The flexible way forward

Claire Knowles considers the options for dental practices.

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Every business has a vision. Some businesses aspire to be innovative whilst others are driven by quality, client care, or perhaps reputation. Though each employee has different ambitions and values, the business' unique vision will permeate the culture of the workforce, inculcating attitudes and practices that push it towards success. However, despite technological and societal progress, attitudes towards working arrangements can still prove particularly stubborn.

There are still many people, for example, who continue to understand 'work' as a 9-5 exercise in presenteeism, even where this contradicts business efficacy or the business' core values. But the landscape is changing. For years, practices such as flexi-time have been tested by the public sector, while the private sector has seen an influx of consultants and zero-hour workers. In recent times, the coronavirus pandemic has been a catalyst for innovation and reinvention as businesses have begun to realise the potential benefits of more flexible arrangements. With all we have learned this year, it is the perfect time to consider whether a more flexible culture could improve morale, efficiency, and profitability in your business.

The business case for flexibility
A culture of flexible working is not about working less, but instead about working more effectively and productively. Though positives for employees seem obvious, businesses can benefit in a number of ways as well:
● Morale
Happy employees are profitable employees. Research shows that employees who are happier with their jobs are more enthusiastic, productive, and creative at work.➲

↶Maintaining morale also reduces the number of sick days taken and the likelihood of grievances, resignations, and tribunal claims which can all be expensive and time-consuming. Keeping employees happy is a win for everyone and is a lot easier when employees can work in ways which best suit them.

● Business expenses
Business costs eat into profitability, especially when renting office space or paying for regular travel. Adopting more flexible arrangements allows a business to re-evaluate whether such expenses are necessary. Could working from home and video conferencing reduce these costs?

● Performance metrics
When measuring an employee's performance, is their 9-5 routine really important? With technological improvements to performance monitoring, this metric is quickly becoming obsolete in favour of output and efficiency. Many practitioners now work outside of 'normal working hours', making it illogical to penalise those willing to work more flexibly to achieve greater levels of efficiency and client care.

● Motivating the new generation
In many ways, the new generation of employees are redefining what is expected from employers. Some have mistakenly generalised this as a sense of entitlement, but studies have shown that what is really occurring is a shift in motivation. Research illustrates that work-life balance, career progression, and positive relationships with colleagues are far more appealing to this cohort than their salary. By communicating with these recruits, and exploring their strengths and ambitions, the business could unlock a valuable new source of energy and innovation.

How to introduce a flexible culture
The business case for flexibility is compelling, but granting greater freedom to employees comes with its risks. Some individuals may reject the system or attempt to abuse it. To create a sustainable culture of flexibility, employees will need to understand both trust and personal accountability.

Is trust earned or given? Many believe that, at least within the workplace, the attitude of 'earning' trust can be counterproductive. There is no metric for measuring trust and employees will never really know whether they have gained the trust of their colleagues or supervisors. This prevalence of uncertainty can instead heighten feelings of anxiety and affect cooperation. Instead, by promoting a culture where trust is offered more freely, employees will understand what is expected of them from the outset and opportunities can be distributed based on merit rather than length of service.

Managing a flexible workforce can be complicated. In return for the trust offered by the business, employees will need to offer personal accountability. This will involve learning to manage their own time and priorities as well as respecting the expectations of their supervisors. There will always be some who do not appreciate the business' vision, whatever it may be, but clear policies can guide the management of those individuals who abuse a business' culture of trust without depriving others of the cultural benefits. As a minimum, a business should be confident in its:
● Flexible working policy
● Capability management and appraisal procedures
● Disciplinary policy
● Out of office/working from home policy
● Data protection policy
● Use of electronic systems policy

What could a flexible culture look like?
The point of a genuinely flexible working culture is that it allows employees, and therefore the business, to benefit from working arrangements most compatible with individual work style and circumstances. While this may include some 'flexible' business practices for some, others may work more efficiently under a more traditional 9-5 model. Arbitrarily enforcing 'flexible' working practices with those individuals would, therefore, be counter-intuitive. For the purpose of providing examples though, a business could consider adopting some of the following practices:

Flexible hours – This could involve setting a minimum number of hours while removing specific timings or even removing the concept of hours altogether in favour of a performance-related metric. An employee may still be expected to work during certain core hours, but otherwise flexible hours could allow greater availability to patients, especially those who cannot work flexibly themselves.

Remote working – In this computer age, many are quickly learning that some practices can be taken… out of the practice. Although patient contact will be necessary for assessments and treatments, admin tasks, billing, and some other forms of patient contact can be completed remotely. So long as the business invests in its technical support, employees could work in locations where they are most comfortable and productive.

Piecemeal leave – This involves employees taking annual leave on an hourly basis and, potentially, at shorter notice. This encourages employees to take leave when they need it rather than being deterred by the magnitude of a larger unit such as a whole day or half-day. Incorporating more piecemeal working and leave hours generally allows a workforce to more easily respond to sudden changes in patient scheduling such as cancellations or emergency appointments.

Job charting – Oftentimes, employees who excel in their role are gradually bestowed with management duties, even though they may not necessarily excel at people management. Flexibility within the business' management structure can allow employees to continue the duties they excel at while employees with more applicable skill sets fill gaps such as management.