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Drawbacks to flexible workingBy Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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Flexible working has generally received a good press ever since it was introduced. It appeared to be a win-win arrangement: employers retain key people who would otherwise change jobs, while employees enjoy conditions that are easier to manage plus a better lifestyle.

But you can't get something for nothing in this world. And a recent American study has revealed some unfavourable aspects to flexible working, which social commentators have preferred to ignore.

The first and most obvious issue is relative status in the pecking order. Let's say you've decided to allow some of your people to tele-work from home. Immediately you've created a two-tier system, with the full-time attendees liable to feel resentful that they have to work standard office hours and conditions.

One of my clients was a brilliant young software developer who was allowed to work from home for the first time. After collecting his work-brief, he would jokingly wave good-bye, in a spirit of "Keep up the good work. You're doing an excellent job in the office".

He did not mean this in a malicious spirit. He just didn't realise the effect of this unintended piece of arrogance on the feelings of those in the office.

Yet strictly this was not a serious case, because he was one of only two people in a department of about 30 to be given the privilege. So although there might be grumbles, the department as a whole continued to operate much as before.

Pronounced

It is when you start granting the privilege on a wider basis - perhaps to a whole group - that the discontent can start to become more pronounced. Their workload can be affected in all manner of little ways, and the flexibility granted to one group can result in greater inflexibility for the rest.

For example, you may have got used to taking your turn as Fire Officer for the week. Then suddenly half the department is working from home, and can no longer do their usual stint as Fire Officer, so your turn comes round twice as often.

It is easy to see how this effect can spiral, and you suddenly have to manage a team that can feel uneasy and

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resentful.

There is no doubt that this two-tier system can threaten the feeling of common purpose that a department of full-timers naturally enjoys, as a matter of course.

There is also the important matter of knowledge-sharing - something else that full-timers often perform without realising it.

About half of what you learn is picked up by chance in the form of casual dialogue at work. And it is just unfortunate that flexible working - whether in the form of tele-working or the tempting option of hot-desking (working from a different desk each session) - threatens the cohesion of groups in ways that were not envisaged when these working arrangements were devised.

Key points: Discord in office

- Flexibility for a few individuals may cause problems for the rest of the team
- Disadvantages feelings can cause good employees to move
- Flexible working may threaten the cohesion of the office community

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker with more than 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers' Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

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