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## How we work now: The enduring impact of Covid lockdown on flexible working

How Scottish employers are adapting  
ways of working post-pandemic

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# Foreword

In autumn 2020 as part of the Flexibility Works *Flex for Life* research on flexible working trends in Scotland, I spoke to 14 employers about how they were using flexible working, and especially remote working, to keep their organisations going during lockdown. I was interested in whether they expected the sweeping changes to work patterns introduced during the pandemic to 'stick' long term. Had work really changed as much as was touted? I was also looking for examples and experience for other organisations to learn from.

At that time, the employers I interviewed had only recently experienced the upheaval of moving office staff practically over night to working from home, while frontline staff who were not furloughed had had to cope with social distancing, which for many had required new flexibilities around working hours, rotas and shift patterns. I asked whether they thought the changes they were experiencing would have long lasting effects. Broadly, they responded that there would be no going back. That – wherever they had been on the flexible working scale – their organisation's use of and acceptance of flexible working\*, and especially of working from home, had jumped forward to somewhere beyond expectations. No matter their size or sector, the future appeared to be flexible.

In late 2022 I was able to speak again to 11 of those employers, across a broad range of sizes, sectors and industries, to find out what had happened. I was interested not only in how hybrid working\*\* was developing (a term and concept that was just beginning to come into use when we had first spoken) but in finding out whether greater flexibility was also being extended to frontline workers. The interviews were held only around six months after Scottish government restrictions on numbers in the workplace had been relaxed, and so, although it was two years on from our first interviews, to some extent the organisations were still in quite a new place. Were they now operating as they had anticipated? What does the future hold next?

In this report, I explore the differences in how organisations are working, and I consider how the employers are responding to new tensions between the expectations of the individual and the needs of the collective, leading to questions around fairness, choice and control, and use of time. I consider the cultural challenges identified in the interviews, particularly around what makes a strong organisational culture and how to ensure employee connectedness even in more dispersed teams. And I look at mixed opinions around performance, alongside shared agreement about the importance of the role of managers. Finally, after analysing all responses, I reflect on the experiences of the 11 employers since the first lockdown began in March 2020 and make recommendations for action that I hope will be helpful to leaders, HR and diversity heads and to managers who are currently learning to retune work in their organisations.

\*All the organisations interviewed shared an understanding that flexible working describes work arrangements in which one or more of the variables *when, where or how long* differs from the organisation's standard working pattern (most commonly, from Monday to Friday, full time, 35-40 hours per week).

\*\*Hybrid working, which was also termed 'blended working' by some interviewees, is a form of flexible working in which the employee is able to divide their working time between the office and home, with more or less choice and control over the days they choose to work from home.

## About Sarah Jackson OBE

As one of the UK's leading experts on flexible and family friendly working, Sarah works with Flexibility Works on a range of activities to help progress our vision of creating a working culture that truly values work life harmony, enabling all people and businesses to thrive.

As well as being an ambassador and expert adviser to Flexibility Works, Sarah's role as senior associate involves input to our national research and chairing a professional working group.

Sarah is also a Visiting Professor at Cranfield University School of Management and former CEO of the work-life charity Working Families where she commissioned the UK's first research on the links between flexible working and performance. She chaired the Department of Work and Pensions' Private Sector Employers Working Group on Flexible Working, which made early calls for jobs to be advertised flexibly from the off, and which advised extensively on the ACAS guidance to support the Right to Request Flexible Working.



## About Flexibility Works



Flexibility Works is a boutique consultancy and training organisation that provides practical tools, support and resources to help Scottish employers create a successful flexible working culture. We are a team of leading experts and commentators, bringing a depth of knowledge, insight and years of practical experience to help businesses and individuals in Scotland thrive. For more information and to get in touch, please visit [flexibilityworks.org](https://flexibilityworks.org)

## How to read this report

**For a superfast experience:** read *Who I spoke to* and the initial *Key themes summary*. Then flick to the themes you are most interested in and read the bullet point summary and take action sections. The actions provide succinct advice including tips and signposts to more help to support you to tackle issues linked to the key theme. Then skip to page 54 for my personal reflections on what the future holds for employers and how they can make the best of it.

**For in-depth reporting and analysis:** look for the *In-depth* headings under each key theme. This allows you to take a deeper and more leisurely look at the common and contrasting experiences of the employers I interviewed.

**For the fine detail:** *Appendices 1 and 2* allow you to look at a single employer experience, and to compare and contrast your own policy and practice. *Appendix 3* is a short note on the implications of the legislative changes that will be introduced in summer 2024 by the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act. Among other changes, the right to request flexible working will become available to employees from the first day of employment. *Appendix 4* includes the questions employers were asked for this study and the job titles of the interviewees.

**A note on this study:** This report is a qualitative study, drawing on interviews with 11 employers with a total of circa 56,000 employees. I draw my conclusions from the subjective experiences, opinions and attitudes of the interviewees. Their experience will not be representative of all employers in Scotland, and – because they volunteered to be interviewed - their starting point may be more positive towards flexible working and perhaps more mature in its approach. Remember too that the voice of the employee is not heard in this report. Where I refer to ‘staff’ I report what the interviewees believe to be the views of their staff. It is worth remembering that there may be a ‘perception gap’ between what an employer knows they provide in the way of supportive policies, and what staff believe is available to them. Even employers who offer best practice policies find that cultural assumptions, messaging, behaviours, all influence staff assumptions and policy take up<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the perception gap, see Yerkes MA; Javornik J; Kurowska A (eds.) 2019. *Social Policy and the Capability Approach: Concepts, Measurements and Application*. [Policy Press](#)

## Who I spoke to

Semi-structured interviews with senior members of 11 organisations were carried out via Zoom between October 25, 2022, and January 13, 2023, to find out what changes brought about by lockdown remained in place, and/or what else had changed in terms of ways of working since the pandemic. The interviews covered what challenges employers had faced, how they had tackled them, and what they felt future ways of working would look like.

All organisations employ staff in Scotland, four across other UK nations as well. Three have fewer than 200 staff; three have more than 5,000; the other five have around 2,000.

Interviewees spoke from senior positions with an overview of how the organisation is using flexibility, and also had personal insight via their own experience and working style and choices. All interviewees worked hybridly themselves. They were mostly senior HR professionals or other senior roles, such as heads of business services and/or strategy, executive team members and managing directors. A full list of job titles can be found in Appendix 4.

The interviewees came from the following types of organisations.

**The communications company:** large telecoms and internet service provider, with office based, mobile and retail staff.

**The construction company:** large construction company, providing a range of repairs and maintenance, manufacturing, construction and refurbishment activities across the public, private and third sectors. Staff are employed at head office, in a factory, and on construction sites nationwide.

**The disability charity:** large charity that delivers community projects and campaigns, employability, education and training, and self-directed health and social care support to people with learning disabilities and their families. Majority of staff are frontline workers, providing care in people's homes; support staff are office based.

**The leisure services provider:** large arms-length organisation that delivers culture and leisure to a large urban authority. Staff are employed in the office, and at sites and venues across the authority.

**The local authority:** large local authority, with offices and workplaces throughout its geographical area. More than half of the staff are employed in teaching or schools; slightly fewer deliver frontline or other direct services; and around 1/5 are office based workers.

**The manufacturer:** small company producing hand-crafted foodstuffs. Engineering and production staff work on the premises, and administrative and support staff work in the office on the same site.

**The equipment hire business:** large company providing equipment rental to the construction and utility sectors, with depots across the UK, and a central corporate office where around 10% of the workforce (support staff, call centre staff and management) are based.

**The social funder:** small public body that assesses and provides financial awards to enable recipients to live independently. Assessors had always been home-based and mobile; office staff are now employed on a remote-first basis, although some still work in the office full time.

**The uniformed service:** large public sector body responsible for delivering a uniformed service to the public. Civilian staff are mostly office based; staff are also employed at secure sites and in frontline, mobile roles.

**The wealth management company:** large wealth management company with offices across the UK, part of a larger global financial services business. All staff are office based.

**The workplace consultancy:** medium-sized company providing office design and fit-out services, office move and facilities management. Staff are employed at head office plus other offices across Scotland, as well as on client sites.



## Key themes summary

### The lockdown legacy on how we work now

What came through strongly from these second interviews is that the employers are indeed thinking differently about how best to organise work and about the impact of greater flexibility on culture and performance. This was driven in part by leadership concerns about fairness, and about how to achieve consistency across an organisation, and in part by their responsiveness (willing or more reluctant) to changed expectations on the part of employees and potential new recruits around working time and place.

When asked to look into the future, everyone provided a more realistic assessment in 2022 than they had two years earlier. Again, broadly, they agreed there is no going back. Things have changed irrevocably, yes. But I found a much more thoughtful understanding of the challenges that come with increased flexible working, whether hybrid or on the frontline, and around learning to live in a new reality. Nobody now expects more significant change to come, but rather to learn from and build on the experience of the previous two years, and to organically develop flexible ways of working that suit the organisation and its people.

In that sense, the evidence suggests a ‘key change’ rather than a whole new tune. A key change takes the established tune to a new place. The way that the employers interviewed operate has not changed in its fundamentals but, as one interviewee put it, they are having to learn to do the same things, differently.

While the experiences of each employer were different, there were several common themes that emerged, reflecting a broader shift in working culture.





## **1. From individual to collective: hybrid working**

Before Covid, work was something we typically did together most of the time, usually in a shared place. We thought about the collective – our work and colleagues - first and our individual needs second. Lockdown – for those whose jobs could be done from home – turned this on its head. Two years on, many workers have become accustomed to working at least part of the week from home, with related gains for them as individuals around time and money. For many employers, the challenge now is to help staff relearn how to work collectively. Managers, and those they manage, can generally measure and agree on an individual's outputs, whether a piece of work has been completed on time, its quality, whether it has met a specific deliverable target. What is harder, and was evidenced in these interviews, is how to understand and embrace the individual's importance to the collective - to company culture and to collaboration.

## **2. Choice and control: increased transfer of control to the employee**

Across the board interviewees described new ways of working in which employee choice and control had increased, regardless of employer size or sector. Attitudes had changed: staff expected more choice and control, and managers felt they had to provide it – and many actively wanted to. There was increased choice not just around where you work (broadly, hybrid for office staff) but more choice now around when and how long, for office staff and also, although not yet as extensively, for frontline staff. In some organisations, this was creating tension, as leaders endeavoured to find a balance between the collective good and the benefits of employee autonomy.

## **3. Fairness and the frontline: it doesn't have to be the same to be fair**

Before 2020, a common barrier among employers to more widespread use of working from home or working remotely was the objection that it wasn't 'fair' to allow some people to work flexibly when colleagues in different roles couldn't do the same. This had been the case for several interviewees, and some appeared now to be overcoming this, by looking at principles to govern different ways of working, and focusing on clarity around role purpose and equity of process. To a lesser extent, discussions around fairness and flexible working opened up new opportunities for frontline staff to access greater time flexibility via new shift patterns and working hours.

## **4. Time, boundaries and wellbeing**

Conversations around time and boundaries touched often on wellbeing – both the benefits to employees of greater flexibility and concerns about remote working enabling longer hours and work overload. Time flexibility was thus understood by several as an important element of the employment offering and particularly so when competition for new staff is so keen.

## **5. Cultural challenges, and things we used to take for granted**

Organisations were becoming more questioning about their culture and what makes it what it is. Aspects of organisational life that had previously been taken for granted when the majority of staff worked together in the same place for the majority of their working time, such as onboarding and induction, or learning alongside colleagues, were being rethought. Some organisations were becoming more intentional around communication, and how to build and maintain a strong working culture and connectedness between staff and employer.

## **6. New skills for managers**

The role of the manager may be said to be two-fold, to ensure that their team delivers against business objectives and targets, and to manage and support their staff. Flexible and hybrid working add complexity to this. Most organisations were developing manager training to support managers to explain the business rationale for and the processes to access new ways of working. Investment was also being made by some organisations in helping managers become more deliberate in their communication and interaction with their colleagues, especially in more dispersed teams, both to maintain company culture and to ensure staff wellbeing.

## **7. Managing performance**

Almost all the organisations believed that they could show performance gains from increased flexible working, and also argued for improved business performance being dependent on employee satisfaction and wellbeing arising from flex. For hybrid working, two interviewees, both from the private sector, were more sceptical about the relationship between increased flexible working and performance gains, and keener for people to be at work in person. For frontline workers, for whom an emerging theme in these interviews is that new forms of flexible working were becoming available, interviewees could point to performance improvements which they linked to flexible working.



