

Webinar – Let's talk about flex



Russ Norton 00:05

So let's talk about flexibility. And I'm joined by a panel of very clever guests who I've just been having an amazing conversation with. So please, Rebecca, for the sake of our audience who are actually listening now, would you mind introducing yourself and reminding us of what the benefit of flexibility in work is to you?

Rebecca Nicholls 00:26

Yeah, of course. So I am Rebecca Nicholls, and I'm events and awards manager at the Institute of Internal communication. Can I say, Russ, having managed many event, I have done that too, and also not recorded or not turned on. So don't worry, we've all been there! And for me, flexibility is about being able to wear two hats. So, to be a mum to my four and my seven year old and be able to be there and be present and not think about work (most of the time) and then to also be able to be an events and awards manager, and not think about my children when I'm there and wear that career hat.

Russ Norton 01:03

That's amazing. Thanks, Rebecca. Lu, would you please introduce yourself?

Lu McKay 01:07

Yeah, of course. Thanks, Russ. Luy McKay here. I'm one of the directors of consultancy at scarlettabbott. I think that's it's a huge topic. And for me, it's all about being able to flex my day to be as productive as possible. So, really making sure I'm able to take advantage of my energy at key points of the day and flexing around other responsibilities as well.

Russ Norton 01:35

Amazing. Thank you, Andy, please would you reintroduce yourself?

Andy Payne 01:39

No worries. So, my name is Andy Payne. I'm a senior internal communications manager for Vista. We're a global tech company that went fully remote and flexible working in about August 2020. So we've been in that position for a while now. For me, it's similar to Lu. I think it's about optimising my day, being able to plan my day the way

that works best for me. But also, as Rebecca was saying, that work/life harmony. That I can actually factor in some of the other things around my working day that make me happy and help me just have a bit of an enriched working life Monday to Friday.

Russ Norton 02:14

And Tania, finally.

Tania Weets 02:15

Hi, I'm Tanya, I'm director of benefits at Lionsgate and based in the US. For me, flexibility is my two and a half year old twin daughters. My husband is a stay at home dad. And so whether it's being able to see them off to bed, wake them up in the morning, pick them up from school when my husband needs some help. But, also, working remote. I live in Arkansas and we moved here to be closer to family.

Russ Norton 02:51

So, Lu, would you mind giving us a viewpoint from the work that you do with consultants and your perspective on the industry? What are some of the trends in flexibility that you're seeing right now?

Lu McKay 03:07

Gosh, that's a big question. I'm seeing a lot is the main answer to that. Everything from fully remote models, right through to a much more traditional ways of working, where it is still kind of nine to five, or whatever those hours are on site. And a mixture of everything in between. I guess what I'm really seeing is everybody beginning to have this conversation. We've all had to react to the pandemic. Some industries have been impacted far differently than others. I've got contacts, colleagues who work in manufacturing who, when the pandemic first hit, had two weeks where they went into lockdown. But actually, at that point, it was back to work as relatively normal in terms of hours. People kind of had to be in the business. To those of us who went home for three months and suddenly had to figure out how to use Teams. So, I think there's a real variety there. I think what's really encouraging is people are having a conversation and wanting to find that way that does drive the highest levels of productivity, and give people flexibility. Because as employees we all suddenly had to do things very, very differently. We had to adapt and we did. And we kind of pulled through via our individual businesses and businesses have gained a lot from that. It's interesting to see some of our clients and contacts who tell us that their businesses are saying 'come on, back to normal, you've got to be back in the office' - that can come was quite a rush and quite a tough thing for people to take on board when they've dedicated a room in their house to being an office space. I think it's really great that we're starting to figure out what those opportunities are, where's the optimum in terms of being able to get the good mix and really make the most of being able to be more flexible be at home, but also calling out those periods of time when it actually is really important to collaborate and come together, both online or in person.

Russ Norton 05:19

Yeah, for sure. And Andy, Lu talked about the spectrum of fully remote to everyone back on site. You work in a place that is 'remote first' and leans towards remote. What are some of the benefits you've seen from a productivity perspective in your wider organisation? Or even within your team? What are some of the plus points of remote first and full flexibility of location?

