

Flexibility focus group guidance

How to run an effective focus group on workplace flexibility

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Focus group guidance

Overview

In accordance with the strategic approach to flexibility and the gender strategy toolkit, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (the Agency) recognises that early stakeholder communication and engagement is crucial to achieve long term sustainable change. In developing their flexibility strategy, many leading organisations engage their employees across all levels early on to understand perceptions employees across the organisation have on flexibility.

There are various ways to engage employees on workplace flexibility including surveys, discussions in team meetings, open forums and through focus groups. The strategy process typically starts with understanding 'where are we now' and the Agency's flexibility readiness assessment toolkit provide diagnostic tools for organisations to self-assess their baseline.

Focus groups provide a particular avenue for gathering detailed data about a topic from groups of people in the organisation. Focus groups can reveal a wealth of information and deep insights that can be used to structure flexible working arrangements to meet the needs of both employer and employee.

This document provides guidance on how to run focus groups with your employees on flexibility in your organisation.

Understanding focus groups

'Focus group' is a term used to describe a group discussion which has a particular focus. This seems quite obvious, but it is important to distinguish focus groups from undirected discussions and open-ended interviews. Unlike these other methods of collecting data, focus groups provide access to a range of information that emerges from the interactions of participants in the group, and this is what makes them a unique and very useful tool in any type of information-gathering exercise.

Why run focus groups on flexibility?

Focus groups offer opportunities to explore differences between what an organisation thinks it is doing, what is actually happening, and how employees are working within a given situation. A focus group discussion about flexible work may bring to light hidden barriers, benefits or costs that might not otherwise have been seen.

It is important at the start of this process to be clear about why your organisation is running focus groups on flexibility. Reasons will vary widely between organisations, but some motivators may be:

- to encourage early stakeholder engagement in the process of embedding flexible work in the organisation
- to gather input from employees, managers and other staff about how flexibility could work best for them
- to generate discussion and thought about flexibility among people who will be affected by its introduction
- to collect ideas about how an implementation is working, what could be improved etc.
- to facilitate understanding of flexibility among employees

Objectives of the flexibility focus group

- understand perceptions of flexible work in the workplace
- understand participants' perceptions of others who have access to flexibility
- understand the desire for flexible work across the organisation
- determine consistencies / inconsistencies in flexible work within the organisation
- gain insight into the broad range of circumstances that require flexibility in the workplace.

How many focus groups?

It usually takes more than one focus group to produce valid results –three or four would not be unusual. As a facilitator you will know when you have conducted enough groups (with the same sets of questions) when you are not hearing anything new anymore, reaching the point of 'saturation'.

Preparing for a focus group session

Timing

Ideally, a focus group with 6 to 10 participants will run for around 90 minutes. Smaller groups need less time; larger groups take longer. To ensure that discussions flow and ideas build upon each other, it is necessary to run each focus group as standalone session (i.e., don't try and break a session into three half hour slots).

Schedule enough time for each focus group to run about 10 minutes over time. This gives the facilitator some leeway to let a useful discussion finish before ending the session.

When scheduling focus groups, think about what external factors might affect participants' engagement in the session. For example:

- it may not be a good idea to schedule a leadership focus group back-to-back with the weekly managers' meeting
- scheduling non-managers' focus groups over lunch time is likely to reduce the numbers who will participate
- scheduling focus groups for first thing in the morning is similarly likely to reduce participants
- scheduling focus groups at the end of the day may result in participants who become increasingly distracted over the session.

Other factors to consider are peak holiday times, seasonal changes in workloads, and proximity to a weekend or a public holiday.

How to record the session

It is common practice to audio record focus group sessions and have the recordings transcribed afterwards. This is primarily because discussions that involve several people can be very difficult to record with handwritten or typewritten notes, as the ideas and comments can move very quickly. In those circumstances, it is very easy to miss important information. Having a verbatim transcript of each session allows for better quality understanding of the content, and for more in-depth qualitative analysis if desired.

If manual note-taking is the only available option, we recommend that at least two people take notes that can be combined after the session.

Decide what you want to know

Conducting focus groups with employees across the organisation will start to provide valuable insight into the actual practices and perceptions of flexibility in your workplace. A good first step in preparing for a flexibility focus group is to find out how flexible work currently works or doesn't work in the organisation:

- What flexible working arrangements or policies are in place?
- Where are the policies (if they exist) and how accessible are they to staff?
- Are you familiar with the Fair Work Act in relation to flexible working arrangements?
- What are the known barriers to the introduction of flexible working arrangements in this organisation?
- If flexible work is already available in this organisation, does every employee have equal access to it?

Once you have an understanding of the existing position, the next step is to decide exactly what it is you want your focus group/s to discuss. For organisations at the very beginning of the process of implementing flexible work, you might need to know whether flexible work is feasible across the whole organisation, or only in parts of it.

