JUMP Corporate Hub
29 November 2018
Agile and Flexible Work Models: What Impact on Gender Equality, How to Make Them Sustainable.

Summary of the session

1. Introduction

1. In general

Historically, flexible working has evoked a negative perception where employees would be branded as less driven, less achievement-focused or less ambitious. Today, organisations realise that adopting a flexible working policy is critical to create an inclusive environment and attract talent, if they want to respond to the evolving needs of parents – working mothers, dual career families, single parents – and to the changing values of Generations X, Y and Z.

However, this talent will leave and search elsewhere unless agile and flexible working is truly ingrained in the culture of the organisation, where results are rewarded and senior leadership role model a new way of working.

Natalie Wilkins from Thriving Talent shared the theory and best practices to explore how an organisation can positively influence the adoption of agile and flexible working for more inclusion. Erwin Ollivier, General Manager of Athlon Belgium, and Kristien Van den Branden, COO of Accenture, illustrated what their organisations are doing in terms of innovative workplaces reflecting their inclusive culture and both also shared their personal stories.

1. Our host Accenture

This hub was hosted by Marta Pogorzelska, solution architect at Accenture Belux; Marta is also leading the Accenture Belux Inclusion & Diversity programme. She is a passionate believer in an inclusive workplace and the value a diverse workforce creates for Accenture and its clients. With the Inclusion and Diversity programme, Accenture drives initiatives that reinforce the inclusive work environment in which the unique strengths of each individual are recognized.

2. Expert speaker

Natalie Wilkins, Co-founder and Managing Partner of Thriving Talent

Natalie Wilkins is one of the co-founders and Managing Partners of Thriving Talent, a talent management consultancy in Switzerland which helps organisations prosper by enabling inclusive and respectful cultures, so that their employees thrive at work and at home. In close collaboration with forward thinking employers and partners, they

are on a mission to empower one million parents by 2020 and have a positive impact on the future of work.

Natalie Wilkins explained that at Thriving Talent, all colleagues work on a 80% schedule and workload is project-based. They do not have a real office so they work virtually and focus on output rather than on time invested.

In organisations today, people of **different generations** are working together and all could benefit from more flexible work models. The millennial study of Deloitte suggests flexibility and a positive workplace culture to be of utmost importance for this generation. Also dual career couples are looking for more flexibility, as do baby-boomers at the end of their career.

What do we mean by **flexible working**? It is crucial to determine where you are flexing, when, and how.

- *Where?* Here are some possibilities to create a flexible working environment: working across different offices, telecommuting (part of the week or the whole week), or working from a variety of locations (remote work).
- *When?* Companies can establish flexible start and finish times but with core hours, they can annualise flexibility (with term time for example), etc. Some people can work compressed hours, that is to say that they work their total contracted hours over fewer working days. Others can work on shift schedules, that is to say outside the 9am – 5 pm day.
- *How?* With people working part-time, it is possible to establish job sharing: two persons work on a part-time or reduced-time basis to perform a job normally fulfilled by one person working full-time. Another solution is unpaid leave.

Those new ways of working have several **benefits**. First of all, you get a bigger pool of candidates for the job. Therefore, it is important to adapt your job advertisements to reflect what you have on offer. It is also a way of optimising the employees' skills. Retention and motivation improve and productivity increases. Natalie Wilkins refers to a study of BT in the UK which states that performance improved by 30% when more flexibility was offered and higher productivity was reported by >90% of the managers surveyed.

With more flexibility, you get more female leaders, moving up the ladder. The carbon footprint is reduced as a lot of people work from home so drive less and use less office space, which also means that business costs are reduced. It can lead to economic growth. More flexibility also enhances the well-being of employees as people are less absent and less ill, and more engaged. Another aspect of flexibility is that it increases knowledge transfer, as older people work longer and can transfer their knowledge to starters.

This being said, there are of course also some **risks**. Mainly legal costs and insurance coverage – as employees are not working on site – but these risks are easy to mitigate. Collaboration and engagement can also be threatened as people are less in contact with their colleagues so you need to implement useful technology

to help sustain work relations. And, some sceptics think that flexibility diminishes productivity but Natalie does not agree with this idea seen the extensive research, pointing out the performance wins.

