

GUIDANCE FOR MANAGERS ON REMOTE AND AGILE WORKING

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Introduction

Advances in technology have revolutionised how, when and where we work. Laptops, tablets and smartphones enable employees to work remotely from home, during a long commute or from a variety of other locations. Video conferencing has replaced many face to face meetings, saving travel time and costs and allowing employees based in different offices and geographical locations to work together.

Societal changes have also driven an increase in flexible working, especially following the Coronavirus pandemic. Individuals now expect to be able to fit work around their other commitments instead of having to juggle everything in their life around a fixed working pattern. An increasing number of employees require flexible working arrangements to fulfil their caring responsibilities or support their lifestyle. Individuals are placing more value on their physical and mental wellbeing and are aware that creating and maintaining a healthy work life balance is essential to achieving this. The ability to create a work life balance that works for the individual on a personal level influences the roles that they are prepared to do.

In light of these developments, it is very likely that you, as a line manager, are or will be managing at least one employee who works flexibly, or would like to. This briefing outlines the benefits of embracing flexible working and provides practical guidance on how to lead a flexible working team effectively.

What is Flexible Working?

The term flexible working typically describes a working pattern that does not adhere to the traditional nine to five, Monday to Friday working week that is based in an office or other workplace setting.

Examples of common flexible working practices:

Flexible working practice	What is it?
Part time	Work less hours than a full time employee within the same organisation.
Flexitime	Vary start and finish times around core working periods with the ability to build up surplus hours to take later.
Compressed hours	Work weekly full time hours over four longer days or fortnightly full time hours over nine longer days or a variation on this.
Remote working	Work from home or another location.
Term time	Work only during school terms.

While some of these flexible working practices are fixed patterns of work that would usually involve contractual changes, many employees would also benefit from informal flexible working arrangements.

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Legal Right to Request Flexible Working

The statutory right to request flexible working allows employees who have at least 26 weeks' continuous service to ask their employer for a change to their working hours (whether that be to the number of hours they work or when they work them) or place of work, and obliges employers to deal with such requests in a "reasonable manner".

Requests for flexible working are restricted to one request per employee per year and the employer must inform the employee of its decision within three months of their application.

Your organisation will have a flexible working policy and as a line manager it is important that you are familiar with its contents and understand your role in the organisation's procedure for dealing with flexible working requests from your team.

Many organisations have flexible working practices that go well beyond what is required by the law because of the associated business benefits. Some employers choose to allow employees to request flexible working from day one and others actively encourage all employees, rather than just those who request it, to consider if they could benefit from some form of flexible working.

Informal arrangements

Informal everyday flexibility is a key part of creating a culture that genuinely encourages flexible working. As well as ensuring that you proactively explore ways of working with team members that best suit them and in so doing help them to perform at their best, there should be flexibility in the way that team members are able to work on a day to day basis.

An individual's commitments outside work are constantly changing and they will need different things at different times to ensure a healthy work life balance. What works for an individual one day, week or month may not work the next. Everyday flexibility ensures that team members can deal with things that crop up in their lives outside work in the knowledge that the organisation and you as their line manager see work as a flexible activity that can accommodate them and their changing needs.

In practical terms, this means that your team will have a certain degree of assumed flexibility around when, where and how they work. For example, if a team member needs to leave work early for a few weeks to collect their child from school, they may choose to finish early and simply make up the time by working from home that evening. Employees would not need or be expected to secure your agreement every time they varied their working pattern although they would need to ensure that the arrangement worked for the team and was properly communicated.

Benefits of flexible working for employees

The main benefit of flexible working for employees is that it gives them more control over a huge part of their lives. This in turn enables them to organise their work and home life in a way that minimises the conflict between their work obligations and other life commitments. Allowing employees input and control over how, where and when they work also means they are more likely to perform better and be more productive.

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Employee benefit	How does the employee benefit?
Reduced commuting	Reduced travelling time and costs when working from home or other locations. Reduced stress by avoiding peak travel times.
Increased concentration	Quieter work spaces when need to concentrate when working from home or other locations.
Improved work-life balance	Able to balance work and other aspects of life more effectively.
Improved wellbeing	Better work life balance means more time for family, friends, passions, interests and exercise and likely increased happiness levels.

