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WORK IT!

If a new workplace trend is anything to go by, the days of juggling the incompatible demands of job and family could soon be a thing of the past.

We talk to three Kiwi career women who are working it their way

BY ALEXIA SANTAMARIA

Sunday night rolls around and there's that sinking feeling again. Another week, another five days of getting up and running around like a crazy person to get yourself and entourage out the door, working your backside off, fitting errands in your almost non-existent lunchtime and then joining the heaving throng of traffic to get home, make dinner, and rush around some more before falling into bed.

Or not, as the case may be. Workers are now looking at ways to reconfigure their lives so there is more balance. Shift work, working from home, flexible hours and contract work are all becoming part of our employment landscape, and more people are finding ways to work things 'their way'.

Every year the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment carries out a national survey of employers. Results from the 2011/2012 survey show 95% of employers offered staff one or more flexible working arrangements, 85% offered flexible break times, and 74% flexible start and finish times. Other arrangements included part-time work or reduced hours, unpaid leave, working school hours, annualised contracts - where staff have to do a certain number of hours over the year but with flexibility over when they are worked - staff choosing their own rosters or shifts, job sharing and working from home/places other than the office.

So things are definitely changing in the world of employment. Not only are employers offering these arrangements but the recent Survey of Working Life data from December last year (Statistics NZ) indicates many of us are taking them up on it. The survey revealed 48% of employees have flexible working hours.

And the laws around the subject are moving with the times. There was an amendment to the Employer Relations Act (2000) made five years ago which entitled all employees with caring responsibilities to request flexible hours (and have it granted if they met the

criteria) and this is now before parliament with a view to extending it to all employees.

"The law changes are a reflection of what's going on in companies these days," says Bridget Smith, employment law and human resource specialist. "Any forward-thinking company out there is accommodating flexible working hours and locations. It's definitely in part due to technology, which enables us to work from places other than the office. Gone are the days when you needed to get everyone in the same room for a meeting - you don't even need to have them in the same city with Skype, smartphones, video conferencing and tablets.

"It could also come down to changing gender roles," she adds. "It's less common now to have dad at work and mum at home but there are still kids' activities to be fitted in around parents' work hours - even more these days. There is languages, sport, music, cultural enrichment - you name it - and there is pressure to try to fit all those in. Flexibility in hours is needed so parents can ferry kids around!"

Amy Tea, senior search consultant at Sheffield recruitment, has been in the industry for 12 years and believes there has also been a shift in attitude of job seekers over the past five years. "Every day I have candidates tell me money isn't their primary motivator; they are looking for work that has meaning and that will fulfil them. People are looking for so much more >>



than just big salaries, and work-life balance is a high priority.”

So what does the future hold? Will things become so flexible the nine-to-five week will become part of history, studied by future generations in their virtual textbooks as a draconian part of times gone by? Tea says, “Technology is certainly making flexible working arrangements a lot more feasible in terms of location, but some roles, especially executive ones, just have so much in them that flexible working can be the impossible dream.”

Jacqui Barratt, director of Salt recruitment agency and board director of the Recruitment and Consulting Services Association, thinks overseas research might prove contrary. “We’re the industry board for New Zealand and Australia but last year did a huge amount of research into what’s happening in other parts of the world with regards to flexible working arrangements. From what we’ve seen in a global context, I think the working week, as we know it, could disappear,” she says.

“We are seeing, all over the world, that for reasons of economics, employers don’t always need people 40 hours a week, 52 weeks of the year, giving their employees reduced and flexible hours can work well for all parties. There is also people’s increasing desire to be in charge of their own destinies and to

design their own lives. Employees are less willing to just accept the status quo and are looking for ways to make their jobs work well for them and their families.

“In New Zealand we also have the issue of time zones. If we want to really become part of the global economy, our hours will have to be flexible around northern hemisphere timing. The other factor is we are becoming more 24/7 as a society – some gyms are open round the clock and supermarkets late into the night. In the end I guess society will drive when it wants to be serviced and industries will adjust accordingly. It will be interesting to see how it all pans out.”

We talked to three Kiwi women who have tailored their work schedules to better suit their family’s needs.

KIM BALLINGER

Kim Ballinger, 42, has been with Fonterra for a long time – 20 years in fact. Perhaps it’s because of the way they’ve adapted as an employer as her personal situation changed. She even shared a job with her husband at one point.

Ballinger has travelled a lot with the company, including four years in Brazil, Mexico and the US. She had her first child almost eight years ago when she was living in Mexico. “It was great. We had a new baby and although our roles were different, the company was happy to let my husband and I work a few hours each, rotating around the needs of our child. It was perfect for a new mum – some adult stimulation but not too exhausting.”

