Flexible Working and Performance

Summary of Research

Cranfield
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working families
changing the way we live and work

Contents

Summary

This summary presents the key findings from the combined results of the seven organisations which participated in this two-year research project, highlighting the major themes which emerged across all organisations.

Within each organisation, the sample of employees who were invited to participate included both those who worked flexibly and those with a more traditional working pattern. The percentage of respondents indicating that they worked flexibly ranged from 40% to 82% across the organisations.

Findings showed a positive relationship between flexible working and individual performance.

The majority of flexible workers, co-workers of flexible workers and managers of flexible workers reported that there was either a positive impact or no impact on individual performance. This was true for both the quantity of work produced, and the quality of work produced.

Flexible working was seen as a positive factor in achieving a better work-life balance.

The majority of employees reported that flexible working had a positive effect in reducing and managing stress levels. However, there was evidence to suggest that for some individuals flexible working itself could become a source of work stress.

Significant positive relationships were found when comparing those who work flexibly with other employees. Flexible workers were found to have higher levels of organisational commitment, and in some cases they also had higher levels of job satisfaction. In addition, the availability of flexible working was a key competitive strategy within the labour market.

There was evidence of some managerial resistance to flexible working. A key concern was the amount of time employees were present within the workplace, with flexible workers being less likely to be chosen for crucial or urgent work.

There was a high degree of informal flexible working across the organisations.

Flexible working was seen as an appropriate method of working and culturally acceptable when it was available to all employees regardless of their personal circumstances. Greater cultural resistance was found in organisations where the actual take up of flexible working was dominated by certain types of employee, such as parents of young children.

The implementation of flexible working needs to be accompanied by a review of HR policies which have usually been designed around full time employees. This is particularly important for issues such as career progression, supervision and 'face time'.

A training need was highlighted with regard to managing employees with a flexible working arrangement.

About the Research

This report details the findings of the two-year research project conducted by Cranfield School of Management[1] and Working Families into the impact of flexible working practices on employee performance. Seven leading companies took part in the research: Centrica; Citi; KPMG; Lehman Brothers; Microsoft; Pfizer; and the Defence Aerospace business in Rolls Royce.

Three main approaches to data collection were used: staff surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups of stakeholders within each organisation. Employees were invited to respond to the survey through an internet link which ensured confidentiality and 3,580 completed questionnaires were received. The invitation was sent to those who worked flexibly as well as those who did not, and those who were considering such an option. In addition to demographic details, the questionnaire asked about the different aspects of jobs and working life including performance, satisfaction with different aspects of employment, career preferences and stress levels.

A total of 123 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the organisations. Interview participants included those who used a range of flexible working patterns such as remote working, flexi-time, staggered hours, compressed hours and reduced hours. Additionally, we spoke to individuals who worked with colleagues on a flexible working arrangement, either as a co-worker or as a manager. Topics covered in the interviews included individual working patterns, benefits and drawbacks of flexible working to the individual, colleagues and the organisation, challenges of managing flexible workers, career progression and company support for flexible working. Focus groups involved a further 60 participants who were stakeholders in flexible working from different departments or divisions within each organisation.

Three main approaches to data collection were used: staff surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups of stakeholders within each organisation.

Discussion

As flexible working arrangements become part of the mainstream approach to work and the range of available options increases, there is an ever-pressing need to examine how such working practices affect the organisation with regard to performance of individuals and the impact on colleagues and managers.

As this research shows, there is widespread use of informal flexible working practices which may exceed the assumptions that organisations have about their employees' working arrangements. What are the effects of both informal and formal flexible working arrangements on organisations, and how, particularly in the case of informal arrangements, can this information be captured and understood? With legislation increasing the pool of employees who are entitled to request flexible working, and probable changes to leave entitlements for parents, as well as social and demographic change, organisations need to understand the constantly shifting picture of employee working arrangements.

Why measure performance?

Understanding the relationship between flexible working and performance benefits the organisation in a number of ways. Assessing the quantity and quality of work of individual employees within organisations provides the opportunity to measure the direct influence of flexible working on organisational operations and effectiveness. Consequently, assumptions can be challenged or confirmed, a business case for certain working practices can be more accurately quantified, and the organisation's cultural 'temperature' can be checked with regard to flexible working.

The results of performance measurement have important consequences for the future design of work. Where there is a positive link between performance and flexible working, as shown in this study, organisations can use this information to leverage culture change and plan more effectively for the future.

The results of performance measurement have important consequences for the future design of work.

Performance

It is encouraging to see a strong positive relationship between flexible working and individual performance for participating organisations. It is also welcome that only a small proportion of respondents in each organisation identified flexible working with a negative effect on performance. How can the findings inform the way organisations view their employee working patterns, and to what end?

