

CPA Australia Podcast

Transcript – Episode 69

- Intro: Hello, and welcome to the CPA Australia podcast, your weekly source for business, leadership and public practice accounting information.
- Mel Yates: Hello, it's my pleasure to be here today to participate in this timely and topical podcast about workplace flexibility. My name is Mel Yates, and I'm the Director of Reporting and Red Tape Reduction and ACNC Corporate Services at the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit's Commission.
- Mel Yates: So, is workplace flexibility possible or impossible? Is it fact or fiction? I'm delighted to introduce two very knowledgeable speakers here today, to share with you their experiences, their tips and their insights on workplace flexibility.
- Mel Yates: Firstly, I will introduce Phu Nguyen, who is the Chief Finance Officer at the City of Melbourne. Welcome, Phu.
- Phu Nguyen: Thank you for having me here today, Mel.
- Mel Yates: I am delighted to present our second speaker, Corey Hale, who is the Director of Corporate Services from the Metropolitan Waste and Resource Recovery Group. Welcome, Corey.
- Corey Hale: Thank you, Mel.
- Mel Yates: So, it's great that we've got two perspectives here today to talk about workplace flexibility. I'll start with the questions that I wanted to focus on. I guess if both of you put your employer hats on, why would you offer workplace flexibility? Now, I might start with you, Phu.
- Phu Nguyen: Thanks, Mel. I think as leaders and as employers, we need to move well beyond the legislative requirements in terms of work flexibility, workplace flexibility. And what I mean by that is, if you think about preferences ... I'll give you an analogy. As a capital city, what we are seeing is that the preference for people is to move more and more towards living in city centres, an urbanisation if you will.
- Phu Nguyen: If I extend that out to workplace flexibility, I think we're seeing, and we'll continue to see stronger growth of looking for employers who embrace workplace flexibility. So, from an attraction and retention point of view, I think that's absolutely critical to engaging and attracting the right talent for your business.
- Phu Nguyen: Working in the government, and not-for-profit sector, that becomes particularly important given that the areas that we work in can sometimes struggle to attract the brightest and best of minds. So any, if it's in terms of making it easier for people to join the organisation around workplace flexibility, should be encouraged.

Mel Yates: Great. Corey, from your perspective as an employer, why offer workplace flexibility?

Corey Hale: I think, Mel, I think to provide workplace flexibility means that you are going to provide employees with a lot more control over their work life and their work-life balance. You'll increase morale, you'll increase engagement, and with that comes increased commitment to the organisation. And as Phu pointed out, as not-for-profit organisations and government organisations, we need to provide a much better environment so we can attract people.

Corey Hale: And one of the other additional things for the employer is, with reduced absenteeism, you'll reduce turnover, and with that becomes increased productivity. And one of the very, very key things that we want to see is that we are becoming an employer of choice.

Mel Yates: Great. What would some of the challenges be that are associated with offering workplace flexibility? And I might start with you Corey.

Corey Hale: There's many challenges with workplace flexibility, but I think some of the key ones are to be very clear and defined around the role, have very clear and defined outcomes and outputs, and I think having very, very good lines of communication, and open and transparent dialogue, and an agreement whereby you understand and the employee understands that the performance is measured on those outcomes and outputs, and you have something very clear to guide you, and you're not going to be looking over their shoulder all the time wondering what they're doing because you do develop, through this, enormous trust. And I think the trust is very key to these arrangements working really well.

Mel Yates: Okay. Then Phu, what would be your take on some of the challenges that are associated with workplace flexibility?

Phu Nguyen: I think trust is the key to this. It needs to be a reciprocal arrangement where there are benefits for the employer, but also benefits for the employee. So, making sure that trust is in place, making sure there are measurements around performance so that we actually know that the outcomes are being delivered, and the business outcomes are being met at the same time accommodating work preferences for people.

Phu Nguyen: And Corey touched on a very important point earlier on, which was around the employees feeling in control of their environment. An employee feeling in control in their environment gives them great engagement, gives them great personal satisfaction, which will drive, naturally, more productivity, and putting in that extra couple of percent required in roles.

