

Stretching flexibility

More professional people are seeking a balance between work and lifestyle, reports **Wendy Taylor**.

INCREASINGLY, employers are heeding staff calls for greater flexibility over when, how and even where they get their work done.

Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business reports reveal 52 per cent of certified agreements in their database provide for flexible working hours. More than 20 possible flexibility provisions are categorised.

However, not everyone is covered by awards or the formalised agreement making process, particularly many professionals and middle and senior managers. But the latest Australian Benefits Review published by Mercer Cullen Egan Dell suggests employers are realising that knowledge workers and managers have lives outside work as well.

Thirty per cent of organisations surveyed last year had implemented flexible working arrangements and a further 28 per cent are planning to implement them to help attract and retain staff. More than 50 per cent of exempt staff (those not covered by agreements) have the option of regularly telecommuting, the report says.

Predictably, there is wide variation across industries and sectors. But change is happening, even in one of the most conservative of communities: chartered accounting.

Andrew Wensor, who manages Hays Executive and Hays Accounting Personnel listens daily to what accounting and finance professionals are seeking and what employers are prepared to accommodate.

"Wanting flexibility or balance is

not seen as a negative anymore," Mr Wensor says. He estimates about 20 per cent of clients want to leave their employer because of the long hours and/or lack of flexibility "People are saying they will forgo salary for lifestyle," he says.

And it's not just women with young families. Men with serious sporting interests, a business interest on the side or who are wanting to share the parenting are also looking for receptive employers. Employers are starting to listen.

"Between 50 and 60 per cent of employers in finance and accounting will consider candidates wanting to negotiate non-standard hours, provided they have the right qualifications and experience," Mr Wensor says.

Vic Timos, who has worked in senior accounting and finance roles for more than 15 years has experienced first-hand this change of attitude.

Mr Timos was working 10-hour days at a bank and "only semi-seriously looking" when an advertisement for senior positions at PricewaterhouseCoopers' new Tax Assurance Centre caught his eye. It was appealing to tax professionals wanting flexibility and balance. Mr Timos had worked with one of the 'big five' firms before the bank so was initially suspicious. "I couldn't believe a chartered accounting firm could be offering flexibility or work life balance," he says of the ad.

He applied in part "out of a sense of curiosity" yet he knew what he wanted from his next employer. "I didn't want to make a move that would put me under huge pressure because of my fam-



It's about balance: Louise Zampaglione at work. Picture: MARIO BORG

ily commitments."

Mr Timos has a wife and three children. Like many people he was happy to work five days a week, but working 10-hour days year after year had lost its appeal.

Even so, flexibility and hours alone were not enough to lure Mr Timos from a major institution. He says: "I wanted challenging work and I wanted to use my systems knowledge in my next job. At the interview I was up-front about the tax training I thought I needed to do the job. I wanted to be sure they were prepared to support me in this.

"I was also concerned about being pigeon-holed in the tax

compliance area. So I negotiated that after two years at the Tax Assurance Centre, the company will help me find a position in the practice if this is what I wanted."

Mr Timos' negotiations were successful and he is enjoying his new position. "The atmosphere is great, people have energy and we're getting the throughput. There's also a high level of professionalism and staff can be open and can talk freely about workloads and contracts.

"Our core hours are between 10am and 4pm and if we have to work late we can come in late the next morning if we need to. It's all about give and take. This is

groundbreaking in the accounting profession," he says.

On the home front, he now has time to be the treasurer of his son's junior footy club and says: "When my wife asks me to do things, or pick up the kids, nine times out of ten I can say 'no problem'."

Offering flexible work practices is only one aspect of the new model PricewaterhouseCoopers has developed to attract experienced tax professionals.

"We are looking for 'four-leaf clovers'," says Louise Zampaglione, senior manager human resources for the Tax Assurance Centre. "There's a global shortage of tax professionals so we've had to differentiate ourselves from the other firms. There really is a 'war for talent'. We've had to give people a reason to leave their existing jobs."

When they were designing their new business model they analysed "what Generation X staff wanted in a work environment". "We knew we wouldn't attract staff with our traditional model," Ms Zampaglione says.

"Now we're saying to these people we've taken away the red tape, the focus on time sheets and we've streamlined processes. We're offering you flexibility in the way you work, purpose-built systems and less hierarchy.

"It's not a culture of 'be here and be seen' but 'be here when the work is here' And we're not asking them to sacrifice remuneration for lifestyle."

So have the ads featuring rollers bladers and surfers sparked the desired interest? "We used to get between zero and 10 responses which is typical in this industry. Now we get between 10 and 50 responses," she says.

Over the past few months Ms Zampaglione has negotiated per-

sonalised contracts with all the new tax managers. "People have not asked for nearly as much as I had thought they would. No-one has asked for anything unreasonable yet."

She has agreed to a delayed start dates of several months, part-time hours and extra leave for study and travel purposes. "We specify leave can't be taken in peak periods and we need as much notice as possible. But, when people ask for something, we ask why can't we do it rather than why should we do it."

She says from her perspective it helps if candidates are honest and if they can explain why they need something. "It's also very difficult to help someone when they don't know what they want and they only know what isn't working for them."

And, Ms Zampaglione advises if candidates can explain how they can add value beyond the brief of their role, this will also give them a stronger negotiating base. "The key thing is not to demand conditions as this only creates an adversarial relationship."

Russell Johnson, managing director of EPR careers management specialists says people who are successful in achieving a balanced lifestyle have a negotiation strategy. "They know what they must attain, what their irreducible position is, and what they are willing to accept. They aim for a specific and realistic outcome and put forward win-win proposals," he says. "They are also willing to give something in return and they know what that is."

Mr Johnson advises candidates to wait until the organisation has decided they want them before raising working conditions. "Then you can say: 'I can deliver what you want, but here are the conditions I need so that I can do so.'"