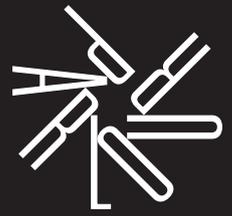


04. Flexibility:



: women,
equity,
architecture.

Flexible work practices are becoming increasingly common in architecture. Some architects already enjoy the benefits of flexible schedules or working from home. In architecture the challenge is less to encourage the adoption of flexible work patterns, and more to overcome their often-unspoken career costs. For example, returning to part-time work after parental leave is often considered a career killer, and this inevitably impacts disproportionately on women.

This guide looks at some of the benefits of working flexibly in architecture and identifies strategies to help these arrangements run smoothly.



**PARLOUR GUIDES
TO EQUITABLE
PRACTICE**

www.archiparlour.org

PUBLICATION PARTNER



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

msd

Melbourne
School of Design

FACULTY OF
ARCHITECTURE,
BUILDING AND
PLANNING

www.msd.unimelb.edu.au



What is flexibility at work?

Workplace flexibility is about when people work, where they work, and how they work. ‘Flexibility’ is a variation from a standard full time, in-office work pattern. Ideally, it should meet the wishes and needs of both employees and employers.

The question of when people work is a central part of the idea of workplace flexibility and includes part-time and casual hours, flexible starting and finishing times, flexible hours worked per week, rostered days off, and unpaid leave. It may include compressed work weeks, annualised hours, part-year employment, taking leave in part days, and the ‘purchase’ of additional leave.

New technologies have increased the options for where people work: at home, ‘on the move’ or remotely on site. Flexibility in how people work includes job-sharing, ‘hot desking’ or ‘hotelling’ as well as technology-enabled options such as video-conferencing, online discussion and other forms of online collaboration, which transform teamwork and information sharing.

The flexible career, rather than a linear model, is expected to be more common in architecture, a trend that would be a positive step for women.

- See *Parlour guide: Career progression*.

Benefits

Flexibility works both ways – enabling employees to balance work with external interests and demands, and allowing a practice to respond quickly when projects and workloads change.

Employees who are able to access flexibility are often more willing to respond when the practice has its own flexibility requirements to meet business or client needs.

Staff who feel valued A culture of workplace flexibility values people and creates an environment in which they feel motivated to do their best work. Recognising and valuing the contribution of their out-of-office lives is also important.

Financial benefits of staff retention

Research shows that flexible employees are less likely to consider leaving. Staff turnover can be a real headache and the cost of replacing staff is estimated at around one-and-a-half times the annual salary of the position (considering recruitment and training costs, the opportunity costs of being understaffed, and the time-lag on projects). This cost should be weighed against the costs of a flexible arrangement (six months part-time parental or carer leave, for example).

Increased productivity Many flexible workplaces (and employees) report vastly decreased stress and increased productivity. There are also important mental health benefits derived from stress reduction, including lowered risk of depression.

Business benefits Working flexibly might allow an employee to avoid a long commute at peak hour, work uninterrupted on a complex task, better manage a particularly busy period, or be more available to colleagues or clients after hours or in a different timezone. This brings clear business benefits.



Adaptability Practices with engaged, committed employees are better positioned to adapt to an unpredictable and challenging business environment.

Challenges

Flexibility does come with some challenges as well as benefits. These need to be understood in order to be effectively navigated.

This guide will practices, employees manage the challenges and thereby realise the opportunities.

Workplace resistance There can be workplace resistance to implementing a flexibility-friendly culture. Employees may be anxious that part-time work is a career-limiting move or that flexible work practices will be imposed. Employers may be concerned that flexibility will generate extra administration, reduce access to an employee or raise trust issues.

Accessibility and servicing clients

Flexible work patterns are perhaps most complex for architects in intensive day to day client-contact roles. How these issues are handled can vary according to the needs of the client (who may also desire flexibility) and the employee (who may be available for client contact, even when they are not formally at work). Flexibility does require more organisation and some inventiveness.

Work/life balance or work/life blur

The blurring of work boundaries thanks to new technologies generates different opinions. Some are wary of a merging of work and life, while others find the work/life blur gives them increased flexibility in both realms. Both of these responses are legitimate. Either way, the capacity to negotiate flexible working patterns is important, with a mutual understanding of availability, response times and communication at work and elsewhere.