Andy Payne 05:45

Yeah, it was the reason why I joined, actually. It was what enabled me to join first and foremost. The previous job I was in at the time, I sort of felt like, "Oh, I've got flexibility, I didn't feel like I needed more flexibility." Because, actually, I kind of like working in a relatively 9-5 structure. It works. It's when my wife works, it's where a lot of people are. So it works for me to have a similar format to that. I think what really appealed was the fact Vista are a global organisation. They're a US founded global tech company. Well, I live in York and I've lived in York all my adult life. I have friends and family here and a nice house. I don't really want to leave. But I love the fact, because they've changed their way of working, that they're able to spread their net, literally globally, and say, "Well, we're working asynchronously, we're not anchoring people to a particular hub or an office. We can look for people around the world." It's what opened the door for me to come and join. Because otherwise, that would have been closed off for me, because I can't commute to Boston or Barcelona or wherever it is. They had hubs before. And I've seen that because I was interviewing. We did a blog for LinkedIn recently with our director of experimentation, and he was recently recruiting for an experimentation ambassador lead. And he was saying to me, "that's a very specialist job. and there aren't hotspots in the world where you'll get a huge groups of these people". By being remote first, working asynchronously, he was able to spread the the net as wide as it could possibly go. And so anybody can apply for this role. If you've got the talent and you're good enough and you want to join, then amazing! And that's been the major benefit, I would say, from business point of view. I would suggest, from a productivity point of view, everybody has a slightly different experience of that. But we're surveying our people very regularly, as we come to understand that even though we've been running in this system for nearly two years now, we would still class ourselves very much in our infancy of being great at remote first, even though we're seeing lots of benefits. 79%, to quote the exact number of people, said that they felt as productive, or more productive, than in this environment largely because of all the reasons like Lu was mentioning. That ability to coordinate your day, manage the meetings. You do need to be at focus, maybe more in the mornings, or the evenings are where you've got your energy, and just have a greater discipline on where you store work, hand work out and work asynchronously. So, there's loads of plus points that I could talk about. But I would say those have been the major ones. I think most people have seen a major uptick in being able to find a job that they really want to do. And then when they're in it, building their day around that job.

Russ Norton 08:47

So Rebecca, I'll come to you next. It's really interesting to think about the benefits of flexible working. And when I say flexible working, it's funny, because really, I mean, hybrid working/remote working. The ability to choose whether you locate yourself in an office or fully remote. And I'm really interested and passionate about diversity and inclusion. One of the clients with whom I work have switched to a location agnostic recruitment model. They've seen a real marked increase in candidates with disabilities, for example. So, much like Andy was saying, they're opening up new talent pools of people that couldn't access work before. From the IoIC's perspective, what positives to hybrid and greater flexibility are you seeing? Also, are you seeing any downsides at all?

Rebecca Nicholls 09:37

I would echo what you said. Having that ability to not have to go to a head office every day. And a bit like Andy's said as well, where you think "I'd be great at that job. I really don't want to commute for three hours a day." If anything, being thrust into that work from home model that happened to us two years ago, is a real positive

that's come out of that. A bit like I was talking about before with the talent pool and people's hours, and you limit that. I think that's fantastic. We are seeing more of that as a benefit. You're taking the people with the right skills and employing them. You've got the right people for that culture, which is really important. Some downsides? Probably the connection piece. Meeting somebody face-to-face is different to meeting them on a screen. It's really important for organisations to still keep that. I think also, what we're seeing is that it's really difficult for employers. We were all thrust into this world and now we're trying to unpick it and what's fair. Tania was talking about the different roles. And there are some roles - if you take a call centre, yes they probably all do go home, and maybe they're still home. But there's still hours that you need to be contactable because your customers are calling in and you've advertised those hours. Or you've got manufacturing or people on a building site. How do you manage it so it's fair? I think that's probably the issue. We also go back to leadership and line management. There will always be my managers who, despite what's happened these past two years, would rather their whole team was in the office. I think for us, what we're seeing is trying to encourage those honest, adult conversations. Saying, "right, you've got this team, what do they want? How can we all work the best for us, but also remember that there is an organisation that also needs that from us?"

