



15/05/2008 - Getting the best from your assets - Marketing Week 8th March 2008

Company owners like to claim that their people are their biggest asset, but when times get hard some of these people are suddenly found to be dispensable. After cutting salaries, scrutiny then turns to getting rid of any time-wasting operations, and deciding whether it really is in the organisation's best interests to provide such perks as flexible working.

Marketing Communication Consultants Association (MCCA) managing director Scott Knox says: "While work-life balance is an extremely important issue, it should not override business needs. The reality is that we are facing an imminent recession and it's sad to say that flexibility may be one of the first things to go."

Knox is not proposing that businesses should stop nurturing diverse and flexible workforces, but he has a caveat: "We mustn't lose sight of the fact that it's also important to develop people who are professionals and able to respond to the challenges of taking agencies forward and handling clients' expectations. Developing fluffy "duvet-day" staff may not be best for the industry."

Short-sighted savings

Cutting immediate costs by being parsimonious with benefits is short-sighted, as high staff turnover is costly. Offering a competitive salary is simply not enough to keep the best people on board. As *Marketing Week's*/Ball & Hoolahan Salary Survey 2008 showed, marketers rate holiday entitlement, and a friendly working environment, more highly than salary. Salary was rated only slightly higher than having flexible working.

The marketing industry may think of itself as forward-looking compared to many, yet it is often the so-called more traditional industries which are leading the way. It is not unusual for accounting firms to offer a wide range of working practices. They were the first professional organisations to recognise job sharing at the partner level.

Brand Learning is a company that specialises in helping multinationals build marketing capabilities, and is itself a success story in terms of growth and offering a flexible working culture. It was recently named as one of the Sunday Times Top 100 companies to work for.

Mhairi McEwan, co-founder and managing director, believes the company's focus on flexible working is one reason why it has been able to attract such senior marketers to the business. She says: "You might think that our company, as a consultancy, would not be able to work flexibly, as we need to support multinational clients, but today's technologies, from Blackberries to easy internet access, mean our consultants can work hours to suit their own needs as well as clients'. People can take time off to be with their kids, go to football matches, and then log onto their computers at 9pm if that suits them more."

As McEwan says, there is no need to have people in the office all hours these days, yet still the standard office-hour culture is pervasive, and the more senior you go, the more embedded it is. She adds: "We don't actually mandate that our people have to be in the office at all. We do mandate electronic timesheets to log hours, however, as it is crucial to put in place the right guidelines and measures."



BRAND LEARNING

The main reason why this works is because, as McEwan emphasises, "People really value being trusted."

The problem with people working at the time that suits them is that if everyone is working different hours, it's bound to create difficulties, from co-ordinating meetings to generating a cohesive company culture. However, Averil Leimon, director of coaching firm White Water Communications, admits that while an organisation may find it easier to have everyone working the same hours, there is a serious drawback.

Reducing your potential" An organisation that insists on everyone working the same hours and refuses to find a way to be flexible and accommodating, could be missing out on a rich source of experienced talent that will be lost to competitors. People who work hours that suit them are likely to be committed and loyal to the firm."

And with demographics indicating an increasing shortage of talent at senior level, being accommodating could be the solution. "Introducing new blood to senior management means including women and part-time employees in a higher proportion than is currently the case," adds Leimon.

Another argument used against flexible working practices is that people who are fitting work into their life, rather than changing their life to fit in work, probably aren't very committed to the job anyway. But Leimon argues that senior people can be just as effective in their jobs, even if it isn't their only priority, as long as the work is challenging. "If you are passionate about what you do, you will willingly put in the time it takes because you are having fun." She also points out that people who put work first are not always the best bet for the long term. "We know that people who have a single-track life - solely work - are low on resilience and more likely to burn out quickly. The key to long-term leadership success is some sort of balance between work, fitness and a robust social network. If one of these falls too much by the wayside, then you are at physical and mental risk in the long term."

In marketing, as in plenty of other disciplines, there are many talented women working at junior levels, but far fewer in senior roles. Chris Bestley, director of education at the Institute of Sales Promotion believes that this is a reflection of how the industry is poor at providing a proper work-life balance. "There is still a culture of long hours, staying late and working weekends that is alien to the needs of older women and men, particularly if they have children." He thinks there are three key tools to tackle this problem: balance workloads; offer sabbaticals; and put proper job descriptions and appraisals in place that take workloads into consideration. "If everyone is clear about their role and all roles are well balanced, there should be no need for excessive hours or excessive workloads".

Another issue when employing people who work part-time, or out of the office, is finding ways to train them. These days, technology means that training can be done online, or at home, and many training providers, including the ISP, offer distance learning courses that are structured so that people in demanding jobs can do them at their own pace and in their own time. Video Arts library, for example, has hundreds of programmes covering a wide range of subject areas from managing people and customer service to diversity and assertiveness.



BRAND LEARNING

Bite-size learning

Video Arts marketing manager Kim Wigfield says: "People remember a training message more fully if they learn in stages. All of our learning content is broken into bite-size learning chunks to help make it more memorable."

The importance of finding a work-life balance is nothing new, as the Greek dramatist Euripides said two and a half thousand years ago: "The best and safest thing is to keep balance in your life, acknowledge the great powers around us and in us. If you can do that, and live that way, you are really a wise man."

Companies that make flexibility a priority

Brendan Condon, managing director, Advertising.com

In an employees' market, competition for talented staff is fiercest. Organisations must go beyond the usual benefits package, however generous it may be. At Advertising.com we feel that the little things make a big difference. For instance we practise 'summer hours' where everybody is free to leave at 3pm on a Friday during the summer months.

We believe that staff training should be bespoke to the individual's needs and we run a wide variety of programmes for employees of all levels and at all stages of their career. We focus on providing the opportunity for employees to develop their management, business, language and personal skills. We are also fortunate to be able to pool best practice and training schemes with HR teams from our parent companies AOL and Time Warner.

We are introducing new flexible working arrangements in 2008 (for instance working a day a week from home, condensing five days into four). We support new mothers by allowing them even greater flexibility – working a four-day week depending on their circumstances. This helps to attract the sorts of talented employees that we need to stay competitive.

Jane Asscher, managing partner, 23red

Creative ideas are the product of a diverse range of talented people sparking off each other. Our people strategies have therefore been structured to recruit talented creative people and encourage them to grow with the business. Our career and personal development packages are tailored to people's lifestyles, life stage and ambitions.

We have a flexible approach to promote diversity. We employ parents who work part-time and also encourage non-parents who want to work flexibly to pursue lifestyle interests. To support this we facilitate home working where appropriate. On the training front we are IPA, CPD accredited. We prepare training schedules off the back of annual appraisals. The training also helps to promote work-life balance. Aside from the discipline and interpersonal skills, we offer staff, where appropriate, courses such as stress management or contributions to furthering study in areas of their own personal interest such as for an MBA.

Our approach has meant we are consistently voted among the top marketing employers and were nominated in this year's Pathfinders employer of the year. Moreover our staff turnover over the past year has been virtually zero.



BRAND LEARNING

Copyright © BRAND LEARNING 2000-2009

For further information:

Please contact us on +44(0) 20 8614 8150

BRAND LEARNING
Burgoine Quay
8 Lower Teddington Road
Kingston Upon Thames
Surrey KT1 4ER

team@brandlearning.com