

HOW DEALERS CAN BENEFIT FROM GREATER WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Flexible working can increase staff retention and attract women to the industry

Flexible working remains one of the biggest challenges facing the motor retail industry, given the long hours and commitments required to run a dealership.

By law, any employee with at least 26 weeks' service has a right to make a request for flexible working. Under the statutory provisions, workers can apply to vary their hours, the times they work and their place of work.

However, with staff often having to work long weekdays and regular weekends to provide customer service and hit sales and commission targets, it can be difficult for employers to approve their requests, particularly in smaller dealerships that have more limited resources.

Among the hardest jobs to work flexibly are those where the tools and equipment needed are only available at the dealer, or those whose roles rely heavily on customer interaction.

Long hours, little flexibility

Henry Knill, head of employment solicitors at Motor Industry Legal Services, said it was difficult to see requirements for long hours changing significantly in the motor trade, largely because of the commitment to selling or leasing a high-value asset, aftersales and stiff competition.

"Pitted against these conditions are, of course, the government policy for greater work-life balance. It is the clash of the irresistible force against the immovable object," said Knill.

He said employers have traditionally argued that full-time working is the only option in sales, partly because of customer service requirements and the often commission-based pay structure.

“ FLEXIBLE WORKING IS A REAL OPPORTUNITY THAT THE INDUSTRY NEEDS TO EMBRACE BECAUSE YOU DON'T NECESSARILY NEED TO HAVE THE SAME PEOPLE WORKING 24/7

LOUISE WALLIS, THE RETAIL MOTOR INDUSTRY FEDERATION



"That said, it is obviously important employers do take requests seriously and don't react with a knee-jerk reaction of 'no,'" he said. "Tribunals are increasingly sceptical of the argument that job shares are not possible and most jobs can't be done flexibly with some good system of handover and cooperation – systems the employer can devise and enforce."

Force for change

However, Louise Wallis, the Retail Motor Industry Federation's head of business management, believes the shift towards flexible working is already happening.

"Flexible working is a real opportunity that the industry needs to embrace, because you don't necessarily need to have the same people working 24/7," she said. "For example, you might have some people who are happy to work evenings instead of during the day."

Simon Boxall, chief operating officer at Jemca Car Group, which has agreed to flexible working hours for five of its roles, said an increase in requests will prompt employers to be more accommodating.

He said job-sharing and redefining job descriptions are two ways of achieving

flexible working, while the internet and better technology allow more people to work from home or on a flexible basis.

"It may be easy to create a job-share, but the problem comes when one employee wants to work four days a week instead of five and you then have to find the appropriately skilled person to fill in for that extra day," he said.

"Even so, there are many positives to come out of flexible working, facilitated by the massive change in online purchasing, which has allowed for home-based workers to respond to initial enquiries."

Julia Muir, CEO of Gaia Innovation and founder of the UK Automotive 30% Club, said Rockar pioneered a flexible working model aligned to shopping centre hours that cover long working days and weekends on a variable-length shift and rota basis. Meanwhile, the Chorley Group recently successfully introduced a four-day working week for all employees, she said.

"Due to the introduction of technology and the 24/7 customer shopping behaviour, more dealer groups are also investigating changes to job design to implement agile and flexible working, which can serve to attract and retain women," said Muir.

Ksenia Zheltoukhova, research adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, said open communication between employers and employees was key.

"Thinking about an employee's role in terms of the tasks they perform can help identify parts of the job that could be performed while working from home or with alternative working hours."

ALEX WRIGHT

RESOURCES

FLEXIBLE WORKING PODCAST



The Chartered Institute of Professional Development has a series of podcasts that cover flexible and family-friendly working: am-online.com/FlexiblePodcast

COMPANY CASE STUDIES

ACAS has a guide on the right to request flexible working, including making a request, handling requests, resolving a dispute, working from home, training for employers and a video by SME company directors on the benefits of flexible working: am-online.com/FlexibleCaseStudies

EMPLOYER'S GUIDE TO FLEXIBLE WORKING



Timewise's guide for employers on how to enable talent progression through flexible working in retail: am-online.com/FlexibleGuide