



## **Case Study: Improving Work-Life Balance for Senior Employees**

### **Introduction**

This case study describes how one London Local Authority (“The LLA”) went about identifying and addressing work-life balance (WLB) issues at senior levels.

### **Background**

The organisation is a major local authority employer of staff with around 2,600 council-based employees, and around 3,300 school-based. Women make up the majority (63%). I began working with the LLA in 2002 when they received a small amount of funding from the government’s Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund.

The LLA is located in an ethnically diverse community and this is reflected in the multicultural nature of its employee profile. Not surprisingly, the organisation was keen to improve WLB provision as a way of supporting its diversity agenda. In addition, the Authority was struggling with hard to fill vacancies and high sickness absence levels in some areas. The Chief Executive was firmly committed to improving WLB provisions as a means of addressing these issues.

Having experienced the benefits arising from initial activities, the LLA decided to fund a second phase of activities. By 2006, WLB was visibly on the agenda and the LLA felt the time was right to look at the personal challenges facing Senior Managers.

### **The Senior Management project – first steps**

The first step was a survey of existing practices, comprising two parts. A brief electronic questionnaire was circulated to the entire senior management group, resulting in a 54% response rate. Telephone interviews were then held with a stratified random sample of 17 senior managers to explore issues in greater detail.

Three key themes emerged:

1. Senior managers were operating within a “pressure” culture, with a number of contributory factors. First was the long working hours culture exacerbated by the number and timing of meetings. Second, senior managers struggled with unrealistic and unclear job expectations, against (third) a backdrop of work intensification.
2. Stress levels were high. A lack of flexible working arrangements and the relentless squeeze on resources were both contributory factors.

3. The most popular WLB option among senior managers was the ability to work from home occasionally. Working from home reduces the overall length of the working day by eliminating long journeys and allows managers an uninterrupted environment to complete work that requires high levels of concentration, such as writing reports. However, respondents suggested a number of reasons why home working was problematic. Many felt it was difficult to manage staff effectively from home; access to ICT equipment and support is poor and patchy; and for some managers home working was simply not permitted in their operating unit.

## Task Groups – process and outputs

Two task groups were set up to address the following questions:

1. How can the LLA tackle the long hours/pressure culture in which senior managers operate?
2. How can flexible working options (including home working) be extended to the senior management group?

Each task group was scheduled to meet for three one-hour sessions at fortnightly intervals. In recognition of the busy lives senior managers lead, and to encourage participation, meetings were scheduled over the lunchtime period (and lunch was provided).

Task group participants were involved in an on-going facilitated process. All outputs from the process were posted on the intranet with an invitation for other senior managers to feed comments back to task group members. Although the two groups were working on separate issues, the benefits of better balance and the actions needed to get there identified by the two groups were remarkably similar.

In session one, groups were asked to list the benefits of resolving the issue under consideration, and to develop a vision of what working at the LLA would look like when this had been done. When the visions of the two groups were combined, we arrived at a future scenario of what working for the organisation would look like once key WLB challenges for senior managers had been resolved.

### Balanced working for senior managers – the vision

- Fewer, more effective meetings
- Free space in the diary to think/work
- Greater flexibility in working arrangements
- More “quality time”
- Improved environment/accommodation
- More time for face to face management
- Time for colleague interaction
- Improved interpersonal communications
- Better technology will enable communications

- Greater ability to focus on service quality, valuing customers and what's important.
- Flexible resourcing
- Extended service options
- Less bureaucracy
- Productivity increases
- More developmental opportunities
- Cultural norms will have been debated and clear messages will come from the top

In session two, participants went on to identify both quick wins and the longer term actions needed to change things. Session three concentrated on developing specific strategies for implementation:

**Quick Wins:**

<u>Long Hours</u>	<u>Flexible working</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Address the meetings culture by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing a meetings protocol</li> <li>• Providing training</li> <li>• Conducting an audit of current meetings across the organisation</li> <li>• Reviewing policies which generate meetings.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Improve self-management by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing policies which make self-management difficult</li> <li>• Providing training to enable better setting of priorities.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improve access to technology by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing central funding for equipment</li> <li>• Reviewing/eliminating cross charging</li> <li>• Focusing on one good system with good support</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. "Walk the talk" by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Top Management being visibly seen to work flexibly and support flexible working.</li> <li>• Itemise the issue on Divisional Management Team meeting agendas.</li> <li>• Provide more publicity around flexible working at senior levels.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

**Longer Term Actions:**

<u>Long Hours</u>	<u>Flexible working</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Change the culture by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Top Management Team acting as role models.</li> <li>• Improving delegation.</li> <li>• Revising decision making authority.</li> <li>• Allowing more flexibility in the way things are done.</li> <li>• Encouraging a "can do" culture.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Change the culture by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusing on more dialogue and less "command and control".</li> <li>• Change the perception of who is the "expert contact" in a department.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

<p>2. Address the resources issue by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better guidance on time staff are expected to spend in meetings.</li> <li>• More flexibility in job descriptions and how things are done.</li> </ul> <p>3. Make priorities clearer by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having an organisation wide protocol on unilateral targets.</li> <li>• Better guidelines on meetings.</li> <li>• Developing a good practice guide.</li> </ul> <p>4. Improve IT for home working by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing a central pool of funding.</li> <li>• Making more laptops and broadband available.</li> </ul>	<p>2. Address the workload/resources issue by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holding SMART meetings.</li> <li>• Delegation and empowerment.</li> <li>• Reviewing total outputs and being confident to say “no”.</li> <li>• Disciplined use of email.</li> </ul> <p>3. Improve performance management/staff development by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting staff clear targets, accounting lines and responsibilities.</li> <li>• Allowing more deputies to attend meetings.</li> <li>• Improving the decision making hierarchy.</li> <li>• Providing appropriate skills development.</li> <li>• Encouraging more “risk”.</li> </ul> <p>4. Sell the “business case” for flexible working at senior levels by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linking it to efficiency savings and service improvements.</li> </ul>
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## Summary

In six years of consulting to the LLA I witnessed its transition from piecemeal policies for specific groups of employees to a strategic approach to WLB; and a supportive culture.

*“Work-Life Balance is now a term we use comfortably...and one which I hope becomes embedded within our culture.”*

Quote from Chief Executive

The senior manager task groups were part of a much larger process designed to overhaul WLB practices across the organisation; and this culminated in the launch of new policies.

The next step is to look at redesigning work processes. This is a challenge the LLA increasingly faces as the pressure to use resources efficiently continues; and the organisation moves to new working practices with a new town hall building. The journey to becoming a fully integrated WLB employer continues.