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How Nous Group tackles workplace flexibility

Business topics

By Business View

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Founder and Managing Director of management consultancy Nous Group Tim Orton explains why taking a flexible approach to working hours makes business sense.

Heavily promoted by new-economy corporations such as Netflix, workplace flexibility is being hailed as “The Next Big Thing”. Policies vary – from unlimited leave to employees having the option of working whenever and wherever they like – but the underlying principle is that staff are measured on output rather than on the number of hours they clock.

Tim Orton baked workplace flexibility into the culture when he launched Nous Group 17 years ago. Nous provides management consultants for business and digital strategy, public policy, organisational capability and leadership development. Nous consultants, along with support staff, can take advantage of workplace flexibility no matter what their life stage.

“I had a young family when I started Nous, and wanted to be a present father for my kids,” Orton explains. “I wanted to work flexibly; therefore, everyone else had to have the option of working flexibly. It isn’t just confined to the parents of young children – younger staff can take six months off to go backpacking, and those approaching the end of their careers and wanting to wind down can go part time. Flexibility has been part of the essence of the company from its foundation. That means no one ever questions it – they just concentrate on making sure it’s working well.”

The business case

So has workplace flexibility yielded bottom line benefits for Nous?

“I can’t present incontrovertible evidence, but I believe the answer is yes,” says Orton. “Nous is growing substantially faster than the industry as a whole. Our client satisfaction is higher than the industry average. Our margins are around industry average, but I don’t imagine they would be higher if there was less flexibility. And we were voted one of Australia’s and Asia’s top five workplaces in the Great Places to Work Awards in 2015 and 2016, respectively.”

Orton argues that there’s a compelling business case for employers wanting to secure the loyalty of difficult-to-replace staff to offer workplace flexibility.

“If you have all your staff working five days a week, it does make managing your business simpler,” he concedes. “But if you insist on that you’re going to lose a whole lot of good people, because at some stage in their life they’re not going to want to work those hours. By offering flexibility, we can attract or hold onto people with enormous experience and expertise and deliver the best outcomes for clients.”

Orton has found that things get tricky when employees are in the office any less than three-and-a-half days a



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week, so only in exceptional cases are they allowed to work less than that.

“We also ask that even on their days off staff check their email at the beginning and the end of the day and keep an eye on their phone in case something urgent comes up,” he says. “One of the most common problems is having an urgent issue arise and not having the member of staff who should be dealing with it around, which means someone else has to sort it out. Flexibility does involve some complexities that have to be managed for or just tolerated.”

Judging on output

But that isn't to say that those who do take advantage of flexibility get the short straw. After all, the whole point of a flexible workplace is that workers are judged on outcomes, not on how long their vehicle is seen to be in the office car park each day.

“We track the satisfaction of employees' clients, how satisfied their colleagues are with them, what the margins are on the projects they work on, the revenue their teams have brought in, whether they've developed any intellectual property, whether they've helped further the development of other staff. It's not simple, but it's not terribly difficult either,” says Orton.

So what advice does Orton have for a business owner who wants to get with the flexibility program?

“You have to trust people. That means they can and sometimes will, for a short while, be able to game the system. That said, that trust creates far more upside than downside.”

He also points out that flexibility isn't likely to take root and bear fruit unless an organisation's heavy hitters persistently champion it.

“Businesses need to be clear on why they have flexibility. Nous does it for business reasons. All the other outcomes are important and pleasing, but Nous offers flexibility because it results in us having better people and getting better business results.”

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