

Building better life balance

Usha & Rob

Flexibility can reduce the need for leave

For Usha a full time working mother with two small children the pressure to manage all of her responsibilities was mounting and something had to give.

"I was at the point of reconsidering my future in the organisation and this new work arrangement has turned me around," said Usha.

As a member of the Life Balance Team working group that developed the Commission's AWL policy and guidelines she had a good understanding of what would be required to work from home effectively.

Initially working from home two days - Tuesday and Thursday - were negotiated. Working this way was not a totally new experience for Usha because she did her PhD from home so she was confident that she had the self-discipline to make it a success.

Sometimes the only barrier to flexibility is mindset

Soon after she negotiated her AWL Usha moved to the Policy area and a new manager where she not only maintained the AWL arrangement but modified it to provide even greater flexibility for her and the Commission in terms of the configuration of days worked. According to Usha, her exact work arrangements all depend on the demands of her job at the time. For example, if there is a meeting outside her control then she adjusts her schedule to meet her work responsibilities and does not stick rigidly to a particular routine of days working at home. And recently, when circumstances changed at home due to an

illness in the family, she was able to effectively work from home four days a week.

"Had I not been able to do that I would have had to take leave, which would have put pressure on Rob and the work would not have been done when it was required. Instead, I continued to be productive by managing what I had to do at home during the day and then working late at night when my family responsibilities were taken care of."

It is a two way street - give some flexibility to get some flexibility

Usha is as satisfied as she could be with the arrangement and what makes it work well is that she knows Rob trusts her and focuses on her outcomes. This gives her the freedom to take her son to swimming and taekwondo after school without feeling guilty.

Usha says her son is thrilled that she is around after school so he can do these activities rather than go to after school care every day. He also fully understands that after he is kissed good night she needs to work.

"I have been there for the children after school to do what they want and often when they go to bed it is my time to work. I had to make a point of talking to my son about my new work arrangement so he understands the rules."

The benefit for Usha is not only that she gets to be the mother she wants to be but also that she can do her work without distraction.

"I definitely feel less stressed so I can concentrate one hundred percent on getting the job done."

For Usha the most challenging aspect of working this new arrangement was at the outset in managing and meeting expectations of other people in the Building Commission, and being aware that some people think you are getting a favour or having it easy working at home.

According to Usha this sort of resentment is something that can be managed if arrangements are totally transparent so colleagues fully understand how working with this sort of flexibility is in fact benefiting not only the individual but the Commission as well. Usha sees this as a shared responsibility – something the individual and the manager must make a concerted effort to address at the outset in the work group and across the Commission.

In the Policy area this is not seen as a problem because, according to Rob, *“We talk about it openly at team meetings – it is just part of the way we all work.”*

Loyalty and commitment to the organisation is what Usha identifies as the most significant outcome for the Commission that could be attributed to the flexibility she has been offered. According to Rob it goes even further. From his perspective her morale underpins her determination to be productive - often in difficult circumstances. Rob says, *“Not only is Usha delivering what is required but she is in a good frame of mind.”*

With Rob also working from home quite regularly the most challenging management aspect for him has been maintaining direct communications and he believes good communication is the web that binds the arrangement together.

“You definitely need to work harder at communications.”

You can't just put your head around the corner to have a chat. You have to plan to meet and you need to meet face to face to maintain the relationship. It is easy to let a week or two go by and the relationship can easily suffer.”

For Rob, managing this sort of flexible arrangement has reinforced that management is not about control and that a lot of the barriers are not real barriers, they are a mindset.

“This could be the catalyst to force people to look critically at the way they manage and the way work is done. This could be the trigger to force people to do things that should probably have been done anyway.”

For us it showed up at the start when there were some glitches in relation to documents crossing while being edited but we have now worked out a simple system to deal with that.

Equally that could happen while we sit in the same office so this has forced us to deal with an efficiency issue.

Usha and Rob both agree that no matter what arrangement you put in place it will only work if the manager has the right management style. They believe what is required to manage flexible work arrangements is being people centred and understanding that if people are not happy they will not be productive.

“Critical to the success of flexible work arrangements is appreciating the importance of delivering on outcomes and demonstrating trust.”

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