

WORK AND LIFE INITIATIVES:

The Issues, Benefits and Considerations



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THE WORK AND LIFE BALANCE

Introduction

There are many options currently being proposed as solutions to balancing work and family responsibilities. It is important to recognise that not every approach will be relevant or practical for each employee or workplace. The purpose of this information paper is to make employers aware of:

- best practice approaches
- the issues for consideration of these initiatives.

The following information summarises several approaches that have been implemented in various industries both locally and overseas. In assessing the issues, benefits and considerations, employers should examine not only the immediate areas of concern but also the long term needs and changing circumstances of their employees and organisations.

Parental Leave Options

Options

- Paid or unpaid parental leave
- Child rearing leave. This is additional to maternity, paternity or adoption leave and may be made available to parents with pre school aged children. It is usually leave without pay and is available for varying terms ranging from several weeks to a number of years.
- Antenatal leave: access to paid or unpaid leave to attend antenatal medical checks.

Issues

- Is it practical for the employer to provide a longer time to return to work?
- Are there part-time alternatives to full time return to work?
- Are there practicalities for part-time return to work and then moving back into full time work?
- Is job share an option?
- Will retraining be necessary?
- Will it be necessary to develop a plan to keep the employee informed of changes and development in the workplace?

Benefits

- Maintains valuable employees and skills within the organisation.
- Reduced recruitment and advertising costs.

Considerations

- Maintaining organisational knowledge, culture and teamwork for employees on extended leave.
- Determining suitability of various positions for part-time and job share arrangements.
- Cost of providing re-training for employees returning from extended leave.

Communication Arrangements for Employees on Parental Leave

Option

One method used to avoid skill reduction and the sense of isolation for employees during periods of parental leave is to identify a level of contact. Prior to the commencement of parental leave, employers and employees agree on the level of communication to be maintained.

Issues

- Do relevant legislation and industrial awards and/or agreements provide for contact with employees on leave?
- Will the employee agree to their home email address being added to the work unit's email network, so that relevant work based information is received on-line?
- Will the employee agree to receive regular hard copies of workplace publications, information on operational plans or any major procedural or structural changes taking place in the workplace, etc?
- Will the employee participate in training sessions that they would normally have been involved in at work?
- Will the employee be invited to attend the work unit's social events, for example, farewells, birthday lunches and the annual Christmas party?
- How will you revisit the issues of returning to work on a part-time basis, job share, voluntarily reduced working year or flexible working hours options in advance of the employee's return to work?

Benefits

- The transition from parental leave to moving back into the work place is made easier for the employee and other employees.
- Retraining time and costs are reduced.

Considerations

- Some of these suggestions may be difficult to implement due to issues associated with the birth and subsequent care of the child, lack of electronic communications and computers, distance from workplace, award and agreement provision, etc.

Working from Home

Options

- Full time working from home
- Part time working from home
- Special projects completed from home
- Casual pool of employees available to work from home

Issues

- How will employees be made aware of the concept of telecommuting?
- What process will be used to choose the right people/jobs for telecommuting?
- How will this be communicated effectively with remote workers?
- Who will measure and evaluate the results and how will this be done?
- How will telecommuters be linked to the office and on the career track?
- What process will be used to plan together, anticipate problems and identify possible solutions?
- Who will monitor the occupational health and safety risks and Workers Compensation liability?
- How will occupational health and safety checks of the premises and equipment be undertaken to ensure compliance with legislation?
- How will contact be maintained and are other employees able to assist with the transfer of message, enquiries, information, etc?
- Is there a suitable space within the home to accommodate working from home?
- Who will provide and maintain the equipment and work area costs?
- What effect will this have on teamwork?

Benefits

- Flexibility for employee
- Ability to maintain employee
- Increased productivity and flexible use of employee

Considerations

- Discuss how the employee will deal with interruptions.
- Discuss how productivity issues will this be measured and sustained.
- Identification of costs involved in set up and maintenance of working from home including remote connections.
- Maintaining contact with work colleagues and the organisation.

- Need to monitor that the balance between home and work is being maintained, as there is a tendency for home-based employees to work longer than required.
- Workload distribution to employees in the office may increase eg. extra telephone calls and counter enquiries.

Work-based Childcare/Eldercare

Options

- Workplace childcare facilities.
- Paying for care when additional hours are required, when traveling for business or attending meetings out of hours.
- Referrals to backup emergency care for parents or carers when usual care arrangements are unavailable.
- Salary sacrifice carer costs.

Issues

These issues are relevant for child or elder care requirements.

