A fine balance
Blueprint for harmonizing working and private lives

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Foreword

The bad news is that for one in three people work will probably continue to be a place where they go each day. For the rest of us, the good news is that work is no longer a place to go but something we do. Even better than this is that virtually everybody can achieve a much greater degree of flexibility about when and how they work. This is great news not only for individuals but for business and for the societies in which we all live and work.

This might sound utopian, but for BT it is a reality that has already delivered real benefits for our people and our bottom line. There is no doubt that technology has given us the freedom to work differently, but this is just one critical ingredient. For sustainable benefits we must also change attitudes and business culture and truly move from the industrial age into the information age.

BT’s migration to an agile business that creates an environment in which all our people can achieve a balance between their personal and business lives began some 15 years ago. This document charts our progress, develops what we believe is the compelling business case for work/life balance and illustrates the win, win, win nature of businesses that embrace innovative work/life balance practices.

Winning the Department of Trade and Industry/Parents at Work/Lloyds TSB Employer of the Year 2001 provided a welcome recognition of how far we have travelled but also sets the pace for the rest of the journey...

John Steele
Group Personnel Director, BT Group
The business case

Let’s be clear and unequivocal: BT introduced its pioneering flexible working policy because of business need, not despite it. At the outset, the most compelling argument was that it would help us attract and retain the best people in a fiercely competitive sector. Today it is the heart of our business strategy.

There is no doubt that technological advances and an increasingly demanding society have changed working life beyond recognition. Markets are fast moving and aggressive, technology continues to change at an accelerating pace and demands for goods and services must be satisfied around the clock. In this new environment the traditional nine to five working day cannot meet the demands placed upon today’s businesses or the people who work for them.

In today’s business world, true competitive advantage is the ability of our people to anticipate change, the speed with which they enable us to react to it and 24/7 availability of our products and services. These changes have already increased both the pressures and perceived opportunities for all of our people and more changes lie ahead. Three key drivers will shape the future nature of work and business.

The first is globalisation which, when combined with the liberalisation of markets such as communications, is increasing competition but also creating a hunger for more business accountability. Accountability is demonstrated through, for example, social reporting, which is already providing the knowledge that many people use to inform their consumer and investment decisions. Ultimately, people will choose to do business with companies that can demonstrate that they will generate profit in a socially responsible manner.

The second is new technology. Today, we can communicate one to one, or one to millions, instantly, whenever and wherever we choose. This capability has prompted demands for business transparency and a way to bring to account companies that pursue profit regardless of their impact on the societies and environments in which they operate.

Personal fulfilment is the final driver. Globalisation and the application of technology have provided today’s society with unprecedented access to a vast range of career and life choices and an expectation that fulfillment will come from a balance across these.

Why should work/life balance be key to future business strategy? Because, in the future the value of any business large or small will be measured to a greater degree by its human capital, because traditional measures such as fixed assets and technological systems will provide increasingly transient value. If we want to derive maximum value from our human resources then we must invest in them and find ways to enable all of them to deliver to their full potential. It is no longer necessary to locate our people in centralised workplaces. We now have the freedom to be far more imaginative about where and how we structure our businesses.
What does this mean in bottom line terms? For us, it means we now have over five thousand people based at home. That has translated into a staggering annual saving of £220 million by simply doing away with the desks that these people used to occupy. A further 60,000 now have the ability to work independently of location, producing further reductions in fixed asset costs. Rationalising our property portfolio in this way, we were also able to release £2.38 billion of capital back into our business through an innovative partnership with an estate management business. At the same time, we have also increased our capability as an agile organisation with our financial assets directed to the heart of our business.

We have embraced work/life balance not just as a means of generating direct savings but of addressing real business issues such as recruitment, retention, equality and diversity. It also underpins our position as a socially responsible company. Flexibility of work location and attendance is also hugely inclusive, opening opportunities to women, carers and people with disabilities which may otherwise have been inaccessible to them. This is especially important to ensure that we select from the widest possible talent pool and employ the best talent.

Recent research shows that the societal impact of years of work/life imbalance during the 1980s is emerging in today’s graduate market. Achieving work/life balance is now a key differentiator in deciding for whom the best will work. It is perhaps not coincidental that in the year we achieved Employer of the Year our graduate applications are running at double the previous year’s!

As well as being an important element of recruitment strategies, work/life balance is a key retention tool. Not just for women returning from maternity leave where increased flexibility has seen BT’s return rate rise to 96%, but also for all those for whom flexibility is an essential part of their employment package - 15% of our workforce have caring responsibilities and a majority have children. As more and more parents become employees, we have a responsibility to provide an environment in which they can harmonise their parenting responsibilities with their working lives.

