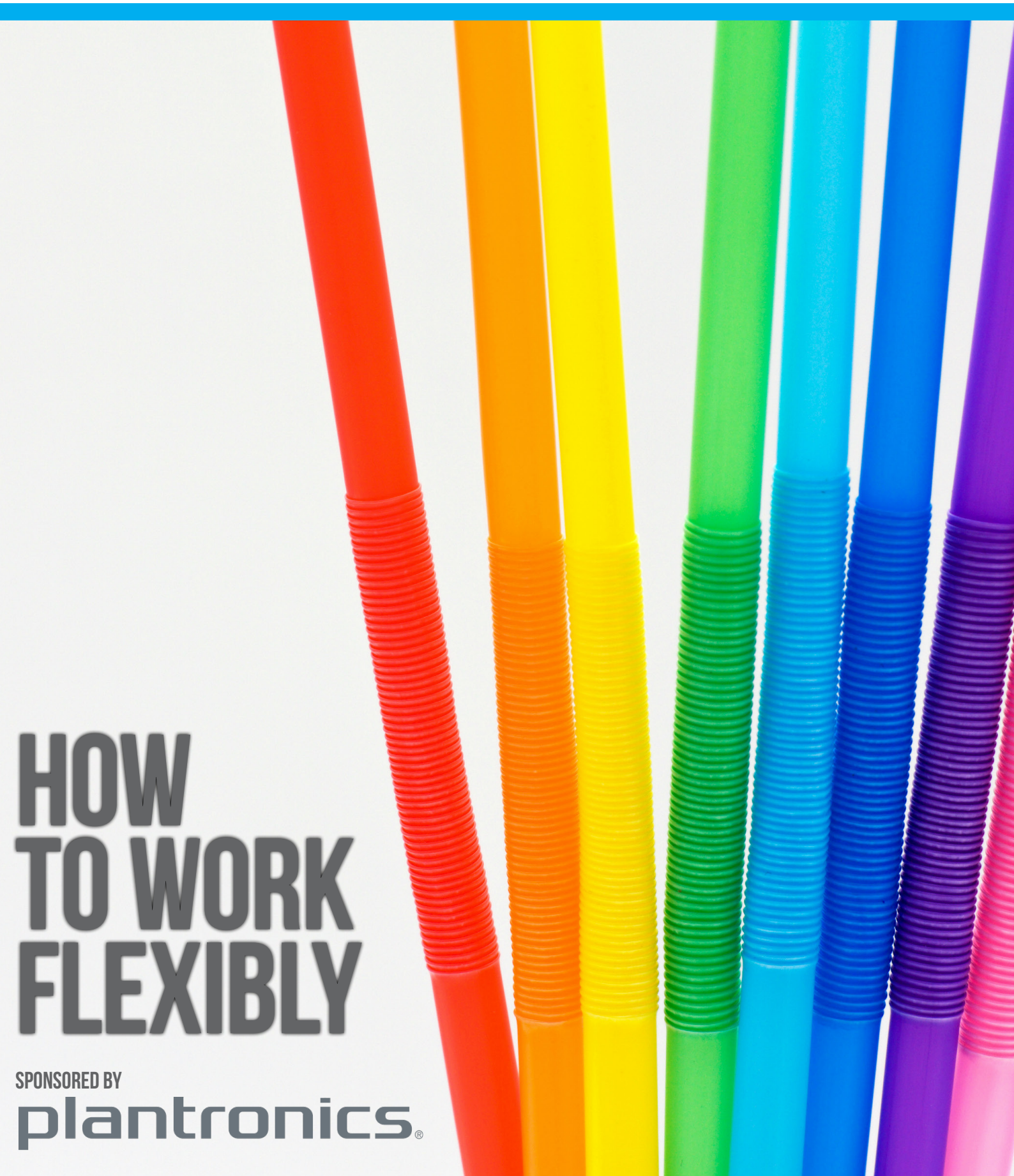


FlexibleBoss

flexible working news, views and best practice



**HOW
TO WORK
FLEXIBLY**

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INTRODUCTION

MANY EMPLOYERS ARE POSITIVE ABOUT FLEXIBILITY AND OPEN TO OFFERING IT. BUT IT CAN BE HARD TO KNOW WHERE TO START WHEN MAKING YOUR CASE.

It would be nice if we could all work in ‘agile’ organisations: places where no-one worried about when you came and went or where you worked as long as you did your job well. Where you could take a long lunch to go for a run, knock off early to pick the kids up from school or stay home for the gas man without asking permission (or feeling guilty).

