



TEN2TWO

# COMPASS BRIEFING: FLEXIBILITY IN SMES

2025



# Contents

Page

1.	Introduction	3
2.	Summary	3
3.	Recruiting Flexible Workers	5
4.	<i>Feature: Managing a Flexible Work Environment in a Conscious Way</i>	6
5.	Onboarding Flexible Workers	7
6.	<i>Feature: Caring for your Team's Mental Health</i>	8
7.	Managing Flexible individuals	9
8.	<i>Feature: Practical Guidance for considering flexible working requests</i>	10
9.	Managing Flexible Teams	11
10.	More Resources: Watch the Webinars	13
11.	Our Contributors	13



# Introduction



Thank you for downloading our Compass Briefing 'Flexibility in SMEs'. 2025 marks Ten2Two's 18th year pioneering professional flexible and part-time recruitment in the UK and during that time we've seen major changes in attitudes towards workplace flexibility. But the changes we've seen over the years pale into insignificance compared to how business had to react to the pandemic and in many cases become flexible employers overnight.

Many businesses, particularly busy SMEs, are still understanding how flexibility works best for them, their people and their customers but they haven't got long to work it out. Without flexibility hanging on to our best people and finding new talent can be a struggle.

So that's why we've put together this guide. We've combined our expertise and knowledge with practical suggestions from a range of our flexible SME clients and added a few features from three expert friends of Ten2Two on 'Conscious Management', mental health and an important legal aspect of flexible working.

We hope you find it useful and look forward to supporting you in the future.

**Jane O'Gorman**  
Director

## Summary

Recent research from Sodexo highlights the changed nature of flexibility in the workplace, stating "76% of employees are more likely to apply for a role if there is an option to work flexible hours". Indeed, a number of Ten2Two's recent clients have approached us to help them find flexible workers for a job that didn't previously have any flexibility on offer as they had an insufficient response to their initial search.

SMEs are best positioned to take advantage of these changes in workplace culture. Their size makes them agile and able to adjust quickly. However, Sodexo's research goes on to say "Of the 52% of employees who would rather work for a big corporation, 45% said they were put off by SMEs due to the lack of flexibility", highlighting the need for SMEs to shout about the benefits of working in a flexible environment that benefits everyone.

Creating and sustaining a productive and flexible working culture can be a challenge. Our clients highlighted effective working practices from designing a role through to the best ways of managing flexible people and the teams they're part of. They highlight the need for great communication (even over communicating), clarity of working practices, clear goals and expectations and a flexible approach to changing and adjusting when required.

Nicola Lloyd from CPS probably summarised it the best in saying "Lead, don't manage. Share the highs, learn from the lows. Listen. Praise." But this is just good leadership and management, flexible or not. Owners, Founders, Directors and Managers must create the right environment, tone and strategy but the beauty of the SME is that it's easier to get every employee engaged, committed and productive in a flexible environment.



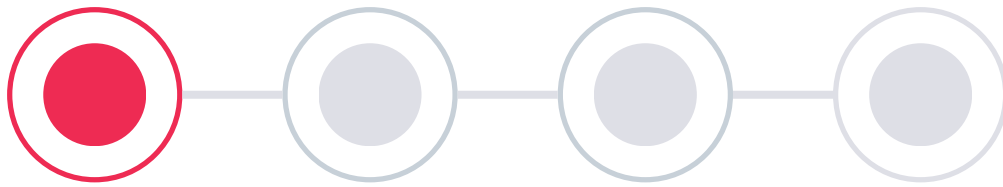


What I like about the current situation is that both men and women are asking for the kind of flexibility that previously has been dominated by women and so flex was a gender issue. It isn't anymore and long term I think this will be good for all"

