



Dawn Ward

Making strides towards gender equality in leadership: a study of flexible working arrangements

Dear colleagues

We very much hope that principals, governors and senior managers responsible for human resources and equal opportunities, as well as individual women and men with care responsibilities, will find this report of interest.

Two years ago, our research indicated that the lack of opportunities for flexible working was the biggest obstacle to career progression for women. In this research project, we have investigated flexible working: what already exists; what the challenges are; what constitutes good practice; and what can be done to ensure that opportunities do exist and are successful for both the organisation and the individual.

Why do we think that flexible working is important for our organisations? Because it will enable more women to aim high, addressing the current under-representation of female principals. And because when women and men with care responsibilities leave the sector or do not progress in their careers, the resources spent on their training and development is wasted. We also miss out on the business opportunities offered by the development of a more flexible workforce.

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Sally Dicketts

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Introducing the research **What we learned: some key points**

This research bulletin highlights key findings and messages from our exploration of flexible working practices within and outside the FE college sector. Our primary interest has been to identify successful flexible working practices that enable women and those with caring responsibilities to continue building careers in leadership roles.

The research involved a national online survey, interviews with individuals from various sectors; literature and internet site searches. The case studies in this bulletin provide real-life examples of flexible working arrangements that benefit individuals and their employers.

The online survey, conducted by LSN in February and March 2011, gathered data from 396 FE college staff – predominantly women (97 per cent) – about their personal experiences and wider views of flexible working. The full survey report is available on the WLN website.

We also contacted 34 organisations about flexible working arrangements for senior staff with caring responsibilities: half were FE colleges, the remainder from the private, public and voluntary sectors. Seventeen interviews were then held with individuals who agreed to discuss their working arrangements.

From these, the most illustrative case studies were selected, some being anonymised at the interviewee's request. All the findings have contributed to building a better picture of what works well and what does not for employers and employees.

Flexible working and the law

For information about employers' legal duties and employees' rights, go to www.direct.gov.uk/en/employment

Most employees have the right to request a flexible working arrangement and employers are required to consider seriously such an application. Employers can refuse the request or offer an alternative working pattern only if there are good business reasons for doing so.

The survey findings, interviews and documentary evidence provide a wealth of facts and perceptions about the flexibility of working arrangements available to employees in different roles and types of organisations. See also Ingredients for successful working on page 4 and the Self-assessment check-list on page 8.

Somewhat surprising were the:

- **Lack of access to flexible working arrangements for senior leaders in FE colleges** compared with other categories of staff. (Principals and second-tier managers responding to our survey were far less likely to have accessed more flexible working arrangements than any other group);
- **Reasons given for refusal of flexible working requests** with some receiving no clear explanation at all. Others were hardly convincing. For example, one respondent was told it was "not possible within the structure of our sector", and another, "It would set a precedent for others which would then cause organisational problems". All those refused said that the refusal had impacted adversely on their families and their personal lives, with the majority claiming it had also affected their careers;
- Findings that over half the respondents (55 per cent) expressed the view that **access to flexible working for women with caring responsibilities in the FE sector was limited or non-existent.**

Of significant interest were:

- The fact that **flexible working certainly is important to many women in the sector:** 35 per cent of respondents had requested it and 28 per cent currently worked flexibly or had done so in the past;
- Flexible working arrangements did not appear to lead to a change in position or pro rata salary for most individuals;
- The **range of successful flexible working arrangements in the sector:** while the most common forms are part-time working, flexi-time and compressed working hours, respondents reported that they were working in part from home, job-sharing, working term-time only, annual hours' contracts or staggered hours;
- That the majority of respondents working flexibly indicated that they witnessed no noticeable changes in the attitudes of their colleagues. Managers with flexible working arrangements reported that **colleagues in the teams they manage were generally positive.** The majority of managers with people on flexible working arrangements reporting to them were positive and supportive;
- That, in spite of concerns expressed by some women currently on flexible arrangements, for the vast majority **flexible working is not seen to have had a negative impact on careers** – especially when individuals look back on a past arrangement. This should be reassuring news for those contemplating making such a request. As employers become aware of the advantages of keeping their staff on board through flexible working, more opportunities may arise at higher levels in organisations.
- **Informal arrangements for flexible working were rated highly by beneficiaries.** Most, however, recognised the importance of having clear policies and procedures that generally applied to all. One senior manager acknowledged, "Arrangements for individuals – even on an informal basis – set precedents, so it needs to be equitable." Another manager observed that people who are trusted to work flexibly will put in far more time than they take from the arrangement and that this is particularly the case for staff at senior leadership levels.

