

Building better life balance

Tina & Gwen

Taking the first step can be the biggest hurdle

It was undeniably painful for both Gwen and Tina getting started with their flexible work arrangement, which now sees Tina work from home regularly each Tuesday and with room to move if training or a conference comes up. They can now laugh at their initial anxieties because they have demonstrated how well it can work.

You need to let go & show some trust

Tina put her hand up to be part of the Life Balance Team work group that developed the AWL policy and guidelines because she believed that if it were successful it would provide her with exactly the sort of predictable flexibility she wanted to effectively combine her career and her role as a mother.

"I'd always relied on other family members to drop my son off at crèche and that meant I never had the opportunity to build a relationship with the kindergarten teacher or talk about my son's progress. In fact they never knew George's mum until I started working from home!"

"Now I make a point of talking to the teacher each Tuesday and that makes me more fulfilled as a mother and confident he is in safe hands. As a result I can focus on work knowing that I don't have to worry about his welfare."

Tina wanted the flexibility to be a better mum but she did not want to use the arrangement as a means of childminding or have it impact on her family's day to day routine so she has developed a work habit that enables her to successfully achieve that goal.

Each Tuesday Tina starts work at 7.30am while her husband takes responsibility for getting George ready for the day. Tina then takes a break to drop George off at kindergarten before coming home to work uninterrupted until 4.45pm when she picks him up again. According to Tina this is a real treat for George as it means they have longer together at the end of the day.

Tina and her family are very satisfied with her new work arrangement because it clearly provides her with a sense of overall fulfilment. They can all see she has a better balance between her responsibilities at home and work. For Tina a small change made an enormous difference!

A small change can make an enormous difference to life balance

Tina's only concern about her arrangement is that she may be impacting on other people in the Commission because there is no system in place where she can let others know she is not in the office and consequently can't always met their urgent requests.

After discussing this concern with Gwen Tina has come to understand that this is probably a service delivery expectation she places on herself and something that needs to be better managed. They agreed that Tina would speak directly with the people she interacts most often with to explain that when she works away from the office she may not be able to respond in the same way as when she is sitting in the office.

This doesn't mean Tina is less productive or efficient - in fact quite the opposite is true according to Gwen.

"I can see that Tina is much more relaxed and in control - she is somehow 'lighter' and more excited about her job. It is like a cloud has lifted."

Tina's initial hesitation in applying for AWL was because she anticipated Gwen would be reluctant to agree to her proposal and that would have made their relationship very uncomfortable. Tina was also afraid that she would not be as disciplined as what she thought would be required - she was afraid that she would be sidetracked at home.

When she finally did work up the courage to put in her application she found Gwen did cogitate on it for a long time. According to Gwen she found the form to be long and somewhat repetitious but when she read it as a manager she saw what it was trying to achieve.

"To be honest, the reason I did sit on Tina's application was because I had issues about trust. In retrospect it wasn't fair that I let Tina wait so long because I hadn't come up with how I would handle the hurdle of discussing trust even though her application was eminently logical.

This was the first time I have managed someone working from home and I was worried about how it would work out. On the other hand, I am a mother so I know exactly what it is like to have an emergency such as a sick child and worry about childcare."

In fact their fears were the same. This was new for them both and in their own way they were afraid.

"I had the same fear as Tina and it was hard to broach the subject of trust and my hesitation actually caused more angst. Once we finally talked openly and honestly we sorted out the arrangement in a matter of minutes. Tina was very brave in pushing me rather than just giving up."

There was obviously a growing period where Tina had to demonstrate that Gwen's fear was unfounded and Gwen had to let go and give Tina the space to transition to a new way of work and sort out what worked best for her and her job.

From Tina's perspective she felt that if she took the opportunity to work in a way that better suited her life she had to make sure it worked.

"In the beginning I found it difficult to get used to planning ahead. On one occasion I did not take enough work home. I was actually so

much more productive, because I didn't get distracted en route to the tearoom or in conversations, that I ran out of work!"

Now Tina has divided her work so that she plans what aspects of her work she could do more productively at home. She likens it to planning the weekend shopping so you make sure you have recipe ingredients on hand when you need them later in the week. She now puts aside numerous administration tasks and files that she knows she will be able to complete more easily at home the following Tuesday.

"I think my work has definitely improved. I am happier and more interested and therefore my output is greater. My head is clear because I can plough through the tedious admin stuff I used to procrastinate about, and put that all behind me quickly each Tuesday leaving the rest of the week for more creative work."

And Gwen is very happy for Tina to work like this and sees one of the benefits is that they communicate much better as a team.

"Once we established that mutual trust was the issue I left her to sort out herself and she has proved to me that it is working well. In fact I would have to say that getting over the trust issue has been the key to our success. It is just a pleasure to see Tina in such a good frame of mind - so it is better for everyone she interacts with, including me."

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