Fiona Mason  
RDT







## Recruiting Flexible Workers

### Incorporating Flexibility into a role

- Some form of flexibility can be incorporated into virtually every job. From part-time hours for roles that might not (now or ever) require full-time hours to a full-time hybrid work from home/office split, there are multiple formats that might work for you. Find out more about the flexible working formats available to you [here](#)
- Several clients mentioned the need to carefully match the demands of the role with the right flexibility option. The functional skills and experience required for the role may be primary but adding flexibility offers a wider range of candidates and improved employee retention
- Flexibility in any single role must work for all stakeholders - the employee, the team, the company and customers so an important part of role design is mapping the relationships and dependencies for each group against the person/job/flexibility to identify the perfect solution
- Flex isn't just about hours worked – it's a philosophy – leading to a better understanding of employees needs and results in better outcomes for clients

### Interview & Selection

- In today's candidate-driven market it's important to sell your company's culture and working environment to candidates and go beyond the 'hard' benefits we're used to discussing
- The most frequent feedback from our clients on selecting candidates for flexible roles was to explore the candidates' 'soft skills' - the skills required not just to do the job but to do it effectively in a flexible environment
- Communications skills, personal organisation and discipline and a collaborative approach to work are all vital to high performance in a flexible role and flexible organisation. This can be explored with a candidate by discussing their recent experiences of working flexibly in other organisations and their day to day lives
- If you're unaccustomed to interviewing remotely by video, consider the limitations of video in gaining the best insight on the candidate's personality and fit for your business. Check out this 'top ten tips' for interviewing via video [here](#) for a useful reminder



Make sure that the needs of the candidate and the needs of the business are equally considered when coming up with a flexible working solution - then everybody is happy! "

**Charlie Haward , Optimising IT**



Offering good work-life balance makes working for a company who cares about their employees very desirable"

KAROLINA RADZICKA  
BIG GREEN SMILE



Concentrate on the communication skills (at interview). If they are great at their job but cannot communicate, WFH or flexible working is really hard"

LOUISE TOWLER  
INDIGO TREE DIGITAL

# Feature: Managing a flexible work environment in a conscious way

**Natasha Wallace, Founder & CEO, The Conscious Leadership Co**



Managing a flexible work environment requires leaders to become more 'conscious' of the needs of the team and how to make sure that everyone is clear about what needs to be delivered, regardless of where or when they work. Here are the 5 key ways in which you as a leader can effectively manage a flexible workforce.

## Communicate consciously

A mix of formal and informal communication is important, discussing work and deliverables while also creating the space to talk about 'less productive' things. We've lost the chance to bond and connect in the workplace and constant Zoom calls aren't helping. Making time to catch up on each other's day to day lives may seem like wasting time but it creates trust which is the glue that binds the highest performing teams together.

## Learn how to empathise

Conscious Leaders have empathy for their team members' unique needs. It's not enough anymore to be a technically competent leader, you need to be able to connect with your team on a human level. That means noticing everyone in your team, listening to them, and being accepting and supportive of their needs. Feeling psychologically safe is fundamental to high performance in teams and so unless people feel like they can honestly express themselves and ask for what they need (including flexibility), you'll undermine the performance of the team.

## Give accountability not tasks

In a traditional office setting, leaders can see their employees daily and hand out work on an ongoing and ad-hoc basis. However, this is harder when people are working flexibly. How do you organise work when you're not always together? You move from giving out tasks to giving out accountability. It means consciously setting clear goals and expectations alongside employees, giving regular feedback and encouraging your team to speak up.

## Encourage flexibility

Rather than simply accepting that people want flexibility and making some adjustments to accommodate it, you should be encouraging flexibility, trusting people to get the work done in the way that works best for them. Obviously, employees need to take responsibility too, recognising that there's normally a team operating together, but with that in mind, you should be comfortable allowing a degree of flexibility in how people choose to work and that often means role modelling some level of flexibility yourself!

## Trust!

You need to trust your team and their skills. Challenging yourself to trust others to do the right thing can be hard, especially for a lot of leaders who like to feel in control but in the long term, it serves you well as trusted employees are generally more engaged and perform better. It means keeping in regular dialogue with them and staying on top of progress but giving them the space to get on and get the work done. You also need to check the judgments you're making of people who want to work in a way that's different from what you'd see as effective or necessary. That can mean challenging some of your own beliefs about what 'good' looks like. So, pay attention to yourself - you may need to change your mind on a few things!