Perhaps the key issue for organisations is culture. Policy, developed within organisations and often utilised in areas such as equality and diversity or recruitment and retention, is less of a differentiator between organisations today - the majority offer a well-developed suite of flexible working options and attendant benefits. However, the culture of the organisation will often reflect how far these policies have penetrated. Where employees are cautious, for example, about using flexible working policies because of negative career effects or loss of status, it can be argued that the culture is hostile. This may be for a number of reasons: there may be overt resistance from some areas within the organisation: there may be a particular cohort of employees who are not comfortable with flexible working as it does not reflect their employment experience, and if these employees are senior figures it can have a disproportionate effect: there may also be other, less direct cultural barriers. Organisational inertia may simply inhibit the development of a flexible culture. Policies themselves may implicitly make flexible working options incompatible with career advancement, with promotion and reward policies, for example, taking as their basis an idealised, full-time, always

Discussion

visible employee. Clarity with regard to the positive effects of flexible working on performance should enable organisations to address any pockets of resistance, and to encourage new thinking about the most effective ways to work. Greater cultural acceptance is apparent when larger numbers of staff from all levels and departments describe their working pattern as flexible, whether formally with an agreed contractual change or informally through agreement with their manager.

Employee wellbeing and work-life balance

The positive work-life balance effects of flexible working are probably the best known and most frequently cited advantages. Aiming for a greater balance between demands from within and outside the workplace is often the driver for individuals to seek such arrangements. The interplay between employee wellbeing, work-life balance and performance brings into play factors such as organisational commitment, enthusiasm, energy and satisfaction. The findings support the intuitive expectation that the employee who is better able to integrate work and non-work will experience enhanced wellbeing. Indirectly, this positive association impacts on performance, with employees in a sense 'repaying' their organisation with improved levels of motivation and drive. Some employees who had become accustomed to working flexibly expressed unwillingness to move back to a more traditional pattern, linking their flexible arrangement to reduced pressure and stress. There was abundant evidence of individuals adapting their working arrangement over time to meet both changing job demands and evolving demands from the home, and great value was placed on the personal control to meet needs from both domains which was afforded by their flexible working pattern. So flexibility is highly valued, but does not remain static over time.

Stress is linked to wellbeing and work-life balance, and here the picture is less clear. Flexible working could be seen as a positive measure which helped reduce workplace stress through reducing hours, cutting down on commuting time and minimising work overload. However, it could also be a source of stress, if a reduction in hours meant that employees struggled to achieve objectives which had not been appropriately reduced to match such a change. This reinforces the message that flexible working needs to be well designed to succeed, particularly in the case of reduced hours work where the required tasks of the role should reflect the hours available.

Flexible working across the organisation

Where flexible working is genuinely available to all employees within an organisation, it is perceived as more acceptable than when used only by a limited group of employees. This is irrespective of whether or not organisational policy says that flexible working is available for all. The gap between the rhetoric of policy and the reality of the types of employees who actually take up flexible working can be indicative of the culture of the organisation. Often 'flexibility for all' translated into a large of majority of parents of young children (particularly mothers) working in flexible ways. This reinforces stereotypical views of what it means to be a flexible worker. There was nothing unusual identified in the barriers to a genuine flexible working culture: managerial resistance; a lack of role models, especially senior men; an unwillingness to 'go against the grain'; well-founded suspicions that career prospects would be harmed; an over-complicated application procedure.

Where flexible working is more successfully ingrained in the culture there is an emphasis on outcomes rather than being visible and available in 'office hours'. Embedding a flexible working culture results in increased numbers of people working flexibly outside of the traditional groups. Technology is a key enabler, with ease of communication valued above physical location, helping to undercut presenteeism.

Embedding a flexible working culture within an organisation is difficult, and can, to some extent, be aided or hindered by the sector in which the company operates and the type of work it does. However, the similarities between organisations will outweigh the differences especially in large organisations. Many roles and teams will have functions which are broadly equal. In addition, other factors that drive employees to seek flexibility, such as the desire for work-life balance or caring responsibilities, remain constant. Examining the barriers to cultural change in some organisations, and the successful embedding of a flexible culture in others shows some general points which may be of benefit. Identifying pockets of resistance is useful, and devising strategies to combat them may be helpful, such as the provision of support to managers of staff with flexible working patterns. organisations also need to embrace and invest in technology and training to allow them to maximise the benefits of remote working, and this includes the provision of appropriate support.

Discussion

Informal vs formal flexible working

The research revealed that there are a substantial number of employees who are working flexibly, but who have not used the formal policy procedures to agree such arrangements. The reasons for this are complex, and there are positive and negative factors for both the employer and employee. To a certain degree informal flexible working is seen by some employees as being 'below the radar', and more likely to be achievable than making a formal request. There is also the element of not wanting to jeopardise career prospects through a formal request for flexible working; such a fear may be unfounded, and certainly contrary to organisational policy, but in some senses employees do not wish to be labelled as 'the flexible worker'. Of course, such informal arrangements are vulnerable to change in a way that formal arrangements are not, as they often depend on a good employee/manager relationship to make them work. This is not necessarily a disadvantage as there is a view that such informal flexibility provides a more responsive and fluid approach to working arrangements which benefits both employers and employees. Peaks in work are able to be managed, with a give-and-take approach from both sides, which allows employees to make decisions about how and where they work in return for making themselves available as much as they are able when required. Care must be taken that this relationship is not abused by either side, but the numbers of people working in this way suggests that for many it is a more practical solution than a formalised arrangement.

