



THE ELASTIC ENTERPRISE:

How flexible working helps you improve efficiency and keep staff happy

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There are some goals a business will never stop pursuing: finding ways to cut costs, getting staff to be more motivated, and making the whole team more productive. And these are the driving factors behind the growing adoption of flexible working practices across the UK.

Now hang on a minute – “flexible working” might sound like the latest bit of business buzzwordery you could live without. But it’s not just jargon. In fact, it’s probably already happening in your business. Do you use your phone to check emails? Do your employees sometimes work on trains on their way to meetings? Have you ever let team members leave the office early to make a personal appointment provided they make up the time later that week?

Thought so. And these are all examples of flexible working.

But it can do so much more. Most importantly, when it’s done right it gives employees the chance to control their own lives, and it gives employers better results from more engaged, longer-serving staff – while cutting all important costs at the same time. And that’s not all, in 2010, [a review of 10 studies](#) involving more than 16,000 people found those who controlled their own working hours were healthier because they get more rest and are less stressed. It seems so obvious. So how do you make it happen in your business? Read on.

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Hang on a minute – what is flexible working, actually?

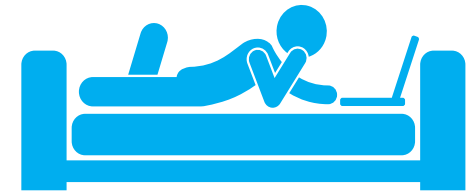


Chapter
ONE

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“ *It's caring about the quality of the work done, not how many hours someone is present in the office. It means people who need to retreat into a quiet space to do complicated work, can. It means we can hire great people, even if they live two hours away”*

Frank Fenten, director of digital marketing company, We Love The Web

We asked a dozen or so growing small businesses what flexible working meant to them. The answers were startlingly similar, with one prevailing theme: flexible working is about building trust and loyalty among staff. It means waving goodbye to the culture of presenteeism and...

Banishing the office

It's quite simple – a “virtual office” is a space providing business owners with pay-to-use services such as meeting rooms and photocopiers, a registered business address and a professional call and mail handling service. So when you need an office you have one.

Remote working

Employees can work on the move, from home and on holiday. It's about results – not minutes at a desk.

Flexi-time

For many, this is the biggest win when it comes to flexible working. Shaking free the 9-5 chains means measuring output and not input – letting staff members work the hours that suit them, when they're at their most productive.

Extending your business hours

Flexi-time works both ways. Could your business benefit from longer trading hours? Are you looking to expand your business offering to countries outside your time-zone? Just as employees benefit from less constrictive working hours, so too can your customers.

“ ”

We have a man who simply wakes up much earlier than most – he gets up at 4am. He’s therefore at work by 7am and that’s incredibly useful to us as he catches journalists before they even get to their desk.

Anne Cantelo, director of communications company, Onyx

How can flexible working help you
do better business?

Chapter
TWO



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How can flexible working help you do better business?

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Keep hold of your staff

Better staff engagement and retention is a key factor cited by businesses that have embraced flexible working. And a recent survey by the office specialists, Regus, found that in order to fit personal and work life into 24 hours, 34% of employees said they often woke up a lot earlier or went to bed a lot later than they would wish. That's a tired workforce.

For Ervin Cenmurati setting up flexible working has generated a happier attitude among his staff. He believes nine out of Directlines's body of ten employees would have left if flexible working wasn't an option. It's saved his business thousands in hiring new staff.

Protect your data

You've read the warnings, you know the dangers, but the likelihood is you've not done much about it. Protecting your business's data that is. Yet if your employees use their own phones to access work emails, or log on to their emails remotely from home computers, you're at risk of data leaks.



“Staff are happier and more motivated”

Ervin Cenmurati, Directline Holidays

By rolling out a full flexible working policy, not only will you be setting your staff up with the equipment they need to work effectively from, well, anywhere, but you can implement a full, secure “[bring-your-own](#)” programme that ensures your business's data is protected across employees' personal devices. Two birds, one stone.

Work on the move

Collectively, how many hours does your staff spend commuting? Transforming this dead time into valuable output is a no-brainer. By equipping staff with the right tools – such as smartphones, laptops and tablets – alongside easy access to the files and data they need, travel to and from the office, as well as to meetings and conferences, becomes time spent being productive. Not frustrated.

How can flexible working help you do better business?

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Stay ahead of the competition

Working flexibly gives your business a huge advantage over its rivals as it means the business can adapt and change to focus on achieving its priorities. A business that allows its staff to work flexibly using the latest technologies means they are more likely to be contactable at unsociable hours, which results in problems being resolved earlier. Working flexibly also requires staff to use the latest tech, which gives staff more advanced tools to resolve a solution to any problems

“Over the long term we expect to see financial rewards, especially a reduction in hardware and ongoing maintenance costs”

O2 on implementing a [bring-you-own device policy](#)

Boost productivity across your organisation

We've had a pretty bad winter and there's little to suggest next year's will be any better. By providing joined-up, shared access to a business's data, not being physically present due to unforeseen circumstances need not hinder your business's productivity.

Cut costs

For many small businesses, the freedom from overheads like office rent, the capacity to virtually meet instead of having to travel to meetings, and the power to attract and retain committed and hard-working staff, means flexible working practices significantly reduces costs.