If there are other large topics that also need to be covered, you may want to consider running several focus groups instead of trying to cover everything in one session.

Decide on your participant group/s

Flexible working arrangements offer different sets of challenges for different sectors of an organisation, and it is important to hear the 'voice' from each sector. To ensure the information gleaned from focus groups is complete and well-rounded, you may like to consider running separate focus groups for the following sections of your workforce:

- leadership teams
- managers
- employees

Separate focus groups with each workforce sector give you the opportunity to explore these different perspectives in detail. Attempting to run a single focus group that includes all sectors will likely produce much less useful information, and may create workplace tensions outside the focus group/s.

Other participant characteristics to consider

When considering invitations to focus groups it is also important to consider the following selection criteria:

- Gender
 - Will both women and men feel comfortable talking freely in a mixed gender group?
 - It may be useful to run all female, all male and a mixed focus group and compare results.
- Age
 - Consider how intimidating it will be for one younger employee to be placed in a group of older adults or vice versa.
- Break up 'cliques'
 - Where there are known close associations among groups of employees, try not to include more than one member of a group in the same focus group session.
- Size
 - Ideally, a focus group would include 6 to 10 employees. The group needs to be large enough to generate rich discussion, but not so large that some participants are left out.

Facilitating focus groups

Selecting a facilitator

Focus groups may be run by a facilitator (especially relevant for focus groups with KMP participants) or by members of the organisation's leadership. By the leadership holding such 'listening' sessions for employees it may also send a signal of leadership commitment.

When selecting a facilitator, it is a good idea to consider the power structure in the room. For example, having a focus group of production line workers facilitated by the CEO will most likely result in very little information about what doesn't work so well.

While considering the ideal candidate to take on the role of facilitator, consider if the candidate has the following traits:

- able to listen attentively with sensitivity and empathy
- able to listen and think at the same time
- believes that all participants are equal and all have valuable opinions to offer
- has adequate knowledge of flexibility challenges in the organisation
- able to keep personal views and ego out of facilitation
- able to appropriately manage potentially challenging group dynamics

A good facilitator is able to deal tactfully with challenging participants. Some appropriate strategies to move discussions along or in different directions:

- 'Thank you. What do other people think'?
- Make eye contact with shy participants, call on them, smile at them
- Respectfully ask quietly speaking participants to repeat their response more loudly

During the session

When well executed, a focus group creates an accepting environment that puts participants at ease, allowing them to thoughtfully answer questions and engage in discussions, using their own words and adding meaning to their answers. As a facilitator, remember that it is the participants who should be doing the majority of the talking. A facilitator should observe and ask questions to guide the discussion, but should not join in the discussion directly.

Welcoming participants and starting the session

Ideally the group will be welcomed by a (senior) leader of the organisation, immediately signalling that flexible work is firmly on the agenda of the organisation and taken seriously by key management personnel.

After this brief welcome, the facilitator should then clarify the objectives of the session, ensuring all participants know what is expected from the group, why the focus group is taking place and why flexible working is a priority for the organisation.

At this point, the facilitator should also confirm that information gathered in the focus groups will be used ethically and constructively, making sure each participant feels 'safe' to be honest and share real opinions and feedback. The facilitator should then move on to setting the ground rules.

Ground rules

So that everybody can be heard and feel safe in the discussion, it is essential to set ground rules with the group at the start of the session. At a minimum, the ground rules should include:

- awareness and consent if the session is being audio or video recorded
- acknowledgement that participants are under no obligation to contribute to the discussion
- a statement that everyone has a right to be heard and participants should not interrupt or talk over the top of each other
- a request that people stay on track and don't launch into long and irrelevant anecdotes, no matter how amusing they may be
- an expectation that respect and courtesy will be maintained in all interactions
- the importance of respecting the privacy of each person in the room. If any controversial, personal, or uncomfortable topics are raised, they must be kept private after the session (what is said in the room stays in the room)
- a clear and unequivocal statement that abusive behaviour – be it physical, verbal or emotional - will not be tolerated
- reassurance that nothing said in the group will affect participants' job security or management relationships
- an instruction that if anyone feels uncomfortable, please notify the facilitator immediately

Making sure everyone is heard

During the session, try to make sure that everybody has a 'voice'. Some people who have valuable input to give might be quieter or less extroverted than others in the group, so it is important that a facilitator makes room for those people to speak (while respecting their right not to contribute).

