



Wragge & Co LLP

Wragge & Co is a full service commercial law firm with a host of major blue chip clients. There are two major UK offices in Birmingham and London and further offices in Munich, Guangzhou and Brussels. Of the 1,100 staff almost 10 % are partners, over 50 % are fee earning lawyers, and the remainder provide a range of specialist support.

Linda Bellis, the Director of Human Resources, describes the firm's approach to their staff: *"As a business we have always been concerned with people. We have always been ahead of the game."*

Although Wragge & Co has had a flexible working policy for a number of years there has been much more significant change over the past five years.

"Openness has always underpinned Wragge & Co. It is safe for our staff to ask for what works for them but equally managers can argue that what has been suggested will not work. We treat every request in a businesslike way. If we can't agree to a particular proposal then we ask 'can we find another way?'"

As a result of this 27 % of the staff now work a formal flexible working arrangement including 18 % of fee earners. In addition many more staff have *ad hoc* and informal flexibility. These high rates of flexibility for a law firm have been achieved in a short space of time.

Linda Bellis is particularly pleased that more senior posts are included: *"Two female partners work flexibly on a four day a week basis. One works in the corporate group. Working flexibly in a transactional environment is unusual and the people involved have to make it work. This sends a strong message to the rest of the staff."*

There are several reasons why Wragge & Co has responded so positively to flexible working. Law is increasingly a female dominated workforce. Nearly 70 % of the total staff are women. In addition trainees are raising quality of life as a key factor in deciding which firm to join.

"In recent years, like other law firms, we have struggled to recruit good people. We have had to think about doing this in different ways. Our partners understood that offering improved control over work life balance was central to staff expectations. We have approached this in a very adult way."

Flexible working has often been seen to be antipathetic to working in a client centred environment. But Linda Bellis is more practical about this. *"Working reduced hours can be a problem in some teams. It depends on the nature of the team. Where there are intense bursts of work the client often wants to speak with the same person all the time. But this isn't a feature of all legal work all of the time. Most clients have similar policies and issues as us. Generally our flexibility has helped us to have more honest communication with clients."*

Wragge & Co see their supportive role in a far reaching way. Recently they have developed support groups to help staff manage the wide range of problems people encounter in their home lives. They are focusing on coping with disability, cancer, and mental health at both work and in the home.

"We will continue to move forward on what works best for the employee and the business. If we think it will create benefits then we will do it. Our experience has shown that we can create significant benefits at low cost."

Supporting Statement

Organisation: Wragge & Co LLP

Approximate number of employees: 1,106

Sector: Legal

Brief description of nature of business: Wragge & Co is a major UK law firm providing a full service to clients worldwide, including 27 FTSE 100s, 22 FTSE 250s, hundreds of public sector organisations and thousands of large private companies.

1. Why is your organisation a good place for parents to work today? We are looking for evidence (eg, maternity return rate, men working flexibly, extra support for carers, senior level diversity) as well as any programmes or initiatives which mark you out from your competitors.

- We have a flexible working policy we call our 'Bespoke Working' Policy (see later). Currently 27% of our people work part time or flexibly in some way. Out of this 27%, 4% of these are men.

Since re-launching bespoke working in March 2008, 122 of our people have made a request to work flexibly, 88% of these have been approved. Out of those 122 requests, 13 have been from men.

Flexibility is supported from the top down. At a senior level, 17% work flexibly. Within the partnership, 5% of partners have a flexible working arrangement.
- **Maternity and Adoption** – We offer increased financial benefit for those on maternity by offering an enhanced payment scheme. This benefit is also to those adopting a child. Since increasing our enhanced scheme in April 2007, 86 employees have taken up our enhanced maternity/adoption benefit. In the last two years 87% of our maternity leavers have returned to work.
- **Paternity** – Dads can take two weeks' leave on the birth of their child. This leave is at full pay. The partner (male or female) of an individual who adopts, or the member of a couple adopting jointly who does not take adoption leave may also take two weeks' paid paternity leave.
- **Births** - We send our new parents a gift of a bouquet of flowers to acknowledge their special arrival.
- **Childcare** – Vouchers are available via salary sacrifice. We introduced the scheme in July 2005. There are currently 5% of our employees enrolled on the scheme. 29% of members are men and 71% women. Each member has a personal e-voucher account giving employees the control to pay their carer when they want.
- **Career Breaks** – All employees with two years' service can request a career break of between one and three years with the possibility of returning to the firm and having continuous employment rights.

2. Please describe up to three milestones, changes or initiatives which helped the organisation become the great place for working parents that it is today.

- **Bespoke Working** - In March 2008 we revamped our flexible working policy and reintroduced it as Bespoke Working which is more a set of guidelines and principles, than a policy. The bespoke working section of our intranet provides guidance to managers and our people on the process and how to make a business case for a changed working pattern. There are also real case studies included so people can see how other people have made bespoke working work for them. Our approach is supported at the highest level by Quentin Poole, our Senior Partner, who is our diversity “champion”. We have open and honest conversations with individuals and treat them like adults. We don’t need to know why they want to change their working arrangements. Bespoke working is available to everyone, even couples working with us – a quote about one couple’s experience follows: “Working flexibly has required an open and realistic attitude from us, and from our teams. Time spent in the office is not reduced, but “shifted” either earlier or later in the day so that we can fulfil our commitments as parents around our working day (and *vice versa*). This can be inconvenient, and has required some management of both client and team expectations. Team support has been vital to help manage team and client expectations and confidently embrace flexible working”.
- **Fertility** – We recognise that undergoing fertility treatment is often extremely stressful and has practical implications for our people, such as having time off to receive such treatment. We have therefore adopted a sensitive and helpful approach in considering each request for time off sympathetically. Since 2001 we have supported 13 people through their fertility treatment. Over the years many people have commented that being able to talk to someone confidentially has been a real support as some don’t always share every part of their experience with close family members.
- **Employee Assistance Programme** – All our people and their immediate families can use our independent and completely confidential employee assistance programme, which was introduced some seven years ago. This provides telephone and on-line support for a wide range of issues including childcare and eldercare. Support includes finding emergency childcare, links to useful resources, advice on using and finding childminders/nannies/au pairs and lifestyle options for the elderly. In the past three months (December to February) 66 queries have been received.

3. What was the driving force behind these initiative(s)? This might have been, for example, a particular business challenge, internal or external; leadership shown by an individual; employee demand for change, etc.

- The driving force behind our initiatives is quite simply our people. Working in a supportive, meritocratic environment means our people are able to play to their strengths and this benefits our business too. Flexibility is valued by our people and helps us to attract and retain talented individuals from a competitive recruitment marketplace. With 68% of our workforce being women, who traditionally have the principal caring responsibility, we take a pro-active approach to flexibility in order to meet their needs. That said, bespoke working arrangements are available to men too.

4. How do you think that your initiative(s) or practice, past or current, have influenced other employers?

The launch of our Bespoke Working guidelines was featured in the legal press. Although not measured, we would hope this would have had an influence on not only law firms but other organisations as an example of how we’re meeting the ever changing needs of our people.

Also, we are frequently asked by clients to meet with them to share our experience and talk through our family friendly policies and guidelines. Again, we hope our best practice would have an influence on their businesses by sharing our knowledge and expertise in this way.

Our Managing Partner showed our bespoke working policy to the faculty at Harvard Business School in Boston. They felt it was the best example of this type of policy that they'd seen as it treated people as both adults and individuals.

We are members of an HR Legal Forum. The purpose of the Forum is again to share knowledge and experience with other law firms and to encourage best practice with regard to supporting working families.