

# Flexible work beyond the pandemic

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Flexible work has always been a drawcard for employees, but while managers have typically been reluctant to embrace flexible work arrangements, University of South Australia researchers warn that the topic is likely to become front and centre as employees return to the office after months of lockdown from COVID-19.

Human resource management experts, UniSA's Professor Carol Kulik and Dr. Ruchi Sinha say organisations should be prepared to discuss alternative work arrangements.

And coinciding with June 10 world Flexible Working Day, it is an issue that couldn't be more timely.

"COVID-19 forced people to work from home under the worst possible conditions—it was done in a rush, it was done across the board, and in some cases, it was done without the right supports such as IT, or ergonomics," Dr. Sinha says.

"Yet, even under these sub-optimal conditions, the pandemic showed that flexibility can work, with many people thriving in their safe, home-bound conditions.

"Of course, not everyone loved it, but the work did get done, and employees did show that working from home is not only possible, but also productive.

"Now, as workplaces return to some semblance of normal, people are asking – 'what will happen to workplace flexibility?' – and with such large-scale evidence that flexibility doesn't diminish productivity, businesses cannot afford to turn a blind eye and just return to normal.

"Beyond COVID-19, we need a next normal that will not only embrace lessons from the lockdown, but also encourage flexible work."

While more than 80% of Australian businesses offer scope for flexible work practice, only 17% embrace flexibility, leaving much room for improvement.

The way forward, according to Professor Carol Kulik, is by 'job crafting'

– the notion that each job can be crafted to match the nature of the job and needs of worker.

Prof Kulik says a balance will be necessary to navigate recovery post COVID-19.

"No doubt we're going to need give-and-take when it comes to flexible working arrangements—both for employers and employees," Prof Kulik says.

"Managers need to recognise that they are often the biggest barriers to negotiating flexible work, simply because they aren't well-prepared to motivate or manage staff remotely. They're also concerned about productivity from home, so all in all, it's easier for them to say no to flexibility, than it is to say yes.

"On the other hand, while the pandemic has afforded us the opportunity to prove we can work flexibly, employees must recognise that not all work tasks are conducive to remote execution.

"The solution, we believe, is somewhere in the middle, and through 'job crafting,' employees and managers can negotiate a better fit between the job role and the individual's needs, skills and passions, with the result being both higher efficiency, engagement and loyalty.

"Organisations that proactively use this [recovery time](#) to re-evaluate their assumptions of [flexible work](#) are likely to be leaps and bounds ahead of their competitors.

"By crafting roles and performance criterion effectively, these organisations are more likely to retain their talent, attract new talent and thrive.

"It's time to stop paying lip service to flexible workplace policies. It's time to see change."

Provided by University of South Australia

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