

## Libby Hakim

Libby Hakim is a mum of two and lawyer with fifteen years experience in legal publishing and private and government legal practice. She enjoys writing from her big kitchen table looking out over her small garden in suburban Sydney. A world away from the legal offices that occupy the upper spaces of Sydney's CBD.

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# Best solution for working mums? Mainstreaming flexibility

BY LIBBY HAKIM / APR 23, 2014 8:03AM / 0 / 0

Making workplace flexibility available and the norm for all men and women, rather than just an option for working mums, is what's ultimately required to make life easier for working mums.

But that requires significant structural change, and turning everything we know about workplace flexibility "on its head", according to Lisa Annese, member services director at Diversity Council Australia (DCA).

"This is about a whole new approach to designing work and designing jobs that enables people to work in a different way, thereby having good outcomes for people who want to work flexibly," she says. And while it's a useful way to manage work generally, she believes the outcome will ultimately be significant for women.

A recent report published by Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia also recommended this approach. As it states: "For work-life policies to be truly effective they must be accepted and integrated into the mainstream for all workers, not simply as a special consideration for working mothers."

So can mainstreaming workplace flexibility across an entire organisation really be achieved?

Grace Chu is a part-time CEO at FirstClick Consulting and a firm believer in the advantages of work-life balance for all. She leads by example, working flexibly in the most senior role in her organisation. "We're very open-minded when it comes to flexibility across all demographics. It's very important everyone is offered the same benefits in terms of flexibility," she says.

With half the senior leadership team working flexibly, and other senior managers regularly working from home, she says organising meetings can be a little tricky, but they always come up with a solution.

Chu credits flexibility for all employees as a productivity booster and a key element in retaining a high calibre team and ensuring low staff turnover. She says FirstClick consulting has been able to mainstream flexibility, while keeping high-level clients happy, by focusing on the following:

- Building an exceptional team.
- Having the right people on board and processes in place to ensure the system isn't abused.
- Putting the attention on results and deliverables, not face time.
- Knowing it's as important to say no to initiatives with less importance as it is to say yes.
- Being ruthless in prioritising workflow.

As FirstClick and other organisations have found, there are three excellent benefits to mainstreaming flexible work.

### 1. It removes career penalties that often come with requesting flexible work.

We've all heard stories of the career penalties that can accompany flexible work. Annese says DCA's research indicates this is indeed a problem. When flexibility is mainstreamed, it's available to everyone, across all roles – including those at the top of the career ladder. "A flexible job can then be a career job, one where you can continue to get all the benefits of working full time," says Annese.

### 2. It's what a large portion of the workforce actually wants

According to a March survey by Randstad, while 79% of Australian workers said they are unable to work remotely in their current position, the majority would prefer to work remotely for 30% of their working hours. Dads with young families, older workers, those passionate about their hobbies, people caring for older parents, those with a long commute -- the list of reasons for wanting or needing flexible work is endless and reflects the changing nature of how we live.

### 3. It provides a competitive edge for businesses

Research conducted by DCA finds that mainstreaming flexible work will lead to many improved business outcomes: businesses will be more sustainable and adaptable to change, employers will attract and retain talent and productivity will be given a boost.

Those are three good reasons for mainstream flexibility. So why does providing flexible work often fall into the "too hard" basket? Firstly, thinking that flexibility is too hard is the biggest obstacle on the path to mainstreaming flexibility, according to Annese. But there can also be structural problems, with some businesses failing to keep up to date with the changing nature of how people do business and live. Another obstacle, she says, is capability. People need the skills to manage and work in a flexible environment.

But some organisations, such as FirstClick Consulting are proving that it can be

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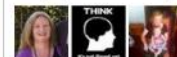
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done. With the right mix of people and skills, flexibility can become the 'norm' rather than merely a benefit for working mums alone.



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