Organisational commitment

The research was able to identify that flexible workers were more committed to the organisation than non-flexible workers. This is important, not least because it challenges the assumption that flexible working arrangements such as part-time hours or remote working are a sign of reduced commitment. Such an assumption can be damaging to careers and to effective management, and suggests that factors other than performance may be in play when evaluating the work of flexible employees. There is a consequent risk of undervaluing the contributions of flexible workers. It is imperative that organisations recognise and value the enhanced commitment levels amongst flexible workers, and develop ways of translating this into tangible benefits for everyone concerned.

Training and HR policy

As noted in the summary and in a later section of the report, some respondents reflected that there was scope for more training to be offered in relation to flexible working. Both employees and their managers agreed on this point with some employees looking for guidance on issues such as the technical aspects of remote working, while managers would welcome training in dealing with and managing flexible workers both individually and within the team environment. Yet, as the research identified, there are large numbers of employees with an informal flexible arrangement, which may make 'formal' training more difficult to achieve.

For flexible working to be seen as more than just an add-on, a review of the goals and methods of HR policies is desirable. In essence, this means that policies need to be reviewed in the context of all employees, whatever their working arrangements, to ensure that people are managed effectively. This is particularly important for issues such as career progression, supervision and 'face time'. For example, evidence suggests that employees who are less visible in the workplace may suffer in terms of promotion and the allocation to prestigious projects although policies may not explicitly specify visibility as a necessary criteria for success. The key issue is to establish policies which do not inadvertently hinder flexible working practices, but rather to support them.

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The Research at a Glance

The total number of responses to the questionnaire was 3,580. The diagrams below show the breakdown of results. Fifty seven per cent of respondents were male and 43% were female.

Seventy nine per cent were married or living with a partner and 42% reported that they had caring responsibilities. Sixty five per cent of respondents indicated that they worked flexibly, but only 29% of that group claimed that they had a formal flexible working arrangement. The remaining 71% worked flexibly on an informal basis. Flexi-time and remote working were the most common forms of flexible working, with over 60% of respondents adopting these arrangements. It is worth pointing out that, of course, individuals may have reported more than one flexible working arrangement. For instance, someone may work flexi-time in the office four days a week and work the fifth day from home.
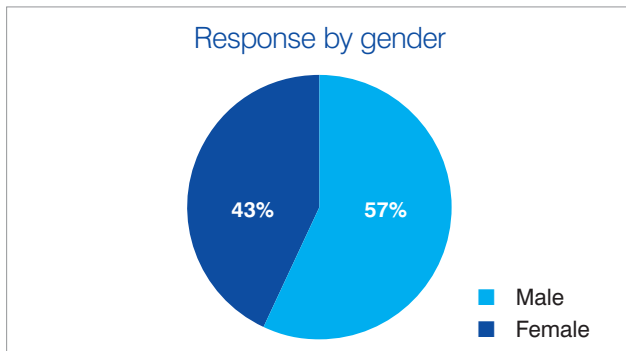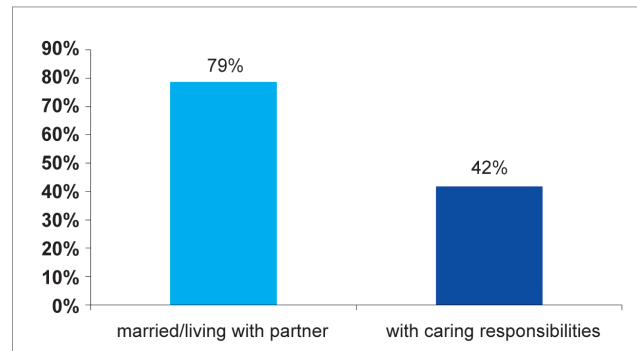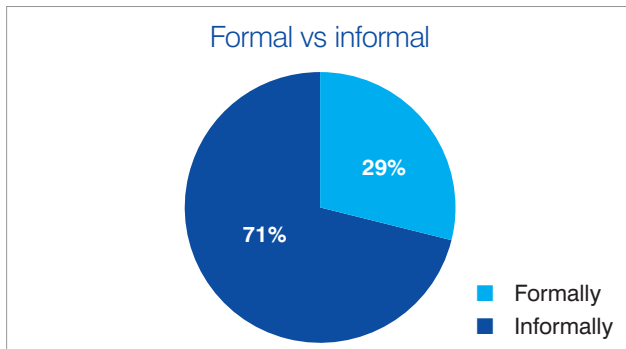
Diagram 1

