MENU

Flexible work

Flexibility is becoming increasingly important for organisations across Australia as they begin to recognise it as a key enabler of gender equality. Attracting and retaining diverse talent is crucial to future-proofing the workplace and the Australian economy more broadly. Making workplaces more flexible and responsive to the needs of employees is a key way of doing this.

Flexible working drives employee engagement and productivity as well as boosting employee well-being and happiness. Access to flexible working is clearly linked to:

- Improved organisational productivity
- An enhanced ability to attract and retain employees
- Improved employee well-being
- An increased proportion of women in leadership
- Future-proofing the workplace

What is flexible work?

A flexible work arrangement is an agreement between a workplace and an employee to change the standard working arrangement to better accommodate an employee's commitments out of work. Flexible working arrangements usually encompass changes to the hours, pattern and location of work. Flexibility is becoming increasingly important for all employees as employees and managers balance competing priorities in life.

Flexible working is not just for office workers. There are numerous examples of scheduled roles with access to flexibility. Some examples include:

- Giving employees the ability to design their own rosters with remote access through rostering and shift-swapping applications
- Flexible start and finish times
- Combining and sharing roles, for example: four days in an operational role and one day in a role that allows for remote working.

Managers can sometimes confuse some relatively minor and ordinary work adjustments with the idea of flexible working arrangements. For example, someone taking time off as carer's leave, compassionate leave or parental leave is not the same as working flexibly. These arrangements fall into the same category as annual leave and personal leave, in that they are standard employee rights at work. While part-time work is currently considered to be a flexible working arrangement, the realities of part-time work are often much the same as those of full-time work and may not offer much flexibility around time or location of work. Part-time work, however, does offer flexibility in the capacity for someone to work even though they may not be able to work full-time.

Type	Description
Flexible hours of work	This is where you may vary your start and finish times.
Compressed working weeks	You may work the same number of weekly (or fortnightly or monthly) working hours, compressed into a shorter period. For example, a forty-hour week may be worked at the rate of ten hours per day for four days instead of eight hours a day for five days. Changes to salary are not required.
Time-in-lieu	You may work approved overtime and be compensated by time-in-lieu. It can include 'flexitime' arrangements where an employee can work extra time over several days or weeks and then reclaim those hours as time off.
Telecommuting	You may work at a location other than the official place of work. A wide range of terms refer to working at different locations, including 'mobile working', 'distributed work', 'virtual teams' and 'telework'. These are referred to collectively as 'telecommuting' in this toolkit. *Note that telecommuting is generally most effective when there is a relatively even split between time spent*

	in the office and working elsewhere. This lessens the sense of isolation that can come from working away from the office. Visit www.telework.gov.au for information about how to make telework work for you.
Part-time work	A regular work pattern where you work less than full-time and are paid on a pro-rata basis for that work. Not all part-time work is necessarily flexible in nature, but it offers flexibility to workers who have other commitments or lifestyle choices that are not compatible with full-time work.
Job sharing	A full-time job role is divided into multiple job roles to be undertaken by two or more employees who are paid on a pro-rata basis for the part of the job each completes.
Purchased leave	A period of leave without pay, usually available after annual leave allocation is finished. Employers typically deduct the amount of unpaid leave from the worker's salary either as a lump sum or averaged over the year.
Unplanned leave	Informal access to leave for unanticipated or unplanned events.
Flexible careers	You are able to enter, exit and re-enter employment with the same organisation, or to increase or decrease your workload or career pace to suit different life stages. This may be particularly relevant for employees transitioning to retirement. It can also include employees who are able to take a 'gap year' early in their careers and return to work for the same employer afterwards.
Other choices	Other options about when, where and how work is done, e.g. overtime and having autonomy to decide when to take breaks during the working day.

Legal requirements

The *Fair Work Act 2009 (FW Act)* provides different groups of employees with the right to request a change in their working arrangements, specifically the hours, patterns

and locations of work. While the FW Act specifies the groups that can statutorily request flexible working arrangements, any employee can approach their employer with such a request, but their request may be dealt with differently as it would not be governed by the current Act.

An employer who receives a request covered under the Act must provide a written response within 21 days. Employers covered by an award must first discuss the request with their employee to try to reach an agreement about changes to the employee's working conditions. A request can only be refused on 'reasonable business grounds'.

A flexible working arrangement may involve a change in working arrangements for a fixed period or on an ongoing basis, to accommodate a range of personal commitments.