There are forward-thinking organisations trying to create these kind of working environments. Headset company Plantronics, which has kindly sponsored this guide, evolved to a flexible working organisation in 2010.

“We have reaped the benefits since,” says Sarah Roxborough, HR Director, Europe and Africa. Staff stay longer, take fewer sick days and are happier at work. “Managers match employees’ flexible working requests with the requirements of the business and this provides a win-win environment. Our associates can enjoy their optimal work life balance and we have a motivated and productive team.”

However, in some quarters change is slow. Until it accelerates, the rest of us need to work in the real world, where flexible working is likely to be based on specific agreements between individuals and employers rather than organisation-wide initiatives.

This guide is intended to act as a starting point for those who want to make changes to the way they work. Thank you to Plantronics for sponsoring it.



“ *The rest of us need to work in the real world where flexible working is likely to be based on specific agreements between individuals and employers.* ”

Heather Greig-Smith, EDITOR

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CHOOSING FLEXIBILITY

Stop and think before you approach your boss. Why do you want/need the flexibility and what are the different ways this could be achieved? For how long do you need flexibility? Here are some of the options available when negotiating a flexible working arrangement:

1

PART-TIME WORKING

This can allow you to combine different elements of life such as caring or parenthood and retain your career. Think through how many days you want to work and how this would work for your employer. Do they need someone covering the role every working day? Do you have a client-facing role and how will that be affected? How would you cope with any backlog or build-up of work? Which days would you like to work? This might be an area where you could be flexible in return – if you are willing to work the three days they prefer then that could go a long way towards getting a ‘yes’.

2

WORKING REMOTELY OR FROM HOME

Maybe this would allow you to pick up/drop off the kids at school or cut down a lengthy commute and have time to exercise. Be clear on your reasons and think through potential objections – many managers feel uncomfortable when they can’t see their workers and not all are good at defining work by output instead of time spent in the office.

3

JOB SHARING

Not always considered, job sharing can work brilliantly when both partners are pulling together to create the lives they want. Sharing the load means you have a sounding board, can cover each other for sickness and holiday periods and don’t come into the office to a full inbox and massive backlog of work. This relies on excellent communication and teamwork between the job share partners. “We never expect anyone else to have to have a conversation twice,” says Clare Dolan, a Unilever global strategy marketing director, who job shares with Rosie O’Malley. For more information on job sharing visit: <http://www.thejobshareproject.com/>



4. Phased retirement

Not everyone wants, or can afford, to retire at 65. With the abolition of the default retirement age there is no reason why older workers cannot remain in the workforce.

Making a case to your employer for phasing your retirement means they can benefit from your expertise and experience for longer, which may be invaluable in training up less experienced members of staff.

Companies such as Lloyds Banking Group have set up projects to bring retired workers in as consultants at peak periods or for holiday cover. “Customers know and like these people. We have increased our customer service levels and lending,” says diversity and inclusion director Fiona Cannon.

This could be something to explore with your business if your manager is open to the idea.

OTHER OPTIONS TO CONSIDER...

- ➔ *Term time working: hours are loaded into the school term, allowing you take holidays off to be with children.*
- ➔ *Compressed hours: working full-time hours but over fewer days.*
- ➔ *Flexitime: As long as the employee covers their core hours they can choose when to start and finish their working day.*
- ➔ *Annualised hours: This means you have to work a certain number of hours across the year but those hours can rise and fall depending on the time of year or demand. This could offer important flexibility at key times such as school holidays.*
- ➔ *Staggered hours: different start and finish times could offer your employer greater coverage. For example if you can start early and open the office or finish late and take client calls after normal hours.*
- ➔ *Charity Working Families has some [useful tables to help you compare your income under different scenarios.](#)*



CAN YOU WORK FROM HOME? SHOULD YOU?

