

Five ways to make part-time working easier and more available, according to new research

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Economic inactivity and the rising cost of out-of-work benefits are [high on the UK government's agenda right now](#). But new research into working patterns during the COVID furlough scheme suggests that both

employers and the government could be missing a trick in this area by not making part-time working easier and more available.

While a quarter of the UK workforce already works [part-time \(90% by choice\)](#), currently [22% of the working age population](#) is economically inactive, which means neither employed nor looking for work. But recent figures show that [more than two thirds of economically inactive over-50s](#) who want to return to work, want to do so part-time.

Employers will need to overcome challenges around designing part-time working patterns in order to attract and retain these workers if they want them to fill [record levels of job vacancies](#). This means rethinking part-time working so that it suits both people and companies.

A business [might be reluctant](#) to do the kind of experimentation needed to identify alternative working arrangements. But the UK government's [flexible furlough scheme](#), introduced during the COVID pandemic, provided an ideal opportunity.

This scheme was intended to preserve jobs when [business activity](#) was curtailed during pandemic lockdowns. It allowed employers to deploy staff on a part-time basis and the government covered some of the cost of their full-time wages.

When firms had to use part-time working under the furlough scheme, many managers started to build the skills and knowledge to manage part-time working and became more open to it. This suggests practical trials of part-time employment should be used more widely, both to meet workers' needs and to help companies attract and retain the best talent.

Making 'part-time' work

The research that we conducted into the implementation of the furlough

scheme uncovered some important unintended—but positive—consequences. First, almost 40% of participants in our study reported that using the flexible furlough scheme helped managers learn how to design and manage part-time working more effectively. And second, just over 40% said the experience of using the flexible furlough scheme made line managers more open to part-time working requests from employees and potential recruits.

As part of [our research into this issue](#), we surveyed nearly 500 employers in various sectors between February and April 2022 (in collaboration with the Confederation of British Industry). We also interviewed line managers and senior HR professionals in the hospitality, manufacturing and service sectors between October 2021 and February 2022, and between May and July 2022.

This study, alongside [our previous research in this area](#), shows managers struggle with both workload and time when designing part-time jobs. Typical problems include redistributing part-time workers' "missing" workload, and ensuring the organization's operating hours are covered.

Information gleaned from these experiences could help create more opportunities for part-time working at many UK companies. Here are five key lessons drawn from experiences of managing part-time workers during furlough:

1. Sharing responsibility for covering operating hours

Where employees can be substituted for each other (for example in hospitality or call centers), redesigning rotas or shift patterns across the whole team helps to facilitate part-time working.

During furlough, this more [collaborative approach](#) allowed teams, not just part-time workers, to take responsibility for (re)organizing work to

meet the challenge of gaps in availability. This is generally something that a part-time worker would struggle to achieve alone.

2. Making more use of 'multi-skilling'

When work is impeded by the absence of a part-time worker with a particular skillset, multi-skilling—training employees to do a variety of different tasks—can create more resilience. For example, a hotel housekeeper who can also serve lunch or check in guests at reception is more flexible than one who only has housekeeping skills.

Where specialist knowledge or [personal relationships](#) cannot be covered by others, a level of "maintenance cover" can sometimes be provided by colleagues—sending initial replies to client emails to acknowledge receipt, for example.

3. Talking about other commitments

During the pandemic, non-work commitments were often discussed more openly since many employees were juggling extra responsibilities such as home schooling. As home working provided a window into people's personal lives, line managers became more aware of the need to consult employees about the timing of their non-work commitments, and their preferences for working hours.

Employers who take a more proactive approach to these conversations may find that workers (and potential recruits) feel less hesitant about asking for part-time hours.

4. Finding a realistic workload for part-time workers

Use of the flexible furlough scheme forced managers to work out what

an appropriate workload should look like for a part-time [worker](#). Managers had to adjust workloads—sometimes redistributing work across a team—as well as performance measures.

In some types of work this is an easy task (for example when meeting targets for sales or number of parts manufactured), but in other cases—particularly in knowledge-based work—performance measurement must be more nuanced and requires individual judgment.

5. Accounting for the fixed costs of employing part-time workers

Investment in recruiting and developing part-time workers might be seen as less cost-effective than a similar investment in full-time employees. However, where part-time working is used to attract and retain talent, these costs can be considered as an organization-level investment in workforce capability and planning, rather than something to be borne by one business unit.

For example, centrally-provided recruitment services or learning and development can cut extra management activity required from line managers who employ part-time workers.

In sectors or organizations where part-time working is uncommon, workers may be reluctant to request part-time working. Employers need to be more proactive about offering it—to both existing employees and new recruits. Companies must also take active steps to understand and enable the different working hours preferences of their workforce.

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