Case study: managing a week in four days

Good practice in making effective flexible working arrangements includes:

- Conducting an **annual review process** to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the policy and processes; this helps in maintaining their relevance and appropriateness for employees and for the organisation. Jobs change and can grow or reduce over time; we found instances where flexible arrangements were no longer suited to the job requirements – with damaging consequences as the arrangements had not been properly reviewed.
- **Cultural acceptance** of flexible working: one senior manager told us the college offers either permanent or phased flexible working arrangements for all “those with caring requirements, whether children or other family members, those looking merely to improve their work life balance, those looking to partially retire, those with medical conditions”. Another senior manager observed: “all these arrangements have benefited the organisation as well as the individual” when commenting on flexible arrangements provided to several staff with various types of caring responsibilities.
- **Providing a written policy statement on flexible working** along with a user-friendly set of procedures, with the following features:
 - a clear, transparent application process
 - offers guidance to the applicant
 - applicable to all caring responsibilities (not just child-rearing)
 - lists clear criteria that will be used for making the decision
 - invites the applicant to explain how the arrangement will work well for the organisation and how they will ensure they will be able to manage their role
 - entitles the applicant to an explanation of the business reasons if an application is refused
 - includes information on how to appeal
 - provides clear, written business reasons for any refusal
 - sets out the timescale for responses at each stage.

There also needs to be someone with responsibility for ensuring consistency in approach and decision-making across the whole organisation.

And, from other research:

We looked at the results of a recent cross-sector survey by Demos (see *Reinventing the Workplace* or the web link on page 7) that indicated:

- **The education sector is considered by its employees to offer amongst the least flexible working arrangements [Fig 10, p65]**
- **The strong business case for flexible working** including data showing that BT has made vast savings due to its adoption of wide-ranging flexible working policies – particularly in recruitment, induction and lower sick leave costs [p31]
- **“Being female and having a more senior position within a firm is positively associated with working flexibly” [p72].** Our findings suggest that this is not the case in FE.

Karen is a senior sales manager in an international publishing organisation, managing its UK online advertising operations. Since early 2009, she has been working four days a week so she can spend some extra time caring for her young child.

She was invited to take a more senior position on her return to work from maternity leave and, after negotiation, secured her current flexible working arrangement.

Reflecting on factors that have contributed to the success of her flexible arrangement, Karen says, “I am fortunate to have a very good working relationship with my line manager so that when and if needed, additional flexibility is available on an informal basis. The company also has a policy that encourages putting family first. The current arrangement fully meets my needs and I have never felt pressured to alter it in any way. That said, there is a clear expectation that I will still fulfil the responsibilities of a five-day week in four days and meet all the role’s requirements. I therefore need to be incredibly organised and methodical in the way I manage my time.”

She feels well-supported by the company in the way the flexible arrangements are working. She thinks that from the company’s point of view, “what is important is that the role and responsibilities are fulfilled and meet their business requirements”.

In Karen’s opinion, the willingness or not of individual line managers to support flexible working requests is essential in enabling people with caring responsibilities to continue in leadership roles and more important than any documented organisational policies.

Case study: an informal flexible arrangement



Sarah Adams is Director for the Centre of Equality and Diversity – an outward-facing income-generating business centre at Suffolk New College. Sarah enjoys an informal arrangement that enables her to attend to the special caring needs of her two young school-age children and several relatives who frequently need her support due to various health problems. The amount of time her support is needed varies, but she estimates that it is probably about half a day per week.

The nature of Sarah's job means that she does a considerable amount of work outside normal college hours – either at home or representing the college at events and meetings.

Her line manager is aware of her needing to provide caring support to family members and is happy for her to do so as and when necessary. There is a high level of trust between them and Sarah is conscious of how important it is to do the job to the best of her ability and feels she more than makes up for time spent on her personal caring responsibilities.

Sarah observes: 'Colleges do need to have a formal policy on flexible working – but such a policy should have considerable flexibility itself and needs to be viewed as a guidance document only and not as a strict set of rules to be rigorously followed in all circumstances'.

She suggests, 'It is important to develop a culture that encourages career development and recognises individuals' needs to grow and attend to life responsibilities as and when necessary.'

Ingredients for successful working

Support of one's line manager

The line manager's support was considered crucial by everyone we interviewed. Comments included, "The willingness or not of individual line managers to support flexible working requests is more important in enabling people with caring responsibilities to continue in leadership roles than any documented organisational policies", and from someone else, "It is all dependent on the manager's attitude towards enabling flexibility".

