

Q&A

Work Life Balance

The answers to the following questions are drawn from the direct experience of those involved in Merton's work life balance pilot.

1. What if everyone wants to work the same pattern?

There is very little likelihood that this will happen in practice. The needs of individual staff within any team, no matter how small, are bound to differ. If it does happen, put the problem back to the staff group, do not expect the manager alone to sort it out. The ground rules we used at Merton, and recommend you use, mean that staff and managers take joint responsibility for agreeing how things will work, and that the needs of the service must be prioritised. So, in the very unlikely event that everyone does want to work the same pattern, unless this will meet the requirements of the service, colleagues and customers, everyone will have to look at a compromise solution to the problem.

2. I have got a 10 per cent vacancy rate here - how can I be more flexible?

Firstly, ask whether your vacancy rate problems could be alleviated as a result of introducing more flexibility - it could make a real difference to your recruitment drive. Vacancy rates at this level, and more, affected many of the teams in Merton's pilot. In reality, not one team was unable to work differently because of cover problems. It really is just a question of working through what staff want, their ideas on how it will work and trying it. Staff in Merton were worried that introducing new patterns of working in small teams or teams with vacancies, would mean overload at certain points of the day or week. But, as one member of staff puts it: "Yes, there are some days when it's even more hectic than it was before, but because we all benefit from the new patterns which suit us better, it doesn't feel anywhere near as bad." Vacancy rates may affect the degree of flexibility that is achievable. But remember, most staff would rather have some more flexibility than have no opportunity to even look at what may be achievable.

3. Can you clarify whether staff who currently receive Unsocial Hours Payment for early morning work would be able to participate in new arrangements under Work Life Balance (whereby proposal is that whole section can work hours between 7am and 7 pm and build up 2 days off a month) but still receive the Unsocial Hours Payment because they are required to come in at 7.30 am?

If an individual opts for WLB they opt for a new working pattern/s and the flexibility this would bring. Therefore, they would choose the new WLB option and no longer receive the Unsocial Hours Payment. Of course, individuals may decide they do not want to choose the WLB route and keep to the working patterns they currently operate. They cannot have both. It may turn out that not enough members of the team want to utilise the new WLB working patterns in order for the service level to be maintained (or exceeded). In this case, the team would come to the conclusion that it cannot go with that particular WLB option.

4. How do I know people are really working if I'm not around to observe them?

How do you know they are really working when they are in your sights? Hours in work do not automatically translate into results. Trust, knowing your staff, having clear expectations of what is to be achieved, and having systems to monitor performance are the keys to success. These things should already be in place. If they are not, work-life balance can be a useful tool to discussing how you will measure the impact of new working patterns on performance in a more positive environment that might otherwise exist. Work-life balance efforts in themselves can act to remotivate staff, building commitment, trust, loyalty and a more open approach to staff management relations. And, if there are employees who have not performed at the levels expected of them, maybe it is because they have been struggling to manage the balance between home and work. Merton's experience has been that productivity has gone up and absenteeism has gone down. Also, colleagues are not likely to put up with people not pulling their weight for long.

5. Is flexible working a right?

Merton has operated a flexi-time scheme for many years. It is not considered a right, and can be withdrawn from individuals and teams where the needs of the service or performance problems with staff

demand. This approach has been extended to all new forms of working. However, there may be some contractual issues depending on the nature of the flexible pattern and any contracts into which you enter. For instance, if an organisation wishes to reduce accommodation costs, it may decide to recruit staff on contracts that stipulate remote or homeworking, and there would be legal implications for changing these.

6. I know some people will abuse the system

As one manager in Merton puts it: " Well, haven't they always?" This is not a flippant remark; if you know someone will abuse the system, it is probably because they already do so with existing systems. It needs tackling, with or without your work-life balance effort. Introducing and piloting new patterns of working gives you a chance to tackle work habits in a positive environment, reasserting what will and will not be acceptable use of new patterns and establishing clear performance targets if they do not already exist. And remember, the majority of people do not swing the lead or abuse the trust put in them. Do not let the very small number who do abuse that trust put you off doing anything for the vast majority who will act responsibly.

7. Once I have a system in place how do I deal with the needs of new members of staff?

Merton has recruited staff in the pilot since it started new patterns of working. Firstly, do not assume a new arrival will want a pattern that means you need to revisit existing arrangements. Indeed, a new member of staff may mean alleviating cover problems associated with the vacancy, and give you the opportunity to be even more flexible than before their arrival. If there is a need to review flexible patterns, then go back to how you approached it at the beginning of your pilot and testing period. Get the team together to look at the patterns they want to work, how they affect their colleagues, service and customers, and agree any amendments or compromises necessary. Because a new member of staff may be at a slight disadvantage as they will not have had a chance to integrate into the team, the manager may need to keep a closer eye on the discussions to ensure their needs are given the same priority as more established team members.

8. What about time off for dental and medical appointments?

This current approach, as covered under the sickness absence policy should be followed. In brief, appointments to visit the Doctor or

Dentist for routine checks should, wherever possible, be arranged for a time outside the employee's normal working hours. Employees working flexible hours should arrange appointments outside of core time/agreed work patterns. Where an appointment can only be made for a time during the employee's normal working hours such absences should be recorded as 'Hospital' or 'Dental' visits. Employees working flexible hours should record standard hours only on their flexi-time sheet. Approval from the line manager must be obtained for any absence from the workplace for medical or dental appointments. Provided these procedures are followed the absence will be treated as authorised paid absence.

