

Transcript – Diversity & Inclusion – Flexible Work

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Guest: Darren Robinson

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Ashish: Hi and welcome to the Actuaries Institute's CareerView podcast. This is another in the series of Diversity and Inclusion focus podcast that we're running. I'm Ashish Ahluwalia and today we're going to be talking about flexible workplaces. A flexible workplace is really important in order to meet the needs of diverse sets of people, so how do we correctly request for flexibility in our working arrangements and how should employers interact with these requests? To discuss this today, I've got Darren Robinson, Chief Actuary at MLC Insurance with me today, Darren welcome.

Darren: Thanks Ashish, it's great to be here. This is a fantastic initiative of the Institute. Diversity of opinion and background are so valuable to modern organisations, it's great to see the Institute acting to find ways to support it.

Ashish: Thanks Darren and thanks for making the time, so I understand you've got lots of experience in both being a beneficiary of a flexible workplace and also allowing your teams to work in quite a flexible way, so I'm really looking forward to talking about that with you today. Before we kick off, so Darren, just tell us a little bit about your background and your career and what's got you to where you are today?

Darren: Thanks Ashish. I've worked as an actuary for all of my professional career with roles at Trowbridge consulting before it was purchased by Deloitte, with CommInsure, with BT, Clearview and now at MLC, where I've been for five years. Throughout my career, relationships and working with others have always been important to me and I like to find ways to help others make the most of their work-life balance.

Ashish: Right, I understand at certain times in your career, you actually work part-time as well and still managed to make it a very successful career. We know that some working part times in the past has often been seen as a bit of a limitation. So, what was that like for you and how did you make that work for you and I guess how did your employer make that work for you as well?

Darren: Well I've got two children, Michael and Alex. They're 13 and 16 now and when they were born it was important for me to spend time with them and I was lucky enough to be able to work four days a week. This was at CommInsure and at BT. They allowed me to spend that time and so I'm really grateful for that time and it just gave me some time to spend with my children when they were young, with the schools that they were at, helping out at the schools, so I found a lot of different things to do on that fifth day when I wasn't working.

Ashish: Yeah, I'm sure you're more than busy with those days, so was that typical or atypical at the time when you know if you think about when you started, started out in your career and say even before you were working part-time, would you have seen it as usual or a bit unusual for people to request part-time work?

Transcript – Diversity & Inclusion – Flexible Work

Darren: No it wasn't particularly usual. I remember at the time though, I made a commitment to both of my employers that I would continue to do what I had done, so from their perspective, it made financial sense, they were basically getting the same work done for 80% of the cost, so it made sense from their perspective, but it also made sense from my perspective and that's how we made it work.

Ashish: Sure and would you say that over your career, you've seen that sort of take-up rate or the incidence of people working part time and has that increased do you think?

Darren: it definitely has increased, definitely at MLC, we're keen to make it work. We've got a lot of great staff and trying to make things work from their perspective, getting the work-life balance is critical because both parties win out of it. If staff are happy and contributing then the organisation benefits a lot as well.

Ashish: Yeah, I think that's right, so now just on that, so I understand you've got both you know a diverse team but geographically as well as the flexible working arrangements in terms of part-time and hours and things, so tell us about the team that you work with and where they are and what they look like?

Darren: So, the MLC actuarial team is actually based in North Sydney. Last year, two of my direct reports both moved to Brisbane. The stories are very similar, they both were expecting at the time, their first child. They both had parents in Brisbane and they both had fairly large portfolios and so we had a challenge, how do we make this work? As it turned out, both of the moves were successful and I look back on it now as to what made them successful and part of it was the individuals.

Trust is very important in making these things work and both David and Chris were excellent and right across there their business and they both came to me with a plan of how they would make it work for them, for the team and for MLC and part of that meant getting their teams to step up into broader roles and so they could cover the day-to-day running of the business while the heads of in Brisbane could think more strategically about the businesses that they face and that worked quite well actually.