Benefits of flexible working for employers

A common misconception about flexible working is that it is an employee benefit that comes at a cost to the employer. In reality, organisations that offer flexible working enjoy huge business benefits.

Here are some of the ways that organisations can capitalise on having a flexible workforce:

Business benefit	How does the business benefit?
Candidate attraction	The organisation is more likely to attract the most talented candidates by not excluding individuals who cannot (or do not want to) comply with a work model that is inflexible in relation to hours and/or place of work. It will be more attractive to diverse candidates who need or want to work flexibly This will increase the organisation's creative and problem solving capacity as it will benefit from employees with a range of backgrounds and perspectives bringing something different to the table.
Employee retention	The organisation will not lose employees to other organisations that offer flexible working options. Reducing employee turnover means that the organisation will avoid the disruption associated with replacing key employees, e.g loss of knowledge, expertise and experience from the team; reduction in team output if work is reallocated; negative impact on team morale of employee's departure and time, effort and cost of recruiting and training a replacement.
Productivity	Improved productivity from employees working at times and locations that suit them.
Engagement and commitment	Enhanced engagement and commitment from employees who are given the freedom to work flexibly.

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Business benefit	How does the business benefit?
Absence levels (and associated costs)	Reduced absence levels as employees more able to reduce work life conflicts (may need less time off if can fit other commitments around work), related stress levels and sickness absences.
Customer demands	Increased capacity to meet 24/7 customer demand as a result of the adoption of different and more varied working patterns by employees.
Operating costs	Reduced overheads as need fewer full time workstations (not necessary for remote workers). May institute desk sharing or hot desking.
Reputation/Brand	Enhanced reputation because employers that give their employees the freedom to work flexibly will be viewed positively by prospective and existing employees

Benefits of flexible working for line managers

As a line manager you may already have had the experience of a job applicant querying how much scope there is to work flexibly in your organisation. It frequently comes top of the list of factors that influence an individual's decision on whether or not to accept a job. If you want to recruit the most talented individuals you need to respond positively or risk these individuals going elsewhere.

As a line manager you should work proactively with your team to find ways of working that suit both you and them. This will be beneficial to both of you. There is ample research to show that your team is likely to be more engaged, motivated and productive if they are given the freedom to work in a way that fits in with their other life interests, aspirations and commitments. Both they and you will be happier while still meeting the team and organisation's objectives.

If you treat your team members as competent, conscientious and responsible individuals, they are likely to rise to the challenge. They may support each other more, collaborate better when difficult situations arise, and be more adaptable if you need them to do things differently for a while.

Do's and don'ts

Do talk to candidates about flexible working during the recruitment process.

Don't wait until you receive a request from a team member to consider whether or not they could be working in way that suits them better.

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Flexible Working Arrangements - How to ensure they succeed

You may be wondering why, if flexible working has so many benefits, is everyone everywhere not doing it?

Flexible working arrangements often fail to reap the benefits that are possible because managers find it difficult to wholeheartedly support them. Perhaps you are worried that your team are not as committed to you and the organisation when they are working elsewhere. If so, you will find it difficult to let them work anywhere but in front of you. Maybe you are concerned about your own targets and objectives and afraid that there will be a decline in performance and productivity if you cannot see what your team are doing most, if not all, of the time.

Allowing your team to work flexibly involves an element of "letting go" and that can sometimes feel uncomfortable. Giving your team more freedom to decide how they want to work will change the way you evaluate their contribution. Your evaluation will be less around their physical presence and the hours they work and more around output and results.

There are three principles that you need to observe to make flexible working a success for you, your team and the organisation.

- **Trust your team.** You have to trust that your team will work diligently towards their objectives without you controlling every aspect of how they carry out their work. You trusting your team to work conscientiously when you cannot see them is fundamental to the success or otherwise of flexible working in your team.
- **Know your team.** Each employee that you manage is an individual with their own unique combination of strengths and weaknesses and particular set of personal circumstances and life commitments. You cannot have a constructive conversation about the different ways in which they can work effectively in a vacuum, you need to get to know them. What other life commitments do they have? What are their aspirations? What motivates them from day to day?
- **Have confidence in yourself as a manager.** Your confidence in your ability to guide and support your team will create a positive environment within which you and your team can explore and incorporate new ways of working. Confidence in yourself is not the same as arrogance. Knowing your weaknesses can give you valuable insights into when you need to pay particular attention to how you are doing something and your performance more generally and lets you work on what you need to improve.

