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

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FOREWORD

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major and lasting impact on the way that Britain works. Across a range of sectors the necessity of mass homeworking has had consequences for the amount of time that workers spend in the workplace, as well as on managers' attitudes towards flexible and homeworking. This has had wide-ranging impacts, including on productivity, gender relations and work-life balance. In short, these changes have had profound implications for how we view the future of work.

Over the past three years, these changes have been monitored as part of an innovative project led by academics at the University of Birmingham Business School and the University of York – the 'Flexible Working and the Future of Work Project' formally the 'Working from Home During COVID-19' project. This new report based on 2022 data, builds on previous reports to explore how flexible working is becoming increasingly core to how we view a positive workplace. Managers' attitudes to flexible working appear to be becoming even more positive, and this is having consequences for other practices such as job sharing and working compressed hours. There are also increasingly knock-on effects on the physical configuration of offices, something that could have positive impacts on the space devoted to collective activities and wellbeing, as well as on our carbon footprint.



Professor Richard Black

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But there are risks too. The physical isolation felt by those working from home remains a concern and there is increasing evidence that it is associated with a culture of working long hours. There are also potentially profound gender implications of these changes in the way we work, with the real risk of the creation of a 'two-tier workforce' structured partly on gendered lines.

The 'Flexible Working and the Future of Work' project is one of a number of initiatives at the University of Birmingham grappling with the question of how organisations and businesses can be more inclusive and more responsible. This is something we are also trying to integrate into our own institutional practice – as in the case of shared parental leave policy where the university has adjusted its practice in light of findings from our Business School researchers.

There is no silver bullet in terms of achieving an inclusive workplace, and this report highlights how flexibility can bring both positive and negative consequences. Nonetheless, the University of Birmingham remains fully committed to exploring how workers in general – and our own in particular – can be better supported, and workplaces made more equal and more inclusive. With that in mind, I want to thank the report's authors and commend their conclusions for serious discussion and debate. I hope that you will enjoy reading the report and find in it insights for practice in your own workplace.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

Managers' Attitudes towards Flexible Working

- Managers are currently more positive than they have been since the outset of COVID-19 about employees working from home, with: 51.8% agreeing that working from home improves employee concentration; 59.5% agreeing that it increases productivity; and 62.8% agreeing that it increases motivation. An even larger proportion of managers (76.5%) believe flexible working generally increases productivity.



76%

of managers believe flexible working increases productivity

- Managers were most positive about the productivity gains from the types of flexible working arrangements that were prevalent during COVID-19, with 59.5% agreeing that working from home increases productivity, while 72.7% believed the same for flexitime.

- Importantly, managers also identified a link between other types of flexible working, which were not as prevalent during COVID-19, and productivity: 43.7% agreed that compressed hours increases productivity; 44.1% that part-time working increases productivity; while 33.2% thought the same about job share.
- In relation to performance, line managers were more likely to see flexible working as a performance-enhancing tool (71.2%) than senior management (65.6%).
- Pre-pandemic (pre-2020) 43.3% of managers believed long hours were needed for employees to advance in the organisation. During the lockdowns this decreased to 38.7% (2020) and 35.2% (2021). Now, 41.9% believe that in order to advance in the organisation employees need to work long hours.



The number of managers believing employees need to work long hours to advance has returned to pre-pandemic levels suggesting a return to a long hours culture.

- Year on year since the start of the pandemic, there has been a slight decrease in managers' perceptions that working from home leads to isolation, although these numbers remain worryingly high with 56.4% of managers suggesting that working from home leads to isolation in 2022.
- While 77.7% of managers believed that caring responsibilities should be shared equally between parents, only 40.4% said their organisations offer support for parents to do this.
- Managers reported themselves as more cheerful, calmer, better rested and more active in 2022 than they had been in 2021, although line managers continued to report higher levels of stress than senior managers.

Managers' Intentions/Behaviour Regarding Flexible Working Since the Pandemic

- In 2022 58.0% of managers said their organisations would be more supportive of flexible working requests in the future, down from 70% in 2020, but this still represents a step-

change in how flexible working is perceived.

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

94%

of managers believe job advertisements should include the availability of flexible working



Spatial Flexibility and Office Space

- In 2022, 69.3% of managers reported that their organisation is not expecting employees to be back in the office more than 4 days a week; this is up from 59% in 2021. This points to a profound change in working norms compared to the pre-pandemic period. Indeed, the number of managers expecting their employees to be in the office just one day a week has nearly doubled from 10.5% in 2021 (Birkett et al. 2021) to 20.4% in 2022 (see Figure 23).



In 2022 twice as many managers are expecting employees in the office just one day a week when compared to 2021

- 33.7% of managers reported their organisation had reduced or were planning to reduce the amount of office space available.
- Only 37.7% of managers reported that their organisation had consulted employees about working preferences before making decisions about the amount of office space available for use by employees in the future.
- Managers also reported on the repurposing of their organisation's remaining office space in the future, with 25.3% reporting that there would be fewer individual offices, 9.7% reporting there would be fewer shared offices, 21.8% reporting more space for events/workshops, and 12.7% reporting more space would be made available for wellbeing. These figures are similar to those in 2021, which suggests that attitudes toward homeworking and office spaces being repurposed are beginning to stabilize and have changed dramatically since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consultation and Surveillance at Work

- More managers are providing regular performance feedback to staff now compared to 2021 (from 59.6% to 64.7%).
- Organisations have been relying heavily on informal employee consultation (46.6%) or other forms of less formal collective consultation, indicating that they consult directly and informally with employees, rather than going through more formal channels such as Trade Union representatives (39.7%).
- 27.0% of managers reported their organisation

as using computer software to monitor performance and 28.0% of managers reported their organisation as monitoring emails.

- Nearly 80% of managers surveyed (78.9%) reported that they feel surveillance at work implies that employers do not trust their employees, whilst 64.2% of managers agreed that the use of surveillance methods increases their own stress levels. On the other hand, over a third of managers (37.4%) felt that surveillance helps to reduce workplace bullying, whilst only 17.3% of managers agreed that it helps to improve employee productivity.



79%

of managers think surveillance implies a lack of trust

- Over a third of managers across all sectors (34.7%) reported that monitoring phone logs and calls (including recording calls) was acceptable at work. In addition, nearly half (42.9%) of all managers surveyed viewed the monitoring of employee work emails, files, and browser history as an acceptable form of monitoring. Within the Medical and Healthcare sector, this rose to 50% of managers surveyed but dropped to only 21.3% in the Education (College, University and Adult Education) sector. Only a small percentage (11.2%) of managers overall felt that the monitoring of social media use outside of work hours was an acceptable form of monitoring. However, more managers felt that the monitoring of employee browser history, when connected to the work WIFI, was acceptable (27.5%).

COVID-19 working practices have dramatically impacted workplace norms around flexible working, particularly across industries which were not classified as front-line during the pandemic. Our research over the past three years (since the pandemic) shows as a result of pandemic working practices: managers are more likely to see flexible working as a performance-enhancing tool at all levels in the organisation; there is less perceived need for employees to be physically present in the

office to progress their careers; most employees will not come into the office more than 4 days a week, indeed, many will only be in once; less office space will be available in the future and it will be utilised differently; surveillance is widespread, despite an overriding view that it does not improve performance and erodes trust.

More broadly, these changes are starting to reduce the stigma of flexible working to tackle the presenteeism culture as well as the long hours culture that has always been prevalent in the UK; all factors which perpetuate inequalities in British workplaces. However, we also see some signs between 2021 and 2022 that the long hours culture may be returning in British workplaces, which highlights the precarious and fragile nature of these new norms. This means that, if we want to press on with the gains made around flexible working during COVID-19, now is the time to strengthen and formalise new flexible working norms and extend them to those working in front-line and precarious roles. To do so, some key questions need to be addressed. For example, how do we ensure all industries embrace the journey to more accessible flexible working for jobs at all levels? How do we ensure that the focus on productivity and flexible working does not lead to work intensification, as people work through commuting times and find it difficult to switch off when working from home? How do we ensure that new opportunities for flexible working are not only taken up by female carers, further gendering the concept of flexible working and creating a two-tier workforce? Finally, what will these changes in working practices mean for other areas such as the Government's levelling up agenda, town planning, city centre employment, public transport, road traffic, and the environment more broadly? For example, while mass homeworking is arguably leading to fewer car journeys and a reduction in pollution, working from home means increased use of gas and electricity throughout the day in people's homes which also has an impact on the environment and is likely to impact employees negatively in the current energy crisis. These are all potential questions that policymakers and employers need to consider, and we offer some recommendations to this effect at the end of this report.



1 INTRODUCTION

The Working From Home During COVID-19 Project was started by the University of Birmingham, in collaboration with the University of Kent, in April 2020, just as the first COVID-19 lockdown was taking effect in the UK. The project's overall aim was to explore changing experiences of flexible working and working from home during the pandemic, and the potential impact of these changes on future attitudes and intentions regarding working practices. The data collected has been used to provide insights for organisations and policymakers about likely changes in ways of working and the labour market in the future. Phase one of the data collection included surveys with managers and employees across the UK immediately after the first COVID-19 lockdown. This data was written up as two separate reports; one looking at the experiences of employees, including their future attitudes towards flexible working (Chung, Seo, Forbes and Birkett, 2020), and the second exploring the experiences of managers managing staff working from home during

COVID-19 as well as managers' future attitudes and intentions regarding flexible working (Forbes, Birkett, Evans, Chung and Whiteman, 2020). A second set of data were collected (phase two) with managers immediately following the third COVID-19 lockdown to explore how experiences and attitudes have changed throughout COVID-19 (Birkett, Forbes, Chung and Evans, 2021). The employee report can be found on the University of Kent's WAF project webpage and the managers reports can be found on the University of Birmingham's Equal Parenting Project webpages. In this new report, we move beyond the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project and begin a new project, the Flexible Working and the Future of Work project, led and funded by the University of Birmingham and the University of York, which will focus on how working practices are changing since the pandemic, particularly around flexible working and what this means for the future of work.

2 MANAGERS' ATTITUDES TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Working from home has become much more prevalent since the 2020 and 2021 UK lockdowns. At the same time, employees' attitudes to flexible working and homeworking have also changed, with the majority having planned to request some kind of flexible working arrangements on their return to work (Chung et al. 2020). In the past, managers across a range of industries have generally offered lukewarm support for flexible working or maintained that flexible working is incompatible with their business, leading employees working from home to suffer from a flexible working stigma (Chung 2020). However, evidence from phase one (2020), two (2021) and the current phase three (2022) data collections suggests attitudes are changing.