I find that myself, I do sometimes work from home and I find I actually do a very different kind of work when I'm alone, there's a bit of distance and so you can slow down and you can think and you can plan and plan out what's needed for the team, what's needed for the organisation over the next six months or a couple of years and the same thing is happening with be these two. That's in terms of the diversity of the team, geographically.

We also have Angela who runs our MI (Management Information) team and she came back from maternity leave and asked if she could work part-time, so this was also a challenge in a different way, so with the geographic diversity it was, how do you run the team when you're not physically there? whereas with part-time work for a head of it's a big role and there's a lot to be done, so the challenge there was how do you find time? and so the solution that we came up with there was, we actually hired a an agile coach who we used previously and we knew was excellent and what that meant was that, that agile coach was able to take up a lot of the activities that Angela previously did so that she could spend her time on the highest

Transcript – Diversity & Inclusion – Flexible Work

value activities which for her at that time was building relationships with our internal customers.

Ashish: Just for our listeners benefit, so what does an agile coach do and what does their role look like in this?

Darren: So agile coaches, there's quite a lot of things that they do and it's a whole new thing. It wasn't so much that he was an agile coach it was more that he was the right person that was able to take up these different aspects of Angela's role that she could delegate downwards and that was really just around helping her manage the team on a day-to-day basis so that she didn't have to have as many one-on-one conversations with the team and it could change that time from spending time with the team which she still loves to do but change it from that to talking to our customers and working out what they need.

Ashish: So you almost broke up the activities of the work that she needs to do into bits that could be outsourced or passed on or delegated to someone else who could do it in other times and she could focus on the most sort of high-value parts of her activities that she could condense down into the part-time days.

Darren: That's exactly right and so we did that we tried that and it did work quite well. The team was very supportive themselves. The team happens to be doing quite a lot at the moment but they were very supportive and this new way of working worked quite well as well it brought the team more closely together. One of the things that the agile coach did was increase the level of communication between the teams, so they actually learned a lot about what each other was doing strangely enough right through increased communication with each other, which was one of the things that the agile coach did bring. I don't know whether that's necessarily part of agile but it was something that this particular individual did bring to the team.

Ashish: Those sound like really positive experiences for all involved in those initiatives, now the question for you I guess (is) you would have seen both the good of it and presumably there were some challenges in making that all work as well so can you talk us through some of that and how you dealt with those?

Darren: If we think about this more broadly around diversity and making diversity work within the workplace. Diversity is an interesting thing and effectively what you do with diversity is you bring a group of individuals together who have got quite diverse backgrounds and experience and different ways of doing things and what that means is if there's a lack of awareness, it can create conflict because people see things being done in ways that they wouldn't have done it themselves and you can get a view (of) "well I wouldn't have done it that way and if you did it my way, it would be a lot simpler" and so that if you don't have awareness that there are these differences in different approaches to things, it can actually create conflict.

Ashish: Yeah, which is not necessarily a bad thing as long as it's the right sort of conflict isn't it?

Transcript – Diversity & Inclusion – Flexible Work

Darren: That's exactly right and so what you need to do is focus the conflict on the issues and so you have robust conversations about the issues in the workplace and don't let it become personal and that's easy to say and hard to do but one of the things that you can do is just make individuals aware of the diversity and that people should expect people to have different ways of working and to take it as a learning opportunity to see how different people work

Ashish: And is that something you talk about quite actively then? about the fact that there are different points of view and to make people aware of that?

Darren: Yeah it's something we talk about and it's also something that we focus on around you know bringing out the different ways of working and making that quite explicit and then from that you can say "ah! you know, I wouldn't have done it that way but now I've seen it done that way and it worked quite successfully", then people become more sympathetic towards each other and more open to learning which is actually one of the major benefits of diversity.

Ashish: So you've got to take a bit of a suck it & see approach sometimes by the sounds of it?

Darren: Yeah, you do.