According to her, the **main challenges and barriers** to establishing flexibility at work are management attitude, the fear of the unknown, some sector limitations, and the customer service requirements. Depending on the sector, more creativity is needed to implement flexible work models: for a SME it will probably be more difficult than for a multinational. In professional services where there is often a 24/7 availability expectation of the client, leadership needs to set the tone, educate clients and innovate the design of the delivery of the output.

For companies that start to become more flexible, it is important to follow a **process**. The first thing to do is to **assess** how much of the office or plant footprint is actually in use and to observe and listen to employees' diverse needs.

Then, it is crucial to set **clear policies and enablers**: when it is or is not acceptable to be away from the office, how compensation and promotion decisions are handled when working flexible, what technologies will support work and collaboration, etc. You need to develop a meaningful set of flexible work options from which employees can pick and choose. For example, a consulting firm in Switzerland has 4 or 5 deals from which employees can choose. In one deal, the employees only work four months a year, in peak season. It is important to be creative to make it work for everyone.

After that, **leaders have to be empowered and equipped**. The need to have the confidence, skills, and tools to lead flexible teams effectively. They can be empowered with robust performance management processes and defined metrics. It is crucial to explain to them that they do not always have to manage by presentism. For example, a bank in Switzerland checked and found a positive correlation between productivity and flex work with their performance management process.

If you have started already and want to **become flex role models**, things get harder. Natalie suggests to challenge the status quo, make it gender neutral and measure success.

You need to actively encourage uptake and make working flexible the standard for every role, including leadership level. Another key element is to challenge the stereotypes that persist – especially on gender. Especially men need to step up and you need to encourage everyone to work more flexible. When all of this is achieved, the last thing to do is to measure success by demonstrating proof of the potential to progress one's career. Measuring will accelerate behavioural change. As for any change programme, you need to benchmark and reassess frequently.

3. Company testimonials

Erwin Ollivier, General manager at Athlon Belgium

Erwin Ollivier is the General Manager of Athlon Belgium, a medium size company with 180 employees, recently acquired by Daimler Financial Services. In 2016 Erwin was elected 'Corporate Gender Equality Ambassador' at the Wo.Men @ Work Award ceremony for his track record in bringing gender equality to his organisation in a pragmatic way.

When he arrived in the firm as general manager in 2012, everything was very top-down and not really inclusive. His goal was and is still to create an **agile organisation**, that is to say an organisation in which people can work the way which works the best for them, under the condition that some values are shared by everyone. In the VUCA world we live, change is here to stay.
According to Erwin, the **organisation's culture** is the key driver to create flexibility. Each year, Athlon runs a survey in order to check employees' satisfaction. The results on the questions about inclusion and flexibility show that people are quite pleased.

One of the first measures he took when changing the culture was to stop asking for the doctor's proof of illness and just **trust** employees. In fact, flexibility is about trusting people and giving them responsibilities. It has to do with the **empowerment** of people. You need to set the **tone from the top** by showing interest, frame expectations and leading by example.
It is a **culture of give and give**: when you give, employees also want to give back to the company. As a consequence, a lot of employees work as **intrapreneurs.**
Erwin Ollivier gave some specific example in order to illustrate:

A female senior manager from his firm worked way too much and took the burden of everyone's work because she was very perfectionist. He explained to her that it was not what was expected of her. A coach was appointed to help her learn to apply the Pareto principle. Most leaders have the tendency to keep on asking people to work more while it is crucial to help them find the right balance. Erwin believes that you need to **care for your employees**, to nurture them. If you see that someone is pushing his/her limits, it is the manager's role to protect this person from burn-out. For example, when a female manager asked for a 4/5 work schedule, he discussed with her how she would adapt her workload in order to make this work in practice, so she would not end up with a full-time job for 80% pay.

Flexibility benefits everyone in the company, including men. In fact, those who are fathers are able to be more involved in parenthood. This cultural shift therefore **also benefits the male population** and **improves gender equality**.

Erwin Ollivier described a new project in his organisation: employees can bring their kids to work during school holidays where employees take turns to entertain them, with the support of external people from Cokido. This increases flexibility for parents and helps them to balance their work and personal life.

Kristien Van den Branden, COO at Accenture

Kristien Van den Branden has recently accepted the role of Accenture BeLux Operations Lead, as right hand of the CEO Bart De Ridder. Her main qualifications are in Project / Program / Business Operations management and in team management, people development, training. In her current role she is also sponsoring the Cultural Change Journey launched with the **Belong.BE.You** program that is amongst other points also focusing on **flexible work options**.

