

Ethics and flexible working

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According to a 2021 World Economic forum survey (Buchholz, 2021), 65% of previously office-based employees wish to continue with remote working, post-pandemic. If we survey employers, 24% responded that they wanted employees back in the physical workplace (Smith, 2021).

What has caused the disconnect between workers and employers?



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One of the reasons that big companies provide for requesting the return to the workplace is that of too much freedom for employees. Other companies surveyed said work from home became “slack off from home”. 24% of employers surveyed said that there were concerns about productivity. Some employers just prefer the “bums in seats practice” (Ringcentral, 2021).

A couple of ethical examples have been identified; for example, people missing when virtual meetings have been scheduled and taking a long time to log on, excuses of loadshedding, no data, Wi-Fi weak, my VPN has dropped, excessive use of social media or watching movies within working hours, e.g. Netflix, long lunch breaks. When someone asks a direct question in a Teams meeting and there is no response, did a ghost employee attend the meeting, log on and then go walkabout? When it happens with frequency, can one blame employers from questioning whether workers are being honest?

This brings us to question as workers, what ethical standards need to be applied to the practice of working from home for a permanent staff member.

In responding to this, there are three questions to address:

1. Let's examine the contract – the basis of the working relationship in terms of expectations.
2. Let's look at applied work ethics in general applied to the workplace.
3. How can we as workers apply this in order to retain the practice of flexible working?

The contract of employment is straightforward. A permanent worker is expected to provide specified services, within specified hours, and to a specific standard. Common law indicates that workers should perform and that employers have a duty to provide work. So this links to self-management. If you have been given specific instructions or key deliverables, you

are expected to deliver these in the specified time (health and circumstances permitting). This gives one a clear guideline of how to behave in the virtual office. A worker is allowed tea and lunch breaks; company policy and practice dictate when these are allowed.

So let's test the law – can one take a two-hour break and be non-communicative within business hours? The answer would be no. If you wouldn't do it in the physical workplace, why would you do so when working remotely? If your direct supervisor approves, it is allowed. The grey area would be to ask, when should one ask for permission? The answer would depend on the nature of one's job – if you work remotely in a call centre or reception, err on the side of caution: a couple of minutes will be noticed, so it is best to make alternative arrangements in order to cover your post.

Work ethics in general: What do you do when no one is looking? Ethics can be defined as the well-founded standards and fundamental principles of an individual (Jobstreet, no date). What is your personal standard of the difference between right and wrong?

What are the five most sought-after practices and behaviour from prospective workers? (Jobstreet, 2021). Integrity, honesty, discipline, respect and fairness, responsibility and accountability. Advice from a Human Resources viewpoint is that these values and behaviours should be practised, as trust between workers and employers takes years to build, and minutes to break. Make sure you evaluate your actions against these standards. Keep yourself honest, discipline yourself to put in those working hours, and work time in if you have to “quickly fetch a child from school” or “run that errand around the corner”. A suggestion is to schedule these breaks into your internet planner; that way, if you are asked to account for your time and whereabouts at a later stage, you will be able to answer truthfully.

Thirdly, what can we apply from the above discussion? The majority of workers who have been granted flexible workplaces due to the pandemic, wish to remain with this arrangement. Unfortunately, employers have not shown overwhelming support to continue with this practice post- pandemic, due to productivity issues, the loss of management control, and the fear that workers are slacking off.

Tips to ensure that working from home continues to work include disciplining yourself to work your allocated working hours, and keeping to existing standards. Schedule specific times in your online diary; even if your boss doesn't ask, make sure you can explain all gaps or missing spots in your workday! Keep to your normal work habits; it will help sustain your performance. If in doubt, rather avoid taking a chance and ask for permission. It will save any future heartache arising from disciplinary action.

Live your values, be honest, be truthful, operate always with integrity, be responsible and accountable. This will make sure that you are the kind of worker who will be sought after in the workplace, and this will ensure your employability.

Work diligently – like no one is watching!

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