Why does it matter?

In architecture, as in many professions, there is a clear gendered pattern whereby women are much more likely than men to work part time or use flexible conditions.

Career impacts Coupled with the fact that flexible work practices are often seen as a career deadend, this pattern has far-reaching adverse effects on women in architecture. It contributes to their under-representation in leadership roles, to gender-based pay inequity and, in some cases, a two-tier system where part-time and flexible workers are seen as less legitimate or committed workers. This is a systemic problem and calls for a cultural change in architecture.

Flexible men While flexible work is often considered an acceptable necessity for women, it's much less so for men. Flexibility for men is often perceived as a poor career move. If flexible working conditions are to become mainstream and accepted as a legitimate career choice in architecture, they will need to be taken up by a large proportion of the profession, including by senior men.

One challenge for architecture practices pursuing a more equitable culture is to ask: how can we shift the culture to make it acceptable for men to work flexible hours?

Cultural shifts If working flexibly was the norm, it would likely have a significant positive impact on gender equity in architecture. We need a new culture that not only supports women and men in their attempts to balance family life and architectural work, but also encourages work habits that flexibly meet the needs of both practices and employees.



What can we do?

Where flexibility is embedded rather than bolted on, it has the potential to revolutionise the possibilities of an architectural career and of architectural practice.

Everyone has a role to play in achieving a successful flexible work environment. Individuals can set out the business case for a flexible role, and be prepared to offer flexibility in return. Work colleagues can be open and supportive of flexibility at work, focusing on outcomes and achievements rather than time in the office. Practices can recognise the benefits of flexibility for all, and offer a broad range of flexible working opportunities to employees, both men and women.

Flexible working often requires greater organisation and communication than more traditional styles of work, but the benefits for practices and individual employees can be substantial.

Practices

Architecture is a tough, demanding industry. It's difficult to remain stable and profitable, and this puts pressures on all aspects of the business.

One of the easier benefits to offer staff is higher flexibility, and this can have wide-ranging positive impacts across the business. Developing and embracing effective flexible working arrangements simply makes good business sense.

Be open to new ideas and new ways of working

Flexibility involves a creative rethinking of the conditions and processes of work in order to better suit the people and practice involved. Flexible work arrangements are inherently responsive: they react to specific needs at a particular time.

- Rethink time, location and mode of work. There are endless possible permutations at the disposal of a creative employee and supportive director or supervisor.
- Remember that flexible arrangements do not necessarily reduce a full-time load: the hours may be filled at irregular or discontinuous times.
- Be flexible about flexible conditions. It will enable you to revisit the arrangement to ensure it's working effectively for all. You can do this by building in a review process. It may take time or adjustments to get it right.
- Try not to make hard and fast rules around flexibility. Don't dismiss an option (for example, job-sharing) because it didn't work in one case; it may just need the right people or some adjustments to make it work.



Develop a flexible work policy

Many architectural practices, especially smaller ones, are run along informal lines without specific policies to deal with flexible work. However, policies are particularly useful in ensuring consistent, clear expectations, obligations and responsibilities for all parties.

- Develop a fair policy in advance, reducing the need to make decisions on the run.
- Formalise work practices. This can guard against unconscious bias.
- Ensure staff understand and access the policy. This will improve its effectiveness.
- Include flexible work options in job descriptions, advertisements and interviews, even for senior staff positions. This will widen your potential talent pool.
- Include flexibility in performance review processes, career development plans and in your own workforce planning to maximise and retain talented staff.

Clearly support flexibility

Good leaders can shape a positive culture of flexibility, help to challenge resistance, and assist with acceptance among colleagues, clients, contractors and consultants.

- Encourage senior staff to use flexible conditions, leading change by example.
- Foster a range of flexible work patterns and facilitate a culture of organisational innovation.
- Develop and fine-tune new policy and practice around flexibility. Cultural change may be slow, and day-to-day implementation may require monitoring and revision.
- Review the progress of the flexible workplace culture with all employees – flexible and otherwise. This may help to build a new culture and encourage communication of the issues.

Provide the necessary resources

Initial training for senior staff will foster a stronger transition to a flexible workplace.