Attitudes towards homeworking have improved

All three phases of data collection, which have taken place annually since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have shown attitudes towards homeworking have improved. Figure 1 shows the positive attitudes of managers around the link between flexible working and working from home and productivity, concentration and motivation. Nearly 60% of managers surveyed this year (59.5%) agreed that working from home increases productivity. Similarly, over half of all managers surveyed (51.8%) agreed that working from home improves employee concentration. Finally, over 60% of all managers surveyed (62.8%) agreed that working from home increases motivation. Across all three measures, attitudes towards working from home are the highest they have been since COVID-19.

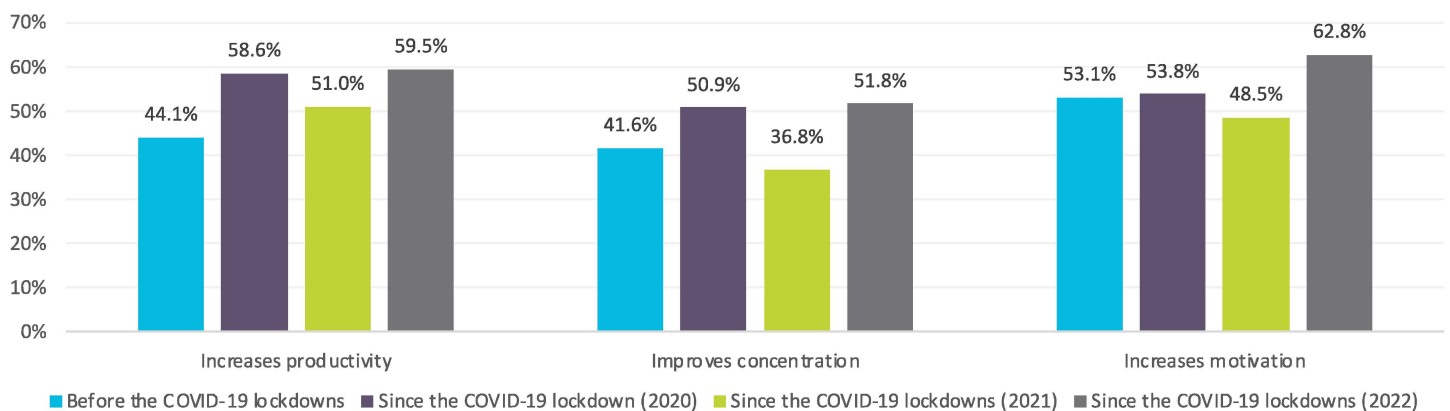


Figure 1: Percentage of managers reporting they agreed or strongly agreed with attitudinal statements about working from home

Managers positive experiences of managing employees working flexibly

Figure 2 shows 76.5% of managers surveyed in 2022 believe flexible working increases productivity. However, attitudes varied considerably regarding the perceived productivity links for different types of flexible working. 59.5% of managers believed working from home increases productivity, while an impressive 72.7% of managers believed flexitime increases productivity. Importantly, managers also identified a link between other types of flexible working, which were not as prominent during COVID-19, and productivity. For example, 43.7% of managers suggested that compressed hours increase productivity and 44.1% agreed that part-time working increases productivity.

time working increases productivity, a smaller number of managers (33.2%) agreed that job share increases productivity. These numbers are likely to relate to the prevalence of these types of flexible working arrangements during COVID-19.

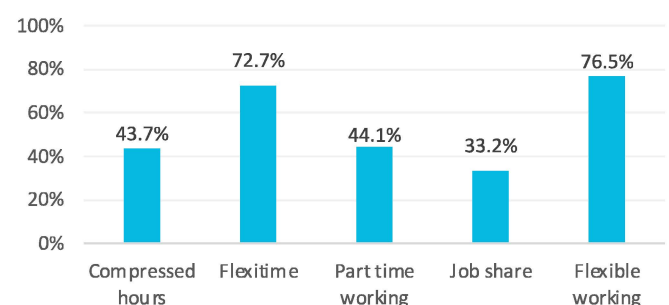


Figure 2: Percentage of managers reporting they agreed or strongly agreed with attitudinal statements about different types of flexible working increasing productivity

Managers' views regarding employees' need to be physically present in the workplace have also changed since COVID-19. Figure 3 shows that before COVID-19, 57.3% of managers believed that employees needed to be physically present in the workplace to advance in the organisation. Following the first 2020 lockdown, this number fell significantly to 37.5% (Forbes et al. 2020). Following the third lockdown in 2021, this number rose back to 48.0% (Birkett et al. 2021) and remained relatively stable at 46.7% in 2022, which suggests some managers might be returning to old patterns and preferences.

However, the pattern is different when we look at managers' perceptions of the positive impact of flexible working. Before COVID-19, only 49.2% of managers believed flexible working was a

performance-enhancing tool, this rose sharply to 68.1% following the first 2020 lockdown (Forbes et al. 2020) falling slightly to 62.9% after the third lockdown in 2021 and back up to 69.2% in 2022. This suggests that managers are consistently beginning to view working from home as an important performance-enhancing tool since the pandemic. By contrast, the data suggest that the long hours working culture may be beginning to return to pre-COVID levels whilst the percentage of managers believing that employees need to work long hours to progress in their organisation decreased in 2020 and 2021, this figure has risen to 41.9% in 2022. This may suggest a return to the UK long hours work culture we saw before the pandemic.

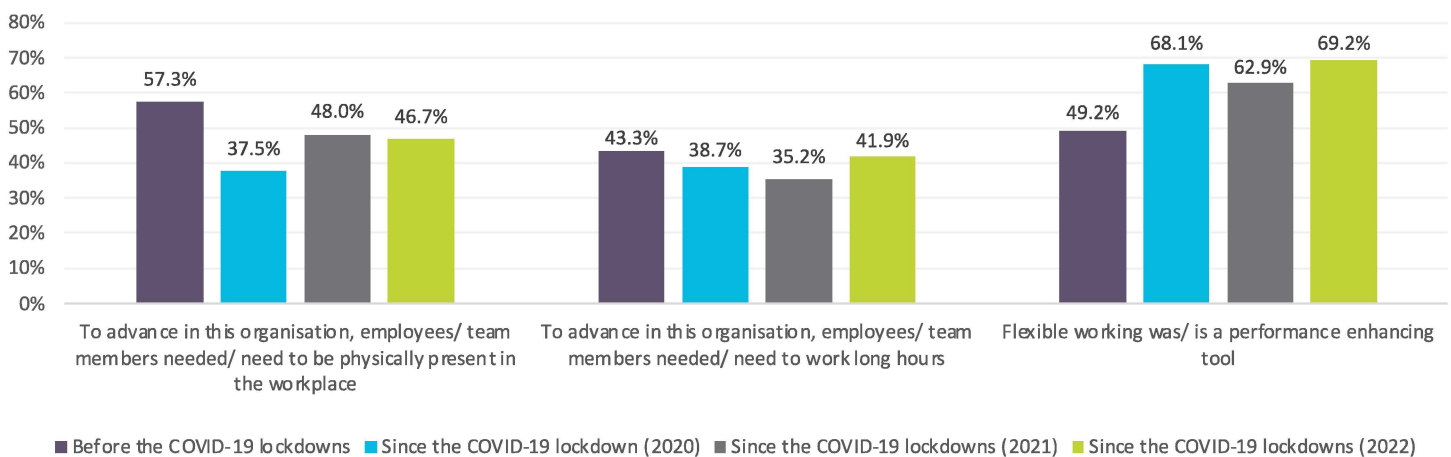


Figure 3: Percentage of managers reporting they agreed or strongly agreed with attitudinal statements about presenteeism and flexible working

Over the course of the pandemic, managers' views of flexible working as a performance-enhancing tool or as a tool for equality/ diversity have changed. In 2020 (phase one) it was revealed that managers overall were more interested in the potential of flexible working as a performance-enhancing tool (68.1%) than an equality/diversity tool (61.6%) (Forbes et al. 2020). Whilst this attitude appeared to have reversed in 2021 with marginally more managers recognising flexible working as an equality diversity tool (62.9%), in 2022, managers again viewed flexible working as more of a performance-enhancing tool (69.2%) than an equality/ diversity tool (63.1%). When these views are examined amongst the different management levels in 2022,

it is revealed that the same percentage (65.6%) of senior management viewed flexible working as both a performance-enhancing and an equality/ diversity tool, however, middle management and line managers still appear to see flexible working as more of a performance-enhancing tool rather than one for equality/diversity. More specifically, figure 4 shows that in 2022, 67.7% of middle management view flexible working as a performance-enhancing tool compared to 60.6% viewing it as an equality/ diversity tool. Similarly, 71.2% of line managers now see flexible working as more of a performance-enhancing tool compared to nearly 65% viewing it as an equality/diversity tool (64.9%).

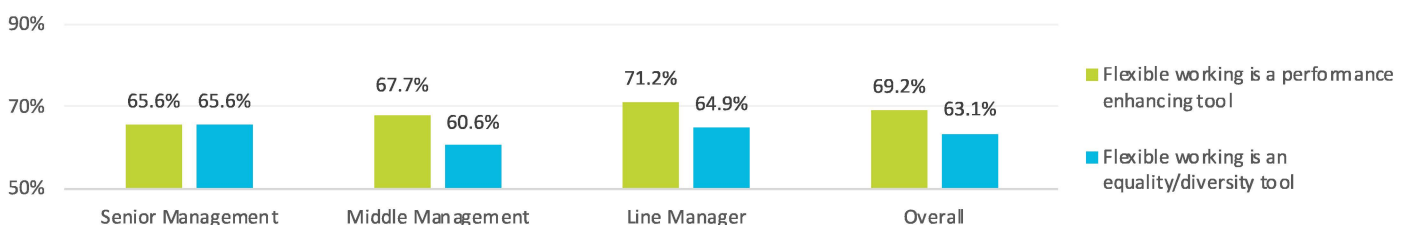


Figure 4: Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements regarding flexible working by role

We also explored managers' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the majority of managers reported experiencing feeling cheerful and in good spirits, calm and relaxed, and active and vigorous more than half the time in the previous month. Figure 5 shows that overall, 71.4% of managers reported feeling cheerful and in good spirits, 59.8% reported feeling calm and relaxed, 60.3% reported feeling active and vigorous, and 45.6% reported feeling fresh and rested when they woke up at least half the time in the past month. It is important to note that negative experiences have reduced significantly since 2021 when 40.9% of managers overall reported that they felt nervous or stressed and 58.2% felt rushed or pressed for time (Birkett et al. 2021) compared to 34%

and 56.8% in 2022, respectively. However, when looking closer at the experiences between different management levels in 2022, senior management appears to experience more positive feelings, whilst line managers appear to experience these positive feelings less frequently. This pattern repeats when we look at negative experiences of managers, 29.5% of senior managers reported that they felt nervous or stressed at least more than half the time in the previous month compared with 37.2% of line managers. A very similar percentage of all levels of management reported feeling rushed, with 56.5% of line managers, 57% of middle management and 57.4% of senior management reporting they have felt rushed or pressed for time.

