

## Employers

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In a nutshell Using 24 by 7 to meet economic challenges We all know that current times are difficult. There is a looming recession which is already affecting our economic activities. The nature and level of economic competition have changed drastically over the last few decades as a direct consequence of the increase in the number of competitive producers and distributors both on the national and the international scenes. External factors such as the high price of raw materials, fluctuating exchange rates and low availability of credits have repeatedly impacted on the competitiveness of our industries. In such a highly volatile environment, our industries (manufacturing as well as services) need to find other sources of innovation that will not only help overcome these hurdles but also sustain and boost economic development and growth over the long term. We believe that the 24 by 7 model is a possible answer to our need for innovation. This new paradigm of work can in effect help us improve our levels of productivity and efficiency as well as have positive effects on the development of our society with adequate planning. The aim of the 24/7 campaign is to sensitise all stakeholders to the potentials of the 24 by 7 model, to help the major actors in developing 24 by 7 solutions and also in identifying and overcoming obstacles to this much-needed transition. [back to top](#) Alternative work practices As employers, you may ask yourselves how best to implement the 24 by 7 model. What are the possible HR arrangements that can be used under this new paradigm? What are the working practices which can be used as alternatives to the current 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. model? With time many alternative working practices have surfaced and gained popularity in many industrialised nations such as:

- Shift work: an arrangement whereby the 24-hour working day is divided into a number of shifts and a separate group of employees works for each period of 7 or 8 hours. This employment practice has been designed to make use of the 24 hours of the clock and allow offices and factory plants to operate non-stop.
- Flexi time and Flexible Schedule: work practices that allow employees to vary their working hours according to their needs as long as they perform their standard 35-hour or 40-hour work week.
- Job sharing: a flexible work arrangement where responsibilities and benefits of one full time position are shared between two employees, thereby mitigating the risk of losing critical competences and also ensuring continuity of work;
- Compressed work weeks: a work practice where employees are offered a day off in exchange of longer periods of work, i.e. working four 10-hour days instead of five days a week.
- Reduced Hours/Part time: working hours which are less than the weekly standard 35 or 40 hours of work. It is usually offered to people with health problems or disabilities, or who wish to devote their time to the family and/or other occupations.
- Banking of Hours & Annualised hours: these practices are closely linked to flexible work schedules. If the workload is high, and employees need to work additional hours, these hours can be stored in a 'bank' until it is convenient to take time off. Annualised hours involve rearranging the hours staff work during the year to meet fluctuating and seasonal workloads.
- Gradual/Phased Retirement: this practice allows employees to reduce their workload or their working hours over a period of time instead of retiring abruptly. This allows for smooth planning and transition with improved handing over of work as well as opportunities for transfer of skills within the pool of workers, thus ensuring little disruption in the work processes.
- Flexible Leave Options and Sabbaticals: paid or unpaid authorised periods of time away from work without loss of employment rights granted for family, health care, education or leisure reasons. Sabbatical leave can also be self-funded by the employee, that is, a portion of the salary is withheld.
- Telecommuting, Teleworking/remote working and Virtual Office: work practices allowing employees to work away from the employer's premises, such as at home or from a cybercafé while remaining in touch with the employer through the use of remote access technology. The employer may connect to the remote access employee on video, for instance. Companies often follow this arrangement as this helps them to keep track of their employees.

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Potential benefits of alternative work practices Some of the above alternative work practices may seem more constraining for you as an employer than beneficial. Yet, these are easily offset by the overall benefits offered to your companies. For instance,

- Flexible work schedules and other family-friendly programs can be effective tools in reducing turnover and tardiness and increasing productivity, job satisfaction and company loyalty. Collectively, these positively impact on a company's bottom line;
- Flexible work arrangements, particularly telecommuting, can be used as a means to diminish real estate and other overhead costs;

- Greater cost-effectiveness and efficiency, such as savings on overheads when employees work from home or do job-sharing, may contribute to:

- save office-space and parking requirements;
  - increase productivity and job performance;
  - reduce absenteeism and healthcare-related costs;
  - increase organisational commitment of staff; and
  - more job satisfaction and better staff morale.
- Recruitment and retention of key employees are improved. The 24/7 model has the potential to reduce hiring and training costs. In some instances, greater continuity has been observed as staff, who might otherwise have left, are offered hours they can manage. Many employers find that a better work-life balance has a positive impact on staff retention and on employee relations, motivation and commitment; and
- Business disruptions caused by unexpected circumstances (cyclones, floods, etc) could be minimised thanks to telecommuting or employees working more hours at a stretch during some time to catch up on work delayed.

