

Straight Talking

By **PHIL GREEN** CBS



As CBS celebrates 25 years in business, we offer a perspective on how business practices have shifted over the years. This month we focus on working practices.

Driven by economic pressures and changing personal aspirations, staffing and management practices in today's workplaces are becoming ever more flexible. Among the more notable trends that have emerged over the past two decades are:

Part-time and flexible working – a boon or a headache?

Increasingly companies are recruiting part time workers. A large majority of these are working mothers but may also be drawn from the ranks of the retired, or younger people choosing to work part-time either to get experience when jobs are scarce or to leave time to pursue other ambitions.

Flexible working patterns and avoiding over-long hours offer benefits to both employers and employees. Workers may benefit from reduced stress and ill-health, while demonstrating improved productivity and quality of work. However, coping with absences due to holiday cover, increased maternity - and now paternity - leave, or other career commitments can put a strain on employers, leaving them under-resourced and faced with supply uncertainty at critical points. Ultimately the answer may be to tackle the situation at a national level, with a more fundamental shift in working practices. For example, companies who have adopted a 3 day week in response to business conditions have

proved that it is possible to keep clients satisfied while operating to reduced hours. This may involve the recognition that we need to put the brakes on client expectations and shift back to a more realistic delivery time frame.

Changing employment patterns - how do businesses stand to gain?

Companies faced with precarious trading conditions and rising overheads are making greater use of short term contractors or temporary workers, and encouraging homeworking sometimes on a self-employed basis. Such flexibility benefits workers as well as providing vital short-term support for employers coping with key skills shortages or fluctuating demand patterns. Such practices may work well in certain industries e.g. IT but where customer service is an important element of delivery, establishing a sense of continuity and making staff aware of company values is important - both in giving them security and ensuring a positive attitude.

Evidence supports the business case for changing work practices, both in terms of improving individuals' work-life balance as well as making a positive contribution that impacts directly on the bottom line. Good work organization and ultimate success depends on understanding and contribution from both sides when considering the impact of change and a recognition that everyone has a role in making it work. Equally important is that all staff share common business goals and aspirations, whether part or full time working from within the office or remotely, and a recognition that **putting clients first is paramount.**