Russ Norton 11:49

100%. You've also just highlighted that there is an inherent privilege to this conversation, right? That we all do roles which enable us to very easily work flexibly? To what extent could this conversation be applied to shift workers or manufacturers? Why wouldn't that same level of flexibility be offered to that workforce, in order to achieve some of the same benefits. Not necessarily flexibility of location, but flexibility of time of benefits, of shift patterns, of all of that stuff? Just to include more people into the workforce? Tania, you were talking about being one person remote, within a team of kind of 20. That was in the blackout zone when none of our audience could actually hear! To what extent does technology play a role at Lionsgate? And what's the journey that you've been on in terms of adopting tech to enable flexibility?

Tania Weets 12:52

Yeah, it's been a process. When the switch over to COVID, you know, it was probably a two, three week period where everything was "we're working from home and we just have to figure it out". I was on maternity leave. So when I came back, it was a whirlwind of "who are we now?" Kind of a 360 from the team. We had started getting there too, from, I just couldn't hear anybody on in the, in the room, because they were just all talking socially, to maybe we should start trying to implement some rules. Now we need everybody on an equal playing field. For me, I actually got much closer to the rest of my team, in in the various office locations, seeing people and talking, having conversations that I never would have had, before. I've worked in my silo team so that was really nice to be able to work a lot more cross functionally, because of technology. That's been really nice. But, you know, how do we keep that connection going? We started having team meetings where, for the first 10 minutes, we'd pull out into breakout sessions. And just talk about social things. How's it going? How's life? What are you working on? What are you doing today? What TV show are you watching? And then we come back together and get into the business of the meeting. So, technology has been a huge change in the company and it's been great to see. We're not as advanced as Andy because there is that fear from executives of keeping that connection together. So it's manifesting into, "oh, maybe we should go back to five days a week in the office." It's a struggle. Technology has definitely helped me connect to my team. But, it's still a struggle to keep those lines open.

Russ Norton 15:11

I find that really interesting because the use of technology kind of democratises, or at least puts us all on a level playing field. The hierarchy isn't as visible anymore. That means that kind of power flows don't quite happen. You can't be the biggest and the bolshiest and the loudest person in the room anymore. You've got to wait your turn and come off mute and put your hand up. Andy, do you notice any change from previous workplaces to Vista in terms of how asynchronous work allows decisions to get made and conflict to get resolved? What's your experience of that?

Andy Payne 15:49

If you're going to be moving to an asynchronous culture, one of the big things you have to be good at is workflow, and that documentation of your work and how you do knowledge management. So much so, actually, and this alludes to Tania's point about "actually, we're going to make a decision as a business to say, hey, we're going to do this, we're going to allow asynchronous working fully flexibly. Vista made that decision. And not only have they invested in the tech we use but also making sure that we are bringing in experts who are brilliant at things like collaboration, brilliant at how to create those connections. And also, for somebody who has just recently joined, really making sure that we're an expert in knowledge management. It's about getting really good at making sure that you have got your workflow processes really good. That you've got some digital tools which actually enable you to look at amends and work asynchronously, so that you can see version controls. You haven't got a myriad of different things. It was a massive eye opener for me, because previous workplaces, I almost used to work out of Outlook. Even though we have tools like Teams and places like that we could go. So much work was done through Outlook. I moved to Vista and everything's cloud based - like literally everything. Outlook is literally just for meeting invitations and all the rest of that kind of stuff. So it was a bit of a culture shock to me. But you learn quite quickly to follow those processes. If anything, it's as efficient I've ever seen it if I'm being honest. Now that I'm in remote work, largely because everybody's got the same way that you have to work, as opposed to people having preferences and working on different platforms, as I've experienced in different organisations.

Lu McKay 17:46

That's a really interesting one, having that real discipline. I think when you're remote first, everyone's got the same process, like you say, Andy. But when you've got a hybrid, and you've got a mixture of people in the office and people not in the office, it's so easy to have those corridor conversations. You've been on a project call, two or three members of the project team, were actually in the office and carry on the conversation, and say, "oh let's do X, Y, and Z" and you make decisions. How do you then make sure that you're looping back in? You don't want to start stifling conversations, because that feels like a negative thing to do. But equally, we have conversations like "oh, by the way, we decided this while you were somewhere else". It's making sure that you're looping back in using those online working processes so that you can keep those involved. It feels like a negative that we've lost this corridor conversation, when you say "did you see so and so last night?" Or "what did you have for dinner?" But the flip side of that is you don't necessarily have those conversations where decisions get made without the whole group.