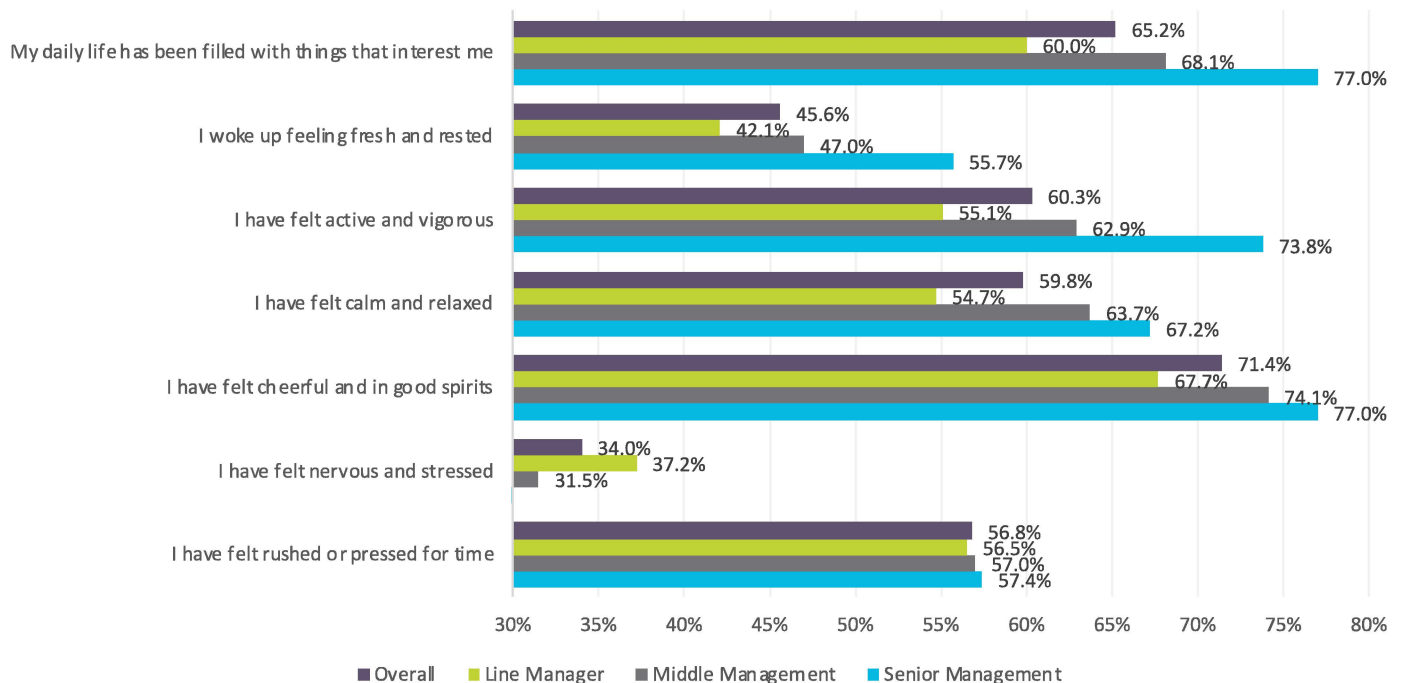


Figure 5: Percentage of managers reporting experiencing well-being indicators at least half the time in the past month by role

There were also some less positive managerial experiences of managing homeworkers since the pandemic

Figure 6 shows the percentage of managers who agree that working from home leads to isolation. Following the 2020 lockdown, 58.7% of managers believed that working from home led to isolation. This fell slightly after the 2021 lockdown to 57.5% and fell again in 2022 to 56.4%, demonstrating that significant concerns about isolation exist but the negative impact on wellbeing may be decreasing as employees and managers acclimatise to working from home and processes are put in place to better support homeworkers as the country opens up following the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021.

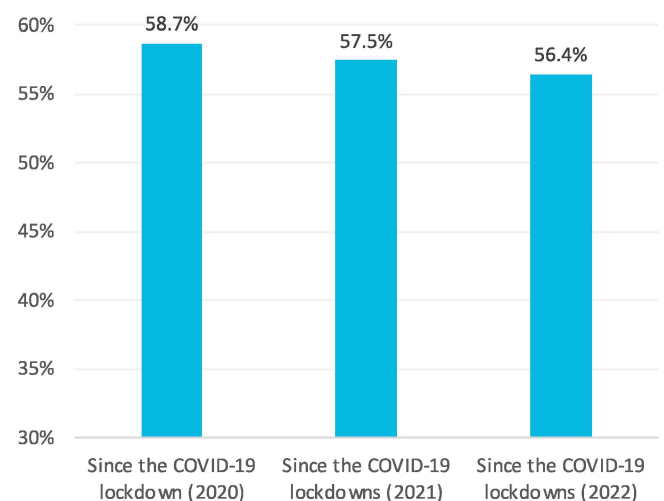


Figure 6: Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing that working from home leads to isolation

Support for parents and carers

Managers reported their support for those with caring responsibilities, including parents, and whether they have received training recently (within the last year) to help them support those with caring responsibilities. Figure 7 shows that only 43.2% of managers have received training or advice to help them support employees who need to balance work and caring responsibilities. Despite this, 88.8% of managers reported feeling confident in responding to the needs of employees with caring responsibilities.



Figure 7: Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing to statements about supporting employees with caring responsibilities

Supporting fathers with caring responsibilities is important for securing gender equality in the workplace. Phase one of the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project demonstrated that fathers were particularly likely to request flexible working in the future based on their experiences of working from home and caring for children during lockdown (Chung et al. 2020).

Figure 8 shows the percentage of managers within the 2022 sample who believe childcare responsibilities should be shared between mothers and fathers and whether their organisations provide support to encourage men to take on more caregiving responsibilities. The figure shows that a high percentage of managers believe childcare responsibilities should be shared, with 77.7% of line managers surveyed agreeing with this statement. However, the data makes clear that there appears to be a clear mismatch between managers' view that caring responsibilities should be shared and organisations supporting fathers to take on more caring responsibilities.

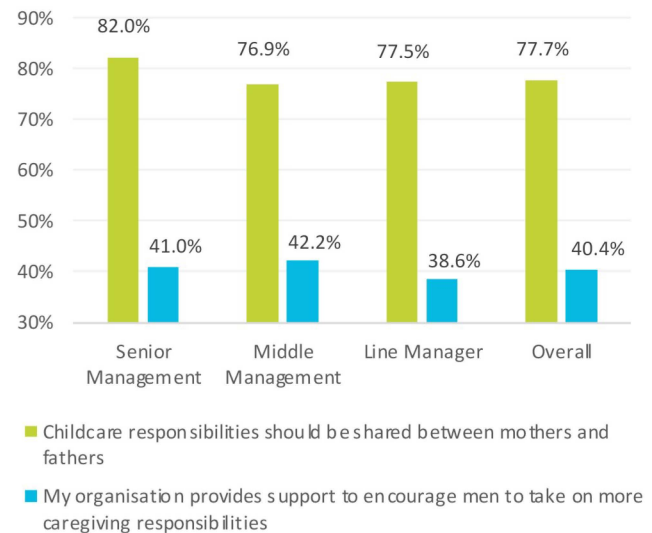


Figure 8: Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements on caring responsibilities by role

Performance feedback

The data shown in Figure 9 is encouraging as we can see that the percentage of managers having performance feedback conversations at least once a week with their team or department has increased since 2021 (from 59.6% to 64.7%), suggesting that managers, now more than ever, are checking in with their teams and communicating with them about performance. However, in some cases, this increase in the frequency of communications with teams about performance could potentially indicate a lack of trust.

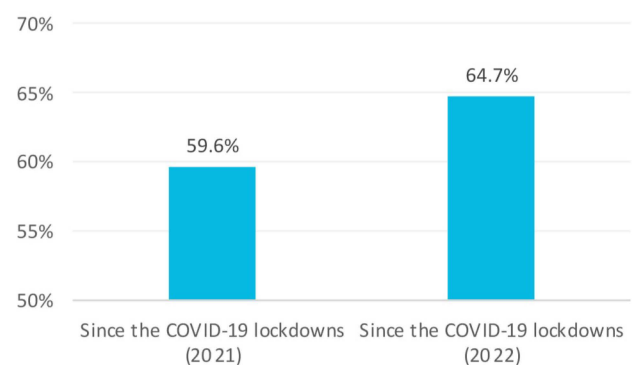


Figure 9: Percentage of managers reporting engaging/having engaged with members of their team/department to provide feedback on performance at least once a week



78%

of managers believe caring responsibilities should be shared but only 40% say their organisation supports parents to do this

3 MANAGERS' INTENTIONS REGARDING FLEXIBLE WORKING

Managers will be more supportive of working from home and flexible working in the future

Managers are much more likely to support requests for flexible working across their organisations in the future, and this is likely the result of their positive experiences of managing homeworkers during lockdown. Figure 10 shows requests for flexible working, such as working from home, job sharing, and part-time working, may increasingly

be supported in future amongst the 2022 sample. There are, however, some clear differences between industries. For example, requests to work part-time are less likely to be supported amongst those in the Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities industry compared to those in the Human Health and Social Work Medical and Healthcare industry, whilst most industries are more likely to support requests for flexible working or working from home requests.

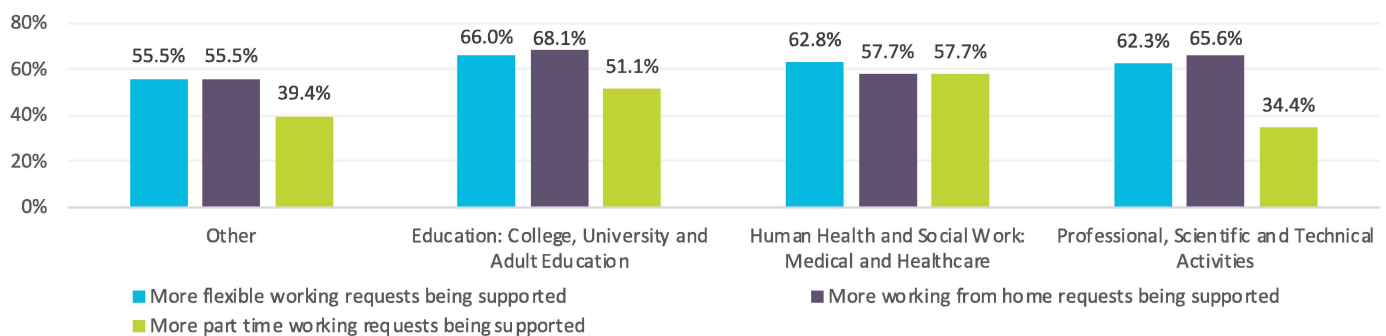


Figure 10: Percentage of managers reporting organisations as supporting more flexible working requests in the future by industry

Phase one (2020), two (2021) and three (2022) data show managers reporting their organisation will support more flexible working and working from home requests in the future. Figure 11 shows this increase in flexible working requests being supported across different types of flexible working and at differing levels of seniority. Despite the general positive direction of more requests being reportedly supported in the future the figure does show a slight drop off in these very high levels of

support between 2020 and 2022. So, we begin to see a pattern where general support for different forms of flexible working has increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 but has begun to decrease every year since. Interestingly, the pattern is different for part-time and job share requests, particularly for senior jobs where more requests were/ are reported as being supported in future in 2021 and 2022 compared to 2020.