## Key themes explored

### 1. From individual to collective: hybrid working

#### Key theme reminder

Before Covid, work was something we typically did together most of the time, usually in a shared place. We thought about the collective – our work and colleagues - first and our individual needs second. Lockdown – for those whose jobs could be done from home – turned this on its head. Two years on, many workers have become accustomed to working at least part of the week from home, with related gains for them as individuals around time and money. For many employers, the challenge now is to help staff relearn how to work collectively. Managers, and those they manage, can generally measure and agree on an individual's outputs, whether a piece of work has been completed on time, its quality, whether it has met a specific deliverable target. What is harder, and was evidenced in these interviews, is how to understand and embrace the individual's importance to the collective - to company culture and to collaboration.

## Summary points

- There has always been a tension, with any kind of flexible working, between the interests of the individual and of the collective. Hybrid working is making this more evident.
- If individuals always put their needs first, without considering the impact on their team and wider organisation, this creates a cultural and management challenge.
- How to re-build collective commitment and responsibility preoccupied the majority of employers interviewed.
- Articulating the benefits of being in the office is important, although it was easier to demonstrate the commercial impact than the cultural.
- Organisations were rethinking the role of the manager, of leaders and the importance of communication in helping people understand their individual importance to the collective.
- Several reported that the social aspect of work was valued by many of their staff, and was a reason that many chose to work in person more often than required.
- Several employers were making the office a more attractive place to work, as well as rethinking how better to use space for collaboration and other collective activities.
- Employers that gave workers some choice and control over how often they came to the office, appeared to see workers spending more time than required on site.

## How you can take action on hybrid working

- Invest in line manager training, to build confidence and capability. *See Key Themes Explored, section 6 'New Skills for Managers', p42.*
- Introduce team protocols, to establish a shared understanding of how hybrid working operates for the individual, the team and the wider business. Use calendars and shared schedules to enable planning. *See Flexibility Works guidance: "[Flexible Working: a guide for managers](#)"*
- Be direct about why you need in person time. Clearly explain the commercial purpose eg a project sprint, or effective sales calls. Remind your people that flexibility has to be a two-way deal.
- Build in person team time into the work calendar, for example for training, social events, and intentional time together.
- Review your internal communications. You may have to be more explicit about things that were previously taken for granted, about processes, about 'how we do things around here'. *See Key Themes Explored, section 5 'Cultural challenges, and things we used to take for granted', p34*
- Review your office setup. Is there space for good collaboration, do you have enough meeting rooms, are desks easy to access, is there space to socialise in?
- Remember not everyone will want to or be able to work hybridly – make sure that full time in the office remains an option, for new recruits and current staff.

## In-depth reporting and analysis

I have always seen a tension, with any kind of flexible working, between the interests of the individual and of the collective, and the development of hybrid working is making this tension more evident.

During lockdown, as several interviewees noted, we were all in it together, all doing the same thing and facing the same challenges. Now the majority of office workers are happy to continue to work from home more or less often<sup>2</sup>. The organisations in this study reported this to be the case for their employees too. The obvious issue then becomes, having done their job perfectly well from home for two years, why should anyone be required to come back to the office?

And in one sense, employees are correct. If your job can be done hybridly, why ever not? But if, as many of the employers noted, the individual is putting their needs first, without considering the impact on their team and their organisation, that becomes a cultural and management challenge, to rebuild collective commitment and responsibility. It is this challenge that most preoccupied the majority of the interviewees.

The wealth management company spoke for many when they reflected, “People had got used to some of the things that they quite liked”. The equipment hire business felt that “if it had been a shorter period of time, it would have been a lot easier to get people back into [the old] routines quicker”.

Organisations were thus trying to find their way to being able to explain why presence is important and how often their office based staff should be on site. This was not always easy to do, because many of the imperatives identified by senior staff, around culture, collaboration and innovation for example, are not immediately measurable in terms of the individual’s contribution.

### **Why is it important to be there?**

The call centre at the equipment hire business was now back on site full time, which they could show delivers a quicker and better service for customers, winning business from competitors who have moved to a dispersed, off site model and whose response times are less immediate.

The wealth management company talked about the importance of learning the business alongside more senior colleagues. In a high pressure, target driven industry, working from home is more suited to process-based tasks, which do not make up a large part of the role of those winning business and managing client funds.

The disability charity had found that remote meetings did not work as well with larger groups; the workplace consultancy noted that, in particular, online client discussion forums

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<sup>2</sup> Mutebi N, Hobbs A. 2022. “[The impact of remote and hybrid working on workers and organisations](#)”, UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology briefing POSTbrief 49

had become more like a lecture, with less engagement and thus less value to the participants.

The leisure services provider summed up many of the wider benefits that are less easy to measure or demonstrate. The collaboration, the idea generation, the sparking off each other. As well as the social and emotional kind of support that is sometimes quite difficult to pick up at the end of a video call when someone just needs five minutes of their manager's time, or you just need the ear of your colleagues to tell something to."

The local authority explained that staff are encouraged to 'work' at home and come to the office to collaborate. They said: "As we've moved through this process we've realised there is nothing that we can't do from home but there are an awful lot of things that are much better done face to face."

### **The pushback from staff**

At the extreme, interviewees described staff resistance to being called in. The communications company was one of many to describe the biggest challenge with hybrid working being to explain why someone should come into the office when they had done their job done perfectly well at home during Covid.

The construction company noted that sometimes people settle into a pattern and claim 'that's my working from home day' if asked to come into the office. The leisure services provider expressed the view of most by describing those who would rather 'just sit in front of the computer and do what they were doing' as not the culture that they want.

The wealth management company described a sense that some staff were choosing what suits them rather than what is needed for the team or the business. They said: "We were [starting] a big new project ... So I got everyone to work in the office, 100% everybody in, and it caused all sorts of stresses and strains. ... There were a lot of people that weren't happy and it was almost as though you were taking their rights away."

As understanding of this challenge develops, organisations were responding by reminding staff that they are part of a bigger whole. The local authority talked about getting a balance between what suits the service, the team and the individual. Most were rethinking the role and responsibilities of the manager, and the importance of leadership and communications in supporting this transition back to something that is more collective. Key findings six and seven in this report consider this in more depth, including the influence of empowering leaders on employee citizenship behaviour.

## Return to the office

But as working in the office becomes normalised again, several noted that people like and value being part of the collective, and were beginning to come back more than required. Reassuringly for those who have concerns that the workplace and workforce will fragment forever as hybrid working develops, a strong theme was the social aspect of work and how this was valued by staff in general. The wealth management interviewees felt this strongly, with one saying: “We’re social animals, we like a bit of humour and banter and chat.” Another said: “I hated being out of the office. Being back in, I love it.”

The workplace also has obvious importance, noted by several interviewees, for those who felt isolated working from home or whose home is not as suitable a place for work as the office.



Several organisations could point to staff who actively wished to work in the office, among them the local authority, which offers the choice to opt in or opt out of their hybrid working programme – 5% of staff have opted out. A total of 4% of staff at the disability charity said they wished to return full time to the office.

Many organisations had invested thought and money in enhancing their office space, and redesigning it to support new ways of working in person, both to attract encourage existing staff to spend more time on their premises, and to compete for new staff.

The communications company described the social value of working back in the office:

“You’re just seeing people that you’ve not seen for a long, long time from different departments. You don’t necessarily work with those individuals but you always cross paths with them when you are in the kitchen making a cup of tea and that’s the bit that I think a lot of people have missed.”

Choice and control over where someone works may have the perhaps surprising outcome of more time being spent in the office than the organisation requires. Mentioned by the manufacturer and the social funder, two very different organisations but whose hybrid policies were among the least prescriptive, this is in line with wider experiences<sup>3</sup> in Scotland, where a third of workers who have been asked for a more general, less prescriptive, monthly or weekly presence in the office say they are going in more than requested.

The helpline staff at the social funder managed their own rota. They said: “It’s very much ... trust and confidence that people ... know what’s expected, they know where the goalposts are, and they manage it between themselves.”

The manufacturer agreed that people were coming back more often, without a formal requirement to do so. They said: “Most people are on site more often these days and I think the balance has gone from in the Covid days where people were maybe coming on site once a week, it's maybe they're off site once or twice a week now, that balance is flipped.”

The workplace consultancy concluded: “I would hope that it would become slightly less of ‘two days at home, three days in the office’. [It] maybe feels better ... that people are where they need to be and it's just part of a trusting organisation and you are trusted to work at home if that works better for you and your job role that day, rather than five days at home to concentrate and have to go into the office three of them.”

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<sup>3</sup> Flexibility Works white paper September 2022 [“Hybrid working in Scotland: how does it look now?”](#)





## Key themes explored

### 2. Choice and control: increased transfer of control to the employee

#### Key theme reminder

Across the board interviewees described new ways of working in which employee choice and control had increased, regardless of employer size or sector. Attitudes had changed: staff expected more choice and control, and managers felt they had to provide it – and many actively wanted to. There was increased choice not just around where you work (broadly, hybrid for office staff) but more choice now around when and how long, for office staff and also, although not yet as extensively, for frontline staff. In some organisations, this was creating tension, as leaders endeavoured to find a balance between the collective good and the benefits of employee autonomy.

## Summary points

- Employee choice and control was reported to have increased across all organisations who were interviewed.
- Greater choice and control existed via hybrid working for **where** people work. Many employers were also offering greater choice and control to workers over **when** they work, such as different shift patterns.
- Key business drivers to increase choice and control were to remain competitive in a challenging recruitment market, and the centrality of staff wellbeing to retention and performance.
- External research shows that increasing choice and control for workers around when, where and how much they work leads to improved wellbeing and happiness at work, which is related to better engagement and performance.
- Interviewees said some managers find it difficult to relax their own control and offer employees greater autonomy, preferring to work within clearly set out rules and parameters, rather than with more flexible approaches to when and where employees should work.
- Several interviewees spoke about practice and culture changing, so that staff no longer felt they had to ask permission to change or choose working hours or place. Manager training and leadership role modelling had contributed to this.

## How you can take action on choice and control

- Encourage individuals and teams to think and discuss where and when work is best done, for the individual, the team and the customer or client.
- Encourage staff to take responsibility for their day to day decisions about where and when their work is best done.
- Remain competitive in recruitment by promoting the choice and control that you offer. Review roles for flex potential, communicate available flex via advertising and comms around the vacancy, and proactively discuss flex options and preferences at interview.
  - Keep on the front foot by getting up to speed with new legislation around day one flexibility. *See Appendix 3 and links to flexible recruitment guidance.*
- Think about manager guidance and support (including technology), to enable them to apply your principles and policy with confidence in order to give their staff greater personal choice and control. *See Key Themes Explored, section 6 “New Skills for Managers”, p42.*
- Support managers in their own control and confidence around flex by encouraging them to review each role in their team for what flexibility is possible.
- Support and encourage your leaders to role model the kinds of flexibility that your organisation wants.

## In-depth reporting and analysis

It was striking that, across all the organisations who were interviewed, employee choice and control was reported to have increased, at least to some degree. This was regardless of organisational size or industry sector. Office workers in every organisation had been offered greater choice and control over **where** they work, because all had introduced different models of hybrid working. There was also increasing choice and control around **when** staff work, including frontline staff, ranging from greater autonomy around travel to wider choices around shift patterns. Those organisations in which flexible working was already culturally embedded before the pandemic were also offering yet further choice and control over working time and place.

The spectrum of change around choice and control is nicely illustrated by three interviewees.

At the wealth management company, who would be unsurprised to be described as one of the least flexible of the organisations in this study, there was nevertheless now more choice about when to travel and when to dial in, especially once client relationships are well-established.

“I don't want to get dragged to London for an internal meeting that can be done over Teams. I'll travel to the ends of the earth to see a client and generate income ... and actually, there are certain times where you should be in a room with your peer group. I make the call, what is the meeting for? What's it about? If it's a short meeting, I'm not travelling to London for a whole day, I'll join in via Teams. So there's more choice now about being more selective about where you spend your time.”

Hybrid working was based on a maximum of two days a week working from home at the workplace consultancy, parameters set by the Board to meet concerns around fairness across the organisation. In practice, there appeared to be greater choice and flexibility in its application than on paper. They said: “I'm very much of the opinion that people will just be where they need to be, if that's five days a week in the office, or five days a week on a client's site or five days a week at home, I'm not going to get too fussed about that. But there will be others who may not like that.”

