

Employees fear flexible working will damage careers

Two-thirds of UK employees aspire to flexible working – but half are worried it will damage their careers, according to research by Eclipse Internet.

The research also found that a quarter of respondents thought that flexi-working was a taboo subject in their organisation.

Mark Thomas, sales manager of Eclipse, said: “Companies risk alienating large parts of the workforce and losing skilled and valuable employees by not recognising this extensive desire to flexi-work.

“Working flexibly includes a vast range of work practices, from flexi-time to equipping employees with the technology to work from home.”

Three-quarters of all flexible-working requests are made by women – even though 80 per cent of respondents said it was important to both genders.

The legal right to request flexible working applies to ‘parents’ of children under six or under 18 if the child is disabled. It will be extended to carers in April 2007.

Workers covered by the legislation can request flexible hours and, if employers agree, change their contract to allow shorter hours, compressed hours or a change of work location to help them balance childcare with their career.

But Eclipse’s research shows that three years on, understanding is still extremely poor. Only 25 per cent of people know what the legislation means, while 47 per cent of those surveyed thought, incorrectly, that the legislation was relevant to all workers, not just parents.

Barriers to flexi-working across the UK, besides office culture, are complex. Technology was one of the major reasons cited by both men and women, with over half suggesting that their companies aren’t willing to provide the technology they need.

After technology, women were mostly likely to consider that businesses being ‘stuck in the dark ages and averse to change’ (48 per cent) impacted the uptake of flexi-working, while men considered that it is due to companies not trusting their employees (52 per cent).

Thomas added: “We are seeing a marked difference between the number of people wanting to work flexibly and those who can. Although it is most important for those with children, to help them juggle their childcare and workload, flexi-working is gaining popularity rapidly across the board.

“With the benefits of increasing productivity, and in an active recruitment climate, there are many reasons why businesses should seriously consider equipping employees to work flexibly.”

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