Four ways you and your company can make flexible work better

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The world of work is fast changing. As life expectancy lengthens and labour markets shift, our working lives have become more complicated. The old expectations about how we work have become

unsustainable—not least the expectation that we religiously travel to and from a fixed location ten times a week during rush hour, with all the knock-on effects that this has for carbon emissions.

Flexible work has the potential to solve many issues that see people fall out of the workforce. For employees, this means being better able to fit their jobs around other responsibilities, such as looking after children or elderly relatives. For businesses, this means retaining staff and saving the tens of thousands of pounds it costs to replace them.

Yet many remain stuck in positions with rigid working hours. One of the sticking points for employers seems to be that flexible work is equated with the one or two formats that they are familiar with—most often, letting staff work from home or work part-time. So a whole battery of ways in which flexible work could be used to align with the needs of a diverse workforce gets overlooked.

Recent research mapping the various combinations of flexible work found over 300 possible ways in which jobs could be organised flexibly. This includes job shares, compressed hours, term-time working, flexi-hours and tapered working. There is considerable scope to draw upon this host of working practices.

Here are four ways that businesses can get flexible working to work for them and their staff.

1. Get line managers on board

First and foremost, managers need training in how to manage flexible work. My own research found that line managers are the single biggest block on flexible work uptake. And even where flexible work is supported, too often it is assumed that managers know the unknowable and can just run with new working practices.

But without any investment being made in managers, flexible working arrangements are set up to fail. Alternatively, the buck gets passed onto the flexible worker to make a success of a new arrangement, giving him or her one more task for their workload, and one with a high penalty attached to failure—a stressful experience in itself.

Realistically, achieving this buy-in will also need some nudging, particularly for smaller businesses and sectors where there has been less flexible work. Giving managers access to [success stories and practical guidance](#), backed up by lots of leadership and peer support, is vital.

2. Be flexible about flexibility

Managers and employees need to come together in a safe space to assemble flexible working arrangements that work for everyone, with a real understanding of what is at stake and what is possible. A part of this is the need to get flexible about flexibility—recognising that circumstances change and that work arrangements may need to be tweaked or even reversed over time to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

Flexible work has been used as a management tool to achieve savings by imposing remote or zero-hours contracts on workforces, with little input from those called on to do their jobs differently. So it's necessary to give people space to make suggestions and give feedback about flexible work. And it is also about making use of a range of flexible working arrangements.

3. Redefine productivity

Flexible work demands a shift away from seeing productivity in terms of being present for fixed working hours. Indeed, the problem of

presenteeism—where people feel compelled to show their face at work even if they are ill—only feeds into the UK's productivity puzzle.

Companies (and managers) need to devise better measures of output: has a project been completed within schedule, did the team work well together, is the report of a high quality? These are much more effective yardsticks of success than whether staff clock in at 9 o'clock each morning.

4. Advertise your flexibility

Making flexible work available at the point of hire will widen the talent pools available to employers, as people who already work flexibly will be more likely to apply for positions where they won't lose a valued part of their contract. The demand for such a move is significant—flexible working consultancy [Timewise's latest Flexible Job Index](#) found that 87% of employees either work flexibly or want to But in 2019, only 15% of UK jobs were advertised as flexible. Employers who ignore this demand will be poorly prepared in the war for talent.

The evidence base for [the benefits of well-managed flexible working arrangements](#) is getting more and more compelling. It offers increased retention and productivity, and drops in absenteeism. And it's not only employers who stand to make business gains from getting good at managing flexible work, employees with a good work-life balance are more motivated and content. Plus, as the [latest pay gender pay gap figures](#) show that older workers are seeing the greatest disparities, flexible work is a key tool in creating more [age-friendly and equitable workplaces](#).

On a societal level, by organising work more thoughtfully we can make inroads into tackling carbon emissions as our car use becomes more efficient. We could see reduced demands on health and social care

systems as workforce stress levels fall, and balancing care and work demands become more manageable. But we will only achieve this through good management, a fresh approach to job design, and enthusiasm from all involved.

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