



University of Essex

MY GUIDE TO **WORK LIFE BALANCE**

This practical guide provides an essential toolkit for staff who may be considering their work life balance.



INTRODUCTION

The University has a strong commitment to diversity and this means actively helping staff to combine work and home life effectively. The University recognises the importance of maintaining a healthy balance between work and other aspects of life.

This guidance is designed to give you the practical and essential information you need to support you when you are considering your work life balance.

This guidance should be read together with the work life balance policy which can be found at: www.essex.ac.uk/hr/policies/

Further guidance and support is available from your link **HR Manager/Officer** at any time.

“THE PEOPLE SUPPORTING STRATEGY MAKES CLEAR OUR COMMITMENT TO INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTION AND TO ENSURING PEOPLE ARE ABLE TO WORK IN WAYS THAT SUIT THEM BEST WITHIN THE LIMITS LAID DOWN BY THE UNIVERSITY AND BY THEIR ROLE. WE WANT TO BE AS FLEXIBLE AS WE CAN BE.

FLEXIBILITY MAKES US RESPONSIVE, PRODUCTIVE, EFFICIENT AND HAPPY. EMBRACE IT...”

Susie Morgan
Director of Human Resources



IS WORK-LIFE BALANCE FOR ME?

Why consider balancing your work and home life?

- You wish to care for your children or an elderly relative. Looking after pre-school age children can mean needing a greater degree of flexibility with working hours. When they are older, accommodating school runs and the summer holidays may also mean you need some new flexible working patterns as well.
- You would like the opportunity to reduce your hours as you get older (in the absence of a mandatory retirement age).
- You may wish to improve your physical and mental wellbeing.
- You may wish to participate in activities and further personal interests and hobbies outside of work.
- You may wish to undertake study.
- You may wish to travel.
- You may wish to cut down on the amount of time spent travelling to work.

What arrangements are there to support work life balance?

- **Flexible working** - 'Flexibility' and 'flexible work' are terms used to describe a wide range of work styles and employment practices. Broadly speaking, they include all kinds of employment which differ from the traditional nine to five full-time job.
- **Time off in lieu** - Where you work hours in excess of those in your contract, you can take time off in lieu with prior agreement of your line manager. For Support Staff (Grades 1-6) in exceptional circumstances overtime may be paid.
- **Career break** - A career break is intended to provide a facility for you to request an unpaid extended period away from employment to meet your personal needs.

Can my request be refused?

Yes, the Executive Dean/Registrar & Secretary can still say "no", but now they have to justify their decision.

FLEXIBLE WORKING & CAREER BREAK

Who can request flexible working arrangements?

All employees can make a flexible working request providing they have not made any other application during the past 12 months.

Who can request a career break?

If you are requesting a career break you must have at least 2 years continuous service before the date of commencement of the career break and hold a permanent contract (either full or part-time).

If you are an academic member of staff wishing to take leave of absence for academic purposes, which are directly linked to your research work, you should refer to the [Research Leave](#) policy.



What flexible working patterns can staff request?

Flexible working could include:

- part-time working
- compressed hours
- term-time working
- annualised hours
- job sharing, and
- homeworking

What arrangements can be made for flexible working requests?

Three levels of arrangement are possible.

- Informal arrangements that confer no rights.
- Formal arrangements that confer rights for a defined period of 12 months or less (e.g. ideal for when you return from a period of family leave and you wish to reduce your hours for only a short period before returning to your original contracted hours).
- Changes to contractual terms that are permanent (you wish to reduce your hours of work on a permanent basis).

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN CONSIDERING YOUR WORK LIFE BALANCE

Type of change

- Do I want to make a permanent change to my working day?
- If it is only temporary, how long do I want it to last?

Finances

- If I work part time how will my reduced salary impact on my pension and subsequent plans for retirement?
- How will I manage if I earn less money?

Benefits

- How will it help my work-life balance?
- How will it help me cope better?
- Will it improve my performance?

Impact on the University

- Will it cost the University more?
- Will there be a cost saving or will the University have to employ somebody else?
- Will it help or hinder any pressure on office space?

Team and colleagues

- Have I discussed the proposed changes with my colleagues?
- How do they feel about it?
- Is there anybody who works flexibly already that I can speak to about how they have managed the change with the team?
- Will I be putting more pressure on other staff?
- Will there be enough cover?

Impact on the service

- If I provide a service to service users, can I still do that and change my hours?
- How could I make it work?

Job sharing

- Would I be happy to share a job?
- How will I hand over work?
- Will I have to share a desk?

Working from home

- Have I got a suitable space to work from home? (see Homeworking Guidelines and Home Working Risk Assessment).
- Am I motivated enough to work on my own?
- Am I organised enough to work from home?
- How will I make sure I keep up to date on office developments?

