

Building better life balance

Vicky & Peter

Following the process will help find the right answers

Flexibility is essential in today's workplace and the work/life challenges Vicky faced as a full time employee, mother and daughter make that abundantly clear. With aging parents who rely on her for support, and a young family of her own, Vicky is very much one of the sandwich generation – the generation of women who have caring responsibilities across several generations.

Life balance means something different for everyone

When Vicki first came to work at the Commission she worked full time in the office and a very rigid eight to five routine to take flexi-leave every fortnight. She used this to help manage her extended family commitments. However, when her father became sick she

soon started to feel the pressure of not being available to transport him to hospital twice a week for treatment. She knew she needed greater flexibility. That is when she considered her Life Balance options and applied for regular AWL to work from home to coincide with the days her dad has appointments.

"Dad was not only dealing with his illness and loss of independence, he was also trying to manage hospital sessions three times a week. He was relying on every neighbour and relative he could muster to get him to appointments and it became a nightmare for him trying to coordinate a range of people to be available to suit his inflexible appointment times. It undoubtedly added to the stress of his illness."

For Vicky the round trip to collect her father, drop him off at the hospital and get back home takes around 30 minutes each Tuesday and Thursday lunchtime. She does the same trip later in the afternoon to take him back home. By working from home she can easily take a short break and be available when he needs her without too much disruption to her work.

"For dad this arrangement is fantastic because he is confident that I will be reliable and it makes me feel good that I am giving something back to my dad because he helped out for years by taking my kids to and from school when they were younger. Now it is my turn."

Vicky also continues to use flexitime because her mum still needs to be taken shopping each fortnight. The whole family is satisfied.

This sort of flexibility really relieves the pressure

"The fact that I am home those two days has also meant that my kids don't play up as much. They are a great deal happier because I am around after school."

For me it reduces my stress because I don't have to organise after school pickup and care, and it saves money. The fact that I take an hour off from 3.30 – 4.30pm to do school pick up on the way to the hospital means that I also feel more part of the school community."

I often think to myself how lucky I am because I don't know of another employer providing this sort of flexibility to relieve the pressure."

However it has been a steep learning curve for Vicky. In the first place she was unrealistic about what she could achieve in a day and would take home too many files. Now she concentrates on one or two priority tasks that really need the thinking space she can get at home. She finds that approach a lot more rewarding because it is evident tasks are completed well.

Technology is also a challenge. At the moment she has to transfer folders onto the Division's Life

Balance laptop in preparation for each time she works from home. She thinks this process is a waste of time, and a risk, because she could lose something important. According to Vicky it would be much more efficient if she worked from a laptop the whole time. Another technological challenge she faces is slow network access without broadband connection. She expects the new broadband policy will make a big difference to her efficiency.

She also knows she must do something to overcome the uncomfortable feeling that by working at home she is sometimes imposing on others. For example, if she takes a call at home requesting information she cannot deliver until she is back in the office, she is forced to call a colleague and ask for assistance to expedite service delivery to external clients.

Vicky recently raised this concern with her manager, Peter, and they realised that they did not work with the broader team at the outset to identify possible barriers to the success of Vicky's arrangement. They have decided to bring together the people Vicky interacts most with to seek their feedback on how her arrangement impacts on them. Peter expects this team review will help draw out any issues Vicky and her colleagues may have, and encourage open discussion so the team can develop solutions together.

"As a manager I can see now how it would be useful to also involve a persons' colleagues to help identify potential barriers to success and how the new arrangement could benefit the outcomes of the team. This would also help overcome any negative perceptions or feelings of envy."

For Vicky the key factor contributing to the success of her arrangement has been the attitude of her manager. He has been understanding of her personal needs and willing to try something new to relieve her of some of the pressures in her life. According to her manager it is not just about being a nice guy.

"We have to take into account Vicky, the unit and the Commission. We can see how it is a win for Vicky but we also have to make sure Vicky continues to meet the criteria of the job and the Commission achieves some performance benefit. In this case it is a win for the unit because we get a more productive worker plus we've improved systems of work, and the Commission is having its reputation enhanced through Vicky telling everyone what a great place it is to work because we have accommodated her needs."

The process of working through Vicky's application reinforced for Peter that everyone is different and you have to approach request for flexibility in a very business like way.

"You have to step back, weigh it up in terms of what's in it for everyone and be unemotional - it is after all a business we run. And staff need to have done the groundwork by anticipating any potential problems and have solutions in mind - not dump problems on their manager and expect him/her to sort it out. If you go through the process properly the right answers will emerge."

"I am sure Vicky thought I was being an obstructionist at first but I was trying to get her to come up with the answers and take some responsibility for the flexibility she was achieving."

Peter says he is now quite comfortable about people working from home and compares it to giving someone your baby to mind - you need to trust them - and Vicky showed him that she can be trusted.

"Once I learnt to give away some control I found I actually manage her in a more structured way that focuses us on outcomes. Now we actually sit down to talk about her work rather than rely on passing comments. I think it has made me a better manager."

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