Encourage a culture of flexibility and model behaviour

Like most aspects of managing people, you need to model the behaviour that you want your team to adopt. Challenge your own way of working. If you want your team to embrace flexible working and reap the associated benefits you need to demonstrate that you work differently when it suits you and the organisation. If you are at work long into the evening on a regular basis you will send a signal to your team that this is what is needed to progress. If you do not work flexibly on a regular basis make a point of occasionally going home early or working from home yourself to show that it can be done. Your efforts to help the organisation build a culture that embraces flexible working will not work if you say one thing and then behave in a contradictory way. Nor will your efforts be effective if you allow individuals to make disrespectful or derogatory remarks about team members who do work flexibly.

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Encourage a culture of flexibility and model behaviour

You should also make sure that flexible working is something that is, and is seen to be, equally available at all levels of the organisation. It should not be a status symbol or something that does not apply to you as a manager.

Take some time to reflect on your beliefs about people generally, and how much you trust your team in particular. It is not necessarily a stark choice but consider which end of the below scale your beliefs lie:

- Do you believe that most people want to do a good job, want to succeed themselves and see others succeed, and left to their own devices will get on with the work and do their best?
- Do you believe that most people need someone like you behind them, telling them what to do and when, and unless they are closely monitored will do as little as possible?

The reason that trust is so important in flexible working environments is that, unlike workplaces where employees work more conventionally, your team may not be visible to you for large parts of the working day. They may work from home some or most of the time. They may work different hours than you, so be working elsewhere when you are there, or present when you are not. It is often thought that it is easier to be a good manager if your working days always coincide with your team's but actually this just makes it easier to get away with being a mediocre manager. If you are managing effectively you do not need to be present all the time, you are still available to your team when they need you but as you are managing by outcomes you can leave them to get on with the job when you are not there.

Once flexible working starts to be accepted you may find yourself in a position where everyone wants the same arrangement, for example everyone may want to start an hour earlier in the morning so that they can leave an hour earlier or to compress their hours so that they do not work on a Friday or a Monday. You may not want to choose between your team members' requests, perhaps because you do not want to appear to have favourites, or because everyone appears to have a similarly compelling need. Ideally your role in this situation should be that of a facilitator rather than a figure of authority who decides the fate of each individual request.

Ensure that you identify any requests that incorporate a potential discrimination angle and seek advice from HR in relation to these. For example a request to start later or finish earlier could constitute a reasonable adjustment in the context of a disabled employee and a failure to make such an adjustment may constitute disability discrimination. Similarly, because women generally have primary responsibility for children and the care of other relatives, a female employee who has her request to work flexibly refused may be able to succeed in a claim for indirect sex discrimination.

Dos and don'ts

Do lead by example and adopt some of the behaviour and practices that you want your team to adopt.

Do examine your beliefs about individual team members and whether or not they are justified.

Don't assume that the most effective way to manage your team is to maximise the time that you are in the same physical space.

Do consult HR straightaway if you think a flexible working request has a potential discrimination angle.

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Essential skills to lead a flexible working team

The skills that you need to lead a team of people that work flexibly are the same skills that you need to lead a team that works more conventionally. However, there is an important qualification to this you need to be more skilled at certain things including communicating, relationship building, coaching and managing by results.

For example, if most of your interaction with an employee is by email or over the phone you cannot rely on body language and facial expressions to help convey your message or to better understand what an employee is saying to you so there is more chance of a misunderstanding. For this reason a manager of an employee working remotely needs to be an excellent communicator rather than a competent one.

Communicate effectively

It is relatively easy to communicate with your team if you bump into each other all the time. When lots of team members have different working arrangements, it can be more difficult.

Timely and effective communication with your team, whatever their working arrangements, is vital to ensure that they:

- Feel part of the team;
- Understand how their work fits in with the team's objectives and how the team's work fits in with the organisation's objectives;
- Receive regular knowledge updates and information about organisational developments, and
- Receive regular feedback on the quality and quantity of the work being produced.

To achieve this you will need to use a range of communication tools including face to face meetings, telephone and video calls, emails and instant messages. Select whichever one is the most suitable for each particular communication bearing in mind what you want to say Is it sensitive in nature and as such requires a particularly thoughtful and tactful delivery? Is it something that you need to communicate urgently?