MAKING YOUR REQUEST

Who can request flexible working arrangements?

If you are making a request for flexible working/career break, make sure you leave enough time for the formal process.

You should submit your application to your Head of Department who will arrange a meeting with you, but it will be the Executive Dean/Registrar & Secretary who will make the final decision (therefore do not expect your Head to give you his/her opinion on the success of the application).

You should also think about what will suit your Department and what will fit in with your workplace. Your application is more likely to be approved if you can show that you have thought through your departmental needs and how it will work in practice. This can be quite daunting, but it is important for you to consider how things might work.

You do not have to write an essay or a long description—just a few paragraphs (as part of the formal application) which show you have thought about the impact of your flexible working proposal on the service and on your colleagues/team.



¹ For the purposes of this guidance, 'Department' shall mean Departments, Schools, Centres and Sections. 'Head of Department' shall mean 'Head of Department or Head or Director of School or section or Director of a Centre'.

When making your request it may help to:

- highlight the flexibility you could offer your manager, if appropriate (for example, if you are able to start earlier or work later on certain days)
- work with a job share partner (if this is what you are proposing) and set out a proposal of how you will work together and liaise across the working week
- explain the benefits of home working (if this is what you want), what parts of your job would work well from home, how you would stay in touch with the workplace, and how your work could be monitored
- explain how the different parts of your job would be affected by part-time hours – would another part-timer need to be recruited, or can parts of your work be redistributed elsewhere?

Use what happened during maternity/adoption leave (if that is what you have been on) to support your argument – maybe you were not replaced, or maybe parts of your work were done differently. Be careful how you use this argument, remembering that you do have the right to return to your old job whatever happens to your flexible working request

- be as practical as you can about the different parts of your job and how you think they could be done, how you would communicate with colleagues and how any emergencies would be dealt with

Address problems

Try to suggest solutions to any potential problems which might be created by your new working pattern. It is worth thinking about how the new arrangements would affect:

- external or internal clients/service users
- colleagues
- line manager, and anyone else you come into regular contact with during your work



THE MEETING

It is important to remember that the meeting you have with your Head of Department as part of your flexible working application is a chance to discuss your request in detail and to negotiate if you need to. They are intended for you and your Head to talk about your proposals.

You can take a colleague or trade union representative with you (if you are a member of a union). This could help you feel more confident. But even if you do not have anyone with you at the meeting, try running through what you want to say with a friend or partner beforehand.

Some ideas about how to negotiate:

- explain your position and your ideas about the changes you are hoping for
- try to understand your Head's concerns and what sticking points they may have and why (for example, they may not feel comfortable with home-working because nobody has ever done it before in your area; you can still run through your ideas of how it would work)
- discuss some of the easier areas first so that you can agree on some changes if possible before moving forward
- don't get stuck on one particular option, instead think about the result you want (being able to pick up your child etc.). There may be other ideas or options which will come up during the meeting
- think about what is really important to you and what you would be willing to change

Turning down your flexible working/career break request

If the department is unable to accommodate the request for flexible working, the legislation states that it may only be declined on the basis of one or more of the following reasons:

- the burden of additional costs
- an inability to reorganise work amongst existing staff
- an inability to recruit additional staff
- a detrimental impact on quality;
- a detrimental impact on performance;
- detrimental effect on their ability to meet customer demand
- insufficient work for the periods the employee proposes to work
- a planned structural change to the business



APPEAL PROCEDURE

If you suspect your case has not been treated reasonably, you may make an appeal within 14 days of receiving the rejection letter. Please refer to the Work Life Balance policy for further information.

What should I do after a flexible working/career break request has been approved by the Executive Dean or Registrar and Secretary?

Where a flexible working request is granted it is best practice for you, together with your direct line manager and or Head of Department, to jointly monitor and review the impact of the new working pattern to ensure that it continues to meet operational needs (which may be subject to change). A trial period of 3 months is recommended.

Following the 3 months trial period, your manager may continue to build in a formal review point at six months or a year, when you can discuss how the new arrangements are working and make any adjustments necessary if they need to work better or differently. If the arrangement is not working effectively and no longer meets the departmental or University needs, then you may receive notice that you are required to revert to your former working arrangement.

In the case of flexible working and career break approvals make sure you advise your team members of the change in working hours/career break and have a plan of action for dealing with any problems that may arise from the change.

CASE STUDIES

Julia Greenwood, HR Policy and Projects Officer reduced her working hours following a period of maternity leave so that she could spend more time with her child. She now works 18 hours per week.