Choice and control around *when* staff worked had always been the guiding principle at the social funder, but since the pandemic this highly autonomous model had become equally flexible around place. It had previously been taken for granted that office staff should be office based but they said: “I think it's given us more choice and control ... which we didn't

recognise that we didn't have before. And it was probably our own mindset. I suppose our own minds have changed in that they've grown, they've developed. We can see a bigger picture."

All the interviewees talked about choice and about flexibility. Only the social funder explicitly talked about control, as a foundational principle of the organisation's culture. The workplace consultancy mentioned greater employee control, but in terms of the jobs market and the power to choose that is currently available to jobseekers. This kind of external market control was a driver for others too. But implied in almost every interview was the sense that employees, especially those working hybridly, had increased control over their patterns of work. And on the whole, an acknowledgement that this was a positive development, certainly for staff and probably for the organisation.

There is evidence<sup>4</sup> that helps us to understand why choice and control are so important, for wellbeing and for happiness at work. Greater levels of control over what you do and when, are linked to increased levels of self-reported wellbeing. Informal flexibility and working from home contribute to happiness at work, which is linked to engagement and performance. The links, from increased choice to improved performance and productivity, may not be directly proven but the correlations are becoming increasingly accepted.

This should be welcomed by any business, but managers often find it difficult to relax their own control and offer employees greater autonomy. This was evident in some interviews, with some managers being described as feeling more confident working within clearly set out rules and parameters, and challenged by the introduction of more flexible approaches to when and where employees should work.

### **How have employees been given more choice and control?**

All the organisations taking part in the interviews had introduced hybrid working. Appendix 2 sets out the different models that had been adopted, from no more than two days per week to be worked at home to open-ended employee-controlled management of work location.

Among those taking an open approach, the uniformed service promoted choice about when and where to work, based on a clear purpose which people understand, aiming for maximum autonomy for their civilian staff within their hybrid approach. Attitudes had changed since 2020, with greater understanding among managers and colleagues that hybrid means that individuals may for example choose to walk the dog during working hours, but still be contactable and still be delivering their objectives. They said: "We want something much more fluid, where we have people where we need them, when we need them, through choice and their willingness rather than being enforced to do it." They added that as their practice develops, they hope for 'looser guardrails, greater flexibility and choice'.

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<sup>4</sup> Wheatley D. 2017. "Autonomy in Paid Work and Employee Subjective Well-Being", Work and Occupations journal, vol 44, issue 3 2017

At the local authority, the starting point was that, for those who choose to work hybridly, access to the office is limited, to no more than 50% of the employee's time across any four week period (unless they have opted out of hybrid working). In this, their practice is unlike the approach taken by most organisations across the UK, which tend to set a maximum time that may be spent *out* of the office. Staff work their hours across four weeks, discussing with their manager what suits the service, the team and the individual. Because there is built in flexibility for how employees work their hours, the local authority have moved away from flexi-time, with employees being responsible for keeping track of the hours they work. They said: "We have focused in on trying to work your usual contracted hours so, very much a focus on wellbeing...You don't need a system to record your hours, to show that you're working or that you're being productive. And people have bought into that."

The disability charity was unusual in that, by introducing hybrid working, they were effectively extending to their office staff the day to day control over time and place that their frontline staff had had before the pandemic. Their delivery model provides a high degree of autonomy to their field staff, care workers who are equipped with smart phones via which they manage and record their working time. Control is, quite literally, in the hand of the individual. They said: "We've moved beyond that sort of old fashioned suspicion of what are people really doing when they're at home ... because our standards haven't dropped, our delivery hasn't dropped, the productivity and the levels of work and impact from the back office side of it haven't changed."

Greater choice was now available in all the organisations interviewed, not just around where you work (broadly, hybrid for office staff) but also around when and how long, for office staff and also, not as extensively but developing, for frontline staff. Key drivers were to remain competitive in a challenging recruitment market, and the centrality of staff wellbeing to retention and performance.

Organisations using shifts were showing greater flexibility in the patterns they offered, also driven by concerns around recruitment, retention and wellbeing. The leisure services provider illustrated one end of a spectrum, reporting that changes to location-tied working patterns were driven primarily by service demands and by difficulties recruiting and retaining, rather than by an intentional move to greater flexibility. In contrast, the construction company and the manufacturer both talked about health and wellbeing as a post-pandemic driver underpinning the development of new shift patterns and additional choice for employees around their working time. The equipment hire business was not unusual in the new thinking it had done to support greater choice in working hours, introducing new shift patterns for depot staff, office and call centre workers. They said: "We need to make sure that everyone's wellbeing [is] looked after and they enjoy working here and that's what brings us a successful business."

Greater choice was also being offered to mobile workers, who can 'touch down' to work remotely, or at other premises, or at home. The local authority, which had a defined mobile workstyle for staff who deliver services in the community, pointed out that touching down at home often suits individuals much better. Mobile workers at the equipment hire business

are mostly salespeople, who might previously have had to make calls from the depots, which are noisy and unsuitable. Being able to work from home or hotel room meant 'they can concentrate more ... in a better environment, a better space. They must do a professional sales call'.

Several interviewees spoke about practice and culture changing, so that staff no longer felt they had to ask permission to change or choose working hours or place. The communications company pointed to the combination of hybrid working, new core hours and manager training, with the result that 'you rarely hear people asking for permission to go to appointments'. The manufacturer understood the importance of role modelling in establishing a culture in which people feel confident to exercise choice and control: "Since Covid I don't get to my desk until 9.30am on a Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and the fact that people see me walking in is almost as if it's permission to follow that type of behaviour."

The local authority expanded on their approach:

"When we talk about contracted hours ... we are not talking about a nine till five. ... It's about that certain amount of time you need to work and what we've tried to focus on is what suits the service, what suits the team and what suits the individual. And they should all be balanced."

The social funder summed it up: "You don't need permission – we trust you, we've got the confidence."



## Key themes explored

### 3. Fairness and the frontline: it doesn't have to be the same to be fair

#### Key theme reminder

Before 2020, a common barrier among employers to more widespread use of working from home or working remotely was the objection that it wasn't 'fair' to allow some people to work flexibly when colleagues in different roles couldn't do the same. This had been the case for several interviewees, and some appeared now to be overcoming this, by looking at principles to govern different ways of working, and focusing on clarity around role purpose and equity of process. To a lesser extent, discussions around fairness and flexible working opened up new opportunities for frontline staff to access greater time flexibility via new shift patterns and working hours.

## Summary points

- A common barrier to more widespread take-up of flexible working, even before the pandemic, had been the belief that fairness had to mean that everyone had to have access to the same patterns. This had particularly applied to working from home.
- Since the first lockdown, things have changed for office workers. The number working from home at some point in the week has tripled since 2019.
- Interviewees had wrestled with the idea of fairness more keenly as they recognised the benefits of hybrid working for desk workers but were less sure how to increase flexibility for people who can't work from home.
- Changing employee expectations, competition for staff, greater understanding of wellbeing benefits, and greater manager confidence all seem to have contributed to a more pragmatic approach to what 'fair' means.
- Interviewees were increasingly creating different flexible working arrangements for different kinds of workers, such as flexibility on time for frontline workers, rather than one blanket policy for all employees.
- There was a greater understanding that the process for increasing flexibility needs to be fair and transparent, even if the resulting flexible working patterns are different.

## How to take action on fairness and the frontline

- Be open minded to possibilities of some element in flex in all roles, including in frontline positions.
- Talk to people and listen to their ideas, and think about what might be possible in line with business requirements.
- Consider developing formal workstyles, that allow staff immediate clarity about what is possible for their role, and what support they can expect, for example with technology or expenses.
- Explore the [CIPD role assessment flowchart](#).
- Review your processes around flexible working for clarity and transparency; and communicate them to your people.



## In-depth reporting and analysis

The first lockdown in March 2020 ushered in what has turned out to be an apparently permanent and large-scale change in the way office workers work. In 2019, only 12% of the workforce in Great Britain worked from home at some point in the week. In January and February 2023, that number had more than tripled, to 40%<sup>5</sup>. Across all other forms of flexible working, there has been very little change<sup>6</sup>.

There was general acceptance across the interviewees that hybrid working is a benefit for office staff that frontline staff cannot access. They are right to think so. Stanford professor Nicholas Bloom assesses the ability to work hybridly as being worth the equivalent of a 7-8% pay increase<sup>7</sup>. Increased costs from home working (for example, winter heating) appear to be outweighed by reduced spending elsewhere (for example, on commuting)<sup>8</sup>. Hybrid workers in Scotland are estimated to save around £1,800 a year, in London around £3,000<sup>9</sup>.

Several interviewees spoke about how, before the pandemic, their organisational attitude had been that because not everyone could work from home, then no one should. This concern around fairness remained as they adjusted to hybrid working. The leisure services provider noted: “Some of our more senior colleagues who have responsibility for the front facing operations have a firm view that it should be one size fits all. If all of my staff are back ... well, all the office staff should be back as well.”

However, partly driven by necessity in the face of changing employee expectations and increasing competition for staff; partly by greater understanding of the wellbeing benefits that they can link to greater flexibility; and partly as managers have become more confident as they have been exposed to day to day flex used by their teams, there seemed to be a pragmatic relaxing around what ‘fair’ means. This was taking several organisations into new thinking about how best to support their frontline workers, whose roles are not suitable for hybrid working.

**Several organisations had developed formal workstyles**, that allow staff immediate clarity about what is possible for their role, and what support they can expect.

The local authority defined five workstyles:

- Hybrid: office staff providing support services;
- Mobile: field work, inspection roles, able to touchdown at home or office as suits;
- Direct care: location tied;

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<sup>5</sup> [“Characteristics of homeworkers, Great Britain: September 2022 to January 2023”](#) ONS 13 Feb 2023

<sup>6</sup> [“Trends in flexible working arrangements”](#), CIPD analysis of ONS Labour Force Survey Feb 2022

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Sarah O’Conner, Financial Times 9<sup>th</sup> May 2023 [“The ability to work from home does not just benefit the elite”](#)

<sup>8</sup> Channel 4 FactCheck 5<sup>th</sup> September 2022 <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-does-working-from-home-really-add-hundreds-to-monthly-energy-bills>

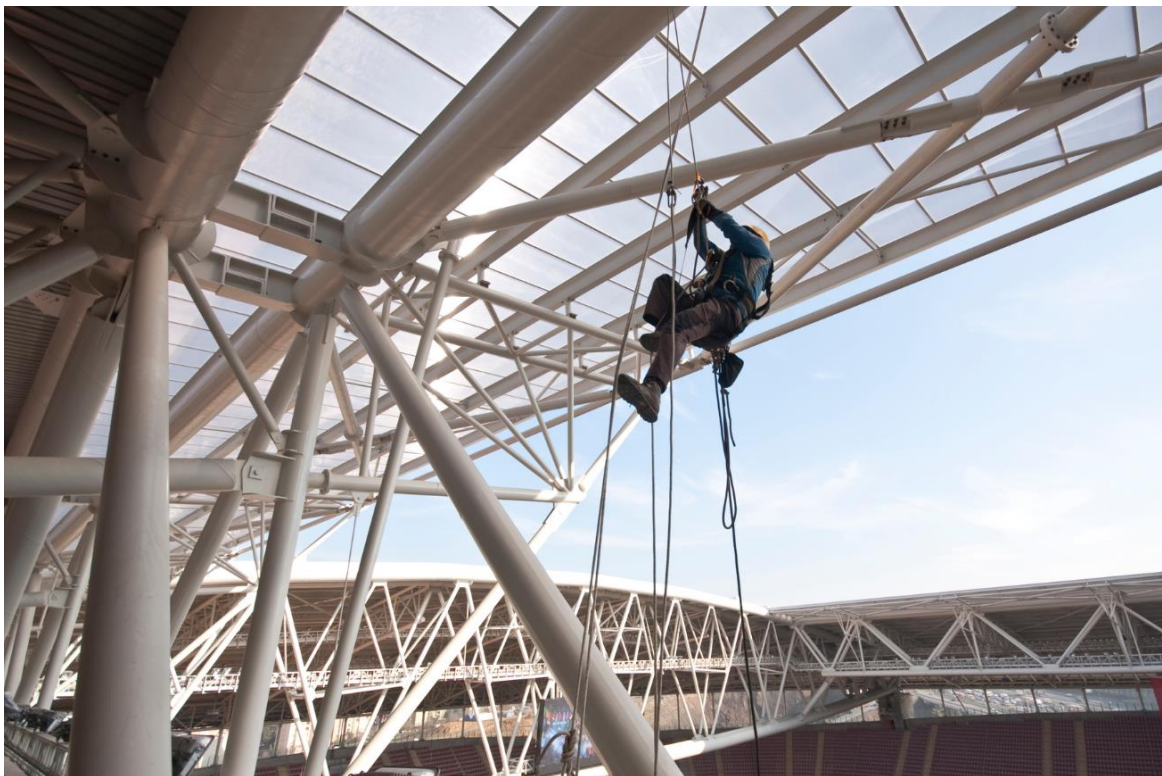
<sup>9</sup> Value of hybrid working, report by CEBR for Virgin Media 2022, cited in [“Hybrid Working Across the UK”](#), Raconteur 14 February 2023

- Face to face: (contracting services, teachers, housing officers): location tied;
- Customer contact: (telephony) four days per work working from home, one on site

“As well as location dependency and time dependency, we also looked at the technology that was required for each of those..., so that’s helped us define the workstyles as well. Somebody who needs a working from home kit is quite clearly somebody who could work [hybrid], whereas somebody who needs a tablet or a device to allow them to work on the go, put them more into the mobile style.”