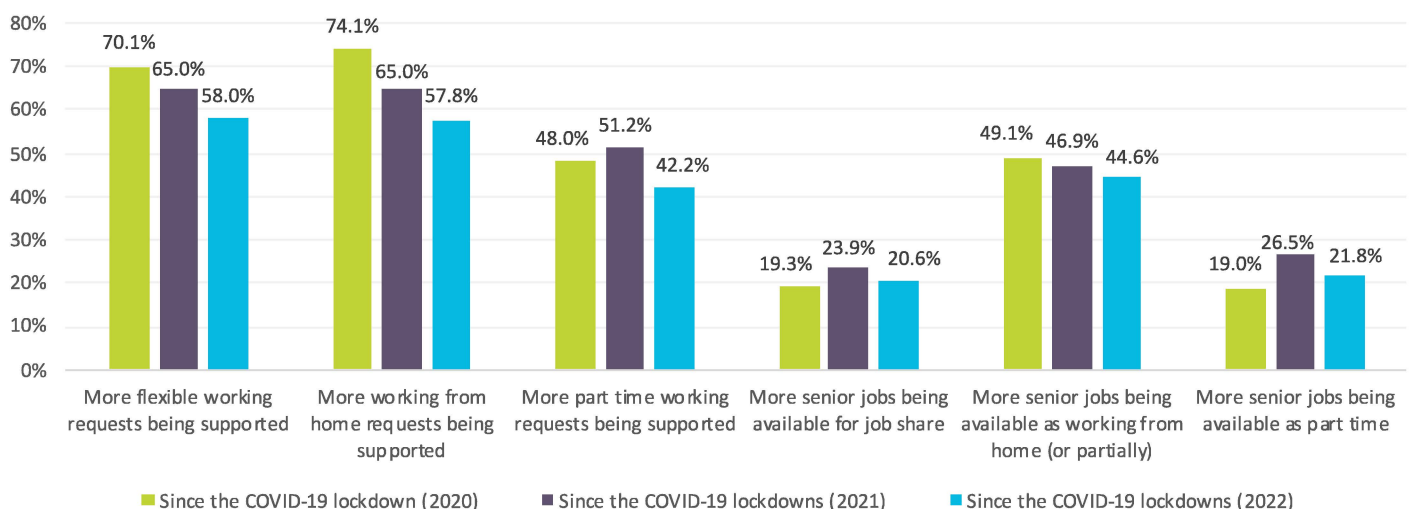


Figure 11: Percentage of managers reporting their organisation as being more supportive of different types of flexible working requests in the future

Managers also report receiving advice or training on how to better support employees making use of hybrid and flexible working across all industries, as seen in Figure 12. This training and advice on how to support employees using flexible working policies have been more prevalent in the professional, scientific and technical industries than in any other industries.

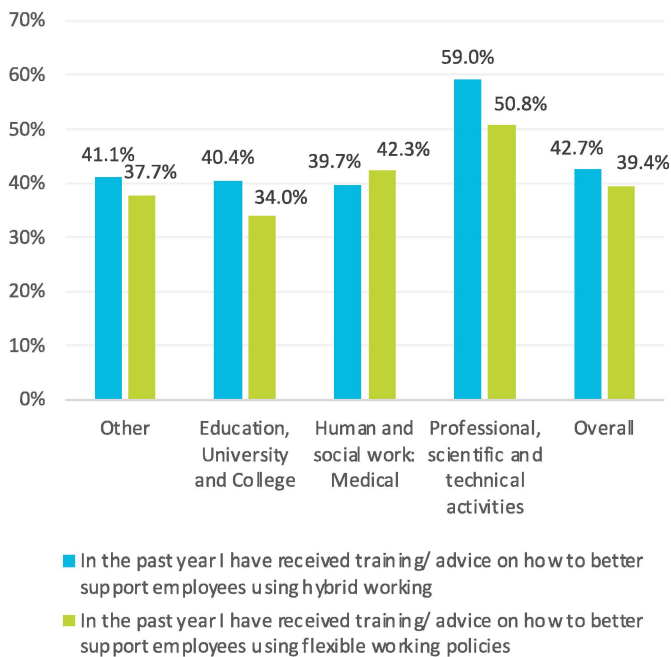


Figure 12: Percentage of managers reporting receiving training or advice on how to better support employees using hybrid working and flexible working policies in the past year by industry

Figures 13 and 14 show the flexible working arrangements that managers find the easiest (13) and hardest (14) to approve, either formally or informally. Nearly half of all managers reported that they find working from home the easiest request to approve (43.9%). However, over 1 in 5 managers also reported that working from home requests are the most difficult to approve (21.3%) which suggests that managers have very different experiences approving the same type of flexible working arrangement. Job share requests appear to be the most difficult to approve, with 44.9% of managers reporting that these are the hardest. These findings related to job share being a hard request to support may also be shaped by the attitudes held toward job shares not increasing productivity (see Figure 2).

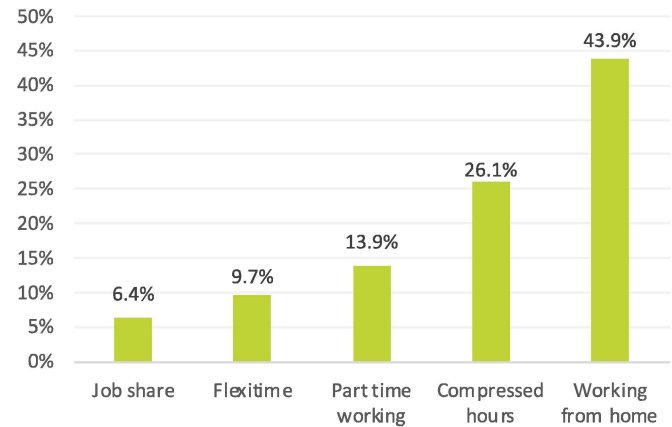


Figure 13: Percentage of managers reporting which form of flexible working is the easiest request to approve (formally or informally)

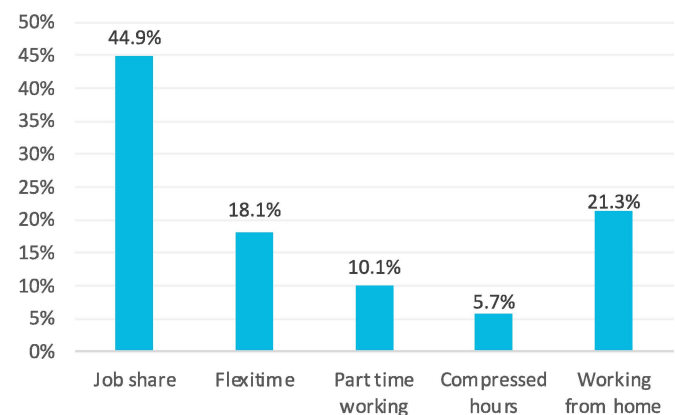


Figure 14: Percentage of managers reporting which form of flexible working is the hardest request to approve (formally or informally)

Managers reported that they have many employees who are not able to use the types of flexible working they wish to use (see Figure 15). Overall, 36.2% of managers reported employees and team members are not using the form of flexible working they wish to use. This figure is highest in the Human and Social Work: Medical sector (41%) and lowest in Education, Universities and Colleges (31.9%). Across all sectors, 63.8% of employees and team members are using the form of flexible working they wish to use. This is highest in Education, Universities and Colleges (68.1%) and lowest in the Human and Social Work: Medical sector (59%).



Managers find working from home the easiest Flexible Working policy request to approve and job share the hardest to approve

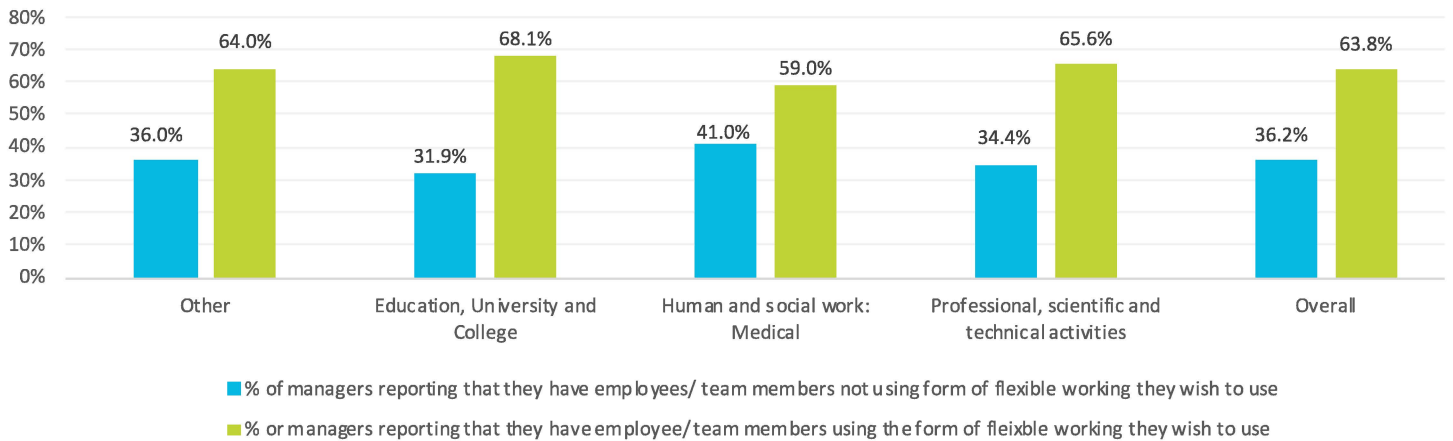


Figure 15: Percentage of managers reporting that employees/team members are not using the form of flexible working they wish to use.

