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Top Employer Awards

Best Practice Report 2015

An in-depth report of the best practice in flexible working and progressing women in the workplace



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Top Employer Awards

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Introduction

Welcome to the 2015 Best Practice Report. This is our third Best Practice Report and it aims to highlight what the most progressive organisations are doing in the field of diversity, family support and flexible working as a way of inspiring other employers. First, though, it is important to set that good practice against a background of policy and news developments over the last year.

2015 is a year of change for working parents. Not only will it see a general election, but new legislation on issues including Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and the introduction of a childcare tax rebate will come on stream.

In December 2014 SPL - which allows mums and dads to share most of the leave after their baby is born - came into force for parents looking to adopt or have children after 5th April 2015. This could potentially have big implications for women's career progression if the appetite for it shown in various surveys turns into reality. Workingmums.co.uk's annual survey 2014 found that 44% of parents would consider taking SPL. A survey of employers conducted towards the end of last year found 81% welcomed SPL, with 19% - mainly smaller businesses - saying they would find it difficult to implement in their organisation.

What the actual uptake will be will be interesting to follow and many employers seem to be adopting a wait and see approach. For some, the focus is on trying to find out what dads want in terms of work life issues. They may have extensive women's networks and maternity coaching, but dads are a more amorphous group and more difficult to identify. Some, such as Centrica, are therefore surveying their male employees to find out how dads have taken paternity leave recently and to calculate the likely number who will become new dads each year. Centrica has also set up a dads' network which will provide dads with a place to meet and discuss issues that are relevant to them, but will also give Centrica a better idea of what dads want. It also hopes to do more structured surveys of dads this year and is using Yammer to raise awareness and start conversations.

A big issue with regard to SPL is the financial one. If employers offer enhanced maternity pay, what will be the implications of SPL and will couples be worse off - or employers be in breach of equality legislation - if a similar deal is not offered to dads? Our recent employer survey showed many employers had either adapted their company maternity package [15%] or were considering doing so [39%], for instance, by reducing what they offered to mothers in order to increase what they offer to dads.

Some organisations have already committed to offering enhanced paternity pay on an equal level to what they offer mothers. They include the Civil Service, PWC, Shell and Deloitte. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have pledged increases in paternity leave - and in Labour's case paternity pay - as SPL shines the spotlight on the potential barriers to dads taking leave when their children are born.

Extension to Flexible Working

Our survey also questioned employers about the impact of the extension of the right to request flexible working to all employees introduced in June 2014. It found that 11% would be more cautious in granting flexible working as a result of the extension and 53% said they would grant it on a case by case basis despite 30% saying managers find it hard to manage multiple requests.

Nevertheless, many saw the benefits - 58% of employers thought flexible working improved retention, with only 9% said it didn't. Only 3% thought it made workers less efficient with 36% saying staff who worked flexibly were more efficient. While 25% said they faced no challenges in implementing flexible working, for those who did the biggest barriers were that their business or their clients demanded set hours.

The statistics show that employers are still adopting an ad hoc approach to flexible working rather than considering a whole culture change. This makes it more difficult to cope with multiple requests and to ensure all staff see it as a business benefit rather than just an employee one.

A recent legal case against PricewaterhouseCoopers shows that even the most progressive employers can be caught out by managers who don't get the case for flexible working. A dad sued them when a manager turned his flexible working request down saying it would damage his career, whereas women in the same office had their requests accepted. Meanwhile, a Workingmums.co.uk technology survey, sponsored by the BBC, found nearly three quarters of parents rate flexible working as very important when they are looking for a new job - with homeworking the most popular form. However, respondents said relatively few of their employers supply any equipment or technical support to enable them to work outside the office.

Among other legislative changes about to come in is the extension of unpaid parental leave. Currently, this applies to children under five or up to 18 if a child is disabled. From April, the age limit will increase to 18 for all children. The leave allows employees with over a year's service to take unpaid leave of up to four weeks a year [up to a maximum of 18 weeks] for each child. In addition, fathers and partners, including surrogate parents, have been given a new right to take time off work to attend up to two ante-natal visits.

Childcare

Later this year, a new child tax rebate will be introduced to help parents out with childcare costs. This allows couples where both parents work to claim 20% off their annual childcare bill. Childcare costs and availability, a particular problem for parents of disabled children, are set to become a major issue in the elections with each party promising to lower the costs in some way, including plans to increase the amount of free pre-school care [Labour and the SNP], to guarantee access to after and before school childcare [Labour] and to give 15 hours free childcare to all two year olds [Liberal Democrats]. The Conservatives argue their child tax rebate proposal and the creation of 50,000 new childcare places will make it easier for women to return to work.

Meanwhile, the Workingmums.co.uk annual survey, sponsored by McDonald's Restaurants Ltd, showed the number of parents using grandparents for childcare has risen. 56% make use of grandparents to reduce their childcare costs, 18% use tax credits, 25% have childcare vouchers, 23% use friends, 8% get older siblings to help and 18% get help from other relatives while many use a combination of these options.



The survey also showed two thirds of working mums are considering setting up their own businesses in part to get around flexible working and care issues, including childcare and elder care which is becoming a growing issue for many parents. Some 38% of those considering starting a business have already put the wheels in motion.

The annual survey highlighted other changes, for instance, the growing number of women who are the main breadwinners in their family. Some 17% of women who are living with a partner earn more than them. Moreover, UCAS figures show the gender gap on university admissions is widening, with 57,800 more women being admitted to university than men this year. In addition, the Office for National Statistics shows record numbers of women in work. This is helping to push diversity issues up the business agenda. SPL is also placing a new spotlight on dads' attitudes.

The Modern Families' Index, published by Working Families and Bright Horizons, shows dads, particularly younger dads, want to be more involved in childcare and that more than a third had taken time off sick to look after children. Half of dads said they would be worried about asking to reduce their hours and 34% said they would be nervous about asking their employer for time off for a family event.

It's not just dads who are pushing for change. At both ends of the age spectrum there are demands for a greater focus on flexible working and work life balance. A recent survey by global people management business Penna of Generation Y staff [aged 18-34], for instance, showed that work life balance and a sense of fulfilment ranked far higher than progression to management on the long term priority lists of employees of this age group. As older workers have to stay in work longer until they retire, there is also growing demand for flexible options which enable them to do so and for employers to develop multi-generational approaches which cater for the different ages and stages they are at.

Diversity initiatives

Progressive employers are keen to promote diversity initiatives aimed at women in the form of mentoring programmes, women's networks and women's leadership programmes. Spurred on by the media spotlight cast by Lord Davies' report on women on boards, which has set a target of 25% for women on FTSE 100 boards, many employers have been looking at women's career progression at all levels in their organisation. At board level, progress seems to be being made, despite concerns that many senior leadership posts are being held by the same small pool of women. A Cranfield School of Management report in November put the percentage of women on FTSE 100 boards at 22.8%. However, employers are well aware that the main issue is at just below board level and they are focusing on how to support women moving into senior management positions.

Part of that has to be about flexible working, including the promotion of flexible new jobs. The Confederation of British Industry has called on businesses to promote flexible working from the recruitment stage, something that is supported by a major IPPR report on flexible working in Europe, and to show greater openness to ideas like job-sharing in senior positions. Another issue is the perception by many women that they cannot progress up the career ladder. An O2 survey of 1,000 women found 17% felt it was "impossible" for a woman to reach a senior management role in their organisation and a third said they were disappointed that their career had failed to live up to their expectations so far. The top reasons for this were lack of proper training and development programmes and office politics.

Reports of discrimination against women in the workplace are also still widespread. A TUC report last year stated that the attitudes of many employers towards pregnant women are still stuck in the 1970s - with the sacking, bullying and sidelining of expectant mothers commonplace. During the recession, tribunal complaints involving pregnant women went up by a fifth, and in the five years from 2008 to 2013, more than 9,000 women took their employers to a tribunal.

The introduction of fees for tribunal cases in 2013 has seen the number of cases being taken out fall by 46% and campaigners say the cost of taking out a case is allowing many poor employers to get away with discriminatory practices. There are also concerns about the number of working mums in insecure, low paid jobs which can make arranging childcare very difficult. Workingmums.co.uk's expert panel of lawyers have also seen a spate of requests for advice from those working shifts which have suddenly been changed, making it impossible for them to find childcare.