Response by gender

- Male — 57%
- Female — 43%

Diagram 2

- married/living with partner — 79%
- with caring responsibilities — 42%

Diagram 3

Formal vs informal

- Formally — 29%
- Informally — 71%

Diagram 4

Working flexibly

- Yes — 65%
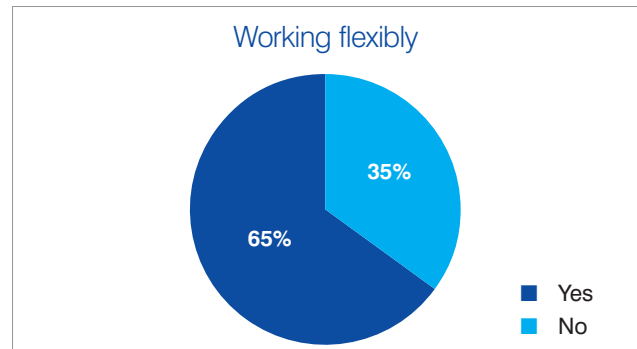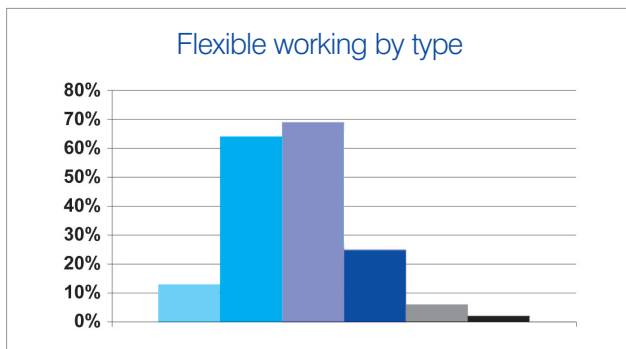- No — 35%

Diagram 5

Flexible working by type

- Reduced hours
- Remote working
- Flexi-time
- Staggered hours
- Compressed hours
- Term-time only

Direct Impact on Performance

In order to assess the impact on individual performance we sought the views of flexible workers, their managers and their colleagues. Flexible workers commented on their own performance, managers on the performance of their staff who worked flexibly and colleagues were asked how working with flexible workers affected them.

Quantity of work

Overall there was a positive relationship between quantity of work and flexible working, as shown below.
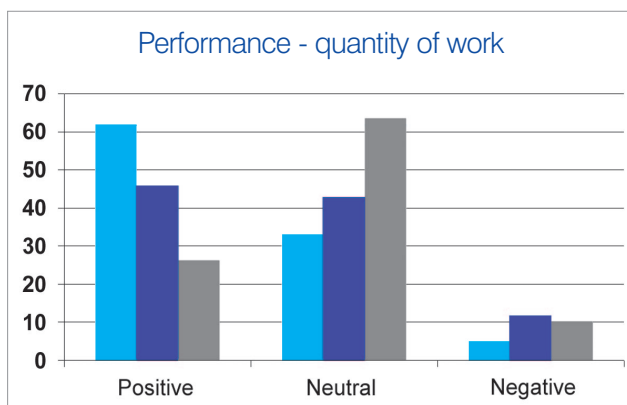

Diagram 6

■ Flexible working and own performance
■ Manager's view on impact
■ Effect on others of working with flexible workers

It is encouraging that individuals and their managers felt positive (61% and 45% respectively). A similar number of managers (43%), felt that there was no impact either way from flexible working. Only a small proportion of respondents indicated that flexible working had a negative impact on the quantity of work of either the flexible workers themselves or their co-workers.

Data from the interviews supported this positive view of the impact, with managers commenting on their staff continuing to meet, and even surpassing, their objectives:

"I think over the longer term it's the relationship they're developing with the staff, when staff are being trusted to work their time and get the job done… they don't get any negatives, it's a flexibility that could have been there anyway and it doesn't reduce the productivity."

Employees noted that in some cases the type of flexible working allowed them to have a greater output because they were free from interruptions.

"I would say that I am more productive because you get less randomised by people coming to your desk, or just getting caught up in the banter of the office, or that kind of thing.

I think it's just easier and I can be quite focused, and probably productivity is higher I'd say if I work from home."

Flexible workers also identified their conscientious approach to work, which for some arose from a specifically perceived need to demonstrate that their work was not suffering in any way as a result of their flexible working pattern:

"I felt I had to prove myself that first time. So I was keeping a very close check on my hours… so I could prove that every week I was doing at least my contractual hours."

Flexible working can lead to a blurring of work and non-work time (give-and-take), and a need was identified by some respondents to make sure that workload expectations matched flexible arrangements:

"I regularly leave here at five… I get home for bath and bedtime with the kids but then will sit down and do another two hours work; whereas if I were somewhere that said "no, you can't leave until 5.30" then you might miss bedtime but then you are also less likely to pick up any other work afterwards."

"Don't expect yourself to be able to do everything because you can't. You've got less time to do it."