- ➔ *A mix of office/workplace and remote working could be best – both for you and your employer in keeping good connections and stopping you feeling isolated. Think through the practicalities – do you have space and quiet at home? If not, could you use a local co-working space? Do you like working without supervision?*
- ➔ *Some people enjoy the social interaction they get from the workplace and struggle to work from home. When Chinese call centre C-Trip experimented with homeworking, it randomly allocated home or office locations to 249 employees. At the end of the trial the scheme was rolled out to the entire business and employees were allowed to choose where they worked. Half of those at home switched back to the office and two thirds of those who had previously wanted to try working from home decided to stay in the office because of fears of loneliness and lower rates of promotion.*
- ➔ *You may be surprised to find you don't like working on your own so consider asking for a trial – your employer may prefer this anyway as it demonstrates commitment to making the arrangement work and tweaking things if they don't go smoothly.*

PLANNING YOUR CASE

BEFORE YOU APPROACH YOUR EMPLOYER, THINK THROUGH HOW FLEXIBILITY WOULD WORK FOR YOU AND THEM.

Things to consider:

- 1. Look for examples.** If there are people already working flexibly in your workplace, talking it through with them could help you plan your own case. Try to be confident. Recruiting staff is time-consuming and expensive – it makes sense for your boss to keep your skills.
- 2. Think output.** What does your employer need you to do? Provide a list of your tasks and show how they would be achieved under your new schedule. You need to be realistic as if you are going part-time it will not be possible to do everything you were doing in five days.
- 3. Impact on colleagues and clients.** How will your proposal affect them? Show that you have thought about this and can ensure your flexibility isn't their headache.
- 4. Stay in touch.** Think through how you will communicate with your manager and colleagues and how and when they will be able to reach you.
- 5. Be flexible.** Have a couple of options that could work and be prepared to listen to your employer's worries and needs – it's better to deal with any concerns and objections now than find they are resistant to your new working pattern when you start it.
- 6. Trial period.** Some employers will suggest a trial period for your new working pattern. This could be a perfect opportunity to tweak things that don't work for either side. Your willingness to agree to a trial period will reassure them that you're committed to the solution working for everyone.
- 7. Trust is key:** Remember, it's often all about attitude. Companies have set up entire home working schemes purely because a top employee was moving away and they didn't want to lose them. Sarah Roxborough at Plantronics says: "We do everything on a trial basis for three months. Then we will make a contractual change but it is always in the company's gift to take it back if there are issues. We haven't yet had to do this."

MAKING YOUR REQUEST

What is a statutory request?



From 30 June 2014 every employee has the statutory (legal) right to request flexible working once they have worked for an organisation for 26 weeks. Requests need to be made in writing. If the company turns down the request you can appeal and the whole process of application, decision and appeal must take place within three months.

Bear in mind that it could take this long to get a final decision. You can only make one request in a 12 month period so an informal discussion may be a good idea to gauge your employer's initial reaction.

What if I don't have 26 weeks service?



It doesn't mean you can't ask. The employer won't have to follow the same processes but some are happy to consider requests from all staff. In certain cases it may be preferable to make a non-statutory request anyway. Citizens Advice has some [guidance on the advantages and disadvantages](#), such as getting a quicker decision, making temporary changes or asking for a trial period.

Where can I get more advice?



Acas (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) provides free and impartial advice to employees and employers on flexible working and other workplace issues. It wrote the code of practice on how employers should handle flexible working requests and provides a wealth of information plus a free helpline for advice. [Visit its flexible working pages for more detail](#). You can also access [government guidance](#) online and charities such as [Working Families](#) and [Citizens Advice](#) publish their own guides and can advise you, particularly if you experience difficulties or discrimination and need help.



Reasons for saying no

If the employer says no it has to give one of the following business reasons:

- the burden of additional costs
- an inability to reorganise work amongst existing staff
- an inability to recruit additional staff
- a detrimental impact on quality
- a detrimental impact on performance
- detrimental effect on ability to meet customer demand
- insufficient work for the periods the employee proposes to work
- planned structural changes to the business.

This covers a lot of possibilities so an employer who is averse to flexible working will probably be able to find a reason to refuse. They don't have to offer an appeal but it is best practice to do so and will show they handled your request in a 'reasonable manner'. See page 13 for more on what to do if your request is refused.

WHEN YOU MAKE A STATUTORY REQUEST...

- ➔ *It may be worth having informal conversations prior to submitting your formal request so you can gauge the initial reaction.*
- ➔ *Make your request in writing and state the date the request is made.*
- ➔ *Explain the change you want and when you'd like it to begin. You may want to offer more than one option.*
- ➔ *You need to state whether you have previously made a flexible working request and if so when that was.*
- ➔ *You don't have to give a reason for your request (but in practice it may be easier if you do).*
- ➔ *You should say if you are making the request in relation to the Equality Act, for example because of a disability.*
- ➔ *It is good practice for your employer to have a meeting with you to discuss your request.*
- ➔ *If a request is approved then it means your contract will be changed permanently. If you want it to be temporary or subject to trial you should discuss and agree this.*

WORKING FLEXIBLY



Good news – they said yes! While it’s tempting to sit back and enjoy the result, now the hard work begins in making sure your flexible arrangement works for the long-term (or as long as you need it to).