 For more information on requesting flexible working arrangements, please visit the Fair Work Ombudsman website.

The Business Case for Flexible Work

Attracting and retaining diverse talent is crucial to future-proofing the workplace and the Australian economy more broadly. Making workplaces more flexible and responsive to the needs of employees is a key way of doing this.

Flexible working is increasingly recognised as a valuable way to attract and retain employees across all age groups and genders. It drives employee engagement and productivity as well as boosting employee well-being and happiness. Access to flexible working is clearly linked to:

- Improved organisational productivity
- An enhanced ability to attract and retain employees
- Improved employee well-being
- An increased proportion of women in leadership
- Future-proofing the workplace

The proportion of Australian organisations in the private sector with flexible working strategies has exceeded 70% since the 2017-18 reporting period. In addition, many organisations have informal flexible working arrangements with their employees. Access to flexible working arrangements is a key requirement of the WGEA Employer of Choice for Gender Equality citation.

The Benefits of Flexible Working

Improvements in productivity	+

Employee attraction and retention	+

Well-being	+

Diversity & women in leadership	+

Future-proofing the workplace	+

The business case for flexible working (PDF, 194.94 KB) ⭳

The business case for flexible working is an evidence based resource that outlines the ways flexible working is good for business.

Assessing Flexible Working in your Workplace

Prior to developing your flexibility strategy it is important to conduct a readiness assessment to understand where you are now, determine your flexibility vision and identify key priorities. This section provides a summary of the key concepts of the flexibility roadmap.

Using the flexibility roadmap

The flexibility roadmap has been developed to help organisations think about the flexibility journey and their overall position. Does the organisation view flexibility as a compliance or programmatic issue, in the sense that flexible working arrangements are offered in a limited way, or does the organisation view flexibility in a more holistic

way, where flexibility is part of the organisation's strategy and factored into the way work is done? Or does the organisation lie somewhere in between?

Figure 2: Flexibility roadmap

The flexibility roadmap has been simplified into three distinct stages: 'limited', 'basic' and 'embedded', which are aligned to the six broad phases outlined in the gender strategy toolkit. You can use your assessment against the capability framework to plot your position on the roadmap and determine where you want to go. Each phase is outlined below.

No.	Stage	Description
1	Limited	- This is consistent with the 'avoidance' or 'compliance approach' on the gender equality roadmap. - No recognition of how effective flexible work and family-friendly policies / practices can promote gender equality and diversity. - Flexible work and family-friendly policies / practices only exist to the extent they are required by legislation or regulation.
2	Basic	This is consistent with the 'programmatic' approach on the gender equality roadmap.

- Flexible work and family-friendly policies / practices are provided to meet the needs of specific groups or individuals.
- Typically flexibility is seen as a human resource function only.

3	Embedded	

- This is consistent with the 'strategic', 'integrated' and 'sustainable' approach on the gender equality roadmap.
- Enabling progression as flexibility becomes strategic in the mindset, systems and culture.
- Flexible work and family-friendly policies / practices are designed and accessible to benefit all employees; the flexibility business case is established.
- Flexible work and family-friendly policies / practices are leveraged as a business enabler; no value judgements are made about flexibility needs.
- Flexible, family-friendly working is expected, normalised and equitably accessible; it is integral to all business and people practices (e.g. workforce planning).
- The flexibility strategy is aligned to the business strategy and the organisation is moving towards the workplace of the future.

For more information on supporting your organisation to diagnose it's progress on flexiblity, please access the resources below:

Flexibility readiness assessment diagnostic tool (excel file) (XLSX, 50.42 KB) ⬇

This tool provides you with a template to calculate your flexibility score and determine your position on the flexibility roadmap.

Flexibility readiness assessment (PDF, 1.35 MB) ⬇

Prior to developing your workplace flexibility strategy, it is recommended that you undertake a readiness assessment. This toolkit provides the framework and practical guide to conducting a systematic diagnosis of 'where are we now'.

Flexibility employee focus group guidance (PDF, 235.15 KB) ⬇

A guide on how to run an effective focus group on workplace flexibility.

