



Flexible working

**The route to greater business efficiency
and happier people**

An O₂ White Paper



Executive summary

Flexible working can be viewed as making work into an activity, rather than a place you go. It offers many benefits to organisations and their employees, of any size, from sole traders to larger companies.

The greatest benefits are increased productivity and more effective working, according to recent studies. On top of that, employees say that flexible working helps them improve their work/life balance. It can also make them more loyal to their company.

The two key things needed to enable flexible working are technology and working culture. It's crucial for people who spend some or all of their time working away from the office to be able to stay in touch, and access company systems reliably and securely.



What flexible working means

Flexible working is generally understood to mean freedom from the fixed time or location at which people work.

Many companies already offer some kind of flexibility about when people work – over half the respondents to a recent survey* said there was potential to choose the hours they work. (That could be starting and finishing later than the norm, compressed weeks where people do a full week’s hours in fewer days, or having time off in lieu of extra hours worked.)

Organisations are also looking at flexibility about where people work. The same survey found that, of companies that have flexible working policies, half allowed for remote working, either at home or at satellite facilities. Being flexible about location – such as helping your people do more at clients’ sites, enabling them to use time between meetings effectively, or letting them work from home some or all of the time – can bring really worthwhile benefits to both employers and employees.

So why aren’t more companies already doing it?

‘We are on the verge of the second great technological transformation of our lifetime: the mass switch from computers to mobile devices. This is a game-changing moment because mobile devices are action-oriented and location aware. If you search for sushi on a traditional computer, it delivers data. A mobile assumes you’re hungry and find you somewhere nearby to eat sushi. That is a world of difference when applied to an office environment.’

Dave Coplin, Director of Search, Microsoft UK



The ingredients of flexible working

There are three key ingredients of flexible working:

- hardware
- connectivity
- applications

Hardware

Smartphones and tablets (and other special purpose handheld gadgets) are revolutionising people's ability to connect – and their appetite for doing so. They're powerful, lightweight, and easy to use.

There's other clever technology around that can make working life more flexible – and reduce drudgery. For example, if their role involves any kind of form-filling, digital pens can convert handwriting into digital data for direct upload to a computer system. Think how much travel time and expense they save, and how much more productive they can be, if they don't have to go back to the office to transcribe their notes.

'BlackBerry handsets and other enterprise-based phones are having a massive impact on day-to-day business life. Smartphones are actually making it possible for more companies to work flexibly, as they open up access to company networks and files in an affordable way. In the future, small and medium-sized firms could even be tempted to allow their entire workforce to operate away from their business premises.'

**Heather McLean, Editor,
Smart Gorillas**



Connectivity

About three quarters of homes in the UK have broadband internet**. Businesses can offer connectivity to employees via home broadband for logging on to work email and other company systems over the internet. There are similar options like 3G for secure remote access via personal smartphones and tablets. So people don't have the bother of another computer and get the convenience of using a device they're already familiar with.

Applications

Free or low-cost video-calling services, such as FaceTime and Skype, can help people collaborate, and not feel isolated. Many people use these services to stay in touch with friends or family, so why not use them to spend time with colleagues as well?

Keep tabs on what's happening with your sales team with the Salesforce app. Or start work on a Microsoft Word document, update a spreadsheet or finish off a PowerPoint with the Microsoft Office app for iPhone. Open PDFs on the go, or log your expenses. There's no such thing as downtime anymore - apps have changed the way we use our time.

Reducing the amount of time that clinical staff spend on paperwork and admin is one of the most important challenges that the healthcare sector faces.

Using digital pens cuts this time radically. It sends notes and information in forms straight to an electronic file as they're written. There's little training required, or changes to the way that people work. It keeps paper trails in place, if they're needed. And you don't have to worry about messy handwriting either. Patient records can be updated remotely too.

The digital pen technology we put in place for community midwives in Portsmouth has made big improvements to the way they work. It's one example where we've worked closely with an NHS Trust, to create more time for staff to care. We call it O₂ Health.



Getting it to work for you

There's one more ingredient. It's having a culture that's suitable for flexible working. Employees trust and value a manager who empowers them to work to their own initiative. Outputs become important. If your work depends on people's outputs and achievements, more than how or where they do the work, flexible working could make a real difference.

Collaboration is a key element of working flexibly. And collaboration tools don't just help people work together – they also help managers monitor their work and keep home-based staff in touch – two major concerns that organisations often have before they try flexible working patterns.

'To really embrace [flexible working], it should be unilaterally endorsed by the board, some of whom will be resistant as they will fear a loss of control over what, when and how employees are working.'

Nicky Imrie, Co-founder, The PR Network



The benefits of flexible working

The benefits of flexible working depend on the nature of the business. How it operates, what its customers need and how its people work. But it's likely all companies will see the key benefits to a greater or lesser extent.