Andy Payne 17:46

Totally. And just to come back on that. I sort of smile when I hear that because I've heard some organisations justify "let's go back into the office" for those reasons. Fine, for the social side of things. But if you're saying, "hey, our work is based on slightly 'per chance', serendipitous, you happen to mention. "how have you seen this thing or signed it off"? That's not a great way of working. Who's reliant on these kinds of per chance checkpoints to see where the work is being done or seen? That's just not good. But I absolutely get it, you're saying watercooler moments, bumping into people from a social side of things. But actually, all organisations, remote or otherwise, could adopt the discipline of working in that more methodical way. That surely can only be a good thing.

Russ Norton 19:45

Tania, I'm interested in your perspective on EVP and benefits. We've talked a lot about location and channels, and some part time work. Are there any other elements of flexibility that your employees or your candidates is starting to ask you for and that you're seeing a demand for?

Tania Weets 20:02

Obviously, flexibility is a huge one. that's probably the biggest one. We're getting a lot in wellness initiatives. Telemedicine is a huge portion in benefits. We saw a huge spike in telemedicine, from very little pre-pandemic to people only using telemedicine to speak with their doctors. So that's been a huge push. And us pushing our insurance carriers to support those methods as well. Childcare has been a huge push for flexibility. People rethinking. In the US, childcare is not in a great situation. Before, when people were safe, comfortable with a backup care, or somebody coming into their home to help with childcare, when there was a need, people in COVID, all of our employees stopped asking for all of that. That's one of the projects we're working on right now. How do we relook at childcare and how can we support our employees who have who have kids and need to be productive? Maybe their kids are in quarantine because they got exposed? How can we support as a company? There's been a lot of pushback on vacation time and increasing that. I know, before the call, we were talking a little bit about unlimited vacation time. We're not at that point yet. Flexibility's the huge one. We've had people just completely stop and say "no, I'm not taking this role" on the fact that they they couldn't work 100% remote. That's been a hindrance for us. But you know, everything's on the table of how can we support employees when we have that as a big struggle?

Russ Norton 22:16

I think that's fascinating, that balance of power between organisations and employees, and how far are you willing to go? There does have to be a line. Some connection, as we know, really is vital. I've got some stats here. You mentioned about employees making decisions based on the presence of flexibility. This relates specifically to diversity and inclusion. Younger employees 18 - 34 years old, are 60% more likely to leave if hybrid work isn't available. Black employees are 14% more likely to leave than their white peers. LGBTQ+ people are 24% more likely to leave than heterosexual ones. Women are 10% more likely than men. Those who identify as non binary are 18% more likely, and employees with disabilities are 14% more likely. So, I do feel like there's an imperative for organisations to respond here to foster a more inclusive and more diverse workforce. Rebecca, what kind of trends are you seeing in that space in terms of that balance of power between employee demands and organisations responding to different extents?

Rebecca Nicholls 23:31

I think, as you've said, it's a very difficult balance between an employment contract, which is a legal binding, and what somebody wants, and making sure that you are being inclusive. I think you and I probably read the same report, because they were talking about those underrepresented groups actually feeling more comfortable at home, because you haven't got to go to the office, and it be obvious about whatever you've chosen. I think that's a really big deal. That's not a good place to be. You should be able to be your authentic self at work, whether you're on a Zoom screen, or whether you're in an office or in the factory. There's obviously much more work to do around that. And that's probably a much bigger conversation than flexibility. That's about inclusion and making sure people feel welcome at work. I still think it's something that especially our members and their organisations are still learning about. If anything, one of the negatives of COVID is that we were all thrust into something to deal with that, and perhaps some of the other things that need to be dealt with haven't been because we've been dealing with the hybrid, the Zoom, the connection, the sending out Boris's updates every day to help our organisation. Now the dust's settling a bit, we need to look at those issues more.