Increased flexibility has enabled us to recruit more effectively and our retention rate has improved, with some employees turning down offers of more highly paid employment in favour of the flexibility that has enabled them to satisfy the demands of their work and personal life.

The key to assessing the value generated by flexible working is to measure realistic objectives. We have achieved greater attraction as a recruiter, reduced employee turnover and absenteeism, and increased productivity, by 20% in the case of homeworkers!

Wayne Holt customer service engineer, BT retail

“Working within the Self Motivated Teams model I earn my bonuses through improved productivity rather than through overtime. My wife works shifts as a paramedic so it’s helped us make more time to be together. I also have time to ride out on my motorcycle.”
Uma Navsaria and Manisha Kotecha joint marketing managers, BT Openworld

Uma Navsaria and Manisha Kotecha job share at BT Openworld so that they can spend time with their children. “And I am now involved in fundraising for the school PTA” adds Uma.

Vanessa Hollis special projects and revenue assurance, BT Wholesale

“I have two small children so I work until 3pm in the office, take my laptop home and do the rest of my work once the children are asleep. I love being able to drop my daughter off at school and collect her at the end of the day. It’s hard work but well worth the extra time I get to spend with Sophie and Luke.”

Peter Awomoyi customer service engineer, BT Retail

“The scheme has given me the chance to have at least one hour’s study towards my computing qualification every day after work, before I pick my children up from school.”

The people case

Businesses always talk about their people as their most important asset. Too often, the reality is that people are perceived simply as another physical asset.

But, these assets have a will and an intelligence and, increasingly, an attitude which critically shapes the level of voluntary contribution that they will bring to their work. People make decisions about whom they will work for and how much they will contribute. Increasingly, their choice of employer is based on the employer’s reputation for delivering work/life balance for all their people (the number one criteria for graduates selecting an employer - Universum Survey 2002).

Every employee is an individual, but as a group they form, influence and shape the societies in which we conduct our business. There is a range of major societal changes that affect employers across the UK. Like the rest of Europe, we face declining birth rates and an ageing population. Global competition and instant communications are accelerating customer expectations in terms of speed, quality and choice, increasing cost and innovation pressures everywhere. Global events have made people less willing to invest heavily in the future and more inclined to focus on fulfilment now.

These societal changes pose real challenges to employers: how to attract the right skills from a declining recruitment pool, how to get the most from their existing people, how to retain key people? And the challenges don’t stop there because all of these changes affect individual employees too.
More and more people are responsible for older family members as well as for children. More and more want time for activities outside work. At the same time, work pressure, presenteeism and the invasive use of technologies can reduce their ability to meet personal needs.

So what must we do? We must abandon traditional thinking about work as a place to go to and focus on what needs to be done. We must open up working opportunities to people currently outside the workforce, who in many cases have been excluded by current working arrangements. With often quite simple adjustments many more people could become highly productive employees.

Making it happen

Introducing a comprehensive work-life policy is most challenging in the early days. Once the culture is understood and established, it becomes self-perpetuating and the benefits grow and grow.

• Start with a culture of trust
• Avoid value judgements. When people want to change work patterns, don’t ask them why, only if it is possible
• Work with the individual to determine the option that delivers the needs of the business while empowering the individual
• Analyse the cost of any potential change and its impact on budgets
• Use technology to liberate not devour personal time
• Recognise that ingrained attitudes and culture will have to change to make it work. Challenging outmoded attitudes and resistance to change will be vital
• Make sure you have role models at the top of the organisation to lead the way – even a part-timer on the board!
• Train managers to manage teams with diverse working patterns
• Put in crystal clear lines of communication
• Make it clear that it is output not presenteeism that is rewarded. Presenteeism should be viewed as counterproductive for both the business and the individual
• Ensure the approach is fair and consistent – one employee’s benefit must not become another’s disadvantage
• Investigate how investing in the right technology can help secure success
Consider all the options

- Compressed time – eg, full time hours over four days or working a combination of long and short days
- Job sharing
- Full home working
- Periodic home working
- Working longer hours over a defined period to accrue blocks of non-working time, for example around school holidays
- Term-time only working
- Annualised hours – variable hours worked each week
- Flexitime – starting and ending the day at variable times
- Phased retirement – gradually reducing hours

The people case – some numbers

- The number of women working has risen from 10 million in 1971 to over 13 million now
- Just 14% of women with pre-school age children work full time at the moment. Over 50% don’t work at all
- While 56% of self-employed people are based at home, just 4% of employees are
- 15% of working people look after someone needing special attention at home, other than children
- Fewer than a third of women with school age children work
- There are almost seven million people of working age with long-term or work-limiting disabilities, of whom just over half are economically active

*Steve Browne (right) field security officer, BT Wholesale*

“I take extended breaks in the middle of the day to run, particularly around the time of the London Marathon – this year raising money for children with leukaemia. My training and running performance are improving and it adds variety to what can become a drag, especially in bad weather.”