Kristien Van den Branden shared with us her **personal story** in order to illustrate the changes that occurred in her organisation in terms of flexibility.
When she started in 2006, Accenture was a very male dominated environment. If she could give her younger self one career advice it would be: choose your life partner wisely! Kristien married a great husband, also working for Accenture at the time, and they share all household duties and care for their 3 children 50/50. When they had their first child, Kristien asked if she could work four days a week and the answer given to her was not very encouraging: "If you think you can make it work you should try"… so in the beginning she claimed flexibility to make it work.

Since then, there has been a lot of changes, such as more flexibility with clients and working hours. Now this is generally available. When she returned to work after a period of absence due to burn-out, she received a lot of **support**, also from male leaders giving her the time she needed. Kristien is now mentoring/sponsoring people that are returning after LT absence herself.
The new CEO has one mission: be a "more human CEO". He shares openly on his personal life. According to Kristien Van den Branden it illustrates the **creation of a new culture** – even if changing the culture of a big corporation takes a lot of time.

At Accenture, they used to talk about work-life balance but decided not to use this expression anymore as there is only one life so now they talk about **work-life integration**.
Flexibility is needed, both for millennials and for the first colleagues becoming grandparents and the first person retiring after a career at Accenture.
Accenture has a clear vision on D&I. Now there are 35% women and they want to evolve towards 50% by 2025.
In the last employee engagement survey, people expressed their expectations with regard to flexibility. They believe it should be a given that training and holidays are not cancelled due to work. People expect managers who support them to work from home. So Accenture is talking to clients to educate them, as some don't want to provide flexibility to contractors. Employees also believe that in order to be creative and innovative, there needs to be less work pressure, so this is something Accenture still wants to work on as consulting remains a very demanding work environment.

4. Discussion & Best practices Sharing Session

- Office space

The participants questioned the **open-space office**. As Isabella Lenarduzzi points out, having no individual office can reinforce the traditional powers in place as

everyone is visible, there is no privacy, and it can make people feel more uncomfortable. It is particularly true for women who always feel on display. It can put a lot of pressure on them, for example on how they dress. Moreover, Natalie Wilkins thinks that open spaces do not encourage productivity or collaboration. It does not suit every personality style. She explained that they have stopped implementing open-spaces in Switzerland. Today, some organisations are creating new sorts of work spaces. One participant for example explained to have implemented more **activity-based work stations** and this mix of different spaces suits all types of personalities. There are different areas, such as silence areas, meeting rooms for collaboration, open spaces, and a big central spot. Erwin Ollivier thinks that it is crucial that employees feel good at work. In his organisation, everyone is allowed to work from home but almost everyone comes to the office daily for the cosy atmosphere. According to Erwin Ollivier, most companies go wrong by giving the project to the financial and facilities departments whereas it should be about the organisation's culture so tackled at strategic level.

- It's all about the culture

Is it a good idea for a firm to have a **Chief Happiness Officer** or well-being director? For Natalie Wilkins, it should be the role of every leader. A participant said that it was peculiar to give the ownership of happiness to someone in the office as everyone should be responsible for its own attitude. As Isabella Lenarduzzi states it: shouldn't we begin with **respect**? An organisation should first be inclusive so that everyone feel that they belong. More and more companies have a well-being policy but no diversity policy, but it is crucial to **be conscious of the level of inclusion** of your company.

- Are women less satisfied/happy/engaged than men?

Erwin Ollivier explained that each year, the results of his company's satisfaction survey show that **women are 10% more critical than men**. How can we explain that? Are women more demanding? Or do they have a different reality than men at work?

