

Transport

AT Brown Coaches

Small employer

AT Brown Coaches Ltd is a family owned business. They operate 22 coaches, mainly 53 seats, with 70 seaters for school trips, and some 16 seat vehicles. Three-quarters of the company's business is in school and works contracts, including firms that operate late/early shifts. The remainder of activities involve private hire.

AT Brown employs 31 people. The company and staff have a flexible approach to work, for instance many older employees work reduced hours or take on a different role.

Flexible Working and Business Benefits

“Staff value the flexibility and it helps me to retain the skilled people we need to keep the business successful”, says Director Ewen MacLeod. “Our vehicles operate from 4:15am until midnight. We have to be flexible to meet customer demand for early and late shift hours and school runs, and of course during summer everyone wants extra coaches. Because we're able to respond, we get the business.”

MacLeod believes it is vital for business to take advantage of the flexible approach of staff, and that managers need to be able to respond. Businesses that don't adapt will be left behind. Flexible working has proven benefits for AT Brown and its employees, in terms of commitment and helping retain staff.

Decisions are made on individual and business needs. MacLeod says: “We don't have the flexibility to change the times that schools or factories start and finish – but I can bend, and if I can't fully meet my staff's flexible working requests then I will say what I can do. We have a two-way dialogue to make things work. If I just said ‘no, I can't do that’, they would go – and I'd have to employ the devil I don't know. I don't want to lose them to the competition. I offer the flexibility, they stay in a job that fits in with the hours they want to work. It's a win-win.”

“Being flexible is also about getting the balance right between full-time and part-time, so you're not paying for people to just stand around. It works for the business, it's not about altruism, as the business benefits just as much as the employees from the relationship.”

For example, Freeman (67) is a driver for the school-runs and occasional weekends. As an ex-school teacher, he transfers his people management skills into the job and his experience is essential when dealing with the customers in all kinds of situations.

Alan (69), is a former employee who was asked to come back part-time to drive a specialist coach with wheelchair access. As an ex-ambulance driver, Alan (69) successfully uses his experience to operate the vehicle which carries up to 12 wheelchair passengers.

Brian joined the business at age 57 as a full-time garage manager. With fifty years' experience ‘on the spanner’, Brian, now 67, plans to continue working part-time rather than retire. When he considered working differently he discussed options with his manager.

A gradual twelve month handover was agreed, and he has moved from full-time to part-time three days a week. Brian is mentoring Andy (31) into the garage manager role, where Andy is “learning the lifetime of skills and knowledge they don’t teach you in a course!”

Fred (75) works early shift hours through the year. In June he takes a week off. Although it is peak time, the company takes the balanced view that they benefit from Fred’s reliability throughout the rest of the year. When he had some hip trouble, Fred was swapped into runs with an automatic vehicle, and continues to work part-time doing mornings over 5 days.

Francis, who will be 65 at Christmas, wishes to scale back his working hours rather than stop working overnight. Plans are already agreed, both parties are happy, and arrangements will be reviewed regularly, as with all staff, and amended if necessary.

Ray (68) left the company last year after a period of ill health, but now that is behind him, he starts back on a totally flexible, almost casual, basis. Ray is one of life’s ‘characters’, and is viewed by the company as having a positive influence on morale.

The experience and knowledge of older workers plays a big part in the success of the business, growing from 7 coaches in 2002, to 14 by 2005, and now up to a fleet of 22.

Training that meets the needs of the business and staff

Across the industry, firms are at risk of losing older drivers who decide to leave rather than do Driver CPC training. But AT Brown is unwilling to lose experience and flexibility that would be costly to replace. By working with a provider to tailor the CPC to better suit the needs of his business and drivers, MacLeod is encouraging all his drivers to complete the training and stay with the business, saving the cost of additional recruitment and potential disruption. “I have to take cost into account,” he says, “but you get out what you put in.”

At any age, investment in training can show results, including increased motivation and better performance that helps the business grow. Part-timer Alan (69) recently completed a SAFED (Safe and Fuel Efficient Driving) course and says that it has improved the way he approaches his job and helps cut fuel usage.

Performance Discussions and Phased Retirement

AT Brown’s managers have discussions about performance with all their staff. They used to try formal staff appraisals but found that an informal approach suits the business better. Through an open culture between staff and managers, the ‘door is always open’ for two-way conversations: individual and company needs and plans are regularly discussed and aligned, for example about where people see themselves in the future, ideas and preferences for working or the timing or gradual phasing of any plans for retirement.

Younger and Older

MacLeod says: “Sometimes performance does start to tail off, it’s a fact of life, but is more than compensated for by the positive influences older workers have on younger staff. There’s no substitute for experience.” AT Brown reports no difference in the absence rates between older and younger employees.

MacLeod sees no need to remove older workers to make way for younger workers. “They’re like gold-dust. Their experience and flexibility would be hard and costly to replace. At the same time we do also have a 16 year old apprentice mechanic who is shaping up well and is very keen. Life is full of conundrums, but the bottom line is that I manage my human resources for the best return. It’s better for my business to keep our older workers, many working flexibly, than to recruit replacements. It’s all about long-term survival, even more so in the current climate.”

Learning Points

- Flexibility is a two-way arrangement. (Tip: start with a trial period to see if it works).
- Business and customer needs come first.
- Support from the top is essential.
- Managers able to discuss options for working flexibly.

First Group

Large employer

First Group (‘First’) is a transport operator carrying 2.5 billion passengers a year. Its UK Bus division employs over 23,000 people and operates in 40 towns and cities. It also operates Greyhound UK.

Phased Retirement

The company’s Flexible Pension Options scheme allows employees between the ages of 55 and 75, who are able to receive their pension, to work flexibly as well as using their pension income to supplement their reduced pay.

The scheme was introduced to help retain valued older employees (around 40 per cent of employees are aged 50 and over) and also to remove the ‘cliff edge’ impact of retirement. First also attracts staff from other companies.

The scheme website enables members to model their benefits based on their existing, or revised, rates of accrual, at their choice of retirement age. They can also model the impact of taking a tax-free lump sum on their annual pension income.

Learning Points

First’s Reward & Pensions director John Chilman accepts that there were challenges: “Some people felt that retaining older workers could block opportunities for younger employees. There were also concerns that the policy might ‘force’ people to stay in work.”

When the scheme was launched, briefings were delivered to each operating company in partnership with trade unions, to ensure buy-in from all sides.