[www.tclc.co](http://www.tclc.co)



## Onboarding Flexible Workers

### Planned Induction

- An onboarding programme acclimatises employees to their new role, the company's strategy, plans, processes and policies. It quickly engages employees, creating commitment and a stronger sense of belonging to the company and people around them. James Wiles of Foam Engineers says "We don't do anything differently (for flexible workers)". But with hybrid working people can easily feel uninformed and isolated if they do not feel involved or are not learning from day one

### Face to Face

- Most of our clients highlighted their preference for new recruits to have some face to face time if the company is fully or semi remote. Several organise days when everyone is in the office (or together at a different venue) to meet their new colleague to create a welcoming environment and establish strong working relationships as quickly as possible

### Clarity

- Judith Sweetman from Reason highlighted the need for clarity from the get-go saying "Clarity about expectations and accountability and about contacting others (how and when) and meetings etiquette to honour everyone's working pattern is vital" and this clarity is needed for both the new recruit and the other members of the team to enhance the whole team's performance

### Flexibility

- A new employee's working pattern may need adjusting over time (e.g. more time in an office for the first months or a change of part-time working schedule) so it's important to agree what further flexibility might be needed upfront and start discussing needs and options as early as possible

### Buddy Up!

- Allocate a buddy colleague or mentor who's working a similar pattern to point the way, help resolve logistical or communications issues and help the new recruit feel supported and engaged.



Ensure that the onboarding includes some F2F time initially with a variety of team members - it's so important to start building those business relationships"

**Danusia Jolliffe, TVision Technology**



Make sure any technical issues are ironed out before any working from home is done"

CHARLIE HAWARD  
OPTIMISING IT



Have an interactive onboarding process - don't leave them to just read tons of stuff.

NICOLA LLOYD  
CPS



# Feature: Caring for your team's mental health

**Sean Ruane, Founder & CEO, Mind Data**



## So, why is mental health important at work?

Much recent research shows happier employees that have a high degree of trust are more engaged. Ultimately, more engaged employees are more productive and stay longer at organisations.

There was so much uncertainty during the pandemic and with the world at large and this uncertainty can be linked with a number of different mental health challenges from anxiety to depression. It's important that as managers and leaders we start to understand more about mental health and how we can better support our teams in this aspect like we've never needed to before.

## Understanding our team's needs for mental health support

Mental health comes in all shapes and sizes; what affects one person's well-being may be entirely different to another's so it's important to know that as leaders and managers there isn't a one size fits all approach. Connecting with each individual on our team and understanding how they feel, subjectively is important to understanding how to support their mental health.

Traditionally, as managers we can be more transactional. That is, we talk about job roles, the workload and job-related targets. What this doesn't enable us to do is to connect as humans. We must focus on creating a connection, rather than a transaction.

## So, how can we do this as leaders?

Ask them how they are feeling without talking about work.

Be vulnerable with your team, it's hard to be open and honest with someone who isn't open and honest with you so lead by example. Ask them what they need from you. As the old saying goes: Don't treat people how you want to be treated, treat them how they would want to be treated.

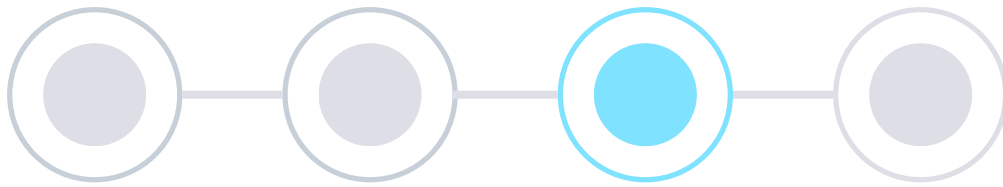
Be aware of mental health fluctuations and how quickly things change. Having a monthly or quarterly mental health related conversation is probably too infrequent. Try to aim for a weekly catch up. Be as flexible as you possibly can, with a hybrid approach, many people can't predict unknown events to do with children, parents or pets for example.

Be self-aware: be aware of how you are coming across to your team. Asking someone out of the blue if they "have five minutes" can be anxiety-inducing. Give some context and explain why you need five minutes with them.