For example, if you want to tell an employee that they did not deliver on a particular project, consider doing this in person to ensure that you are able to take on board their reaction as you deliver your feedback. You do not want them to feel totally demoralised so it important to notice how your feedback is being received, articulate what the employee did well and listen actively to what they say about why they tackled the project in a particular way. Delivering this type of feedback over email can come across as harsher than you intended. On the other hand, a telephone call may be best if you want an employee to pick up an urgent piece of work. This will ensure that they are aware of its urgency and can reprioritise their other work accordingly. It also gives you the opportunity to get some buy in from the employee by explaining why the work is important and why you are asking them to do it.

When a team of individuals are physically present in the same space this provides lots of opportunities for team members to share knowledge and ideas and discuss issues as they arise on an informal basis thereby strengthening relationships within the team and enhancing team performance. When a team works flexibly, spontaneous communication and knowledge sharing can be more difficult. However, it is possible to simulate similar interactions by using secure, online communication and collaboration tools.

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An instant messaging tool can be a good way for you and your team to interact with each other socially regardless of whether or not they are physically present in the office. Saying " and "how are you?" when people start their working day is a good way for the team to connect with each other. If you set up an instant messaging tool to allow team members to interact socially do not monitor it constantly to see what they are up to or criticise individuals for how much time they spend on it. You should also join in yourself in a friendly way and share some personal information when doing so.

Most organisations regard it as important for teams to retain some face to face interaction to be effective. Setting clear expectations about how much face to face time is required at the start of any flexible working arrangement will help to avoid potential conflict around this issue further down the line. The amount of face to face time needed will depend on various factors including the employee's role, the nature of the work they do, their knowledge and experience, the amount of supervision and support they need and how the team operates. It may be that the employee needs to be in the office for three out of their five working days or only to attend important meetings

Dos and don'ts

Don't immediately jump into a conversation on an instant messaging tool and correct a piece of misinformed gossip.

Do join in conversations in a friendly way so that your team know you are around.

Do be mindful that some concerns are much better addressed face to face.

Plan and schedule

If you have individuals in your team who work on different days, or on a different timetable, you must be mindful of this when you are organising meetings or social events. It can create resentment if you always set meeting times to suit yourself, rather than considering when and where your team will be working. It may also send a signal that you do not respect your team's flexible working arrangements.

At the beginning of any flexible working arrangement, it is a good idea to agree any regular events that you want everyone to commit to regardless of their working pattern. If you can agree these events as a team, through a discussion where there is mutual cooperation and compromise, team members will feel more committed to attending them. For example, it may be that Wednesday afternoon rather than Monday morning for a regular team update is the best compromise for the whole team. You should use the same consideration when planning projects, organising training, or scheduling and delegating work.

Ensure that you plan and diarise the events that you want everyone to attend well in advance. Given advance notice, team members can more easily plan and, if necessary, change their work schedule so that they can attend an event. For example, a team member can more easily arrange childcare to attend team training on a day that they would not normally work.

Meetings should have a remote dial in to join where possible to ensure that team members are not excluded from attending if they do need to work remotely.

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Set objectives and manage performance

Measuring an individual's performance by results and not by their presence in the workplace or the number of hours that they work is the best way to ensure that flexible working arrangements succeed. A person's presence in the workplace does not necessarily mean they are working. Equally, when someone is working from home, or on the move, this does not mean they are not working or slacking. Often it is the reverse. Given the freedom to work in their own way, employees almost always get on with the job and appreciate being trusted to choose when and where to work.

To assess an individual's performance by their output you must conduct a thorough objective setting process. With your input and sign off, having your team members propose their own objectives is an effective way to get their commitment.

The focus during the objective setting process should be on agreeing with your team members the outcomes that they will achieve over a specific period of time and how these outcomes will be measured. You should then allow your team members the freedom to choose how they will meet their objectives. You are agreeing what they will do rather than how they will do it. This flexibility will give individuals the chance to use their knowledge and experience. The individual actually doing a job is usually the one who knows best how to do things better or differently and it is important that you give them the autonomy to put that knowledge to use.

