



IMPROVING STAFF RETENTION: FLEXIBLE WORKING

Staff are increasingly seeking flexible ways of working for a broad range of reasons, such as to accommodate caring responsibilities, childcare, studying, volunteering, hobbies or social activities.

Offering and advertising flexible working opportunities is one of the ways you can attract and retain a diverse workforce. By demonstrating a genuine commitment to flexible working, prospective and existing employees are more likely to feel valued as individuals, which can lead to higher levels of staff engagement and job satisfaction. Flexible working is also an important part of your employer brand and has an impact on the talent pool you attract.

Balancing the increasing number of staff who want to work flexibly with maintaining staffing levels is a challenge many NHS organisations are facing. This guide explores three key areas to consider and includes examples, resources and top tips from trusts to help you implement flexible working successfully.

What is flexible working?

Flexible working can mean different things to different people. It can include working on different days, working different shift patterns, working in different teams or working in different locations.



Senior leadership buy-in is essential when developing an organisational culture supportive of flexible working. Your senior leaders set the tone for the organisation. They act as powerful role models and communicate with staff at all levels on a regular basis. Line managers are also important as they have the responsibility for managing flexible working requests by understanding their team members' priorities, and the needs of the service.

Building a strong business case for flexible working will help to ensure you have leadership and management buy in from the outset. Start by doing the following:

- Use the data your organisation holds around attraction and retention to demonstrate vacancies in the workforce, gaps and turnover.
- Showcase examples from your organisation which demonstrate how flexible working benefits both staff and services.
- Challenge any misconceptions or myths about flexible working, for example that only parents can request to work flexibly.
- Outline the consequences of not offering staff enough flexibility such as increased turnover or difficulty recruiting new staff.
- Develop a story that senior colleagues can buy into, such as improved care quality and productivity and demonstrate this in your business case.
- Identify role models within your trust who successfully work flexibly.

Benefits

For employees

Improved job satisfaction

Higher level of engagement

Improved health and wellbeing

A better work-life balance

Reduced travel time

Support to manage caring responsibilities

For employers

Increased recruitment

Larger talent pool of potential employees

Widened participation and improved diversity of the workforce

Reduced costs where full-time cover is not required

Loyal and committed employees

Reduced sickness absence

Still need some convincing as to the benefits?

- Listen to **this webinar** produced by the Health & Care Women Leaders Network which discusses how to move away from traditional working hours in order to help grow, develop and support talent.
- Watch **this webinar** featuring Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust describing how the trust empowers managers to take a more flexible approach to the management of sickness absence and musculoskeletal health.
- Read **this report** from Timewise which sets out the case for flexible working in the NHS.

MANAGING ROSTERS

Effectively managing rosters to provide adequate staffing levels for safe patient care is essential when seeking to implement flexible working. Below are some examples of how to manage rosters and flexible working arrangements.

Team-based rostering

Timewise is currently running a project to implement team-based rostering for nurses.

Birmingham Women and Children's Hospital took part in a pilot which was completed in June 2018. As part of the initiative, a lead team on each ward represents a group of their colleagues. The lead team members are responsible for liaising with their colleagues to populate a draft roster, based on individual shift preferences and requirements, and then collaborating with them further to negotiate an agreed version.

The pilot is currently being evaluated but initial results are positive. These include:

- Improved engagement and personal responsibility for rostering
- A sense that the system is fairer for all
- Better understanding of the rostering process.

Read more about the pilot on the [Timewise website](#).

E-rostering

E-rostering systems support flexible working by allocating staff to shifts based on their working patterns and preferences as well as the needs of the ward. E-rostering systems house a range of information on staff working patterns and preferences, annual leave, sickness absence, professional registrations, competencies and skills in one central place. This enables managers to quickly build rotas and allocate shifts. It can also help to reduce agency staff spending by using the workforce more effectively.

Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust has significantly reduced agency spend through centralising and incentivising the booking of bank shifts. Read more in our [case study](#).

Read [this report](#) from The Workforce Deployment Expert Group published in March 2018 on e-rostering technology use in the NHS. One of the key findings from the report is that e-rostering technology can support staff retention and attraction by giving people greater control of their shifts and flexibility in their working patterns.

Read more about e-rostering on our dedicated [web pages](#).



When implementing flexible working, organisations need to strike a balance between the needs of the service with those of individual staff and flexibility needs with predictability.

For some staff, a flexible working arrangement means a fixed working arrangement where staff have a predictable working pattern. For others, working a mixture of shifts with flexibility week-to-week is more appealing. Consider the types of flexible working your staff are requesting and consider how you could accommodate them or try and negotiate a middle-ground.

Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust asks staff to be flexible about where they work to help accommodate all flexible working requests.

Communicating your flexible working offer clearly and transparently is key to helping you balance the needs of the service with individual's preferences and will help manage staff members' expectations in relation to flexible working.

Flexible working can be implemented in a range of ways:

1. Part-time

Part-time (less than 37.5 hours per week) working is currently more common in bands 1-5, but it doesn't have to be restricted to these roles. Consider how you could use part-time hours in more senior roles, for example, leadership roles or staff who are looking to retire and return on fewer hours.

Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust promotes flexible working opportunities at the trust with lots of examples of senior nurses working part-time including a nurse consultant and ward sisters.

2. Job shares

Job shares are a great way of making the most of part-time hours and have the added advantage of giving you the opportunity to use different skill sets and experiences to fulfil the duties of one role. Job shares can work particularly well in senior and leadership roles.

3. Annualised hours

Using annualised hours contracts gives both employers and employees more flexibility, allowing working hours to be flexed around the needs of the service.

West Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust committed to providing flexible opportunities which allow staff to balance their professional and personal commitments. Introducing a variety of flexible working arrangements including annualised hours has helped to overcome the workforce issues around flexible working. Read more in our **case study**.

4. Term-time only contracts

Term-time agreements are another way of using annualised hours contracts. This type of flexible working can help you retain working parents by enabling them to work the entirety of their contracted hours during term time and take all their annual leave during the school holidays.

This **guidance document** from Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust provides a good reference point for others looking to introduce term-time only contracts.

5. Compressed hours

Many NHS staff already work variable hours each week, for example by working a combination of long and short shifts to make up their contracted hours. You can give staff more flexibility and control over their work-life balance by introducing a system to allow them to indicate which specific shifts they would prefer to work. This approach works particularly well with e-rostering.

Several staff in the Speech and Language Therapy Service at Derbyshire Community Health Services NHSFT work in a nine-day fortnight pattern which enables staff to have one day off per fortnight.

6. Flexi-time

Flexi-time gives flexibility to employees to vary their working patterns to meet fluctuating service needs and to accommodate their own commitments while fulfilling their contracted hours. Flexi-time may be difficult in some patient-facing roles, particularly where services require a specific number of staff at all times. There are however, many roles within the administrative and support functions where introduction of flexi-time arrangements could be of benefit to both employees and service delivery.

7. Home/remote working

Home or remote working enables staff to have flexibility in where they do their work and has benefits such as reduced travel time. Within the NHS there are community roles which already maximise the use of technology by enabling staff to update patient records on mobile devices, or work from different community bases. Remote working is also an option for administrative staff, who can carry out some of their duties away from the office.

8. Career breaks

Career breaks are a way of enabling your staff to take unpaid time off, for example to undertake caring responsibilities, travelling, volunteering or studying. Career breaks usually last 3-12 months, to give staff flexibility over a longer time period. Consider how you might promote career breaks to staff as an employee benefit and how you could utilise career breaks to retain staff in the long-term.

This section of the NHS Terms and Conditions of Service Handbook provides further information about the implications of employment breaks on contractual arrangements.

This factsheet provides useful information on NHS Pensions and authorised leave and career breaks.

9. Staff bank

Promoting your staff bank is another way of offering staff flexibility by allowing them to work additional shifts at times suitable for them. Consider expanding your staff bank opportunities to include all your staff groups, including doctors, nurses, midwives, healthcare assistants, allied health professionals, administrative, clerical and management staff.

Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust was part of the Department of Health and Social Care bank pilot. Part of the pilot involved the launch of Allocate's Me app. 90 per cent of staff use the app to book bank shifts.

10. Flexible retirement

Offering older staff opportunities to retire flexibly is another way to retain your skilled and experienced workforce for longer. The NHS Pension Scheme allows staff flexibility to balance retirement with continuing to work. Retire and return schemes work particularly well when staff have options about the working pattern they return to and where they have the opportunity to maximise their skills, for example by working in a senior role or taking on a mentoring position.

Read more about flexible retirement options on our **flexible retirement hub**.

This blog from Jamie Coates, Attraction Manager at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust details how the trust has implemented and promoted flexible retirement options.

One NHS trust has retained staff with over 130 years of nursing experience with just these four examples.

- Matron, retired and returned on same band to lead on international recruitment
- Lead nurse, retired and is now working 30 hours per week in twilight shifts as the hospital's out of hours lead
- Band 7 ward sister, retired and returned as a full-time band 5 nurse
- Band 6 retired and returning as a part-time band 6 nurse



FLEXIBLE WORKING: TOP TIPS

● Policy

Ensure your organisational policy and process is up to date and clearly accessible to staff. Include your policy in new staff inductions and promote it on your intranet. You can find out more about managing flexible working requests by reading our **frequently asked questions**.

● Culture

Develop an organisational culture which values flexible working for all staff. By ensuring your approach to flexible working is inclusive, you'll maximise the benefits to your organisation and your staff.

● Leadership

Ensure you have buy-in at board level by presenting a strong business case. The executive director of workforce and chief nurse at Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust champion flexible working as part of the trust's recruitment and retention strategy.

● Support managers

Provide training to raise awareness and equip managers to deal effectively with flexible working requests. Our **People Performance Management toolkit** provides practical advice and support to handle key management situations confidently and consistently.

● Empower managers

Seek to understand from staff the reasons behind requests. This will enable you to explore various working options.

Read about how Derbyshire Community Health Services NHS Foundation Trust empowers line managers to maximise flexible working at the trust in our **case study**.

● Communication

Promote flexible working to staff and managers to make sure your approach to flexible working is understood, as well as including information as part of your recruitment process.

● Review

Regularly review individual flexible working arrangements in line with policy timeframes. Any proposed arrangements could be trialled for a few weeks or months to see if it will work for the staff member or service before formalising it.

● Role modelling

Share successful flexible working stories, particularly in senior roles to help demonstrate that flexible working arrangements aren't career limiting.

Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust employs two assistant HR directors on a part-time basis. One had a pre-existing arrangement which she maintained when promoted to a senior HR manager and then assistant director of HR.

● Support your staff

Build a network of mentors to share individual experiences. There are approximately 6.5 million carers in the UK and flexible working helps staff with caring responsibilities to feel supported in your organisation. You can find a range of digital resources on supporting working careers on the **Carers UK website**.

● Evaluation

Support future improvements by evaluate your flexible working arrangements to understand challenges and benefits.

Derbyshire Community Health Services Speech and Language Therapy Service provides staff with job plans which detail activity expected from staff. Changes as part of flexible arrangements are reflected in the plan to ensure that equivalent activity will be delivered by the new way of working, and this is monitored via the line manager.

NHS Employers is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first.

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