The uniformed service used the [CIPD role assessment flowchart](#) to help define appropriate flexibility for different civilian roles: those required wholly in the office, those that had the ability to work between home and office, and mobile roles, those that needed access to secure sites, but not necessarily a fixed site.

The communications company defined the role contractually by location: dual location (hybrid, for office staff), location independent (out and about, seeing customers) and location fixed (retail). They said: “We’ve updated our location framework, we’ve made it clear ... what does it mean from a tax perspective, what can you claim expenses for, what can you not claim.”



The construction company, when interviewed in 2020, had been concerned to manage the return to work so that it was fair. Attitudes had changed since then, with an understanding that equity does not have to mean that everyone gets the same. Different flexible options had been developed for site-based workers. They said: “We have embraced many different approaches in terms of flexibility and worked on the basis of an inclusive approach. We still have some flex as we knew it before – say, someone working compressed hours to allow a day off – but mostly people are working flexibly not just around location but flexi times too.”

The equipment hire business had carried out an analysis of roles to make it clear who can have what. For public facing roles in the depots and others that are location dependent, they had introduced new part-time contracts and different shift patterns that would not have been available before.

All the organisations that I spoke to (except for the wealth management company) have frontline staff. Three had already offered frontline flexibility before the pandemic (the disability charity, the social funder and the uniformed service). Of the others, all had begun thinking about how to offer greater flexibility around time to non-office staff who are tied to location and, to a lesser extent, about compensatory benefits, in order to be fairer.

The construction company said: “[On the construction sites we offer] four days on, four days off, 12-hour shifts (48-hour week) – incredibly popular, because it pays more (standard working week was 37.5 and is about to be 36) and gives such good time off.

“The factory has less flex because of the nature of the work, but it’s there too. They finish at 1pm on a Friday, and now with the move to 36-hour week, they will slightly reduce each working day Monday to Thursday.”

The manufacturer had introduced different shift patterns for production and engineering workers, based on a four day week of 36 hours, instead of 37 hours across five days. The four day model frees up Fridays to be offered as overtime when additional production is needed, building flexibility and commercial responsiveness into the business model. Shift patterns included a day shift with set hours, rotational shift patterns and a twilight, evening shift that was particularly popular with students and people with care responsibilities. The MD commented:

“The starting point for anyone that's looking at flexible working is keep a real open mind, don't set parameters falsely because everyone that spoke to us before said you'll never be able to offer flexible work into a production line. We can.”

Open minds were very much in evidence throughout the interviews. The local authority identified the next priority as being how to bring in equivalent flexibility to their direct care and face to face staff. They said: “Some of these things are actually really simple, things that people are looking for – advance notice of shifts, being able to shift swap, maybe slightly adjusting start and finish times.”

The uniformed service, which already offered part-time working to uniformed staff, was considering investigating compressed hours and the four day week.

The leisure services provider was thoughtful about the kind of flexibility it could offer its frontline staff. They manage a wide range of venues and services within their local authority, with staffing patterns driven by opening hours, which does not offer the kind of choice or control enjoyed by colleagues in the office. They said: “It's the flexibility that says, this week you're working here, next week we need you to go there, or even tomorrow we need you to go there.” In response, they were looking at compensatory development opportunities and pathways for their staff who are location fixed, including for staff on lower grades.

The leisure services provider and the equipment hire business both spoke about the importance of making lower paid or more routine roles attractive, as competition for staff continues to be sharply felt. Being able to offer some flexibility around when or where a job is done was increasingly understood as an essential part of their approach to recruitment and retention.

The equipment hire business said: “We're doing a lot of trying to get them to really want to work for [us] and to really want ... to stay [with us]. That's where we see the biggest difference with us and the competition. We want them to see this as a job they want to be in and a company they want to be part of.”





## Key themes explored

### 4. Time, boundaries and wellbeing

#### Key theme reminder

Conversations around time and boundaries touched often on wellbeing – both the benefits to employees of greater flexibility and concerns about remote working enabling longer hours and work overload. Time flexibility was thus understood by several as an important element of the employment offering and particularly so when competition for new staff is so keen.

## Summary points

- Conversations with interviewees about time and boundaries touched on wellbeing – both the benefits of greater flexibility and concerns about remote working enabling longer hours and work overload.
- Several interviews had a thoughtful focus on doing your job within your contracted hours, and on the use of core hours, as essential elements of promoting staff wellbeing. This was noted as being an important part of the recruitment offer.
- There was some evidence that less overtime was claimed as greater use was made of time and location flexibility.
- Online meetings were mostly seen as a positive, contributing to reduced travel and generally making working from home a practical proposition.
- Some employers reported that work was – as feared - spilling out of working hours because better technology made people more contactable.
- Several spoke about proactive efforts to ensure the culture didn't slip into one where staff were expected to be available all the time, such as discouraging emails out of hours.

## How you can take action on time, boundaries and wellbeing

- Look at practical steps around time, such as introducing core hours when meetings can be held, or reminding staff how flexible working, and flexitime if you offer it, can be used to better manage individual working hours.
- Look at the use of tech. Require a scheduled break between online meetings. Consider putting boundaries around when emails may be sent.
- Make sure your leaders are role modelling respect for staff time outside your normal working hours.
- Monitor what is happening around working hours, to spot work overspill.
- Carry out a wellbeing audit, encourage conversations about wellbeing, build into line manager one-to-ones.
- Make sure your managers are aware of when people are working, beyond their personal choice.
- Look at the size of the role and make sure it fits the hours to be worked. Have a realistic conversation about expectations.

## In-depth reporting and analysis

How time is used at work, and what choice employees have around this, was tied by almost all to wellbeing. Most felt that greater flex, whether via hybrid working or on the frontline, was bringing wellbeing gains. But several worried about online life, and particularly the mental pressure possible because of its lack of boundaries, whether day to day in terms of Zoom fatigue, or work overspill into home life in the evening or at weekends.

### Time

Several interviews had a thoughtful focus on doing your job within your contracted hours, and on the use of core hours, as essential elements of promoting staff wellbeing. The local authority talked about focusing on doing the job within the contracted hours, and noted that absence figures were better for those working hybrid or mobile styles. The manufacturer had developed a combination of flexible working, core hours and overtime arrangements, that helped the business avoid burnout and also to retain and attract staff. Core hours between ten and four, during which you are free to book meetings, and also the right to disconnect after half past six in the evening let staff at the communications company flex when they worked and control their working hours. As with many of the interviewees, this was noted as an important part of the recruitment offer. Core hours at the social funder were 7am until 7pm, outside which times staff are discouraged from sending emails.

The construction company and the manufacturer noted that less overtime was being claimed as greater use was made of time and location flexibility. There were divided views about flexitime. The local authority had moved away from formal flexitime, and was using Time Off in Lieu to manage any additional hours that were needed. The uniformed service on the other hand used flexitime as a way of managing overtime, and also to manage remote working lest it enabled presenteeism or long hours.

### Travel

For office staff, time is saved not just because of reduced commuting when working from home, but because greater use of technology for virtual meetings means that there is less expectation of business travel. This had been predicted in the 2020 interviews and is a change that was being maintained. The workplace consultancy noted that no longer having to travel had made it easier to coordinate client diaries to get people together, so proposals could be written, business won and work started more quickly. However, they added a wellbeing proviso: "I think we're all suffering from a little bit of not having enough downtime between various things and travel would sometimes give you a little bit of enforced downtime that would actually be beneficial in hindsight. If you're getting on a train, you can do a bit of prep, you can do a bit of work, you can even just decompress a little, but with the reduction in travel you maybe don't get that."

Frontline staff too were reported as being keen to travel less and at least in the current market feeling able to be choosier about the jobs they accept. The leisure services provider noted that it has become much harder to recruit place-based staff, who factored in the ease or complexity of their prospective journey to work.



## Boundaries

Several people talked about how working in the office, rather than at home, helped establish a boundary between work and personal life.

“Sometimes as well on Friday it feels like I’ve actually finished work, I’ve closed the laptop and I’ve left the building, whereas working from home you can still be sitting at your desk at half six, seven o’clock on a Friday, and husband’s downstairs making dinner, shouting it’s nearly ready...” *The communications company*

Online meetings were mostly seen as a positive, contributing to reduced travel and generally making working from home a practical proposition. However, the workplace consultancy reflected on the importance of continuing to be thoughtful about scheduling: “I think the balance has swung back a bit. I’m not in back-to-back meetings now ... Some days it was just ridiculous during lockdown. That has seemingly ironed itself out.”

Some interviewees expressed anxiety about work overspill into life outside. This was especially the case in one public and one third sector organisation, who each spoke of noticing weekend emails and boundary-blurring that would not have happened before the lockdowns, describing a new culture that they felt was creeping into public and civil sector life. This appeared to be driven by technology enabling being ‘always on’, compounded by the example set by senior people.



“I had a work-related email from my Chief Executive, with a message sent to me on WhatsApp to say, I've just emailed you, and a response from my director, on a Sunday afternoon. That would never have happened [before]. So then that starts to develop that ‘am I now expected to log on this afternoon because people can now reach me in that way?’” *The leisure services provider*

The technology that had enabled rapid adjustment to working from home during the pandemic was now feared to be enabling ‘always on’ expectations. Several spoke about making sure that the culture did not slip into one where staff are constantly at work or constantly on the clock, with the uniformed service and the leisure services provider making a particular point about the challenges for staff in meeting ever increasing organisational and service demands.

The leisure services provider said: “[At which point would we say], thank you for the flexibility, but actually no, I genuinely do need to phone in sick now and please don't contact me through any of the 1,400 various ways you've now got to contact me that didn't exist before lockdown.”

The uniformed service said: “You're getting emails from people at midnight. That just doesn't make any sense for somebody that doesn't work a night shift pattern.

“I think the fact that people have more and more access to their equipment and their network drives and so forth, it's probably too easy for them to break the rules. I guess we're relying on people just being autonomous and having a bit of common sense around about what they're doing.”



## Key themes explored

# 5. Cultural challenges, and things we used to take for granted

## Key theme reminder

Organisations were becoming more questioning about their culture and what makes it what it is. Aspects of organisational life that had previously been taken for granted when the majority of staff worked together in the same place for the majority of their working time, such as onboarding and induction, or learning alongside colleagues, were being rethought. Some organisations were becoming more intentional around communication, and how to build and maintain a strong working culture and connectedness between staff and employer.

## Summary points

- Interviewees agreed that the normalisation of flexible working has changed culture, and that there are challenges as a result around, in particular, communication, career progression, induction, communication and collaboration.
- Employers had a wide range of attitudes on how to tackle the cultural challenges of people working differently.
- At the extremes, one employer felt their culture challenges could be overcome by manager intentionality and better communication, while another felt the importance of in person working in their industry is being dangerously undervalued.
- There were particular concerns about younger workers missing out on learning and connection because of increased home working, by them and by more senior colleagues.
- Organisations were having to rethink day to day arrangements, as well as more structural elements of working life such as onboarding and cultural connectedness. This included identifying and understand the things that continue to be better when done in person.
- All employers had thought about the best ways to encourage collaboration, mainly focused around some presence in the office.
- Employers with more flexible cultures spoke in greater depth about communications, and how good communication helped them maintain their culture and engage staff in positive changes.
- This included managers investing more of their time in comms with teams and with their direct reports.

