



Flexible Working in India- the way forward?

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Abstract: *The term flexible working refers to working practices, mutually agreed between employee and employer, which cover working hours, locations or patterns of work. Such arrangements have to comply with the law on working time, including hours, rest breaks and the working week. It is about mobilizing work forces and giving individuals the freedom and ability to work anytime, anywhere, using any device. It is about enterprise-wide access to information, applications and data and the ability to utilize these items as and when they are needed.*

Keywords: *flexible working, workforce, Hot-desking.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In last 15 to 20 years, the relationship between work, family and leisure has altered significantly due to emergence of small families in India. From the 1990s onwards, large numbers of women entered the workforce taking dual responsibilities for outside job and meeting family commitments. This no doubt helped in increasing the family status and better way of life but has also affected life of their children and elders living with them. This issue led to need for more family-friendly work practices by the employers.

Interestingly, flexible working is not only demanded by female workforce but also by male workforce as men role in a small family is equally significant for the care and guidance of their children and family. Even in the present situation of recession, where cost cutting is very important for number of organizations, some options of flexible working can be useful.

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To study various options of flexible working and their viability in India
2. To study flexible working practices by corporate in India

III. OPTIONS WITH WORKING HOURS

One option is to change the number or pattern of working hours. This section examines some of the most common ways of flexible working hours

1. Part-time work:

This is the most popular type of 'flexible' work. Workers are contracted to work less than the standard, basic, full-time hours. Working 'half time' is a common pattern, but employers have increasingly been offering valued workers other alternatives. Part-time work is also used by some people as a way to explore other options or to study for higher qualifications. Some employers operate flexible working practices to allow moving in and out of part-time work, according to one's needs and circumstances. In India part time hours ranges from 4 to 6 but other benefits like PF, gratuity, pension etc., are not available.

2. Flexi-time:

With flexi-time, workers have a fixed quota of hours to work, including a standard core of working hours agreed with the employer, typically in the middle of the day or at the busiest times. Apart from the core hours, workers can make up the required hours at times to suit themselves. In India this option can be practice in restaurants, shops etc., having pick hours of business.

3. Compressed hours - restructured hours:

With compressed hours, workers can carry out their contracted working hours in fewer working days. This enables employees to save on travel costs and have an extra 'free' day or days in lieu of extended hours. In India several people travel ranging from 1 to 3 hours daily just for the routine work that can be finished in 2 to 3 hours.



4. Term-time working:

With term-time working, a worker remains on a permanent contract but can take paid or unpaid leave during school holidays. This arrangement exists mostly, though not exclusively, in the education sector, and allows workers with children of school age to be at home during school holidays. Such option is already in practice in many schools and colleges in India.

5. Time off in lieu:

With time off in lieu, workers take time off to compensate for extra hours worked. Time off in lieu usually has to be agreed with the employer in advance. In India such option is used by manufacturers or retailers before festival to meet the extra demand

6. Annualized hours:

An annualized hour's contract specifies a number of hours to be worked in one year. This pattern originally developed in industries with a seasonal work flow, such as manufacturing, but has been adopted by other employers to deal with fluctuating workloads. While the majority of shifts are allocated, the remaining hours are kept in reserve so that workers can be called in at short notice as required. Annualized hours can be difficult for those who have fixed weekly commitments as their working hours will vary. It is not much in practice in India as it is difficult to find total annual hours of work because of uncertainty. Like - sickness, accident or natural climates.

7. Zero-hours contracts:

Workers with zero-hours contracts are not guaranteed any work at all. They are 'on call' to work according to the short-term needs of their employer. Initially used in retailing, the practice soon spread to other industries. Supply teaching, in which qualified teachers replace teachers absent through sickness, is a well-established zero-hours contract scheme in United States. This approach is most suitable for people who are genuinely in a position to offer the high level of flexibility needed. In India it is practiced in form of day wages in factories and agriculture.

8. V-time working:

V-time working is a voluntary agreement in which an employee's hours are reduced for an agreed period, with a guarantee that full-time employment will become available at a specific date. This might be in response to the needs of either the employer or employee. It can be practiced in seasonal productions like sugar mills, seed - oil industries etc.