Business efficiency

People who can work flexibly tend to get more done. They may be more motivated, do more work in their personal time, or work during the hours they would otherwise have spent commuting. Flexible working can help you serve customers better – you could offer extended help desk hours covered by home-based workers. It can also help a business keep going when the unexpected happens – if people can't get to the office because of transport problems or heavy snow, they can simply work from home or another office.

Happier people

Some valuable employees may be available only on a flexible working pattern – perhaps they live too far from the office to make daily commuting feasible; or they're parents and carers who need the flexibility they're entitled to ask for by law.

Lower costs

There are cost and environmental benefits too. A desk costs £6,000–£12,000 a year, so think how much you can save if you can get rid of even just a few – you might even be able to create some office space, too. And reducing commuting and other travel will help cut your carbon footprint.



What employers and staff think

In one study[†] of small and medium businesses, employers said the following were the main benefits:

- Increased productivity – 78%
- Improved customer service – 71%
- Savings in fuel – 76%
- Reduced business travel – 70%
- Increased staff retention – 60%

In the same study[†], employees described the following as important benefits:

- Work more effectively – 93%
- Get more work done – 89%
- Improved work/life balance – 84%
- Reduction in unproductive commuting – 83%

They also revealed that the availability of flexible working has a significant influence on their loyalty, with a large majority (81%) of respondents saying that it would make them more likely to stay with their employer.

58% of UK workers think the traditional office will not exist by 2020. 56% believe they will work from home or from a remote hub, rather than commuting to work. 83% feel that technology has enabled them to become more productive in the last ten years.

Source: Virgin Business Media, Measuring the benefits of agility at work report, May 2011



How O₂ can help

Flexible working is a big part of O₂'s philosophy. At our head office, we support flexible working with innovative technology to help us boost productivity and reduce our environmental impact. We've implemented smartphones, conference calls, videoconferencing, car kits, broadband and mobile broadband to help people share and access information and stay in touch. There's wifi in all our offices. And we provide secure home offices for people based at home.

We can help you do the same. We provide equipment, connectivity and services. Plus consultancy, excellent network quality and technical expertise, to help you work the best way for your business.

Connections

We've got the fastest 3G data coverage on average in the UK^{††}. Our 3G network provides over 84% of the UK population with voice and high-speed data services. And we're building a free wifi hotspot network around the UK.

For office and home, we offer landlines and broadband services. When there's no fixed broadband nearby you can connect via mobile broadband. It connects over 3G.

Wifi hotspots in your buildings let people work from any office. And if they're waiting for a plane or train, or grabbing lunch, using public wifi hotspots such as O₂ Wifi means they can spend that time getting on with their work.



Get the most from your phones

This rich connectivity means you can really get the most out of smartphones, tablets and laptops. We can provide phones and smartphones from all the major manufacturers and operating systems, enabling you to make voice and video calls, and access email and other corporate systems.

Even a simple phone can give you far more options for how you work. We can help you divert calls to a mobile; you can do conference calling; our Business Text service enables you to keep in touch easily with large numbers of employees (or with customers). On smartphones there are thousands of business apps that can save time and effort and boost productivity. Sometimes these are really simple things, such as train time apps which mean you can plan your journey on the fly. And there's TrafficLine so you can avoid jams. Plus spreadsheets that enable you to prepare estimates for customers while you're with them, instead of having to work on them after you get back to the office. Not to mention having email and your calendar, so you can respond quickly if a meeting changes – or if a decision is required urgently on an email.

Support

Simple things, like having a single bill for all your services, can make a big difference. Our combined bills mean you can track and manage costs more easily.

Our O₂ Gurus for Business can help you implement new flexible working solutions. They can come to your premises to manage the process and will spend time showing your people how to use and make the most out of the technology. And our O₂ Gurus, who are available instore, by phone or online – including on the O₂ Guru TV YouTube channel – can help too. O₂ Gurus can help with big stuff like choosing the right phones for your organisation, as well as the small stuff like getting to know the features of your phone.



Are you ready for more flexible working?

To find out about how your business can reap the benefits of a more flexible way of working visit o2.co.uk/business/flexibleworking and complete the Contact Us form.

References:

- * Future Poll, the research division of The Future Laboratory 2011
- ** Ofcom statistics, end of 2010 <http://media.ofcom.org.uk/facts/>
- † 'Business Anytime Anywhere: The impact of flexible working on small and medium sized businesses', actnow flex project, 2009
- †† Ofcom statistics, 2011 <http://media.ofcom.org.uk/2011/05/26/mobile-broadband-speeds-revealed/>

We're better, connected **O₂**