On the positive side, the gender pay gap is beginning to fall and has hit 9.4% - the lowest since records began in 1997 when the gap stood at 17.4%. However, in part this is because of greater pay equality among younger workers.

The gap rises the higher up the career ladder women rise. For male and female managers over 40 the gap stands at 35%, meaning women would have to work an extra 14 years to make the same amount of money as a male manager over her career, according to a new study by the Chartered Management Institute and XpertHR. A spokesman for XpertHR said this could be in part because employers are writing women off after they start a family.

Forward-thinking employers, however, are looking to exploit the pool of women who have taken time out or a career break for family reasons. They are offering maternity coaching and returnship programmes which range from helping women prepare for a return to work to offering internships in their organisation. The NHS has also just launched an initiative to target women GPs who have taken a career break.

Top Employer Awards

The Workingmums.co.uk Top Employer Awards celebrate best practice in diversity and flexible working in a bid to promote the business case for such positive initiatives. At the 2014 ceremony, issues raised included shared parenting, the extension of flexible working and how small businesses can grow while retaining a flexible model. Speakers felt shared parenting and flexible working were about cultural change through the promotion of positive role models, including at senior level. Keynote speaker Wendy Hallett, Founder and MD of Hallett Retail and a member of the Women's Business Council, said that policy changes can only go so far and a conscious effort to push change was needed by employers.



Awards judge Andy Lake, editor of Flexibility.co.uk, said SMEs had a lot to teach larger organisations about flexible working and added that it was important to keep things flexible and as virtual as possible as businesses grew. He said many organisations were still adopting a reactive approach to flexible working based on individual applications and then worrying when they couldn't get it all to work. They were missing a strategic approach, he said, and were stuck in what he called "inflexible flexibility". Many also had flexible working policies which were nearly always framed negatively.

Wendy Hallett argued strongly for SMEs not to lose sight of family friendly working once they expanded. "If you are passionate about it hang on to the bit that makes it work and that, for me, is the people who work in the business. If you stay close to the people in your organisation as you grow you will keep that culture," she said. She added that working mums often made excellent employees. If someone had been a good worker before they went on maternity leave it was very likely that they would return an even better one because they had to be so organised and focused both at home and at work, she said, adding, "We should do more to make that case."

Gillian Nissim, founder of Workingmums.co.uk, pointed out that the Top Employer Award judges were impressed by how flexible working was being implemented across industry sectors and by how strong the entries had been in the SME categories, bucking the idea that SMEs found flexible working particularly difficult to offer. She said: "Every year we are struck by the range of policies and practices being adopted by organisations to promote diversity and flexible working. But in most recent years what has struck us is the way such policies and practices are spreading to sectors which have proven particularly challenging for women. This year is no different. We have organisations from the rail sector, engineering and law - traditionally male dominated and, in some cases, such as law, renowned for a family unfriendly long hours culture. This is encouraging evidence that things are shifting across industry."

The winners of the 2014 Workingmums.co.uk Top Employer Awards were as follows:

Overall Top Employer Award, sponsored by headline sponsor McDonald's Restaurants Ltd and the SME Award (26 to 250 employees), sponsored by WM Recruit, went to McMillan Williams Solicitors. The winner was praised by the judges for the comprehensive range of support it offered, the breadth of the case studies it submitted and for the inspiration it offered others in the legal sector and beyond.

The **Top Employer Award for Innovation in Flexible Working**, sponsored by last year's winner Atkins, went to BAE Systems Maritime Naval Ships. The judges praised BAE Systems for taking action on flexible working in a very traditional, male-dominated sector.

The **Top Employer Award for Career Progression**, sponsored by last year's winner Royal Mail, went to A.T. Kearney Ltd. The judges praised the winner's exemplary Success with Flex programme for acknowledging there is no one-size-fits-all career path and working with staff on tailored career solutions that allow them to balance work with other commitments.

The **Top Employer Award for Best for Dads**, sponsored by IG Group, went to the London School of Economics and Political Science. The judges felt that the winner was committed to innovating in this area and had clearly grasped the wider benefits of doing so. Its research leave policy, which enables academic staff members to re-establish their research trajectory following a long period of absence, was highly praised as a model for other academic institutions.

The **Top Employer Award for Talent Attraction**, sponsored by CA Technologies, went to Reality HR Ltd. The judges praised the winner for the impact it was having externally as well as internally through the encouragement it gives to its clients to consider flexible workers.

Winner of the **Top Employer Award for Family Support**, sponsored by MamaBabyBliss, went to Bank of America Merrill Lynch. The judges felt the winner provided a comprehensive package of support, including back-up care, maternity coaching, quarterly webinars and a programme for dads.

The **Top Employer Award for SMEs with 1-25 employees**, sponsored by WM Recruit, went to Hireserve Ltd. The judges praised the winner for a strong entry which showed how it had grown the business using a flexible model. Hireserve has previously won a Top Employer Award and the judges felt its entry showed that it had continued to build on a deeply ingrained flexible model.

The **Working Mums Champion Award**, sponsored by Arise Virtual Solutions, went to Adeline Ginn of Women in Rail. The judges were highly impressed by the work and passion evidenced in Adeline Ginn's work for Women in Rail, a sector where there were significant challenges for flexible working and female career progression. She was not only doing her day job, but attempting to change an entire industry, not just a company.

The Award judges were: Gillian Nissim, Founder of Workingmums.co.uk; Andy Lake, editor of Flexibility.co.uk; Jennifer Liston-Smith, Director of Coaching & Consultancy at My Family Care; Dave Dunbar, Head of BT Flexible Working Services; and Clare Kelliher, Professor of Work and Organisation at Cranfield School of Management. The Q & A session at the event was sponsored by BAE Systems and the networking session by Unilever.

The Best Practice Report aims to flesh out exactly what the winning employers are doing which makes them stand out from the rest and to inspire others to follow if not what they do, then the spirit in which they do it on the clear understanding that to do so brings mutual benefits for employer and employee.

We would like to thank all our sponsors, without whom this report would not be possible.

The Workingmums.co.uk team

Overall Top Employer and Top Employer Award for SMEs [26-250 employees]: McMillan Williams Solicitors

Flexible working is part of the DNA of McMillan Williams Solicitors and its culture has not only seen it being recognised nationally as one of the most progressive companies in the UK, but brought it many business advantages in a sector renowned for long hours and family unfriendly working which has lost much good female talent through its lack of adaptability.

McMillan Williams is the first SME to scoop the Workingmums.co.uk Overall Top Employer Award. It also won the larger SME category. The judges praised “the comprehensive range of support it offered, the breadth of the case studies it submitted and for the inspiration it offered others in the legal sector and beyond”.

Its flexible work culture developed early. Denise McKeown, one of the first solicitors in the law firm’s injury department, was a new mum in the 1990s. Flexible working was very rare in law firms at the time, but Denise’s boss Colum Smith - now the company’s managing partner - realised the business advantages of offering flexible working as a way of retaining her skills. “Rather than abandon her career she has stayed here through three maternity leaves and today is a partner, making a significant contribution, training others and being a role model for junior lawyers,” says fellow partner Nicola Manning, herself a mum of five. “There was an awareness at that early stage around 20 years ago that all the time and energy invested in women could potentially go to waste if there was no flexible working. They have reaped the rewards of that decision. They understand and appreciate that if they can accommodate people’s different responsibilities and needs and how these change they can retain the best talent. That ethos of adaptability has permeated the company.”

Manning added that that ethos came from the top and continues today in the face of ambitious expansion. Smith became managing partner in 2012 just as the company was pushing to expand following the deregulation of the legal services market which will see the introduction of non-lawyer investors. The company is keen to grasp new opportunities and branch out in new directions such as consumer awareness and brand building. “It is part of our ability to look beyond what a traditional law firm does,” says Manning. “A lot of firms are sadly stuck in a rut as they are never able to look beyond the old school way of dealing with challenges in the legal marketplace.”