Ashish: So when you were talking about your team and how you've dealt with their diverse set of needs around work practices and plans, (it) sounds like you and your teams have had really positive, productive experiences on those. Now I imagine for our listeners out there sort of you know that that may not have been down the flexible work path before, they're not so sure about exactly what the employers policies are or maybe some in some cases not everyone's employers policies are the most advanced on flexible work like some practices.

What would be your advice to someone thinking about wanting to request flexible work arrangements? How would you suggest that they tackle it particularly in an environment where they're not sure how it would be received or perceived?

Darren: I think the important part around requesting is actually not the request. from the employers perspective, What's important is that the employees happy with their working relationship, that the team remains productive and remains engaged and so prior to the requests, one of the things that could help is demonstrating your commitment to the role and it's important to build up a level of trust, because you know depending on what the work arrangement is, usually if you change it, your manager has to have an increased level of trust in what you're doing and that's around intent and it's also around capability, so to the extent that you can demonstrate to your manager that the work is going to be done, it's going to be done to a high quality and it's going to be done probably more efficiently if you are working from home, then they'll be comfortable with that arrangement.

One of the things that they'll also be concerned around is communication and how do you, in this different environment whatever it is, how do you keep up the level of communication with your colleagues and with your manager and what are the things that you're putting in

Transcript – Diversity & Inclusion – Flexible Work

place so that the work gets done and the level of communication and engagement within the team either stays where it is or improves.

Ashish: Yeah and technology and tools surely play a big role in that in terms of being enablers to make that communication a lot easier these days.

Darren: That's right so there's tools that allow you to virtually see your workspace at home which is which is an amazing development and we sort of take it for granted now but when you reflect on it, it's amazing.

Ashish: No more carrying paper files home to work on and that's bringing them back into the office.

Darren: Yes that's right so things become a lot simpler but communication is still an important one, you still need the watercooler effect which is just people going for cups of tea or coffee together and there's quite a lot of innovation and ideas that happen when people just happen to meet each other but by circumstance and so you've got to be able to create opportunities for that to still happen and that you don't become isolated at home.

Ashish: For the employers and managers out there, what would be your advice to them when they get such requests and how can how can people in the industry become champions for having flexible work arrangements?

Darren: I think each situation needs to be managed on its own merits. Trust in the individual is important. The impact on the rest of the team needs to be considered. The impact on productivity needs to be considered and a question that most managers will ask is "Has this individual properly thought through the consequences of this change"? They don't want to be in a position where they have to make this work and they would expect whoever is requesting it to have thought through it particularly in a professional services organization that individual needs to think through the consequences and be mature enough to see what the implications are and if they can do that and they can put in place plans and they can work with their colleagues to do it then I think most forward-thinking organisations would support it because there are a lot of benefits to the organization in terms of making staff feel welcome and you know feel like human beings not just resources of the organization.

Ashish: That's right which is got to be good for staff morale, staff retention and productivity. I think that's about all we have time for today Darren but that's been a really interesting discussion, I think for me that the takeaways have been that it's really worthwhile making flexible work arrangements work, both for the employer and the employees.

I think a lot of it is about planning, so planning both on the employers part and the employees part and then finally to make sure that there's communication and that you enable the right sort of communication and enable the right sort of activities to take place and there's great benefit by all accounts, productivity, you mentioned morale and of course at the end of the day, making people happy both professionally and personally, so I think there's a lot of merit to flexible work and thank you for sharing your insights with us on that today.

Transcript – Diversity & Inclusion – Flexible Work

Any sort of final comments before we wrap up?

Darren: Thank You Ashish, yeah it was an absolute pleasure to be here and it's great to see the Institute taking such a positive approach to this issue, which is so important to so many of its members.

Ashish: Thank you Darren, well thanks listeners, we hope you enjoyed the discussion. Please do get in touch with us if you have any comments or questions or suggestions for future podcasts on the CareerView - Diversity & Inclusion podcast series. I'm Ashish, bye for now