



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 increased retention of male employees, higher morale and a greater capacity to meet customer demand.

Traditional family roles have changed significantly – both partners often work and 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 high calibre employees.

Historically, work life balance has targeted the needs of women. Although many workplaces have introduced family friendly work practices, men are often reluctant to access such entitlements due to perceived barriers including:

- that family friendly policies only apply to women;
- poor understanding of the eligibility for entitlements;
- a culture in which organisational commitment is associated with working long hours;
- 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.

Employers can take a significant step by recognising the importance of providing father friendly work environments – challenging the assumption that work life balance does not apply to men.

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 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 (barring exceptional circumstances); 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 working fathers. Part-time employment can assist a business to meet peak workload periods, and can provide certainty for fathers to address family needs.

Flexible working hours

Flexible working hours (e.g. having flexible start and finish times) may suit both the business and the employee. For example, employers could prescribe core working hours, allowing employees flexibility outside of these times. This allows employees to meet regular or unexpected family commitments without loss of wages, provided the missing hours are made up at other times. Accumulated hours could also be 'banked' for school holidays or family matters such as medical appointments, pupil free days, school or sporting events.

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

Rostering arrangements should be made in consultation with employees, taking into consideration both business needs and employee family responsibilities.

Scheduling meetings and training

Meetings and training 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 meetings or training. They should also provide their staff with as much notice as possible to enable employees to make alternative arrangements (such as child care) if required.

Home based work

Home based work has become a viable alternative to the traditional site based office. By utilising internet, e-mail and mobile phone technology, employees can maintain contact with their employer and colleagues and effectively manage their workload from home.

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.

Purchased leave

Employers can allow 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.

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 paternity 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 paternity leave may provide an attractive retention strategy.

Paid parental leave pay

Employers may seek to promote fathers accessing the Commonwealth Government's paid parental leave scheme should a father wish to act as the primary caregiver to a child. This scheme provides eligible employees with up to 18 weeks of paid parental leave pay at the national minimum wage for the birth or adoption of a child.

Workplace family room

The establishment of a family room in the workplace enables employees to continue working productively while minding a child when normal care arrangements break down. This could assist fathers with childcare emergencies or pupil-free days and reduce absenteeism related to parenting responsibilities.

Access to facilities

Simple measures can be introduced to reassure fathers that their family obligations are considered important by their employer. Examples include access to a telephone for emergency family calls, reasonable personal use of company mobile phones, or use of a company car to attend family emergencies.

Getting started – creating a father friendly workplace

Management support

The key factor in creating a father friendly workplace is management support. Working fathers need to know that the organisation supports them taking advantage of flexible work arrangements. A workplace cultural shift may be needed to ensure fathers are comfortable in accessing flexible arrangements. Senior managers can act as role models by utilising father friendly practices themselves where appropriate.

Assessment, implementation and communication issues

Not all of the strategies outlined in this fact sheet will suit all workplaces. The different requirements of each business will affect the practicality of implementing these strategies. Conducting a workplace assessment prior to introducing these initiatives 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.

Prior to implementing any father friendly initiative, employers should ensure that it is consistent with existing obligations under any relevant award, agreement, or contract of employment. 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.

Transparent communication with employees is essential. All employees need to be made aware of the initiatives 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 setting 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 is available on the Department of Commerce work life balance website at www.worklife.wa.gov.au.

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