It is that entrepreneurial spirit which is in part behind its adaptability to colleagues’ circumstances. It all makes good business sense. Staff expertise is retained and company loyalty increases. Moreover, if people are trusted to work flexibly they are flexible back, making the company seem much more agile. Some staff, for instance, break off at school run time and work later in the evening. “Clients see that we are not an organisation that clocks off at 5.30pm,” says Manning. “It’s nice for them to know we are always at the end of the phone or on email.” The success of this policy has prompted thinking about the firm offering late night sessions and Saturday morning openings. “We recognise that people are not always able to see a lawyer in the daytime,” says Manning.

Growth

This strategy of being open to new opportunities seems to work business wise. The company now has 18 branches but plans to grow that number to 50 in the next couple of years. “That requires funding and a commitment to recruit top quality staff and invest in IT such as cloud computing for remote working and branding. We are a high street consumer law firm, but we don’t just sit there and wait for clients. We go out and advertise on buses and trams. A flexible work culture and the feeling that this is a company which is going somewhere makes it a doubly attractive place to work. Many other firms are standing still or worse,” states Manning.

Growing a business at such a pace has its challenges, though. The firm, which currently employs 240 staff, has managed to retain its flexibility by having no formal flexible working policy. However, it is now having to write one up due to external pressure. “We have to ensure that a written policy still allows us to adapt to individual needs. The demands, for instance, of a six month old baby are different from those of a 16 year old. Many of our staff have different childcare arrangements. There is no one size fits all,” says Manning.



The firm is also looking to restructure its HR department, but as it does so it is looking at how this can work for both the company and its workers. It is looking, for instance, to increase staff benefits, such as leadership training, in order to attract the top talent.

Manning adds that training of new managers in the company ethos is vital too to ensure flexible working permeates the firm as it grows.

Part of the firm’s success is due to its diversity which is in turn partially attributable to its flexible culture. Manning recalls being told by someone about the 30% Club. The person was talking about how firms were aiming to have 30% women on boards within 5 to 10 years. “I remember thinking we have 50% already,” she says. This is no accident, but part of its commitment to adaptability. “Where women would have abandoned their legal careers at other firms, we have seen them progressing to senior roles and training others,” she says.

It was the realisation of their relative diversity compared to other firms - and not just for women - that led to the firm entering awards and league tables. It has been named the top law firm for its percentage of female partners by the Black Solicitors Network diversity league table, second for its percentage of ethnic minority partners and first for its percentage of ethnic minority junior staff such as paralegals. Manning says having a diverse staff means it attracts a broader client base, for instance, a Nigerian head of crime has brought in a lot of business from African communities, and other staff have been specially trained to get specialist cultural knowledge in areas such as sharia finance. “There are huge opportunities and social impact in tapping into different communities,” says Manning, “and having staff who understand different cultures and languages gives us a business advantage.”

The awards are part of an attempt to brand the company as progressive and going places. The promotion is not just external either. The company holds an internal awards scheme to recognise and reward excellence, whether in legal or administrative functions. “It’s an inclusive thing,” says Manning, “and provides us with an opportunity to celebrate success and work beyond the norm.” Beyond the norm is something that McMillan Williams definitely embraces and its inclusive model has reaped it many business benefits.

Case study: Rowena Tompkins

Rowena Tompkins has worked for McMillan Williams doing conveyancing, private client work and, most recently, file auditing, complaint handling and problem solving, off and on since the mid 1980s.

“Apparently she just cannot keep away,” it says on the company website. Much of the reason for this, she states, is down to McMillan Williams’ culture and the support she has been given both through fertility treatment and supporting her parenting of two adopted children, now aged 13 and 10.

She did conveyancing and private client work at McMillan Williams in the mid 1980s and left the company in 1989 to work nearer home in an attempt to save her first marriage. She came back in the mid-1990s, having remarried in 1993, and started fertility treatment. McMillan Williams allowed her to work from home at times during the treatment. “There was a lot of trust. It was very much a case of ‘you have a job to do and how you sort that out is up to you. We trust you’,” she says.

Ultimately the long journey to work proved difficult to cope with, however, and she had a hip problem at the time so she found a job closer to home which was where she was working when she adopted her first child, who was then 18 months old. She took adoption leave to provide the necessary intensive one to one parenting for a while and came back on 14 hours a week. When her child started school, Rowena returned to frontline conveyancing with a different firm on two full days and three half days a week, but on those half days found she was increasingly having to take her child into the office after school or catch up from home.

Rowena left work altogether when she adopted her second child who was nearly two and a half at the time. She had planned to take 18 months out, then go back to work. However, her second child had a lot of behavioural, emotional and social issues which meant Rowena could not return to work until her second child started primary school in 2008.

Rowena then got her CV together and asked John McMillan to be a referee. Instead he asked her to come in for a chat and he would see what he could find to fit around school hours. Rowena’s first child had had her full attention on adoption, had been younger at the time of adoption and had a less turbulent background. Even so, she realised belatedly that being picked up twice a week from school by a childminder was unsettling. Her child couldn’t understand why other children were picked up by their mothers. “It made my child feel very different and they felt different enough already. The need for continuity is even greater for adopted children and I felt I could not do that to my children again,” says Rowena.

John McMillan agreed to her resuming work from 10am-2pm initially. She started back doing private client work and then moved across to the Conveyancing Department to assist the then Conveyancing Supervisor with conveyancing-related complaint handling and problem-solving.

After a while the company was happy to let her work part of her week from home, with remote computer access making this much easier than in the 1990s. "I had the equipment I needed to work from home and it snowballed from there," says Rowena.

The company then asked her if she could do more hours and she said the only way she could do so without compromising her children's emotional and social needs was to reduce commuting and work longer hours from home. That is what she has done for the last three years. She is still based in one of the McMillan Williams offices and goes in for meetings, on-site file auditing and training. "It has made a big difference," she says. "My contract was slightly expanded, but still allowed the flexibility required after school hours to meet the demands of parenting adopted children. It suited both me and the firm. The firm knows that I will find extra time later in the evening and at weekends to ensure that the work that is on my desk gets the attention it needs, especially if there is a deadline or an urgent matter that cannot wait."

Rowena says being a part-time working mum with McMillan Williams has not held her back from achieving what she wants to achieve. She was a partner with John McMillan in the 1980s. When she went back in the 1990s, she no longer wanted to be a partner. "I felt I had been there and done that," she says. "I had other priorities in my life. It was my choice." She considers her current role works to her strengths and meets her professional ambitions alongside the priorities of her personal life.

Due to the fast growth of the firm, the need for roles like Rowena's has expanded and the company is looking to recruit. It currently has 42 conveyancing fee earners and three residential conveyancing auditors. Rowena's role is Head Residential Conveyancing and Private Client Auditor which covers everything from improving the firm's residential conveyancing practices and problem-solving to assisting with complaints handling and auditing conveyancing files. She is gradually handing over her other role of Retentions Officer to another member of staff to enable her to concentrate on an increasing workload arising from the firm's continuing expansion. As the firm grows, her role continues to develop. "The bar is being lifted all the time," she says.

Rowena's experience shows that flexible working and family support can be mutually beneficial. She feels supported in her role as mum of adopted children and her employer clearly gains a lot from all her experience. On the website it simply says: "She is very highly respected in the firm."

Top Employer Award for Innovation in Flexible Working: BAE Systems Naval Ships

The job of transforming a traditional, male-dominated company into one of the most progressive in the shipbuilding business is rather akin to turning an ocean-bound tanker around in a storm. It's not for the faint-hearted. But BAE Systems Naval Ships has done just that.

The transformation came about as part of the company's ongoing diversity and inclusion focus. About a year and a half ago Emma Nabb, HR manager, Programmes & Support Diversity & Inclusion, was given a stretch assignment to focus on enabling a diverse and inclusive workplace. She recognised that having a flexible working environment was an important part of this and to understand how to achieve this research was done on best practice in other organisations, employee satisfaction and feedback and understanding the business drivers and case for change.

BAE Systems Naval Ships had some flexible working in place, but there were different conditions on offer at different sites and even within a site. "There were a lot of inconsistencies. There was flexible working, but when we spoke to employees we realised it was not fit for purpose and that there wasn't a culture of people feeling they could work flexibly," says Emma.

She realised early on that leadership buy-in and support for change was vital. That meant meeting the managing director and getting the management committee engaged through making a strong business case for flexible working.

Being bold and innovative in the approach and ensuring that a culture was embedded where performance was measured by output rather than working in a particular place at a particular time was critical. "We felt it was really important to embed the right culture," says Emma, "and to cut our core hours right back."