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**Crafting a proper strategy** The use of Flexible Working Schedules (FWS) can be an effective employee recruitment and retention strategy if the factors contributing to FWS failure are successfully addressed prior to and throughout implementation. Careful planning around factors (like nature of work, total weekly hours and the skill and sophistication of management), using participative schedule design among others, can maximise the chances of achieving the benefits sought and minimising the costs involved in such a transition. To capitalise on the full range of benefits associated with a 24/7 economy, it is imperative for the enterprise to develop a strategy for new ways of working, for instance, by devising a programme of cultural change and awareness raising. To be effective, the strategy should take the following into consideration:

- Staff involvement from the outset in order to minimise risks of internal resistance and to increase motivation to adopt the new model proposed;
- People who need to feel they are not merely a factor in the production equation but real human beings who can contribute greatly to the organisation thanks to their availability and ideas;
- Location and working facilities in order to propose adequate conditions for employees, thereby increasing their motivation;
- Technology and process which may need to be reviewed to be able to meet the needs of 24 by 7 operations, for instance, internet access, upgraded machinery,;
- Organisation of the firm to adopt more team-based collaboration and flatter structures to enable lean and efficient management;
- Support services in order to ensure that core activities are not hampered by issues related to logistics or other non-core activities; and
- Third party facilities which need to be adequately taken on board to ensure that no disruption occurs in the supply chain;
- Social and environmental responsibilities to ensure the sustainability and viability of the organisation whilst maintaining its goodwill with all stakeholders in society;

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**Effective communication & conducive environments** Evidence reveals that, when implementing new successful ways of working, it is vital to communicate and manage the change that is about to happen in the organisation to receive the collaboration of all internal stakeholders. Organisations need to share the vision, make people aware and involve staff in the change programme and to give proper training for staff to use technology needed for flexible working. Human Resource policies also have to be revisited to examine the physical environment and physical demands of several positions and required changes in the workplace. The organisation has to understand where employees can work most effectively and create the facilities and infrastructure to enable them to do so by restructuring and redesigning office, office at home, office on the move and so on. Although workplace behaviour is most positively influenced by internal motivators (e.g., the challenge of the work) rather than external hygiene factors (e.g., the work environment), the absence of satisfactory hygiene factors can lead to decreased performance. The importance of a healthy environment in FWS success should thus be emphasised.

**Employee's wellness programmes** A formal Employee Wellness plan can further increase motivation among staff and thus increase commitment and efficiency. This could include a range of programmes and activities to provide for a healthy workplace. At a broad level, healthy workplace practices should be encouraged, aiming at eliminating or reducing risks to people (including employees), the environment, company assets, and production. Managers too need to communicate adequately with employees about their expectations regarding working arrangements. It is thus important to identify and assign priority to ergonomic factors in the work place. Flexible work hours have been described by employees as a strong contributor to employee well-being. It is also vital to assess the health and safety implications of working at night, for example the fire-evacuation procedure may need review as well as tightening of the security arrangements at night.

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**Provision of child-care policies** Working families would like to see the role of employers enhanced and their involvement in child-care encouraged. The best employers see child-care assistance as

one part of the package of support they provide to their employees to help them with their work-life balance. Good employers recognise that the package they offer must meet the needs of their workforce for high quality child-care which fits with their working patterns. Workplace nurseries, or employer-supported childminding networks can bring additional benefits to the wider community. It is also possible for companies to offer options such as on-site day-care or assisted near-site day-care, subsidies, financial support for community child-care facilities and family child-care networks for temporary or emergency situations. Although telecommuting can allow more flexibility in scheduling child-care and family responsibilities, it is not necessarily a sufficient alternative to day-care.

