

Managing People

Assessment 1

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Introduction

Flexible work practices do not refer to simply working from home, and it means the employees are encouraged or given the opportunity to do their job while managing their time according to their preferred schedule. The whole purpose of this arrangement is to let the employees use their schedule more meaningfully. Flexible work hours have been in talks for a few years now in the United Kingdom (Flexible working, 2022), and the COVID 19 pandemic has just fueled the issue, bringing it under notice and, needless to say, at a much larger scale. Due to this highly infectious VIRUS, employees had to work from home, which brings the old question to the table: can flexible work hours become the new normal? Following the pandemic, Human Resources in many companies are considering developing a flexible work model that maximises productivity. This report on managing people will try to highlight the potential impact of flexible working from two perspectives- the first would be in relation to diversity, and another would be to inequality. Sainsbury's, one of the largest retailers in the UK, has been used in this report to analyse and understand the issues.

Flexible Working Practices

According to Torrington et al. (2017), flexible working practice is a workplace policy that brings flexibility to the work schedules of business organisations. Flexible working hour is often misunderstood as working for fewer hours. However, it's a time management technique applied by employers to improve employee performance by providing greater freedom to the employees regarding their work time. Walker (2021) has described flexible working practice from a different perspective by stating that flexible working practice enables employers to focus on the achievement of business objectives and employee performance instead of the time spent at the workplace by the employees.

Flexible working arrangements can be beneficial for the firm in several ways. Firstly, the flexible arrangement gives the employees full liberty of using their time according to their personal needs. This can have a remarkable impact on productivity as the employees gain full control over their work-life balance (Walker, 2021). Secondly, the employees are less likely to stress about their personal problems during their work time; this will lead to error-free work and a higher productivity rate. Thirdly, since employees are enabled to work from remote places or their homes, less work is delayed due to sickness, injury or other health problems and emergencies. Also, as employees can spare time for themselves every now and then, they can be more relaxed at work and feel less monotonous.

Flexible Working in Relation to Diversity and Inclusion

A diverse and inclusive workforce is a testament to the current world of globalisation. As people move from one country to another and more and more jobs are created every day, there is a wide range of people joining the workforce. From part-timers to contractual, there are numerous types of jobs with different job requirements. On top of that, people from different countries, races, cultures and beliefs are now working under the same roof. At Sainsbury's, the situation is no different, and the company warmly embraces each individual's uniqueness.

The Human Resource at any company has the authority to build a diverse and inclusive workforce, and Sainsbury's HR has done a great job so far. The company was the first in its sector to introduce the Carers Policy back in 2011. The thought behind this trailblazing step was to include and improve the position of colleagues who need to care for a family or friend along with their day-to-day work. This is a notable step for the company since 20,000 of its employees also happen to be carers- some to their families and others to their ill relatives. This policy applies to all the employees of Sainsbury's, irrespective of the department or work they are involved in- depot, store or support centres, and it gives the perfect opportunity to balance their lives at home. Quoted in the text are the common offerings under this policy (Helping our unsung carer heroes, 2022)-

- "Colleagues with caring responsibilities can request to change their hours, times or place of work on a temporary, alternative, or permanent basis
- Colleagues who need time away from work to attend appointments with the person they care for will be offered 'carer days.'
- Carers dealing with unexpected situations are allowed emergency leave."

In many modern workplaces, the uniqueness of an individual is much more welcomed than it was even a few years ago. Today the differences in individuals are treated as an important input that can lead the company to many creative endeavours in future. Like many other firms, Sainsbury's also encourages the uniqueness of individuals, which can be a driving force when it comes to boosting creativity. The company is committed to inclusion and diversity. As a part of fostering diversity and inclusivity, Sainsbury's acknowledges the challenges faced by their female employees and the fact that it is the women who are more likely to be the carers in their families (Accelerating towards a gender-equal workplace: our success, 2022).

Sainsbury's attempt to ensure inclusivity has many layers. On the one hand, they are ensuring a safe workplace for their female employees. On the other hand, they make their best effort to support the local small businesses. The company also is supportive of ongoing issues that make their stance clear, for instance, the Black Lives Matter movement in recent years. Considering all these, it can be said that Sainsbury's has done a decent job in ensuring not only a diverse group but has also put in an active effort to protect their rights. Because of its success at fostering diversity, especially among different races, Sainsbury's was named one of the UK's best employers for the race (Walker, 2021).

The biggest advantage of flexibility in work probably comes from the difference in language, culture and lifestyle. For example- in most workplaces today, believers and non-believers work side by side. Despite their differences in beliefs, the Muslims have the opportunity to take some time off or their time to say their prayer. In hindsight, this may not seem like a big deal, but small changes like this help to build loyalty towards the firm. Not only that, fostering this diversity without the flexibility would be very hard for Sainsbury's or any other firm.

Role of Human Resource

As per Connell and Teo (2010), Human resource management isn't limited to the selection and recruitment of employees within an organisation. It's a holistic approach that focuses needs and wants of the employees to fulfil their expectations and ensure maximum productivity at the workplace. Jones and Martain (2013) have pointed out that human resource managers are responsible for ensuring a positive and productive work experience for the employees to develop an effective workplace environment. Therefore, it's vital for HR managers to create an environment that enables employees of different statuses within a company to receive equal support and treatment within the workplace. Meagher (2019) has mentioned that the development of a diverse and inclusive workforce increases the sense of belonging among the employees, which not only reduces the turnover rate but also enhances workplace commitment and loyalty.