The organisation decided to adopt core hours which run from 10am to 2.30pm, but within those hours allowing people to take an ad hoc pop out, for instance, if they had a doctor's appointment, as well as a two hour period where people could take lunch – effectively reducing core hours to a two and a half hour window. "It's about trusting people," says Emma. "In the few cases where there may be issues we will deal with those on an individual level rather than assume people will abuse the system."

She added: "If we had gone to senior leadership two years ago and said we are going to have two and a half core hours a day but without engaging them appropriately and obtaining their support as a part of a wider cultural transformation then it's unlikely that we could have been as bold in our approach. We invested a lot of time and commitment to understand our own culture, make sure it was right and to argue the case for why it was important and what benefits it would bring."

Opening conversations

People had to see colleagues throughout the company, from senior leadership down, working flexibly so they could feel enabled to do it themselves. Managers had to be encouraged to open conversations about flexible working with employees and their team.

The team in BAE Systems Naval Ships developed a toolkit to help them to “embed a flexible culture rather than just write a policy and made them focus on what good practice looks like.”

Apart from the leadership team, it was crucial to ensure the unions were on board from an early stage. BAE Systems Naval Ships has strong union relations so it was important, she says, to show that they were adopting a fair and consistent approach which would take into account the different needs of different employees.

Changing the work culture of an entire organisation is not a small task, and crucially the team within BAE Systems Naval Ships was made up of a strong team of volunteers from across the business, including people from different functions, grades, lengths of service etc. This ensured that the case for change and the new way of working were fit for purpose for the business and employees.



The new flexible working policy was rolled out from October 2013, but the organisation held a diversity and inclusion workshop for 180 senior leaders a year before. The discussions from these workshops helped create the business case and further understanding of what ‘good’ would look like. At the meeting a senior leader had a lightbulb moment. “He had not realised that every night when he was working late when he went to the toilet everyone had left when he came back. Because his desk was at the door people had been waiting for him to go so they could leave. It suddenly dawned on him that people had interpreted him as a gatekeeper and that people did not feel comfortable leaving when he was at his desk. He worked late, but he didn’t expect other people to. He spoke to his team about his expectations afterwards and encouraged them to work in a way that suited them and moved his desk away from the door,” says Emma.

Embedding the culture

Her team began drip feeding information about the new policy from March, and September was a month when lots of conversations about the new work culture were held. Between October 2013 and April 2014 118 people took pop-outs and 73% of the company’s professional employees took flexi hours. There was a 22% reduction in paid time being taken for medical appointments and overtime with predicted savings of £440,000. More is expected to be saved for individual employees and the company through increased homeworking and reduced travel costs. However, the most powerful feedback was anecdotal feedback from employees about raised morale and increased engagement because of smart working practices. “It is something they really value,” says Emma.

Now BAE Systems Naval Ships is focusing on continuing to embed the culture through internal and external communications. Emma has now moved on to a new UK diversity and inclusion role in BAE Systems. She says she learnt a lot in the process. Her commitment was clearly key to driving it through, although she credits a strong team.

From a part-time diversity and inclusion stretch assignment, it became a full-time passion. “It makes a big difference to individuals and the company and without my team of champions and leadership support it would not have happened. That structure is still going in my absence and volunteers are covering my role until a replacement starts work. They are a passionate group of people who want to make this change and it has helped them grow and develop. We started off behind the curve at BAE Systems and we are now seen as a model of good practice in the UK business. We have come a long way, but recognise that there is still work to be done.”

Case study: Chris Westcott

Chris Westcott has recently got back from five weeks of Additional Paternity Leave (APL) with his son Josh and says he loved it and would definitely do it again. “It’s so worth it. You only get one chance to spend that time with them when they are very young,” he says. “When you take the first two weeks off after the birth you are so busy and the baby is sleeping all the time. You barely get to know them. By eight months they are babbling and crawling and they interact with you. It’s a brilliant thing to do.”

Chris, who is Head of HR – QEC & RN OPV at BAE Systems Maritime Naval Ships, thought he might face some peer pressure with regard to taking APL, but in fact it was quite the reverse. He spoke to some of the older dads working in the Glasgow shipyard where he is based and where he says you might expect a very traditional “male” culture. “Unanimously they said if they had the chance again they would have done the same thing. I got supportive emails from colleagues. Some even said they were jealous of me,” he states. Chris took two weeks off when his son was born last March and then five weeks when his wife went back to work in November. He says he only did it because his wife was supportive of the idea. “If she had wanted to take longer off I would have supported that, but she was very supportive of it and said she thought I should do it.”

His boss was also supportive and only asked that he promote the fact that he had taken APL internally so other male colleagues knew about the opportunities available. Chris indeed blogged about his feelings before he started the APL.

He received statutory pay when he was on leave, but it didn’t make too much financial difference to the couple since they earn very similar salaries. The five weeks were beneficial on many levels, he says. Firstly, he got to know his son and all his routines and says he and his wife are now interchangeable as parents. This is useful as his wife often travels abroad for work. “I feel I really know him inside out now,” says Chris. “I can properly contribute. I know what makes him happier and what he likes.”

It also helped his wife feel happier about going back to work because she knew Chris was with Josh and Chris was able to do the whole settling in week at nursery. “It really helped her transition back to work,” he says.



Going back to work after five weeks off was not too difficult since it was not a long period and he had checked emails occasionally while on leave. He hit the ground running. "The biggest thing was that I was sad to leave Josh," says Chris.

Both he and his wife work flexibly. He finishes early on a Friday and his wife works a compressed week in four days. Her parents look after Josh one day a week and he goes to nursery three days, but finishes early on a Friday. Chris says the culture at his work is "completely flexible". "I can come and go as I want. No-one checks my hours as long as I get the job done. I am judged on my output. Having a little one this is unbelievably helpful. If he is ill, I can look after him and I am totally trusted to get my work done. I either work late in the office or from home, but there is no expectation about doing a fixed number of hours, its simply about achieving the outputs required."

He describes the changeover to a flexible culture as "a huge shift". "Shipyards have traditionally had a clocking in clocking out mentality and now we have gone to the other end of the spectrum which is so helpful," he says. He states that that flexibility has made him more committed to his employer. "You can almost not put a price on it," he says. "I cannot overestimate how important it is. For people with families it is the most important thing an employer can offer."

Top Employer Award for Career Progression: A.T. Kearney Ltd

In 2004 a group of consultants at A.T. Kearney came back from maternity leave and put together a proposal for flexible working. They presented it to the UK management team who approved a pilot. The pilot went well and in 2006 it was adopted as a formal policy, subject to annual review and incorporating feedback from employees and employee networks such as the women's network. In 2008 after further input from employee surveys and more people coming back from maternity and paternity leave the company created a global work life programme, Success with Flex, with the UK unit being seen as a leading light in flexible working within Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Since then the programme has evolved according to changing workforce needs. All the consultants who set it up are still with the company and all the women have progressed up the career ladder, demonstrating the benefits of the programme both for individuals and the company.

HR manager Henriette Smith says flexible working is becoming the norm at A.T. Kearney as more and more people request it despite the fact that consultancy offers very particular challenges. "We tailor what we offer to different people's needs," she says. "The variety of what we offer in the UK is quite vast. It ranges from people who work 80% of full-time hours and do not have a fixed day off to people who work one day from home to people who leave the office earlier and come in earlier."

Consultancy work involves a lot of travel and the company looks at options such as minimising travel or offering alternative roles for mums returning from maternity leave, recognising that they might not want to be away so frequently. "Many of our clients are also implementing flexible working in their own organisations so they understand where we are coming from. It is important, however, to consider each project individually and take into account the different circumstances. It is vital that we do not have one stringent policy in place," says Henriette.

Henriette says management consultancy tends to attract a certain type of fairly ambitious person who doesn't want a 9-5 job. The challenge is matching that with flexible working and career progression. Solutions might include leave of absence over the summer so people can spend time with their families.

Mentors

All the consultants have mentors who champion their careers because they do not have traditional line managers due to the nature of their work. The mentors represent them at their performance reviews with HR and a team of Partners and Principals forming the review committee.