Silence is golden. In focus groups, participants often need time to think about a question or an issue that has been raised, and to consider how they might want to respond. A good facilitator will allow silences to be a natural part of the flow of the discussion, and will resist the urge to fill silences with words, or to repeat the question. Observe participants' body language to understand whether they are uncomfortable with the question/issue, or are thinking deeply about it, or are perhaps bored or tired and in need of a coffee break. If

no-one responds after a reasonable interval, it is OK to repeat the question in a slightly different way, or ask a different question, to help generate discussion.

Number and type of questions

Focus groups are usually structured around a set of carefully considered questions that allow a free-flowing discussion. Participant comments should stimulate and influence thinking and sharing in the group. Some people may be surprised to find themselves changing their thoughts and opinions during the focus group.

In order to make focus groups run smoothly and to maximise participants' opportunities to contribute, ensure questions are:

- clear, short and to the point
- focused on one dimension each
- unambiguously worded
- open-ended - worded in a way that they can't be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer (use 'why' or 'how' instead of 'what', 'who' and 'when')
- neither threatening nor embarrassing

Samples of questions to use for different types of focus groups are provided in Appendix A.

Modes of questioning

There are different 'modes' for focus group questioning. For experienced facilitators, asking an overarching question and then having several prompt questions ready to guide the discussion is a very effective way to maximise the information gathered.

Another mode is to determine several specific questions in advance and to work through them, in much the same way as a structured interview. This is a good method for inexperienced facilitators, or in situations where the purpose of the focus group is to glean specific information about specific topics (often used in market research).

Whichever mode is chosen, it is important that questions are asked consistently across all related focus groups. That is, if several focus groups are being conducted using the same questions, the questions must be asked in exactly the same way in each focus group. Changing the way the question is stated can change the message different people hear, and therefore change the responses they give. Consider this example: the question is "How can we implement flexibility in this team?" and it is stated this way in one focus group, but in the next group it is stated as, "What do we need to do to make flexibility work in this team?"

Adjusting focus groups for different types of participants

Focus groups may need to be adjusted to suit different types of participants:

- focus groups with leadership teams may be structured around understanding how leaders view the status quo of the organisation's workplace flexibility, vision for the future of work, and how they may be role models for flexibility.
- focus groups with managers may be more concerned with the challenges of managing flexible working teams, how they view the current level of workplace flexibility, and the support required for managers in enabling greater levels of flexibility.
- focus groups with non-managerial staff might concentrate on the practicalities of working flexibly, the impact on colleagues, expectations of management, and the potential difficulties in daily working.

Adjusting questions for different circumstances

Questions will need to be adjusted according to the stage of implementation an organisation has reached:

- Organisations who have not yet introduced flexible work but are considering how to go about it will want to ask questions about how to successfully implement flexible work.
- Organisations who are in the process of introducing flexible work will want to ask questions about how to work effectively with flexibility ('Living it' questions).
- Organisations who have already implemented flexible work and want to know how it is going will be asking evaluating questions.

Appendix A: Sample questions

The sample questions below are offered merely as examples of the types of questions you may want to use in focus groups with different sectors of the workforce. You can tailor questions to suit your own organisation's needs or preferences.

Sample questions for leaders

How to implement flexible working (for organisations who are considering the introduction of flexible work):

- Can every employee in this organisation have equal access to flexible work?
 - In which areas of the business might it be easy/difficult to introduce flexible work?
 - Are there roles in this organisation that cannot be done flexibly? Why?
 - What parts of roles deemed 'not flexible' could be done flexibly?
 - Should flexibility be a whole of business offering?
 - Should flexibility be mainstreamed?
- How do we as management measure/ evaluate flexible workers?
- What could each team leader/line manager do to make flexible work more available to everyone in their team/s?
 - How could team members help to integrate flexible work into their teams?
 - What types of flexibility would work best with different teams?
- Is flexibility the responsibility of leaders to manage?
- Do you agree that a flexible workplace is a workplace of the future?
- Can flexible workplaces lead to more collaborative cultures?
- Are flexible workplaces not productive?

'Living it' questions (for organisations who are in the process of implementing flexible work):

- How can you set an example for successful flexible working?
- How do you support your staff in implementing flexible working?
- Is flexible work supported across all sectors of your workforce, or are there still pockets of resistance?
- Are flexible workers given equal status with other workers when considered for promotions and additional training?
- Is flexible work causing disruptions to any workflows?
- How well are managers coping with the challenge of team members on flexible work?

Evaluating questions (for organisations who want to measure how flexible work is working):

- How effective is flexible working in producing its intended outcomes?
- What barriers still exist to effective implementation of flexible work?
- Are employees who work flexibly finding it easy or difficult to work this way?
- How well are teams of flexible workers functioning?
- Are there areas of the business where we have not yet introduced flexible working where we now think we could introduce it?
- Based on our experience to date, what changes could be made to the policies and procedures around flexible working to make it more effective?
- Are there any areas of the business where flexible work has been introduced and where it is just not working?