*Claire Jebson finance manager, BT Wholesale*

“I now work four days a week from home so I can organise my time with my son, Sam. I can take him to music and swimming classes and be confident that I will get to his childminder to collect him on time because I am no longer stuck in traffic.”
BT has developed a portfolio of formal policies and practical guidance to help employees work with their managers to achieve a more balanced lifestyle

Called Achieving the Balance, the guidance covers four areas: introducing flexible working, making time to meet family need, making time for careers, and improving health. Let’s concentrate here on flexible working.

Most jobs can involve an element of flexibility. At BT, employees who are considering a flexible arrangement, work with their managers to decide the approach that is right for their role. They look at their own needs and the needs of their unit, including implications for customers and colleagues. Options discussed may include alternative attendance patterns, homeworking, part-time working and job sharing.

Our guidelines cover all the issues the employee needs to consider before making a choice. Some of the questions we help them to consider are:

- Would it suit their personality and way of working to be at home alone all day?
- What are the health and safety and insurance implications of working from home?
- If they are considering part-time work, what would the impact be on their pay and benefits package?
- If they opt for job-sharing, will they be able to work in full partnership with their co-worker?
- Would a trial period be sensible?

Homeworking is suitable for many but not all jobs. The key criteria include:

- A limited requirement to be in a designated place
- Minimal need for supervision
- Work that is measured by defined objectives, milestones and outputs
- Work that needs high levels of concentration
- Work that doesn’t need any large business equipment
- Processing rather than manual work
Part-time working is a good option, for example when the amount of work in a particular role doesn’t make a full-time post cost-effective or when an employee wants to reduce their hours in the run up to retirement.

It is the employee’s responsibility to make the business case to their manager for a change in their working arrangements, suggesting a range of options and considering the potential impact of each on the business, on customers, and on colleagues.

Managers are given guidance on handling requests and formalising any new arrangements, including communicating, managing and maximising the benefits for all involved.

**Into the future**

**Work/Life Balance** is achieved when every individual’s right to a fulfilled life inside and outside of work is accepted and respected as the norm to the mutual benefit of the individual, the business and society.

What would this look like though? What would be different?

Jobs as we know them are a relatively recent invention as is the whole concept of partition between work and life. Until the industrial revolution, home was the place of production. People worked at home or close by whether they were farm workers or professionals. Work and personal life quite naturally intermingled and advanced together.

With the industrial revolution came centralised industrial complexes in which the economies of production-line manufacture prevailed. The industrial age created the need for managers to control increasingly large and complex workforces - a model that still pervades much of today’s business culture.

Developments, both industrial and technical, in the last 20 years have opened the door to restoring this earlier natural balance, while maintaining the enormous benefits of the knowledge workers who no longer need a manager to control or measure their output.

Technology is giving opportunities to previously excluded groups. Imagine a world in which it no longer matters where, when, or how you work, in which carers, parents, people with disabilities and people in remote locations are all able to achieve economic independence because access to employment is no longer a barrier. Homeworking and flexible attendance patterns are already making a difference to these groups as well as helping businesses address the problems of the reducing talent pool.

The technology that is emerging today allows us to make better use of underused community buildings such as schools, libraries, community centres and railway stations - as places in which the growing community of homeworkers can interact. People will have the option not only to work from their employers’ premises or from home but also within their...
own community, bringing life back to dormitory towns and re-energising our inner cities and rural communities.

Amanda Kaveney technical administrator, BT Affinitis

"Since I started to work two days a week from home, I feel under much less stress and have more time for my family. I can also make time for myself and have joined a local gym."

Alan Walker customer service engineer, BT Retail

"I work a nine day fortnight as part of a Self Motivated Team. It gives BT flexibility in rostering and enables me to pursue my love of golf and take part in tournaments."

A fine world

The potential for societal change is immense. Imagine the impact of a 50% reduction in commuting traffic on the environment and on our health. Imagine the reduction in crime, possible because parents can play a larger role in the day to day life of their children and because the local community presents a more balanced and collaborative life model. Imagine ‘full-time’ workers actively involved in their community, as school governors, charity workers or in local government.

The rate of change in society is increasingly dependent upon the age at which people are first able to access the latest technology. Even 20 years ago this would occur at around 16 years of age. The young of today are ‘born clicking’ with the average age for access to computing now two to four, producing the potential for societal change on a two to four year cycle.

In this environment the only thing that limits how we access and control work is our imagination...