Phu Nguyen: So, from that perspective, I think the challenges are around trust, but I think the benefits to be gained from workplace flexibility are enormous.

Mel Yates: So you both mentioned trust, I might just expand on that. Why is trust so important for workplace flexibility? I might start with you, Phu.

- Phu Nguyen: Sure. I think trust is important, because on the one hand it enables the employer to really have engaged a productive workforce, because if an employee feels that they are trusted, and that they have ownership of their roles, they'll likely put in that extra effort.
- Phu Nguyen: So, from that perspective, I think trust is incredibly important. Likewise, that trust goes both ways. So, it's the employer in trusting the employee, but also the employee contributing towards the workplace success, as well.
- Mel Yates: Okay, and Corey, from your perspective, why is trust important?
- Corey Hale: Well, trust is key for the whole arrangement to work, and it's if you, I guess, hinge it on the measures and the outcomes from the role, both the employee, the manager and the employer and the manager will be very, very satisfied with the outcome. It doesn't mean, then, that you need to worry about somebody being in their seat at work from say nine to five. It's not a measure of time spent, it's a measure of what they're delivering. And that's where you develop up that trust. And I think having open and honest dialogue too.
- Corey Hale: It doesn't mean that if somebody is working it from home, as an example of one way flexibility can work, is that if they're not available between nine in the morning and 12, they might be available between nine and 12 at night, and getting their work done in that time frame. So, it's allowing them to work when it best suits them, and that provides that control that Phu referred to before.
- Mel Yates: Great. I'm just reflecting on a senior executive that I used to work with, and they quite often would say work is not somewhere you go, but work is something that you do. And I think that touches on what you were talking about. It's not necessarily a specified period of time or turning up to the office, but it's getting the work done and getting the outcomes that need to be achieved.
- Mel Yates: So, I might touch on communication, because that came up, as well. Why is communication key to workplace flexibility? And I might start with you, Corey.
- Corey Hale: Yeah, communication is very, very important, and that's because if you know that you can contact your employee, and you're going to get the relevant response within the agreed time frame, it doesn't mean it has to be immediate, but you know you're going to get the right type of response in the right agreed time frame. You know that you're going to meet each other's objectives.
- Corey Hale: If, for example as a manager, I have a question, and I know that my employee's not available at that particular time, I know that I need to wait, and vice versa. But it's communication around what they're, if they need support and help, that you don't necessarily have to do that face to face. So it's learning to work really well, either by the phone, or through email, or other electronic means, and that you have a shared understanding of how much and how well you do need to communicate.
- Mel Yates: Great, and from your perspective, Phu. Communication, well, why is that important?

- Phu Nguyen: Look, I think Corey's outlined the key aspects of why communication's important. What I would add to that is, really, that there are technologies out there at the moment, and they continue to evolve that enables that communication to happen quite seamlessly. So, whether that enables you to work from home, whether it enables you to communicate remotely, dial in to meetings, use Skype, these other business tools that enables that communication to be quite seamless, so that you don't necessarily have to be there and present for the whole duration of your working time.
- Phu Nguyen: And I think we should take the opportunity to leverage off those communication advancements, and technology advancements, and I think they'll continue to evolve over time.
- Mel Yates: So, just exploring on that, what I'm getting from you is that technology is really facilitating some of the workplace flexibility arrangements that might be in place. Is there anything else that we sort of need to be conscious of in terms of technology and some of the, I guess, doors that, that opens allowing workplace flexibility?
- Phu Nguyen: Sure. So, technology is a great enabler. It enables that seamless communication that I've spoken about earlier. The other thing that we do need to consider though is the risks in terms of that communication, and storage of data. So, you do need good systems, and good processes and practices in place that ensure the integrity and security of information that is being exchanged, as well.
- Phu Nguyen: So, there's some consideration that needs to be considered in working through that, but the net benefit is there in terms of utilising those technology capabilities.
- Mel Yates: Okay. And, Corey, was there anything that you wanted to add from a, I guess a technology context? Is there anything that people should be aware of or thinking about in relation to technology and the use of, for workplace flexibility, or as Phu mentioned, are there any other risks?
- Corey Hale: Technology, as Phu rightly pointed out, is the key enabler to making these arrangements work. Not every organisation is as well-equipped as the next in terms of being able to provide the appropriate technology. I think going forward in years to come, that should be made available to almost everybody, and I think we're seeing more and more change over the years in relation to the use of that technology.
- Corey Hale: We have mobile phones now, almost everybody I think has a mobile phone. We still do have landlines, we have email, and so I guess one of the downsides of the technology is the 24/7 access, so we do have to modify how we respond to some requests through technology, that we do ensure that it suits both parties in terms of that ability to respond. So, there is quite a number of different issues with technology.
- Mel Yates: Yeah. It's obviously, that element of this discussion is obviously quite large, and there's a lot more that we could probably explore and talk about. But one thing I will say before we move on, is that there are organisations, specifically in the not-for-profit context, whose objective is to make technology available. So, I am mindful with my work at the