You can't pour from an empty cup. You must take care of your own mental health to stay focused and engaged at work.

Ultimately, we are seeing a shift from the traditional manager role to a more coaching role. With hybrid work becoming ever more prevalent it's easier than ever to change employers. We must put an emphasis and priority on keeping people happy, healthy, and engaged at work and trust that this will lead to greater rates of productivity and achieving targets. If nothing else, it's the right thing to do and we as leaders, who are in a privileged position, owe it to our teams to make them feel safe and mentally healthy

[www.minddata.io](http://www.minddata.io)



## Managing Flexible individuals

### Communication is the Key

- Nearly all of our clients highlighted the need for regular communications with individuals to help keep them on track, understand and address barriers and issues and keep them in touch and aligned with the business. Suzi Lawrence from the London Communications Agency says "Agree what you both want and need in terms of checking in and contact. Meet in person regularly as well as online and adjust as needed – just because it worked at first doesn't mean it will forever".
- The personal catch up is as important as the work stuff and needs to be created when working remotely or part-time. It helps keep people involved and engaged and offers an informal opportunity to listen and understand the individual. As one client says: "You need to replicate the chat at the coffee machine that we used to have when we all worked in the office". A deliberate structure helps this, whether it's a regular 1:1 or just time when the team know you're around for them (see Louise Towler's great tip below!)

### Performance Management

- Setting objectives and regularly reviewing progress encourages high performance and alignment of people's goals to those of the organisation. Linking this to regular, structured feedback and empathetic, supportive coaching provides an effective framework for a flexible organisation. It crucially also triggers discussion around personal development needs, encouraging improved performance and personal growth. An agile, continuous cycle (instead of a rigid annual process) brings more dynamism to the organisation and is proven to improve engagement

### Review and Adjust

- Regularly reviewing working patterns and habits for individual and teams was also mentioned by clients. As the business changes, the flexibility within the team and individuals may also have to adjust. Good planning and collaboration is important if working patterns need to change.
- Setting specific working hours also helps in a remote environment. It's easy to blur work and home when not set by a regular commute. Both productivity and wellbeing can suffer if not monitored.



I diarise 121s fortnightly so that my team know they have time in my diary. It's so important they know they are valued and allocating regular time demonstrates this. "

Danusia Jolliffe, TVision Technology



Have daily open hours when they know they can speak to you without needing to schedule a call. I hang out on teams for 30 mins every day around noon"

LOUISE TOWLER  
INDIGO TREE DIGITAL



Listen to what their needs and concerns are and encourage them to be open about those needs and concerns"

JANE BENNETT  
JE BENNETT LAW

# Feature: Practical Guidance for considering flexible working requests

**David Rushmere, Partner, Machins**



Since a change in law in April 2024, all employees have the right to request flexible working from day one of employment for any reason. A formal request can relate to a change of hours, a change to the times when the employee is required to work, and also a change to the place of work (home/employer's other locations).

There is no legal requirement to allow a flexible working request but employers must consider all requests in a reasonable manner. Many requests fall to be determined by the direct line manager of the person making the request as accommodating the request is more often an operational question. It is therefore important for managers to understand the obligations placed upon them by the statutory scheme so they can understand how to consider a request. It is also important to consider related employment rights so that managers can exercise the discretion in a lawful manner.

## Procedure

Employers have two months to respond to a request unless both parties agree to a longer period. Generally, employees will not be willing to extend the decision period beyond two months as most make a request in the hope that it will be agreed as soon as possible. There is no formal right of appeal but not allowing an employee to appeal a refusal of a request might be considered unreasonable.

## Reasons for refusing

A request can be accepted in its entirety or, if part of the request is acceptable to the employer then the parties may agree a varied arrangement; however, if the employer wishes to refuse the request then it may do so for specific reasons only. It is not lawful to refuse a request simply because the employer does not wish to allow flexible working. It is important to seek advice if a request is going to be refused to make sure that the refusal is lawful.