A.T. Kearney is open from the start of the recruitment process that it has a flexible working programme and that everyone can apply. This is mentioned on its website, in its recruitment presentations and in campus recruitment sessions. Henriette says the most popular form of flexible working is 80% hours, either as a four-day week or over five days but leaving earlier or starting later. She says lower than 80% can be difficult for consultant roles.

The Success with Flex programme also allows for alternative career paths, for instance, consultants can move to non-consultant roles or work on internal projects for a period. The HR team always have available alternatives and are alert to consultants who might want to step out of consulting for a short period. “It allows them to keep their options open and they can provide an internal resource for us. Some make a permanent switch,” says Henriette. Other alternatives are three- or six-month secondments to other departments or clients so consultants can enrich their experience. “It is beneficial all round,” says Henriette. “It gives them a different point of view and makes them better consultants.”

Those working in management services are easier to manage as they are office-based. Each unit has a flexible champion who is a senior consultant or partner who has worked flexibly at some point and works with individuals and HR as different cases arise.



Flexible working agreements are discussed openly and every agreement is reviewed every three months to see if it is working for all involved. “Individual situations change,” says Henriette, “so reviewing the process is useful. We want to give the message that it is okay for everyone to ask and look at options. It also means we can trial something and if it doesn’t work we can try and find an alternative solution if possible. It’s so different for every person, hence why we have guiding principles for flexible working and not a tick box approach.”

As part of an extensive Learning and Development programme for all staff, managers are given specific diversity training, including a managing diverse teams course for senior managers. The sessions cover everything from learning how to build on everyone’s competencies to how to communicate effectively. All other staff have a mandatory webinar on diversity and inclusion.

Henriette says the main challenges of the flexible career structure at A.T. Kearney is striking a balance between individual and business needs. “It’s about having open, honest conversations about what works well and about the potential challenges. Consulting is what it is. It is not a regular office-based role and you do not know when or where your next role will be. It is a demanding environment and it is fast paced - people have to perform and progress to the next level. It is subject to a rigorous performance management process for that reason, including regular reviews. For some it is a career and for others a stepping stone,” says Henriette. “But we want to help people achieve that next progression and reach their career goals and aspirations.”

Case study: Inna Baigozina-Goreli

Inna Baigozina-Goreli is a partner in A.T. Kearney’s global Energy and process industries practice and has worked in consulting for over 20 years. She was one of the women consultants in London who drafted A.T. Kearney’s flexible working policy back in 2004.

“We all got pregnant with our first children at around the same time and were thinking about what might be possible on our return. We thought through our preferences and wrote structured options for women returning to the firm after maternity leave,” says Inna.

That included flexibility for a classic consulting path, alternative career paths such as working in the research department or marketing and ensuring that those who returned on four days a week wouldn’t have their careers put on hold. They discussed these proposals with HR and with the UK leadership who were supportive and the policy was approved.

Once it was established it was possible to scale it up. “The more success we had the more we created a notion that it was a business benefit. It happened step by step over 10 years. It was not a straight line going up,” says Inna.

Inna says flexibility is key for consultants who are parents, particularly, in the early days, women since that was where the demand was, although more and more men are also keen to work more flexibly. “There are now some men who work four days a week and it helps to drive our agenda. It’s a joint agenda now, which makes it more inclusive and positive for the firm,” says Inna.

What the initial proposals did was give people options, she says. “We created a framework, but it was flexible and could be tailored to individual circumstances. For instance, some parents want to work full time with some flexibility around working hours while others want to spend more time with children and go for the reduced hours option. It is hard to dictate what works for different individuals.” Over time the policy has improved through feedback and there are more case studies of how it works for different people.

Inna leads A.T. Kearney’s European Women’s Network which focuses on supporting women across the network to progress their careers, recruiting more women into the firm and connecting with external organisations and governments on research and charitable work.

Inna has been working flexibly for nine years now. “For me it was always a balancing act as I do like consulting and I want to spend time with my family too,” she says.

She thinks it was relatively easy to reduce to 80% of her full-time workload six years ago. In fact, she says it is easier to work flexibly as you get more senior and can manage your time more independently. She adds that she does not feel her career progression has been delayed by having children.

Inna says that she is proud to be a positive example of combining career progression and motherhood. Over the last 10 years she progressed from a manager to a principal and a partner at A.T. Kearney. Her flexible working was always considered as a positive example rather than a constraint.



She believes that the support of the leadership team and HR and openness with A.T. Kearney to flexible approaches were crucial factors throughout this time. She was helped by having a good sponsor and a supportive family and believes sponsorship is a great way to retain and support women. A.T. Kearney is now in its third year of a global sponsorship programme for women, which gets very positive feedback from participants.

Asked what the future holds, Inna says she hopes to work more closely with A.T. Kearney's clients on diversity issues so that they can learn from each other. She says, "There is a strong business imperative for diversity. It's not just a social feel good factor. Diverse teams make better decisions and produce better results, and our clients comment to us about it. I think client testimonials will have a strong impact on our industry and will allow everyone to move forward."

Top Employer Award for Best For Dads: London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

LSE offers a generous maternity package to mothers, an onsite creche and childcare vouchers, but its offering to fathers is what puts it head and shoulders ahead of its peers and is what has seen it win the Workingmums.co.uk Best for Dads Top Employer Award for the third consecutive year.

Dads can take up to 26 weeks of Additional Paternity Leave (APL) if the mother chooses to return to work early, which is usually paid at the statutory rate. However, LSE offers up to 16 weeks of Additional Paternity Leave at full pay. LSE will also offer 16 weeks full pay for dads taking shared parental leave (SPL) when it comes in in April, and says it is modelling its approach to SPL on its experience with APL and on its innovative research leave policy. This allows any academic who has been absent for more than 18 weeks a teaching-free term on full pay to catch up on research. Most returning parents can opt for a phased return to work using their accrued annual leave.

Gail Keeley, HR Manager, Policy and Employment Relations, says: “The research leave policy was part of a collective agreement on a new academic structure introduced to improve the recruitment, mentoring, review and remuneration of career academic staff. It was recognised that having a significant break does have an impact on career progression.” The Research Leave document, for instance, says ‘The purpose of research leave is for Academic Staff members to re-establish their research trajectory following a long period of absence.’

The LSE ensures that APL does not affect career progression, a potential hurdle to dads taking the leave. For instance, the impact of APL in terms of research output which is taken into consideration as part of probationary periods and promotion of academic employees. The same will apply to academic employees who take SPL from April 2015.

Keeley adds: “Those academic employees who have taken advantage of APL have all taken a term’s research leave and I think this shows that when employers think creatively about the steps to improve career prospects, employees appreciate the opportunity to share ‘bringing up baby’ without the risk of ‘suspending’ their careers.”

New dad workshops

Other benefits offered to parents include workshops for new dads on issues such as negotiating flexible working introduced by the second most senior manager at the LSE, and workshops for mums which are offered to women even if they are not LSE employees in recognition that they help support dads who are LSE employees. Other workshops held in the past include positive parenting and balancing work and being the carer of an adult. LSE is also holding a new workshop on ‘Building Resilience in Our Primary School-Age Children and Ourselves’ to help parents to prepare for the first years at school. In addition, there is a mentoring scheme for parents, a network for carers, a Working Parents’ Network Yammer group and a Network for Carers of Adults Yammer group.

LSE was also involved in research which spun out of the 2012 Happy Homes, Productive Workplaces report conducted by Working Families and OnePlusOne. The project focuses on how organisations which promote family friendly policies aimed at lessening stress can reap the rewards in terms of increased commitment and productivity. LSE will participate in the follow-up on this research to increase awareness on how relationship quality can have a positive impact on productivity and the workplace. The follow-up will address the employee life cycle and individual life transitions, such as having your first child and caring for an ill relative.

Keeley says awards are “very important” in promoting LSE as a good employer and being a family friendly employer is one of the four ‘brand pillars’ on the front page of their jobs page. She adds: “The LSE was founded in 1895 for ‘the betterment of society’, recognising that family life in society has changed/ is changing and enabling fathers to be more involved in raising their children is in line with the founding principle of the LSE.”



Case study: George Lawson

George Lawson took six months off to be with his son, which he says had an enormous impact on their relationship. When his son learnt to speak he called his parents “mamadaddy”, fusing the two together. It was a very positive experience, but one which was supported by the support system established by his employer.

