QUEENSLAND URBAN WATER SKILLS PARTNERSHIP

INFOSHEET – FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Background:

Flexible working arrangements can be a topic of contention in many organisations, yet with the current demand and competition for highly skilled staff employers need to ensure that they provide the workplace conditions that meet the wants and needs of the skilled workers they are trying to attract.

There are already some legislated provisions for employees in regards to flexible working arrangements. Under the National Employment Standards (NES) an employee who is a parent or who has responsibility for the care of a child, may request flexible working arrangements such as;

- Changes in hours of work
- Changes in patterns of work
- Changes in location of work

The employer is required to give consideration to this request and can only refuse the request on 'reasonable business grounds'.

Beyond the requirements by the NES, there is a fair amount of research to support flexible working arrangements including the benefits they bring to the employer as well as the employee.

Employees and work/life balance:

According to the University of South Australia's Centre for Work a+ Life Survey of 2,803 employees full-time workers are finding it increasingly difficult to achieve work/life balance. In particular, a quarter of women and one-fifth of men working full-time are unhappy with their work/life balance, a proportion that has increased over the past three years. There is also a decrease in work/life satisfaction levels once employees start working very long hours (Managing Work Life Balance International, 2010). Such employees are likely to be looking to find better working conditions with another employer.

As job demands and time restrictions increase, there is evidence that working parents in Australia who lack workplace flexibility make decisions to forgo income and/or advancement in an effort to meet the demands they face. Three methods they use include changing jobs, with consequent loss of work status and income, rejecting jobs that involve too much travelling, and changing preferences for shift work as the ages of their children rise (Thornthwaite, 2002). Again, if these employees cannot find flexible working arrangements within their current workplace, it is likely that they will move onto an employer who will.

The negative impacts of work/life stress and conflicting demands can often be reduced through flexible work practices where employees have some say over the how many hours they work and how they work them. Research has found that time autonomy (being able to control aspects of work e.g. span of hours, overtime etc) has a positive impact on work/life balance (Deloitte, 2011).

Impacts of an Aging workforce:

As with other industries, the water industry employs a large number of staff in the 50+ age bracket, in particular in supervisory, operations and management roles. A recent survey of opinions of 2,500 aged 50+ employees indicated

that 81% want to stay employed, but under flexible working conditions (Zillman, 2011). There is a vast amount of knowledge and skills within the 50+ age group that needs to be passed on to younger workers, it is therefore essential that employers respond to the needs of this age group and look at ways to implement flexible working practices and transition to retirement programs. If the industry is flexible it will be able to retain older workers in mentoring or training roles rather than being unresponsive and losing the employees altogether.

Benefits to employers:

There are a variety of benefits that employers can gain from the implementation of flexible work arrangements. Studies on Australian Workplaces have shown that organisations with flexible work practices achieved a reduction in turnover of 15% and a 16% overall reduction in absenteeism. In addition 79% believed that the implementation of flexible work practices had a positive impact on productivity and 76% said they were able to attract and retain the best employees (Queensland Government Office for women, n.d). In addition, a UK study found a strong positive relationship between flexible working hours and individual performance, in particular employees with flexible working arrangements were found to have higher levels of organisational commitment (Queensland Government Office for women, n.d).

For the urban water industry, adoption of work/life balance practices can provide an alternative employment option for employees that prefer flexible working hours and a more family friendly working environment that other higher paying industries are less able to offer. Additionally, adoption of such practices can address skills shortage problems by attracting and retaining previously 'untapped' pools of talent such as mothers returning to work, mature workers and certain minority groups (Hudson, 2005).

Given the competitive market for key skilled professionals such as engineers, work/life balance should be a strategic human resource issue that all water service providers look to address.

Possible disadvantages:

Some employers may report that flexible working arrangements do not always have a positive impact on the workplace. In particular, some employees may take advantage of flexible working arrangements and employers encounter a loss in productivity.

It is worth noting that issues regarding employees who take advantage of flexible working arrangements or view certain arrangements as an expectation are likely to be the result of inherent cultural issues rather than the actual flexible work practices.

Other disadvantages may include; employees ending up working longer hours when working remotely or not benefiting from co-worker interactions and knowledge sharing, flexible arrangements are more complex to administer, additional overheads due to a longer span of hours for employees (e.g. some employees working 7-3pm others 10-6pm).

Implementing flexible work practices:

Beyond merely written policies and procedures on flexible working arrangements, employers need to address any inherent cultural or management issues that may prevent employees from making use of flexible working arrangements.

In particular 'managerial support' is consistently emphasised in studies as a factor influencing work/life balance as managers are in a position to encourage or discourage efforts to implement work/life balance arrangements (Hudson, 2005). Further, co-workers and workplace culture also play an important part. It is important to change the perception that visibility equals productivity and focus on effectiveness rather than length of work hours, and recognise the impact of communication technologies and skilful time-management strategies to boost output (Hudson, 2005).

When dealing with older workers nearing retirement, it is important to have the conversation to discuss their career path intentions. Also consider negotiating options for part-time work or a change to the structure of working hours and job re-design, older workers might want to work less on outdoor sites and focus more of their areas of expertise.

There are a number of things that employers can do to promote flexible work practices including;
- Allow staff to make up hours if they need to attend appointments.
- Negotiate flexible start and finish times
- Establish procedures for working from home or offsite arrangements
- Look at part time options for older employees transitioning to retirement or other workers with competing life demands (e.g. primary caretaker roles)
- Provide opportunities for averaging of hours, e.g. 9 day fortnights.

Summary:

As more employees struggle to maintain work/life balance, it is becoming more important to ensure that workplaces are responding to the needs of employees and providing flexible work arrangements. Flexible working arrangements can benefit the employer as well as the employee and ensure that skilled workers remain in the workforce. Besides development and implementation of policies and procedures for flexible working arrangements, employers also need to consider the impact that organisational cultural issues can have on employee's inclination to make use of flexible working arrangements and the workplace impacts that may occur when they choose to do so.

References

Deloitte (2011). *Flexible Working Times: Effects on employees' exhaustion, work-nonwork conflict and job performance.* https://www.deloitte.com/view/en_AU/au/services/consulting/human-capital/diversitynewsletter/78ee4f36fb320310VgnVCM3000001c56f00aRCRD.htm

Hudson (2005). *The Case for Work/Life Balance: Closing the Gap between Policy and Practice.* http://au.hudson.com/documents/emp_au_Hudson_Work-Life_A4_Std.pdf

Managing Work Life Balance International (2010). *Work/Life Research.* http://www.worklifebalance.com.au/research.html

Queensland Government Office for women (n.d). *Flexible work arrangements in science, engineering and technology – information for employers.* http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/resources/women/hardhats/resources/fot-4-flexible-work.pdf

Thornthwaite, Dr. L. (2002). Work-family balance: international research on employee preferences, *Working Paper 79 From the Working Time Today Conference*, University of Sydney. http://www.wrc.org.au/documents/WP79.pdf.

Zillman, S. (2011). *Flexibility the key to engagement of mature workers*. http://www.hcamag.com/forum/flexibility-the-key-to-engagement-of-mature-workers/117860/