9. Holiday purchase scheme:

This is a scheme that enables employees to buy an additional number of days' holiday on top of their annual entitlement. The cost of a day's holiday depends on the worker's salary and is deducted from annual pay. There is usually a limit to the number of days that can be bought. It is not practiced in India.

10. Holiday work and work experience for students:

Students can work during holidays usually to earn money to support their studies and/or to gain work experience (paid or unpaid) relevant to their future career. Contracts for these opportunities vary widely: they may be formal or informal, paid or unpaid. Such contacts are available in form of selling assignments or target work mostly in semiskilled areas.

IV. OPTIONS WITH LOCATIONS

Another approach to flexible working is to change the location of work for all or part of the time. The expense of business premises, commuting difficulties, and developments in communications technology has contributed to this. The main options are outlined below.

1. Hot-desking:

Where workers only need a desk occasionally, some employers have rationalized desk space by hot-desking', i.e. allocating a desk only when you are actually in the office. This is a way of economizing on the high cost of urban office space. Some employees find hot-desking difficult because they don't have their own desk space or territory. It also requires a high level of organization because items needed for work have to be brought in on each occasion. In India it is practiced in educational institutions that are working in two shifts

2. Home working:

One of the easiest ways to free up office space and save on commuting time and costs is home working. Home working was once a low-pay alternative for people who couldn't go to work. Some employers have now adopted a more radical approach, equipping staff to work from home most of the time, apart from meetings, supervision and training. This is now fairly widespread at managerial level, on an informal basis. Working from home requires discipline because of the inevitable distractions, as well as trust on the part of your employer. The corporate like Procter & Gamble India, Hewlett Packard India (HP India) and ICICI are already practicing this option.



3. Mobile working:

Mobile working is a catch-all phrase indicating that 'work' is no longer defined in terms of time and space but can happen anywhere and at any time with the use of technology. For example, travel time was not previously treated as work time as it was unproductive. Now, with the arrival of laptops and sophisticated mobile phones and 'blackberries', travel time is no longer down time. Mobile working is 100% dependent on new technology, currently broadband, 3G and WiFi, so in order to be successful, it is essential that the employing organization can continue to invest in technology to support mobile working for its staff.

4. Tele-working:

Tele-working is similar to mobile working. Its essential feature is the use of communications technology to deliver work carried out away from the employer's premises or other colleagues. This may apply to people working full time or part time at home, those dividing their time between home and office, and mobile workers who use their home as an administrative base.

5. Virtual teamwork:

Like any conventional team, a virtual team consists of a group of people who interact to complete interdependent tasks and work towards a common goal. But instead of working in the same office, the team members work in different places, often at home, and in different time zones. A copywriter, editor, illustrator and graphic designer might collaborate on a book, for example, sending specifications, drafts, samples and comments between themselves and they may never meet their co-workers face to face. Virtual team working has become possible because of advancements in communication technologies. Members of the virtual team mainly interact electronically by email, messaging and voice over IP technologies such as Skype. They may also communicate by telephone, teleconference and, to a lesser extent, through video conferencing.

V. WORK PATTERNS

Apart from time and location options of flexible working, there are work patterns that provide similar benefits.

1. Job-share:

A job-share is when two people share the duties and responsibilities of one job, usually the equivalent of full time. The responsibilities are not split to create two separate part-time jobs but shared. The employer needs to state whether a post is suitable for job-sharing. The success of the arrangement is highly dependent on working relationship with job-share partner. It requires a high level of confidence and trust between partners and is not an option to be entered into without giving serious consideration to how it will work in practice.

2. Portfolio workers:

Portfolio working depends on a very high level of personal organization, and the ability to cope with different work styles and handle pressure.

3. Short-term contracts:

Short-term employment contracts have been an increasingly common feature of the UK labour market for some years. These contracts are being used more and more frequently by employers to 'assess' individuals' suitability for employment before putting them on a full-time contract. This practice has become very common and it is difficult to assess how many workers are on short term contracts. Some people choose to work on short-term specific projects, moving on to the next as each is completed. This tends to be more common in occupational areas experiencing a buoyant labour market, as has recently been the case in IT and construction and many types of consultancy. This type of 'contracting' requires a certain confidence that more work will be available when the current contract has finished.