Necessary time off shall be granted to all employees for the purposes of being screened for cancer, and for ante-natal appointments.

9 Can you clarify how the annual leave arrangements will work if, for example, a 9 day fortnight or 4.5 day week arrangements are made

It is probably simplest to calculate the no. of hours holiday a year an individual has. E.g. if someone is on a 7 hour day and has 26 days holiday a year then the total hours holiday would be 182. If the individual is compressing their hours into a shorter number of days then they need to compress their holiday. So, if they are working 9 days over a fortnight (working equal hours each day) they are working a slightly longer than normal day (approx 7.77 hours a day). This means that each holiday day must equate to their longer working day and should be subtracted from their holiday allowance. In these cases it will be imperative for the manager and employee will need to keep very clear documentation on their work patterns and hours worked

10. Did I understand correctly that managers can allow some of their staff to work WLB arrangements even if others don't wish to?

Yes, absolutely. WLB is not a right, nor is it something we would wish to be enforceable upon individuals. Provided the service/outputs can be maintained or improved then teams can be made up of those that may take part and those that may not. However, there may be instances where all members of a team would need to take part to make it work. In the event of the last example, where there is not total buy-in from each team member, then the team may not be able to implement new

WLB working patterns.

11. I assume a section manager's decision is considered final on how/whether it will work

The general agreement is that the team should propose solutions and work out the best way of working but that the line manager will make the final decision.

12. How do I balance service needs - will service standards reduce?

As one manager explains: "I think our service standards have improved as a result of the new patterns of working because everyone is feeling so much more positive. We were operating with a backlog of work every year for four years; we got rid of this within three months of implementing more flexibility. Because there is more opportunity to work during hours when there are fewer interruptions, like early in the morning, later at night or from home, we've improved efficiency."

13. If it does not work, how do we revert to original working patterns?

Try to avoid a knee-jerk reaction to problems. Reverting to original working patterns is not your only option. Take it back to the whole work group, work together to find out why it is not working and what can be done to solve the problem whilst maintaining some flexibility.

In addition, a review period has been built into the guidelines, (<http://intranet01/LBMIntranet/specialprojects/worklife/>) along with a letter to be issued to those taking part. The line manager will need to keep a strict eye on the effectiveness of WLB. It must also be made very clear, from the start, that it is not a right but an opportunity to work differently provided that the needs of the service are met or exceeded. Some of the pilot groups drew up a set of 'principles' (an agreement) which included an agreement that if there was a sudden increase in work then it was a case of 'all hands to the deck' and WLB work patterns would have to go on the back burner for a while. Similarly, if the needs of the service should change then it may be possible that certain WLB patterns would no longer be appropriate.

14. How do I remove flexible working from a team member or whole team?

The reason why you want to remove flexible working will affect your options. If you want to remove flexible working opportunities because they are not working for some reason, look at question number thirteen for one option. If you want to remove it from one person because they are abusing the scheme, or seem not to be coping with the performance requirements of the service, then you may have other options. If an employee is abusing the system you could warn the person that unless they respect the requirements expected, you will remove their flexibility and impose a structured set of hours. You could remove them for a period, with a view to reviewing the situation in a few months if performance improves.

15. What if a member of the team does not want to be involved?

In reality, there is no such thing as not being involved. Simply being at work, with or without work-life balance options, means you are involved. Merton staff already had years of experience with flexi-time, and the different start and finish times that result. Certainly, do not impose particular options on a team or an individual. Part of the process of determining what patterns can operate is assessing the effects on other team members, and limiting any adverse effects on colleagues. In practice, many staff in Merton have chosen not to change their patterns at all. What is interesting is the number of people in this position who are much happier now they know they could have the opportunity to work differently if their circumstances change.

16. What if someone's performance reduces?

You will need to find out if this is because of the new pattern of working or whether there is some other reason. Give people a chance to adapt to their new way of working - performance may normalise after a few weeks. Keep an eye on it - make sure you have set clear performance targets and monitor. Talk to the employee about your concerns - find out if something else is behind the decline in performance. Most organisations have processes in place to deal with poor performance, and you may need to resort to these procedures.

17. But we have an equal opportunities policy – is not everyone entitled to the same working pattern options?

This has not been raised as an issue by any employee involved in Merton's pilot. Treat people with respect, as adults. It's fairly obvious that not all working patterns are appropriate to all business needs and no one has the right to demand a particular flexible pattern of working. A rigid approach to this issue would mean reducing opportunities to the lowest common denominator, and very few options would be available to cover the diversity of service area needs. Few staff would want this to happen. Giving everyone the same opportunity to explore how more flexibility could work for them, their colleagues, service and customers is the key entitlement.

18. I have a very small team - it cannot work here.

Three of the pilot areas in Merton consisted of only three members each, and all had frontline contact with customers and specific open hours for customers. In every case, more flexibility was introduced. Compressed working, taking advantage of two days a month flexi-leave, a 7am start and 3pm finish time are just some of the options that worked in such small teams.

19. Won't this cost me more money?

This depends on what options you pursue. Homeworking may mean some investment in equipment (although you may be able to use the employee's existing equipment if it is a permanent arrangement). Think about the return on your investment in each case – increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, lower recruitment costs. Invest to save. However, there are many no cost and low-cost options to consider, like flexi-time, and compressed working.