What can you do to make sure your flexible arrangement is a success?

Communicate: tackle concerns your colleagues, manager and clients may have by communicating effectively. Don’t sit at home quietly working without making contact with your team. Get on the phone or use other ways to stay in touch regularly. It’s easy to let this slip so if needs be put it in your diary and make time for keeping in touch. Working part-time you may want to cut back all small talk and

‘time wasting’ but connecting with co-workers face to face is important as well.

Delivery: make sure your work quality doesn’t slip and deliver on time. Communicate regularly with your manager to reassure them that you’re getting things done. This may be particularly important with managers who aren’t used to managing flexible workers.

Set expectations and stick to them: if there are times you can’t be available then be clear about them and give options for people who may need you (you may not be checking email but can respond to urgent phone calls on non-working days, for example).

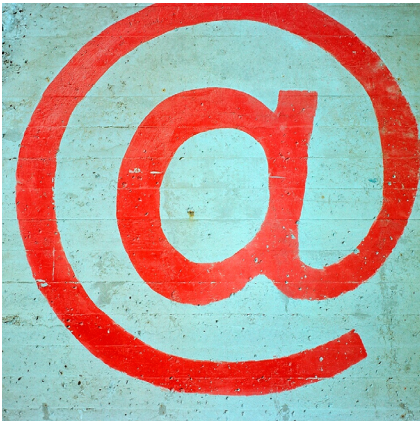
Don’t get lonely: working from home some or all of the time can be isolating. Make sure you get some face to face contact when you can and consider local business networking groups, and co-working spaces for human contact.

Don’t work too much (or too little): when you don’t have a commute to break up your day it is easy to lose track of time and not take the breaks you need to be healthy and productive. Put boundaries in place so you don’t burn out. Equally, make sure you’re doing your job in the time you have and not abusing the flexibility you’ve been offered.

TECHNOLOGY

According to Cisco, this year the number of mobile workers will reach one billion – that’s 40% of the global workforce. Technology providers are working hard to replicate social connections and water cooler moments from afar. Jon Mell, social business leader for the UK & Ireland at tech giant IBM, points out that working in the same place as your whole team is no longer guaranteed. “Even if you’re in the office, in some ways you are working remotely,” he says. “It’s not just a working from home thing – it’s a global trend in terms of not being physically located together.”

How can you use technology to best effect when working flexibly? Don’t neglect the solutions offered by your company. Many of us don’t get to grips with the tools provided – or we use them in a limited way. Changing your working patterns is a good time to explore what’s available to you.



OPTIONS FOR COMMUNICATION: ARE YOU USING THEM ALL?

Remote access to files and company information. This is a basic requirement for those working away from the office. Make sure your network connection can handle the applications you need. Document sharing options are common and vital when working with others.

Email: an obvious way to communicate, it doesn't always offer a personal connection and inbox overload is a common source of stress. "Emails can be in an inbox for years and useful stuff is lost when someone leaves," adds Maria Casu of IT consultancy Portal. Be wary of overusing.

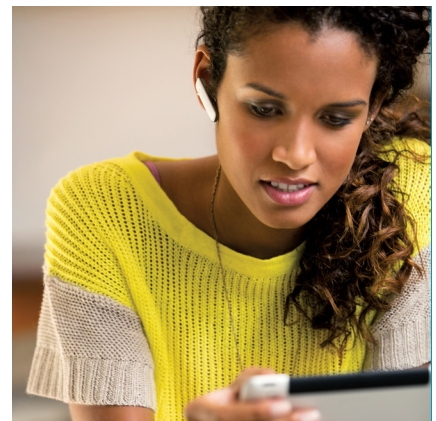
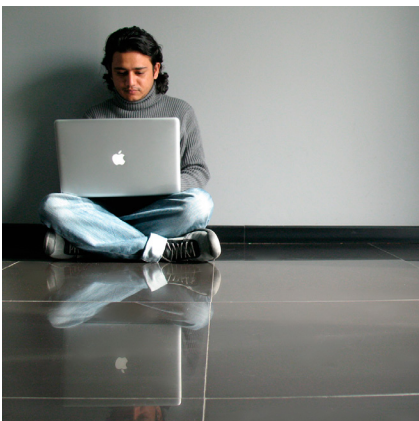
Video conferencing: a valuable communication channel, though feared by some. As video gets better (including free options such as Skype and Google Hangouts) it's worth getting over any reluctance to turn on your web cam. There are plenty of [tips on video etiquette](#) out there.