ACNC, that there are a lot of not-for-profits who can't necessarily invest in large IT systems or have adequate controls, so I would encourage organisations to look up things like Connecting Up, who help to make technology available, both software and hardware, at a fraction of the price that not-for-profits would pay at commercial rates.

Mel Yates: So, we've talked about some of the challenges, we've talked about some of the risks, and I guess some of the foundations to making workplace flexibility possible, and make it work. I might just touch on any barriers. Are there any things that may exist that just stop workplace flexibility from occurring, they make it impossible? Any thought on that? Might start with you, Corey.

Corey Hale: There are a number of barriers to making it work well. We've talked about the IT, and that can be a barrier if we don't have the right provisions in place. I think one of the key barriers is possibly old fashioned work practices. So, I think we ... one of the barriers would be not having a contemporary mindset, and cultural issues whereby we might have a management team that is very insistent on having people in the office for five days a week within the hours of nine to five, I see that as being probably one of the biggest barriers, the cultural issue.

Corey Hale: And that leads itself to that element of change, and that change management issue, and designing that change, and how that might work for you. Another key barrier would be not having an appropriate policy and framework in place to help manage those arrangements.

Mel Yates: And, Phu, from your perspective, what stops workplace flexibility?

Phu Nguyen: Look, I think there are some limited roles where workplace flexibility can be a challenge, particularly if it's public facing, and you require that human interaction there and then in terms of that transaction. Putting that aside, I think the other barrier is really what's been talked about, and that is about leadership and about culture. And we've all got a role to play in making sure that workplace flexibility works, because that's what the expectations of the future generations will be.

Phu Nguyen: However, the leadership in driving through the right culture, and calling out behaviours that aren't aligned with the right culture, is incredibly important, and it takes only a few leaders to step up and do the right thing. That really influences the future culture of an organisation. So, I don't think we can underestimate the importance of the right leadership and the right culture, and setting the right tone for workplace flexibility.

Mel Yates: Great. Thank you for that. So, we might move forward now to, perhaps, your experiences, perhaps, with your employer hat on. What are some of the success stories in relation to workplace flexibility? Corey, I might start with you.

Corey Hale: I think I've had some great success. If I put my employer hat on, I have a couple of wonderful employees, one in particular who has come to us, and it's one of the very first flexible arrangements that we've put in place in our organisation, and I'm really pleased to have done that, and I think it is a great success story. It allows this employee to be

able to have that balance, and provide the support and care for a child, and I reiterate, that flexible arrangement doesn't necessarily have to relate to childcare. It can relate to other things, but I see this person being able to be incredibly productive, and her output, and desire and drive is fabulous.

Mel Yates: Wonderful. And, Phu, from your perspective. As an employer, do you have a success story?

Phu Nguyen: Look, there are many success stories, Mel, but I think the one that I'd like to share with people is at the City of Melbourne. The current CEO, Ben Rimmer, he unfortunately, for a period of time, was unwell, and when he transitioned back to work, he was able to come back to work in arrangement with his effectively a dual sharing of the CEO role for a period of time. And that was really quite insightful for the organisation, because it actually demonstrated that the most senior role in the organisation could make work flexibility work, and that sends a very powerful message to all layers within the organisation.

