



Flexible working for optometrists - case studies

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Veno works flexibly part-time

Veno works in Adelaide as a locum for various practices, both in the industry and for volunteer organisations. She works three days per week—usually Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, because she likes to maintain a regular structure.

Working part time hasn't had a negative effect on her career progression - she became a manager while working under a part time arrangement.

What impact does flexibility have on other, non-work-related aspects of your life?

The reason I went down to this sort of work was because of my health. I had a knockback in 2016 and couldn't work for three months, so when I did start working again I had to really look at how I was going to go back to work. Starting later each day helped me regain my health and well-being.

Does this structure have an effect on your energy and engagement when you're at work?

Definitely. I also enjoy working in different practices and with different teams.

Are there any other benefits to your flexibility?

It helps me manage the family life easier; and I have a passion for art and painting, so it gives me time to do that as well; otherwise I just wouldn't have time. I think so many people, when they talk about flexibility, only think about the caring responsibilities, but there are so many other things that enrich our lives. Painting is my outlet.

Was it hard to find work as a locum?

I've been working in Adelaide for a few years and am well known within the industry. I've found it easy to pick up work. Franchise optometrists value my experience and know they're getting good customer care.

Do you see any issues with people gaining flexibility who are full-time or part-time permanent workers?

Firstly, I think it's important to gain experience after graduation, such as working in a store to see your contact lens fits and learning how to troubleshoot when patients don't get used to their spectacles. Secondly, as I've experienced, to go part-time locum means no benefits, like superannuation, sick leave and paid holidays. So it has to make monetary sense.

Do you plan on keeping your current arrangement as it is?

I have been offered permanent part-time work, but one of the reasons I haven't taken it is as I need to take more than three weeks holidays per year. We're from South Africa and my mum was recently diagnosed with a health issue. I normally go back home once a year; but as of this year, with my daughter being at university and my mum being sick, I'll be able to go back twice a year—outside of the normal holidays that we take. Working as a locum is great as I can forward plan my availability.

How important do you consider work flexibility?

Optometry has a huge female-based work force, so work-life balance and flexible hours are very important. When I first started working, it was from 8:30am to 3.00pm on a permanent part-time basis so I could pick the kids up after school. Depending on your employer, you can negotiate those sort of arrangements. I think it is really important—there's a huge need for it.

In your experience, did working part-time have an impact on your professional development?

My previous employer was flexible and supported me as a Optometrist Manager even though I was working part-time. I could apply to go to a higher position if I wanted to and still keep similar hours, as long as the work got done. I was still respected for the work that I did on the days that I did work, and acknowledged for that, which was really good. A lot of women join the profession for that reason.



Frances works a flexible pattern

Frances works as a full-time optometrist in Melbourne, based in a store in a shopping centre. She works Monday to Friday one week, with Friday off on the second week so she can work on Saturday; usually 8-hour shifts.

What does flexibility mean to you?

To me, flexibility means that when I need to do something that's not associated with work, like attend to personal matters, I'm not questioned about it. Of course it works both ways—I don't take advantage of the situation.

To create good morale in a business, I think flexibility is really important. The team is really supportive and I am flexible with my colleagues as well. As an example, if they have to leave half an hour early to pick up kids we manage it.

Management are very supportive of our team working flexibly. Sometimes if I need to swap a day of work, and as long as the whole team's happy, no one really questions it.

Does your employer offer any sort of flexible work arrangements in terms of trying to encourage people to be flexible with their start and finish times, time-in-lieu etc.?

I'm not a mother myself, but many are; and especially those nursing can block off time to pump breastmilk during work. They're very flexible about that. Often late starts can be negotiated as well if there are things that can't be worked around.

With the time-in-lieu, they really want us to take it—they don't want us to bank it for too long—to spread it out, because we have busy times during the year. December is our busy time, so they prefer people to not take leave during that time unless it's exceptional circumstances. Everyone working in the industry knows that this is the case — that generally it's hard to get leave over that period.

If you needed to ask for more flexibility, would your employer be open to that?