"I work hard in the office (and often start a little earlier than I need to) but once the day is done I make sure I leave on time – no excuses. As a Mum I don't want to miss out on my child's younger years. My Manager and I respect each other and we both try to do the best we can for each other. In return I am flexible (where I can be) about swapping my days to attend conferences or meetings. Accommodation goes both ways".

Before having her child Julia also worked compressed hours (over a nine day fortnight) to support her postgraduate academic study.

Natalie Booroff, Recruitment Officer, works compressed hours (a nine day fortnight, with every other Friday off) to allow her to study part time with the Open University for a Social Sciences degree.

"A day off each fortnight allows me to study and spend less time studying at the weekend than I would otherwise need to, providing a better work/life balance. I'm currently four years into my degree (which I am doing over 6 years part time), and have been working compressed hours since October 2014 (having started at the University in November 2013)".

Lisa Barrass, Academic Section Assistant, has a daughter who has been diagnosed with severe M.E. The possibility to utilise the work-life balance policy (and in particular compressed hours) helps her to plan the week.

"I get every other Friday off and it just means that I can say to the doctor, I need the appointment on that day and we're able to do that. I feel that I'm not letting [my colleagues] down by suddenly having to go off for tests. It's a really good balance. The team gets my full attention when I'm here and my daughter gets my full attention for getting her appointment sorted. If she hasn't got appointments, I have got that extra day to spend with her to get her out and about as well. I have a fantastic manager who's really supporting".

Annette Burling, Payroll and Pensions Administrator, works in a job share arrangement. Following retirement, Annette decided that she still wanted to work for some of the time so a job share arrangement seemed perfect for her. Whilst the arrangement works well, Annette said

"It is sometimes harder to keep a track of things, so it is essential that you keep good notes for yourself and your job share partner. We are lucky that we get a 30 minute handover period during the week so that we can update each other on completed work and the upcoming priorities. It is definitely worth having the right job share partner'. I love the flexibility job share offers me and I now get to spend more time with my husband in our older age".

Vicky Pratt, Education Abroad Manager, started as a part-time office administrator at the University of Essex before moving into her full-time role with flexibility around working hours so that she can come in slightly earlier and leave slightly earlier. She said,

"I need this flexibility so I can drop the children in school and nursery and then be there to pick them up". She adds, 'Most people do have some kind of caring responsibility whether it is children or parents with a disability or just elderly parents. The working parents or working carers I know take their responsibilities seriously and are concerned about doing a good job at home and at work.'"

Martin Price, Information Officer, When Martin's eldest son was approaching school age, Martin and his wife were both working full time and were looking at the possibility of going part-time.

"Luckily an ideal position came up at the University with a 50% working pattern. Having this job means that I get to take my son to and from school, and allows me to spend a lot more time with him and his 3 year-old brother. This is not something that I really envisaged, but it was definitely the right decision. I now have two distinct halves to my week, although I don't want to say which is the most demanding!

The University has shown a very positive approach to flexible working, and I do feel very well supported at work. I understand that not everyone is able to go part-time, and it certainly isn't without its own set of challenges, but for those for whom it is feasible I would strongly recommend it. I personally think I have been very fortunate to be able to re-arrange my work/life balance in a way that is so beneficial to me and my family. It's a bit of a cliché to say 'You don't get those years back', but it's also true. I just hope my sons don't get "Daddy Fatigue!"

USEFUL CONTACTS

UNIVERSITY WEBPAGES

Childcare Vouchers

www.essex.ac.uk/hr/policies/childcare-vouchers.aspx

Wivenhoe Park Day Nursery (Colchester campus)

www.essex.ac.uk/nursery/

Equality and Diversity

www.essex.ac.uk/equality/

Family Leave

(maternity, adoption, parental and time off for dependents)

Keeping In Touch Days (KIT) Information

www.essex.ac.uk/hr/policies/docs/family-leave-suite.docx

Special Leave

www.essex.ac.uk/hr/policies/docs/special-leave.pdf

Stress Management Policy

www.essex.ac.uk/staff/ohs/health/stress.aspx

Protection During Pregnancy

www.essex.ac.uk/ohsas/occ_hlth/services/pregnancy.htm

EXTERNAL WEBSITES

Benefits Calculator

www.turn2us.org.uk

Citizens Advice (Helping to solve legal, money and other problems through free, confidential advice)

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Directgov

www.direct.gov.uk

Family and Childcare Trust

(Advice on finding day care for your child)

www.familyandchildcaretrust.org.uk

Gingerbread (a charity supporting single parents)

www.gingerbread.org.uk

Maternity Action

www.maternityaction.org.uk

National Childbirth Trust

(NCT) Organisation

www.nct.org.uk/

Working Families

www.workingfamilies.org.uk

