

How to cite:

Forbes, S., Birkett, H., Evans, L., & Chung, H. (2022). Flexible Working and the Future of Work: Managing Employees Since COVID-19. Retrieved from Equal Parenting Project, United Kingdom.

Executive summary

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many managers have been forced to adjust to managing large numbers of flexible workers for the first time while also experiencing the shift to flexible work themselves. This abrupt change in working arrangements has profoundly impacted workplace norms and managers' attitudes and intentions towards appropriate working practices which has important implications for the future of work. In particular, managers' experiences during COVID-19 have made them more accepting of flexible working practices and more likely to believe their organisations will support a move to flexible working, including part-time working and job sharing. Here, using data collected between June and August 2022, we build on our previous reports to explore four key areas of change, since the pandemic, in relation to flexible working and working norms: managers' changing attitudes towards flexible working since the start of the pandemic; managers' future intentions in terms of support for flexible working; changes in spatial flexibility and use of office space; and, finally, changes around consultation and surveillance in the workplace.

Managers' Attitudes towards Flexible Working

- Managers are currently more positive than they have been since the outset of COVID-19 about employees working from home, with: 51.8% agreeing that working from home improves employee concentration; 59.5% agreeing that it increases productivity; and 62.8% agreeing that it increases motivation. An even larger proportion of managers (76.5%) believe flexible working generally increases productivity.
- Managers were most positive about the productivity gains from the types of flexible working arrangements that were prevalent during COVID-19, with 59.5% agreeing that working from home increases productivity, while 72.7% believed the same for flexitime.
- Importantly, managers also identified a link between other types of flexible working, which were not as prevalent during COVID-19, and productivity: 43.7% think agreed that compressed hours increases productivity; 44.1% that part-time working increases productivity; while 33.2% thought the same about job share.
- In relation to performance, line managers were more likely to see flexible working as a performance-enhancing tool (71.2%) than senior management (65.6%).
- Pre-pandemic (pre-2020) 43.3% of managers believed long hours were needed for employees to advance in the organisation. During the lockdowns this decreased to 38.7% (2020) and 35.2% (2021). Now, 41.9% believe that in order to advance in the organisation employees need to work long hours.
- Year on year since the start of the pandemic, there has been a slight decrease in managers' perceptions that working from home leads to isolation, although these numbers remain worryingly high with 56.4% of managers suggesting that working from home leads to isolation in 2022.
- While 77.7% of managers believed that caring responsibilities should be shared equally between parents, only 40.4% said their organisations offer support for parents to do this.
- Managers reported themselves as more cheerful, calmer, better rested and more active in 2022 than they had been in 2021, although line managers continued to report higher levels of stress than senior managers.

Managers' Intentions/Behaviour Regarding Flexible Working Since the Pandemic

- In 2022 58.0% of managers said their organisations would be more supportive of flexible working requests in the future, down from 70% in 2020, but it still represents a stepchange in how flexible working is perceived.
- Interestingly, the pattern is different with part-time and job share requests, particularly for senior jobs, with managers reporting in 2022 that more job share requests will be supported in future than they did in 2020.
- Managers find working from home the easiest flexible working policy to approve (43.9%) and job share the hardest (44.9%) to approve.
- Requests for part-time working are less likely to be supported in future amongst those in the Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities industry compared to those in the Human Health and Social Work industries or Adult Education industry.
- Most staff are using flexible working policies informally, particularly for working from home (45.1%) and flexitime (36.5%), but also for part-time working, compressed hours and job shares.
- Managers are much less likely to apply to work part time, compressed hours or job share in the future than flexitime and working from home which suggests some types of flexible working may be seen as more acceptable in organisations than others.
- 20.1% of managers in 2022 reported they were either currently working part-time or planning to work part-time in the future, while 19.4% are either currently working compressed hours or planning to do so in the future. However, job share is much less popular with only 5.0% of managers reporting that they were either working this way or planning to in the future.
- 57.5% of managers reported that whilst part-time working was available in their workplace, they did not make use of it.
- Over 50% of all managers reported that job sharing (53.1%) and compressed hours (54.6%) were not available in their workplace.
- There has been a steady increase in the percentage of managers reporting that more roles will be advertised as available for flexible working, with 50.0% reporting this in 2020 and 55.4% reporting this in 2022.
- Most managers believe job advertisements should include the availability of flexible working (93.5%) making them more attractive to potential applicants (90.5%). These figures have risen since 2021 (Birkett et al. 2021).

Spatial Flexibility and Office Space

- In 2022, 69.3% of managers reported that their organisation is not expecting employees to be back in the office more than 4 days a week; this is up from 59% in 2021. This points to a profound change in working norms compared to the pre-pandemic period. Indeed, the number of managers expecting their employees to be in the office just one day a week has nearly doubled from 10.5% in 2021 (Birkett et al. 2021) to 20.4% in 2022 (see Figure 23).
- 33.7% of managers reported their organisation had reduced or were planning to reduce, the amount of office space available.
- Only 37.7% of managers reported that their organisation had consulted employees about working preferences before making decisions about the amount of office space available for use by employees in the future.
- Managers also reported on the repurposing of their organisation's remaining office space in the future, with 25.3% reporting that there would be fewer individual offices, 9.7% reporting there would be fewer shared offices, 21.8% reporting more space for events/workshops, and 12.7% reporting more space would be made available for wellbeing. These figures are

similar to those in 2021, which suggests that attitudes toward homeworking and office spaces being repurposed are beginning to stabilize and have changed dramatically since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consultation and Surveillance at Work

