

WORK LIFE CASE STUDY 1

An initiative that encourages a family friendly workplace.

subject: A MANAGER IN A GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT

background

Since her return to the government department she had been employed in for twelve months prior to becoming pregnant with her first child, in August 1998, Jane (not her real name) has been working full time under a **flexible work arrangement**. This involved Jane telecommuting from home two days a week.

Following her promotion to a managerial position in 2000, Jane continued to telecommute two days a week, instigating new methods of communication and management to ensure the members of the her team continued to feel she was an involved, enthusiastic and approachable manager.

objectives

- Jane was keen to show that telecommuting or any form of flexible work arrangement – provided it was managed transparently and proactively – could still work in a management context
- That successful implementation of such a program would provide other staff with an effective model on which to base their own working arrangements (this applies to both the managers who agree to the arrangements as well as any staff who undertake them)

records maintained

In 1998, Jane developed – in consultation with key personnel across her division and from the human resources area, a telecommuting agreement which was used as a model for future agreements for that division.

Jane also maintained a work diary and weekly record throughout the 4 years she was telecommuting.

In 1999, Jane developed and submitted a report on telecommuting.

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A new telecommuting agreement was drawn up when Jane was promoted to the management position in 2000.

key messages

Flexible work arrangements should be accessible to all staff and such arrangements are neither a luxury nor an avenue for less committed staff to exploit the system.

Without effective managerial support and cooperation, flexible work arrangements do not work!

The myths surrounding flexible work arrangements – whether the arrangement is telecommuting, part-time, flexible hours – need to be dispelled.

Leaders need to become proactive and genuine advocates of flexible work conditions.

Flexibility in one's work practice leads to heightened productivity.

Strategies employed

As it relates to being a manager:

- Jane gained managerial agreement and support of the arrangement (she was only willing to accept the promotional position if she was able to continue telecommuting two days a week. With a young family, Jane felt this was vital and she also felt that the experiment of allowing a manager to do so would provide a positive role model for other managers and staff)
- A written agreement was drawn up – this covered all aspects from expected hours of work / venue / review processes / insurance / work cover and expected type of work to be completed
- Jane's arrangement was widely advertised so others knew that she would be telecommuting from home two days a week – this meant meetings she was expected to attend on either days would require either a deputy or teleconferencing facilities
- Jane instituted weekly review meetings with her manager and both assessed the success and implementation of the arrangement during these meetings
- Jane instituted weekly and fortnightly meetings with individual staff within her team and weekly strategy meetings for the entire team.
- Each Friday, Jane would send an email to each team member reviewing the progress of that week, passing on any administrative information which

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needed to be disseminated and discussing short term and longer term goals for each project. Staff would respond individually and this would assist them both in their record keeping and performance reviews.

Here is an example:

16/11/01

Hi everyone,

How is the morning going?

I will keep this pretty short and just cover mainly the meeting notes from last Thursday. We had quite a few comings and goings last week: XXX arrival (a breath of fresh air and already our office space and a sense of organisation is pervading everything!!!! :-), XXXs attendance at XXX Conference, XXX at the Business Writing PD, XXX chasing soccer players and filling in forms for XXX, XXX trying to keep a stiff upper lip despite some hassles, and XXX still working on those Memos!

At least we sent out 2 RFQs : This was the source of some considerable discussion at our fortnightly XXX Officers meeting and will hopefully be a project valued and useful to all offices and divisions.

Notes from me:

1. PROJECT 1

I met with staff from the XXXX Joint Venture team to discuss the next steps with the project, as it applies to our work. It was one of those interesting meetings where they're being cagey (there were 3 of them and 1 of me and they had their agenda well planned before I got there...particular as it potentially applies to \$\$\$\$!) but where we have a set of steps to now undertake with regards to the project. Peter is now coming on board with this and we will be having another meeting with this team in December. We will keep you posted. This will be an interesting and potentially pretty useful pilot project for both the XXX and ourselves in ensuring interoperability with other national initiatives.

2. XMAS and the team

Can you all pop the 17 December as a prospective lunch / Xmas celebration for us? How does that suit everyone? We can discuss venue (my place or somewhere out or whatever) when we're all in the same place next week.

3. IDENTIFICATION CARDS

Let's do it this week eh?!

4. Report against deliverables

Please have your dot point report ready to give me on Wednesday. Thanks.

5. ABSTRACT FOR BRISBANE CONFERENCE

You now have the second cut of the abstract - please take a look and work on it so we can have a great doc to distribute to the wider team meeting next Wednesday. Ta.

NOTES FROM XXX LEADERSHIP TEAM MEETING

(You have the relevant handouts in your pigeonholes.)

XXXXXX(notes)

Thanks for getting to the end of this long email.....and have a great day everyone.

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I will see you all on Tuesday.

Cheers

Jane

ANOTHER EXAMPLE (with annotated notes to highlight issues):

OHS

Issues have been raised regarding the number of photocopiers in each photocopy room and lack of ventilation. Printers and access to network printers was raised as an issue (John - how are we going getting our two printers networked? We could make these available to other staff as soon as done. Pls let me know how we're going here. Thanks.)

CORRESPONDENCE/BRIEFINGS

You have received a copy of this in your pigeonholes - basically all originals of BRI etc Of course, whenever we are on leave we need to ensure we have back-up so we have other staff members who can pick up in our absence (this is not usually and issue with us as it is preplanned).