- What is the type, availability and accessibility of the care required? This may include occasional or longer-term childcare or differing levels of support for elder care or for those with responsibility for people with disabilities.
- Will you develop a referral or contract service for care?
- Can you contract with childcare providers to reserve spaces for employee's children?
- What information will you provide on finding and recognizing quality care facilities?
- Will you provide subsidised school holiday programs?

Benefits

- Provides support to the employee in a variety of unforeseen circumstances associated with carer responsibilities.
- The issue of proximity of childcare should also be noted. If childcare is reasonably close to the place of work, it will be easier for the mother to go to the baby or have the baby brought to her. Work-based childcare, employer sponsored childcare and assistance with finding nearby childcare are some of the options available to employers.

Considerations

- Usually support during illness is not provided in institutional care as children are usually excluded from the centre depending upon the nature of the illness.
- Employer provided in-house facilities are expensive to set up because of insurance and registration costs.

Children In the Workplace

Employers may consider, despite the range of child care options available, that there will be times when employees request to bring their children into the workplace.

Benefits

- Employees remain available for urgent matters that require their attention at the workplace.

Considerations

- Dependant upon the age and needs of the child not all work areas will be suitable for children due to safety reasons and the nature of the work performed by the parent or carer.

Facilities for Nursing Mothers

Options

- Expressing rooms and separate milk-storage facilities
- Lactation breaks, the mother is able to either express breast milk or go to feed her baby.

Issues

- What flexibility of times of usual breaks and/or lactation breaks is required for expressing of breast milk or breastfeeding?
- Do lactation breaks need to be negotiated between the employer and employee?
- Whether the breaks would be paid or unpaid and whether extra time would be worked?
- Can you provide a clean, private (lockable) area with comfortable seating and power point (eg the first aid room, but definitely not a toilet)?
- Can you provide facilities for washing hands and equipment?
- Is a refrigerator available for storage of breast milk?
- Are facilities available for the storage of breast pumps and other equipment (eg cupboard or locker)?
- How will you provide information about facilities and policies provided at time of request for maternity leave?
- How will information about facilities and policies be displayed and distributed, where appropriate, to inform employees who are pregnant or considering pregnancy?
- Is it possible to provide car parking for the carer to bring baby to the workplace when required?

Benefits

- Supports a family friendly work culture.
- Improved retention of female employees after maternity leave thereby ensuring that the employer does not lose the valuable skills and experience of the employee.
- Earlier return to work by some mothers.
- Reduced absenteeism and employee turnover because of improved health of child.
- Easier return to work transition for women returning from maternity leave.
- Acknowledging the needs of employees who are breastfeeding will improve employer-employee relations. It is likely that relations will be more harmonious, that employees will have a greater loyalty and respect for their employer and therefore there will be benefits from enhanced morale and productivity.

Considerations

- Cost of setting up facility, availability of space.
- Possible cost of paid time for lactation breaks.
- Interruption to the daily schedule.

Leave for School Functions

Options

- Ability for employees to build up a bank of time in lieu entitlements to attend school functions during working hours.

Issues

- Is it feasible to cover the role during such absences from the workplace?
- What is the process to ensure equity in providing these arrangements where a number of employees have children at the same school or conflicting timing of events?

Benefits

- Allows parents or carers flexibility to attend school functions held during the day eg. special mass or sporting functions. May be taken as several hours leave instead of a full day.

Considerations

- Groups of parents from one district or school may want to attend at same time.

On-site health services

Options

- Provision of health services on-site such as Quit Campaign, Sun Smart Program, healthy eating programs and hearing tests.
- Provision of gym or pool memberships in near-by facilities
- Salary sacrifice for health and life insurance or gym memberships.

Issues

- What types of immunisation can be provided for employees? eg. flu injections.
- Do you share the cost with the employees?
- Who determines what is “healthy” food and drink for provision in the workplace?

Benefits

- Improved employee health and reduction in absenteeism due to illness.

Considerations

- Cost of administration in program delivery and setup costs.

Employee Assistance Programs

Options

- Confidential employee assistance program to refer employees to various forms of counselling eg. grief, health, substance abuse, stress management, family or financial counselling where the impact of personal or work problems impacts on the ability of the employee to perform their job. Some organisations also offer short-term personal loans and payment for counselling sessions.

Issues

- Which counselling services will be provided?
- How will you maintain and reinforce a confidential procedure to access the program?
- How will employees be informed of the program?
- How do employees access the program?

Benefits

- Employees are able to obtain professional help and support.

Considerations

- Employees may not feel comfortable in discussing their personal issues or asking for assistance.