Figure 16 shows the percentage of managers using different forms of flexible working themselves and what types of flexible working are available to them in their workplaces. Over half of managers surveyed reported they were using working from home (52.8%) and over a third used flexitime (37.9%). Over 50% of all managers reported that job sharing (53.1%), and compressed hours (54.6%) were not

available at their workplaces. 57.5% of managers reported that whilst part-time working was available at their workplace, they did not make use of this. Finally, over 1 in 5 managers (20.8%) reported that they used working from home as a form of flexible working over the lockdowns but had since stopped working in this way.

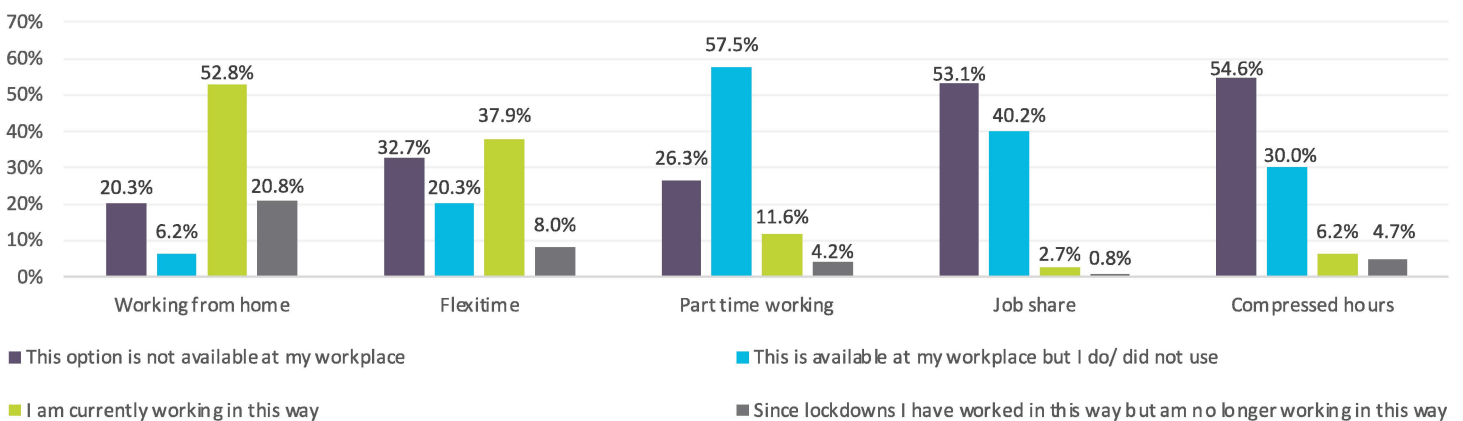


Figure 16: Percentage of managers reporting if they are currently using flexible working and the availability in their organisation

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, more managers have worked flexibly which seems to influence their likelihood to apply for or continue to use these policies in the future. Figure 17 shows a high percentage of managers still working from home (52.8%) or making use of flexitime (37.9%) in 2022. A large proportion of managers who are not currently using either of these flexible working policies still reported that they are likely to apply to use these in the future (36% and 48.1%, respectively). Interestingly, managers are much less likely to apply to use other forms of flexible working

such as part-time, compressed hours or job share in the future, suggesting that changes in attitudes around flexible working practices outside of flexitime and homeworking are still yet to change and/ or be addressed. 20.1% of managers were either currently working part-time or planning to work part-time in the future, and 19.4% are either working compressed hours currently or planning to work compressed hours in the future. Job share is much less popular, though 5.0% of managers were still either working this way or planning to in the future.

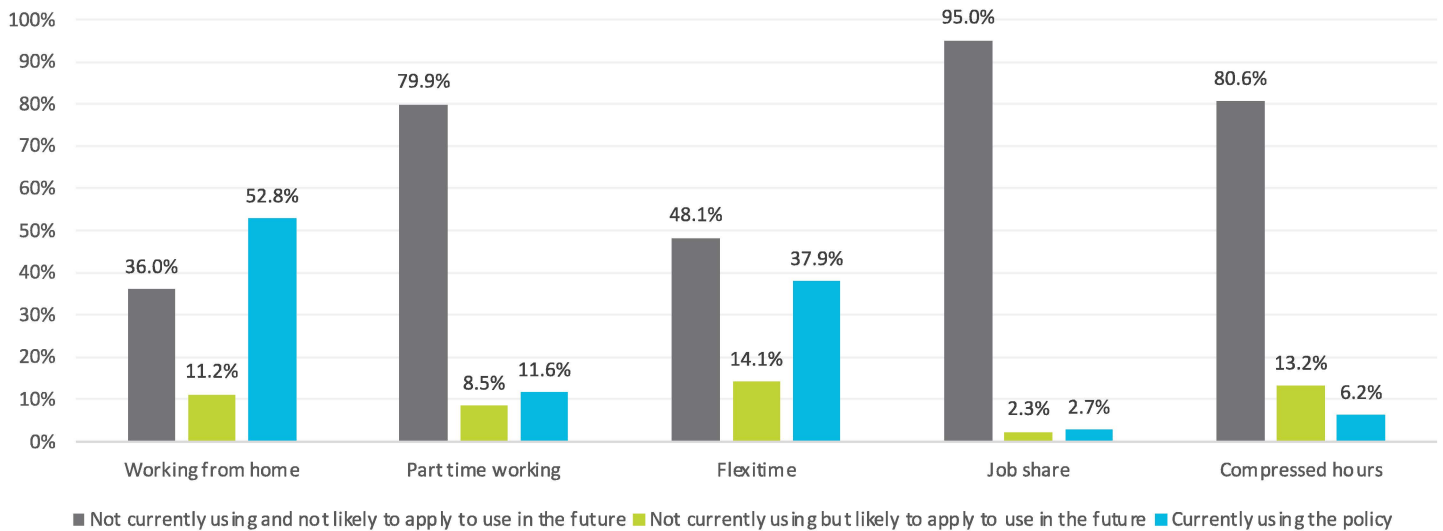


Figure 17: Percentage of managers reporting they are likely or very likely to apply to work using each form of flexible working in future

A large proportion of staff are working flexibly on an informal basis

Figure 18 shows that where staff are using flexible working policies, they are very often doing this informally, particularly for working from home (45.1%) and flexitime (36.5%), but also for part-time working, compressed hours and job shares. It is noteworthy to see nearly 50% of managers reported the majority of employees working from home informally with no formal application made to the organisation, which suggests that employees are being allowed to work flexibly informally without a formal request. This finding also highlights that, moving forward, organisations may not require formal approvals for employees to work more flexibly. Whilst these numbers have dropped slightly since phase two (year 2021; Birkett et al. 2021), they are still very high and suggest a change in norms around flexible working requests. However, this also potentially raises issues when employees return to work or change line managers and could lose the opportunity to work flexibly unless these arrangements are formalised.

Of the managers who reported use of flexible working since the beginning of the pandemic, the ways in which they requested this varied greatly. Figure 19 details the different ways in which managers asked for the forms of flexible working they currently use. Many of the managers (28.8%) appear to have made a request through an informal

conversation with their manager, followed by those who were instructed to work this way due to the COVID-19 lockdowns (19.1%). Only 0.2% of managers made this request through a conversation with HR, 9.0% through a formal meeting with their manager and 12.4% via a formal email request. This demonstrates the informal way in which flexible working arrangements appear to be requested and used since the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Figure 20 shows the percentage of managers whose flexible working request was processed as a contractual change. Only 13.2% of managers reported that they began working flexibly after their request was approved and their contract had been changed to reflect this, compared to 32.7% of managers where no contractual change took place.

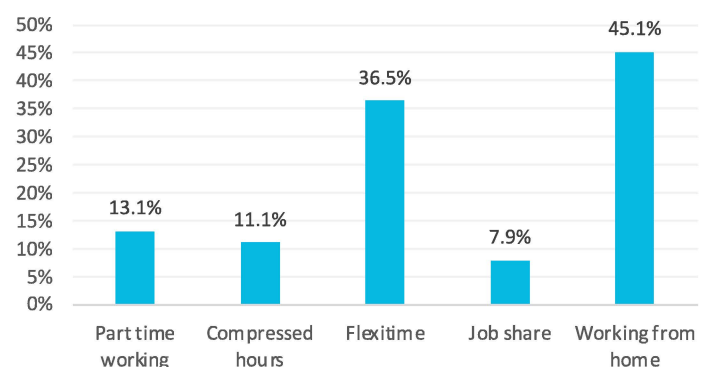


Figure 18: Percentage of managers reporting the majority of employees using type of flexible working have been doing so informally (no formal application made to the organisation) in the past six months

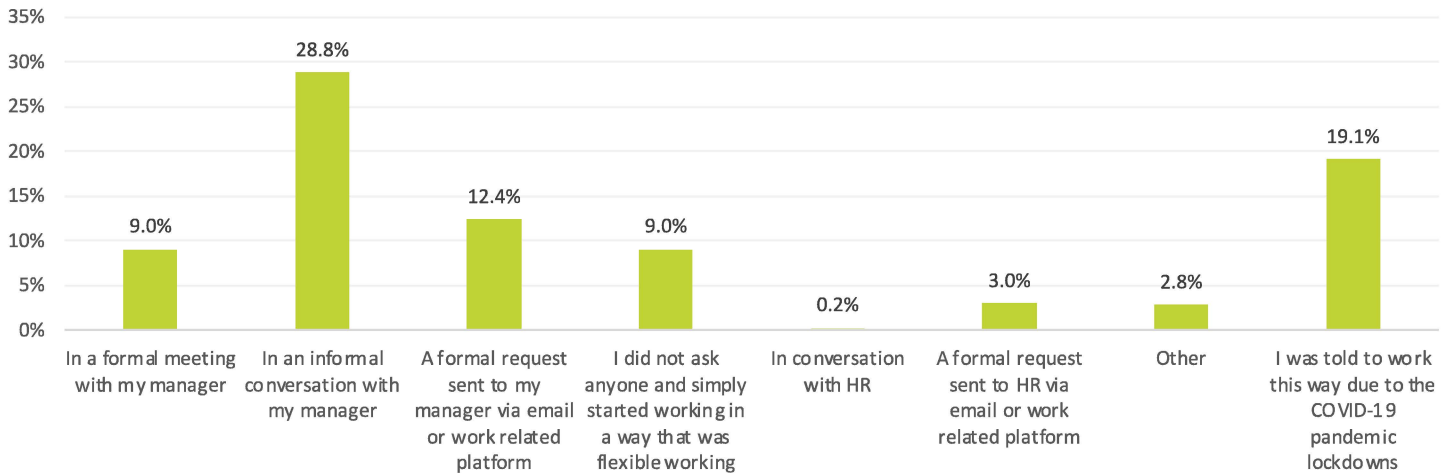


Figure 19: Amongst those managers that used flexible working since COVID-19 or are currently using at least one form of flexible working, how did they ask for it?