## How to take action on cultural challenges

- **Communication**
  - Build in formal and informal time for communication and connection, encourage conversations.
  - Formally recognise the increased responsibility of managers for communication within teams and one-to-one with direct reports
  - Review and refresh internal comms.
  - Explain to staff the benefits – and expectations – the organisation has of in person working.
  - Consider the purpose, frequency and format of town-halls and all-staff meetings, a regular blog or vlog by the CEO, team meetings, individual catch-up calls.

- **Career progression**
  - Make sure your flex workers have the same opportunities to progress, time for training, time with manager – monitor this.
  - Look for opportunities to cross-skill frontline staff, and enable more junior staff to act up to cover longer opening hours.
  - Be prepared to explain the importance of presence to more senior colleagues, who may otherwise feel they can do their own work effectively from home.
- **Induction and onboarding**
  - Seek out feedback from new staff about the quality of their induction.
  - Review your induction processes to make sure that colleagues (not simply the line manager) who work flexibly or from home are on site more often during onboarding in order to build team connectedness and share your organisational culture.
- **Collaboration**
  - Ask staff what works and what doesn't as a result of increased flexible working, and be prepared to make changes where necessary.
  - Consider what changes you might make to the office, to support greater in person collaboration.

## In-depth reporting and analysis

The big question for everyone interviewed added up to: what are we, if we are not all together in the same place? Questions were raised around collaboration, communication, induction and career progression. Several interviewees talked about how to establish and communicate what the organisation needs, as they moved from the highly individualised ways of working that office workers experienced at the height of the pandemic, trying to recapture what was best about the collective from before (this topic is investigated in more depth in the key theme section *From individual to collective*, p11). The range of attitudes was wide. At the extremes, the social funder recognised the culture challenges but believed they could be overcome by manager intentionality and better communication; while the wealth management company believed that the importance of in person working in their industry is being dangerously undervalued.

This section considers two themes around culture that came out strongly: that culture has been changed irrevocably by the pandemic, and that, as a result, organisations and their people now have to think about things that were previously taken for granted. Two of these are collaboration and communication, also covered in this section.

### **Culture, no going back**

“100% we’re not going to go back to the way we were before, it will be different from our ways of working.” *The communications company, 2020 interview.*

Two years later, and to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the organisation, its business and culture, it was clear that many of the changes in office working that were introduced in 2020 were here to stay. And that questions of fairness across the organisation, given additional force by the competitive recruitment market, were ushering in new ways of working on the frontline too.

How people think about the place of work in their lives has changed. The push from the employee for greater flexibility, choice and control was requiring the organisations I interviewed to think deeply about what their culture is and how it is shared and passed on.

Perhaps the social funder best summed up the shift that every organisation was coming to terms with around culture:

“[I] probably didn’t think it would be quite so challenging ... to make sure that everybody keeps on with the same story, the same culture and managing their team in the same way.”

This seemed to be especially the case for younger workers. The wealth management company worried that, in their industry, the choice by younger colleagues to work more often from home would in the end damage their careers. They said: "You are not hearing 40% of the experienced chat [if you work from home two days a week]. You are not learning."

The local authority wondered about the long-term sustainability of home-working. They said: “For somebody who is starting out their career in a support service, are they really going to work in their bedroom for the majority of their time for the next thirty- forty years? It’s quite a scary thought, isn’t it?”

Cultural concerns were balanced by recognition of the benefits of flexible working. The construction company pointed to a recent staff survey, carried out independently: “[It showed] ... increased trust amongst the teams, ... a positive impact on our culture where [flexible working was] managed well, team morale improved, productivity increasing, having flexibility brings great opportunities, less overtime claimed and a very positive tool.”

In general, across the interviews, there was a sense of a cultural shift towards the normalisation of flex. The disability charity, which was extending the autonomy previously enjoyed by its field workers to its office staff, described how it was ‘really embracing the fact that people work very well when they have working balance that works best for them’. The social funder noted that you *can* keep connections without the water cooler, but that you have to be more intentional, for example by making time in meetings for personal exchanges and updates. The uniformed service saw managers adapting to new expectations and ways of working. They said: “Most have accepted it willingly. There are a few Dickensian managers still out there, but I think with the passage of time they will soften.”



## Rethinking the familiar

“We said the world will never be the same again ... but I think at that point [2020] we were almost like if we were in a bungee jump, we were right at the bottom of the bungee jump and we’re coming back up, just to somewhere approaching normality.” *The workplace consultancy.*

In autumn 2020, although most had been confident that work was changing forever, none had really begun to think about what this would mean for day to day arrangements nor for more structural, yet taken for granted, elements of working life when everyone works together in the same place, such as onboarding, how people learn the job, how people absorb the culture. The disability charity summed it up well, talking about how they had had to learn new ways to deliver services or to work on things that had previously been done face to face. They described it as ‘doing the same but differently’, which included understanding that some things work better in person.

In most cases none of the new challenges was seen as insurmountable, although nobody underestimated the thinking and investment that was required in order to sustain a future that is more flexible for all staff.

- Relationships with clients and customers need in person face to face engagement (the wealth management company, the equipment hire business, the workplace consultancy), although once established, there is more scope for virtual meetings. The workplace consultancy commented: “If I’m doing client interviews and I’ve got four or five interviews per day, I’m more likely to do that from home. One-to-ones generally are just about as good over Teams as they were face to face.”
- Induction and onboarding was being rethought, often requiring managers and key colleagues to work on the premises with the new recruit for a number of weeks. For the disability charity, it had to be in person, which meant “we need to be more conscious in a way that we weren’t necessarily forced to do previously”. The induction of senior managers, who will have to maintain their new flexible cultures, was understood to be critical and was well summed up by the leisure services provider. They said: “How [do] we make induction more than a series of meetings and introductions, and generally make it about understanding not just what we do, but how we do it.”
- Several had been thinking about how to get the best out of meetings. The convenience of Teams and other platforms was widely valued. But the disability charity noted: “Slightly larger meetings with more than two or three people on them, these sorts of things seem to work better in person. It can be quite stifled in the online environment.”
- The social funder now worked on a remote-first model, with their first reaction always being to ask “does this need to be in person?”. They were now spending a lot of time talking to staff and to managers, especially to new managers, consciously trying to keep their culture live and understood. It had become even more important to them to recruit to values first, before competencies.

## **Can we still collaborate, but differently?**

“A kettle is a great thing to have in an office because ... there's a minute where you're chatting, whereas [if you] have instant hot water, make a cup of tea and you'd be away again...[though] definitely in terms of sustainability, we would say, don't get a kettle!” *The workplace consultancy.*

There was a span of attitudes around collaboration, ranging from reluctant accommodation of the new ways of working (a strong sense that working from home means you are not there, not one of the team) through to well-thought through purposeful change (learning to be more conscious of working together in a way that was not needed before).

There was a sense of organisations and their people feeling their way towards the balance of presence that worked best for their needs around collaboration. And almost a sense in some cases of yes, we can collaborate via online platforms, but often it's just not as nice. As the workplace consultancy put it, almost all work other than site visits could be done remotely, which was “not necessarily the best way but certainly a possible way”.

The disability charity talked about scheduling teams in the office so that people have maximum time to work together. They described having “gently brought people back in” who had said they'd prefer to work from home full time. For their culture, full time home working was not something they wanted, even if the role could in principle be done fully remotely.

Several talked about redesigning office space to be better for collaboration. The uniformed service, for example, has redesigned spaces “so that they are more appropriate for collaborative working”.

The equipment hire business aimed to have most people in the office most of the time, with a maximum of two days per week at home. In a fast moving environment, teams were all in at the same time (flexibly, in a way that they would not have been before the pandemic) and could bounce ideas off each other.

The social funder, operating a remote first model, noted that people go to the office to meet rather than to work. Every team did this differently in terms of working together. They had developed a purposeful programme of all-team dates to support belonging, and described being increasingly purposeful too about keeping in touch within and between teams.

## **The centrality of communication to culture**

Those organisations that had more developed flexible cultures were also those that spoke in greater depth and detail about communications, showing understanding of the importance of communication in maintaining culture and engaging staff in change. This has always been important for dispersed teams, where misunderstandings and conflict can result when information is not distributed consistently or is accessed at different speeds by different people, or when individuals have different understandings of what is important<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Cramton C D. 2001. “*The Mutual Knowledge Problem and Its Consequences for Dispersed Collaboration*”, Organization Science INFORMS Vol 12, No 3, May-June 2001 pp 346-371



The construction company said: “To ensure equality, you have to ensure that people *feel* it. Comms are very important to challenge old or inaccurate views.” To this end, it was engaging an external communications agency for the first time, to help the firm really communicate around flexible working.

The disability charity spoke about being more intentional with their communication in order to support their shared culture. The social funder shared this approach, and talked about the importance of managers investing time in their communication with teams and their direct reports.

The manufacturer had built a very open culture, with monthly comms briefings in person in the canteen for all shifts. They valued good internal comms, noting that as a small organisation, it was easier for them to know each other and their lives.

Change had not always been a smooth process, and here communications were understood to be key.

For the local authority good corporate comms had been an essential underpinning of their new ways of working, particularly the more challenging messages, such as moving away from formal flexitime.

“When people struggled to understand the new approach, good communications were really fundamental in trying to get those messages across in how this is actually about giving people greater flexibility rather than taking it away.” *The local authority.*

“It's really about making sure we continue dialogue with managers and let people know what our difficulties are, and how we're going to overcome them.” *The uniformed service.*



## Key themes explored

### 6. New skills for managers

#### Key theme reminder

The role of the manager may be said to be two-fold, to ensure that their team delivers against business objectives and targets, and to manage and support their staff. Flexible and hybrid working add complexity to this. Most organisations were developing manager training to support managers to explain the business rationale for and the processes to access new ways of working. Investment was also being made by some organisations in helping managers become more deliberate in their communication and interaction with their colleagues, especially in more dispersed teams, both to maintain company culture and to ensure staff wellbeing.

## Summary points

- Every interviewee had something to say about the importance of managers in making a success of their new post pandemic ways of working.
- One employer noted that managers need to be more deliberate in how they communicate with their team to ensure they build positive team dynamics, and this takes more time to do virtually than in person.
- Managers will need new skills, and so training and support, at every level of the organisation, and regardless of size and sector, this was identified by most as an essential part of the transition to new ways of working.
- The experience of working flexibly themselves, and of managing remotely during lockdown, was reported to make managers more confident about managing flexible workers.
- Many interviewees reflected on how to find the balance between providing managers with clear rules and asking them to operate more autonomously within a set of principles around hybrid or flexible working.
- Managers who feel confident, trusted and autonomous, in turn feel confident about and trust their staff to work flexibly.

## How to take action on new skills for managers

- Support, train and upskill your managers to lead and supervise flexible and dispersed teams, using new technologies and ways of communicating. Ask them about their confidence and co-design any required training.
- Require managers to identify the core operational requirements for their team, and help them develop the skills to be very clear about parameters and expectations.
- Include communication in the training you provide to managers on hybrid and flexible working.
- Train your managers to understand the principles behind your flexible working approach or policy, so that they can operate with greater autonomy and confidence within it.
- Encourage your managers to work flexibly themselves.
- Ensure managers have awareness of the diversity of lived experience within their team, of the variety of needs that people might have, and to be open and understanding.
- Encourage managers to really get to know their people, for example via team huddles at the start of meetings, and in one-to-ones, to focus on that person and their needs and what they have to offer.

## In-depth reporting and analysis

Managers play a critical role in the success of flexible working, for which they need excellent people management skills and strong relationships with their staff<sup>11</sup>. In this context ‘manager’ particularly refers to middle management, to supervisors, line managers, team leaders. Every interviewee had something to say about the importance of managers in making a success of their new post pandemic ways of working. People were concerned that it would not necessarily be easy for managers, faced with the challenge of managing dispersed teams, hybrid teams or frontline workers using greater flexibility, and talked about the support and training that will be necessary. Conversations ranged widely, from working out how to manage by outputs and how to manage workflows, to manager responsibility for culture and through to the social funder thinking about how a manager can be present when not there in real life.

### The importance of good management

Having a good manager, matters. It matters to engagement, to performance<sup>12</sup> and to retention.

In a flexibly working organisation, good management rests on qualities that go beyond technical skills or a focus on results. Coaching, empowerment, listening and sharing, an interest in employee wellbeing, and a clear vision for the team are all important manager traits. Important not only to building a team and supporting staff who may be more or less dispersed and rarely together in the same place, but also to establishing what might be called organisational citizenship<sup>13</sup>. Such an individual willingness to think and act beyond the boundaries of one’s own role and deliverables, to identify with the team and its wider interests, will help move organisations back to a more collective culture after the highly individualised habits of lockdown.