Once you have agreed objectives, you should check in with team members on a regular basis about what progress they are making, ideally as part of your regular one to one catch ups. Creating regular opportunities to review, reflect and provide feedback on the level of progress that a team member has achieved against required outcomes is important, even more so when an individual is working flexibly, as the opportunities to observe directly or provide in the moment advice or feedback are more limited.

Make a point of recognising good progress and outcomes because this is vital to maintaining and boosting your team's motivation levels. Equally, if there are issues with the progress or outcomes that a particular individual is achieving, you must feed this back promptly regardless of how difficult you may find the conversation so that they have the opportunity to improve. It can be demotivating if a team member thinks they are doing a reasonable job because no one has said anything to the contrary only to be presented with a lot of negative feedback at their annual performance review, when it is too late for them to do anything about it.

This is an area that can be challenging if you are managing individuals who work flexibly. You need to make time for regular catch ups with your team and to know them well enough to recognise when they might be struggling but reluctant to admit it. If you are not confident that your listening skills are good enough to pick up on this you should work on improving them.

If your team members are producing the outcomes you expect, then you are doing your job as their manager. You do not need to stand over them all day checking every single thing they do. Your role is to make sure people know what is expected from them and to support and encourage them. You also need to be sure they are still getting the training that they need even if they have assumed some responsibility for their own development.

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Get to know your team

To get the best out of your team you need to adapt your approach to suit individual team members. You can do this only if you make the time and effort to get to know them. Over a period of time you should aim to answer the following questions about them: What are their values? Which aspects of their job do they particularly like? Are there any aspects that they dislike? How did they come to be employed by the organisation? What are their priorities in life? What motivates them? What are their particular reasons for working flexibly?

It will take time and effort to get to know your team in this way and it is likely to happen through a variety of ways including individual catch ups, team discussions, casual chats and interaction at work social events.

It is equally important that you understand the role of everyone in your team and the work that they do. This will make it easier for you to assess objectively how any proposed flexible working arrangements will work in practice. Be aware that not everyone will want to share their motivation for requesting a particular working pattern and it is important that you respect their privacy although if you suspect that the reason behind an employee's request is health related you should seek advice from HR as there may be issues around disability discrimination that you need to take into account.

You should also try and get some insight into any challenges that are particular to team members who work remotely. You could explore if there is anything that slows them down from a technology point of view to ensure that you are aware of any potential issues. You could also ask them if they feel they have access to the right level of support from other team members and if there are any individuals in particular that they think they would benefit from working with more closely.

Do's and don'ts

Don't expect to get everything that you want to know about a team member from one conversation. You are trying to develop a relationship as well as gather information.

Do create opportunities for team members to work together and learn from each other.

Coach and facilitate

Adopting a coaching management style will be more effective than a "command and control" approach when managing a flexible team. You not being in the same physical space as your team members all or most of the time means there is less scope to help trouble shoot problems when they arise. Team members need to develop the skills to solve problems independently. A coaching management style, which involves you guiding individuals to work out things for themselves by asking powerful questions, will help them do this.

Using coaching to help solve a team member's problem could involve you:

- Asking the individual for a clear summary of the problem
- Reflecting the summary back to them to check that you have understood them
- Asking for their proposed solutions and then suggesting any other relevant options
- Discussing the pros and cons of each option and

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Using coaching to help solve a team member's problem could involve you:

- Asking the individual for a clear summary of the problem;
- Reflecting the summary back to them to check that you have understood them;
- Asking for their proposed solutions and then suggesting any other relevant options;
- Discussing the pros and cons of each option; and
- letting the individual suggest the best way forward.

Do not feel that it is your job as a manager to solve every problem that you are presented with. Indeed, the critical thing when coaching is that responsibility for dealing with a problem and finding the best solution remains with the individual. Many managers lead a person to a specific outcome but consider the process of getting there to be coaching but if you genuinely want to coach your team then responsibility for finding a solution should stay with them while you ask the right questions and provide support at the right points. If you think that an individual is going in the wrong direction then make sure that you put questions to them that explore the pros and cons of following that particular path. Coaching potentially involves the individual taking a risk and stretching themselves so you being approachable is critical. It is essential that you do not reprimand someone for asking obvious questions or suggest incompetence if an individual cannot see what you consider to be an obvious solution straightaway.

If you adopt a coaching approach to management you will help your team to grow and develop while also giving them the confidence to deal with problems more independently.