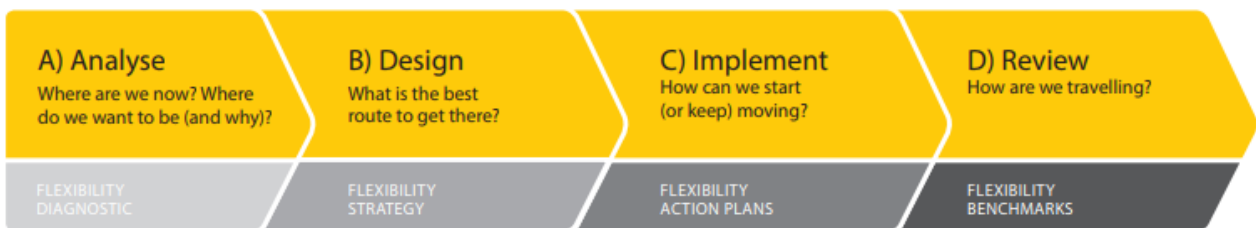# Developing and Implementing a Workplace Flexibility Strategy

Adopting a strategic approach to flexibility ensures it is viewed as an important organisational issue. When issues are seen as organisational, rather than individual, there is an understanding that they need to be dealt with comprehensively, taking into account every part of the organisation.

A strategic approach to flexibility

Due to the increasing imperative for organisations to improve their flexibility capability, flexibility is no longer confined to the working relationship between an employee and their manager. It involves many parts of the organisation working together to create a successful transformation. Whether it be creating new processes and systems around work; requiring managers and employees to change the way they work; or implementing new infrastructure and technology, organisations need to create a holistic, integrated approach that involves all key stakeholders. Leaders also need to play a role in supporting flexibility, whether it be via resourcing, modelling flexibility themselves or creating accountability for the transformation. The strategic approach enables internal decision makers to make choices that support the overall business direction. This is the role of a flexibility strategy, to enable decision making, as well as support implementation more broadly.

The change process

The change to organisation-wide flexibility requires a comprehensive strategy that includes an ongoing learning process, which enables the organisation to handle the complexity. In the past, flexibility has been seen as a benefit to employees, with little focus on the potential benefits to the organisation. As a result, the focus is usually on individuals and their managers with many organisations yet to develop the capabilities needed for effective, productive flexibility. Often within organisations, flexibility begins with one trusted, valued employee adopting a flexible working arrangement with minimal imposition on operations. While this is an important first step, it is not sufficient to enable an organisation to deal with the important areas of change that facilitate organisation-wide flexibility. An organisation's experience of flexible work with isolated individuals may reinforce, rather than challenge, existing misunderstandings about flexibility.

The resources below are designed to assist you with the design, implementation and review of a flexibility strategy and change journey:

Building a workplace flexibility strategy (PDF, 491.99 KB) ⤓

A guide to building an organisation-wide approach to implementing and managing workplace flexibility.

Sample employee flexible working questionnaire (XLSX, 36.46 KB) ⤓

These sample questions can be used in an employee questionnaire to assess perceptions and support of flexible working.

Sample workforce metric formulas (XLSX, 180.96 KB) ⤓

These sample workforce metric formulas can be used and adapted within your organisation.

Developing a flexible working arrangements policy

A formal policy on flexible working arrangements states the principles, guidelines and procedures related to flexible working arrangements and conditions that support employees' personal choices. It provides an overall framework for complying with legal requirements as well as for the responsibility and accountability of both employer and employees.

Why have a flexible working arrangements policy?

A formal policy on flexible working arrangements clearly outlines the organisation's stated intent and practices to provide a work environment that enables employees to optimise their contribution to the employer. It assists employers to meet basic legal obligations and supports people managers to make consistent and reliable decisions, which promotes a culture of fairness. It assists employees to manage their participation in paid work while providing clarity around entitlements and expectations. It benefits both the business and its employees.

It is recommended that organisations have a formal flexible working arrangements policy, which will assist organisation:

- meet legal requirements
- increase staff loyalty, satisfaction and commitment
- improve workplace productivity
- reduce absenteeism and staff turnover, resulting in lower recruitment and training costs
- attract, retain and develop talents
- be recognised as an employer of choice

Informal versus formal flexibility policy   +

Leading practice snapshot   +

Key features of a flexible working arrangements policy   +

Developing a flexible working policy (PDF, 189.4 KB) ⬇

This briefing note provides guidance on the key features of a flexible working arrangements policy.

Flexibility for Executives

As traditional ways of working are disrupted, CEOs and executive leadership teams increasingly need to develop the leadership skills to implement more flexible ways of working.