As they considered how work has changed and continues to change since the pandemic, the wealth management company identified a management skills deficit around managing flex, particularly around managing people and around managing workflows. Good management of flex was highlighted by the construction company in their organisational survey of hybrid working. *Where hybrid was managed well* (my italics) there was greater trust, better morale and better productivity.

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<sup>11</sup> Nicks L, Burd H, Barnes J. 2019. “[Flexible working qualitative analysis, Organisations’ experiences of flexible working arrangements](#)”, Government Equalities Office

<sup>12</sup> Shaw K. 2019. “*Bosses Matter: The effects of managers on workers’ performance*” IZA World of Labor 2019:456

<sup>13</sup> Lee A, Willis S, Marcy AWT. 2018. “*When [Empowering Employees Works, and When It Doesn’t](#)” Harvard Business Review*



### **Managers developing new skills**

The institute of Leadership and Management identifies communications, effective planning and good target setting as the three key manager skills for managing a flexible team <sup>14</sup>. Most interviewees would recognise those.

Both the wealth management company and the social funder spoke about the higher level challenges of continuing to manage the business, while making this new way of working work.

Despite the social funder's long experience of working within a highly flexible environment around when work is carried out, they pointed to increased and different management challenge now that their default is to work from home. There are new operational risks to anticipate and mitigate (policy around travel from home, for example). But overwhelmingly, they talked about the centrality of communications in maintaining culture and engagement. For the manager, this involves spending more time, and becoming much more deliberate around comms with the team and relationships with the team. They said: "Every Friday [person A] makes time to say thank you and to wish us a good weekend. Just as we would on a Friday if we were all sitting in person. Without fail. And there's real value in that because that takes time and energy to do that. But that's really important when your team are working remotely."

During lockdown, most managers will themselves have experienced working from home and working flexibly. Studies suggest that this experience should help them have the confidence

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<sup>14</sup> "Goodbye nine to five", Institute for Leadership and Management 2016

to embrace greater flexibility today for their teams<sup>15 16</sup>. The disability charity spoke about how managers had to learn to trust during lockdown and about how they now had “much more modern attitudes”.

Several spoke about managerial trust and confidence. The communications company gave as an example areas of the business where experience had led to improvements. They said: “[They were previously] very much uncomfortable with ... people working from home. It was almost that presence, that visibility piece. Now that’s not an issue.”

In contrast, the leisure services provider had found that the confidence of managers had dropped after the pandemic.

Training and support for managers, at every level of the organisation, and regardless of size and sector, was identified by most as an essential part of the transition to new ways of working. The starting point for the local authority was that, because the ways of working are now different, managers would need different skills. Visible corporate buy-in from the CEO and senior managers was important (as it was for the organisation most different in size and scale, the manufacturer, who also talked about senior role modelling). HR Business partners offered support to managers, including challenging their own assumptions and requirements of their teams. The aim was to get managers to move beyond policy and to understand how the principles of flexible working support real change in culture and performance. The communications company was one of several to talk about training managers to be more confident in communicating this bigger picture to their staff.

### **Rules and processes v frameworks and principles**

The opinion of the uniformed service that “managers manage better when given autonomy to do so” is supported by the evidence that links greater control to improved wellbeing and performance (as discussed in the key theme section about choice and control).

Many interviewees reflected on how to find the balance between providing managers with clear rules and asking them to operate more autonomously within a set of principles around hybrid or flexible working.

The desired shift was described by the leisure services provider, contrasting managers who would prefer clear rules, and who struggle not to be prescriptive about hybrid working with those who were happy to “have the grown up conversation on what's going to work for us, or what's going to work for you, and how we're good to move it forward”.

The local authority identified this as a huge cultural shift, from managing by presenteeism to setting smarter objectives.

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<sup>15</sup> *Goodbye nine to five*, Institute for Leadership and Management 2016

<sup>16</sup> Gascoigne C, Kelliher C, Walthery P. 2023. “Part-time working after the pandemic: the impact of the flexible furlough scheme” Cranfield School of Management and ESRC

These suggestions are given support by the experience of the uniformed service, whose monitoring demonstrated that the more rules and requirements put in place by managers, the greater pushback from staff:

“It's the departments that tended to have more fixed rules around about how their teams needed to work that were experiencing the most difficulties. The more barriers they were putting up, the more fight they were getting back from the staff. Whereas those departments that had very little guidance, or left people much to their own devices because staff were autonomous, didn't.”

In 2022 Gallup surveyed over 8,000 US employees<sup>17</sup> about their experience of hybrid working. Responses, from individuals, managers and senior leaders, showed agreement that the advantages (including improved work life balance, control over work hours and location, and higher productivity) outweighed the challenges (which included feeling less connected to the organization's culture, and concerns around collaboration and relationships). Gallup concluded: “The art of hybrid work largely comes down to [managers] leveraging the advantages it creates, quickly addressing its challenges and being very intentional about how time is spent on site versus at home.”

This reflects the experience of the organisations in this study. Managers have a critical role to play, and organisations are investing in their development, anticipating that the result will be better managed flexible working that leads to cultural and performance gains.

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<sup>17</sup> Wigert W, White J 2022, “[The advantages and challenges of hybrid work](#)”, Gallup



## Key themes explored

### 7. Managing performance

#### Key theme reminder

Almost all the organisations believed that they could show performance gains from increased flexible working, and also argued for improved business performance being dependent on employee satisfaction and wellbeing arising from flex. For hybrid working, two interviewees, both from the private sector, were more sceptical about the relationship between increased flexible working and performance gains, and keener for people to be at work in person. For frontline workers, for whom an emerging theme in these interviews is that new forms of flexible working were becoming available, interviewees could point to performance improvements which they linked to flexible working.



## Summary points

- Interviewees could provide anecdotal (and in one case, independently researched) evidence of gains from hybrid and flex, and in two circumstances, actual or perceived evidence of reduced performance from hybrid.
- Interviewees linked gains to the increased employee satisfaction and wellbeing that they believed arose from flexible and hybrid working.
- Losses were believed to relate to inappropriate use of hybrid working, for example from individuals choosing to work from home when it would have been better to have been in the office.
- Frontline gains were more measurable, in terms of extended opening or working hours, reduced cost of overtime and the ability to scale staffing up or down in response to need. In general, private sector interviewees were more sceptical about the relationship between increased hybrid working and performance gains, and were keener for people to be at work in person. Public sector organisations were more likely to report anecdotal gains in performance.
- All agreed higher performance is not guaranteed by offering greater flexibility.
- In general, interviewees could see an opportunity for improved performance if new ways of working are embraced with careful planning and appropriate investment.

## How to take action on managing performance

- Flexible working does not need to result in performance gain, but should not lead to lowered performance, individual or collective. Establish that as the starting point.
- Know your baseline so you can track impact against team working patterns, so that a commercial case for change can be made if necessary.
- If there is an individual performance dip, don't immediately blame the working pattern, but look more holistically at circumstances, capability etc.

## In-depth reporting and analysis

It has always been, and continues to be, very difficult to demonstrate a direct link between flexible working and performance. Interviewees provided anecdotal evidence of performance gains, and also argued for improved business performance being dependent on employee satisfaction and wellbeing. There is research evidence to support these assumptions. Job satisfaction can be linked to performance; and can also be linked to flexibility, both to the perceived availability of flexible working arrangements and, for remote workers, to having informal arrangements. It is also known that overall, older workers are more engaged than younger workers, but being able to access and use more flexible working arrangements brings younger workers to an equivalent level of engagement.

The overall impact of flexible working on wellbeing is less clear, with some pre-pandemic evidence that flex can be a source of stress, especially because of work-home role conflict, although as employee control increases, such conflict appears to decrease. Good organisational support and support from managers also appear to reduce some of the negative aspects of flexible working<sup>18</sup>. All could support a case that extending well thought through and well managed post pandemic hybrid and flexible working is likely to be positive for employers. When considering hybrid working in particular, current evidence suggests that it is generally either performance positive or neutral<sup>19</sup>.

In general in this set of interviews, private sector organisations were more sceptical about the relationship between increased flexible working and performance gains, and were keener for people to be at work in person. Public sector organisations were more likely to report anecdotal gains in performance: of the five interviewees who pointed to gains, three are public sector, and two are commercial businesses.

### **Performance, hybrid working and the office**

On balance, interviewees agreed that hybrid working is a positive development. The disability charity felt that there had been no change either way around performance, and that “all markers continue to be hit”. This view was shared by the communications company and the social funder.

The disability charity said: “I think the productivity works very well because you're almost having your cake and eating it. You're getting the benefits of that isolated quiet time to do your job, but you're also getting the social aspects and the meeting and the productivity that comes from joint working.”

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<sup>18</sup> For a round-up and discussion of the evidence relating to performance and to wellbeing, see Kelliher C, de Menezes LM 2019 “*Flexible Working in Organisations – a research overview*” Routledge

<sup>19</sup> Barrero JM, Bloom N, Davis SJ 2023 “*The Evolution of Working from Home*” working paper No 23-19, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research

The local authority agreed that performance gains are anecdotal, but noted that attendance, which was an issue across the council, was less of a problem among hybrid and mobile workers, stating, “performance does not relate to where people work, but this is not always understood”.

The uniformed service also reported anecdotal increase in performance:

“Productivity hasn't dropped, in fact in most cases I think we would anecdotally say that it's increased. We have no hard figures around about that ... but we're not hearing a great noise around about people not doing their job, in fact, most people are working, as the research would suggest, more diligently at home.”

The construction company had commissioned independent research into its workforce, staff and their managers, which reported that productivity was increasing. Hybrid working had resulted in reduced overtime claims, and improved service delivery to internal customers, as colleagues were now willing to work later within their flexible hours.

The manufacturer made a strong case that wellbeing supports productivity and that flexible working supports wellbeing; a view shared by the equipment hire business. Although in the latter case, managers were more sceptical about working from home, feeling that, as lockdowns had continued, the productivity of ‘mid-range’ staff had fallen away. They have introduced hybrid working and different forms of flexible working patterns, but maintained a culture that is strongly based on everyone working together in the office. They believed that the office needs to be a great place to work, in order to motivate and retain staff. This in many ways was a more central part of their employment offering than their flexible working.

The wealth management company was also sceptical about the impact of hybrid working, feeling that performance and productivity were down because colleagues were not in the office and were less responsive to clients and colleagues; while those in the office were having to pick up the slack.

### **Performance and flexible working on the frontline**

Frontline staff by definition are not office based. Tied to a specific location, opportunities for hybrid working are not open to them. However, an emerging theme in these interviews was that new forms of flexible working were being made available to frontline workers. And that interviewees could point to performance improvements which they linked to flexible working.

The construction company talked about being more responsive to customer needs because of greater flexibility for staff:

“Our customers always want things done differently now and therefore we have embraced many different approaches in terms of flexibility and worked on the basis of an inclusive approach. More flexible shift patterns have been adopted for our operational teams working four on four off shifts.”

The manufacturer said that new patterns on the production line helped to reduce overtime, an outcome also noted by the construction company. In particular, the manufacturer was using flexible working to scale staffing up and down in response to customer demand, while avoiding employee burnout from too much overtime week after week.



The equipment hire business was rethinking working patterns at its depots across the UK, where the public facing nature of the service is that everyone has to work onsite. As business grows, many of the depots have longer opening hours, so flexible working helps to cover staffing needs by making available more shift patterns and part time options. Working mothers especially liked the part time shifts (noted also by the manufacturer). Managers at the larger depots cannot work across the full opening hours, so an assistant manager will cover, which was seen as a development opportunity.

Higher performance is not a necessary outcome of increased flexible or hybrid working, and this understanding was shared across the interviewees. (In fact, since 1999, when what was then Lloyds TSB introduced the first flexible working policy in the UK<sup>20</sup>, it has been accepted by many that as long as no detrimental impact can be proved, alternative ways of working should be agreed). Several talked about the challenge for managers (as discussed in the key theme section, *New skills for managers*) and the new skills they will need in delivering an approach based on results rather than presence. But generally, interviewees could see an opportunity for improved performance in their organisations, if new ways of working are embraced with careful planning and appropriate investment.

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<sup>20</sup> Lloyds TSB *Work Options* policy, cited in “*The Right to Request, an employers guide to implementing the flexible working legislation*”, Parents At Work/Linklaters 2003

# What does the future hold?

## How can employers make the best of it?

Three overarching conclusions were reached by every interviewee:

1. Hybrid is here to stay, and will become established as business as usual.
2. No more major change is anticipated – the earthquake has happened.
3. But it will not be plain sailing to bed in the changes.

