

Flexible Sussex – Flexible Working a Guide for Managers

Background

The University is relaunching its existing flexible working procedure as part of the University's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. Flexible Sussex - becoming an organisation that is flexible by default to ensure we are inclusive in everything we do – is one of the four goals within the strategy. Flexible working forms one strand of delivering this goal.

The University already has a flexible working procedure that enables staff to adopt flexible working patterns, but feedback through the Changing University Cultures research, Athena SWAN and discussions in relation to reasonable adjustment for staff with a disability has identified that this procedure is not widely understood and that it is not applied equally across the University.

Flexible Sussex

In response to the feedback about flexible working we are not changing the procedure but the way it is used. From 1 October 2018 all roles will be advertised as open to flexible working arrangements¹. This means that we will invite applicants to raise and discuss potential flexible working options from the outset to make all roles as accessible and open as possible. We will also be removing the 26 week qualifying period to reflect this change.

As part of sharing the EDI Strategy we will be talking to teams about the benefits of flexible working and there will be news articles and events to ensure that all staff understand our flexible working procedure and how it should be used. This will include the benefits of flexible working to the University and as well as the individual and why we are expecting individuals, managers and teams to take a proactive approach to flexible working.

Supporting Materials

This document provides an overview of the benefits of flexible working that form the drivers for why we are embracing it. It also sets out the four key principles everybody should apply when following the procedure and advice for managers on how best to move towards a more proactive approach. Managers should ensure that they have read this pack along with the flexible working handbook and the flexible working procedure.

The existing flexible working procedure remains in place and this will be updated with effect from 1 October 2018 to reflect the removal of the 26 week qualifying period which will no longer apply. The procedure remains unchanged in other respects.

The Flexible Working Handbook helps staff understand the most commonly used options for flexible working and supports managers and teams with ways of facilitating flexible working when requests are made.

¹ Where there are fixed requirements or constraints for a role that exclude certain flexible working arrangements recruiting managers should ensure that this is clearly stated in the advertisement.

1. Why Sussex is embracing Flexible Working

Flexible working can be a useful tool to improve employees' work-life balance and wellbeing, whilst helping to attract and retain staff. There are many compelling reasons for our renewed focus on ensuring we are embracing our flexible working procedures:

Gender Pay Gap

Our analysis of the University's gender pay gap highlighted underrepresentation of women in higher paid jobs in the University. The action toolkit, published by the Government Equalities Office and the CIPD, recommends embracing flexible working as one of four key areas to take action to reduce a gender pay gap. A lack of flexible working opportunities is believed to lead to fewer women being attracted into the organisation at senior levels. According to the IFS and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, working part-time is a contributing factor to the gender pay gap for mothers as 'they miss out on earnings growth associated with more experience'

Accessibility

Flexible working can be used as a tool to assist those with disability and impairment find a way into the workplace and to succeed and progress in the organisation. Flexible working is a cost effective reasonable adjustment and has a key role to play in retaining valuable staff who develop a disability or impairment whilst working for us. An overall ethos of flexibility ensures that accessibility can be addressed inclusively rather than as a special arrangement.

Attracting and Engaging Talent

Flexibility is highly valued in the job market with more workers expecting greater control in managing their work-life balance. Technology and digital services have opened up more jobs to being flexible. Flexible working is a valuable element in overall reward packages which helps attract the best talent. Increasingly the understanding of work has changed. It is no longer a place you come to but a service and outcomes you deliver. Having control on how, when and where you work and being valued for what you deliver, rather than how long you spend in the office, is key to staff engagement levels. Flexible working helps us attract and retain staff and is shown to improve productivity.

Efficiency and Effectiveness

More flexible service and job design can ensure that services are not reliant on a single person who can potentially become a single point of failure. Opening up the potential for more jobs to be flexible will help reduce these issues and the stress they can cause for individuals and service managers.