George’s wife took the first six months off after their son was born and then George took six months additional paternity leave on full pay. After this he benefited from having a term’s research leave to re-establish his research trajectory. “That amount of financial and career support made it a no brainer, although I would probably have done it anyway,” he says.

He says the support he has received from LSE has made him more loyal and more productive.

It gave the family time to establish a childcare regime that was stable and worked so they could fully focus on their jobs. “It’s a win win for us and LSE,” says George, who is an Associate Professor of International Relations, “and it’s something LSE should be proud of. If employers help staff during moments of change it makes them more productive. When I talk to colleagues at other institutions I realise that what LSE is doing is very pioneering and off the radar.”

Most other dads he knows outside the LSE take a maximum of two weeks’ paternity leave and even then they complain that their work piles up. “This makes an enormous difference to our well being as a family. The childcare is genuinely shared. If employers are genuinely committed to equality this kind of scheme is a must. It has allowed us to institutionalise a fair childcare system and keep both our careers on track.”

He hopes that such schemes, supported by the managers who implement them will change people’s attitudes and create a more equal society, but he realises this will take time.

George worked for a think tank in the 1990s and says that the language used in supporting such social change is very important. It needs to be about encouraging broader social change, he says, and not suggest that parents are being done a favour or being given a lucky break.

This is George's second time around as a father. He has a 12 year old son from a previous relationship. When his first child was born he was in the third year of his PhD and things were very different. He managed to extend his PhD for a year, but his then partner gave up her work for a while and eventually went back part time. Both George and his current partner work full time.

He also took a while to get his career on track, getting bits of funding here and there to support his research. "It was flexible, but not in a voluntary way. It was very hard financially. I was younger and I didn't have secure employment," he says. "This time round it has been completely different, partly because I am older, but I cannot emphasise enough the difference the institutional support we have had has made. And not just for the first months, but 19 months on we have a system in place that is quite straightforward. That has been enormously important."

Top Employer Award for Talent Attraction: Reality HR Ltd

Reality HR is not only promoting the business case for flexible working internally, but also externally to its clients.

Everyone at the firm works flexibly, many doing different work patterns. Four new members of staff started this year and they were immediately set up to work remotely. “We want to show people that we trust them,” says Laura Davis, who started the firm from her back room 10 years ago.

To support remote working, they have tools to record conversations so that work started by part-time staff can be picked up by others later on in the week.

80% of the 15-strong team are working mums and flexible working works for them all. Some - mainly the support team - have set hours. Others are more flexible, for instance, one woman gets up very early and logs on straight away while others prefer to pick things up in the evening if they have had to take time out in the day. One woman works full time, but does school hours on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays and then logs on later to pick up urgent work. Another does 10 hours a week, with two to three hours in the office and four hours with clients. The rest of the time she works hours that suit her around her two children who are three and a half and 20 months, but there is normally a pattern to when she works which means her colleagues and clients know when they can get hold of her. The hours sound complex, but Laura says the firm has had nothing but positive feedback from their clients to the flexible working patterns.

Laura works full time and long hours, but takes lots of time off. “I have built up a strong management team over the last three years. Delegation works well for me and for them as it is a tremendous development tool,” she says. “I’ve seen companies where the MD doesn’t take holidays and the team is dependent on them. They tend to be too involved with the day to day. From a commercial perspective I think it’s important to empower other members of your team and it makes their job more attractive too.”

Planning ahead

To coordinate all the different work - and holiday - patterns staff are able to have access to everyone else’s diary. “We need to know what consultant is available to speak to a client at any given time as we are very client facing,” says Laura. It’s a challenge, she admits, particularly during school holidays, but it works and it pays dividends in terms of staff loyalty. “No one wants to leave their colleagues in the lurch so we plan ahead,” says Laura. She also knows that those who work reduced hours when their children are small can often increase their hours in line with business needs as their children grow older so for long-term business strategy it makes commercial sense.



Laura adds that externally Reality HR is trying to educate its clients about the benefits of flexible working. SMEs, with whom Reality HR mainly works, struggle to attract and retain talent, she says, and they need to think outside the box. “If they need a skill which is in short supply we encourage them to think what they can offer to attract candidates to them rather than to corporates,” says Laura. “They need to demonstrate how they are different and make sure they do not only search in the normal places. It’s a big education process.”

Reality HR begins this process with new clients by trying to unravel the business’ challenges and what they need to achieve their business goals. “They often come to us trying to replace like for like. They are replacing an individual, but not thinking strategically about what they might need in the future,” says Laura.

This process can lead to moving existing staff around to create a vacancy and supporting the client with the HR aspects of recruitment. Reality HR then focus on what kind of person the client wants for the job and encourages them to think about different ways of doing things. New clients have to take their expertise on trust until they have seen it work.

Reality HR helps with initial sifting and telephone interviews of candidates. They often throw in a candidate who does not absolutely fit the client’s ideal criteria, but who they know would do a good job and is a bit different. “It’s like a wild card and it forces them to think differently, for instance, do they need someone five days a week and could they have someone working remotely. We want to challenge, for instance, any mistrust they might have around remote working. We educate them about managing by objectives rather than presenteeism. If they manage people correctly from day one and set clear parameters and targets then they do not have to be in the office every day,” says Laura, citing one employer who was digging their heels in against homeworking. In the last nine months they have started to think differently and Laura says it is working very well.

She adds that many candidates find it difficult to talk about their flexible working needs at recruitment stage and sometimes end up to agreeing a work pattern that is unsustainable for them. It makes no business sense because they end up moving on after a short time. “Employers need to be more open about talking about agile working as part of the interview process,” says Laura. “If they want to attract younger people, retain talent and hire people of exceptional calibre they need to think differently about the recruitment process.”

Case study: Kate Scott

HR consultant Kate Scott has the ultimate flexible working schedule. She does one full day in the office and additional hours from home across the week on an ad hoc basis around her young family. “As and when I can,” she says, adding that it works really well for everyone concerned. Her children are aged nearly two and nearly four.

She had worked for Laura Davis in the past when the firm was called HR Solutions (now called Reality HR) and did two afternoons a week when her eldest child was little. When she went on maternity leave again she asked if she could do all her hours in one day, expecting a no, but to her surprise Laura said yes. “It was ideal for me as my parents look after my children. Childcare for two children is so expensive that it is often not feasible to return to work,” she says.

Kate has been in HR for 17 years and before she had children she worked as a HR business partner for a large organisation with 300 staff, covering all aspects of HR. She asked to go part time, but their idea of part time was just cutting four or five hours off a full-time week and her role was never 9-5. It also involved travel to other sites. "It would never have worked with very small children," she says.

She took a career break which lasted just over a year and during that time she looked around for other options. HR Solutions was the fifth job she applied for. "I could not believe it existed. I had never seen work patterns of less than 25-30 hours a week in HR," she says.

She had been considering administrative and secretarial jobs at the time because she thought it would be impossible to find anything at HR business partner level. She went for a job as a postroom clerk, for instance. She was in a Catch 22 with some employers telling her they felt she would get bored with lower skilled work.

The advert for the HR Solutions (Reality HR) job mentioned flexible working so she did not have to bring up the subject. The role she applied for was an HR administrative post. She had a telephone interview to check her skills and the hours she could work - she wanted to do 10-12 hours. Then she did a formal interview and tests. After three weeks her bosses sat her down and asked if she was interested in some project work. "They started filtering me interesting work, but at a pace which did not overwhelm me on the hours I was doing," says Kate. "I am so grateful to them. I got my confidence back after the career break without really knowing it. They gave me the type of clients and work across different sectors that fitted with my experience which built my confidence up quickly."

She had been with the company for around a year when she went on maternity leave. She took a year off, but kept in contact. "They made it clear there would be a seat for me," she says. She did some holiday cover and project work during that year too. Then she had the discussion about her return. Kate says she would not have been able to return without the arrangement she now has as she does not have a regular back-up childcare plan. However, she can do extra days when needed.

She works with clients who do not need regular contact every day and the duty consultant or director at Reality HR can pick up calls when she is not there or forward them to her at home.

There is a huge whiteboard at the office with a duty consultant and director assigned to each day as no staff do more than four days a week. "There is always cover," says Kate, "and clients know that they can get answers to their questions when they need them and how we work."



