compromise, as flexitime should work in the organisation's favour as well as benefiting employees.

Ongoing monitoring and review

- The benefits of introducing or extending flexitime should be weighed against the costs of putting the scheme in place. Even if the effects can not easily be quantified, they should be recorded in order to help evaluate the scheme.

- Most organisations start their evaluation by determining a benchmark against which to assess progress against targets.

- Some useful measurable indicators of performance are listed below. You may not wish to use all of these measures, but you should identify those of particular importance to your organisation for inclusion. Use a range of indicators to give a reasonable picture of how the scheme is operating -
    - Sickness absence – particularly short term
    - Absenteeism
    - Maternity returnees
    - Why new starters applied for the job – for example what benefits attracted them
    - Turnover
    - Requests to move from full-time to part-time hours

- It is also relatively simple to measure to some degree –
    - Staff motivation and morale – for example surveys, questionnaires, focus groups and appraisals
    - Impact on productivity and quality – for example assessment by line managers

- Retention – for example exit interviews
- Customer satisfaction

- A review of the objectives defined when flexitime was introduced should be done after a period, perhaps 6 months and then annually. Not only can you see what progress is being made, but the evaluation is also a closed loop which helps you to deliver constantly improving performance and benefit the work/life balance of staff. All the monitoring procedures mentioned are of course useful generally to gauge the effectiveness of many areas of working practice, not just flexitime.

Summary

One of the most important aims of introducing flexible working should be to hand over control to employees of when and how they achieve their work objectives. This trust is enormously empowering, and when handled correctly frees employees to better balance their work and personal lives. The benefits of doing this are well documented, but how does this fit with offering flexitime?

Often one of the main concerns of line managers when first dealing with flexible working is the issue of controlling employees, and the monitoring of hours and work. Managers fear for instance that everyone will want to leave at 4pm, that staff will want to take flexi days at the same time, or that they themselves have to be there early and late because the people they

manage are. As the employees are allowed to choose between set hours when they start work each day, line managers often fear that they will not know when employees will be arriving and everyone will start late or come in at different times each day, causing difficulties in staffing offices and handling workloads.

In practice, most employees settle to a routine, and arrive and depart at roughly the same time each day. However this will be at a time that suits them, depending on what they need to achieve before work, their means of transport and perhaps whether they prefer an early or later start. Any variations to this will probably be pre-planned and a few will be emergencies but no more than before, and in fact is usually fewer as time off can be planned or time made up rather than having to phone in "sick". Good and regular communication and planning between team members and managers ensures the smooth running of the department.

Employees are usually sensible about managing credit and debit, and usually enjoy building up credit to take the odd day or afternoon off. Debit is usually disliked and it means needing to spend more time at work catching up. A manager can keep an eye on credit and debit levels and any abuses of the scheme can be dealt with through normal disciplinary channels.

Coverage of office hours can still be planned, and if control of coverage is passed to teams, then both sides benefit from this delegation. Often in a department it is found that coverage each day can actually be extended because there are employees who like to regularly work either early or late. One of the other benefits is that at busy times employees are usually willing

to work longer hours knowing that the time can be given back at a later date. It also allows someone to stay and finish a piece of work, or go if something has been completed and work longer another day.

In some organisations the fixed core times have been removed so that staff can come and go over the whole bandwidth, which is often 7am to 7pm. This works particularly well where employees and managers have been used to traditional flexitime.

In all cases, normal good management practices should apply and the needs of the workplace should take priority. Good communication and discussion of what needs to be done and when, helps to plan working time, time off and flexi hours. A manager needs to operate by objective setting rather than presenteeism, and if they have been used to rigid hours may need training and support from human resources, their own managers and more experienced colleagues. Consideration should be given for line managers themselves to have access to flexitime.

Given the opportunity to have some control over when they work, sensible, intelligent and hard working employees work smarter, making their own patterns to suit their personal needs and achieve work objectives. It should be possible to allow individual flexibility within the flexible system, and sometimes it only takes a small change in working hours to transform someone's life.

HEIs with flexible working policies or flexitime policies -

Aston University www.aston.ac.uk

University of York www.york.ac.uk

HEIs with more comprehensive flexible working and work/life balance policies include –

University of Brighton www.brighton.ac.uk

(flexitime policy as well as a range of other options, along with other work/ life balance considerations and working hours guidelines)

Leeds metropolitan University www.leedsmet.ac.uk

(Good flexible working policy which includes flexitime as one of several options as well as a flexitime policy)

HEIs with flexitime for all staff groups include -

University of Bath www.bath.ac.uk

Oxford Brookes University www.brookes.ac.uk

Further reading

"Croner's flexible working practices"; Fraser, G. (ed.); Wolter Kluwer, 1998. (continually amended) - As well as general information on the advantages and disadvantages of flexitime, it also has case studies and covers contractual, legal and payroll issues.

"Flexible working practices: techniques and innovations"; Stredwick, J and Ellis, S;"IPD, 1998. - Good general guide to whole subject; includes a section on flexitime.

"IDS Studies: Personnel policies and practice" - flexitime schemes"; Incomes Data Services study 725, March 2002. - Covers details of flexitime schemes in 32 organisations drawn from different sectors including higher education.

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