Russ Norton 25:07

Lu, to extend the question to you. I know you're very keen on coaching - you're a very experienced organisational coach. We'd talked at the beginning about a lot of this and flexibilities about optimising individual styles to their best performance in. And, increasingly, there's a recognition that different people's brains work differently, whether you're neurodiverse or not. Different people work in different ways and bring different value to the table. The last webinar that I was on was a conversation about neurodiversity, specifically, and they talked about being brought into a room to ask those challenging questions and look at things from a different perspective. That's the value that they add. How do you see flexibility of individual approach fitting into this kind of optimization of efficiency and productivity? Does that fall on the line manager to do that coaching and help those employees fit the mold in the best way possible? Or is it about redefining the value that an individual adds within the context of work? It's a big question to lump on you. But for, I guess, from your experience, how do you balance that?

Lu McKay 26:24

It's a great question. I think you've got to come at it from an outcomes perspective. What is it ultimately you're looking to achieve? What are those things you're looking to land upon? I think there is an element from a line manager, yes. As a line manager, you have responsibility for understanding your team, getting to know the individuals, being able to respond and flex to their needs and their styles. It could be from something as simple as whether you're an early bird versus a night owl. How would you allow those people to work most effectively? But equally, if you've got one of each and the need to collaborate, how would you make sure that that happens, too? There is definitely line manager elements there. I think in addition, there's a real cultural element, because you can have numbers of different line managers. Rebecca, you said earlier, in terms of 'depends on that line manager', whether they've said, "I want my people in, because that's my style". I think it's being very open to understanding, as an organisation, what do we trust? What do we believe? And what do we stand for? Equally, looking from a line manager point of view, how do I enable that culture? How do I make sure that happens? It's a very open answer to quite a big question. But it's about establishing the trust, being very clear on outcomes, and then making sure that you're sufficiently flexible to allow people to perform at their best.

Russ Norton 27:56

So we're coming up to our allotted time. I know that we obviously missed a little bit of time, folks in the audience. If there are any questions, please do submit. Because what I'm curious about is what are the calls to action that people can take from this conversation today. I think, listening to what you've shared, on the call, I would say things that strike me are about understanding the value of flexibility, both to individuals and to the organisation. So, as Andy said, the value of flexibility and location, opening up this global talent pool. If you've got a very specific job to fill, open those borders and find the right person for that job. That's got to benefit your organisation. But then from an individual perspective, the ability to take your kids to school and put them to bed and still get a great day's work done. So, understanding that value so that people aren't just "no, I'd like to think back how they were." It's a really compelling argument to persuade people towards flexibility and greater flexibility.

Lu McKay 29:05

Just to add to that. Obviously the kind of the flexibility, in terms of time - whether it's looking after your family, what have you - if you think about all those people who picked up hobbies or side hustles through the pandemic, through that flexibility, they might have more time for that, but what does that then bring potentially to the organisation? The skills, the talents, the knowledge, the experience. As organisations we could and should be tapping into that as well because it's great for the business. It's also great for the individual because they're adding more value. That will give them a higher sense of worth, which in turn will make it much more likely to get them to stay with your organisation

Russ Norton 29:44

100%! From a personal perspective, I like to sew, so my benefit to the organisation is that my trousers now fit much better. But you know, other people did slightly more productive side hustles.

Andy Payne 29:57

A build on that. I think if you are sort of contemplating on "how do we want to have more of a flexible working policy here?" I think you've also got to be careful not to assume that if you just give people flexibility that everybody will pick up and run with it in the right way, for lots of different reasons. As I said before, Vista is investing very heavily in making sure that we have all got the kind of the guardrails, the right tech and the right support and a remote first handbook. And we're continually investing in that, even to the point of recruitment trying to find out "are you the right kind of person? Are you the kind of personality that can work this way?" Because not everybody can. And that's not a good thing or a bad thing, per se. Some people say "you know what, I'm not disciplined enough to do that". The other side, which I would absolutely say, and I was having a chat with somebody about recently, was just make sure that the flexibility doesn't become a curse, so to speak. All those things you've talked about earlier, these side hustles or "I want to do my peloton class midway through the day", or in my case, I like to bike on Fridays and Thursdays after school. I go after school, pick up my boys, but I won't lie. There's been some Fridays where I've been looking at the clock going, "Oh, this meeting could do with wrapping up". By adding in these wonderful work life harmony things into your working schedule, make sure that they don't themselves become a driver of additional stress. Otherwise, it's not harmony anymore. There's a skill and a discipline and a trust. All of those things come together to be able to work flexibility at work to really ace it.