Direct Impact on Performance

Quality of work

As with the quantity of work, respondents felt that overall flexible working either improved the quality of work, or had no effect on the quality. A small minority identified a negative effect on quality. The chart below summarises the findings.
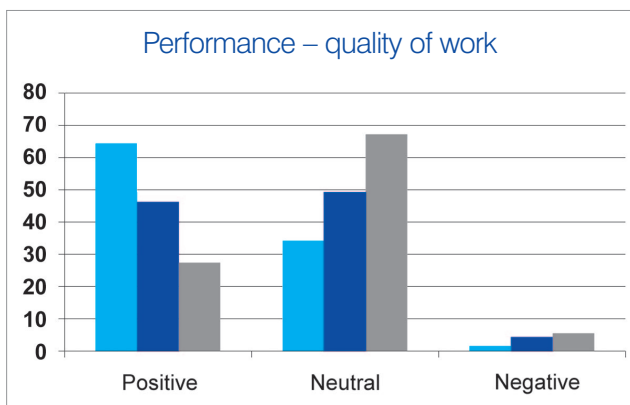

Performance – quality of work

Diagram 7

■ Flexible working and own performance
■ Manager's view on impact
■ Effect on others of working with flexible workers

One flexible worker described the situation concisely:

"I don't feel that in the quality of work that I do has affected my performance at all. No, I think I still work at the same level I did when I was full-time, I just work differently."

Working away from the office was often seen to have a positive effect on the quality of work:

"You tend to work on one thing and you're focused on it far, far better… and the quality of work sometimes is far better, and you're comfortable with your environment."

However, there were some negative effects, as this manager noted:

"[When reduced hours workers] say 'can I have something more challenging?' and you say, 'Well, it's really hard, when you're only here 60% of the time' and we can't do it… [it's] little bits of work that you tend to end up giving them… and they end up getting lots of small jobs."

Employees reviewed their effectiveness when working flexibly, particularly if their arrangement involved a reduction in 'face time' through either home-working or reduced hours. They examined their role closely, focussing on the essential parts of their jobs, although this could mean swimming against the cultural current:

"What was actually worth going to? Where was I going to make an impact? Because it's a group meeting and the whole group's just expected to attend. So it'd be noted if you didn't go, but actually, what was I getting out of going to that meeting? So I started focusing on only going to the meetings where I could get something out of it, or the company would get something out of it."

Direct Impact on Performance

Teamworking

The majority of respondents felt that flexible working had no impact on the performance of teams within the organisation. The positive impact on team effectiveness reported was lower than in the cases of quantity and quality of work. More respondents felt there was a positive rather than negative effect, but the proportions were less than for quality and quantity of work.
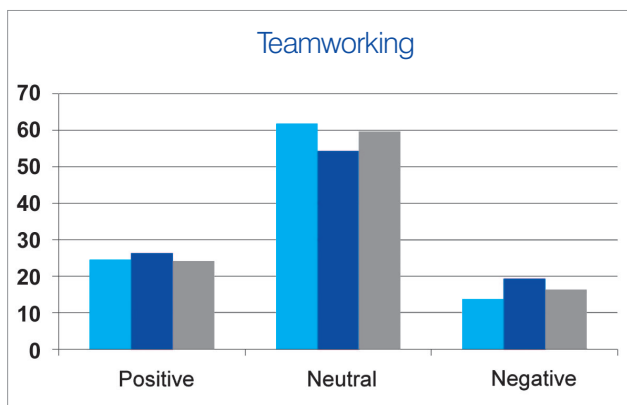

Diagram 8

- Flexible working and own participation in a team
- Manager's view on ability of flexible workers to work in a team
- Impact of your colleagues who work flexibly on team effectiveness

It was felt that teams had to be able to meet their objectives first, while accommodating individual needs for flexibility wherever possible:

"The need to address flexible working as a team, to ensure the productivity of the team, remains high and all deliverables are met. It is not just about focusing on the individual needs of the team, but also the on the aims and objectives that they are there to fulfil."

Employee co-operation is vital to teamworking, with a dialogue to deal with the implications of people working in different ways:

"We felt at the time that we would be able to accommodate the flexible working in the team and it did actually work quite well. We had to sort of sit everybody down and say, 'This is what was going to happen. Has anyone got any concerns?'"

Managers acknowledged that co-operation was vital, and were mindful of potential backlash against flexible workers if colleagues felt that they were picking up work left undone by those with flexible arrangements:

"There is a potential for conflict whereby the wider team feels that so-and-so is leaving at 5 because of their flexible working arrangements, and yet we're having to stay until 8 or 9 o'clock to get this project finished: and so there is that whole kind of tension that can arise."

Concerns were raised about isolation, both from flexible and non-flexible workers:

"I came in at six and I didn't see anyone from my team until 10.30 or 11 o'clock and it's not really motivating you when you're supposed to be a team."

"You're not in the office and an important meeting is arranged. You feel like you're being left out. And do you have any right to complain, or to argue that the meeting should be moved to a different date?"

Still, there was some indication of an informal organisational response to team members working flexibly:

"People do generally, I don't know whether it's consciously or sub-consciously, tend to organise meetings between Tuesday and Thursday. There's not a great deal of stuff that happens on a Monday and Friday. I don't know whether that's a conscious thing, it's actually just quite an interesting thing."

Communication was seen to be even more vital to the effective operation of the team when some members work flexibly. Remote workers, in particular, need to be accessible to their colleagues when team members expect them to be to assuage any concerns about being a team player:

"Your communication has to be excellent, because you've got to be telling your team exactly what you think: when things must be delivered, so you can meet deadlines, so that they know if you're going to be out if certain things come up and how they need to be handled."