To make a diverse and inclusive workforce, a company first needs to be determined rather than taking the route of "tokenism". A truly inclusive and diverse team will have numerous new ideas, discussions and limitless creativity. The HR must weigh where each individual's uniqueness or individual skills will be the most beneficial. According to Forbes (2021), there are several strategies that a company can devise to ensure the best output from a truly diverse and inclusive team. Among these, some of the major ones are-

- Instead of a monotonous uniform process, the employees sometimes need to be allowed to do their work in their way.
- While conformity leads to discipline, the employee should be able to be themselves and expect the company to embrace their individuality.
- Be committed to developing the best candidates by providing the employees with adequate training so that they can maximise their true potential.
- Take notice of the chemistry between the team members and arrange projects where the team members can bond and find their best combinations.

In Sainsbury's, each and every employee is an asset to the team and the company. HR openly embraces the uniqueness of every individual and also constantly addresses the combined efforts. However, problems can arise when the company is open to both an inclusive workforce and flexible work practices.

Flexible Working in Relation to Inequality

Like every coin has two sides, flexible work arrangement has their downsides too. First of all, there are no hard and fast rules about flexible schedules. This can offer some employees, especially those who are carers, a great opportunity. However, it does not diminish the idea that this liberty can be abused by some of the employees. In the UK government's new regulations, the employee can even ask for the reason if their leave has been denied. Another drawback of the flexible work model is that since there are no boundaries/ limitations of time, the company may end up paying the employees more than required.

In Sainsbury's case, it is very apparent that the company really favours their women employees. From supporting employees during menopause to endorsing female-led small businesses- they have truly backed the idea of building an inclusive workforce. Having said that, Sainsbury's should provide the same help to everyone who needs their support. In simple terms, the arrangement should not be exclusive to simply one or a few parties.

The most apparent inequality arising from flexible work arrangements is how it discriminates against the employees who are in service. Companies rarely have backups for skilled workers, which eliminates their chances of availing the same opportunity like the ones working at a desk. The skill-based workers must perform their duties irrespective of what the other employees get to enjoy.

Another major concern of inequality due to flexible working hours surrounds women and their careers. According to the Guardian (Walker, 2021), the Equalities and Human Rights Commission said almost four in 10 employed mothers had not requested some type of flexible work they would like. This was often because they assumed it would be turned down, but many women also said they feared that to work flexibly would damage their careers". To this day, many women do suffer from misogynistic views in the workplace. Hence, the suspicion and dilemma regarding flexible work hours having an impact on their careers and achievements do not come across as impossible. This is where Human Resources can play a crucial role.

Role of Human Resource

The role of human resources in addressing inequality arising from flexible work arrangements can be notable. HR plays a crucial role in determining the type of employees that the firm requires and the skills required to perform their duties. It is not unsafe to say that there is enough room for the flexible work arrangements to be inadequate for some employees. For example, the arrangements will never serve the same purpose for a chauffeur as it does for an official. In such a scenario, the flexible work arrangements do not offer much to those who are in service. Since their job is practical skill-based, the company cannot afford to keep their alternative.

In cases such as these, HR needs to rethink the limitations of such arrangements- are those actually flexible for everyone? It is needless to say that when employees notice the difference in treatments, it is bound to be confusing and chaotic. To avoid these, Sainsbury's HR needs to make different schemes or benefit plans for each category. In this way, HR can ensure there are no conflicts among the employees.

So far, at Sainsbury's, HR seems to be open to bringing everyone under the same umbrella. They have introduced several programs that focus on employees at every level, not exclusive to one or two categories. For instance, the carers policy can be applicable to anyone. However, the difference in flexibility in two different skill-based professions can never be denied. HR needs to play a vital role here. To tackle this, the HR at Sainsbury's can make the following attempts-

1. Develop different models for employees working at different jobs.
2. Prepare a reward or incentive scheme for the skill-based employees.
3. Despite the differences, HR should still emphasise the unity and the power of combined effort.

Apart from these, HR needs to take timely measures so that every individual can enjoy the flexibility and none feels deprived or unequal/ inferior to others. Since skill-based workers cannot avail as much flexibility in their job, HR should make up for this in some other way. For example- paying monetary incentives based on their service. The main aim of their measures should be to ensure that every employee can relate to the core belief of a flexible work model.

Conclusion

The UK Government has been very much favourable to the flexible work arrangements in the workplace. While it has its benefits, it cannot be applied to every category. For instance, an HR executive may enjoy the privilege of working from home, but a truck driver does not have the same option. To be more precise, the associated skill of the respective worker defines to what extent they can enjoy flexibility. While making flexible work arrangements, HR should be considerate about such issues that can otherwise be labelled as unequal treatment from the company's side. On the other hand, flexible work arrangements can be a great medium to boost productivity. In diverse and inclusive workforces, flexible work arrangements can bring better combinations by reducing waiting time. Since the employees are given absolute liberty, they can accommodate their time for work without compromising their personal life. In Sainsbury's case, a diverse team has been being practised for a long time, especially for different races. However, HR must come up with newer ideas to make the most out of the flexible work arrangements in diverse teams and to reduce the chances of inequality.

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