When she came back to New Zealand and the couple had their second child she went part-time, but a year ago she took on a role as director of key internal customers in Fonterra Nutrition and made the move to full-time. “My boss is very supportive of work-life balance and was happy for me to start at 7 or 7.30am, depending on the day, and finish at either 3 or 4pm. This way I can go home and take the kids to their activities and do any extra hours in the evening to make it up to full-time hours.”

And it works well. “The whole thing has been a lot easier than I thought and we’re both happy as neither of us is missing out on career or kids. Only thing is, I’ve had to learn to be a ‘morning person’ and my husband has had to become much better at hairstyling!



“The thing I like the most is I haven’t had to shy away from career advancement as so many women do. I am in a relatively senior position and there is no loss of respect from my team or management because I’m not doing late hours. In fact I make sure my team has flexibility too and support them with working from home some of the time.

“A change of space and timing can do great things for both people’s general wellbeing and their productivity. I’m so grateful to be working for a company that understands the value of this.” >>

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LOUISE MAY

Louise May has a flexible working arrangement - across three continents.

She works from her Auckland home for VTech, a Hong Kong-based children's educational electronics company, as marketing manager for the American market. You don't get much more international than that. Clearly there are three time zones involved here so this is definitely no nine to five. May's day starts around 8.30am when she Skypes Chicago and New York for an hour and a half or so. At 10am it's time for the American offices to go home so she spends from 10am to 1pm writing and doing non-contact work till 1pm when Hong Kong comes online and she can have her Skype meetings with them.

At 2.30pm she packs it in and goes to pick up the kids. She does this six days a week to make up her hours and loves it. "I get the best of everything. Time with the kids and a fulfilling career I enjoy. It's all a bit crazy but it works amazingly well, especially because I can work while the other offices are sleeping and vice versa," May says.

Maybe part of this is because the company is very family-focused. Amazingly, May and her counterparts in Hong Kong and the States - all mothers - sat down and worked out all their school and kindy pick-ups and drop-offs and made sure they never schedule meetings at that time.

"We're all on the same page," May says. "We are all trying to work around our kids and we respect each other's lives enormously. We are all brutally efficient without being brutal. There are no long and unnecessary meetings. We just get on with it!"

May credits her ability to hold down this kind of job (with three kids under seven) to a great company and a supportive husband. "Christian helps a lot with getting the kids off to school. I couldn't do it without him. It's so great to be able to enjoy my work but not miss out on my kids' lives. If you're willing to work hard, you can make it work for you and have the best of both worlds without having to compromise either family or career."

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HOW TO WIN FLEXIBILITY

Arny Tea from recruitment agency Sheffield and Bridget Smith from Swarbrick Beck Mackinnon share some top tips for negotiating flexible working arrangements:

- **Be as clear** as you can about what you want. Think through what type of flexible arrangement will suit you. For example, will you enjoy working from home or will you feel isolated? Can you afford to go

part-time and take a pay cut? Once you're clear on how you'd like to structure your hours, consider how the arrangement will work for the company. If you can show how what you are proposing will add value to the business, you stand a far better chance of winning over your employer.

- **Suggest or agree** to a trial period. It will give both parties an opportunity to review, and will make the risk seem less to your employer. If you genuinely think it

can and will work, a trial period won't hurt anyone.

- **Make sure you** are able to demonstrate how you will measure and report on the work you do.

- **Explain how you** can be easily contacted when you are working away from the office.

- **Make sure you** think through any possible objections your employer may have before you meet to discuss the proposal, and have an answer ready should these arise in the discussion.



KATHRYN SWALLOW

Kathryn Swallow has never worked harder and more efficiently in her life. She is part of a group of three mums who make up the communications team at Pfizer and they all work 20 hours a week each, whenever and wherever they want.

"My boss, Frances, is amazing," Swallow says. "She did it hard when she returned to work after kids and even had to sign a contract saying she wouldn't get pregnant again for two years! Her experience means she values working mothers and realises if you let parents work around their kids they will feel more in balance and be more productive."

Swallow's team all work in different parts of communications: from internal communications through to government relations, but they are all able to cover each other's

Working it my way

removes the element of drudgery and makes me really enjoy what I do'

jobs, which makes it even easier.

"From a financial viewpoint it works well for the company too; they only pay for three part-timers and get a wealth of expertise and probably more productivity than what they would from one full-time, in-house worker," Swallow says.

"I do a mix of home and work time, which gives me the best of both worlds. Home is the easier location because there are no distractions, but being in an office makes you feel connected and you can bounce ideas around. Working it my way definitely removes the element of drudgery and makes me really enjoy what I do, as it doesn't infringe too much on my second career of being a mum.

"I still can't quite believe I have landed this ideal position and I really hope the fact a big multinational like Pfizer can do this is of encouragement to others.

"Frances really understands what parents are looking for, and as long as we achieve what we need to, she doesn't really care how or where. I really hope to see more opportunities like this open up for other parents in the future." □

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