Managing a flexible workforce requires more organisation and strategic thinking to ensure differing employee schedules are in sync, mobile technologies are fully utilised, and essential meetings are scheduled appropriately.

Training may help rethink modes of teamwork, collaborate across multiple sites and ensure employees are proficient in remote technologies.

- Equip practice leaders with the skills to manage flexible employees.
- Be clear about who is responsible for managing flexibility in the practice; resource the role and assess outcomes.
- Assist employees with the equipment and technology they need to work flexibly.

Encourage all types of flexibility

A practice that embraces flexible work may have employees using many different modes – working at flexible times, in varied places, and in unconventional ways.

- Offer flexible working arrangements to all staff. This will foster a sense of equity in work arrangements and establish flexibility as a tool for all employees, not just those with caring responsibilities.
- Consider job-sharing arrangements. These often work best when undertaken by people who have a good pre-existing relationship, similar experience levels and excellent communication. Successful job-sharers take responsibility for the job-sharing arrangement, they learn from each other, provide quality control for each other's work, and assist each other with problem solving and troubleshooting tasks.



Negotiate the arrangement

Most flexible arrangements will be quite specific – closely tailored to the needs of the individual and practice concerned – and dynamic according to changing circumstances.

There is no universal template for flexible work, so it is important to think through implications for both parties, to discuss the arrangement in detail, and identify and resolve potential problems in advance.

Clear and open communication is crucial.

- Be explicit about expectations for work outcomes, and how they might be assessed. Increase transparency and reduce confusion and tension by including a clear and simple way to track hours.
- If employees are working from home, discuss who is responsible for establishing and funding the phone, electricity and software costs.
- Document the agreement in detail so both sides understand the intent and the mechanics of the agreement. Consider writing up both short-term and long-term plans, and keep them on file.
- Plan specific review dates and/or review periods. Even if the arrangement is working, reviews are useful. If things go wrong, even external mediation can be helpful.

Manage contact and availability

Effective communication between a practice and flexible employee is vital to the success of the arrangement.

The way contact is managed will vary. Some employees will be prepared to be contactable most of the time, some will require defined contact hours, while others will be flexible and available for emergencies. Clear communication, negotiation and boundary setting on this will help build openness, trust and good faith between employer and employee.

- Agree on availability, particularly during the hours when the employee is not working.
- Remember that flexible employees often have other, planned activities in their non-work time. If extra work is required, discuss it in advance.
- Consider establishing a list of the kinds of situations and issues for which an employee will be available for contact.
- Have good communication and negotiation mechanisms in place to foresee and solve any problems that arise.

Don't make flexibility and career progression mutually exclusive

Values around flexibility vary. However, many flexible employees report that flexible work has devalued their careers, and that employers and colleagues assume that they are not serious or committed.

- Establish conscious policies and procedures to combat these negative assumptions, particularly around promotion.
 - See *Parlour guides: Recruitment and Career progression*.
- Have clear criteria for awarding bonuses and other additional payments.

Advocate flexibility to clients and community

Make a virtue of the practice's flexible working culture and reap the reputational benefits. A forward-looking, equitable, progressive firm is attractive to clients and potential new staff.

- Work collaboratively with clients, consultants and contractors on ways in which you can meet their needs while supporting flexibility.
- Communicate the benefits of flexible work to clients and the community – give examples and success stories, show how such arrangements work, advocate for flexible work practices.



Employees

In many architectural workplaces, flexible working conditions are widely used and enjoyed by staff at all levels. In others, flexibility is unheard-of. If you're blazing a trail in your workplace or activating a long dormant clause in a dusty HR policy, the ability to make a sound business case for supporting flexibility is important.

Respect the 'right' to request flexibility

While many employees have the right to request flexible working arrangements, it's important to note that employers have the discretion to grant and refuse requests. There are some positions (and people) that may not be suitable for such work arrangements.

- Keep communications open, full and frank. It's important that all parties have realistic expectations.
- If your request is meeting with resistance, suggest a trial period with the option to return to standard hours/practices if it's not working.

