

A Culture of Flexibility Built on Trust

Marque Lawyers

Organisation

 40

 Legal

 Sydney

EST. 2008

Marque Lawyers ('Marque') was founded by Michael Bradley, Managing Partner, and a group of colleagues in 2008. Their vision was to create a workplace where employees would behave as a collective whole and feel happy practising law. They envisioned a model that was very different from the traditional 'command-and-control' model still seen in many organisations today. Fundamental to their model for the business was to allow the business to be 'elastic' and not tightly structured. This model continues to underpin the way people behave and make decisions today, including Marque's approach to workplace flexibility.

Flexibility is at the heart of the why and how of Marque Lawyers's operation. Flexible work is not perceived to be a policy or statutory entitlement, but rather part of the 'elasticity' with which the firm operates and grows.

A UNIQUE APPROACH TO WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY

Within a year of opening, Marque had to decide how it was going to approach flexible work. Four senior leaders (two partners + two senior associates) announced they were pregnant and were going to go on parental leave – at the same time. At first, this seemed like a huge operational challenge, as it would to most organisations. However, Marque decided to view it in a positive light: the organisation has happy, loyal employees who want to go on leave and come back. Marque decided to adopt a trust-based approach in which staff are able to determine what arrangements would work best for them and how those arrangements would work. In the end, all four senior leaders went on parental leave, and all returned and are still there today (as has also been the case with 13 subsequent pregnancies).

Leaders at Marque believe that their approach has evolved since that early experience and will continue to mature as they challenge the boundaries between work and the enjoyment of life. Today, Marque has no set definition of flexible work, no policies and as little structure as possible. They believe that there cannot be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to flexibility, because the

meaning of 'flexibility' is dynamic and different for every individual. Trust is now the cornerstone of Marque's unique approach to workplace flexibility.

**“THE ONLY THING WE MANAGE WITH OUR
STAFF IS THEIR WORKLOAD; WE DON'T
CARE WHEN OR HOW THEY DO IT.”**

- Michael Bradley, Managing Partner

On any given day, up to one third of employees are not in the office, having chosen to work from home or start later in the afternoon. All employees can work flexibly in terms of when and where work is done. Whether they choose flexible working arrangements depends on the matters they are working on, the amount of team interaction they require or prefer and their individual and team workload.

WHY IT WORKS

The team at Marque has built trust and respect through their core values and value-based behaviours. In the first year, Marque's whole team agreed on three core values—Give Respect, Be Bold, Have Fun—and these values continue to underpin the way people behave and make decisions today.

The team behaves as a collective, which is reinforced by internal events and rituals. For example, every six months, every person moves desks to a random new location within the open-plan environment. Seniority does not entitle any person to opt out or have preferential treatment in desk selection. This ritual has been in place since Marque was established and is seen by staff as being a core driver for building strong relationships. The team has described themselves 'like a family' that 'looks after each other'.

Strong relationships also cultivate open communication. Enjel Phoon, a partner who works flexibly, says that the reason workplace flexibility is successful at Marque is because of the open and constant communication. The strong connection between people on a personal and professional level means that everyone is able to be clear on what outcomes need to be delivered in what timeframes; and they work together to ensure they are met. High performance is not compromised by workplace flexibility.

OUTCOMES

Not surprisingly, Marque does not measure flexible work by numbers of employees working part-time or full-time. Rather, success is measured in other unique ways. For example, Marque takes pride in the fact that 17 babies have been born to employees since the firm was established seven years ago and that 100% of those employees returned to work and are still there today.

One other particularly noteworthy outcome is Marque's success in achieving gender equality. Specifically, Marque has created a workplace in which 70% of all employees and 55% of partners are female; figures that are significantly higher than those of their law firm peers.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM MARQUE?

For other organisations seeking to increase workplace flexibility, Marque states their top three tips are:

- › Minimise rigid policies and procedures that fail to recognise individual differences;
- › Don't be afraid to try new things; and
- › Trust your employees to do the right thing.

WHAT'S NEXT

Marque is now revisiting its approach to managing leave. In the future, Bradley states that he would like to follow in Virgin's bold footsteps on the matter. In 2014 Virgin announced a 'no policy' approach to annual leave that allows all salaried staff to take off as much time as they want, whenever they want, with no monitoring of time away from work.

REAL LIFE EXPERIENCE

Enjel Phoon joined Marque as a partner soon after its establishment. Phoon admits that she was reluctant to leave her previous In-house Counsel role to go back into a law firm, knowing that female partners in law firms typically struggle to balance the competing demands of parenting and their work. Phoon has had two children since joining Marque and works flexibly. For her, this means that she leaves the office at 4pm every day and comes back online at 8pm. Phoon says that the key to making this work is being very open and honest with everyone—including her clients and team members—about her family and the time she wants to spend with them. She is available on Skype anytime she is not in the office, and people trust her to deliver what is needed. Phoon says, 'it's about results and getting it done. I don't need a policy to tell me how to behave'

A project by the Centre for Workplace Leadership



A case study by AHA on behalf of Centre for Workplace Leadership