A high level of trust between the person with the flexible working arrangement and their line manager

One interviewee observed, "People are more likely to be flexible themselves to accommodate their employer's business needs if the employer demonstrates trust and makes an effort to recognise and support an employee's need for some flexibility in their pattern of working." Another senior manager claimed she is "conscious of how important it is to do the job to the best of my ability and more than make up for time spent on my caring responsibilities".

Commitment to the principles of family-friendly policies by the organisation and its senior management

The importance of organisational commitment cannot be underestimated. Where it was lacking or superficial, applicants for flexible working arrangements were more likely to have their applications refused or to be highly dependent on the goodwill of line managers only.

Willingness to be flexible oneself to accommodate unanticipated business needs

Most people interviewed were very conscious of the importance for them to show flexibility when it was needed by their employer. In the majority of cases this worked well, but some interviewees reported that they felt they were expected to do far more than was reasonable. Recalling a flexible arrangement with a previous employer, one senior manager described how she had requested to work three days a week (which was agreed), but ended up regularly working five days a week and being paid for only three.

Job-sharing arrangements require the development of quite a special relationship between the two people involved

Where job-sharing was considered successful by the participants, it was often attributed to having:

- a strong working relationship with the job-sharing partner
- complementary management styles
- different areas of expertise
- responsibilities shared equally
- a good, open relationship so that there is no reluctance to discuss any issue
- clear divisions of roles within the job-sharing arrangement.

Clear, open communications featured highly in successful arrangements. This will include agreement of clear procedures for covering issues that may arise when the individual is not available. Whether or not the agreed arrangement is likely to restrict further promotion should also be openly discussed.

The value of a trial period for the flexible arrangement was often mentioned

This has advantages for both the employer and employee. One interviewee quickly found that her new arrangement of three days a week was not viable financially but found herself locked into it. The City Lit case study above illustrates how an employer gained confidence in the viability of a job-share arrangement at senior level after a trial period. Six months was generally recommended.

Flexible working arrangements: some examples

The perception of many of our research respondents was that the flexible working policies and procedures at their colleges could be clearer and more objective. What about your organisation? This health-check will help you to reflect on some of the considerations that people we surveyed and interviewed thought were important in terms of values and attitudes for embedding effective flexible working practices.

Job-sharing:

- Two middle managers with caring responsibilities carry out a 1.0 FTE role between them very successfully.
- The post of head of faculty is successfully job-shared by two individuals, split 0.4 / 0.6.

Home working:

- "My sister works for a large organisation and has the option to work from home when the children are ill and has been able to change her working hours on two days of the week in order to collect the children from school."
- A training manager works mostly from home to meet domestic responsibilities (private management development training provider).
- Everyone in a team of 13, apart from the PA and another colleague, works at least one day from home.
- BT offers home-working arrangements to project managers with caring responsibilities.

Flexi-time:

- "My sister works flexi-time for Rolls-Royce. They allow her to work her full-time hours to suit her requirements (i.e. two small boys at school). It also enables her to bank extra hours and then take time off for school events."
- A widower works flexible time to look after his 11-year-old daughter.

Compressed hours:

- A teacher's timetable was adjusted to facilitate taking the children to school and nursery and collecting them in the afternoon.
- A teacher had her teaching commitments covered in four days, enabling her to care for her elderly mother one day a week.
- In the NHS, there are examples of people working nine day fortnights.
- A senior sales manager returned from maternity leave on a four-day working arrangement. Although she completes a full-time job in the four days, she is able to devote one day a week to her child.

Part-time working:

- Two managers of support services have reduced their hours to four days a week to care for young children.

Staggered hours:

- A vice principal starts and ends early on occasions when he needs to collect his children from school.
- A senior manager with childcare and other caring responsibilities is able to devote half a day a week to these responsibilities and make up the time because of the high level of trust between her and her line manager.

Case study: variation in normal working hours



Marcia Summers is a senior manager at West Thames College and recently agreed a variation to her contract, enabling her to finish earlier one day each week. She went through a formal application procedure, providing a case to justify the request and to demonstrate that it would not result in any detrimental business effects. This flexible arrangement enables her to collect her son from school. She says: 'Being able to do that at least once a week is important as otherwise he is collected only by a childminder or goes to after-school care'.

She has agreed to be contactable to deal with any urgent matters that happen to arise during the 'normal hours' period when she is out of college. Marcia more than makes up for the time when she leaves early by working at home and with other out-of-hours commitments.