Availability of and support for Flexible working in the future

Since phase one of this research in 2020, managers have consistently indicated that working from home will be much more available and better supported in the future. This has levelled off somewhat in 2021 and 2022 but is still consistently above 50%. The managers in this phase three survey indicated that working from home would be much better supported in the future with more jobs advertised as available for homeworking (58.6%), more tools to support working from home (58.3%) and improved support for working from home by the organisation (55.9%) as shown in Figure 21. These figures have decreased slightly since 2021 but markedly since 2020 levels when working from home (if possible) was mandatory. Despite this, it should be noted that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of homeworking and support for homeworking was relatively low and it is encouraging to see that these figures remain high despite a decline over the course

of the pandemic. Additionally, it is encouraging to see a steady increase in the percentage of managers reporting that more roles will be advertised as available for flexible working, with 50% reporting this in 2020 and 55.4% reporting this in 2022.

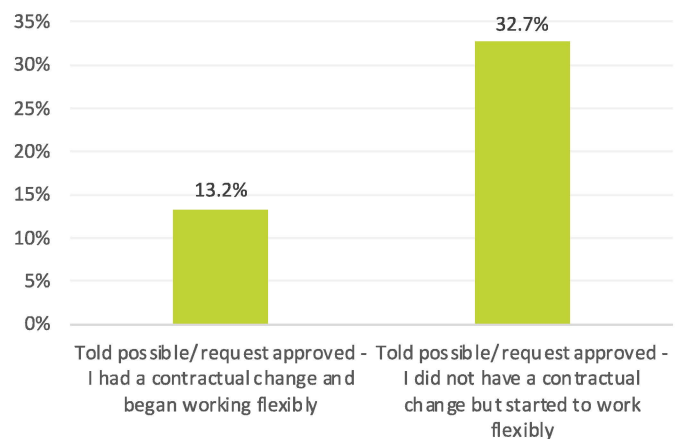


Figure 20: Amongst those managers that used flexible working since COVID-19 or are currently using at least one form of flexible working, what was the outcome of their request?

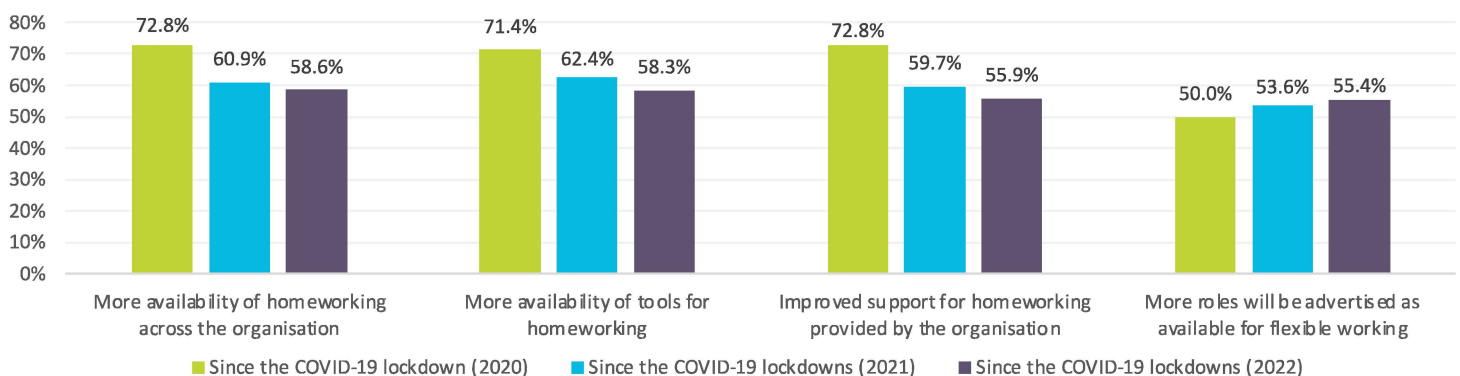


Figure 21: Percentage of managers reporting their organisation as likely or very likely to make changes around flexible working/homeworking

Figure 22 shows the percentage of managers who believe job advertisements should include the availability of flexible working (93.5%), making them more attractive to potential applicants (90.5%). These figures have risen since 2021 (Birkett et al. 2021) which might suggest that managers' attitudes towards flexible working have improved.

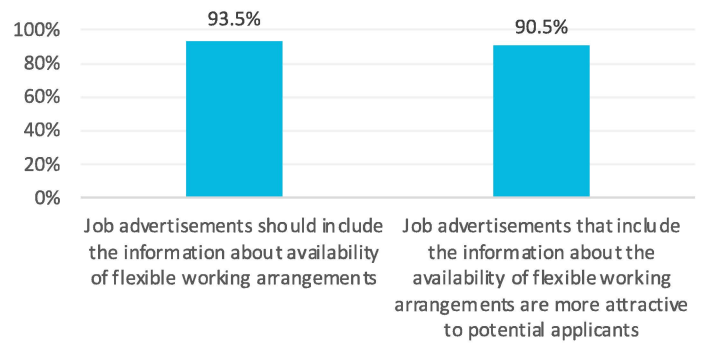


Figure 22: Percentage of managers reporting agreement to statements involving flexible working and job advertisements

4 SPATIAL FLEXIBILITY AND FUTURE USE OF OFFICE SPACE

Use of office space

Since the pandemic began, organisations seem to have recognised that attitudes towards and expectations for flexible working have markedly changed. As we have seen, managers expect their organisations to be much more supportive of flexible working in the future. These changes are mirrored in managers' expectations for how often their staff will come into the office in the future. In 2022, 69.3% of managers suggested their organisations are not expecting employees to be back in the office more than four days a week. This is an increase from 2021, which suggests a profound change in working norms compared to pre-pandemic times. Indeed, the number of managers expecting their employees to be in one day a week nearly doubled from 10.5% in 2021 (Birkett et al. 2021) to 20.4% in 2022 (see

Figure 23). Less than a third (30.7%) of managers reported that they are expecting employees to be in the office five days a week now all COVID-19 restrictions are removed (see Figure 23), this is down from 41.0% of managers reporting this in 2021 (Birkett et al. 2021). What is clear from the data is that managers are expecting employees to be in the office a lot less than in pre-COVID times, but there is still some uncertainty about what this will look like. Despite this, employers have been making alterations to the office space available. However, in 2022 only 37.7% of managers reported that their organisation conducted a survey (consultation or similar) with employees about working preferences before making the decision around the amount of office space available for use by employees in the future.

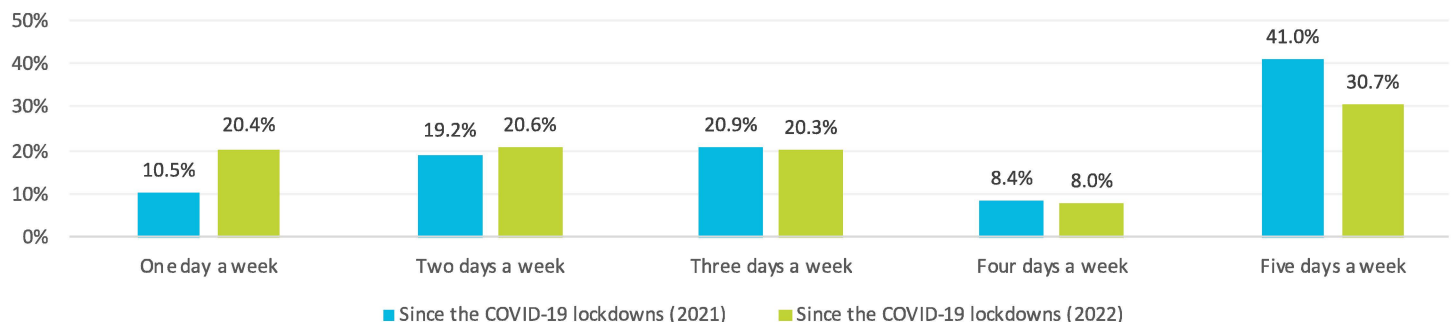


Figure 23: Percentage of managers reporting how many days per week, on average, their organisation is expecting employees to be in the office

Organisations plan to reduce and repurpose office space

Regarding planning for future office space, overall, 33.7% of managers reported that their organisation had reduced or was planning to reduce the amount of office space available in the future. Managers also reported on how the remaining office space in their organisation would be repurposed, with 25.3% reporting that there would be fewer individual offices,

9.7% reporting there would be fewer shared offices, 21.8% reporting more space for events/workshops, and 12.7% reporting more space would be made available for wellbeing (see Figure 24). These figures suggest organisations are planning for very different patterns of working in future. These figures are very similar to those from phase two (2021), suggesting that attitudes towards homeworking and office spaces being repurposed have gone through lasting changes since the COVID-19 pandemic.

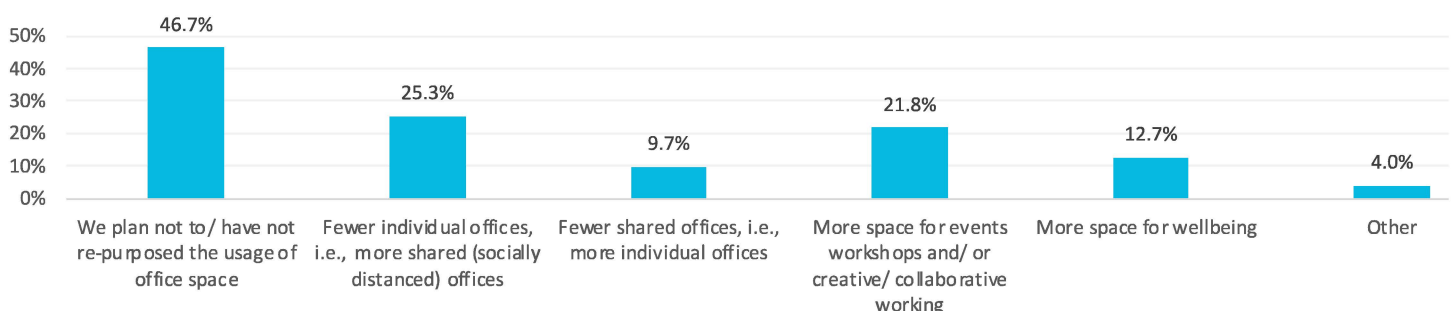


Figure 24: Percentage of managers reporting how the office space would be repurposed

5 CONSULTATION AND SURVEILLANCE

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

Consultation

Figure 25 outlines the ways in which organisations have consulted with employees as a way of keeping an open conversation with staff generally over the past six months. The data shows us that organisations rely heavily on informal employee feedback (46.6%) or other forms of less formal collective feedback, indicating that organisations engage directly and informally with employees for feedback rather than go through more formal channels such as Trade Union representatives (39.7%).

