

Flexibility Case Study — GlaxoSmithKline, 20 May 2010

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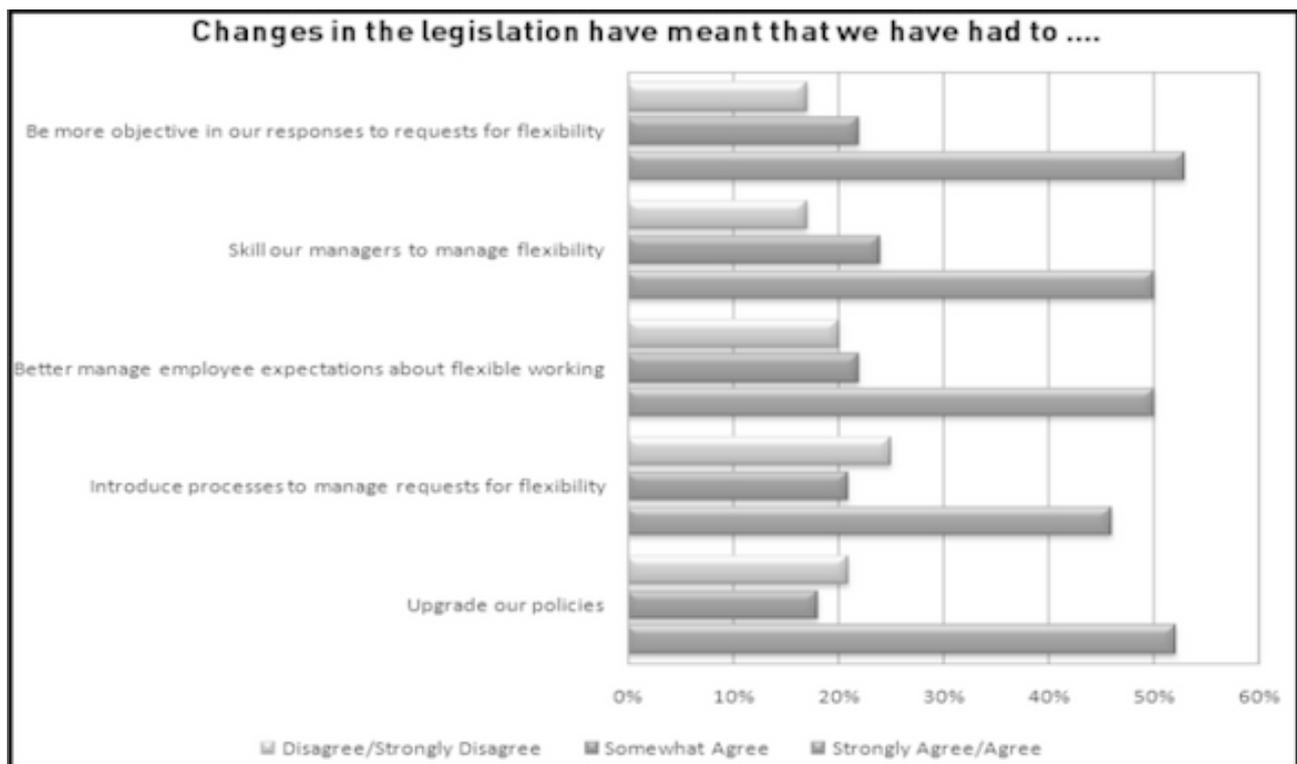
Have changes to industrial relations legislation (Fair Work Act 2010) and the right to request a flexible work arrangement had any impact on the numbers of employees asking to work flexibly?

This was one of the key questions asked in the survey titled “Flexible Work in 2010 — A Pulse Survey”¹ conducted by Managing Work|Life Balance International in April this year. This survey looked at what has changed within organisations as a result of the “right to request” a flexible work arrangement being introduced for carers of young children and dependants under the age of 18 with a disability.

Feedback suggests that — since 1 January 2010 — there has been little change in the percentage of staff requesting a flexible work arrangement. However, this may be because a great deal of preparatory work was done before the introduction of the legislation.

Table 1: Impact of legislative change on flexible work practices

(Source: Holmes, B, *Flexible Work in 2010 — A Pulse Survey*, Question 3, Managing Work|Life Balance International, see www.worklifebalance.com.au)



Discussions with best practice organisations and others indicate that — in many organisations, policies and programs implemented over the last five years or so are now considered to be an established part of the work environment.