While these arrangements suit her well now, Marcia had a previous flexible working arrangement at another college. There she had an informal agreement with the principal to have half a day each week to attend to her family caring responsibilities. She particularly appreciated the informal nature of the flexible arrangements that were agreed there, but says she understands why her new college would want to have a more formal agreement. She explains: 'Arrangements for individuals – even on an informal basis – set precedents, so it needs to be equitable'.

Marcia also suggests: 'The individual needs to be willing to demonstrate flexibility as well, so that the employer is not unduly disadvantaged by such an arrangement'.

Case study: managing time and location more flexibly

Sophie has a full-time role as the general manager of the London office of an international private health provider. Reporting directly to the worldwide director, she line-manages 10 staff and is responsible for the day-to-day operations of most aspects of the business.

While Sophie can plan her own hours and work location, the reality is that she finds she needs to be in the office for a significant core period each day. She has therefore agreed a pattern of arriving at the office by 9:00am after dropping her two children at school and leaving at 3:30pm to collect them.

Once home and settled, she generally works for a couple of hours – often on her laptop at the kitchen table alongside her children while they complete their homework. Frequently she works quite late into the evening, depending on the needs of the business.

This arrangement has been operating since her promotion to general manager about five years ago. Before that she used to work three days a week for the same company, although not in the same role or with her current range and level of responsibilities.

Sophie claims, “The real advantage of being able to leave the office at 3:30 is that I get to see the children and they can talk over what has been happening during the day on the way home. It is also good to be there while they do their homework, even if I am also working.”

She is very committed to her job, aiming for appointment to the board, and works long hours. Even so, spending time with her young family is a priority and so far she has managed to organise her hours and working locations to achieve this goal.

The views of two principals – Maxine Room and Mark Malcomson



Flexible working, I believe, increases productivity of staff and gives them more ownership of their working lives.

In the results of our recent online staff survey, I saw that 37.7 per cent of staff felt that the college does not have satisfactory flexible working provision to help them balance work with personal commitments and career development.

We introduced a flexible working policy that encourages a variety of different contractual arrangements, from compressed and annualised hours to working from home on an occasional or regular basis. The emphasis is very much on encouraging managers to be open-minded and explore the possibilities.

Obviously, the needs of the business need to come first and each manager needs to be confident that there will be no detrimental impact on learners, but so far, the policy, which is part of our well-being strategy, has been well received. We will be monitoring its impact closely.

**Maxine Room, Principal,
Lewisham College**



How does an organisation make the most of the talented people that work in it?

Flexibility and imagination are the key or you risk not realising the potential of those who work with you or, even worse, losing them to somewhere else where they place higher value on attracting real talent.

Really talented people often have many commitments and are pulled in a myriad of directions; that is part of their appeal.

Any organisation who wants to make the most of them, their knowledge and their connections has to work with them, so that they can take advantage of what they can bring.

City Lit has a history of attempting to accommodate different working patterns and arrangements, and I hope that we will continue to be able to do that going forward, as that is one of the main ways that we will keep ahead in a constantly changing environment.

**Mark Malcomson, Principal,
City Lit**

Women’s Leadership Network

The Women’s Leadership Network is a member-based organisation which supports women leaders in further education, encourages women to apply for senior posts and lobbies for the promotion of women. Women are still under-represented at the top: while 64% of the workforce in England’s colleges are women, only 38% of principals are women. WLN activities include: research into gender issues affecting career progression, mentoring programmes for staff at member colleges, seminars and conferences.

We have over 80 corporate members and are reliant on their support to continue our work. Sally Dicketts, Principal of Oxford and Cherwell Valley College, is Chair of the WLN and Sue Daley, retired Principal of Boston College, is the Director. Support us through your membership. Find out more at: www.wlnfe.org.uk

Case study: faculty head job-share



Kate Wickham is joint head of faculty for visual arts and psychology with her colleague Nick Doran at the City Lit in central London. Kate's role is for 0.6 of the post, with Nick taking on the remaining 0.4; however, the remainder of Nick's position is in a senior administrative role.

Their job-sharing arrangements as joint heads of the largest faculty at City Lit with over 170 teachers provide an inspirational, if perhaps unusual, model of flexible working at a senior organisational level.

Kate has worked at City Lit for over 20 years. Initially a part-time tutor coordinator (0.5) for about 12 years, her original reason for preferring part-time work was to enable her to continue pursuing her career as an artist, but in 1993 she became a mother and ever since has needed to have suitably flexible working arrangements in order to care for her severely disabled child, now a young man. Her caring responsibilities continue.

