

A VIEW FROM JOSH KRICHEFSKI

Why agencies need to be inflexible about flexible working

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There's been a lot of talk in the industry over the past couple of weeks about flexible working and its potential benefits, and drawbacks. And while there's arguments on both sides, I feel it's worth sharing my thoughts.

As a strong advocate for flexible working, I truly believe it is only ever a positive thing for a business – and the people within it. The challenge though, is to really analyse its impact – both positive and negative – on the business and then make the necessary cultural changes needed to get the most out of it.

At MediaCom, we introduced flexible working – what we call MediaCom My Way – over four years ago, and were the first media agency to do so in the UK. However, we didn't do this because we were struggling with office space or for the sake of being the first.

MediaCom My Way formed a cornerstone of our People First philosophy and is our recognition that our staff are individuals with unique needs and lifestyles – and they would produce their best work when they're allowed to work in ways which best suited them. It's important that we encourage everyone to reach a balance between the time they invest in their career and other commitments, interests and passions.

Clear process

We made it clear that our people can work where and when they want so long as they deliver on their KPIs. I don't believe that we always do our best work tied to a desk, but that inspiration, creativity, and productivity can happen anywhere.

To support this, we also put a ban on emails after 7pm and on weekends unless there's a client emergency. Doing this made sure people working flexibly still "switched off" at a healthy hour. We've all I'm sure found ourselves working a 12-hour day from home because the remote working day can so easily roll into home-time.

This rule also helps ensure that if anyone wants to work different hours to the standard nine-to-five, they don't impose additional working hours on their colleagues. That was a hugely important step because we knew that while many would work flexibly, a lot of the agency prefer the structure of standard working hours from the office.

Setting goals

We've found that the key to making MediaCom My Way work is letting staff set out what they want to achieve from it at the beginning; whether it's just to get a better work/life balance, finding time to train for a triathlon, or time out for school commitments. What's central to the entire flexible working proposition is to make sure it works for your staff. If we offered a solution but implemented it as a one-size fits all rule, then we'd be failing to treat our people as individuals.

That's not to say introducing something like MediaCom My Way is easy; we had to put new

processes in place and ensure that it was introduced efficiently with minimal disruption. It also took a little while for people to acclimatise to these changes. We can be so used to presenteeism and often don't feel confident asking for flexible time, but with encouragement from senior leaders and managers it's been a great success and has helped create a more trusting and empathetic working culture.

By listening to our staff and creating this culture, I've found that people usually come to the office even when they don't need to, whether that is a Friday or any other day, because they feel that their personal priorities are valued and in turn want to work harder. In this day and age, if you don't create a working environment where people want to spend their time with you, you will not be able to attract and retain the best talent.

And – despite the argument that it's impossible to offer flexible working because of client demands and needs – as soon as our clients learnt what we were doing the majority respected these email guidelines as well.

Some of them have even adopted it themselves. After all, they're individuals too.

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