Almost every conversation included some reference to the shock of enforced working from home and social distancing in 2020, and several concluded that the experience had resulted in changes that might otherwise have taken much longer, if indeed embraced at all.

Language vividly reflected the shock of the new: the pandemic *forced our hands*, *accelerated plans*, *leapfrogged us*, *bounced us ten years ahead*.

In 2022, everyone was more realistic than they had been two years previously, when all had thought that there would be no going back. Now interviewees described on the one hand an irrevocable shift and on the other, the human desire for normality, for routine, for social contact. They had got used to using flexible and hybrid working, to dealing with the practical implications, and had begun considering what it means long term. They expected no further great change, but rather that, over the next few years, we will get used to what we have now. They were also more realistic that this means hard work around developing manager capabilities, investing in better communications, and will require bigger thinking generally about how to manage an organisation that is much more flexible than it was in 2019, and whose staff have far more expectations around work life balance and flexible working.

### A final word about hybrid

There is clear evidence, from the employers in this study and more widely, that hybrid is positive for most individuals. Interviewees provided anecdotal evidence that it is also positive for performance, but there were also some emerging whispers of concern about negative impact on team or organisational performance. Again, this reflects findings in other studies and surveys<sup>21,22</sup>. And it would not be surprising, aligning very clearly with the challenges of managing the tension between the interests of the individual and the collective.

It could be argued that for office workers, work before 2020 tended to be suboptimal on the individual level (impact on work life balance, family responsibilities etc) but on the whole worked well for organisations. Even flexible workers tended to work most of their hours in

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<sup>21</sup> Barrero JM, Bloom N, Davis SJ. 2023. “*The Evolution of Working from Home*” working paper No 23-19, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research

<sup>22</sup> Swinney P, Graham DJ, Vera O, Anupriya, Horcher D, Ojha S. 2023. “[Office Politics: London and the rise of home working](#)” Centre for Cities

the office along with everyone else. This worked well too for all the things that we took for granted that followed from everyone working together in the same place – ease of communication, collaboration, shared culture. Now hybrid working seems to have rebalanced the scales to favour the individual. But crucially, not the individual standing alone. Hybrid working can mean that the **majority** of workers may be working flexibly off site at any one time. It is this that makes hybrid so different from other forms of flexible working. Because it offers greater choice around work location to all individuals in a team or organisation, to work well it must be carefully managed by the group in its application. It works less well when it is driven by individual preferences, resulting in team fragmentation and significant reduction of shared time together.

Interviewees could not, with confidence, measure and demonstrate what value of being together they could lose as a result. They were feeling their way towards this, and towards solutions. And we do not yet know how to recreate that missing value – it may mean being more intentional about how we use time together, as the social funder demonstrated for example. It certainly requires us to monitor the impact of hybrid and to find ways to understand how to bring teams and organisations back together, without losing the benefits that arise from increased individual choice and control.

This is possible to achieve. Even before the pandemic, some organisations had been fully remote for years and performing highly. But they had learned how to do it, and had generally set out to do so. Most hybrid organisations today have reacted to necessity. In 2020 they had no choice but to require staff to work from home, and now they are using hybrid because retaining at least some homeworking is what most employees demand. There is a new normal to be learned. So organisations need to be prepared to discover that they have to change the way they are currently doing hybrid. To be able to explain to staff why the individual must put the collective first. It may not be enough simply to take a team-based approach. It may require strong, clear and empowering leadership to establish support and engagement for the model of hybrid working that best delivers for each organisation.

### **A chance to rethink time as well as place**

This conclusion has necessarily focused on hybrid working, which is where the major changes and challenges lie. However, we should not overlook the stirrings of change for frontline staff. Place-based flexibility does not bring with it similar concerns about negative impact on culture and performance. Here the combination of seeking greater fairness across the organisation between staff groups, and employee expectations that some flexibility will be available to all, opens up opportunities to rethink how time is used. The benefits of doing so were well illustrated by the experiences of the equipment hire business and the manufacturer, who had each introduced new working patterns that met the needs of their people and of the business.

## A personal postscript on trust

Eleven very different employers shared eleven very different experiences of adjusting to and rethinking new ways of working, during and since the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. In this report, I have tried to pull out common threads and to highlight particular challenges. Reflecting now, one word encapsulates the positives and also the risks within this key change – trust.

Many employers talked about trust in our interviews – that people are trusted to know what is expected of them, that the organisation is trusting, that managers had learned to trust during lockdowns, that flexible working had increased trust in the organisation. As a long-time campaigner and commentator on flexible working, this struck me as powerful evidence for the necessary underpinning ingredient of any flexible team or organisation. And it reminded me that trust is not a simple thing, to be summoned up at will as part of the culture. It has to be earned, by leaders, managers and workers; and respected, and renewed.

Lockdown taught many cautious managers that their people could be trusted to deliver while working flexibly. Some organisations are staying true to that learning, others are reverting to old patterns of presenteeism. The new ways of working that we are experiencing now will require continuing investment in trust, if they are to be sustained and if they are to deliver longer term benefit to organisations, their staff and their customers.

## And my thanks go to...

*Very grateful thanks to all my interviewees, including Steve Currie and Kirsty Townsend at R&W Scott, for your generosity and frankness in sharing the experiences of your organisations.*

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*And, of course, thank you to the team at Flexibility Works, and especially to Jenny Legg for your ever-sharp editorial eye.*



# Appendix 1 – Employer Overview: past, present and future

The tables for Employer Overview and Working Models (Appendices 1 and 2) allow you to **look at a single employer experience**, and to compare and contrast your own policy and practice.

	Interviews 2020	Interviews 2022	
Interviewee	Predictions	Reflections on those predictions	What the future holds
<p><b>The communications company</b> (large private sector)</p>	<p>“100% we’re not going to go back to the way we were before, it will be different from our ways of working.”</p> <p>Pre-pandemic, there was a reality gap, between the firm’s policy, and how it was implemented in different parts of the business by different managers.</p> <p>There has already been a shift, from asking permission to having confidence and manager trust.</p>	<p>Hybrid is well established, plus new core hours.</p> <p>“I had anticipated that we would have done a full review of flexible working and of our way of working, and we have done that.”</p> <p>Greater consistency in how flex is implemented, and investment in manager training.</p> <p>The shift away from asking permission has been sustained.</p> <p><b>They are where they hoped to be, making steady progress.</b></p>	<p>Hybrid will be further embedded and kept under review.</p> <p>“83% of people are happy with hybrid working so ... what about the other percentage, what is it they are not happy about?”.</p> <p>They will also look more broadly at other forms of flexible working.</p>
<p><b>The construction company</b> (large private sector)</p>	<p>The future of work will be around flexibility of working hours and working time, based on agreed output.</p>	<p>Two big differences as a result of the pandemic are that employee health and wellbeing has become paramount; and that customers demand more, beyond 8am and</p>	<p>Hybrid working will be the norm, without needing surveys to support it.</p> <p>“There will be new things we haven’t thought of.”</p>

	Interviews 2020	Interviews 2022	
Interviewee	Predictions	Reflections on those predictions	What the future holds
	<p>For office based staff, blended working will be more common.</p> <p>Social distancing will result medium term in flexibility for trades-people on site.</p>	<p>4pm five days a week.</p> <p>Hybrid has been established in the office.</p> <p>New shift option onsite is very popular – four days on, four days off, 12 hour shifts (48 hour week).</p> <p>Factory has less flexibility because of the nature of the work, but it is there too. Staff finish at 1pm on a Friday, and a new 36 hour week means they will slightly reduce each working day Monday - Thursday.</p> <p><b>Moving forward confidently and aiming to set industry best practice.</b></p>	
<b>The disability charity</b> (large charity)	<p>Longer term, the charity is unlikely to return to full-time, office based working as default.</p> <p>Medium-term, phased return to the office will provide practical experience of mixing different teams, and using face to face for different purposes.</p> <p>Questions remain about how to communicate and share the charity’s culture, when not everybody works in the same location.</p>	<p>They have not reverted to full time office-based, and a hybrid pilot is in train.</p> <p>There are challenges around sharing their culture, and how in person induction will work. “People who joined through the pandemic, they’re still with us, they still embody our culture, our values, they are working well within the organisation, but now that we’re able to go back to in person, there is no better</p>	<p>Lockdown moved things forward a lot.</p> <p>Looking ahead – “bed down what we’ve got”. Hybrid will become the norm.</p>

	Interviews 2020	Interviews 2022	
Interviewee	Predictions	Reflections on those predictions	What the future holds
		<p>way than in person for that sort of introductory piece.”</p> <p><b>Still transitional, but not far off where they predicted.</b></p>	
<b>The equipment hire business</b> (large private sector)	<p>There will be more flexible working and working from home, with many people adopting blended working patterns. It has been shown that people CAN work from home, but company culture is very important, so the business does not expect to have extensive permanent homeworking.</p> <p>Staff will hope for more choice and more flexibility, which is important when they are competing for staff, especially for the head office.</p>	<p>There is much more widespread flexibility, both office based and in the depots. It is still a place-based organisation where flex comes second, but far more open today to different ways of working.</p> <p>People come first, in the sense of supporting wellbeing and ensuring that options are available that keep the business attractive as a place to work.</p> <p><b>They are where they predicted – with a culturally appropriate form of flexibility that puts a premium on presence, but which offers greater time flex than before.</b></p>	<p>Flexible working will continue to be core to the offering, although not necessarily on any greater scale. Key strategic driver is around staff wellbeing, support and engagement.</p> <p>“We need to make sure that everyone's well being looked after and they enjoy working here and that's what brings us a successful business.”</p>
<b>The leisure services provider</b> (large arm's length organisation)	<p>Managers have learned that flexing hours has no impact on the work getting done and in fact builds loyalty and hard work.</p> <p>There remain questions about the different opportunities for flex that are available to different parts of the workforce.</p>	<p>Changes to location-tied working patterns have been driven by service demands and difficulties recruiting and retaining staff (a challenge they could not have predicted), not by an intentional move to greater flexibility.</p> <p>Covid has made people reassess – early retirement, career change, just leaving.</p>	<p>“The organisation doesn't understand hybrid working as a benefit. It sees it as something that had to be done at the beginning because we had no other way of coping ... and now it seems like ... okay, everybody's doing it, ... but we're not 100% convinced that we will fully embrace it.”</p>

	Interviews 2020	Interviews 2022	
Interviewee	Predictions	Reflections on those predictions	What the future holds
		<p>Place-based staff are equally focused on flex, less willing to travel.</p> <p><b>Not all managers are onsite – still quite a lot of resistance. Probably not as far along as they expected, with normalisation of flex still a work in progress. But the organisation has come a long way in two years.</b></p>	<p>Still a work in progress, but come a long way in two years.</p>
<b>The local authority</b> (large public sector)	<p>The Council will definitely offer more flexibility to its staff in the future.</p> <p>Longer terms plans for flexibility recognise the diversity of the organisation.</p> <p>Introducing more flexible working is not just about culture change and training.</p> <p>There are many possibly knotty practical issues to address as well.</p>	<p>The Council has settled down into five workstyles, with hybrid established for office staff.</p> <p>Flexibility for frontline staff is work in progress.</p> <p>They are taking steps to address practical issues around contracts, expenses, kit etc.</p> <p><b>They are where they anticipated they'd be, dealing with what they expected to work through.</b></p>	<p>For office workers, give hybrid the chance to bed in and learn lessons. And for the rest of the organisation, explore how to extend greater flexibility, including improving comms so people know what is already available.</p>
<b>The manufacturer</b> (small private sector)	<p>Flexible working will be for everyone, although different parts of the business make different demands of staff and will need different solutions.</p> <p>Flexible working will become the norm and not the exception.</p>	<p>Different kinds of flexible working are being introduced across the different parts of the business, including on the production line; and flexible working is now the norm within the business.</p>	<p>Intend to continue to build on what they have done so far, and anticipate examples of things they haven't thought of yet.</p>

	Interviews 2020	Interviews 2022	
Interviewee	Predictions	Reflections on those predictions	What the future holds
	In the future, policy will be formalised, so that people are clearly encouraged to manage how they work.	<p>Policy has remained largely informal.</p> <p><b>Future predictions were made perhaps more in hope than expectation two years ago, but internal changes since then have made possible a confident move forward.</b></p>	
<b>The social funder</b> (small public sector)	<p>Although the social funder is already highly flexible, it will become more flexible, as a result of this experience.</p> <p>More meetings will be held remotely, and the office will be used more thoughtfully.</p> <p>Future flexibility is not just about the task-fit, but also the psychology of the worker.</p>	<p>Have established a remote first working model.</p> <p>Office is used more thoughtfully, and some choose to be there full time.</p> <p>Putting a deal of thought into how to support the individual, how to communicate, how to ensure everyone feels included, regardless of working pattern or choices.</p> <p><b>They have moved further and faster than they would have anticipated.</b></p>	Want to keep ahead of the game but don't see any changes in what they offer now - more how embedded it is.
<b>The uniformed service</b> (large public sector)	There is already employee demand to continue with flexible working and home working, and there is a strong business case to retain and build on new practices. There will be challenges around attitudes and perception, and it will be important to demonstrate that flexible working does not have a negative impact on performance.	<p>Hybrid has become a normal way of working and, anecdotally, without negative performance impact.</p> <p>Flexitime is being extended to more senior frontline grades, to compensate for lack of paid overtime.</p>	Doesn't see much scope for future change on the scale just experienced. Hopes for less Dickensian management, looser guardrails, greater flexibility and choice.

