Senior managers and staff at UniSuper work under flexible workplace arrangements in various forms, but as one executive manager points out, these arrangements are actually meant to support the business.

‘We are not blowing up the business for one person to work flexibly’, the manager explains. With that said, leaders at UniSuper acknowledge that just about any request for flexible work arrangement can be accommodated, and that promoting flexibility can lead to benefits in terms of employee performance and retention.

For example, the market research manager comments on her own flexible work arrangement, ‘They get the best out of me, and I would not be in the workforce without flexible work arrangements’. As a high achiever, she was recently head-hunted by another business, but did not feel that other workplaces would be as supportive of her work-life balance.

In addition, UniSuper leaders believe that accommodating flexible work requests helps build trust, which permeates throughout the workplace and ultimately supports the membership. UniSuper also respects employees’ desires to develop professionally and personally, encouraging staff to further their learning and development as they continue to gain valuable experiences and skills. Learning and development opportunities for employees increases the value of the organisation’s human capital overall. Employee retention then becomes even more important, but this is supported by a culture for flexible work.

THE MANY SHAPES AND SIZES OF FLEXIBLE WORK

Due to the range of jobs at UniSuper, as well as the internationalisation and technological advancements of today’s business world, leaders and employees have adopted a variety of flexible working arrangements to support business outcomes. UniSuper understands that in this day and age, work needs to be customised to meet the needs of each employee and each job. These arrangements include job-sharing, telework, part-time workweeks, alternative hours, and combinations of these and other arrangements.

With today’s technological developments, staff can also be provided with full remote access to work at home, which was not the case until recent years. Senior managers often enjoy flexible arrangements in which they spend at least part of their workweek at home. For example, one senior manager works one day from home so she can pick up her daughters from school while another usually works one day a month at home to pick up his children.

Relatedly, many full-time data analysts feel they work better on large data projects at home, where there are fewer workplace-related interruptions. As the market research manager explains, ‘I am more efficient when working at home, as I am in control’. She has also arranged to work three full days and two half-days—for a four-day workweek. The system works for her and her...
own manager. She feels satisfied that her non-work responsibilities are being fulfilled, while also being available to her manager and team at some point during each of the five days of the ‘traditional’ workweek.

Unisuper aspires to enable customer service officers to work remotely from home, after the development of new telephony platforms. This is a feasible plan because the busiest time for customer service is between 10 am and 2 pm, so staff with parental responsibilities could take children to school, work from home for the peak hours, and then pick up their kids.

Finally, UniSuper is able to think outside the traditional workweek, and is not focused only on accommodating employees’ family demands. One executive manager will shortly commence a 9.5 fortnight so she can have a half day per fortnight to pursue personal interests. As she began to think about retirement, this manager realised that as a “busy mum and a bit of a workaholic”, she had not made time to develop many interests outside of family and work. Improving her fitness and learning to play golf is a new goal for her—she knows its important for her well-being. She made this arrangement with her manager and continues to be paid her full-time salary, working extra hours on other days to make up the time and get her work done. However, much of this extra time is put in flexibly—from home in the evenings.

A CULTURE OF ACCEPTANCE

Although many of today’s organisations offer flexible work arrangements, the market research manager points out that there is something different about UniSuper that makes it all work. ‘I worked flexibly in my previous workplace but I feel that here there is more respect for work-life balance.’

Indeed, UniSuper’s success in creating a culture of acceptance towards flexible workers was apparent in the results of their latest employee survey, which revealed positive overall perceptions of part time and flexible workers throughout the organisation. Because flexible work policies are in place, because senior leaders—including men—have adopted flexible work arrangements themselves, and because flexible workers are considered for promotions, working flexibly does not mean career stagnation. Nor does it entail any stigma, as it might in many other organisations.

As a result, even the part-time employees at UniSuper are typically very engaged at work. In fact, many of the part-time employees tend to be what one manager describes as ‘head down, bum up at work’. Employees feel encouraged to fulfil their responsibilities in all spheres of life. They appreciate that their needs are supported, and this is good for morale overall.

THE CHALLENGES OF FLEXIBILITY

Of course, establishing a culture of flexibility at such a large organisation is not without its challenges. One of the executive managers notes difficulty in maintaining consistency across employees’ arrangements. Formalised flexibility policies can help, but these need to be revisited regularly, and employees’ arrangements may need to be re-evaluated and revised from time to time.

Furthermore, while there are exceptions such as the budding golf enthusiast mentioned above, most arrangements are associated with balancing parental responsibilities. Managers and employees alike need to realise that flexibility can be applied to meet other needs, such as those associated with caring for aged parents, or even short-term needs.

Finally, flexibility can pose challenges to team-based work, particularly when regular meetings are required. Part-time arrangements and accommodating requests for alternative work schedules can be especially difficult. Careful coordination of team members’ work schedules and making the most of today’s communication technology become critical.

Clearly, some jobs are more accommodating than others when it comes to requests for flexible work. However, success with promoting a culture of flexible work depends on the degree to which leaders and employees are able to think flexibly about flexibility.