Phu Nguyen: Having really bold and inspirational leaders out there, who can actually demonstrate how work flexibility works, in very senior levels, has a huge impact in terms of driving that organisational culture, and changing mindset required to make workplace flexibility work.

Mel Yates: Great, so clearly that was an example where the whole workforce really saw that, and took notice.

Phu Nguyen: Absolutely. It was a great example. And like I said, it really demonstrated the ability for workplace flexibility to apply at all levels within the organisation.

Mel Yates: Excellent. So, if we now switch hats, so we'll take our employer hat off, and we'll put our employee hats on. How do you approach workplace flexibility? And I guess, are there any tips that you can offer to our audience today? Corey.

Corey Hale: Well, one of the key things is, don't be afraid to ask. And when you do go in and ask for any sort of flexible arrangement, make sure that you're taking a solution to put on the table, and provide clear ideas about what's in it for you, but also what's in it for your employer. And I think that is a really critical thing, and I think one of the things you need to do is, over time and when you are undertaking that arrangement, is constantly try to show how that arrangement is benefiting both you and the organisation.

Mel Yates: And, Phu, as an employee, how would you approach workplace flexibility, and do you have any insights that you want to share?

Phu Nguyen: Sure. I think Corey's point earlier was really the pertinent one, and that is about coming with a solution as well in terms of the employee. This is all about compromise, and it's about working together to try to get a mutually beneficial outcome.

- Phu Nguyen: So, as an employee, if I'm approaching an employer, I would also think about, well, what does this mean for the employee in terms of operational impact, if there is any, and come forward with thinking about, well, what are the options on how you might overcome those hurdles.
- Phu Nguyen: I think you'll find that employers will be a lot more embracing and open to the suggestion of more workplace flexibility if they know that the employee's also thought about those potential solutions, and thought about what it might mean for the business. So, I think taking that open mind, that willingness to negotiate and be flexible in terms of the arrangement, goes a long way to making it work.
- Mel Yates: So, there may be people who are listening to this, and they're thinking, well, that sounds good in theory, but you don't know my manager, and I'm petrified to even bring this up, or I'm scared to ask. Have you got any thoughts about that, Corey?
- Corey Hale: That's a very difficult question to answer, because it's a very personal question, but then flexibility is a very personal issue. Look, I've learned over the years, if you don't ask, you don't get, in many, many cases. And if it is something very new to your organisation, be brave, and be a trailblazer. What is the worst that can happen? And as I said, if you can take a solution to your manager, and have an arrangement whereby you might check in to see if it's working or not, so it's a two way street, that's where the communication comes back into it again. And then, you can demonstrate that success story.
- Corey Hale: So, you might have some check-in points. It might be two weeks, it might be a month, and then just check-in to see how it's working. I think if you can do that and demonstrate that, I don't think it'll be as hard as you think.
- Mel Yates: Okay, great. And, Phu, from your perspective. Anything that you want to add to that?
- Phu Nguyen: Just one point, and it might not come across the way that I intend it to. But in terms of approaching your employer, I think you should. And I think that in the rare instances where you're not being received warmly or openly with that suggestion, I'd suggest that there will be other organisations out there that will be open to it. Not all organisations are equal, so I think you will find that the really good employers, and the ones who are able to attract and retain the best talent, are the ones that are actually open-minded in terms of adjusting to workplace flexibility.
- Phu Nguyen: Because actually, that's the workplace of the future, that's what people are actually demanding and asking of organisations. So, it's not about resisting, it's actually about, well, how do you embrace that so that you do attract the right talent.
- Mel Yates: Okay. And I think that's a very salient point that you've just made. As we hurtle, or it seems like we're hurtling towards the future, and I like to use the term, it's not business as usual, but change as usual. What do you see as the future of work, and how that may affect workplace flexibility?

Phu Nguyen: I think the future of work is incredibly difficult to predict into the future. I mean, even five to 10 years from now, I think the workplace of today will look dramatically different. It's very difficult to predict what that exactly looks like, but what I would encourage leaders to do is actually to be flexible in their mindset and their openness to adjusting as they go along.