4. Freelancing:

Freelancing is hiring your-self out to somebody else for a specific piece of work. You will effectively be selling your skills and time, and will usually be paid by the hour, although contracts with a fixed payment to complete a fixed project are also possible, depending on your field of expertise. Freelance work has been on the increase for the past decade. Originally most associated with the media sector - publishing, journalism, graphic design - to name a few, it has spread to many other sectors. Freelancers are technically self-employed and the advantages and disadvantages are similar to those of being self-employed, but vary depending on the sector you're in.

5. Agency work:

Agency work is putting your-self 'on the books' of an agency which calls on when employers have need of emergency cover. The agency does the job-hunting and one has the freedom to accept or reject what is offered. The disadvantage is the unpredictability: assignments can vary from a few hours to a few weeks and there is no guarantee of employment. Supply teaching and bank nursing are forms of agency work. Temping agencies may either deal with a wide variety of employment or specialize in particular areas of work. This is a good option when you are looking for permanent employment and want to get experience with a variety of employers in the meantime. A temping job may lead to a permanent position, but some people prefer to 'temp' or do supply work on a more or less permanent basis because the freedom suits their personal circumstances.



6. Downshifting:

Downshifting is making a move down the career ladder in status, responsibility or reward in order to improve overall quality of life. As downshifter must, by definition, already have established themselves (you must have something to downshift from), it's unlikely to be an option for graduates early in their career. It's mainly at professional and managerial levels that downshifting occurs. Downshifting is perhaps the most radical response of all to work-life balance difficulties and requires considerable reflection, planning and commitment. It often involves changes outside work, such as a geographical move. In the UK, downshifter often move northwards to areas of cheaper housing, making up for financial losses in salary by making gains on housing costs.

7. Career break:

Here, an employer provides a career break policy as part of their flexible working practices. Typically, an employee may ask for a period away from work in the knowledge that their job will still be there for them when they return. Often there is a minimum period you have to work for your employer before you are eligible for a career break. Reasons for taking a career break may include, for example, wanting an opportunity to travel or do voluntary work.

VI. FLEXIBLE WORKING PRACTICES BY CORPORATE IN INDIA: SOME EXAMPLES

In 2002, Hewlett Packard India was ranked the third best employer in India by the Best Employers in India Survey. The survey studied the extent of employee satisfaction with regard to seven factors including the culture and purpose of a company, its work environment, relationships between the employees, the nature of work, rewards and recognition, work-life balance and growth and development opportunities. What distinguished HP India from other best employers was its consideration of the personal needs of its employees, and the 'flexible work options' policy adopted by the company.

HP India offered its employees almost all forms of flexible work options. It allowed its employees to work part-time or for flexible hours, especially young mothers. For instance, Sujata Sundaresan, a financial analyst at HP India, started working part time after maternity. HP India also allowed telecommuting, which allowed its employees to come to the office only for half a day and work from home for the rest of the day. Employees were also allowed to return to the normal schedule after working as per any of the flexibility options for a specified time period.

A few companies, both multinational as well as domestic started introducing flexible working options in some form or another since late 1990s. For instance, Procter & Gamble India, ranked the second best employer in India by the Best Employers in India 2002 Survey, had introduced flexible work options in 1999. Initially, the company offered flexi-time and sabbatical leave and included telecommuting options among these by late 2001.

According to the survey, ICICI, the fourth best employer in India, also offered some forms of flexible work options, especially for women. Since a majority of ICICI's employees were women, it allowed them to work part time, keeping in mind their domestic responsibilities.

VII. CONCLUSION

In nutshell, as work has become more central to people's lives, vying for time with family and leisure, many have become concerned in India also with what is termed the work-life balance. However, problems like unemployment and disguised unemployment, supply of labour is more than demanded, lack specific law governing for initial and implementation of flexible working, lack of networking and communication facilities and need of proper employers' attitude are some of the major hindrance in making flexible working viable in India and bearing few industries like information technology and communications such practices needs to cover a big ground.

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