Providing flexible working arrangements for all employees and reducing work/life conflict has clear benefits for employers and research shows that flexibility is a key driver for all women and men at work, not just those with young children. Many women and men don't conform to the full-time worker mould; they have other priorities and aspirations such as pursuing additional study, approaching retirement or being engaged parents.

Flexibility is a key driver and enabler of gender equality. Flexible working at all levels enables greater access to roles and leadership positions across an organisation for women and men. As there are fewer opportunities for combining flexible work, especially part-time work, with management and supervisory positions, a lack of flexibility is a barrier to greater workforce participation for women. Supporting women and men to work flexibly can help enable women's increased participation in the workforce. Supporting men to work flexibly enables women's increased participation in the workforce, a key to achieving gender equality.

Flexibility capability

When an organisation takes a strategic approach to implementing flexible working arrangements, flexibility capability is viewed as an important organisational issue, rather than an issue confined to the relationship between an employee and manager. When issues are seen as organisational, rather than individual, there is often a parallel realisation that they need to be dealt with comprehensively, taking into account every part of the organisation.

The transformation that occurs when an organisation improves its flexibility capability is far-reaching and can involve creating new processes and systems around work and require managers and employees to change the way they work. It can also require

new infrastructure or technology. Organisations need to create a holistic, integrated implementation approach that involves all the key players who can enable flexibility.

It is also important to understand your obligations Under the Fair Work Act 2009. Certain employees may request a flexible working arrangement under certain circumstances. The National Employment Standards that are part of the Fair Work Act 2009 require employers to consider employees' requests for flexibility.

The Fair Work Act 2009 also prohibits discrimination in the workplace on the basis of factors such as family or carer's responsibilities, among other things, and makes provision for 'individual flexibility arrangements'. For more information see the Fair Work Ombudsman website.

What we say	+

How we act	+

What we prioritise	+

What we measure	+

Executive briefing on workplace flexibility (PDF, 399.53 KB) ⬇

This toolkit highlights the role of the executive team in leading an organisation towards an successful flexible working environment, including:

- Why introduce flexibility?
- Flexibility strategy roadmap – how to develop clear strategic objectives
- The 10 leadership capabilities required for effective flexibility
- Demonstrating a strong leadership commitment to flexibility.

Flexibility for Managers

Organisations are under increasing pressure to improve their flexibility capability. Flexibility can no longer be confined to the working relationship between an employee and their manager, but must become a standard way of working to meet the demands of modern life. Flexible working arrangements help teams and individuals to work productively, be more strongly engaged with their work, and stay longer with the organisation. Implementing flexible working arrangements across teams and organisations presents a variety of challenges that managers and employees will need to negotiate. Teams that are working flexibly still need to operate productively with other teams and departments that are also working flexibly. This requires new and different approaches to management, drawing on individual abilities to connect, enable and collaborate with their teams and other stakeholders in the organisation.

The benefits of flexibility for teams and organisations

Research has shown there are a number of benefits for individuals, teams and organisations when employees are enabled to work flexibly.

- **Improved output.** For jobs that require concentration, working at home, working at hours when the office is quiet, or working from another location can help with the quality and speed of the work.
- **Flexible workers can be more effective.** Successful flexible workers are excellent self-managers who are both well organised and effective communicators.
- **Improved ability to meet the needs of clients and stakeholders.** An organisation that works flexibly can expand service delivery hours, meeting customer needs for out-of-hours contact with the organisation. Flexible work locations may extend the organisation's ability to react more quickly to client needs, or to extend their reach to more or different clients. Extra levels of service can increase loyalty.
- **Retaining knowledge, skills and experience / avoiding the cost of recruitment and retraining.** In the current job market, flexibility has become an attractive feature of organisations and has been marked as a key influence in candidates' job choices. Retaining existing knowledge and skills is also important to ensure maximum value is gained from the organisation's investment in recruitment and training. Offering flexibility reduces the likelihood that employees will leave and increases loyalty to the organisation.
- **Employers of Choice do flexibility well.** If your organisation aims to become a WGEA Employer of Choice for Gender Equality, providing employees with flexibility may align nicely with that aim.
- **Increased job satisfaction.** Employees who have opportunities to work flexibly have been shown to have greater job satisfaction and this increases both their productivity and their sense of loyalty to the organisation.

- **Improved teamwork.** Teamwork often improves as knowledge and enthusiasm are shared among a more motivated flexible working team.