Direct Impact on Performance

Retention and recruitment

Overall it was well understood that one of the main aims of flexible working policies was to assist with the recruitment and the retention of key staff with varied skills. Flexible working, allowing employees to attend to other concerns outside the workplace, was highly valued by employees:

"One of the reasons I stay with the organisation is the fact that I've got that flexibility. It enables me to meet family commitments, whether it's the kids or whether it's my wife."

There was also a recognition that flexible working signalled a more adult relationship between the employer and employee:

"We've got flexibility in all senses of the word and it's one of the things which keeps me… everybody came here because you're treated like an adult but at the end of the day it's what keeps people here. The thought that I'd have to go and do a job that I have to be in the office for eight thirty and everyone will disappear at 5.45pm in the evening, I don't know how I'd work in that culture. I think I'd find that very hard."

In addition, there was evidence that flexible working was a key factor for women returning to work after maternity leave, as well as being attractive to new recruits to the organisation.

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Indirect Impact on Performance

Indirect factors which have an impact on performance are job satisfaction, organisational commitment and the level of stress experienced.

Existing research on the link between people and performance found that these factors are often greater when people have a degree of choice over how and where they do their job. Policies such as flexible working encourage positive attitudes towards work and the organisation, leading to discretionary behaviour which makes people work harder, resulting in improvements in performance.

Overall there was a positive relationship between working flexibly and both work-life balance and organisational commitment. In addition, for reduced-hours workers there was a positive relationship with work facilitation and satisfaction with pay.

Job satisfaction

Increased job satisfaction was largely reported by those who work flexibly:

"Well, working the way I do, I think I'm more satisfied with the job because I feel that working some of the hours these people work, I think personally that the work-life balance wouldn't be right for me. So if that wasn't right, I don't think I would get so much satisfaction out of the job."

"I think it's improved [my job satisfaction] because I can see that it's sustainable."

Only a few respondents reported negative effects on job satisfaction, associating their flexible working arrangements with decreased opportunity to be given more demanding work:

"I felt that it was very much an admin-based role because I found myself doing stuff that I thought was woefully short of my capabilities."

Organisational commitment

High levels of commitment were identified by those who themselves worked flexibly, and this was supported by colleagues and managers:

"I've seen nothing but improved commitment from the individuals who have been offered and are currently occupied either working from home, career breaks, reduced hours, compressed hours and the multitude of ways we offer that."

"I guess, more motivated but also quite grateful in some respects, that they've accommodated that. So I guess – it sounds a bit cheesy – but it would increase loyalty to an organisation."

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Indirect Impact on Performance

Stress

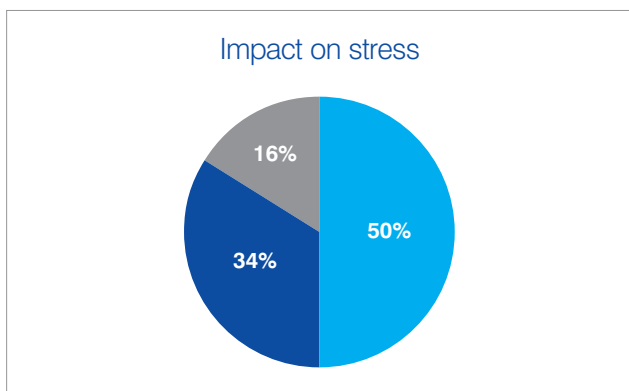**The overall impact of flexible working on stress can be seen below.**

Impact on stress

Diagram 9

- ■ Positive effect
- ■ No effect
- ■ Negative effect

The opportunity afforded by flexible working for a better work-life balance was seen by many respondents as a way of avoiding or dispersing stress:

"I think stress levels are down. I think that in some respects I consider myself quite fortunate that I have a team that has embraced flexible working in the spirit in which it was intended. I think the team are generally happier."

Working on a reduced-hours contract was seen by many as a means of reducing stress:

"I have a buffer to my weekend and, where Monday morning and Thursday evening can be very fraught, I think it's a great stress management tool having an extra day."

Adopting a different pattern of working had led some respondents to review their approach to their role in a way which helps with managing stress:

"I think, even at work, it's probably caused me just to get more organised. So it's forced me to plan and maybe made me slightly more assertive."

To the contrary, flexible working itself could be a source of stress, if individuals struggled to achieve similar workloads in fewer hours;

"I think clearly the pressure of trying to do what could be a full-time job in three days a week is quite stressful."

"Clearly, the fact that you're under tighter timescales does raise the stress level. There is no doubt. But it's just something that you have to deal with if you want the Friday off."

"I think stress levels are down. I think that in some respects I consider myself quite fortunate that I have a team that has embraced flexible working in the spirit in which it was intended. I think the team are generally happier."

Impact on Individuals

Careers

There was generally a belief amongst respondents that adopting flexible working practices could harm their careers. Visibility was identified as a particular issue:

"The more your face is seen and the more you're proactive around the workplace tends to be more beneficial. If you're not seen around and people don't know your face then it's not going to benefit."

"One of the drawbacks of not working full-time is a perception that you don't have the job opportunities that you might have if you were working full-time."

