



Flexible Working and the Future of Work: Managing Employees Since COVID-19

by Dr Sarah Forbes and Dr Holly Birkett

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many managers were forced to adjust to managing large numbers of flexible workers for the first time. This abrupt change in working arrangements profoundly impacted workplace norms and managers' attitudes and intentions towards working practices which have implications for the future of work. Research amongst managers by the Equal Parenting Project at the University of Birmingham and the University of York revealed that this experience has made them more accepting of flexible working (FW) practices and believe their organisation will support an increase in FW in the future.

Managers' improving attitudes towards flexible working

Managers have become much more supportive of all types of FW, particularly working from home (WFH) and Flexitime since the pandemic.

- Since COVID-19 managers have become particularly positive about types of FW that were prevalent during the pandemic. For example, 51.8% agreed that WFH improves employee concentration, 59.5% agreed it increases productivity and 62.8% agreed it increases motivation. Managers were also positive about the impact of FW on productivity with 59.5% agreeing WFH increases productivity, while 72.7% believed the same for Flexitime.
- Managers' experiences during COVID-19 appear to have impacted their attitudes toward other forms of FW. For example, 43.7% of managers agreed that compressed hours increase productivity; 44.1% agreeing part-time working increases productivity; and 33.2% agreed that jobshares increase productivity.
- Managers suggest the UK's long-hours culture receded during COVID-19, but it seems to be returning. The report found manager's beliefs that employees need to work long hours to progress their career had 43.3% agreement pre-pandemic, 38.7% agreement in 2020 and 35.2% in 2021, but went back up to 41.9% in 2022.
- The majority of managers (77.7%) in 2022 were clear that parents should share caring responsibilities equally but only 40.4% reported their organisation as offering support for parents to do this.

More managers expect employees to be in the office only one day a week

Managers' future intentions to support more flexible working

Managers and organisations are more likely to support FW requests across their organisations in future and advertise jobs as available for FW.

- In 2022, 58.0% of managers said their organisation would be more supportive of FW requests in future.
- Managers find jobshare the hardest policy (44.9%) to prove, and WFH the easiest.
- Many managers are reporting FW policies being used informally, particularly for WFH and flexitime, but also for part-time working, compressed hours and job shares. Over 50% of all managers reported that job sharing (53.1%) and compressed hours (54.6%) were not available in their workplace.
- More managers are saying their organisations will be advertising more roles as available for FW, up from 50.0% in 2020 to 55.4% in 2022.

Changes in spatial flexibility and use of office space

Managers expect their staff to be in the office less often in future and for the office space to be used in different ways which has led to organisations relinquishing office space.

- In 2022, 69.3% of managers reported their organisation as not expecting employees to be back in the office, on average, more than 4 days a week; up from 59% in 2021. The number of managers expecting their employees, on average, to be in the office 1 day a week nearly doubled from 10.5% in 2021 to 20.4% in 2022.

- 33.7% of managers reported their organisation had reduced or was planning to reduce office space available.
- Managers reported that there would be fewer individual offices (25.3%), and fewer shared offices (9.7%), but more space for events/workshops (21.8%) and more space would be made available for wellbeing (12.7%).

Consultation and surveillance at work

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced ways of working but also processes of consultation, engagement and control in organisations.

- More managers are providing regular performance feedback to staff now compared to 2021 (from 59.6% to 64.7%).
- Organisations rely heavily on informal employee consultation (46.6%) indicating that they consult directly and informally with employees, rather than more formal channels such as Trade Union representatives (39.7%).
- 27.0% of managers reported that their organisation uses computer software to monitor performance and 28.0% of managers reported their organisation as monitoring emails. However, 78.9% of managers 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 stress levels.

Managers reported that there would be fewer individual offices (25.3%), and fewer shared offices (9.7%), but more space for events/workshops (21.8%)

Recommendations

Below are a series of recommendations for policymakers and organisations to build on these changing attitudes to create more inclusive and supportive flexible workplaces.

Recommendations for organisations/managers:

- 1 Encourage the assumption that all jobs will be available with some form of FW by default and task managers with thinking about how FW may apply.
- 2 Add information on FW in all job advertisements and introduce mechanisms to ensure the organisation follows through on any commitments made.
- 3 Review FW policies to ensure they are inclusive and provide appropriate tools and support.

27.0% of managers reported that their organisation uses computer software to monitor performance and 28.0% of managers reported their organisation as monitoring emails

Recommendations for policymakers:

- 1 Encourage companies with 250+ employees to report on the use of FW as part of gender pay gap reporting and make this information publicly available.
- 2 Consider changing the onus around FW to employers providing a case as to why certain jobs should not be available for FW rather than employees providing a case.
- 3 Review employment law around FW 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 parental leave to encourage a more equal distribution of care and provide them with information about FW 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 Actively promote the HMRC scheme for reimbursing companies for employees WFH 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 FW in all industries and jobs, particularly amongst men, focusing on how jobs you would not expect can be done flexibly (e.g., construction, factory work).
- 9 Encourage employers to add information about FW to job adverts.