## Indirect discrimination

When considering a request for flexible working, it is important to bear in mind that discrimination law applies to all decisions taken in the workplace and therefore, if a request is being made in order to accommodate childcare or because of a health condition then refusing it may be discriminatory.

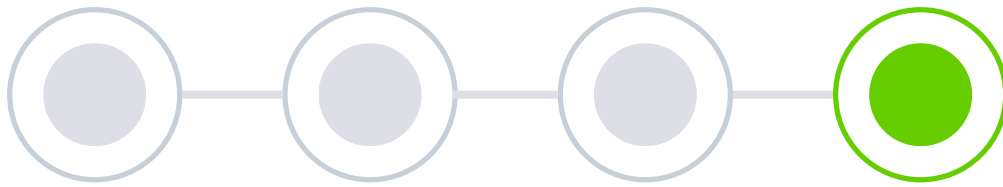
## Contract changes

Finally, if a request is agreed then it is important to confirm any changes to the employee's terms and conditions in writing.

Considering a flexible working request can be a tricky process and it is always a good idea to seek professional advice.

[www.machins.co.uk](http://www.machins.co.uk)





## Managing Flexible Teams

### Over Compensate

- All the communications that used to happen is now exaggerated and according to clients, improved. They said problems often occurred due to complacency around communications but as communications became more managed and deliberate the environment improved. Communication varies from a daily 'stand-up' call to review what's happening that day to informal video-based winddown meetings on Friday afternoon reviewing highs and lows and encouraging sharing amongst the team. Like communications with individual team members, deliberately bringing the team together formally and informally on a regular basis and through a format that involves everyone is key to success.

### Performance Management

- Consider enhancing personal objectives with team-based goals that everyone contributes towards. This brings a common purpose to a disparate team, encourages teamwork and collaboration and employee engagement. A regular review of company performance that everyone attends is motivating and engaging, and helps align people better when remote. As one client says "It's also easy, when working remotely and flexibly, for people to become overly focussed on immediate tasks, so trying to convey the more general picture can be helpful".

### Collaboration Tools

- Technology has been our saviour as we've become more flexible and there are many tools out there that can improve the way the team works. Charlie Haward from Optimising IT highlights the importance of collaborative systems "Make sure you put in place an effective method for the team to communicate and share information, for example a messaging and file sharing solution such as Microsoft Teams." There are some inexpensive (and sometimes free) software packages that complement email, messaging and Teams/Zoom. For example, for engaging collaboration consider a tool like Miro that enables remote whiteboarding and creative collaboration and for project and programme management check out Asana or Trello.



Open communication, clear instruction, empathy and kindness"

Rose McCarter-Field, Project Recruit



Communication and organisation are key to ensure respect for each others working patterns"

KATE MEDD  
HOSKING ASSOCIATES



Arrange team gatherings to suit flexible workers so they can be included"

CHRIS O'RIORDAN  
FIRESTARTER BUSINESS SOLUTIONS



Lead, don't manage. Share  
the highs, learn from the  
lows. Listen. Praise.”

Nicola Lloyd  
CPS

## Find out more: watch the webinars

If you've found our guide useful, here are a couple of Ten2Two webinars you might find useful. Click on the image to watch.



This recent webinar expands on similar themes we explore in this guide, with a focus on SMEs



We cover the fundamentals of designing any new or existing role with a focus on flexibility.

## Our contributors: Flexible SMEs

We'd like to thank our clients who have contributed to this guide, some of whom are listed below. They have all embraced flexible and part-time working to support the growth and development of their businesses





**Ten2Two is a pioneering recruitment consultancy that helps businesses of all sizes find affordable, talented, high-calibre professionals who can work flexibly.**

Founded in 2007 we were among the first companies to recognise and respond to the growing business need for a flexible, part-time and remote recruitment agency driven by the changing landscape of the workplace.

Post-pandemic, flexibility is more relevant today than at any other time in recent history.

As experts in the field of flexible working Ten2Two also advise businesses of all sizes on how to implement flexible working successfully.

## **Find out more:**

Jane O'Gorman

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[Book a call](#)

[\*\*www.ten2two.org\*\*](http://www.ten2two.org)

