We don’t usually associate workplace flexibility with customer service-oriented organisations. However, the Teachers Health Centre, Richmond, Victoria, is a model of best practice in flexible work arrangements for such organisations.

The Health Centre provides optical, dental, physio and remedial massage services 48 hours per week—8:30-5:30 on weekdays and 8:30 to 2:30 on Saturdays. While many customer service organisations would view such an arrangement as a constraint for flexible work arrangements, leaders at Teachers Health Centre view flexible work arrangements as a solution for making the typical full-time employee’s 37.5-hour workweek compatible with the 48-hour workweek of the Centre.

FLEXIBILITY IS THE WORK CULTURE

Staff at Teachers Health Fund regard the organisation as ‘supportive, diverse and collaborative’, noting that it is particularly committed to work-life flexibility arrangements. It has a formal standalone policy for flexible work, which lends itself to various formal and informal arrangements at the Health Centre in Richmond.

But perhaps most important to this culture are three primary ingredients: a particular mindset on the part of organisational leaders, trust among managers and employees, and teamwork and mutual support throughout the organisation.

Leader Mindset for Flexibility

While many of us think of flexibility as working from home, teleworking is not an option for most employees in customer service organisations like this. Instead, work rosters must be coordinated to ensure that staff are able to work a full workweek around their various needs and interests outside of work, while also ensuring that the Health Centre is sufficiently staffed during opening hours. This requires a particular mindset on the part of organisational leaders.

As the practice manager at Richmond put it, ‘I don’t see that flexible work arrangements are extraordinary. It’s how we all have to be going forward. Work should be a nice place to be.’

Management at Richmond adjust the roster at least twice a week to coordinate and balance the needs of both staff and client. ‘We all use flexible work

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arrangements. I am very flexible’ states the practice manager, but this culture for flexibility runs all the way to the top. When requests for flexible work arrangements are for long-term changes or pose particularly challenging situations for practice managers, they are encouraged to consult with HR staff in the Sydney head office.

**Trust among Managers and Employees**

The policies, practices, and overall culture at the Richmond Health Centre help employees to develop a sense of trust in their leadership. The practice manager is prepared to adjust and adapt schedules to ensure the best outcome for staff, but management is similarly able to trust employees to keep the client and the organisation in mind.

In this environment, employees are comfortable discussing their life-style needs and are encouraged to voice their flexibility requests, ultimately helping to keep the Health Centre’s roster up-to-date. This culture of trust means that employees do not feel they will be ostracised if they voice their needs and work flexibly.

For example, the optical dispenser notes that she does not feel ‘disposable’ because she works flexibly. In her opinion, which seems to be shared among other employees and leaders alike, there are ‘more pros than cons’ for flexible work arrangements. ‘You don’t get penalised if you work flexibly’, she explains.

Trust on everyone’s part is critical to the success of flexible work arrangements and a culture like this one.

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**Teamwork and Mutual Support throughout the Organisation**

Related to the previous point, providing employees with flexibility in such an environment requires flexibility from employees, too—especially during busy times like school holidays, when teachers and their families—the clients—are most likely to visit. This means that staff also understand that there has to be some give-and-take, accepting that they may need to cooperate in coordinating their working arrangements to adjust to clients’ demands.

It also helps that the Health Centre staff work in teams. One employee noted, ‘If things come up, there is a flexible option’ through consultation and teamwork arrangements with other team members.

**BUSINESS BENEFITS**

Flexible work arrangements among full-time employees helps the Health Centre achieve a number of benefits. As mentioned above, the Health Centre can leverage flexibility to reconcile the employee’s 37.5 workweek with the Centre’s 48-hour week.

They also maximise employee outcomes by catering to individual needs and interests outside of work. Research indicates that morale and productivity may be increased when employees are provided with flexible work arrangements, reducing absenteeism and increasing retention (Berkeley HR).

Finally, they are able to avoid much of the significant HR cost associated with hiring casual staff to cover for employees’ time off. More importantly, this also allows Management to preserve and fully utilise its organisational knowledge by ensuring that knowledgeable experienced employees staff the Health Centre during all opening hours.

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*A project by the Centre for Workplace Leadership*