2. Our Four Key Principles of Flexible Working

A proactive approach to flexible working.

We will adopt flexible working in line with our policies, to enable us to deliver our business and services more effectively. The efficient and effective running of the University and the services we provide to our students must take priority, but requests for flexible working should only be refused for objective business reasons. All positions will be advertised as suitable for flexible working by default, unless a clear business case can be made for not doing so. This reason should be clearly stated in the job advertisement.

Flexible working covers so many variations and options that we have flipped the onus on being open to discuss and accommodate the flexibility that we can whilst identifying constraints on what can be accommodated for a certain job. This more flexible approach will encourage much wider interest in our roles so we get the opportunity to recruit from the widest pool.

Encouraging and supportive of individuals who want greater flexibility.

We will challenge assumptions about traditional ways of working, taking account of the needs of our work, our students and our staff to find the best way to deliver the right outcomes. We need to be clear about the requirements of a role and open to different ways of working to deliver those requirements. Managers and employees will keep an open dialogue to help identify solutions or compromises, where appropriate, to accommodate and adjust flexible working.

Our starting point should always be to say yes unless there is good reason to say no. It will not always be appropriate or possible to meet all requests and where this happens following a period of negotiation and dialogue clear reasons will be provided and a right of appeal. We hope through agile working and innovative management people feel supported in using flexible working to find a good work life balance to fulfil their potential at work.

Flexible working is easy to arrange and easy to change.

For the majority of requests staff and managers should be able to work together and come to an agreement which is then formalised using the procedure and actioned for the individual's pay and terms and conditions.

All requests for flexible work and appeals will be handled within three months in line with the procedure but much quicker if there is no need for delay. Managers must consider all new formal requests in a reasonable manner but make decisions based on an objective process that does not discriminate against particular employees.

Flexible working should not restrict opportunities for development, reward, promotion and career progression

We will ensure that we manage and develop the talent of all our staff regardless of whether they choose to adopt flexible working arrangements. Opening all jobs to flexible working should ensure that choosing a flexible working pattern is not a block to changing role or progression.

3. Embracing Flexible Working – Advice for managers

Flexibility is an opportunity not a threat

Implementing flexible working arrangements across our teams will present a variety of challenges that are real and need to be addressed. We need to see these challenges as an opportunity to improve how we work both within and between teams and in the services we provide. Encourage your team to embrace the change.

Be open and proactive in discussions on how to enable flexibility

Within our community there will be differing views about flexibility based on previous experiences both positive and negative but also based on myths and misconceptions. Take time to understand the truth about flexible working and the overwhelming positives it brings to individuals and organisations. Reflect on whether you or any of your team have conscious or unconscious bias about flexible working. It is important for your team to discuss these.

Discuss priorities, activities and roles with your team and collaborate to design flexible working solutions. Try things out and see what works and what doesn't. It is easier to design a flexible and agile service that can adapt to a range of requests than to deal with requests one at a time. In your 1-1s with staff take time to understand whether your teams have any flexible working aspirations so they can discuss them with you if they want to make changes.

Things can change, so discuss options and ideas so you can respond quickly when needed

Even if nobody in the team is seeking a flexible working pattern now, people leave and personal circumstances change. Starting to review options as a team can help you review how you work and may be an opportunity to introduce ways of working that improve services or work life balance for everybody. If you wait until a request is made you will need to respond within the timescales and starting the thought process in advance will help you to do this.

Introduce best practice on communications and team working that support effective flexible working

One of the perceived challenges for members of teams who have different working patterns or locations is communication. In reality teams who already work effectively tend to have effective communications. Getting this right will support any team and make it easy to accommodate flexible working without reducing effectiveness.

Further information on flexible working options and how to accommodate them are provided in the flexible working handbook: Flexible Sussex – Embracing the University's Flexible Working Procedure.

Your HR Business Partner or HR Adviser will be able to provide further guidance on introducing flexible working arrangements.