

#WORKSCHOOLHOURS



Case Study Interview with Trudi Ballantyne. Director of Stem Rural Accountants

What was your motivation for operating a 6-hour day? **Being able to attract and retain really good talent.** We said, "right, we're a pretty cool place to work. We need to have a bit of a point of difference from other accountants around the area." Plus, I was getting a bit frustrated with the standard workday. Through your standard seven-and-a-half-hour day, there was all this pick up and put down and interruptions, and it just felt unproductive.

How did you implement it? We recognised that you couldn't just leap in and do this off the bat. You couldn't just say to people, "hey, you're going to be more efficient." **It was about giving people tools and about also reexamining the way that we do things within the firm.** For example, teaching people to turn off their email notifications so they're not constantly getting interrupted with new work. It's about teaching people to block their time. For example, "each block, maybe only work on annual accounts, and it doesn't matter if GST work comes in. You're only going to concentrate on annual accounts for that first block of the day, and then after your break, come back and then maybe work on GST". You're mentally focusing on one task at a time rather than getting constant interruptions. We had to basically train people or give them tools, tips, and tricks on how to do that.

There was a whole lot of asking questions about why we do things a certain way, particularly when it came to unproductive time. A really classic example of that was our receptionist, every day, used to walk down to the post office and get the mail. "Why are we doing this? Let's just clear the mailbox two times a week." All of a sudden there is an hour and a half from the receptionist's week which she can now do something else with. But the time that we spend with our clients and the time that we are working on the clients' books and things like that, that hasn't changed a lot. **It was more focusing on how can we get rid of the unproductive time? How can we stop the pick up and put down?**

We used to have innovation awards. If someone within the team found a better way of doing something and it might be something really simple, even just a shortcut key on your keyboard, every month we'd put on a morning tea, and say, "right, who's got some really good ideas about different things that one of the team has told you about, and that's led to efficiencies or some gains?" **It was a really good introduction to start people thinking about different ways of working and different ways of doing things, and why do we do all these things the way that we've always done them?**

"Doesn't working less hours means you're charging less hours?" Yes, we are selling time, but with the help of technology and that focus on getting rid of the unproductive time, we're still delivering a quality product to our clients and meeting our deadlines. **Now that's not because we've got extra people, but it's because we've actually got better people, and our six-hour workday has allowed us to attract and retain really good people** who want to come to work every day, who can balance their home and their work life. We're definitely achieving our targets and still meeting our clients' expectations.



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The other thing is, by giving people the tools to work more efficiently, to do things better, it's actually given people within the team the encouragement to reach out and do more with their clients, which is actually to pick up the phone, to talk to them. It's more efficient with a phone call rather than sending an email and waiting several days. It's encouraged more engagement with the team and clients, which is really good.

What did your clients think? I didn't say to our clients, "hey, we're doing a six-hour workday and that's it." I just sort of alluded to the fact that we were looking for a better work / life balance for our team. And interestingly, a lot of people came back and said, "hey, that's a fantastic idea. I wish we could do that." There was a lot of clients and different businesses who were very envious about what we were doing. It just hasn't been an issue.

What would be your recommendations or advice to a business that was thinking about this? I think you'd have no problem selling it to your team, and that's certainly something that we had no problem whatsoever. We basically said, **"we want to give you back one of the most valuable things that you have in life, which is time. We want to make sure that your time at work is productive and worthwhile and that you enjoy coming to work."**

And I don't think people can just launch straight into this. They need to have a lead in time to be able to mentally prepare for this. And to give the team members the skills that they need to be able to try and think differently about turning off the notifications, stopping interruptions and making sure that people have got the tools that they need to do the job.

Overall, would you say that this was a good business decision to move to a six-hour day? Absolutely. Absolutely. I love being able to go to the supermarket while it's still daylight in the middle of winter, avoid the 5pm rush. I love being able to go and walk out the Papamoa Hills while it's still daylight in the winter or go home and walk on the beach. It's a much better work life / balance. We still meet our goals. We've still got a great team. **We're still growing. We've still got new clients coming on board. We're still doing more work for existing clients.**

Absolutely. It's been revolutionary for us and for different people, different reasons. Obviously, the parents who now have the ability to manage their after-school childcare a lot better (**#workschoolhours**). It's allowed people who are studying, for example, to do their study while they're not too tired. It's allowed people who have building projects on to go home and manage those building projects while the builders are still onsite. It's really had great benefits all around everyone involved. **We would never go back.**