Audio: in their book [The Smarter Working Manifesto](#), Guy Clapperton and Philip Vanhoutte suggest that a generation of workers don't have good phone skills. Polish yours. Instead of emailing it may be more productive to call and connect with the person to resolve an issue.

Instant messenger: can get you close to that small talk, team-working feeling. Manage yours effectively to be 'present' when team members need you.

Face to face: if you don't work in the office all the time make the most of opportunities to meet colleagues when you are there. Plan your work so you do tasks that require concentration at home and collaboration in the office.

Collaboration software: increasingly companies are buying products that offer some or all of the above options: collaboration 'rooms' or mini sites for projects or teams. Explore what's on offer - you'll be most successful if you get to grips with all the tools at your disposal.



WHAT EQUIPMENT DO YOU NEED TO WORK FLEXIBLY?

Keep it simple. The number of tools you need to do your job is probably small and most mobile or flexible workers become used to carrying around their 'office' in a backpack. Do make sure you follow your company's guidance on data security. Here are some of the tools you're likely to need:

A laptop computer – this should be lightweight and portable as you'll probably be carrying it between your office/workplace and home or other locations on a regular basis. Wireless internet connections will allow you to connect wherever you are, but it's worth considering the quality and speed of your home internet connection. What is your back up if the connection goes down?

Associated equipment - Using a laptop for long periods of time is not advisable without using a stand or laptop riser to ensure the screen is at the right height. You may want to have a second, larger screen at home that you can connect to. Using a proper mouse, either fixed or wireless, is sensible and you can buy neat folding keyboards as well.

Phone connection: does your company have a unified communications system that you can connect to? Will you be using fixed line, VoIP or mobile? Make sure you have good reception/a good connection as it will frustrate your employer if the quality of connection is poor.

Bluetooth headsets: if you need to make calls then a bluetooth headset can be invaluable. Discreet and comfortable, many have noise-cancelling properties that mean you can make calls on the go without interference. They leave you hands-free and can connect to multiple devices.

Chargers: if you're working on the go make sure you have plenty of chargers (for computer, phone, headset) so you don't get stuck with a black screen or depleted mobile.

Home office equipment: your employer is responsible for ensuring you work safely at home. A proper space to work with desk and ergonomic chair are important - sitting on the bed won't cut it and they can't agree to you working somewhere unsuitable.



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WHAT IF THEY SAY NO?



What do you do if they say no? This can be hugely disappointing. Hopefully you have a sense of the reason for the refusal. Is there a genuine problem with your role being flexible or is the company just resistant to the idea?

If there really is a practical problem then perhaps you can discuss ways for this to be resolved and revisit or revise the request in future. You can only make one statutory request per year but your employer may be open to an informal dialogue.

Appeals within statutory process: Acas advises that it is preferable to reach agreement within the company so you should try and do so before going elsewhere. If your appeal is refused you can try your company's internal grievance procedure (which could help if you have a difficult line manager rather than a company that is anti-flexibility), seek assistance

from a third party such as a trade union or go through the Acas conciliation process.

After that, if an agreement is still not reached Acas has an arbitration scheme or you could choose to go to employment tribunal. However, there are fees for this and you can't do so just because your request was turned down - there would have to be a problem with the process. For more detail see [Acas's guide](#).

The sad reality is that there are some companies and managers that just don't get it yet. It is possible to go through all the appeals and challenges, but you may be left feeling that your position and prospects are damaged.

The good news is that more organisations are implementing smarter or flexible working programmes. "The flexible working and family friendly landscape is changing and work life balance is now an achievable goal for people of all ages and at every stage of their working lives," says Working Families CEO Sarah Jackson.

Moving jobs may be best. This can seem impossible when you are undergoing a transition such as having children or taking on caring responsibilities. However, there has been a rise in the number of specialist recruiters who have flexible roles on their books. [Capability Jane](#), [Timewise](#), [Flexiworkforce](#), [Working Mums](#), [Mumsnet](#), and [Ten2Two](#) are among those. The world is changing, take heart.