• *See **Rights and responsibilities** at the end of this guide.*

Plan your request

When planning to request a flexible work pattern, do your homework and prepare an argument. Set out the business case for why the flexible pattern will be good for your employer, your colleagues and your clients, as well as for you. Under the Fair Work Act 2009 a formal request for flexible conditions needs to be made in writing, and at minimum needs to include details of the change sought and reasons for the change.

- Carefully assess and analyse your own needs, and articulate them clearly to yourself.
- Identify possible barriers or obstacles to the arrangement being approved, and strategise ways to overcome them.
- Informally gauge what the level of practice support is likely to be – talk to others who have used flexible arrangements before, collect successful examples and learn from them.
- Consult with colleagues who might be affected by your changed work pattern and seek their ideas for how it might work. This is also an opportunity for them to voice any concerns, and for you to collaborate on solutions.



- Write the proposed arrangement down, being clear about what it would entail and articulating the business case. Make the case logically.
- You never know whether a request will be approved until you ask. Remember that it is illegal for an employer to discriminate against an employee on the basis of a request alone.

Negotiate the arrangement

Arrange a meeting with your supervisor well in advance of when you would like the flexible arrangement to commence. Bring your proposal, and note in writing any other points you would like to address in the negotiation.

- Remind your employer of your value to the practice. Articulate your strengths and contributions.
- Think about your request from your employer's point of view – what are the benefits for them?
- Acknowledge that the flexible pattern might require some logistical juggling and be prepared to discuss this.
- Discuss boundaries and expectations around availability and contactability outside specified work hours.
- Plan to review the arrangement periodically. This may need to be more frequent initially, while everyone adjusts to the new situation.

Do your research and be creative

If a particular arrangement has never been used in your workplace before, do some research on other practices, and even other industries. Understanding how and where the arrangement has been used successfully may very well help your case.

- Research and highlight successful scenarios and models from other workplaces.

- Job sharing is uncommon in architecture, but it doesn't mean it's unworkable, even in project architect roles. Investigating how job sharing works in other situations could allow you to propose a viable model for your office.
- Remember, if you do develop a workable new scenario, you may be blazing a trail for those who come later – so publicise your flexible working successes.

Be open with colleagues

Flexible working agreements will be more readily accepted if there is transparency and clear communication about what arrangements are in place and how workload is managed.

- Be sensitive to the politics of flexible work. It will take time for culture to change.
- Be prepared to calmly state what your role is and how the flexibility works to colleagues, clients and consultants, so that everyone understands how the work will be managed.
- Consider adding a note about availability to your email signature to set up clear understanding of work hours.

Stay visible

It's important to stay visible – literally. When you're working from home, or on reduced or time-shifted hours there's a temptation to put your head down and chug through the work. But it's very important to stay connected with your colleagues and ensure they are aware of your contribution.

- Consider emailing your team a list of what you've achieved prior to time out of the office. This can be a subtle way to highlight what you've done while making it easy for others to carry on your work if required.



The profession

Industry and professional bodies can take a lead in shifting the cultural change that needs to happen if architecture is to fully embrace flexible working patterns.

Lead cultural change

Visionary professional bodies can lead the cultural change required to support women and men in their attempts to balance architectural work and family life, and to encourage flexible workplaces that meet the needs of both practices and employees.

Educate the profession

Further practical resources are also needed to demonstrate the possibilities.

- Research and publish case studies of different successful flexible work arrangements in different practice contexts.
- Include material on flexible work models and strategies in member resources and continuing professional development programs.

Teach students well

One of the strongest barriers to flexible employment is the established long-hours work culture within architecture. These cultures often start in the universities and it is incumbent on schools of architecture to encourage a healthy and balanced approach to working habits for students still at university.

- See *Parlour guide: Long-hours culture*.

Rights and responsibilities

The *Fair Work Act 2009* provides employees with the right to request flexible working conditions, provided they have been employed continuously for a full year (including part-time and some casual employees), and they fall into one of a number of categories, most of which relate to caring arrangements.

The request must be made in writing, and state the reasons for and nature of the proposed change. The employer is obliged to seriously consider the request, and respond in writing within 21 days. A request can only be refused on 'reasonable business grounds', which are outlined by the Act.

If there is a dispute about the decision, it may be possible to ask the Fair Work Commission for assistance. It is unlawful for an employer to discriminate because of a request, or because an employee approached the Fair Work Commission.