“ ”

We work where, when and how it suits us to get the job done – whether that’s at home, in the office, or on the move”

Management Process Systems

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Flexible working in practice, a tale of two businesses

Chapter **THREE**



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Case study ONE

The Big Flexiday at O2

“In failing to embrace a flexible working culture, companies are missing out on huge benefits, both for their business and their staff.” Said O2 Business Director, Ben Dowd. “Our own research of over 2,000 UK employees and over 400 employers shows that three quarters of people say they are most productive when they can change when and where they work and one in ten even rate flexi-working as a more important benefit than their holiday allowance and salary.”

And the success of flexiday has since marked a new era for O2 – from which they’ve not looked back.

“The changes we’ve seen at O2 since our flexi-day speak for themselves, with the right mix of technology, policy and education, businesses can use flexible working to help them shape their own definition of the 9 to 5.”

And it’s not just the output that can be measured. Since flexible working has been introduced to the O2 Slough office, the business is saving £7,000 for every desk no longer needed, staff are saving a typical 1.5 hours per day on their commute, and on flexiday itself, 25 tonnes of carbon were saved.



Case study TWO

How Tots To Travel grew their business with flexible working

We now operate under a core team of six, each of whom comes into the office but works part flexi-time and part remotely. The business wouldn't work if everybody was in the same place at the same hours," explains Wendy.

From early on Wendy spotted the need for her company to adopt new technologies to give her business the flexibility it needed to grow. "One of the main technologies we use is Skype. We use it for telephone calls, screen sharing, and instant messaging. We have colleagues who work in France for instance, but because we're all on Skype we can instant message them and get everything sorted out very quickly.

Embracing technology has helped to give her business a more personal touch with customers too, "by screen sharing we can take customers through our website and show them properties that suit them there and then. If they like the property, we add it to their shortlist, which we then send to the client straight after the call. Without screen share we would have to take notes and send a list of places that we'd have had to predict the customer might like. Using screen share helps us to be accurate and makes the process for the customer quicker.

So what advice would she give to businesses thinking of going flexi? " Do it. Becoming flexible and growing the business is a lot about getting out and building relationships. If you're tied to the office all the time it's very limiting. Having good technology gives you the flexibility to be out visiting suppliers and having meetings while still being in touch with colleagues and clients. It gives you the ability to grow your business.

Ready to become elastic?
How to adopt flexible working...



“ ”

“The role of IT is overemphasised. If people simply want to work different hours or part-time, IT is not needed to support it”

Anne Cantelo, director of
communications company, Onyx

Ready to become elastic?

How to adopt flexible working

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So you're coming round to the idea? Great. Perhaps you're already thinking about the practicalities: which new technologies might suit whom, which regular meetings could turn virtual, how much easier it would be to arrange a conference call rather than travel an extra hour in rush hour to meet a client.

Well the good news is there's probably nothing stopping you from implementing some new working practices right away. And the sky's your limit when it comes to the *possibilities of technology* to help you run your business flexibly.

Here's your must-have technology checklist to get you started...

Skype

Despite all the video-conferencing software packages available, many people still swear by Skype. After all, it's free to use, and even your great-aunt can use it.

A private cloud system or VPN

Whichever you choose, your data must be readily available and secure. A private [cloud](#) will store your data more securely than a public one will, and can host everyday office tools like Word, plus any software as a service (SaaS) applications you might use.

A virtual private network (VPN), meanwhile, enables your business's servers, data and software to be accessible remotely but hosted on a central machine – not in the cloud. Do a little research to find out what suits your needs best.



Ready to become elastic? How to adopt flexible working

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Smartphone

Too obvious? Maybe, but vital nonetheless. A decent smartphone and [tariff](#) is an essential piece of kit for any flexi business. For Frank Fenten of We Love The Web it goes even further: "Skype's great but you still need a phone, and a talk-until-your-hind-legs-fall-off tariff should be part of the any standard toolkit."

Tablets

Being able to carry around a sleek tablet that houses all of your documents is a huge plus. Type your notes on it in meetings and instantly sync these notes with your other devices. Show examples of your website, products or other offerings in an easy smart way, without having to plug in a laptop and wait while you load up all the work you need.

Get a web-based data storage service

Simultaneously work on a document with your colleagues in real time from the opposites sides of the world. Or Birmingham. Wherever you are, the technology offered by these types of businesses is a revolution in collaborative working. Search online for the best.

Instant Messaging

Whether it's Skype, Chatter or Apple's Instant Messenger (IM), for many businesses this easy and immediate way of communicating is faster and more effective than traditional email. It can be pretty fun too...

A strong network

Fast and powerful Internet is vital. Whether it's 3g, 4g or Wifi, you need to make sure your business is as Internet ready as possible. You want to be able to take full advantage of any new technologies, which allows your business to work flexibly which makes powerful Internet a must for this. For example a bad connection that results in important Skype calls with a customer cutting out would be terrible.

How to measure output rather than time

- ✓ **Set targets**
These need not be numerically quantifiable, but should be drawn up as a collaborative process with your employee. Discuss the targets, agree to them and keep a record. Review them regularly – at least once a month.
- ✓ **Communicate**
While you get used to this new way of working it's better to over-communicate than to under-communicate. You'll need to check in with your team on a regular basis – but be careful, you're checking in not up.
- ✓ **Weekly round-ups**
Ask each team member to provide weekly bullet-pointed round-ups of what they're working on and the progress they've made. Ask them to share this update with the rest of the team and keep it somewhere accessible to all. Every two months review the updates.



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