



Fathers at Work

Work life balance fact sheet 14

This fact sheet outlines a range of father friendly work arrangements which can benefit business through the increased retention of skilled male employees, higher morale and a greater capacity to meet customer demand.

Traditional family roles have changed significantly in recent decades. Now both partners often work and modern fathers are choosing to play a more active role in their children's lives. Employers who support this choice are more likely to attract and retain these employees.

In the past, much of the focus in addressing work life balance has been on the needs of women. Many workplaces have introduced family friendly work practices, however men are often reluctant to access these entitlements due to the different cultural expectations placed on men in the workplace.

A significant step that employers can take in retaining fathers is to recognise the importance of providing father friendly work environments, and to challenge assumptions that work life balance does not apply to men.

Demographic change – particularly an ageing workforce – means that Western Australia will experience ongoing labour and skill shortages, irrespective of short term economic fluctuations. Long term business success therefore depends on putting strategies in place to ensure a reliable source of employees going into the future.

In understanding how to provide a father friendly work environment, those factors that are a barrier to supporting fathers in the workplace need to be understood. These can include:

- attitudes of management and individual supervisors that family friendly policies only apply to women;
- a lack of understanding of eligibility for entitlements;
- a culture in which commitment is equated with long hours in the workplace;
- restrictions on the use of family friendly practices in workplaces where performance is either rewarded or measured solely by production outcomes; and
- inflexible work practices that unnecessarily prevent fathers from playing a more active role in child rearing.

Example of father friendly work

Andrew is a full time web developer with a working wife and two young children. He regularly starts work early so he can leave at 4.30pm and be home to cook dinner. One afternoon a week he collects his son from school at 3pm, using flexi time built up throughout the week.

Father friendly work arrangements

Reasonable hours of work

Work cultures that emphasise long hours with little flexibility can create an environment that is less attractive to potential employees, and may result in high staff turnover. For many male employees, a higher wage cannot compensate for time away from their families. Implementing reasonable working hours in individual workplaces may require a cultural change. Some practical starting points include:

- rewarding performance rather than attendance or “face time” on the job;
- scheduling meetings within normal working hours;
- discouraging weekend and late night work except in emergencies; and
- extending workplace social events to families.

Part time employment

Most jobs can be undertaken on a part time or job sharing basis, and such arrangements may suit some male employees who have parenting responsibilities. Part time employment can assist a business in meeting peak workload periods, and can provide certainty for fathers in addressing regular family needs.

Flexible working hours

Flexible working hours can be as simple as having flexible start and finish times, which suit both the business and the employee. Employers could prescribe the core hours of the day when employees are required to be at work and give employees flexibility within the non-core hours. Such flexibility allows employees to meet regular or unexpected family commitments without penalty, provided the missing hours are made up within a specified time period. Accumulated hours could also be ‘banked’ for school holidays, or for family matters such as medical appointments, pupil free days, school or sporting events.

Alternatively employers could allow some employees to regularly start and finish earlier, and others to start and finish later. This could suit employees with childcare responsibilities, and provide a longer span of operating hours for the employer and clients.

Rostering arrangements should generally be made in consultation with employees, taking into consideration the work requirements and employees’ family responsibilities.

Scheduling meetings and training

Training and development courses which are scheduled to start early or late in the day, during school holidays, or are residential (live-in), can place an unnecessary burden on employees with family responsibilities. Employers need to consider the normal working hours of employees and school holiday periods when organising training and courses or meetings. They should also provide employees with as much notice as possible to enable employees to make alternative arrangements, such as child care, should the need arise.

Home based work

Due to advances in technology, home based work is becoming a viable alternative to the traditional site based office. Utilising internet, e-mail and mobile phone technology, employees can maintain contact with their employer and colleagues and effectively manage their workload at home, the same way they would in the site office.

Home based work enables employees to work outside the office environment on a full time, part time, or temporary basis. The amount of time that employees spend in the site office and in their home office will depend on the requirements of their position and should be negotiated on an individual basis considering the needs of the business and the employee.

Purchased leave

Employers can provide the ability for fathers to work on a full time basis at reduced pay and take additional self-funded paid leave during the year. The income earned for the actual time worked (including accrued paid annual leave) is averaged and paid over the full year. This provides a steady reduced income and additional leave.

There is no limit to the combination of work and leave that can be designed. This arrangement is useful for fathers needing additional time off work to attend to children during school holidays, and may also suit employers if such periods are usually quiet.

Paid paternity leave

Paid parental leave may be an attractive option to new fathers providing them the opportunity to support their partner and new baby at an important time. Typically only relevant for working fathers a few times in their careers, paid parental leave may provide a key incentive to remain with an employer.

Workplace family room

The establishment of a family room in the workplace enables employees to continue to work as productively as possible while minding a child or another dependent family member when normal care arrangements breakdown. This could assist fathers with childcare emergencies or pupil-free days and provide an alternative to employees withdrawing from work for the day to care for their family member.

Access to facilities

A number of simple measures can provide reassurance to fathers that their family obligations are considered important by their employer. It could be as simple as access to a telephone for emergency family calls, reasonable personal use of company mobile phones, or use of a company car to attend to family emergencies.

Getting started – creating a father friendly workplace

Management support

The most important factor in creating a father friendly workplace is support from all levels of management. Fathers at work need to know that the organisation supports them in taking advantage of the flexible work arrangements on offer. A cultural shift may need to occur in the workplace to ensure fathers are comfortable in accessing flexible arrangements. Senior managers can act as role models by utilising father friendly practices themselves where appropriate.

Assessing your workplace

Not all of the strategies outlined in this publication will suit all workplaces. The different requirements of each business will affect the practicality of implementing these strategies. Conducting an assessment in the workplace prior to introducing initiatives to assist fathers may be useful.

An assessment could include identifying the organisation's key operating requirements such as client contact hours, equipment operating needs, minimum staffing requirements, workflow peaks and troughs, as well as asking employees which flexible work practices would assist them.

Implementation and communication issues

Prior to implementing any father friendly initiative, employers should ensure that it is consistent with existing obligations under any award, agreement, or contract of employment that operates in the workplace. It is important to assess the implications of any proposed changes in working arrangements, and ensure that unintended additional costs, such as overtime payments, are not incurred.

Communication with employees is essential. All employees need to be made aware of what new initiatives are available and how they are to be implemented.

Checklist for employers

- Is information readily available to employees on flexible work practices?
- Is it made clear that flexible work arrangements are available for all employees?
- Do managers set an example by accessing flexible work arrangements?
- Do we discourage unnecessarily long hours of work?
- Are meetings scheduled during normal working hours?
- Are flexible start and finish times available to employees?
- Are employee preferences taken into account when formulating rosters?
- Can employees "bank" accumulated hours of work?
- Are social events extended to family members?
- Can employees access part time or home based work?
- Do we provide reasonable access for employee to facilities such as telephones etc?
- Do we have processes for handling requests for flexible working arrangements?
- Are managers trained in handling requests for flexible work arrangements?
- Do we advertise ourselves as a flexible employer?
- Are our employees accessing flexible work arrangements?

Further information

Further information on a wide range of flexible work arrangements, and how they can be implemented in Western Australian workplaces is available on the Department of Commerce work life balance website at www.worklife.wa.gov.au.