The *Fair Work Act 2009* also provides other entitlements to assist workers to balance work and family commitments.

In some states and territories additional equal opportunity legislation provides additional protections and remedies for employees to balance work and family life. Where more than one law exists, the form that is most beneficial to the employee will apply. Contact the anti-discrimination body in your state or territory for the most up-to-date information.

Note: This is offered as an overview only. Readers are reminded that legislation may change and they are advised to check current legislation at the time of reading.



Credits

The Parlour Guides to Equitable Practice are an outcome of the research project 'Equity and Diversity in the Australian Architecture Profession: Women, Work and Leadership' (2011–2014), led by Naomi Stead of the University of Queensland.

The development of the guides was led by Justine Clark and Naomi Stead, working with Susie Ashworth and Neph Wake. The guides were designed by Catherine Griffiths. Full credits can be found in the introduction to the guides. The guides are published with the support of the Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne.

Disclaimer

The Parlour Guides to Equitable Practice are offered as a guide and overview only. They may be of assistance to individuals, practices and organisations, but the authors, Parlour, the University of Queensland and University of Melbourne exclude, to the extent permitted by law, all warranties, express or implied, including without limitation warranties of merchantability, fitness for a particular use, safety or quality in relation to the use of the information contained in this publication, and disclaim all liability for any loss no matter how incurred, which might arise from relying upon the information contained in this publication. Individuals and practices should seek advice regarding employment and human resources policy and particular situations from their legal, HR or other business adviser as appropriate.

Copyright

© 2014, Parlour, University of Melbourne and University of Queensland. You are permitted to download, display, print and reproduce this material in an unaltered form only for your personal, non-commercial use or for use within your organisation. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, all other rights are reserved.

Further resources

Work and Family Best Practice Guide

Fair Work Ombudsman

<http://www.fairwork.gov.au/resources/best-practice-guides/pages/work-and-family>

Consultation & Cooperation in the Workplace

Fair Work Ombudsman

<http://www.fairwork.gov.au/Resources/best-practice-guides/Pages/consultation-and-cooperation-in-the-workplace>

Men Get Flexible! Mainstreaming Flexible Work in Australian Business

Diversity Council Australia

<http://www.dca.org.au/files/file/Work-life%20and%20flexibility%20documents/DCA%20Men%20Get%20Flexible%20FINAL%2024%20Aug%202012.pdf>

Flexibility – The Business Case

Mary L Bennett, ML Bennett Consulting

<http://www.aicpa.org/career/womenintheprofession/downloadabledocuments/2010%20mary%20bennett%20flexibility-the%20business%20case.pdf>

The Business Case for Workplace Flexibility

A Better Balance, The work and family legal centre

http://www.abetterbalance.org/web/images/stories/Documents/fairness/factsheets/BC-2010-A_Better_Balance.pdf

How 20 Leading Companies are Making Flexibility Work

National Workplace Flexibility Study, Boston College Center for Work and Family

<http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/cwf/research/publications/pdf/5.%20How%2020%20Leading%20Companies%20are%20Making%20Flexibility%20Work.pdf>

Further reading

Work-Life Balance vs Work-Life Blur

Mobilizer, A Guide to Mobile Working in the Modern Enterprise

<http://blog.worksnug.com/2011/09/17/work-life-balance-vs-work-life-blur/>

The Merge: How our Work-life Balance is Changing

Gaby Hinsliff, The Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/money/2013/jan/01/merge-work-life-balance>

Managing the Work-Life Merge

Peter Boucher, The Huffington Post UK

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/peter-boucher/managing-the-worklife-merge_b_2454698.html

See Parlour  for a range of articles about work/life issues in Australian architecture.

<http://www.archiparlour.org/topics/workplace/>

www.archiparlour.org



msd

Melbourne School of Design

FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE, BUILDING AND PLANNING

www.msd.unimelb.edu.au



Parlour :
: women, equity, architecture.



Australian Government
Australian Research Council



THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA



Australian Institute of Architects

This guide is an outcome of the research project 'Equity and Diversity in the Australian Architecture Profession: Women, Work and Leadership' (2011–2014), funded by the Australian Research Council through the Linkage Projects scheme.

Project LP100200107. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Research Council.