Flexible working and the future of work: Managing employees since COVID-19

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Executive Summary

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

Policy recommendations

It is important to act quickly to entrench some of the pandemic-related wins around FW highlighted throughout this report. Below are recommendations for policy makers to aide this process:

- Encourage companies with 250+ employees to report on the use of FW as part of gender pay gap reporting and make this information publicly available.

- Consider changing the onus around FW to employers providing a case as to why certain jobs should not be available for FW rather than employees providing a case. Also, review FW being a day one of employment right.

- Review employment law around FW to ensure it is fit for purpose with post-COVID-19 hybrid working, including protections for those working flexibly.

- Offer fathers more non-transferable parental leave to encourage a more equal distribution of care and provide them with information about FW during this period.

- Government should consider implications for the environment, town centres and employment of

changes of ways of working and reductions in office space.

- More actively promote the HMRC scheme for reimbursing companies who pay their employees working from home (WFH) overheads.

- Explore the possibility of parental pay being available from day one of employment.

- Support a campaign to promote FW in all industries and jobs, particularly amongst men, focusing on jobs which aren't perceived as flexible.

- Encourage employers to add information about FW to job adverts.

Key findings

Managers' attitudes towards flexible working

WFH has become much more prevalent as a result of the pandemic. At the same time, employees' attitudes to FW and WFH have changed, with the majority planning to request FW arrangements on their return to work. The research found that:

- Managers are currently more positive about employees WFH compared to pre-COVID-19 with 51.8% agreeing that WFH improves employee concentration, 59.5% agreeing it increases productivity and 62.8% agreeing it increases motivation.

- Managers were most positive about productivity gains for FW that was prevalent during COVID-19 with 59.5% agreeing WFH increases productivity, while 72.7% believed the same for flexi-time.

- Managers identified a link between other types of FW and productivity, which were not as prevalent during COVID-19, with 43.7% agreeing that compressed hours increases productivity; 44.1% that part-time working increases productivity; while 33.2% thought the same about job share.

- Manager beliefs that employees need to work long hours to progress their career had 43.3% agreement pre-pandemic, and this decreased to 38.7% in 2020 and 35.2% in 2021, but then increased to 41.9% 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' future intentions in terms of support for flexible working

Managers are much more likely to support requests for FW across their organisations in the future, and this is likely the result of their positive experiences of managing WFH during lockdowns.

- In 2022, 58.0% of managers said their organisation would be more supportive of FW requests in future, down from 70% in 2020, but this still represents a step change in how FW is perceived.

- Managers find WFH the easiest FW policy to approve (43.9%) and job share the hardest (44.9%) to approve.

- Most staff are using FW policies informally, particularly for WFH (45.1%) and flexi-time (36.5%), but also for part-time working, compressed hours and job shares.

- Over 50% of all managers reported that job sharing (53.1%) and compressed hours (54.6%) were not available in their workplace.

- Most managers believe job advertisements should include the availability of FW (93.5%) making them more attractive to potential applicants (90.5%). These figures have risen since 2021.

Changes in spatial flexibility and use of office space

Managers expect their organisations to be much more supportive of FW in the future. These changes are mirrored in expectations for how often their staff will come into the office in future and the reported repurposing of office space.

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

  - 33.7% of managers reported their organisation

had reduced or were planning to reduce office space available. 37.7% of managers reported having consulted employees about working preferences before making decisions about office space.

- Managers reported that there would be fewer individual offices (25.3%), fewer shared offices (9.7%), but more space for events/workshops (21.8%) and more space would be made available for wellbeing (12.7%).

Consultation and Surveillance at Work

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

- More managers are providing regular performance feedback to staff now compared to 2021.

- Organisations rely 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 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.

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

Find out more

The full report is available here.

Contact

Dr Holly Birkett, University of Birmingham
h.birkett@bham.ac.uk
Dr Sarah Forbes, University of York
sarah.forbes@york.ac.uk