On the days she is not in the office, Kate checks her emails twice a day and puts in her calendar - which can be accessed by her colleagues - when she is not available. Colleagues check this if she gets a call so they know when she is working. They can also email her. Reality HR also use project management software which everyone updates daily about the status of the work they are doing. Kate says the flexible system works very well and has definitely increased her loyalty and commitment to Reality HR. "It's a really clever way of working. So many women want to come back to work, but are prevented by strict ways of working. We have shown a flexible culture can work and still offer a very professional service," she says.

"We are very open with our clients and we promote different ways of working. If they are reluctant to consider these we can show they work. HR is sometimes one of the worst environments for flexible working, yet it is a female-dominated profession. Other organisations could really benefit from being more open-minded. If they just did a fifth of what we are doing here it would make a big impact."

Top Employer Award for Family Support: Bank of America Merrill Lynch

Shared Parental Leave (SPL) is due to come in in April this year and the most progressive employers have been looking to increase their support for dads and other carers in preparation.

Bank of America Merrill Lynch is one of these and its comprehensive family support programme includes initiatives for mums and dads, including those who are caring for other members of the family, and is closely linked to the company's health and wellbeing programme. The bank's support of dads is increasing and includes paternity workshops and case studies.

Information on paternity workshops is circulated through internal communications and via the bank's intranet. Sessions are also recorded and run as webinars so more new fathers can take advantage of them. Dads who have taken part so far have been targeted after they registered that they were intending to take paternity leave between April and October last year. The sessions cover how they can support their partners and issues such as bonding with their child.

BofAML is also looking to run a special workshop on SPL and has been preparing staff so they are ready to answer any questions about it. Jay Butler, the bank's EMEA Health and Wellness manager, said "We want to raise awareness of the various options available to both mothers and fathers."

The company is also looking at developing positive case studies so people can understand how SPL might work. Ama Afrifa-Kyei, Diversity and Inclusion manager for EMEA, says it is keen to get an idea of possible take-up of SPL. For her, what is more important is "changing people's mindsets". "It's about encouraging people to think differently. Change doesn't happen overnight," she says. "It will be interesting to see what the trends are across various sectors."

The company has also launched an informal maternity buddy scheme so returning mums can be paired up with women who have already been through the process. It is considering offering the same for new dads.

Maternity coaching

BofAML also has a range of initiatives aimed at mums. Its maternity coaching programme which was started before Merrill Lynch merged with Bank of America has evolved since, with the main change being the decision to include a managers workshop following employee feedback.



The workshop is not mandatory, but managers are told that it is recommended that they attend and that it aids talent retention. Some 63% of those invited attend. Sessions include raising awareness among managers of their responsibility to pregnant employees, supporting employees' return to work and how to open up conversations about flexible working.

Managers are also taught how they can reduce any disruption for the rest of the team caused by a colleague being away on maternity leave and make for a smooth transition period. BofAML is also looking at manager excellence programmes and is emphasising the importance of diverse teams and inclusive leadership. It continues to run its Returning Talent programme to help those who have taken a career break for caring reasons to return to the workforce. The fourth annual cycle of this programme, one of the first in the UK, starts this month.

Care package

My Family Care provides BofAML with a care package which includes emergency childcare, school holiday cover such as subsidies for summer camps and back-up adult and elder care and links to BofAML's health and well-being programme. The most popular service offered is emergency childcare, although demand for school holiday cover has been increasing recently and elder care support is significantly up in the last 12 months. Half of those registered for emergency childcare support are dads. "It provides peace of mind," says Butler. "People are really satisfied with the service and it spreads through word of mouth. They tell their colleagues. We provide testimonials on our intranet and, this year, will be promoting case studies, allowing employees to identify with their peers."

She adds that analysis shows people who have booked are likely to book again which confirms the service offered is useful and highly regarded. They register on the system and can call or book online when they need help. Emergency childcare can be provided within a couple of hours and employees can recommend a carer they know in their area to My Family Care who can then register them on the system.

My Family Care's Work + Family space offers a wide variety of webinar topics, such as mindfulness for working parents and how to find 'domestic bliss'. Some of the most popularly attended webinars last year included how to talk so children will listen. 'Being a dad' is also very popular as is 'raising smart kids'. My Family Care advises on how the webinars can evolve in relation to new developments and employee interest.

Despite high levels of support, BofAML is keen to keep building on what it offers. Over the next year, it hopes to get more employees to register for its family support package and to also make it more accessible. It also plans to give employees direct access to experts who can give them advice over the phone if they need it, to organise regular events, including inviting My Family Care on site, and to develop the programme of promoting manager excellence. In addition it wants to further promote the Back-up Adult and Eldercare services for carers, not just for those looking after elderly relatives, but for employees who might have had an operation and themselves need the support of carers.

Butler says: "We believe that we should provide as much support as we can to allow our employees to combine their career and family commitments successfully to ensure consistency and peace of mind."

Top Employer Award for SMEs [1-25 employees]: Hireserve Ltd

“Flexible working should be part of the very soul of a company,” says Karen Ovenden, a director of IT firm Hireserve. The company has won the Workingmums.co.uk Top Employer Award for smaller companies for the second time. The judges were impressed with what it offered employees and how the firm had built on this and embedded their flexible culture.

“A company can only be successful if it has people at the core,” says Karen. “The team we have drive our business forward. We genuinely care about everyone who works for us. It’s not just how you do your job, but everything that makes up our lives. It is important to engage with our team as people.”

Karen has a personal interest in flexible working. Her daughters are now 23 and 25, but she still remembers what it was like working when they were little. “I have never forgotten it,” she says. “When they are little their well being is central. If I can ease a little bit of the stress for other parents that is a good feeling. Making life easier for people with families should be the essence of every business. It seems bizarre to me that businesses would not recognise that people have families.”

The company’s flexible approach starts from the recruitment stage. At interviews, Karen always says to candidates that she knows their personal life is the most important thing in their world. She says “Work clearly has to be a close second so there is no detriment to our business, but the benefit is that people who work for us know it is their whole being that matters.”

Candidates are interviewed by telephone initially and in many cases they bring up flexible working early on in the recruitment process.

“In addition to being able to do the job, we are looking for people who will fit in with the way we work. We need people who are enthusiastic team players. We don’t want clock watchers. We want people who have a give and take mentality.” She says the Workingmums.co.uk award shows candidates that what they say in their job adverts is genuine.

As an IT company which specialises in recruitment software Hireserve works with lots of HR people. “From a business perspective we get positive feedback when they see we have won awards,” she adds.



Flexible working

The Basingstoke-based company has a number of staff who work flexibly, although Karen admits it is easier to be more flexible with part-time than full-time staff, simply because there are more permutations of hours to play with. Employees include a mum who was looking for a challenging full-time role with flexibility. “She’s brilliant at what she does, which is running the support desk, but she just needed some flexibility, for instance, if her son’s homework club changes. We can adapt and the development team can pick up the calls or take messages if she has to leave early and she makes up the time or can pick up emails later from home,” says Karen. “We realise that she cannot leave her children waiting at the school gate and we don’t want her to have that worry and stress. We want to make it as easy as possible for her.”

She adds: “The flexible model is one that works well for us and if we scale up I do not see why we could not still offer this flexibility. If you have the right team they will adapt to each other’s needs naturally. There will be give and take on both sides. It’s how you are with friends. We are very open and we’ve never had a problem.”

The company’s technical author is a sub-contractor and lives in Shropshire. “It works brilliantly that she does all the help documentation remotely. Another potential client could not get their head around how we could manage her remotely, but they have missed out on building a relationship with an exemplary consultant who I could not recommend highly enough,” says Karen.

Other members of staff don’t have children, but work flexi hours to avoid the rush hour. Two members live very far away and tend to do two days at home and three fixed days in the office although Karen is happy to consider flexibility in their work patterns too.

Planning

Hireserve, which has offered university students placements, has just taken on an apprentice as Karen has found trouble finding a web developer so felt the company could “grow our own”. “It’s a great career opportunity,” says Karen, who takes a very strategic role in the business. That means planning ahead in terms of staffing and skills. “I am always thinking about what the business requirements are and might be. For instance, if we hire a part-time person would they be able to increase their hours if their role grows. We sit down and think about what we are looking for in the long term,” she adds. That currently includes a digital marketing executive and reorganising marketing to place a greater focus on customer care. All this is done through open consultation with staff and a discussion about what works best in terms of adding value to the business and finding the best person to do the job.