Mr Simon Cowl, Human Resources Director, GlaxoSmithKline Australia and New Zealand, says: “there has been little change in our approach to flexible working as the legislation simply formalises what we have been doing for some time. Our philosophy is to provide an inspiring workplace where people can work to their full

potential. Encouraging and supporting flexibility within the bounds of good business practice is just one way of doing this”.

GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) is a world-leading, research-based pharmaceutical and consumer goods company operating in more than 100 countries and employing more than 100,000 people world-wide. In Australia, GSK has over 1,600 staff located in four production facilities: at Boronia in Melbourne, Ermington in Sydney, Latrobe in Northern Tasmania and Port Fairy in Western Victoria. GSK is the first pharmaceutical company in Australia to be awarded a citation as an Employer of Choice for Women in the EOWA 2010 listing. This recognition demonstrates the effort that the company has put into not only developing initiatives to support women but also building a workplace culture that is supportive of all staff with work/life flexibility issues.

Mr Cowl indicated that support from senior leaders has been one of the keys to their ongoing success. At GSK, some leaders work flexibly through working flexible hours or working from home. These leaders are considered to be positive role models because they are able to demonstrate how work/life balance and flexible working arrangements can be a success at any level of the business. This he says is critical for any organisation that wants to develop a flexible work environment and a culture that recognises the importance of “balance”. Balance can mean different things to different employees.

GSK started developing and implementing their flexible work initiatives a number of years ago as part of an overall equal opportunity strategy to attract and retain talent. Mr Cowl said that: “GSK is committed to supporting employees to balance their work and personal lives, and we endeavour to do this by creating a culture where the needs of individuals are accommodated and employees are encouraged to reach their full potential”. Currently, their flexible working arrangements include:

- flexible start and finish times
- part-time or part-year employment (ie reduced hours, part-time for employees returning from parental leave, part-time for parents during school holidays, study, family and job sharing)
- leave of absence/career break, and
- unpaid leave.

In addition, GSK offers up to 12 weeks paid maternity leave on full pay for the primary carer and three weeks (also on full pay) for the partner following the birth of the child. Decisions to approve and support the flexible work arrangements are based on business needs, personal circumstances and the nature of employment. Currently, GSK has 14 per cent of the workforce using some formal flexible work arrangement. Many employees also have less formal arrangements in place which they have agreed directly with their line manager.

In preparing for the introduction to the FW Act and the “right to request a flexible work arrangement”, GSK undertook a comprehensive review and updating exercise to ensure that their policies and processes were compliant. In particular, they ensured that managers and staff knew that responses to requests needed to be provided within 21 days. GSK also provided staff and managers with the relevant paperwork to formulate the application and record the responses. Most importantly, GSK facilitated communication to managers and team leaders to ensure that they:

- understood the implications of the legislation
- knew their responsibilities as leaders (under the legislation)
- understood the priorities for particular demographic groups (eg carers of young children) and how that applied to their staff, and
- knew how to discuss requests with employees and how to provide appropriate feedback on their decisions.

In general, the update and the legislative requirements have been well received by managers; although (not unlike many Australian companies) there are still small pockets of resistance. These issues are addressed through one-on-one coaching meetings and ongoing support.

Mr Cowl said that “there has been no increase in demand for flexible work arrangements due to the change in legislation in January”. He attributed this to the fact that flexible working was already embedded into the

culture at GSK and that the legislation simply formalised what had been happening for some time in the organisation.

About the author

Barbara Holmes is the Director of Managing Work|Life Balance International — one of Australia’s leading consultancies in the area of work/life balance and flexible work arrangements. Much of Barbara’s work involves working with managers and employees in client organisations to create change in the workplace, enabling business to thrive and employees to achieve the balance and career goals to which they aspire. Barbara has worked extensively in Australia and around the Asia Pacific region, providing advice, consulting support and a range of practical tool kits and resources to government and private sector organisations. Barbara can be contacted on telephone number 1300 131 126. For more information, please see: www.worklifebalance.com.au.

Footnotes

- ¹ Holmes, B, *Flexible Work in 2010 — A Pulse Survey*, Managing Work|Life Balance International, see www.worklifebalance.com.au