

IXL Laundry Services Group

The company

IXL provides laundry and dry cleaning services to domestic and contract clients in the Midlands and North Wales.

Sector	Other services
Location	Buxton, Derbyshire and Chester
Turnover in 2002	£750,000

Workforce

Number of employees	20
Percentage women	75%
Average length of service	10 years+ for most staff
Maternity	The company usually has no more than one member of staff on maternity leave at any one time.

The challenge

When the new owners bought IXL, there was a high turnover of office staff and some systems were outdated and bureaucratic. There was a traditional culture, work-life balance was not seen as important.

Response

Simple, informal work-life approach

- IXL has an 'open door' policy.
- Any employee can make a request to work flexible hours.
- The business case is paramount; not the personal reason for the request.
- Managers need to take into account the production schedule in the factory and overall employee cover and attendance.
- Part-time jobs were introduced: when some office vacancies arise, they are re-advertised as two part-time roles at 20 hours per week.

Business benefits

- Staff retention and loyalty.
- Low cost of implementation - work-life policies cost only management time to implement.
- Reduced recruitment and training costs - the turnover of office staff has been reduced.
- More efficient office systems - new part-time office roles enabled IXL to introduce more efficient systems over time.

Challenges

Factory production requirements

- Work-life initiatives have to revolve around an understanding of weekly and monthly production requirements
- Employees are encouraged to work out rotas among themselves that ensure production is completed on time, while accommodating individuals' personal commitments
- Drivers and factory workers start at 7.30am and finish at 4.00pm or 3.00pm on Fridays: this timetable leaves sufficient time for personal commitments

- Office staff can work more flexible hours: they can start early and/or work late.

Employees motivated more by salary

- Unemployment in Buxton is 5% and there are few factory jobs.
- Family support is traditionally strong: grandparents expect to look after grandchildren whilst their sons and daughters are at work.
- IXL's workforce tends to be older, therefore fewer staff than the national average have childcare responsibilities.
- Potential recruits are therefore motivated more by salary than work-life balance policies.

Entrenched attitudes as a barrier to change

Some office staff were not prepared to learn the new systems and chose to leave.

In practice

Kathleen, 48, has recently started a job with IXL as a part-time bookkeeper. Kathleen keeps horses and needs to feed them in the morning before work. Usual office hours are 9.00am to 5.00pm, but Kathleen negotiated to start work at 9.45am before she joined.

Kathleen says: "I appreciate the flexibility that I have in starting later. IXL is currently changing computer systems and accounting packages. I've often worked longer than my agreed hours in order to ensure a smooth transition of the system."

Benefit to IXL: Agreeing to Kathleen's request to work flexible hours has helped engender a spirit of co-operation, which benefits the business and the bottom line.

Anna, 36, has recently started a job with IXL as a secretary working two and a half days per week. She has three children and needs to get to two different schools and a nursery in the morning before work which are several miles apart. Anna negotiated to start work at 9.15am, to accommodate the extra time needed to cover the distances.

Anna says: "The flexibility in starting times and a shorter lunch, if required, is a huge benefit as it means travelling through lighter traffic and being able to deliver all three children to their destinations calmly and safely. I don't have the worry of being five minutes late as I know I can make the time up at lunch or after work."

Benefit to IXL: IXL has gained Anna's skills and ensured she has the flexibility to manage both her work and her other commitments.