In 2001, she was invited to apply for a head of studies role and was able to agree to do it on a 0.6 job-share basis.

This was the first such arrangement to be offered at middle management level at City Lit. She continued in that role until late 2008, when she decided to apply for the senior management head of faculty post.

With support from the deputy principal, a job-share arrangement was proposed and the college cautiously agreed to see how it went for six months.

During that period, the college advertised it as a full-time role only, but then failed to appoint a suitable candidate. Kate and Nick continued job-sharing while the position was re-advertised. This time though they were able to apply and their joint application was successful. They have maintained the job-sharing arrangement ever since.

Initially, Kate and Nick encountered some scepticism about how well the job-share was going to work. There were all sorts of little 'tests' by staff to their individual and combined authority where staff would try to play one off against the other. They quickly recognised they had to be 100 per cent together on everything and present a solid front on all decisions.

This approach has paid off and there is now general acceptance of their authority and regard for their work across the college. In June 2011, they led the faculty in achieving grade 1, 'outstanding', in its Ofsted inspection.

Nick reflects, "I feel that the job-share arrangements have worked, and continue to work, very well. It felt like we went through a very steep learning curve but, because we were so committed, the transition has been successful."

Kate notes, "The personal rapport between us has been really important to the successful delivery of the role. There is strong mutual trust and regard for each other's skills and expertise."

Kate also pays tribute to the support received from a member of the senior executive team and considers "without that active advocacy in the beginning, the job-sharing proposal for such a senior role in the college would be unlikely to have been countenanced".

Useful web-links

Individuals interested in requesting flexible working will find official government information, help and advice about making a request at www.direct.gov.uk/en/Employment/Employees/Flexibleworking/index.htm

Recent research published by the independent think-tank Demos (July 2011), argues the business and social cases for flexible working. *Reinventing the workplace*, by Dan Leighton and Thomas Gregory, includes interesting comparative data across sectors and examples of good practice. Visit

www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace

The *actnow* Broadband Cornwall website on flexible working includes sample policy documents, case studies and advice for employers and employees about flexible working. Visit www.flexible-working.org

The University of Cambridge's policy and procedures for flexible working offers an accessible example. Visit www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/hr/policy/flexible

Self-assessment checklist

The perception of many of our research respondents was that the flexible working policies and procedures at their colleges could be clearer and more objective. What about your organisation? This health-check will help you to reflect on some of the considerations that people we surveyed and interviewed thought were important in terms of values and attitudes for embedding effective flexible working practices.

Use the scale: 1 extensively; 2 very well; 3 fairly well; 4 a little; 5 not at all	1	2	3	4	5
Organisational readiness					
To what extent do the organisation's values and goals demonstrate commitment to achieving a work-life balance for all employees?					
To what extent is flexible working promoted as an option for employees with caring responsibilities?					
To what extent does the senior management team support applications for flexible working arrangements from staff taking on caring responsibilities?					
How much flexibility has your organisation shown over working arrangements for middle managers?					
How much flexibility has your organisation shown over working arrangements for senior managers?					
To what extent does the organisation promote flexible working possibilities when advertising management posts?					
To what extent have the benefits to the employer of providing flexible arrangements for different categories of staff been assessed?					
To what extent have the costs to the employer of providing flexible arrangements for different categories of staff been estimated?					
Implementation effectiveness					
How would you rate your organisation's flexible working policy and related application procedures in terms of:					
■ How well informed staff are about them?					
■ How clear the criteria for decisions are?					
■ How objective and fair the decisions are?					
■ How consistent the decisions are across the organisation?					
How would you rate the following aspects of the policy and procedures:					
■ The application process overall?					
■ Timescale for decisions and responses?					
■ Negotiations on the nature and detail of flexible working arrangements?					
■ Feedback in the case of a refusal?					
■ Appeals process?					
■ Periodic reviews?					
■ Effectiveness and existence of trial periods?					
To what extent are those in line management and leadership roles given development and training in the law relating to the legal rights and duties associated with flexible working for parents and carers?					
How well do line managers understand their role in using positive, constructive approaches when dealing with requests for flexible working arrangements?					
How well do line managers understand their role in supporting individuals with flexible working arrangements once these are in place?					
To what extent is access to flexible working arrangements equitable for all employees with caring responsibilities?					
How would you rate your organisation's strategies for reviewing and evaluating on a regular basis the fair and effective implementation of the flexible working policy?					