Other respondents identified a privileged view of full-time over part-time workers, with those working less hours almost being 'parked' until they returned to a full-time contract in the future and were once again perceived to fully participate as an employee.

"I've seen that over the years with lots of people. They always go on a kind of a slow track, the sidings, and then join the main track again and speed off."

Although respondents indicated that flexible working should not harm careers, and organisational policy upheld this belief, there was a feeling that flexible working, especially reduced hours and remote working, had a negative effect on individual careers. This may help to explain the widespread use of informal flexible working arrangements, where employees hesitate to formalise their arrangements because of the perceived adverse effect on their career.

However, those on a reduced-hours contract were less likely to consider moving between employers as a means of progression, supporting the earlier finding with regard to retention. Some flexible workers were more likely to demonstrate influencing behaviours intended to favourably affect the decisions of their managers. Similarly, they tended to ensure they had the contacts, skills and experience necessary for the next step in their career. Thus they were conscious of the possible negative effects of their chosen working pattern and took steps to mitigate against this likelihood.

"One of the drawbacks of not working full-time is a perception that you don't have the job opportunities that you might have if you were working full time."

Impact on Individuals

Work-life balance

Unsurprisingly, there was a positive relationship between work-life balance and reduced-hours working. Yet, the benefits were not confined to this group of employees with a majority indicating a positive effect as shown below.
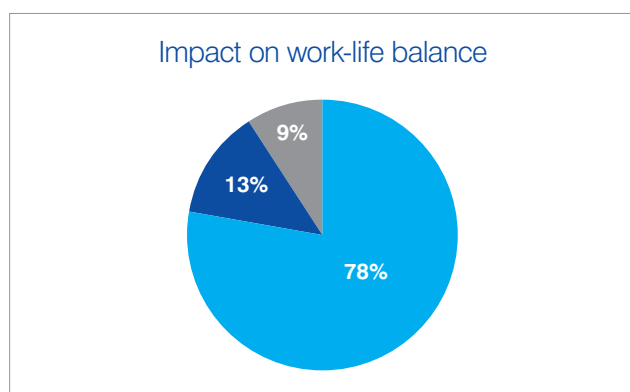
Impact on work-life balance

Diagram 10

- ■ Positive effect
- ■ No effect
- ■ Negative effect

Respondents identified elements such as control and choice as key benefits resulting from use of a flexible working arrangement:

"I like the flexibility of it. I can manage my own workload, which is managing the team, but I can put steps in place so that I can fit my personal life to suit my family, which I find is priceless really. To me, that's worth more than overtime pay, time is worth a lot more than money."

"When they're at work they want to be engaged and motivated, but also they want that balance with their life as well."

Some respondents noted that working flexibly blurred the boundaries between work and home which could lead to work overspill, which adversely affected work-life balance:

"It also can have a negative effect on your work-life balance, because I do far more work in the evenings than I ever used to; and, in a way, it's sometimes difficult to switch off. You blur the lines between work and home, because I work at home as well; and so it does take self discipline to say 'Today I'm not going to plug in my computer, and nothing will fall apart'."

In some organisations the issue of travel seemed particularly difficult to manage for those on a reduced-hours contract.

Where balance is a priority, then travelling outside of working hours, especially at weekends, was perceived as an even greater intrusion:

"That's been more hard to manage with the travel schedules. On one of my trips I didn't get in until Saturday at 11am. So it has encroached on the time I would have normally not been working. But actually what I've been trying to do is make sure that I've scheduled another day when I've taken the day off, as time-off in lieu."

There was a positive relationship between commuting and remote working and flexi-time, which impacted on work-life balance, allowing employees to save time which could then be used to reduce the competition between work and non-work tasks:

"But just being at home on a Friday, it's really silly things; like, if I get up in the morning, I don't have the hour and three quarter commute for a start… things like, I can put the washing on and then at lunchtime I can put it out on the line. Things like that, which otherwise impact on my, don't impact on my professional career but can add to the burden of trying to, be a working mother, actually ease the burden and therefore make me more effective."

Managing Flexible Working

Technology

There was broadly agreement that technology was well used to support flexible working, through internet, phone and other tools:

"The technology here works quite well. The phones can go through to my mobile, you can get onto a PC relatively easily."

There were mixed responses with regard to the provision of support for technological difficulties which may arise. Some respondents raised concerns whereas others were happy with the level of support available. These variations were found within some organisations as well as across the whole sample.

Only in one organisation were serious doubts raised about the use of technology to support flexible working. Respondents here identified a failure to keep pace with the way that technology could be used to facilitate different working arrangements.

Training and support

There was general awareness amongst respondents around the existence of company written policies, procedures and guidelines concerning flexible working practices. However, there was little comment on the need for training on how to actually work flexibly, with some respondents saying that it was a matter of common sense which employees needed to follow themselves:

"You can either go in the classroom training or you can go on the e-learning and I've said to a number [of my team] 'Look you can get to this package from home if you're connected, take half-a-day, work through the modules required, because that's probably a better environment for you to be able to do it'."

Some managers noted that additional support in strategies for managing flexible workers would be welcome.

