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Flexible working: 3 questions to ask before backing Brand Me



by **Ky Chow**

It's the dream of millennials and working parents alike: working when you want while still getting (well) paid. But while flexible working is on the rise among both independent consultants and employees, there are three important dimensions that company workers considering a switch to Brand Me need to consider.

1. MONEY VERSUS STABILITY

While both freelancing and traditional employment can deliver big pay cheques, Expert360 CEO Bridget Loudon says an independent consultant can earn three times more than at a traditional management consultancy, such as Bain or McKinsey. Ms Loudon says a typical contract on her job matching site brings in \$45,000 for

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6-8 weeks consulting work, with a daily rate of about \$1,000.

While more volatile than company employment, Ms Loudon says the jump in earning potential means independent consultants can handle 30-40 per cent down time that can be, say, spent on a passion, play, business projects or family.



Bridget Loudon, CEO and Co-Founder, Expert360. Supplied

Technology also helps smooth out the peaks and troughs for freelancers. Word of mouth recommendations are now amplified thanks to listings on sites such as Seek, LinkedIn and Expert360. The latter two allow recommendations and in the case of Expert360, eBay/Amazon style ratings. Edmund Gill, a director at recruiting firm Hays, says while sites such as LinkedIn make candidates and employers less reliant on traditional recruiters to find each other, the likes of Hays are still called on to use phone calls and face to face interviews to help sort through the deluge of LinkedIn applications.

Expert360's Loudon is bolder, saying her site's comprehensive rating system, which unlike LinkedIn does not allow candidates to screen out bad reviews, means many employers can skip a face to face meeting altogether, further enhancing labour mobility for freelancers.

2. REGULAR TIME OFF VERSUS PEAKS AND TROUGHS

If a project has "strong, hard defined timelines, then the flex is obviously limited" says Mr Gill. Given project work is driving the growth in independent consulting - "there's not much business as usual" says Mr Gill - there's less occasions for a freelancer to take a day or two off per week, compared with an employee who can hand

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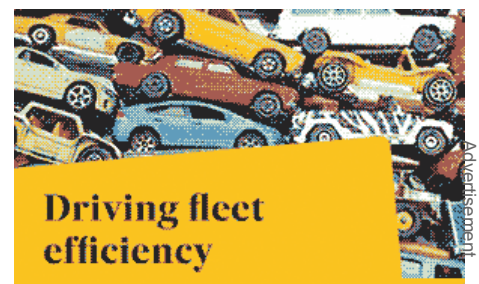
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work over to colleagues.

Stories now abound of company staff reducing their work week to three or four days, whether it's for personal projects, child care or parental care, says Right Management's Rosemarie Dentesano. Ms Dentesano says there's plenty of benefits in flex time for the employers beyond just staff satisfaction, saying companies need to invest in the technology that's "changing the nature of work" and saving the company expensive office space.

Yet Hays' Gill says Australia's relatively small workforce means local workplace practices, such as flexible working, evolve more slowly here than overseas. Conservative workplaces often are inspired to change by the famed workplace culture of tech companies like Google and Atlassian. Until then, progress in company flexibility is mixed despite "All Roles Flex" proclamations by the likes of Telstra, PwC and ANZ.

"Many employers say that 'all roles are flex', but there are degrees of flexibility", warns Mr Gill, citing an investment banker who says his firm's universal flex policy didn't apply to the deal-driven M&A team.

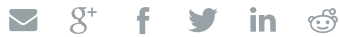
Overall, however, he says Hays has seen a strong growth in flex culture, particularly with larger organisations. "Organisations are saying "yes" [to flexible working requests] more often", Mr Gill says.

3. STAGE OF CAREER

Companies crave independent consultants in niche areas, says Expert360's Loudon, which means independent consulting is less suitable for a junior worker looking to broaden their skill set, but ideal for seniors happy to do the same work at multiple employers. "If you're just really good at setting up digital strategies for clothing manufacturing companies, you can earn way more money and get way more specialised if you do it outside a company."

Ms Loudon says clients have become increasingly picky with the independent consultants they will hire, saying the company has accepted only 7,000 out of the 40,000 applications for a place on the Expert360 platform.

Mr Gill agrees, saying he'd be surprised to see a tax specialist with less than three years of experience, although the new skills needed for the booming IT and startup space often come down to achievement rather than years under the belt.



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