

Post COVID-19 And Flexible Working Arrangements

By Adaku Ezeudo

The concept of flexible working arrangements (FWAs) has been on many executive's lips across Nigeria for a number of years now. However, for one reason or another, progress on the implementation of this new way of working has been slow. Until recently, that is, earlier this year, with the global spread of the novel corona virus, COVID-19, many businesses around the globe have been left with little option but to send their staff home. Faced with the choice between halting operations entirely, and establishing remote working practices, most businesses have gotten on board with the latter.

When a decision like this is foisted upon us, it is uncomfortable. We weren't ready for it. Many staff didn't have appropriate workstations set up at home and managers had to learn to manage their teams remotely without any training or lead in time. Of course it was going to be difficult. But somehow, despite the setbacks and false starts, in the time of COVID-19, by and large, remote working has been a success for most companies.

The question, however, now turns to what happens next. Given that remote working, one of the most sought-after forms of FWAs, has enabled business to keep working over recent months, with some preparation and attention to detail, could FWAs benefit all parties even more as we move forward?

As we begin to relax restrictions and life returns to normal over the coming months, should employers presume that returning their entire workforce to their usual place of work is the natural next step?

Although FWAs are yet to be mainstreamed in Nigeria, they have been emerging as a real alternative to traditional work practices in other jurisdictions over the recent years. In the United States, 4.7 million people were working remotely at the start of this year.

Despite the fact that less than 10% of the jobs advertised in the UK offer flexibility, 92% of millennials claim it is one of their top priorities. It's not just younger people, however, 70% of UK employees believe flexibility makes a job more attractive, while older people are attracted to the idea of winding down to retirement with a FWA.

According to the Society for Human Resources Management Future Insights Report, of 2014, workforces are aging across the globe and more employees will be dealing with multiple caring responsibilities, multiple paid jobs and staying in the workforce longer, which all have an impact on the availability of staff to work full time.

At home, the Nigerian tech sector has proven there is an alternative to traditional working arrangements, an alternative that is recognized by more workers as a result of COVID-19. The tech sector, globally, is noticeable for its proliferation of young companies which are run and operated by young, tech savvy staff. The speed at which the digital space evolves necessitates a fresh, agile approach. It's not surprising that the tech sector in Nigeria has been the first to adopt FWAs. By providing flexibility for their staff, tech start-ups can operate in a lean, cost-effective way. As the sector has expanded, it has brought with it an increase in short-term, contract, and freelance positions. Therefore, not only is how work is performed evolving but so, too, is the entire basis of employment.

When we look at the impact of our current mode of working in Nigeria, it has a significant impact on the personal lives of staff. Long commute times, extended office hours, and the necessity for parents to spend so much time away from their children are just some of the factors that have long been seen as the price of career success.

Cultural considerations are also important. Increasingly, people want to choose their lifestyle and have their career support it rather than the other way around. The availability of FWAs has allowed employees to navigate

conflicts arising from competing demands of lifestyle versus career. It is not just those with caring duties who are eager to adopt FWAs, those in education may want to schedule work around classes, while for others it is simply more convenient to work on a shift or split shift basis. According to Owl Labs Global State of Remote Work 2018 study, 14% of people identified a better work-life balance as their main reason for opting to work remotely. Interestingly, in South Africa, 66.9% of state agencies offer FWAs because they see it as a way to help their staff achieve a greater work-life balance.

Research has shown that FWAs are not just beneficial to employees but to business too. The benefits to employees are largely understood and include eliminating a stressful commute, more time at home with family, greater access to positions for working mothers, and those with disabilities, in addition to more energy and creativity. However, the benefits to business are not quite as well understood, and yet, workplace flexibility is a growing business strategy for companies that want to attract and retain a more diverse, virtual and global workforce.

When you want to attract the best talent, providing flexible working arrangements outside of the norm can give you the competitive advantage. Not only will you be able to hire the best talent, but you're more likely to keep them as FWAs have been shown to result in increased employee loyalty and reduced staff turnover.

Workers who avail themselves of FWAs are more engaged, more productive, and present with less absenteeism.

A wider catchment area can increase the number of suitable applicants during recruitment. When your staff have the option of avoiding rush hour or working remotely, it encourages those further away to apply when they otherwise may not have done so.

You can also attract a more diverse talent pool, including mothers who want flexibility to look after their family and those with disabilities who can do an excellent job but who may face challenges in a traditional office setting.