Questions for managers

How to implement flexible working:

- What are the barriers to the successful implementation of flexible working arrangements in your team?
- How well supported do you feel to actively offer flexible working arrangements to your team?
- Can every member of your team have access to flexible work?
- What would need to happen for flexible work to be successfully implemented in your team?
- How easy or difficult would it be to manage teams that have a variety of flexible working arrangements in place?
- Are there roles in this organisation that cannot be done flexibly? Why?
- How might some of these roles be conducted flexibly?
- What parts of roles deemed 'not flexible' could be done flexibly?
- What policies or guidelines do you have at your disposal to make evaluations of flexible workers?

'Living it' questions:

- How can you set a good example for flexible working?
- How do you support your staff in implementing flexible working?
- How are you supported by management to manage a flexible team?
- How well does flexible work integrate into your team's functioning?
- Should flexibility be a whole of business offering?
- Should flexibility be mainstreamed?
- Is it the responsibility of leaders to manage flexibility?
- Do you agree that a flexible workplace is a workplace of the future?
- Do flexible workplaces lead to more collaborative culture?
- Are flexible workplaces productive?
- How do you measure/ evaluate flexible workers?

Evaluating questions:

- How well is flexible work operating on your teams?
- What challenges do your teams encounter in flexible work?
- Are employees who work flexibly finding it easy or difficult to work this way?
- How well are teams of flexible workers functioning?
- Based on your experience to date, what changes could be made to the policies and procedures around flexible working to make it more effective?
- Are there other areas of the business where you think flexible work might be beneficial?

Questions for non-managerial employees

How to implement flexible work:

- What do you think about the idea of flexible work in your team/s?
 - Do you agree that a flexible workplace is a workplace of the future?
 - Do flexible workplaces lead to a more collaborative culture?
 - Are flexible workplaces productive?
- How easy is it for you to get information about doing flexible work in this organisation?
- How comfortable would you feel asking for a flexible working arrangement?
 - What makes you feel comfortable/uncomfortable with this?
 - What would need to happen for you to feel comfortable about asking for a flexible working arrangement?
- How do you think your manager sees flexible work?

- Does every employee have equal access to flexible work in this organisation?
- Should flexibility be a whole of business offering?
- Should flexibility be mainstreamed?
- Is it the responsibility of leaders to manage flexibility?
- Do you feel you need to be more or less 'physically present' to do your job?
- What parts of your job do you think could be done flexibly?
- Do you think you would be more productive if your hours were more flexible?
- Do you think there are roles in this organisation that cannot be done flexibly? Why?
 - How might some of these roles be conducted flexibly
 - What parts of roles deemed 'not flexible' could be done flexibly?

'Living it' questions:

- What do you like about working flexibly? What do you not like so much?
- How do you manage flexible hours while remaining up to speed and feeling part of the team?
- How does management support you in implementing flexible working?
- Do you have enough technical support for seamless flexible working?
- How well does flexible work fit in to your team?
- Do you feel that flexible work is successful on your team?
- What improvements would you like to see in the way flexible work is managed on your team?
- How are you measured/ evaluated as a flexible worker? How would you like to be measured/ evaluated?

'Evaluating' questions

- How well is flexible work operating on your team?
- What challenges does your team encounter in flexible work?
- Are employees who work flexibly finding it easy or difficult to work this way?
- How well are teams of flexible workers functioning?
- Based on your experience to date, what changes could be made to the policies and procedures around flexible working to make it more effective?
- Are there other areas of the business where you think flexible work might be beneficial?

Appendix B: Sample run sheet

The table below provides a suggested run sheet for facilitating focus group.

No	Session	Time
1.	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none">→ welcome→ objectives→ ground rules→ how the information will be used	10 minutes
2.	Facilitated discussion <p>Ask a question and let the discussion evolve around it. Take notes. Ask a prompt question when the discussion either peters out or starts repeating itself. When the topic is exhausted, ask another question.</p>	60 minutes
3.	Summary of key messages and outcomes <p>Ensure all key messages and outcomes are captured and repeated back to the group. Upon completion of each focus group the assistant will transcribe captured notes and/or recordings into a comprehensive (anonymous?) report ensuring the feedback of each group can be used constructively in creating an overarching organisation strategy on flexible working.</p>	10 minutes
4.	Debrief <p>Ask for feedback on the focus group process. Deal with any concerns about what happens next. Reassure participants that their input has been valued and that, even if they have raised controversial issues, their employment will not be affected. Take note of anyone who might be struggling with information or issues that arose during the focus group. If needed, refer them on to an appropriate source of assistance such as the Employee Assistance Program or an Harassment Contact Officer. Provide an anonymous written evaluation survey if you want to get more detailed feedback.</p>	10 minutes