



Aquarius has been a flexible employer ever since taking on its first employee in 1997. At first, like most small consulting businesses, working from home was the natural choice for the founders, Chris and Andy. As more people have been employed in the business, the question of home based working and flexible hours, has been revisited regularly. So far, the business case for flexible working has always remained overwhelming on the grounds of cost, fit with our customer proposition, geographical reach, reduced carbon footprint, life work balance, employee recruitment and retention.

LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

As you would expect, over the years since we began, we have learned a lot about what works and what does not work when it comes to flexible working. What has become very clear to us is the way that flexible working is as much a cultural and organisational dynamic as it is a personal and job-related issue. Some of the key factors in our experience are:

- Building and maintaining a high level of mutual trust – with clients and colleagues
- Developing specific management practices, tools and techniques for managing remotely and ensuring quality and consistency of service and customer experience
- Taking a holistic view of the individual at recruitment that ensures cultural fit is as important as professional competence
- Designing an induction process that builds personal trust and relationships – not just knowledge of our organisation and services
- Ensuring alignment between reward, performance, employee contracts and contribution to the business
- Looking out for possibilities and opportunities presented by changing technology as a way of improving the way we work with each other and with our clients
- Making time to talk to each other and to meet on a regular basis – both formally and informally – so that time together is well spent and highly valued

EXPORTING OUR EXPERTISE

As you would expect from a consulting firm that specialises in connecting people and organisations, our interest in flexible working is professional as well as personal. We also work closely with partner firm Capability Jane (www.capabilityjane.com); specialists in flexible recruitment.

Global Professional Services

A global professional services firm wanted to explore the possibility of offering flexible working as a way of attracting and retaining their talented people. Although some existing staff members had been allowed to work flexibly, this was usually informal and the few formal contractual arrangements that existed tended to be individual exceptions, and did not represent generally accepted practice.

We co-hosted a number of half-day workshops with Capability Jane, working with groups of employees and line managers, focusing on key roles. The outputs for each workshop included:

- Identification of the specific flexible working options that could work for the jobs we looked at, taking account of the impact on the business, the customers and colleagues
- Assessment of the practical and cultural implications of implementing the proposed options and an outline action plan
- Clarity around what was and was not possible - and why – to help with communication and roll out
- Significant increase in understanding and openness to the possibilities of working flexibly and managing flexible workers

"I believe flexible working will become increasingly important – perhaps even the norm – going forward. It's not just a gender issue any more – and technology is making it possible to do things now that were simply not even imaginable before. The big lesson for me from our experience has been the extent to which successful flexible working needs a holistic approach. You need to consider the job, the individual, colleagues, customers, the organisation and the cultural context or else there is a real danger that a great initiative will fail because something was overlooked."

Chris Garner: Director Aquarius Management Consultants