REGIONAL FUNDS

Yesterday, 1/11 it was agreed that the funds would be released to regions. (This is great news for us - particularly the \$Xk needing to go out to our XXX regional PD coordinators....if unclear XXX I know you'll have a chat with XXX. But it also means we can start planning that 2 day seminar with the coordinators which will be brilliant and good timing for your 10/11 meeting with XXXXXX and the XXX Region team)

- Each email would also contain individualised information for each staff member and was sent individually to them.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE – with customized notes

Hi XXX

How are you this morning?

A couple of things which need to be considered within your deliverables doc for Tuesday:

- The work you are doing with the XXX website / XXX and XXX
- Your assessment of computer operating systems etc across the division
- Your work with XXX - has there been a clarification of roles etc? What's your next task etc?
- Weekly/fortnightly reports- please remember to contribute

Thanks for your work to make our workshops this week so successful - the stuff you brought, your enthusiasm and insight were great! (But you will have to talk next time.....!!!)

I am looking forward to seeing the results of the collated evaluations which XXX is pulling into a report. Your work has been excellent in this. Thanks.

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As you know, I have asked you to develop these key deliverables as an essential platform through which your mid-cycle performance review will be completed. This is also the framework around which our weekly meetings needs to centre: so that you can give me updates on expected events / highlights / things you have been doing. You can present this however you wish - I will not ask you to talk about it while XXX is visiting us, but will leave time during each of our further meetings to discuss each other's deliverables.

- Tasks which were discussed in person, documented in the emails, recorded in performance plans were also allocated as TASKS within OUTLOOK.
- Each term, Jane would also ask the team to review *her* performance – will particular focus on how they felt the telecommuting arrangements and would also send out regular 'tele quizzes'...telecommuting quizzes for staff to (briefly) address. An example follows:

Tele quiz

1. *Do you find the Weekly Reflection emails useful? (yes? No?)*
Yes I do it's like a back up to Outlook reminders
2. *Are you finding you are getting enough feedback, support and direction in the work you are doing? (yes / no)*
Yes I am, I feel much loved but need to work hard to pay back the emotional debt
3. *What concerns or issues do you currently have about your work? (whatever)*
XXXXXXX
4. *What are the good things about your work at present?*
Its new, exciting and good fun
5. *What would you like to change?*
I'd like to move see below (no.8)
6. *In what way does it affect you that your Manager telecommutes on Mondays and Fridays? (/ comments)*
She seems to be here just as much as when she's in the office
7. *What is your general attitude to the work you are doing?*
Positive
8. *In 12 months' time, where do you want to be?*
XXXXXX
9. *Any other comments.....*
You're really a dynamic driven manager Jane I hope some of it rubs off...

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works

- Any significant issues for the team were addressed in strategic weekly meetings (because Jane utilised the email information dissemination process, little time was spent handing out or reporting on information to the team). More effective time was given to planning and discussion.
- Each term, an entire planning day (reviewing successes and planning for short and long term goals) involved all team members. At the initial establishment of the team, they went away for two days to undertake concentrated strategic planning.
- Jane maintained close communication with key Human Resource personnel to ensure the process was working – any queries or concerns were subsequently directed to these contacts.
- Jane also actively encouraged members of her team to take advantage of flexible work if they felt the need.

budget implications

- mobile phone (as manager, this is part of the package anyway!)
- fax machine (\$350) at home office
- ISP connection
- Jane paid for her second phone line / phone connections (and maintained a record of hours worked at home for tax and accountability purposes)
- Jane's desk was able to be used by other staff when she was not there – effectively freeing up space for her already overcrowded team
- Jane had a laptop computer from her beginning of employment with the department

outcomes

- Highly successful working arrangement which was regularly reviewed by Jane and her team
- An effective model of how a manager can take advantage of such arrangements was developed

evaluation

- Despite the politically-correct 'speak' of other managers, there remains a long way to go before flexible work arrangements are seen as viable and professional options for staff. There continues to be a perception that 'at desk=on task' and that working from home is a luxury rather than a viable option for staff. Meetings were invariably called on Jane's telecommuting

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days or at early hours to which Jane was unable to attend. At times, there seemed to be a tacit disapproval of Jane's arrangements (or, at least, Jane perceived it this way).

- Employees need to be able to feel they are 'trusted' and empowered, rather than monitored for attendance. Outputs are surely more important than who is sitting at a desk when!
- In the space of 11 months, Jane was managed by 5 different people. The level of managerial trust and support for her flexible work arrangements varied significantly over this time.
- Despite the fact that Jane developed and nurtured a highly effective and efficient team, that all work was done on time and as requested, and that productivity in general was extremely high, there was no acknowledgement of the successful implementation of this flexible work arrangement by those managing Jane. Alternately, the team with whom Jane worked were very supportive of the arrangement – they felt communication was clear, that Jane had a sound understanding of their work outputs and needs and that they received significant support from her.
- If telecommuting or any form of flexible work arrangements are to work, there need to be champions of this process. There continues to be a feeling that 'at work early and staying to late' is commendable and that any variation on this theme implies lack of commitment to the organisation. Perhaps it should be incorporated in an executive's performance plan that flexible work arrangements and encouraging employees to have a balance between their lives and work should be advocated / acknowledged / praised / publicised / encouraged and implemented – targets set and achieved!
- Jane also had a team which valued undertaking extra responsibilities. Staff were very supportive not only in terms of their commitment but also in their willingness to be delegated responsibility when and if necessary.
- There is still a long way to go – to ensure that managers can be effective, and be perceived as being committed and effective, if they opt for part time or flexible work conditions – and that promotional opportunities are actively encouraged. Jane found this not always to be the case.

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