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**Providing a well-balanced pay policy** Satisfaction with pay and promotion is important. Compensation and recognition systems should be matched to work systems. To be effective, compensation and recognition might be tied to demonstrated skills and/or to peer evaluations. Compensation and recognition approaches might also include profit sharing, team or unit performance and linkage to customer satisfaction and loyalty measures or other business objectives without any bias on the different working arrangements.

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**Ensuring staff welfare** Stress and working hours are showing an upward trend in today's world of competition and era of globalisation. But this grim situation can be changed, and the keyword to bring this change is flexibility. If employees and employer both are flexible then employees can reduce stress, and become more productive as they achieve better work-life balance. The tools are flexible hours, part-time work, job-share, term-time working, home-based working, teleworking and parental leave as described above. Other approaches for enhancing employees work climate might include: mentoring; recreational or cultural activities in all shifts, especially during festive seasons; day-care; special leave for family responsibilities and/or for community service; home safety training; and retiree benefits (including extended health care).

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**Providing rest breaks & food facilities** Hygienic food and refreshment facilities should ideally be provided on the work place during night and Sunday working shifts as local facilities could be closed. Work and jobs should be designed so that employees are able to vary the timing of their own rest breaks to match their individual needs. This also helps them to compensate when necessary for differences in their physical performance capacities.

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**Ensuring transparent terms and conditions** High performance work is characterised by flexibility, innovation, knowledge and skill sharing alignment with organisational objectives, customer focus and rapid response to changing business needs and requirements of the market-place or mission environment. Details such as hours of work and types of communications between the teleworker, co-workers and customers need to be outlined in HR policies for the benefit of all. It is important to note that successful flexible workplace arrangements are achieved through mutual trust, compromise, negotiation, and above all FLEXIBILITY between the employee and employer. Both parties are responsible for ensuring that the arrangement is suitable and is working. Some employees may prefer to prepare a detailed proposal outlining their interest in a flexible workplace arrangement or that their employer adopts formal policies to address these issues. Others may slowly migrate to an arrangement preferring the informal ones that are made between themselves and their immediate supervisor. Every situation is different. Formal policies are designed to protect both the employee and the employer but in some instances they may be too rigid or, on the contrary, too open for interpretation. On the other hand, informal arrangements may initially work well but may be subject to reconsideration in the event that supervisors change.

**Formal written proposals may not be the best way to raise the issue of telecommuting with employers. A better solution may be to begin telecommuting in a casual manner and with the involvement of only the employee's immediate supervisor. Working at home on a short term, casual basis at the start may also give both the employer and employee an idea of what would be involved if the arrangement evolved to a more permanent basis. Again, depending on the individuals, the company, and the job tasks, job sharers may fill in for each other during vacation time, sick days and extended leaves, in compliance with national legislation. Staff working flexibly must naturally be valued and respected in the same way as full-time staff.**

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**Providing adequate technological facilities** The advancement of technology has given a boost to flexible working by providing new technology-enabled ways of working. It is a win-win situation for both employers and employees. A new flexible economy can be brought in through flexible facilities by addressing technology, processes, management and human resources at the same time. Technology infrastructure for flexible working can thus be provided like full voice and data routing, data-dial up and voice divert. Making greater use of the Internet is an increasingly viable solution. Telephone is delivered via the PC using voice over IP and data connection using Internet tunnelling. Flexible working could be implemented using technologies such as group-ware, intranet, knowledge management, integrated messaging and others.

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**In a nutshell** The above list may seem daunting to most employers who are used to the current traditional 9 to 4 model and justifiably so. Yet, we believe that the long term benefits that will be reaped thanks to such efforts will represent valuable compensation to all organisations who embark on this initiative. We believe that a gradual transition is possible with the collaboration of all stakeholders and that not only will our local industries ensure sustainable growth for their activities and revenues, but that our nation will also greatly benefit from such a transformation. External resources that may be consulted (information and practical tips on how to implement flexible work practices):

<http://www.jobwise.gov.au/Jobwise/Employers/PracticalGuide/flexibleworkpractices>  
<http://www.jobwise.gov.au/Jobwise/Employers/PracticalGuide/flexibleworkpractices/Howto.htm>