Agreeing flexible working hours

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With practices back up and running dentists are considering their options upon their return. Working conditions have changed with increased requirements on PPE appointment lengths and patient expectations. With these changes some dentists have been considering their options on how they want to balance their work life situation with these new expectations. Many are being asked to work different hours and some have been working remotely triaging. With the return many are looking at flexible working as an option to help them better manage their situation.

What is flexible working?

Flexible working is a way of working that suits a worker's needs. This could be flexible start and finish times or working from home or changing from full time to part time working. Usually flexible working is talked about in the context of employees and employers often when returning from maternity leave, but there is nothing to stop the same considerations being made for self-employed associates. Many practices have had to adjust the way they used to work and so some dentists are already working in a flexible format. With that proof of concept, it is the perfect opportunity to formalise the arrangement to ensure the benefits continue.

How to apply for flexible working

To be eligible to apply for flexible working you must have been working there for at least 26 weeks to make a claim. This is done in writing setting out what the new arrangements you would like are, how they are likely to affect the business and what could be done to limit any negative impacts on the business due to the change. Although flexible working is usually assessed for employees it makes sense to address it in the same way for self-employed associates. As part time working is fairly common in dentistry it should be fairly easy to

accommodate within the requirements of the business. You may make one application a year in writing and if it is refused or agreed to, you would have to wait another year before applying again.

Within 28 days of receiving the request the practice should arrange a meeting to discuss the request. If the proposed format is not suitable then other options should be considered at that time. Within 14 days of the meeting it should either be agreed, or the practice will have to present business reasons for why it is not possible to accommodate. You would then have a further 14 days to appeal a decision not to agree to flexible working.

How to come to agreement?

The key to a successful flexible working application is to ensure that the proposal is beneficial for the practice and doesn't fall foul of the grounds for refusal:

- The burden of additional costs
- An inability to reorganise work amongst existing staff
- An inability to recruit additional staff
- A detrimental impact on quality
- A detrimental impact on performance
- A detrimental effect on ability to meet customer demand
- Insufficient work for the periods the employee proposes to work
- A planned structural change to your business.

Dentists are likely to be interested in either condensed days or part time working. These do present difficulties for practices, but they also represent opportunities.

As an example, if a dentist were to request condensed days, for example working for longer each day to allow them to take a different day off. This presents a benefit and a cost to the practice. They will have later appointments for patients which patients often seek, but it means they will have one less dentist on another day which could present issues if there are insufficient dentists to cover all the practice's days. The longer hours would also mean they would need other staff to stay late to support the dentist. This is potentially less of an issue at the

moment as the more stringent appointment requirements mean appointments are running longer and having the practice open longer means they are more likely to see sufficient patients.

Where dentists want to reduce their commitments to practices, they often look at part time working as an option. Practice owners are often concerned that this means they will have difficulty recruiting another dentist to fill the other part of the role. But what if this is actually an opportunity for the practice? Allowing another dentist to join the practice gives the practice the chance to increase the skills in the practice, they can attract dentists with different specialisms and with a wider range of services available they can then market to a wider patient base. It should also increase the resilience of the practice as there would be additional dentists to potentially cover each other for sickness or holidays.

Some of these proposals wouldn't be possible to implement immediately and so it might become a negotiation on how the practice can work with you to start bringing these changes into place. This may mean waiting for recruitment of staff to cover the suggested hours or could involve recruitment of another associate. If you are flexible in the way you approach the request, you are more likely to succeed in agreeing to greater flexibility in your own working practices.

BDA members can access further advice about flexible working from the BDA advisory services. ♦

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