

Case study: Flexible working at Henry Davis York is “here to stay”, 27 May 2011

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Henry Davis York (HDY) is a commercial law firm based in Sydney with 235 Lawyers and 183 Non Legal Staff. The results from HDY's latest employee survey demonstrate that 21% of staff are working flexibly in a formal sense and this number is expected to rise in the next two to three years. Barbara Holmes — Director of Managing Work|Life Balance International (MWLB) covers the Firm's move towards a more flexible workplace in the following case study.

HDY started its journey to attract and retain staff via work/life/flexibility initiatives back in 2003 when it conducted an in-depth survey to discover the real needs of staff and the potential impact on the Firm and its clients. Since that time, there has been a continual process of monitoring and improvement.

In 2009, a further assessment and evaluation was undertaken within the Firm with the assistance of MWLB. This looked at what was happening in regard to flexibility and other work/life issues.

One of the outcomes of the review was the establishment of a Flexibility Manager role. The role provides a central point of contact for all staff and partners who wish to discuss issues relating to flexible working. Justine Knight, who was returning to work from parental leave, and who had previously held a role within the People & Development team, was appointed to the new role. The objectives of the role included helping staff, managers and partners to better implement and manage flexible working arrangements within their respective practice groups.

Ms Knight spends much of her time supporting and coaching staff who either want to work flexibly, or who want to improve the way that their current flexible arrangement works. Another key component of her job is working with managers and partners to ensure that they are satisfied that any arrangements continue to meet the needs of the business and client service standards are maintained. “Our experience has shown that a successful flexible arrangement hinges on both parties (the employee and their manager) talking honestly to each other on an ongoing basis about what they want and need from the arrangement”, says Ms Knight. “There is a mutual responsibility for making it work and I try to help them work together to understand the challenges flexible working can present and work through solutions.”

While much of the work Ms Knight does focuses on coaching maternity leave returnees and their managers/partners to ensure a smooth transition back to work after having a child, there are a variety of other circumstances in which flexible work arrangements are sought. “Aged care responsibilities, transitioning towards retirement, other lifestyle choices are all reasons we've had approaches about working flexibly in a variety of ways”, she says. “It's important to look at every case individually in establishing what's feasible — no two roles or circumstances are the same.”

Other outcomes of the review included an update of the flexible work arrangement policy (and related documents), and a more structured process for initiating a discussion about flexibility, applying for a flexible work arrangement and documenting agreed flexible work arrangements.

The most recent data (2011) shows that the steps taken in 2009 have:

- improved understanding and clarity around flexible work arrangements and what is available
- provided a more consistent and equitable approach to the management of requests for flexibility
- increased dialogue, which has resulted in a better balance of firm and individual needs, as well as clearer expectations being set
- centralised the process (through the new Flexibility Manager role), and
- provided enhanced tools to facilitate remote working.

The data from HDY's survey (mentioned at the beginning of this case study) shows that increasing numbers of staff will want to work flexibly in the future. Sixteen per cent of survey respondents who currently work full-

time indicated that they would be "highly likely" to request flexibility in the next two years. Of those already working flexibly, 31% said they would be seeking to change their arrangements within the next two years.

The Firm is under no illusions that this presents a significant people management challenge, but feels that the measures it has recently introduced around its approach to flexibility puts it in a good position to tackle it successfully. Director of People and Development Deborah Stonley says that HDY has "learnt that open, honest and ongoing dialogue is essential in creating and evolving flexible work arrangements that work. We need to talk about expectations, talk about career goals, talk about concerns, and talk about what works and what does not".

About the author

Barbara Holmes is the Director of Managing Work|Life Balance International — one of Australia's leading consultancies in the area of work/life balance and flexible work arrangements. Much of Barbara's work involves working with managers and employees in client organisations to create change in the workplace, enabling business to thrive and employees to achieve the balance and career goals to which they aspire. Barbara has worked extensively in Australia and around the Asia Pacific region, providing advice, consulting support and a range of practical tool kits and resources to government and private sector organisations.

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