A few years ago, Isabella Lenarduzzi attended a presentation of the label "Great place to work" in Madrid. When she asked a manager if they included a diversity indicator and if the results of the satisfaction questionnaire were gendered (analysed by sexe), he replied that they stopped doing so as women were systematically less satisfied/happy at work than men. He explained that since there was no clear objective reason for this difference, they wanted to erase the fact that women are more difficult than men. This is a **classic stereotype** of women "too complicated to understand" that completely denies the reality – which is that the culture of a company is not naturally respectful of everyone and **women live another reality** each day. Each company has its own culture, but those who do not fit the model of their leader are perceived as "outsiders" and they have to adapt themselves in order to be recognised and valued. Therefore, as the norm in companies is usually masculine, women feel part of the "diversity" even though they constitute half of humanity. Isabella Lenarduzzi added that it is a gender issue as women still struggle with the imposter syndrome and the impression that they always have to prove

themselves. **Sexism** is not necessarily openly aggressive, and this is why it is sometimes difficult to perceive it, sometimes it is a sum of a lot of micro-aggressions. People use benevolent sexism, sometimes without the intention of hurting women. It is the case for example when a woman is kindly asked if she should not be taking care of her kids on Wednesdays.

- The employee experience

"Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of your clients." (Richard Branson)

Companies need to become more inclusive, by catering for all, very diverse, flexibility needs. There is a lot of diversity in the needs of employees. Your flexibility is not the same as mine. **Focus groups** explaining the results of employee engagement surveys and social barometers help to understand those needs. Women networks and other Employee Resource Groups (**ERG**) like e.g. expats or working parents, could also give valuable input to leaders and HR. If those groups are asked to help create flexibility guidelines, cafeteria plans & policies, people will feel a greater **sense of belonging** and engagement and your plans will be more effective.

According to Erwin Ollivier, the relation between employees and the company is economical and should be a fair-trade. He talks about a "**psychological contract**". A participant stated that we sometimes forget that we do not buy a person but a service. The person is not a resource, but a means to reach a certain result. Erwin explained that sometimes the human factor is forgotten, that is to say that we think that when we pay people, everything is allowed.

- Role models wanted

"Be the change you want to see in the world." (Mahatma Gandhi)

We can all do something, and lead the way for change, also at our level. We should not always wait for others to change or complain about the situation, but start with changing ourselves: our perceptions, our communications, our actions.

However, there was consensus that in order to work flexible, you **need the back-up** of the leader at the top of your universe, otherwise it's almost a suicidal mission. It is important to have frontrunners, and it is crucial that leaders support them if we really want the company's culture to change: **the change needs to come from the top**. When it comes from the top, it influences the middle management. For example, it is crucial to **change the perception** on part-time jobs. Even for people working 80%, everyone has the idea that they are less committed and so they are less able to advance their careers. If we want to change things, we need to get rid of this way of thinking.

In order to change the mentality of people, it is interesting for a company to implement **group coaching** sessions. People then feel that they have the support of others and it can thus help make a real shift of culture.

- Work-life integration.

"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans"

The question is to know how you manage to integrate your work into your life.

Isabella Lenarduzzi gave the example of a company that wants to do a coaching on work and private time with the two partners in order to raise awareness in couples. Natalie Wilkins also mentioned some programmes for **dual career couples** to help them have a **meaningful conversation** about their time management. Is it too intrusive? According to Erwin Ollivier, it really depends on the company's drivers. Today, our society is going to overdrive and it is important to re-centre on important things: leaders from the organisations we work in should help us do that. For example, Natalie Wilkins thinks that learning how to be vulnerable is a life-changer.

Integration also has to do with **parental leave**, and especially **paternity leave** which is not yet widely taken. Kristien Van den Branden for example explained that her husband – who was working in a big company – was the first one from his department to ask for parental leave. The next year, they were four. It is important that companies organise campaigns to explain the importance of flexibility. However, in terms of paternity leave, it is usually difficult to **find men that want to testify and become role models**. In fact, according to Isabella Lenarduzzi, they have the perception that it will hinder their careers.

The problem remains that **not each role can be flexible in every context**. A participant takes the following example: a doctor having medical appointments needs to be there in person. Does it mean that some people cannot really be flexible? Or is this an easy excuse used by some to end the discussion? Companies need to get more creative and innovative to see what is possible instead of looking at the barriers and risks.

- Add a gender dimension to flexibility

With virtual and remote working, a different approach is needed to manage one's career. **Women often lack visibility**, and this can be increased if they do not always work at the office. Men tend to **find mentors and sponsors** informally; women need to be conscious of this and strategically invest and look for mentors and sponsors. It is thus crucial that company leaders understand this specific issue and develop solutions, such as horizontal networks.

Thank you to all participants!

Thanks for sharing!

Don't miss the up-coming Corporate Hub on "***Do's and don'ts for building and evolving your diversity network strategy for success***" (February 14, 2019).