One example of how this works is that the company has hired part-time assistants for managers whose workload is getting too heavy. They can also consider bringing in another part-time assistant if people want to remain part time but the workload increases. “It’s not a job share as such. We look at how we can adjust what we need so that each part-time role has a different range of responsibilities,” says Karen. It is a careful, well thought through process. “We don’t want to just cobble together roles and say that is a job. We are very conscious of making roles that are interesting and challenging,” she adds.

The company is also developing the range of benefits it offers, such as performance bonuses. “We want to recognise hard work,” says Karen. They offer a stakeholder pension scheme, cover some childcare costs in the summer holidays, offer a car and bike loan scheme and interest-free loans and have just started a gym membership scheme. Karen says being an SME means they have to search carefully for something that works financially, but they realise that they need to offer a package of benefits that attracts the best candidates.

Karen says the proof of their approach is that they have never had a problem with absence and a manager who left earlier this year because he had a long commute has decided to return and Karen has amended his hours to help reduce the long commute in peak times. “It’s good for team morale and shows we are a good place to work and we are delighted that his skill and experience has returned to our team. One of our Dutch colleagues described us as a family with gifted children and it does feel like a family. It is good for the business and for those who work here,” she says.

Case study: Archana Mahabaleshwarkar

Archana Mahabaleshwarkar started working for Hireserve in March 2014 as the company’s Implementation and Support Consultant.

Previously she had been working full time in the US and India with her husband Kedar who is also in IT. As is often the case in IT, projects tend to change, meaning the family moved quite a lot. In 2012 they came to the UK. It was a big change and Archana took a year out of work to settle the family. She has a 14-year-old daughter Ketki and an eight-year-old son Aarya. She then set about looking for full-time work in her local Basingstoke area so she could manage work and school life. She found Hireserve. She had previously worked for larger firms in the US and India in similar roles, so the location and role expectations were a perfect match for her.

At her interview it was mentioned that she could work flexibly if necessary. Archana had read about the company and had seen on Hireserve’s website that it had won a Workingmums.co.uk Top Employer Award for its flexible, open working culture. “I felt after the first interview that I would be really lucky to work at Hireserve. It was exactly what I was looking for,” she says.

She started working in the support role and, as she got to know the cloud-based e-recruitment system that Hireserve operates better, she moved to the implementation role. She has been able to work very flexibly, although she is full time. For instance, if she needs to leave early she has been able to. She has been able to change her work times to adjust with the kids’ after school clubs and other classes.



“Sometimes I am not able to do an eight-hour day, but I will ensure that I make up for the same over the next two weeks. Hireserve supports flexible work hours,” she says. “It is a big help as I would have had to take leave otherwise. At times when Kedar has to travel to London, where his main office is based, I leave early to pick up my son from school and then I work from home. iCams, Hireserve’s e-recruitment solution is software-as-a-Service (SaaS), a cloud-based software. This allows me to work from any location and I can work from home. That makes full-time working possible for me. If I had not been able to get that flexibility, I would probably have had to work part time, although I prefer full time. The flexibility makes me feel greater loyalty to the company.”

She adds that it is not just the flexible working that has made working at Hireserve so motivating but also the work culture and the great team lead by directors Jeremy and Karen Ovenden. “It’s a second family away from home,” says Archana. Another benefit is that working for a SME she gets more opportunities to develop her skills. “It gives a chance to play multiple roles and it’s such a positive and enriching experience in so many ways,” she says.

Working Mums Champion: Adeline Ginn, Women in Rail

Adeline Ginn was on her way to a diversity event with her boss in October 2011. She was nervous and had prepared a lot of questions to ask to keep the conversation going. Her boss asked her what she thought about diversity in the rail industry. She didn't hold back. She said that in her experience women felt isolated and intimidated because there was no support for them to progress their careers. Her boss asked what she would do to address it. She said set up a women's network.

Three years later Women in Rail, the network she established, has grown and developed and Adeline is being recognised for what she has done to change not only her organisation but an entire industry. The network has come a long way since it was started via LinkedIn in April 2012 and Adeline has big plans for the future.

The aim was to provide mentoring support to women and create a networking platform through events where women could discuss the barriers to their career progression, for instance, lack of confidence when faced by a room full of men, and advice on how to overcome them.

Adeline, who organises Women in Rail on the side of her job as Head of Legal at Angel Trains, says the rail industry may be male-dominated, but it is not anti-women. Many managers allow women employees time off to attend Women in Rail meetings, she says. Nevertheless, only around 18% of employees are female and she feels there is a lack of awareness of how it might feel to be a woman in such an environment and a lack of knowledge of how to do something about it. "Women in Rail raises awareness about the issues," she says.

Adeline adds that the mentality in train operating companies is changing, but it is still more accepted, for instance, that women take parental leave than men, although there is interest among men in Shared Parental Leave. "It is my view that senior management needs to lead by example," says Adeline, "for instance, not having meetings after 5pm. Men think they will be judged by their peers if, for instance, they say they have to leave early to pick up their children. It is deeply ingrained. It will only change if people at the top of the pyramid show that it is acceptable." Her own CEO sent an email around encouraging people to work flexibly and twice a week leaves early for family reasons.

Website

Earlier this year, Adeline launched a new Women in Rail website. It includes a day in a life type of features as well as anecdotes about the working life of women in rail, many of which have been provided by Aslef (Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Fireman).



"I hear stories through Twitter or word of mouth and I ask people for testimonies. It gives a snapshot of women in the industry," she says. She cites one example of a woman train inspector who had to confront disruptive passengers late at night. One of the men, who was high on drugs, had a knife and threatened to stab himself and her. "It highlights how courageous she was and what being a train inspector at night involves and that it is part of their day to day life," says Adeline.

Also on the website are details of events organised by Women in Rail. Adeline has been speaking to Aslef about repeating a conference held earlier this year which highlighted issues around job shares and flexible working in rail. She hopes to have more time for debate and have mini workshops aimed at developing a plan for the industry about what best practice, including in flexible working, would look like. The conference workshop this year included videos of women train drivers who were asked what would have happened if they had not managed to get flexible working. Several said they would have had to leave the profession. "It's a waste of talent," says Adeline. "It costs £60,000 to train a driver. If you don't offer flexible working you have lost that investment."

Other events planned for next year include a workshop on what is holding women back in engineering and a mentoring workshop. Women in Rail is seeking volunteers to do mentoring. In the workshops, mentors and mentees are first put in separate rooms. The mentees are told how to make the best of the mentoring relationship. The mentors are asked to think about their approach to mentoring women. Many mentors will not have mentored women before.

Adeline says research shows male mentors tend to introduce other men to their own network whereas they are more reluctant to do that with women. The mentees are keen to grasp a unique opportunity to have access to senior management. The two groups are then brought back together and a contract is agreed about the goals they are working towards. A speed matching exercise allows for some initial discussions and possibly matching. Mentees, who have earlier expressed their preferences, are encouraged to refine their requirements to help them choose the best mentor for them. "It's interesting because the mentors learn as much as the mentees and it shows that the industry is committed to supporting all members of the workforce to climb up the career ladder and realise their full potential," says Adeline

Giving back

She has been working round the clock since she has her full-time day job to do as well. Women in Rail is like another full-time job on top. To take some of the pressure off, she has established a steering committee for Women in Rail to keep up the momentum she has built and the organisation is applying for charitable status. She plans to establish mini workshops and delegate more to other women in the industry and build up a network. "I will still be doing it, but I want to get the industry more involved in trying to make it more of an industry initiative," she says. "I love the feeling of helping to give something back to the industry."

She also hopes to get more men on board in 2015 through events like wine and beer tasting. "The name Women in Rail can put men off. Their first reaction is why should we join. We thought about changing the name, but it is about supporting, retaining and encouraging women in the rail sector and improving diversity for the benefit of the industry as a whole. We may have a tagline about attracting the widest pool of talent to make it clear to men that it is not just about women. It is about making the industry more dynamic and efficient," says Adeline. "Rail is a caring industry, but it still suffers from an image problem. We want to change that and show it is a modern, dynamic industry."