



FLEXIBLE WORKING

## Right to a life: new rules on flexi-working for parents

**New rights to flexible hours for working parents could boost productivity and encourage job retention. But how accommodating can retailers be? Alison Clements reports**

The Government has fully embraced the notion that happier people are more productive, and next week is introducing legislation to enable flexible 'family-friendly' working.

From April 6, employers will have a legal duty to consider applications for flexible working if an employee is responsible for young or disabled children. This will affect 4 million parents with a child under six, and 200,000 mothers and fathers of disabled children up to the age of 18.

Technically, any full-time worker

within these groups can apply for flexible hours or home working once a year. The employer does not have to agree to the request, but must justify any refusal in writing.

Department of Trade & Industry research indicates that 46 per cent of jobseekers choose flexible hours as the most sought-after benefit.

Time will tell how many applications the retail sector will receive, although with a high percentage of shop staff being women, there could well be a wave of demand. While many

retail organisations are beginning to offer flexibility to head office workers, managing flexi-time across stores may not be as straightforward.

A spokesman for the Institute of Personnel & Development (IPD) says: "If a retail company was approached by store staff with a request that was not deemed workable, they would need to back up their rejection with valid reasons why the business could not accommodate changes to working hours."

The IPD will monitor how many requests are made and granted in the coming months, and report its findings in the summer.

Meanwhile, employee management software company Crown Computing believes many UK companies will be 'caught short'. It estimates that 75 per cent of organisations it speaks to about employee management don't have a strategy in place for addressing the issue.

One retailer that has built flexibility into the working environment is electricals chain Comet. Social

### COMET - FLEXIBLE WORKING IN ACTION



Natalie Worsfold (pictured), applications support resource coordinator at Comet, has benefited from the retailer's flexible working programme since its inception, making child care arrangements for her two-year-old son considerably easier. "With a small child there are always times when you need to be available at short notice, and at Comet this has not been a problem," she says. "In fact I have been able to carry on full-time, develop my career, and still not miss out on crucial family events." Worsfold believes her productivity has risen. "Working in this way you tend to go all out to complete tasks in the designated time. You map out your work far more efficiently."

responsibility manager Veronica McCarthy says that since early last year several options have been introduced at head office for all staff, whether they have children or not.

These are flexitime, so that employees can begin and finish work at different times of day, compressed fortnights, where working extra hours enables staff to gain an extra day off a fortnight, and career breaks for up to a year. Store staff can take advantage of compressed fortnights

and flexible hours too.

"The core philosophy is that if we can do it we will, so we will easily meet the new legal requirements," says McCarthy. "Take up of flexible working in the two head offices has been 35 per cent so far, and it's growing. Departmental Staff turnover has reduced by between 4 and 12 per cent."

McCarthy believes employees value being able to manage their own lives, while investment by Comet to put the processes in place has been minimal.

#### FLEXI-WORKING RIGHTS

Staff must have responsibility for a child aged under six or a disabled child under 18

Parents wishing to adopt a flexible working pattern must submit a written application to their employer, setting out the desired pattern and how the employer could accommodate the request

There will be a clear procedure for staff and employers to follow

A support package will be provided for employees and employers