

# NSW Govt Round Table - Part-time work

## Part-time work is a team issue

### 1 Definition of the issue

Mallesons is a major corporate law firm and has approximately 2000 people in Australia, Asia and London. Our experience is that in large professional services firms flexible work practices come in many shapes and sizes. Flexible work arrangements are very important in an environment where over 68% of our employees are women and 50% of all employees - our lawyers - are in client facing roles. Of the total number of employees at Mallesons, over 290 work on a part-time or flexible work arrangement. 94% of these are women.

The first part-time work practices were implemented 20 years ago when our first female partner took parental leave and returned to work part-time. While we have made progress in this area, it would be fair to say there is still, in many parts of our business, a tension between client facing roles and part-time work arrangements. Part-time work is an important strategy on the continuum of flexible work. This continuum for our firm involves:

- “traditional” part-time work (the norm is 3-4 days per week with some exceptions)
- 48/52 pay for leave arrangements
- compressed working hours or flexible start and finish times
- job sharing
- working from home

We have found the most successful arrangements come about through structuring and implementing part-time work as a **team initiative**.

### 2 What was the biggest challenge in implementation of quality part time work?

There have been three key challenges to the wider acceptance and implementation of part-time work:

- (a) Structure of work - especially for lawyers/partners
- (b) Attitudes and assumptions regarding client expectations
- (c) Limited management skills of partners (supervisors)

#### (a) Structure of work (a challenge in two parts)

Firstly, lawyers at the large corporate law firms could easily be described as “extreme knowledge workers”. They have exceptionally high levels of education and training. In many ways they see themselves like artisans or craftsman who have highly specialised expertise. I am sure they are similar in accounting, engineering, medicine and other similar professions.

As producers of revenue lawyers and partners in law firms are required to meet billable hours targets in the vicinity of 6-7.5 hours per day, plus contribute to business development, team coaching and firm activities. To achieve this, they need to work on average 10 hours day or a 50 hour week. For those choosing to

work a four day week, part-time work may represent a reduction in working hours from 45-50 hours per week to 35 hours per week.

Another challenge is the type of practice area in which a lawyer works. For example, transaction based groups (such as Mergers and Acquisitions) are an area where flexible work comes under greatest strain when a major transaction is on and teams may be working "around the clock" across multiple time zones to get the deal done. The challenge then becomes how do you staff these matters and if the part-time workers can put in extra days, how do they get compensated?

### **(b) Attitudes and assumptions regarding client expectations**

In each major law firm, the client base is largely made up of ASX top 200 clients such as investment banks, financial institutions and other major corporations in Australia and Asia. Many of these clients set very high expectations around levels of service and timetables for deals. There is a view among many partners that it is necessary to be available to our clients "24/7" in person, by email, phone or blackberry. Some have genuine reservations regarding how the demands of some clients really can fit with part-time work. Some hold a view that clients won't understand or accept part-time lawyers.

### **(c) Limited management skills of partners (supervisors)**

Managing people working part-time requires strong people management skills, especially if there is more than one person working part-time in the team. This includes the challenges of work allocation, day-to-day communication on fast-moving matters, team meetings, travel for clients etc. It is not uncommon for partners to find managing large teams or multiple part-time workers in one team quite challenging.

## **3 How did we meet this challenge?**

We have adopted the view that part-time work a team issue not just an individual issue and have implemented a multi-pronged approach to get better acceptance and buy-in to part time work. You have in your packs an extract of the kit we produced in 2005 called *Making Flexible Hours Work Together*, which is still in wide usage and outlines the following strategies:

### **3.1 The importance of mutual obligation:**

- between the employee and their supervisor for making it work
- detailed discussions from the outset
- work together over time to get the arrangements right for all concerned (eg 3 or 6 month trial period)

### **3.2 Assessing the home context (home team support)**

- the need for flexibility, what form it will take, what options are available, spouse/partner support, sharing the load
- family priorities and needs for childcare arrangements (having Plan A, B and C), emergency childcare
- structuring your time at work and home "routines at work and rituals at home".

### **3.3 Assessing the work team context (including clients):**

- what is the likely impact on the team, who will pick up the work on the days you are not in the office, what can be delegated?
- what structure of part-time work will be best for the team (eg two days in a row)
- what are the client expectations, how do others in the team work with you to meet these

### **3.4 Tips for managers:**

- set clear role and performance expectations
- open discussions about flexibility within the team
- manage client expectations to ensure continuity and accessibility
- distribution of quality work, to leverage the client relationships of the part-time worker, allocate advice work, in large complex transaction identify what chunks of work lend themselves to part-time work

### **3.5 Tips for team members:**

- remember you may want to work flexible hours one day, too
- be prepared to share the load
- manage communication - do you need to call them on their day off
- be considerate of time constraints around drop off and pick ups
- make sure any training, social or team activities are run at a time to include everyone (wherever possible)
- secretaries can play a key role as conduit and support eg handling messages

In summary, seeing part-time work as a team issue has made it a little less “scary” and a lot more manageable for our partners. It has also encouraged employees to give greater consideration to the things that will make the arrangements successful for them and their teams. We feel this approach has contributed to the success and “stickability” of these work structures. It should also be remembered that our clients appreciate our efforts to retain talented staff.

We have come a long way with almost 15% of staff working part-time but we have a long way to go to encourage a critical mass of our fee earners to do the same. We have made it relatively OK for working mums to work part-time however we haven’t begun to scratch the surface for men to restructure their working lives.