"I think it would be [good] to provide more support to me as a manager and to the other people affected by it… I think the organisation provides a lot of support and a lot of beating the drum to say 'this is fine, you have these options' to the actual person doing it, but not to the people around them… I think guidance in how to manage the people and the teams around them."

There was some evidence that the outcome of flexible working requests could vary depending on managerial attitudes, and this could be more standardised through managerial training.

The nature of work

There was a general acceptance amongst respondents that the ability to work flexibly was largely determined by the nature of the role that they had. Some roles were seen to be particularly suited to flexible working, whilst others were seen as very difficult to do on a flexible working arrangement. Factors like client expectations, meetings and keeping abreast of events in a fast moving environment militated against flexible working, whilst for some other respondents the type of job they had was specifically tied to being in a location where colleagues or specialised equipment was available:

"My team is virtual as in they live all over the country. So, whether I was in here everyday actually makes no odds to them because they're not here every day."

Some respondents had appraised clients directly of their flexible working arrangements with success:

"It was made clear to the client, and in fact all the clients I've worked for since then, that I don't work on a Wednesday… they were happy, providing they saw the results coming through and deadlines being met, they were perfectly happy to accommodate that."

The global nature of business was mentioned by some of the respondents as directly relevant to the practicalities of flexible working:

"For a lot of the meetings and things like that, if you're on the telephone to Spain, it makes no difference if you're there or you're at home. Spain is Spain and somebody else is in the office, you've got a three-way call rather than a two-way call, and there's not an awful lot of difference there."

When dealing with colleagues internationally, a flexible approach was identified as necessary:

"You may have six sites either coming to a meeting in the US or in Europe, and if that was your day when you were flexibly working, you would have to be flexible on the part of the organisation… otherwise you're going to miss out on that meeting."

For many respondents, workload was a big factor in working flexibly, with accounts of extra hours required to get the job done. Particularly in the case of senior or managerial roles, some respondents felt that working flexibly (particularly on reduced hours) excluded people from senior roles:

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"My viewpoint is I think it's quite a big issue in terms of flexible working that if you're a secretary or an administrator it's not a problem. You can do that, not a problem at all. But if you're in a managerial job then I think it's often seen as a problem."

Culture of flexibility

There was a general view amongst respondents that the organisation was supportive of flexible working. There were some responses, though, which indicated that employees felt that this supportiveness remained at a policy level:

"There is big support within the organisation to actually encourage at least the knowledge of flexible working. The message to the managers and employees is, 'It's there and it's available. Use it when you need it'."

There was an acknowledgement that employee experiences of flexible working could be affected by the managerial attitudes which prevailed in their particular department or division:

"Although I think there are pockets of flexible working, I don't know if it's truly accepted… I'm not sure that it's necessarily rippled all the way through the organisation."

There was a theme amongst respondents that dealing with some managers, who are the first decision-makers, could present a challenge. Two different managerial attitudes are outlined below:

"If you trust people to do things in work, then why wouldn't you trust them when you let them do it at home; and I quite like the idea that if you've given them a task to do and they've completed the task when they come back, whether they worked on that from four in the afternoon until ten at night or whatever and played golf in the morning, I don't care, they got the task done."

"It's the, 'I want to know what it is you are doing every minute of the day. If you're not here I don't know what you're doing.' It's the control thing."

Trust was a recurring theme amongst both managers and employees. If flexible workers are not present in the office, or are present at different times, then it may be harder for managers to monitor their performance on a day-to-day basis and consequently a degree of trust is required:

"If someone is working from home, and isn't in contact with me, I don't get that insight as to whether they're really working or whether they're sitting there having a cup of tea and reading the paper. So the visibility goes away… I have to trust."

Some managers were seen to support flexible working as a result of positive exposure to it in the past:

"The managers who already have flexible workers recognise the benefits and are supportive. It's the managers who don't have flexible workers who need the education of how flexible working could be beneficial."

Some respondents indicated that they thought there were barriers for men who wanted to work flexibly, since it wasn't seen as the 'right' thing to do. Equally, reasons other than childcare were generally thought to be less legitimate reasons for requesting a flexible working arrangement:

"I think there are a few men out there who would probably like to do four days a week and spend the day on the golf course, but wouldn't probably have the courage to actually ask for it."

Many employees, encouragingly, felt that flexible working was widespread enough to be unremarkable and an acceptable fact of organisational life, summed up in this response:

"It's part of the mindset of the people I work with that flexibility is part of the norm."

Working Families

Working Families is the UK's leading work-life balance campaign organisation. We support and give a voice to working parents and carers, whilst also helping employers create workplaces which encourage work-life balance for everyone.

Our name defines two of the most important parts of life: family and employment. These are often in conflict. We feel passionately that this is unnecessary, counter-productive and must change.

Things ARE changing. By working with parents and carers and organisations alike, Working Families helps children, working parents and carers and their employers find a better balance between responsibilities at home and work. By operating in the real world of pragmatic advice and practical solutions, we are making our vision a reality.

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For further information on the research contact **Dr Clare Kelliher** at **Cranfield School of Management** on **01234 751122.**

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