Health and Wellbeing Programs

Workshops or seminars on parenting, child development, care of the elderly, work and life balance issues.

Options

- Information workshops and seminars provided after-hours to accommodate other family members.
- Subsidised gym memberships or equipment hire.
- Organised workplace walking groups or sporting teams.

Issues

- How will the programs be timed to be accessible to all interested employees?
- What will be the cost of participation?
- How will you develop a range of programs of interest to the employees?

Benefits

- Assists the employees to develop a healthy lifestyle and reduces absenteeism.

Considerations

- Finding a suitable location to deliver these programs so that the service is available to all.

Programs for Teenage Children of Employees

Options

- After-school programs
- Referral information services
- Scholarship/Educational Assistance Programs
- Counselling services

Issues

- How will you determine the number of employees who would utilise this service?
- What is the proximity to locally provided services?
- What is the financial ability of an organisation to fund these programs?
- Are there privacy issues associated with an employee's family responsibilities?

Benefits

- Provides support in the workplace for employee's family responsibilities.

Considerations

- Consultation is required to determine the number of employees who would access this service. Programs of this nature can create inequities in the workplace were there are a limited amount of employees accessing the service and no alternative services for those not requiring family assistance programs.

Flexible Scheduling

Options

- Flexi-time at either end of the day or accessed during the day to attend to health appointments, school events and other family or personal needs.
- Moving back and forward between full-time/part-time work
- Periodical change to start and finish times.

Issues

- What is the range of positions that would allow for the above flexibilities?
- Can the work be organised to allow for flexibilities and equity for employees?

Benefits

- Reduces unplanned absenteeism.
- Provides for greater coverage of the working day overall.

Considerations

- Conflicting priorities.
- Pressure on other employees to cover absences.

Peak Workload Alternatives

Options

- Temporary employees
- Distributing the excess workload across a workgroup to reduce the load on individual employees.

Issues

- How can the work be better organised and distributed to share the workload during peak periods?
- Will you need a trained pool of temporary employees to assist with sharing the workload?
- Will multi-skilling employees enable them to assist others in their area of expertise?

Benefits

- A trained pool of temporary employees can relieve the pressure during peak times. They are trained in the organisation's systems and methods, thereby reducing the lead up time to being effective in the particular role. This pool of employees can also assist during emergency situations or where employees require leave due to illness or on short notice.

Considerations

- Organisations need to invest time in developing a pool of employees and train them to become effective. There is a cost and time factor involved in this.
- Distribution of work may cause issues between employees.

Compressed Work Week

Options

- Employees work the equivalent full-time hours over four days instead of five.

Issues

- What are the availability requirements for a particular work area and position?
- Are there equity issues where some positions may not have access to this?

Benefits

- Provides flexibilities for employees.
- Reduces absenteeism
- Increases the spread of hours available to the employer to provide services.

Considerations

- Scheduling conflicts within the office.
- Availability of employees to provide services to suit the business requirements.
- Provisions on working hours in industrial award and agreements.

Extra Leave Purchase Scheme

A scheme that enables full-time and part-time employees to purchase additional annual leave for family or personal reasons.

Issues

- How will approval be balanced against operational requirements of the work unit?
- How often can the employee adjust participation in the scheme?
- What is the impact on other employees?

Benefits

- Leave is planned in consultation with manager to avoid disruption to work unit operations
- A culture of acceptance and mutual support within the work unit is fostered
- Work outcomes are clearly defined, communicated and measurable
- Arrangements are regularly assessed and fine-tuned in line with agreed work unit performance indicators

Considerations

- Employees should be made aware of the reduction in weekly/fortnightly salary and impact on other entitlements, such as superannuation.
- Workloads change and employees are unavailable to meet demands.
- Conflicting requests for extra leave from employees.
- Not enough employees available within a department to support demand for this type of leave.

Community and Volunteer Work

Options

- Develop policy to enable attendance at Country Fire Authority, State Emergency Service, Defense Force, School Board, Parent and Friends Associations, or other community committees.

Issues

- Will this be paid leave?
- How much leave -paid or unpaid- will be granted, for instance in emergency situations such as bushfires, floods, etc?
- How often can this leave be taken on each occasion or annually?
- How is the leave scheduled to avoid conflicting timelines?
- How is the organisation able to function and accommodate these absences?

Benefits

- Increases the skill level of some employees.

Considerations

- Demands of community work may increase due to expanding responsibilities on the community organisation or emergency situations. This may cause difficulties for the employee in achieving work timelines and the outcomes required by the employer.