Phu Nguyen: So, workplace flexibility, if you think about advancements in technology, if you think about preferences in terms of how people will choose to work into the future, you can imagine a world where workplace flexibility and getting that right balance between work and your personal life will become increasingly more important to those future employees.

Phu Nguyen: So, as employers, we need to be flexible, we need to be very open-minded. We actually need to be a bit creative in thinking about what work looks like into the future. And the organisations that can do that will thrive, they will attract the best talent, the brightest minds, and they will do incredibly well. So, as employers, our job, and as leaders, our job is to try to make that happen.

Mel Yates: Okay, great. And, Corey, from your perspective. What does the future hold?

Corey Hale: Well, I think one of the key things that are going to shape the future of our work force is the way our children are currently taught in schools. Now, they're not taught usually in the normal school environment, sorry, around sitting at a desk. They have technology and, I guess in the form of an iPad potentially, so they can move around the rooms. So, they're not going to be expecting to come and sit in the same place, and do the same thing every single day. And I think they're also encouraged to try very, very different paths, and they're also encouraged to follow their passion. And it's a different way of going through the school system, and I think that's going to deliver a very, very different generation of employees, and I think we must adapt to that, and be quite creative, as Phu said, in our thinking around that type of work force.

Corey Hale: They may or may not stay with the same profession for very long. I think it's predicted, children now could have up to five to 10 different professions and careers throughout their life. There will be all sorts of change to consider. So, we as employers and leaders, need to make sure that we have all the best practices in place to try and retain this type of workforce.

Mel Yates: There's a lot of different threads there that you could follow. Just that comment around the number of professions or careers that people might have, my mind automatically starts thinking about study, and the ongoing learning. So, there's lots there to think about.

Mel Yates: I guess in terms of some comments that people say, and if I think about it, a colleague of mine. Work is work, home is home, and I don't like the two meeting. Now, do you have any thoughts around that sort of philosophy? Does that have a relevance in today's society with technology, or do you think that's a bit outdated? Phu, what are your thoughts on that?

Phu Nguyen: Look, I think previously, that distinction might've been a little bit clearer. I think moving forward, the blending of the two between work and private life is becoming more blended. I don't think that is a bad thing. I actually think there's a happy medium in terms of what people want to achieve in their professional life, but also what they really appreciate and value in their personal life. And I think there's an ability to have really engaged employees, who are happy to do the work at a time and at a place that's suitable for them, but also meets the business objectives in terms of delivering those outcomes.

Phu Nguyen: So, I don't think there's a mutual exclusivity about, well nine to five I'm in work mode, and after five I've switched off. I think those lines are blurring, and I think they'll continue to blur, but I don't think that's a bad thing.

Mel Yates: And, Corey, from your perspective.

Corey Hale: I completely agree. I think the lines are definitely blurred, and I also agree, it's not a bad thing. I think there are times where you might say I'm completely cut off from work now, and you don't have to look at what your device might be, and receive emails or phone calls after a particular time, but I think that gets down to personal preference now, and that's where the flexibility comes in. And I think you can choose, and you can have those arrangements with your employer to make that very clear as to what your choice is.

Corey Hale: But as Phu pointed out, and this is very critical, is that you can often work to when you are most productive by doing that. So, the lines are a bit blurred, but I think that is a good thing.

Mel Yates: Yeah, there's a lot to think about there. And I guess, from our conversation, there's a lot of different layers that need to be thought about. It may not be straight forward, it may not be easy, there are challenges, but by the sounds of it, those challenges can certainly be overcome.

Mel Yates: So, I just want to wrap up our conversation today, and I want to thank both of you very, very much. Phu, Corey, I really, really appreciate your time, and thank you very much for your insights. And thank you very much to our audience today for listening. We hope that you have gained some great insights to take away with you. Thank you very much.

Phu Nguyen: Thanks, Mel, thanks for having me.

Corey Hale: Thank you, Mel.

Outro: Thanks for listening to the CPA Australia podcast. To download the transcript and to find more information on today's episode, visit www.cpaustralia.com.au/podcast/69