When you introduce FWAs, none of these concerns matter and you attract the best, most talented person for the role. A more diverse workforce also has a whole host of benefits – fresh ways of thinking, different problem-solving abilities and an improved brand perception are just some of them.

Staggering working hours, based on company needs and staff preferences, allows you to respond to customer queries around the clock, which results in better customer service provision.

Flexible working arrangements can also have a direct cost reduction. Less office space is necessary and transport costs, which are covered by some employers, are also cut as your employees no longer need to commute to work.

Of course, the shift to flexible working arrangements requires effort. Changes are necessary to allow our workforce to enjoy more flexible working arrangements and the benefits they bring. We can group these into two pools, changes to mindset & culture, and changes to tools & infrastructure.

In looking at tackling tools and infrastructure in Nigeria, we have concerns around the availability of reliable power supply and data connectivity necessary to work off-site. Co-working spaces are becoming more mainstream in Nigeria, with 71 across the country in 2017, but this is from a low base. In 2011, there were only 2 and, still, the majority of the hubs are based in Lagos and surrounding areas.

Although remote working can allow the business to draw from a wider talent pool, good internet and phone lines are essential. If the employee is located

in an area where they cannot access the systems or virtual meetings necessary to deliver work requirements on time, a problem can emerge.

Another consideration is the cost of remote working. Where an employee bears the cost of power consistently, this can mount. Employer support can combat this but must be balanced against the cost-saving measures secured by FWAs.

Finally, data security is a big concern for companies allowing staff to operate off-site. Adherence to data security policies is important but so is the infrastructure to protect sensitive data.

The financial implications of investment in such infrastructure can become a challenge to implementing FWAs in some organisations.

Outside of infrastructural concerns, the biggest evolution required to ensure flexible working success is a change of mindset. I recall a conversation I had last year with the CEO of a Nigerian-based financial services company. The company was struggling to retain its younger workers and wanted to explore ways to remedy this. When I mentioned that FWAs are a very attractive option for younger staff, this director was reluctant to entertain the idea. "How will I know what they are doing?", he queried.

Ernst and Young Ireland's People Advisory Services Director, Olivia McEvoy, believes the success of flexible working depends on collaboration, trust, and leadership. Yet, these are precisely some of the greatest barriers to the success of FWAs. Perceiving a loss of control over operations, a reluctance to change from traditional working arrangements, and a lack of trust need to be identified as risks and addressed accordingly. Shifting the company focus from time-based goals to result-based goals so that set deliverables are achieved but perhaps in a shorter time frame is a good starting point.

All-important trust is a two-way street. While the company has concerns about accountability, staff may worry about having access to the full details to perform to their best ability. When the company communicates clearly, provide exact expectations, and allow staff to get on with the job at hand, usually, they will return that trust with excellent work.

When staff are given the opportunity to work from home or in another flexible location, they no longer have the structures they may have depended upon to deliver their work in a solid, reliable fashion. Without those structures, they require guidance, support, and leadership.

Deloitte found that 84% of workers see employee engagement and productivity as being linked. This means that managers need to step up how well they engage their teams. This may take the form of regular phone calls to assess progress and to troubleshoot problems as they arise. Acting as a good role model is not just a good idea, it is vital. The idea of 'do as I say, not as I do' does not inspire workers nor spur them on to give of their best. Showing how to get the necessary work done within timelines and encouraging employees to enjoy the rest of their time as they see fit, however, can create incredible results.

According to FlexJobs annual survey, 65% of respondents are more productive when working from home due to fewer interruptions. To see this become a reality, training and effective communication are imperative. For FWAs to succeed, they need to deliver the benefits to both the employee and the employer consistently. This is possible, the technology to allow open communication is there. With free programmes that allow video conferencing, project management and document management, the capabilities for flexible working are available. It is the people and the systems, training and tools we implement which will dictate whether FWAs can be a success for business into the future.

With increased productivity and reduced costs as just some of the benefits, it makes sound business sense to explore this for the good of your company and your staff. It will require work to ensure it flows, but there is help available to businesses to make it a success.

This writer works with business leaders and their companies to devise strategies to successfully lead remote teams, foster teamwork within remote teams and communicate effectively across diverse teams. When these strategies are implemented everyone involved can reap the benefits, not just today, but for the long-term.

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