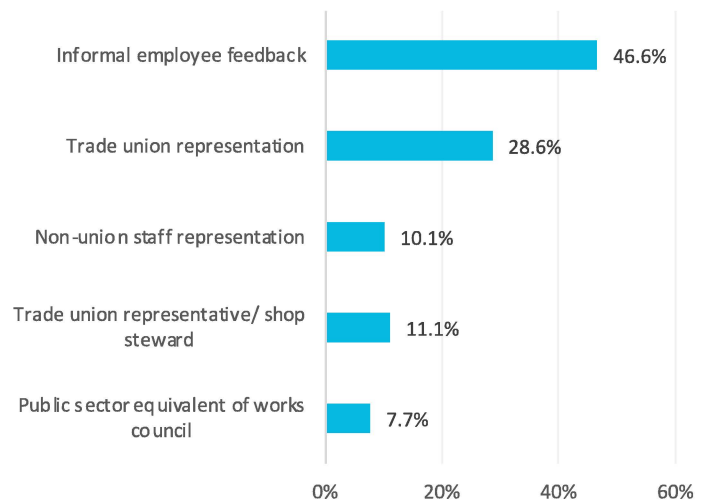


Figure 25: Percentage of managers reporting whether their organisation has engaged with any of these methods of employee communication in the past six months

Use of surveillance and monitoring methods

Many organisations may have had surveillance methods in place pre-pandemic but with more employees working from home than ever before, organisations had to adapt quickly to this shift in working practices, and the data suggest surveillance methods were either implemented or continued. Amongst the managers surveyed, 27.0% reported the use of computer software to monitor performance amongst employees. Managers were also asked about the kinds of monitoring their organisation undertook at the present time and 28.0% of managers reported their organisation monitoring staff emails, 14.7% of managers reported their organisation monitoring staff phone calls, 5.0%

of managers reported their organisation monitoring staff typing and 9.7% of managers reported their organisation monitoring of social media outside of work hours.

Figure 26 shows the attitudes of managers towards surveillance in the workplace. Nearly 80% of managers surveyed (78.9%) reported that they feel the use of surveillance at work implies that employers do not trust their employees, whilst 64.2% of managers agreed that the use of surveillance methods at work increases their stress levels. On the other hand, over one third of managers (37.4%) agreed that surveillance helps to reduce workplace bullying, whilst only 17.3% of managers agreed that surveillance helps to improve employee productivity.

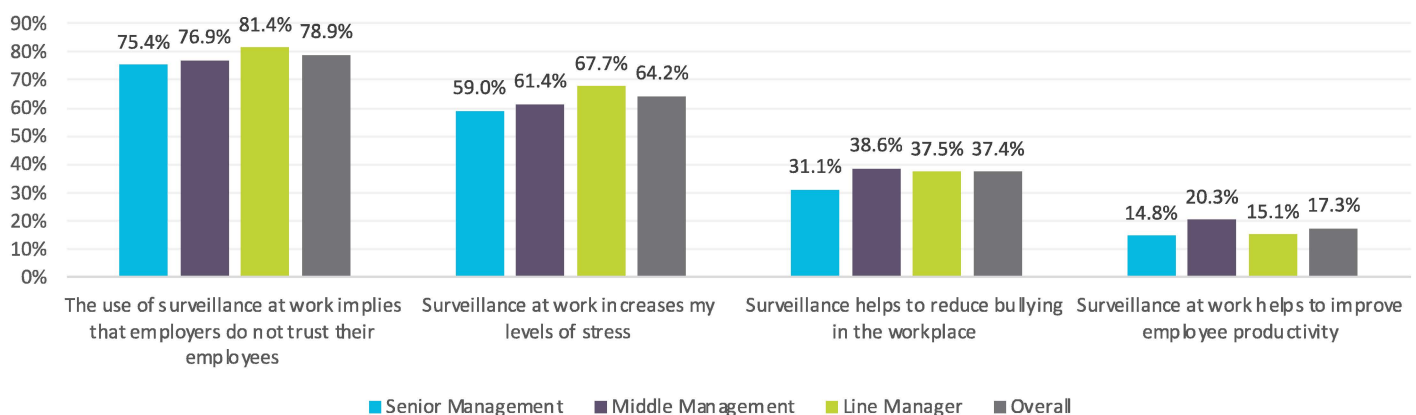


Figure 26: Percentage of managers reporting agree or strongly agree to statements about surveillance by role

The types of surveillance that managers deem as acceptable to use in the workplace differs from sector to sector (see Figure 27). Within the Medical and Healthcare sector, nearly half of all managers surveyed (44.9%) reported that they feel facial recognition software is an acceptable form of monitoring in the workplace. The number of managers across other sectors who agreed with this was significantly lower. Over a third of managers across all sectors (34.7%) reported that monitoring phone logs and calls (including recording calls) was an acceptable form of monitoring at work. Nearly half (42.9%) of all managers surveyed viewed the monitoring of employee work emails, files and browser history as an acceptable form of monitoring. Within the Medical and Healthcare

sector, this rose to 50% of managers surveyed, and dropped to only 21.3% in the Education sector. Only a small percentage (11.2%) of managers felt that the monitoring of social media use outside of work hours was an acceptable form of monitoring, however more managers felt that the monitoring of employee browser history when connected to the work WIFI was acceptable (27.5%).

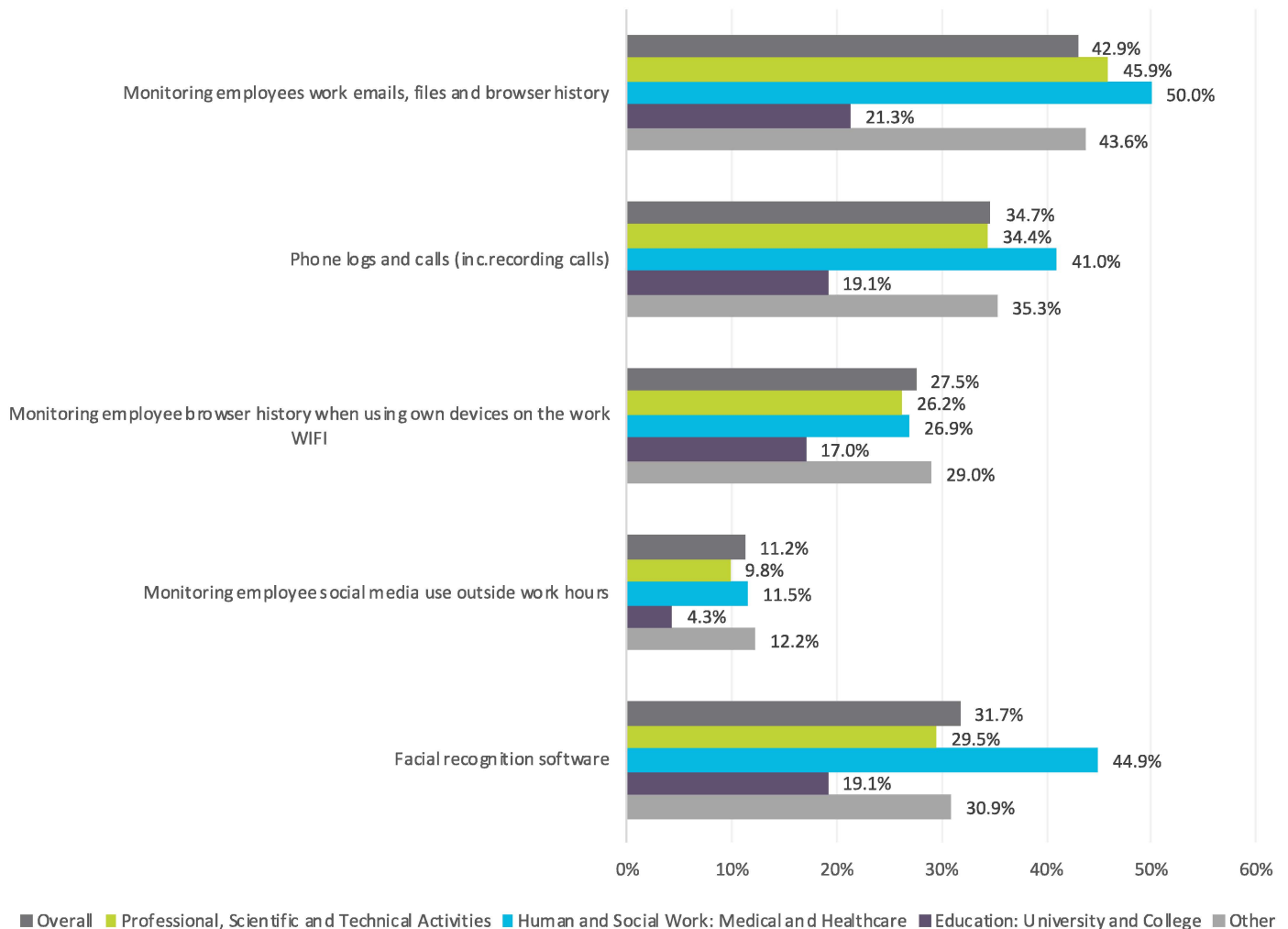


Figure 27: Percentage of managers reporting whether each form of monitoring is acceptable in the workplace for use on all employees in the organisation

6 CONCLUSION

The Working From Home During COVID-19 Project was undertaken by the University of Birmingham and the University of Kent between 2020 and 2021. As we move into a post lockdown world, the focus of this work has changed to look beyond COVID-19 working practices and an original focus on homeworking. As this work moves forward it will focus on the implications of COVID-19 working practices for flexible working and the future of work. As such, the new project has been named the Flexible Working and the Future of Work project which is a longitudinal study of flexible working post lockdown, funded and led by the Equal Parenting Project at the University of Birmingham and the University of York. This study is underpinned by data from managers managing staff working flexibly since COVID-19. Using this data, the team have been able to map the changing experiences of this group and resulting changes in attitudes and future intentions regarding flexible working. The data clearly shows that experiences of working from home during COVID-19 have been broadly positive and managers are expecting their organisations to encourage more flexible working in the future, even in senior roles, with hybrid working becoming increasingly popular. Managers have clearly been swayed by evidence and the experiences of supervising employees and using flexible working policies themselves (Sweet, Pitt, Catsouphe, and James, 2017). Many organisations have already implemented hybrid working practices and reduced office space. The initial picture here is positive considering how quickly employees in many industries have adapted to working from home, often resulting in increases in productivity, work-life balance, motivation and autonomy. This is combined with an increased interest in future flexible working from employees (Chung et al. 2020). COVID-19 has changed attitudes around flexible working and reduced flexible working stigma, creating the potential for more inclusive, more efficient workplaces. However, the current situation is precarious, with flexible working tied to the pandemic mainly in the form of informal work practices agreed with individual managers. Indeed, evidence suggests that the movement away from long hours working during COVID-19 may already be reversing. As such, we cannot assume that these new attitudes and practices will continue now COVID-19 is subsiding.