Russ Norton 31:36

I love that. As a takeaway, there's that defined flexibility, because that's a really broad brush to just say "we're flexible now". Well give me some parameters! Otherwise, how do I manage it? But also self management and discipline. I wonder how much flexibility we had beforehand that we maybe didn't even realise. I do remember one call with a client team. And in the bottom corner, someone was bobbing, for 45 minutes that this person was bobbing, and they were on a treadmill while on the call. They were blending their fitness with a work meeting. And I just thought, that's genius. Again, they had the ability to do that. Tell me any final reflections or key takeaways from this conversation or from your experience?

Tania Weets 32:26

I think it's just keep looking at it, keep evolving, keep, understanding where the employees are at, where the business is at. And never give up on that conversation. Whether it's in my role of benefits, thinking "okay, what's working right now? Okay, but maybe in six months, that's not going to work so much." Just keep at it for the employees. And the companies that are struggling with it, keep at it. Keep having those conversations and keep trying to push the business case and speak to your employees.

Russ Norton 33:04

Andy, there is a question from the audience interested to know if anyone measures the impact of flexibility on the organisation? Is that something that Vista are doing actively or, because by virtue of the fact that you are remote first, your employee engagement scores are the measure of the impact?

Andy Payne 33:21

Yeah, the measures we use are still business measures, because Vista made the decision purely for business reasons. So we look at all the things that most organisations look at around engagement scores, around retention and recruitment, down to the bottom line. Are our numbers going in the right direction, and on the right things? We do use Peakon and for those who are not familiar with Peakon is one of a number that does regular surveys. We get them pushed through once every week, once every couple of weeks. In those are questions relating to people's flexibility and how they're working. So it gives us another measure of whether people are feeling that they are getting manager support. Are they feeling like they are getting support from the business? Do they understand all those other kinds of measures as well? There's quantitative measures there as well to detect how we're doing. But ultimately, as I said, we still judge the success those core business metrics that most people do. And those numbers have been positive.

Russ Norton 34:30

Tell me, what about Lionsgate? Are there any measures that you would say specifically equate to flexibility?

Tania Weets 34:38

It's the same surveys. I think when you're less flexible, your scores are going to go down. And so, I'm glad to hear that and he's getting excellent results. I think that's where it needs to go, just keeping that conversation active. We hear from our employees even if we're holding off on certain surveys, because we know what the resounding answer is. Every time for us, when you put out a survey, and people give feedback, are you actually

going to take action on that feedback? We're definitely hearing it from our employees, from our business, from our turnover. We've got the metrics on it. So those are what's driving the conversation.

Russ Norton 35:25

And so finally, Rebecca, any closing thoughts, reflections, key takeaways?

Rebecca Nicholls 35:31

I found it really interesting. I think, to me, and we've all touched on it and like Tania just said there, there's something about empathy, about the not judging others. The classic 'put yourself in their shoes'. If you don't have kids, you might not really understand what makes Andy or I want to go and pick them up from after school club. Just like I don't have an elderly parent that I might need to look after. I don't have a dog to walk that sits by my desk, looks up at me and says can you take me for a walk now. I think there's something around having that empathy and that understanding. Something that I think Andy and Tania have both touched on, it's that trial. Have the systems in place, and let's keep evolving them. You don't have to get in right at nine o'clock on Monday morning. Let's keep talking to each other as executives, as the line manager, as a team, and see where we go with it. Listen and learn from it.

Russ Norton 36:40

What a wonderful mic drop moment. Well, I think on that note, I apologise again profusely. I am thoroughly looking forward to next week when our marketing manager comes back and will kick various parts of me. Maybe I would avoid working in the office next week, so that's a virtual kicking, rather than face-to-face kicking. But again, thank you so much, folks, for bearing with us. Thank you, Rebecca, Lu, Andy and Tania. I will leave it there and I hope you have a great rest of day.