Creating an open culture

You may find that there is an outdated assumption in your team that those who work flexibly are less committed to their job or the organisation in some way. Individuals who work flexibly may be treated differently by their colleagues. For example, if they leave early they may get sarcastic comments about shirking and if they work from home they may be subject to jokes about watching television all day. It is important that you address these remarks and the attitudes that underpin them openly and firmly, do not allow them to fester or persist. Emphasise that you are rewarding people for outcomes and what they achieve and this is more important than where a person works. Your most productive team member may be the one who works the least hours and conversely the least productive person in your team may spend the most hours working to achieve the same or less.

You must trust your team to create an open culture. If the only reason you expect people to come into work at a fixed time is because you want to keep an eye on them, you should really be questioning why. Maybe they are new to the job and need your help to get up to speed. Maybe they have difficulty motivating themselves on their own and need some external impetus to get them started. Or maybe it is because you do not trust them to work by themselves. If someone has shown that they cannot be trusted, then they may need close supervision for a period. However, you should not assume that people cannot be trusted before you have even tried.

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Flexibility all round

Managing a team of people on different working patterns can present challenges. There will be times when you do not have enough resource to cover the immediate work and times when there will be some slack in the system. However, if you have established positive relationships with your team you will find that flexibility works both ways, and because you have been willing to accommodate their needs, they will do their best to be flexible when you need extra resource.

The most important thing to consider when you are assessing whether or not a job can be done flexibly are the requirements of that job. You will need to think through which requirements must be done in a fixed way and which requirements can be varied in some way. For example, jobs that involve using equipment that is stationary must be done on site, e.g. a laboratory technician. Similarly, jobs that involve contact with the public often have to be done at a fixed place, e.g. a shop assistant. However, there are many jobs that have traditionally been tied to a particular location that can now be done remotely, for example web developer, translator, customer services agent and editor.

Start your assessment of whether or not a particular job can be done flexibly with the assumption that most work can be done anywhere and at any time. You should then explore ways to make this happen before considering whether or not the ways that you have identified are feasible. Many jobs involve regular team meetings and collaboration with colleagues. In these instances consider whether it would be sufficient for remote workers to dial in to some or all of the necessary meetings and use online collaboration tools to work with colleagues.

It is imperative that you are fair and consistent when you assess whether or not a particular job can be done flexibly. You must be able to explain to your team which jobs are flexible and which are not, and why. You must also ensure that you deal with any requests to work flexibly from your team objectively.

If you are unsure how suited a job is to a particular flexible working arrangement, consider having a trial period. You would need to agree the length of the trial period and agree what outcomes would be required during that period with the employee beforehand. If you conclude at the end of the trial period that some parts of the job are suffering then consider if there is an alternative arrangement you could try. Do not immediately revert to a conventional way of working. For example, you may find someone is perfectly capable of doing their own job from home, coming into the office once a week, but the team is suffering from their absence. In this scenario you may agree with the team that there are certain times when everyone is present and available for informal conversations as well as formal meetings.

You will find that it is frequently possible to meet the needs of the organisation and a team member at the same time. Most employees make requests with job requirements in mind and do not ask for impossible changes. Your team are well aware of the work that needs to be done and because of this they will come up with suggestions they believe are workable. Some may be unrealistic but the majority will be worth trying. You are not permanently committed to a change if you agree to have a trial period, and it may be a good idea even if you are minded to agree a request, because the individual or team may find that the proposed arrangement does not work and want to change it.

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If team members have some input into how, when and where they work you will find that they take responsibility for making things work. For example, if someone knows they need time off for a personal commitment they will arrange to swap times with a colleague to cover it. Team members are likely to take ownership of delivering what is required and rather than presenting you with problems. Often they will come up with creative solutions that you might not have thought of yourself. This in itself is a useful team building exercise but you have to be committed to trying their ideas. Try them out and you may be surprised to find how much more effective your team becomes.

Do's and don'ts

Do try to find a solution that works for the individual and the team.

Do work together with your team to try different options.

Don't automatically say no to a request because it makes things less convenient or slightly harder for you.

Don't assume that the question of whether or not a job can be done flexibly is an all or nothing question, it may be that parts of it can be done flexibly.

GET IN TOUCH

If you have any questions, or would like further support, please get in touch with Georgia Wilson by calling 0141 221 2984 or by email at georgia.wilson@aab.uk.