



# Top employers for flexible working

IES Perspectives on HR 2014

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For the last four years, IES has collaborated with work-life balance charity, Working Families, on the 'Top Employers for Working Families' benchmarking and awards. The brainchild of Sarah Jackson, Chief Executive of Working Families, the charity elicited our help to develop the idea and to create the first survey, which forms the basis of the survey today. The plan was to develop a benchmark which showed employers the 'platinum standard' in being a family-friendly, flexible employer. The idea has developed over the years to demonstrate to employers that flexibility is also about business excellence and that being flexible and wanting your employees to be flexible creates the right conditions for productivity and competitive advantage.

Demonstrating the 'platinum standard' through the questions asked in the survey was a deliberate step to help guide employers to know what best practice looks like. For example, we asked about:

- How adoptive parents were treated.
- Carers and how flexible their leave was and was it paid.
- How fathers were informed about and supported through flexible working and leave around childbirth in comparison to mothers.
- Whether flexibility was available from day one of employment.
- Whether all jobs were advertised as available to be worked flexibly.
- What happened to the careers and performance of flexible workers.
- The impact of flexible working on organisational performance and whether this was monitored.

The Top Employers benchmarking recognises the employers who score best against these standards and we also make special awards to organisations who tell us about something innovative they have done: something unique to their sector or industry, both overall and in relation to specific categories, such as 'best for mothers' or 'best for career progression'. These awards are bestowed by a panel of judges including IES and, over the years, have uncovered some really fascinating and creative approaches to flexible working which can be seen at:

[www.topemployersforworkingfamilies.co.uk](http://www.topemployersforworkingfamilies.co.uk)

Examples include: an employer, with mostly male employees, who has developed a variety of support mechanisms for fathers, including support groups, advice and guidance for single fathers and a variety of flexible working practices to support their male employees; a small IT company which has opened up flexible working for all, basically saying, 'We trust you, employees. Here are the tools you need to work how

you like, now get on and deliver and you will be assessed on output'. An obvious step perhaps but one that hardly any organisations have really been brave enough to take.

The judges also look out for clear evidence that an organisation is looking at the impact of their flexible working. What is the impact on employees, their engagement and satisfaction? What is the impact on costs, on productivity and on turnover? Quantifiable measurement that backs up an organisation's claims is important to the judging panel.

Over the years, organisations have got to grips with the benchmarking and the idea of what good practice looks like. However, even in some organisations that do well in the benchmarking there are some steps that seem difficult to take. Chief among these is the idea that a request for flexible working should be judged on its "fit" with the organisation: whether the organisation can accommodate it and the impact on colleagues and customers. Over a quarter of organisations are still looking at the reason for the request when making a decision on that request. This is the case even in organisations that have opened up their flexible working to all and not just to those covered by the Right to Request legislation.

Why are organisations asking the employee why they are making the request? Are these organisations asking their managers to make value judgements about the validity of a request to work flexibly to enable a person to study versus a request to play golf or to look after children? If they are, then the request to look after children will always win and flexible working will continue to be seen as a benefit for the working mother and not a business tool to be accommodated where it fits operational requirements. Flexible working will never become embedded in culture if this continues to be the case.

Another improvement that it would be good to see organisations making is to support their managers more with training and development focused on managing a flexible workforce. It is clear from the benchmarking that when it comes to making decisions about flexible working and leave to care for dependants the decisions are often left to the discretion of the line manager. This is not wrong. Decisions should be made by the people who know the work pattern and requirements best: the individual concerned and their manager. The difficulty comes when organisations that leave these decisions to their managers, do not provide any training, or even any guidance on how to look at requests and come to a decision. In these circumstances, there is a risk that managers behave inconsistently from decision to decision and from manager to manager, leading to feelings of unfairness amongst their staff and not the engagement and satisfaction from properly implemented flexibility.

Year on year we find that organisations report fewer flexible workers receiving the top performance grades than traditionally working staff. While Working Families have found managers anecdotally reported valuing their flexible workers, IES have found,

through our consultancy, that managers frequently give lower performance scores to their flexible workers. To really embed flexible working in an organisation, employers must ensure their flexible workers are not missing out on: top performance grades; opportunities for career development; and opportunities for training. We urge organisations to measure the impact that working flexibly has on outcomes for their staff. Supporting line managers to treat everyone fairly and to recognise unconscious bias is also key to ironing out this unfairness.

The 'Top Employers for Working Families' benchmarking and awards have inspired employers to think creatively about flexible working and how to achieve the nirvana of work practices which are 'best for employer, best for staff'. We hope to see even more organisations participating in 2014 and, to facilitate this, the Top Employers for Working Families benchmarking 2014 will be open to IES HR Network members free of charge.

## References

Mercer M, Jackson S (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013), *Top Employers for Working Families, Benchmarking Report*, Institute for Employment Studies, and Working Families, October

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