- More managers are providing regular performance feedback to staff now compared to 2021 (from 59.6% to 64.7%).
- Organisations have been relying heavily on informal employee consultation (46.6%) or other forms of less formal collective consultation, indicating that they consult directly and informally with employees, rather than going through more formal channels such as Trade Union representatives (39.7%).
- 27.0% of managers reported their organisation as using computer software to monitor performance and 28.0% of managers reported their organisation as monitoring emails.
- Nearly 80% of managers surveyed (78.9%) reported that they feel surveillance at work implies that employers do not trust their employees, whilst 64.2% of managers agreed that the use of surveillance methods increases their own stress levels. On the other hand, over a third of managers (37.4%) felt that surveillance helps to reduce workplace bullying, whilst only 17.3% of managers agreed that it helps to improve employee productivity.
- Over a third of managers across all sectors (34.7%) reported that monitoring phone logs and calls (including recording calls) was acceptable at work. In addition, nearly half (42.9%) of all managers surveyed viewed the monitoring of employee work emails, files, and browser history as an acceptable form of monitoring. Within the Medical and Healthcare industry, this rose to 50% of managers surveyed but dropped to only 21.3% in the Education (College, University and Adult Education) industry. Only a small percentage (11.2%) of managers overall felt that the monitoring of social media use outside of work hours was an acceptable form of monitoring. However, more managers felt that the monitoring of employee browser history, when connected to the work WIFI, was acceptable (27.5%).

COVID-19 working practices have dramatically impacted workplace norms around flexible working, particularly across industries which were not classified as front-line during the pandemic. Our research over the past three years (since the pandemic) shows as a result of pandemic working practices: managers are more likely to see flexible working as a performance-enhancing tool at all levels in the organisation; there is less perceived need for employees to be physically present in the office to progress their careers; most employees will not come into the office more than 4 days a week, indeed, many will only be in once; less office space will be available in the future and it will be utilised differently; surveillance is widespread, despite an overriding view that it does not improve performance and erodes trust.

More broadly, these changes are starting to reduce the stigma of flexible working to tackle the presenteeism culture as well as the long hours culture that has always been prevalent in the UK; all factors which perpetuate inequalities in British workplaces. However, we also see some signs between 2021 and 2022 that the long hours culture may be returning in British workplaces, which highlights the precarious and fragile nature of these new norms. This means that, if we want to press on with the gains made around flexible working during COVID-19, now is the time to strengthen and formalise new flexible working norms and extend them to those working in front-line and precarious roles. To do so, some key questions need to be addressed. For example, how do we ensure all industries embrace the journey to more accessible flexible working for jobs at all levels? How do we ensure that the focus on productivity and flexible working does not lead to work intensification, as people work through commuting times and find it difficult to switch off when working from home? How do we ensure that new opportunities for flexible working are not only taken up by female

carers, further gendering the concept of flexible working and creating a two-tier workforce? Finally, what will these changes in working practices mean for other areas such as the Government's levelling up agenda, town planning, city centre employment, public transport, road traffic, and the environment more broadly? For example, while mass homeworking is arguably leading to fewer car journeys and a reduction in pollution, working from home means increased use of gas and electricity throughout the day in people's homes which also has an impact on the environment and is likely to impact employees negatively in the current energy crisis. These are all potential questions that policymakers and employers need to consider, and we offer some recommendations to this effect at the end of this report.

Recommendations

It is important to act quickly in order to entrench some of the pandemic related wins around flexible working highlighted throughout this report. Our evidence already shows that some pre-pandemic working norms like long hours culture and presenteeism that restrict inclusion are starting to take hold again in some areas. To drive these pandemic related wins, industry, academics, policymakers and the third sector need to collaborate effectively to promote best practice and support the different stakeholders involved in creating long term sustainable change. Below are a series of recommendations to aide this process.

Recommendations for organisations/managers

1. Encourage the assumption that all jobs will be available for some form of flexible working by default and task managers with thinking about how flexible working may apply (for example, if working from home might not be appropriate in a role might flexitime of job shares be possible?).
2. Add information on flexible working in all job advertisements and introduce mechanisms to ensure the organisation follows through on any commitments made.
3. Review flexible working policies ensuring they are not gendered and ensure appropriate provision of tools and support for flexible working.
4. Update performance management systems and promotion processes to be less focused on presenteeism and not disadvantage those working flexibly.
5. Think through the issue of formality vs informality of flexible working arrangements. Informality introduces real flexibility but can also lead to inconsistent practices across the company and people losing their flexible working arrangements if their manager or role changes.
6. Actively encourage more men, including both junior and senior men, to work flexibly and be vocal about this.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. Encourage companies with 250+ employees to report on the use of flexible working as part of gender pay gap reporting and make this information publicly available.
2. Consider changing the onus around flexible working to employers providing a case as to why certain jobs should not be available for flexible working rather than employees providing a case for flexible working. Also, review flexible working being accessible from day one of employment.
3. Review employment law around flexible working to ensure it is fit for purpose with post-COVID-19 hybrid working, including protections for those working flexibly.
4. Offer fathers more non-transferable caring leave after the birth or adoption of their children to encourage a more equal distribution of care and provide them with information about flexible working during this period.
5. Government should consider implications for the environment, town centres and employment of changes of ways of working and reductions in office space.
6. More actively promote the HMRC scheme for reimbursing companies who pay their employees working from home overheads.
7. Conduct research into the practicalities and economic consequences of potential approaches such as a 4-day week. Also, explore the possibility of parental pay being available from day one of employment.
8. Support a campaign to promote flexible working in all industries and jobs, particularly amongst men, focusing on how jobs you would not expect can be done flexibly (e.g., construction, private social care, factory work etc).
9. Encourage employers to add information about flexible working to job adverts.