

Flexible working patterns at the Audit Commission

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Introduction

The Audit Commission is the body that checks that public bodies are using their money properly. Public bodies are those funded by government and the taxpayer. An audit involves the checking of accounts to make sure that they are true and fair. It also checks the quality and efficiency of operations. Each public body is held accountable for the way in which it spends its money. The Audit Commission has recognised that ways of working have changed over the years. New technology may allow people to work from home and can help to bring in more flexible working practices.

Job families

The mission of the Audit Commission is to be 'a driving force in the improvement of public services'. To do this, it employs people at three levels, which it calls its 'families'. These are:

- * the audit family, which carries out financial audits. Most of these are professional accountants who work in teams visiting public bodies
- * the performance audit family, which helps public sector organisations to function more efficiently
- * the functional family, which makes sure that the Commission itself " its core functions " is running efficiently.

Patterns of employment

A variety of patterns of employment have been developed to meet the needs of different groups and provide the flexible workforce that the Audit Commission needs. These include full-time and part-time workers, contract workers, job sharing, temporary and permanent staff. Having all of these different contracts helps to provide flexibility that is numerical, functional and workplace related:

- * Numerical flexibility means that the number of staff can be changed.
- * Functional flexibility means that the skills to cope with a variety of work can be built.
- * Workplace related flexibility means employees gain better work-life balance, including working from home. This involves one-off set up costs to provide facilities such as broadband at to assess health and safety.

Benefits

Employees can apply to work from home and the Audit Commission will allow them to do so if it meets its needs. Both sides can benefit from this. For workers, travel to work in London is reduced, childminding can be more flexible and working from home is more family-friendly. In terms of the organisation, it allows the Audit Commission to recruit from a greater range of workers and leads to a more diverse workforce.

Working from home is based on trust but brings gains to both sides.

Problems

The main problems of home-working are:

- * not mixing with other staff and therefore losing the culture of the organisation. Training days, conferences and networking are used to counter this. There is also an intranet to help workers to stay in touch
- * new technologies can fail to function adequately
- * health and safety risks, which are covered by making sure risks are reduced and through comprehensive insurance

* the keeping of confidential files at home. These risks are reduced through clear guidelines.

Conclusion

Work practices change over time as do the needs of businesses. The Audit Commission has shown how it can adapt to this changing scene by adopting more flexible working practices.