Understand your role as a manager of flexible workers

Managers play a critical role in enabling and embedding workplace flexibility. Key aspects of this role are to:

- ensure employees are aware of their rights and responsibilities around flexible work
- provide employees with support and build a team culture based on high performance, trust and outcomes
- ensure communication and resource management are enabled between teams and departments
- set an example by openly supporting flexibility and working flexibly themselves, which will help employees and teams understand that working flexibly is a normal and accepted part of work.

This toolkit is designed to help managers at all levels implement productive, successful flexible working arrangements. It is intended to be of particular use to managers who directly manage employees working flexibly.

The toolkit outlines strategies that can guide you as you seek to maximise the benefits of flexibility. These strategies can be applied to the implementation of flexible working arrangements across whole teams or for only a few employees.

Flexibility good practice 1: leadership   +

Flexibility good practice 2: team culture   +

Flexibility good practice 3: active learning   +

Flexibility good practice 4: resource planning   +

Flexibility good practice 5: information flow   +

Flexibility good practice 6: results-based performance

management   +

Flexibility good practice 7: self-management   +

Flexibility good practice 8: stakeholder management   +

Flexibility good practice 9: legal risk management   +

Flexibility good practice 10: change management   +

Manager flexibility toolkit (PDF, 412.79 KB) ⤓

This resource will help managers create successful, engaged and productive flexible teams.

Flexibility for Employees

When you first think about flexibility, you might wonder: "How should I approach my manager to talk about this?" or "Is there even a chance that I will get this flexibility request approved?" The steps that you are most likely to go through in requesting and accessing flexibility are:

- What sort of flexibility would you prefer?
- What effect might it have on your team and your manager if you adopt this type of flexibility?
- What will your manager be most concerned about in offering you flexibility?
- What can you do to help flexibility work effectively for your manager and team?
- What are your employer's legal responsibilities?
- What if you can't have the specific type or amount of flexibility you want or need?

Note that adopting flexibility and making it successful in your team may require some deep personal changes on behalf of your manager and teammates. Don't let this put you off asking for flexibility, but think about the whole picture so that you will be better able to negotiate effectively.

| Requesting flexibility | + |

| Addressing manager concerns about flexibility | + |

| Expressing your interest in flexibility | + |

| Making flexibility work | + |

| Prepare proactively | + |

| Monitoring, evaluating, adjusting and consolidating flexibility | + |

| Ongoing management of flexibility | + |

| Managing yourself | + |

| Manage the interaction between your work and your home life | + |

| What to do if problems arise | + |

Employee flexibility toolkit (PDF, 338.22 KB) ⬇

This toolkit explores how employees can negotiate and manage a successful flexible working arrangement, including:

- Identifying a few flexibility options that could work for you
- Expressing your interest in flexibility
- Preparing for flexibility
- Monitoring, evaluating, adjusting and consolidating flexibility
- Managing yourself
- Managing the interaction between your work and your home life
- What to do if problems arise.

Related Resources

Gendered Impacts of Covid 19 →

Research Paper

Health crises can exacerbate existing gender inequalities. As the global health pandemic caused by COVID-19 is ongoing, the impacts and effects are still being assessed and understood. However, preliminary research and emerging data show that women are likely to be affected in particular ways by this global pandemic.

The need for workplace flexibility during the crisis may have a continuing effect on workplace policies and practices

Case study: Working flexibly in a large company →

Find out how NAB balances the needs of their customers, business, teams and the individuals with their belief that flexible working should be part of everyday business, available for employees regardless of gender, role or location.

Latest news

| Working flexibly and COVID19 → | The best Mother's Day gift? Flexible work for → |

Whilst this situation is extraordinary, working from home and flexible working arrangements are not new concepts and, in fact, are key enablers of achieving workplace gender equality. The Agency has developed comprehensive resources to help you plan and implement these arrangements.

women and men

Ahead of Mother's Day earlier this month, the Agency's Director Libby Lyons wrote an OpEd for the Sydney Morning Herald. You can read the full piece in this article.

Employers should set targets for men in flexible work ⟶

When we talk about men and women balancing work and caring, it can be all too easy to frame the discussion in adversarial absolutes. For instance, when we discuss the gender pay gap and inequality in the workplace and at home, some might take the easy option of saying it is mainly due to men focusing on their careers and not "pulling their weight" at home.

External resources

The Great Debate: Flexibility vs. Face Time ↗

This Catalyst report from 2013 examines flexible work arrangements separating the myths from the facts and aims to help organisations become employers of choice in attracting and retaining top talent.