Reflecting on the changes seen between phase one, phase two and phase three of this research

project, it is encouraging to see that managers' attitudes towards flexible working and organisations' approaches to flexible working policies and practices remain positive. This suggests that organisations and managers intend to continue to support employees working flexibly and working from home in the future. However, this does not mean that all the barriers that created flexible working stigma have been resolved or that flexible working will be open to all in the future. Flexible working during this time has not been readily available to those on furlough or in front-line roles, and for the rest has been largely forced on companies by government guidelines, focused on flexitime and working from home and done informally. Using flexible working informally has its benefits, such as permitting trial of a form of flexible working but without formalisation, long-term acceptance and active support from organisations for a broad range of flexible working arrangements, the progress made on flexible working during the pandemic could be lost and the full benefits of inclusive well supported flexible working never realised. Some significant questions arise from this data regarding the future of work, inclusion and gender equality in the workplace. For example, how do we ensure all industries embrace the journey to more accessible flexible working and for jobs at all levels? How do we ensure that the focus on productivity and flexible working does not lead to work intensification, as people work through commuting times and find it difficult to switch off after working hours when working from home? Related to this, will employers expect the same level of productivity on days employees are in the office in the future, essentially extending commuters' workdays? In addition, how do we ensure new opportunities for flexible working are not only taken up by female carers, further gendering the concept of flexible working and creating a two-tier workforce (Chung et al. 2021)? Importantly, what impact will these potential mass changes in working practices mean for town planning, city centre employment, public transport, road traffic, and the environment in the longer term? For example, while mass homeworking is arguably leading to fewer car journeys, working from home means increased use of gas and electric throughout the day in people's home which also has an impact on the environment. These are all potential questions that policymakers and employers need to consider, and we offer some recommendations to this effect below.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Recommendations for organisations/managers

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

Recommendations for policymakers

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

8 METHODOLOGY / ABOUT THE FLEXIBLE WORKING AND THE FUTURE OF WORK PROJECT

The Flexible Working and the Future of Work Project is a joint project led and funded by Dr Sarah Forbes based at the University of York, Dr Holly Birkett and Lowri Evans based at the University of Birmingham. The earlier Working from Home During COVID-19 Project was also led by Prof. Heejung Chung from the University of Kent. The project has received full ethics approval and was set up to understand what impact the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdowns and resulting mass working from home has had on working practices and to explore the likely implications for the future of work. So far, a total of four surveys have been undertaken, one employee survey and three manager surveys.

The employee survey was undertaken between 22nd May – 15th June 2020 with 1,160 employees from across the UK and explores a range of work-life issues, attitudes towards flexible working and future preferences for working from home in the future (to name a few). A full copy of the report on the findings from that survey can be found [here](#).

The first manager survey (phase one) was undertaken amongst 742 managers from across the UK between the 24th of July and the 11th of August in 2020. A full copy of the report on the findings from that survey can be found [here](#). The survey explored how lockdown working has influenced a range of work-life issues, attitudes to flexible working and future preferences around flexible working from the perspective of managers across the UK.

The second manager survey (phase two) was undertaken amongst 631 managers from across the UK between the 28th of May and the 12th of June in 2021. A full copy of the report on the findings from that survey can be found [here](#). It explored the impact of working from home on performance and managers' attitudes towards and preferences for flexible working in the future. The goal was to investigate how managers have managed staff

during the COVID-19 lockdowns, working patterns, experience and views toward surveillance and changing attitudes to homeworking and flexible working across organisations since the COVID-19 lockdown.

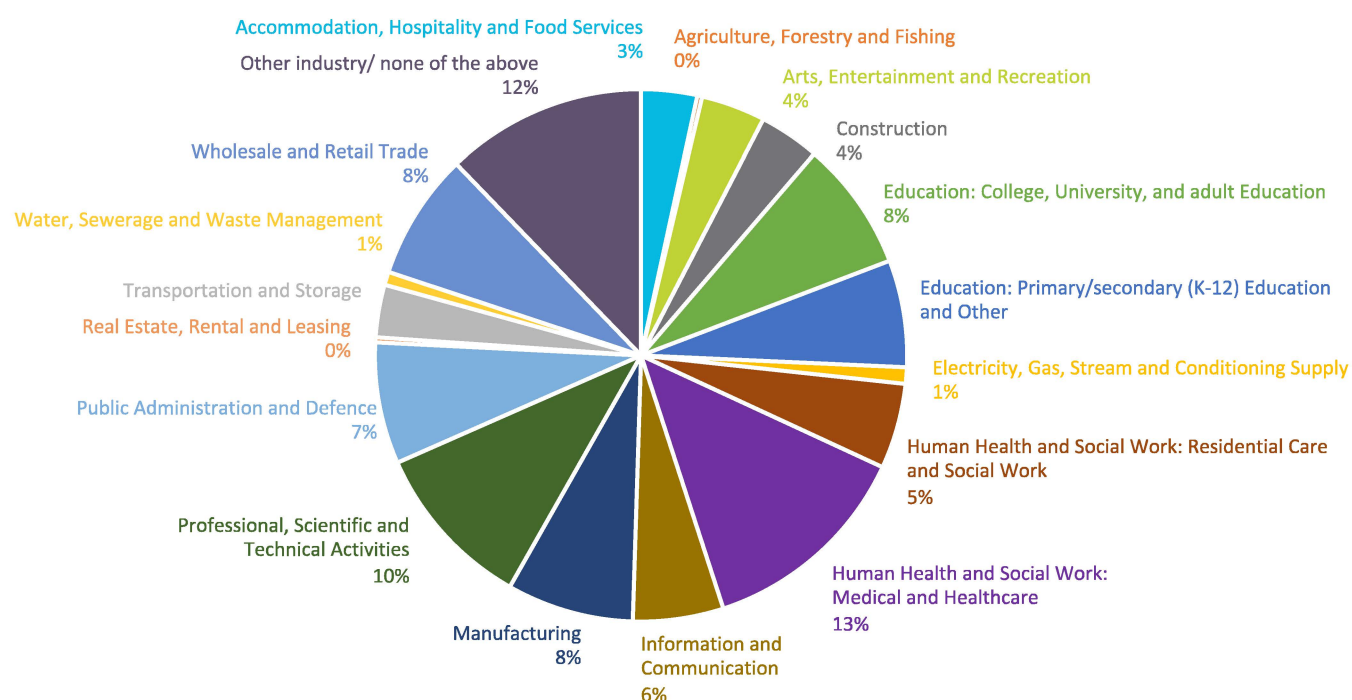
The managers' survey underpinning this report (phase three) asked 597 managers about their experiences of managing employees' flexible working (i.e., part-time working, flexitime, working from home, job share and compressed hours). It also explored the impact of flexible working on performance and managers' attitudes towards and preferences for working flexibly in the future. The data was collected between 22nd June and 16th August 2022. The goal was to investigate how managers have managed staff using flexible working, how employees and managers request flexible working, experience and views toward surveillance and changing attitudes to flexible working across organisations.

This report is based on the third manager survey (phase three). The survey was restricted to participants at least 18 years old, residing in the United Kingdom, in paid employment (not self-employed or on furlough) and those that were line managing staff. Non-probability sampling was used and to gather this sample, we used the online survey panel company Prolific. Amongst the sample, 51.8% identified as female, 17.4% reported London and 15.7% reported Southeast England as their normal work location outside of lockdowns. Respondents were from an array of industries, with 'Professional, scientific and technical activities' and 'Human Health and Social Work: Medical and Healthcare' making up 10.2% and 13.1% of the sample respectively (see Table 1 for a profile of respondents). This sample presents valuable insights into the experiences of managers since the pandemic and their perceived intentions to support flexible working in the future.

Table 1: Profile of respondents

		Senior manager (n=61)	Middle manager (n=251)	Line manager (n=285)	Overall (n=597)
Gender	% Female	44.30%	50.20%	54.70%	51.80%
Age	% aged under 40	36.10%	52.20%	64.20%	56.30%
Ethnicity	% Non-White	11.50%	17.10%	15.40%	15.70%
Size of organisation (employees)	1 to 49 employees	37.70%	17.50%	18.60%	20.10%
	50 to 249 employees	13.10%	21.90%	18.60%	19.40%
	250+ employees	49.20%	60.60%	62.80%	60.50%
Industry	Education: College, University and Adult Education	11.50%	6.40%	8.40%	7.90%
	Human health and social work: Medical and healthcare	4.90%	14.70%	13.30%	13.10%
	Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	11.50%	9.20%	10.90%	10.20%
	Other	72.10%	69.70%	67.40%	68.80%
Gender makeup of the organisation	Mostly women	23.00%	29.10%	27.40%	27.60%
	Mostly men	34.40%	21.90%	24.20%	24.30%
	About half women and half men	42.60%	47.40%	46.30%	46.40%
Gender makeup of senior management	Less than half (0-39%)	55.70%	60.20%	59.30%	59.30%
	About half (40-59%)	23.00%	23.50%	24.20%	23.80%
	More than half (60-100%)	21.30%	16.30%	16.50%	16.90%
Normal location of work outside lockdown	London	19.70%	15.90%	18.20%	17.40%
	Southeast England	23.00%	17.10%	13.00%	15.70%
	Southwest England	3.30%	7.60%	7.40%	7.00%
	East Midlands	8.20%	8.40%	7.40%	7.90%
	West Midlands	6.60%	10.40%	7.40%	8.50%
	Yorkshire and The Humber	16.40%	6.40%	10.50%	9.40%
	Northeast England	1.60%	4.40%	5.60%	4.70%
	Northwest England	9.80%	10.00%	13.70%	11.70%
	Wales	1.60%	6.00%	4.60%	4.90%
	Scotland	3.30%	10.80%	9.10%	9.20%
	Northern Ireland	6.60%	3.20%	3.20%	3.50%

Figure 28: Percentage of respondents by industry



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11 AUTHOR INFORMATION

The Flexible Working and the Future of Work Project is a collaborative project undertaken by the Equal Parenting Project supported by the University of Birmingham and the University of York. The Flexible Working and the Future of Work Project builds on work undertaken for The Working From Home During COVID-19 Project which was a collaboration between the University of Birmingham and the University of Kent which was made up of two distinct but complementary packages of work, one covering employees' experiences of homeworking during lockdown and one covering employers and managers' experiences of homeworking during lockdown and beyond.

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