

The rise of the tracksuit economy

Lawyers were once notorious for spending long hours at their desks compared to other professionals. But a new generation is revolting against this culture of presenteeism. Emma Heuston, author of *The Tracksuit Economy*, says there's an Ugg boot-clad workforce on the march, tearing off the desk shackles for a more efficient way of working.

Whether they like to admit it or not, many lawyers still regard working from home as “shirking from home”.

“Oh, you want to work from home? Do you have an appointment?” your boss might ask. “Is your child sick? Are you sick?”

It's as if the only valid reason for filing work from outside the office is if you're tending to parental duties or are struck down with a debilitating bout of gastro. Never mind if you simply work more efficiently or find it easier to concentrate away from the open-plan office.

All of Australia's “Big Six” firms, and many mid-tiers and boutiques, spruik “flexible working” as a drawcard of working for them. But the January 2017 Law Partnership Survey by the *Australian Financial Review* found that just 10 per cent of the almost 3,100 partners surveyed worked part-time or flexible hours. Seven of the 29 partners in Sydney firm TessCox Lawyers, or 24

per cent, reported working flexibly. Just eight of the 174 partners at top-tier firm Clayton Utz, less than 5 per cent, did the same.

LegalVision Practice Leader and lawyer Emma Heuston believes much of the legal profession's flexible work rhetoric pays “lip-service” to the idea, without truly embracing it.

“I remember applying for jobs that advertised ‘flexible working arrangements,’” says Heuston, who works remotely from her home in Ballina. “Often when you actually get there, working from home is frowned upon. It's seen as bludging off or that you're not working as hard. Or, you have to keep it this big secret and not share it with the team. It's like you need to have a reason. It can't just be that you work more efficiently or enjoy working from home.”

Benefits of a tracksuit economy

Heuston has just published a book hailing the benefits of working from home called *The Tracksuit Economy*.

Appropriately, it is available as an eBook for those who won't or can't physically go to a bookstore.

The book details Heuston's transformation from stressed-out, desk-bound Sydney lawyer, commuting one-and-a-half hours each day while struggling to raise a new baby, to laid-back remote worker who bills just as many hours from her beachside home on the NSW north coast.

“There is an easier way,” writes Heuston in the book's introduction. “I am living it. This morning I woke up, looked out over the lush green hills to the coast towards Ballina and Lennox Head before having a leisurely breakfast with my husband and son. I put my son on the school bus and walked down the stairs, logged on and was speaking to a colleague by 8.30am.”

When she was living in Sydney five years ago, Heuston spent 45 minutes in traffic each way to travel from her home in Lane Cove to her office in Mosman. She paid more than \$100 a day for childcare in Crows Nest and says she

was sleep deprived, stressed out and constantly sick.

These days, Heuston and her husband own a house with a backyard, lemon trees and two dogs in Ballina – all of which cost less than the price of a one-bedroom apartment in Sydney. She works the equivalent of four days over five, earns the same as she would if she was physically in the Sydney office, and doesn't feel guilty for taking a break to attend important family moments – like walking the dogs with her son after school.

Heuston concedes her lifestyle doesn't suit every lawyer, but believes they should at least have the option to experience these small luxuries.

“By all means, you need to make sure you're staffed for court appearances,” says Heuston. “I know a lot of people who say it's great to work from home one or two days to get stuck into some work or deep thinking, then they also get the social interaction with people in the office on other days.”

Top talent demands flexibility

It's not only Heuston who would like to see the elastic-waisted workforce grow (in numbers, not waistlines). A 2016 survey of more than 1,000 Australians by Airtasker found 38 per cent saw flexibility as more important than pay when looking for new jobs. Some 81.5 per cent of those surveyed also agreed that the traditional employment model of working nine to five in an office was inflexible for jobs of the future.

“Flexible work arrangements are about getting the best out of your people, especially when open-plan environments aren't conducive to ‘thinking time,’” says Claire Bibby, a consultant lawyer, Non-Executive Director and Champion of the 100 Years of Women in Law project. “If a manager thinks his or her staff are ‘bunking off’ when they seek flexibility, they've either hired the wrong people or the manager lacks the right balance of leadership skills.”

Former lawyer and founder of the SmartWomen Connect legal networking

group Fiona Craig agrees.

“In theory, the flexibility policies are all there,” Craig says. “In practice, there are many issues, and success tends to depend on firm – and often individual – team culture.”

What Craig says is anecdotally accurate. But if law firms want to attract the best lawyers, they're going to have to practise what they preach in the flexibility department. An international study of 14,000 people aged 18-65 by ManpowerGroup Solutions in 2017 found that 40 per cent of job candidates consider flexibility among the top three factors they consider when making career decisions. The report said there are “new expectations of flexibility among candidates [which] often makes local and/or more traditional companies less competitive for talent”.

What does true flexibility look like?

The study by ManpowerGroup revealed that modern workers saw flexibility encompassing a broad spectrum of work arrangements beyond the ability to work from home in tracksuit pants. These ranged from employees having flexible arrival and departure times, choice and control over when they took breaks, opportunity for extended time off and unrestricted holiday periods.

Heuston believes the key to success is in bosses trusting their employees to work in a way that best suits them.

“I interviewed 14 flexible workers for case studies in my book, and one common thing that emerged was the autonomy they had to choose how and when they worked,” says Heuston. “The common denominator was the trust they felt from their employer.”

As letters have migrated to emails and the work day has invaded the home via digital devices, work can no longer be defined by set hours or location.

“It is my hope that the world does become a tracksuit economy,” says Heuston. “And we'll all be happier, healthier and more efficient because of it.” **LSJ**



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