CASE STUDY: NPOWER

After working full-time for eight years before the birth of her son, npower project manager Katie Horridge requested a four-day week. She was the first person in her team to work flexibly and initially she wasn't sure how her role would work on a part-time basis. After discussing it with her managers she took off two half days a week instead of one full day.

Testing the arrangement showed that one full day would actually be better for her and the business. Katie found she would often work a full day early in the week because she would stay on to deal with something. Making up the time later meant colleagues weren't sure when she would be in. It also became apparent that half days limited the travel involved in her role.

Once it was clear that her performance wasn't affected by the new pattern, Katie says her bosses trusted her to manage her time. Discussing and tweaking her days as she went along allowed them to find the best balance for all. Eighteen months later she is working a four-day week, taking every Friday off to be with her son and working from home on a Monday. "That's all come about by being flexible."

Katie advises others requesting flexibility to be prepared to compromise a little. She also suggests giving plenty of warning – she mentioned when she went on maternity leave that she would like to come back for four days. "I asked them to think about which days they wanted me to be in the office and I would arrange my childcare around that."

She adds that being patient and flexible is important. "You have to give everyone time to get used to it, especially if they don't have other people working flexibly. It will evolve over time."

“ You have to give everyone time to get used to it. It will evolve. ”



CASE STUDY: NPOWER

Technology is the key to Justin Hyde's ability to work flexibly and improve his work life balance. The company's agile working programme has enabled him to make his new home in Somerset his base, despite npower's offices being located elsewhere.

Justin was already working in different locations when he needed to, as his role as continuous improvement manager for workplace development cuts across business functions. However, communication was by traditional phone call and he was still technically based in an office. The set-up and equipment meant working remotely was not as effective an option.

Now, he and other npower remote workers are equipped with light and portable ergonomic technology that allows them to work effectively from home or other locations: laptop and stand, mouse, keyboard and headset. "We're in a much better position. We have Lync technology so can do video or audio calls, share screens and send quick messages. That has improved things dramatically," he says.

Justin asked to make home his main work base a year ago and trialled the arrangement successfully. He works from home three or four days a week and travels to meetings when needed. "It has completely changed the way I think about work. It's not about presenteeism; it's about what we deliver," he says. "The flexibility suits me."

He is working with colleagues to embed an agile working approach across npower. The challenges differ depending on the team but changing culture and assumptions about work is an important step. Having the right tools is also crucial in making flexibility a success.

“ Flexibility suits me. It has completely changed the way I think about work. ”



PLANTRONICS

Headset company Plantronics is now renowned for its agile work environment. Many other businesses have attended its open days and learned from its model. However, Clare Tibbitts, UK & Ireland head of marketing and inside sales, started her flexible arrangement before the wider changes took place.

She credits having a receptive and forward-thinking boss for being able to change her work pattern to suit career and motherhood. After the birth of her second child, she returned to work and used annual leave to work three days a week for a couple of months. After that, when she returned full-time she struggled to fit everything in.

“I had an informal chat with my manager and asked if they would consider a four-day week trial,” she says. “I chose to have a Monday off as Friday is when we do most of our team meetings. I could do everything on that Monday – from dentist appointments to children’s swimming lessons – and be totally organised and focused for the four days of work.”

Clare manages a team at Plantronics and says it is vital to consider what is suitable for your role. For example, customer-facing jobs may require your presence every day. However, some kind of flexibility is usually possible – such as working school hours instead of nine to five. “You have to be realistic about what you’re requesting because the business has to operate. If I needed to come in on a Monday I would. It’s about give and take.”

Her experience of working flexibly has been very positive, both for home and her career. “I have continued to be promoted and have not been hindered in my role.”

“ Be realistic. The business has to operate. It’s about give and take. ”



Sources

gov.uk/flexibleworking

[Working Families:](#)

[A Flexible Future](#)

[Choosing a Work Pattern](#)

[Frequently asked](#)

[Citizens Advice](#)

[ACAS](#)

[Smart Working Handbook](#)

[Smarter Working Manifesto](#)

[C-Trip paper](#)

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Flexible Boss provides independent journalism and research on flexible working in the United Kingdom and beyond. From policy to property; transport to technology; human resources to legal challenges, it is a resource for employers to come together and share best practice.

The site promotes flexible working innovation as a solution to many of the challenges facing the economy and workforce, while recognising the implementation challenges. This is the first Flexible Boss publication for employees.

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