Going to part-time is definitely not an issue. If you're a good Optometrist, they will want to retain you. Some of the Optometrists I work with were full-time, but returned from maternity leave into a part-time capacity.

Starting at a later time (each day) can be a little bit contentious and requires forward planning and agreement with management as it impacts the team.

When people have gone to part-time, has it affected their career, in terms of developing skills or moving up in the company?

The opportunity for people to move into part-time roles has made them stay. Does it adversely affect their clinical skills? No. The job is pretty standard—once you graduate you've got all your skills—and then even as a part-timer you have professional development, so you still attend educational events.

In terms of management, part-time is not necessarily a negative thing. There's definitely a perception that if you're seeking a more senior, corporate role, they would prefer you to work in a full-time capacity. I know that many people think it could potentially impact their application.

Do you know much about the law when requesting flexibility, rights, etc.?

No, nothing at all. I think mainly because I haven't needed to do it. Or more like if I have needed flexibility it hasn't been an issue where I've wanted to investigate the legislation behind it. I mean, no doubt, if I was having some sort of resistance to my request, then I probably would investigate what my rights were and then put it forward.



Katy works flexibly 4 days a week, in 3 roles

Katy works 4 days a week across a few roles, as a visiting optometrist in Nursing Homes, locum optometrist and at the Australian College of Optometry.

What does flexibility mean to you?

Having a flexible work situation is great. Before I had my son, I could manage my work, arrange my own work hours and choose my own holiday times. I started working this way in 2012 when I was offered the opportunity to work with my mother as a visiting optometrist, and found out I liked it. It might not be forever, but it is great for now. I work in three roles:

- 1- Domiciliary work, as a visiting optometrist at Nursing Homes (2 days a week under my own business).
- 2- Australian College of Optometry (employed as a sessional optometrist at 1.5 days per week).
- 3- Locum optometry work (on weekends or afternoons in corporate / private practice – usually planned a month in advance).

What are the benefits of working this way?

It's great. For example, when I am working in the Nursing Homes (2 days a week) I am onsite at 9.00-9.30am, see patients all day and finish around 3.30-4.00pm. This timing works as it also aligns with the staff handover at the Nursing Home. Then I am able to pick up my son and prepare meals, which I share with my husband on the other days. In the evenings I finish the paperwork, which includes writing reports and sometimes calling families. Interestingly, after hours timing often suits the families better. The only thing I need to manage in office hours is the referrals and engagement with GPs, which is done as needed and can flow into other days. From my perspective I think that families today really need flexibility – it enables both parents to keep working as well as have family time.

What are some of the challenges that you face?

One challenge that I face in my own business is the time administration takes. Such as making sure referrals and engagement with GPs is done in office hours. Reports and emails can be done after hours and I try to do that promptly. Sometimes there is overflow from one job to another. It can be a juggle but is definitely manageable. I have found it's just about being organised. I have found that in other roles that I've worked, it's about making sure I plan for appointment schedules and teaching timeframes. – It also helps to have conversations with management if more flexibility is required.

What tips do you have for other people considering flexible working?

- 1- Firstly my biggest tip is to keep the door open for opportunities. I never imagined that I'd be working in this way, but I like it and fits in with my life right now. If I wasn't open to this, work life would possibly be very different
- 2- Be organised. Think in advance what needs to be done within timeframes (and office hours), especially when working timeframes and different roles like myself.
- 3- If you're starting out on a varied 'gig' arrangement, then perhaps think about securing a few days regular work and income while you trial this new approach.
- 4- Perhaps if you are seeking more flexibility in the role that you're in – consider how your role can be done flexibly, what options are available to you (including times of working and work that can be done at home). Then use this to approach management to have a conversation about what options might be available to try out.

What's your thoughts on flexibility in the future?

The allied health industry is evolving and there are different modes of practice and service delivery options. The work place and work hours are changing with different population needs. This can open up interesting opportunities to try different ways of working, similar to what I've done. Whilst I'm doing work that I enjoy and it fits in with my life, it may not be forever. Roles and situations may change and different opportunities may come up.