	Interviews 2020	Interviews 2022	
Interviewee	Predictions	Reflections on those predictions	What the future holds
	<p>The immediate challenge is to allay manager fears around performance, in order to get support for proper flexibility to take the organisation confidently into the future. New performance management tools are likely to be part of this picture.</p>	<p>Performance management tools have not proved necessary. Hybrid is managed via principles rather than detailed policy. Manager confidence is good.</p> <p><b>Flexible and hybrid working are steadily normalising.</b></p>	
<p><b>The wealth management company</b> (large private sector)</p>	<p>Expect hybrid working to become established as the norm in the medium term.</p> <p>Better use of technology will improve quality of life and also reduce business costs.</p> <p>There will be much less presenteeism.</p> <p>Cross-organisation comms will be retained and developed.</p>	<p>Hybrid is now routine, though there are concerns around impact on performance.</p> <p>The ability to decide when to attend a meeting in person and when virtually, has reduced travel demands.</p> <p>What they see today is perhaps the flipside of presenteeism, to what they might describe as “me-ism” – a greater belief that flexibility and working from home is the right of the individual.</p> <p>Managing hybrid reveals a ‘management deficit’ which will have to be addressed if the business is to thrive.</p>	<p>In two years time... back to normal. “Short sharp transition because of pandemic, now a slower transition back to our lives.”</p> <p>There will be more flexibility, especially around use of tech for catch-ups with clients. But entitlement to days at home, will go. Although the next generation will expect more flex because they are seeing their parents work flexibly, and they are enabled by tech.</p>

	Interviews 2020	Interviews 2022	
Interviewee	Predictions	Reflections on those predictions	What the future holds
		<b>Hybrid is becoming the norm, but is not viewed entirely as a positive. There is uncertainty about how it aligns with the business model and business needs.</b>	
<b>The workplace consultancy</b> (medium private sector)	<p>Every business is going to be more flexible in future. The workplace consultancy will have to change too, in order to remain competitive. Working flexibly will let the company practise what it recommends to its clients.</p> <p>Staff will be looking for more flexibility in future. The firm will look for person by person solutions, in discussion with the line manager: no whole-team or whole organisation patterns will be imposed.</p> <p>People will start to think differently about how office space is used.</p>	<p>The business has continued to bed in hybrid working for office staff, and can point to commercial gains from flex.</p> <p>Solutions are not person by person – the Board has mandated a hybrid pattern.</p> <p>Their own office space has been rethought, as they are doing for their clients.</p> <p><b>They are not exactly where they anticipated. They are finding hybrid a bit clunky to manage, though they believe changes so far have been for the better and will bed in further.</b></p>	<p>Future – no big change, hybrid will be embedded and hopefully no longer prescriptive around days in the office.</p> <p>“Just part of a trusting organisation and you are trusted to work at home if that works better for you and your job role that day.”</p> <p>Offices probably a bit nicer to attract people to work there, and probably smaller.</p> <p>“In two years time will we be discussing all this? Possibly not. It will just be natural.”</p>

## Appendix 2: Working Models

### A. For office based staff: hybrid work

Six organisations have set a minimum number of days to be worked in the office (two have expressed this as a maximum number working from home).

The local authority is unusual in setting a maximum number of days to work in the office. A small number of staff have opted out of hybrid and work full time in office. Hybrid working is managed via principles rather than policy.

Four others have loose guidelines or frameworks, with nothing prescribed. Two are very large, two small; two public sector, one third sector, one private.

Minimum time in office defined*	
The wealth management company	min 3 days in office
The equipment hire business	min 3 in office, 2 days max working from home
The workplace consultancy	min 3 in office, 2 days max working from home
The construction company	min 50% in office, generally equating to 3 days in
The communications company	min 2 days in office; core hours 10-4 for meetings
The disability charity	min 2 days in office
Maximum time in office defined	
The local authority	Access to office no more than 50%, default working from home
Nothing formal	
The leisure services provider	Framework, no days defined, varies by team and by manager
The social funder	Team-based protocols, 'you must come to office if required', though default is to work from home and meet remotely.
The uniformed service	Loose guidelines. "We have no policy or procedure as such for hybrid working. We have fairly loose set of guidelines where we are talking about people's welfare."
The manufacturer	Informal hybrid model, people have settled into a pattern, no official rota

\* Interviewees did not discuss how these overall parameters applied to those whose roles may require them to work both in the office and offsite from time to time.



## How did each organisation settle on their hybrid pattern or approach?

<b>Mandated</b>	
The wealth management company	parent company mandated
The workplace consultancy	board decided
<b>Review and evaluation</b>	
The communications company	Evaluation across the organisation of lockdown experience; review of what others were doing
<b>Staff consultation</b>	
The disability charity	staff survey plus influence of Scottish Government's 50% occupancy rule*
The social funder	staff survey
The manufacturer	evolved within the team
The local authority	staff survey, desktop review of roles, consultation with services, influence of reduced office capacity
<b>Defined roles that could be worked hybridly</b>	
The equipment hire business	defined roles that could be worked hybridly, wanting to have most people on site most of their time
<b>Nothing formally defined</b>	
The leisure services provider	Principle that local managers can agree hybrid work, with responsibility falling equally to the employee and the employer
The uniformed service	"Defeats the purpose to make it formal and feels contractual"

\* Scottish government's guidance on social distancing in the workplace during the pandemic.

## B. For frontline staff: flexible working

Five who have frontline staff have made changes to introduce at least some additional choice or control around working patterns.

Two have not made any changes, and currently have no plans to do so.

One (the wealth management company) does not have frontline staff.

New flex for frontline staff	
The construction company	Building sites now four days on, four off, 12 hour shifts - very popular option; alternative option is 36 hour week; factory already stopped at 1pm on Fridays, and has reduced to a 36 hour week
The local authority	Mobile workforce (eg field work, inspection roles) may touch down at home or office  Customer contact (telephony) four days pw working from home  For the present, no change for location tied staff delivering direct care, or face to face services, such as teaching.
The equipment hire business	For roles that are location dependent, they have introduced new forms of flex that would not have been available before. Introducing more shifts and part time options.  Mobile roles may now touch down at depots, at home, at the office.
The leisure services provider	Staff tied to venues, locations - looking at compensatory development opportunities and pathways. Aware that they need to think more creatively about what flex looks like for staff on fixed working patterns. Looking at development opportunities for lower grade staff, even if flex cannot be found for their roles
The manufacturer	Production line was 37/5 and now offers 36/4, which is popular.  Production line staff offered overtime, capped at 48 hours pw. Office staff offered training to be able to take on production line overtime.  Looking at introducing night shifts as 'ultimate' flex offering.
Flex working already available before lockdowns	
The disability charity	Field workers (the majority of staff) have always been mobile, issued with company smart phones several years ago.
The social funder	Assessors have always been mobile; helpline staff have fixed desks, because of paper systems

The uniformed service	Uniformed staff can apply for part time working at recruitment; now offered flexitime in addition to overtime
<b>No change for frontline workers</b>	
The workplace consultancy	Staff on building sites, office fit outs etc. No change to working patterns or flex.
The communications company	Retail staff have shift working, rotas, attached to a particular store.

### C. Role classifications to support hybrid or flexible working

Five organisations have developed formal role classifications to support clarity and equity around hybrid and flexible working.

The construction company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Office</b>, hybrid</li> <li>• <b>factory</b>, early finish Friday, shorter working week</li> <li>• <b>building sites</b>, flexible shift patterns</li> </ul>
The local authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Hybrid</b>: office staff providing support services</li> <li>• <b>Mobile</b>: field work, inspection roles, touchdown at home or office as suits</li> <li>• <b>direct care</b>: location tied</li> <li>• <b>face to face</b> (contracting services, teachers, housing officers): location tied</li> <li>• <b>customer contact</b> (telephony) four days pw wfh</li> </ul>
The equipment hire business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>office</b>, hybrid (roles that are suitable have been identified and listed)</li> <li>• <b>mobile</b>, mostly salespeople, will use home as base rather than office now</li> <li>• <b>depot</b> staff, fixed location and hours</li> </ul>
The uniformed service	<p>Civilian/non-uniformed staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wholly required <b>in office</b></li> <li>• ability to work between <b>home and office</b></li> <li>• work at secure sites (<b>location tied</b>, though locations may vary)</li> </ul>
The communications company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>dual location</b> = hybrid, office staff</li> <li>• <b>location independent</b> - out and about, seeing customers</li> <li>• <b>location fixed</b> - retail</li> </ul>

# Appendix 3 – Changes to flexible working law

## Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023

The new Act makes several changes to existing requirements on employers, which will come into effect from summer 2024:

- New requirements for employers to consult with the employee before rejecting their flexible working request.
- Permission to make two statutory requests in any 12-month period (rather than the current one request).
- Reduced waiting times for decisions to be made (within which an employer administers the statutory request) from three months to two months.
- The removal of existing requirements that the employee must explain what effect, if any, the change applied for would have on the employer and how that effect might be dealt with.

In addition, the government has announced that **workers will have the right to request flexible working from day one in a new job.**

You can future-proof your organisation against unrealistic flexible working requests by assessing all roles for their flex potential before you advertise, and by making clear in the advert and in the job description what kinds of flex are possible for the role.

It will become vital to discuss ways of working with new recruits. Not just offering options around flexibility, but using the interview and the induction process as the opportunity to explain to new staff how and why you work the way you do, and to set clear expectations from the beginning.

For roles that are offered with hybrid working, remember that not everyone has suitable space to work from home, so it will be important to remind candidates that they may work full time on your premises if that is their preference.

ACAS will be updating its statutory Code of Practice on flexible working, which aims to provide employers, employees and representatives with a clear explanation of the law on the statutory right to request flexible working, alongside good practice advice on handling requests in a reasonable manner. You can consult the current Code here

<https://www.acas.org.uk/acas-code-of-practice-on-flexible-working-requests/html>

Helpful guidance on flexible hiring can be found here [https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Flexible\\_Hiring\\_Guide.pdf](https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Flexible_Hiring_Guide.pdf)

You may also like to use the **Happy to Talk Flexible Working** strapline and logo in your recruitment campaigns and advertising, to draw attention to your flexible approach. More information can be found here <https://workingfamilies.org.uk/employers/happy-to-talk-flexible-working/>

## Appendix 4 – Interviewee questions and titles

Interviewees were asked the following questions as part of this study:

1. I want to first look back, then ahead.
2. Briefly, what has happened since we last spoke? Two years of continued lockdowns, uncertainty, economic turbulence...
3. I shared a note of the <b>key challenges</b> that you identified <b>two years ago</b> . Do you still recognise them?
a. How did you tackle them?
b. Are they overcome?
4. Then what about <b>the future as you saw it then</b> – do you feel that you are now living the future you predicted?
a. What's different?
b. What's as anticipated?
c. What challenges did you have to meet?
d. What successes have you had?
5. Let's <b>look ahead</b> . How do you see the next two years shaping up in terms of working culture, use of flex
6. Overall, has flex working been a benefit, a complicating factor, a negative or neutral?
7. Anything else you'd like to add?

### Interviewee job titles:

Associate Workplace Consultant, Business Development Manager, Director Corporate Services, Divisional Manager Corporate Affairs, Group Consultancy Design Director, Head of Business and Strategy, Head of Business Services, Head of HR, Head of xx Office, HR Lead Officer, HR Manager, HR Service Manager, MD, MD Technical and Environmental Services, People Policy Lead, Senior HR Adviser, Senior Investment Manager.

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