

# New research reveals COVID lessons for employers to better support working parents

March 30 2023

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With more than a third of UK workers saying they'd quit if their job demanded a full-time return to the office, and working parents facing the third-most expensive childcare system in the world when juggling

career with family, [research published today](#) by Queen Mary University of London details how flexible working lessons from the pandemic can foster more family-friendly work practices.

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with mothers and fathers who had line managerial responsibilities and worked from home during the COVID-19 crisis. The new report draws on two years of research to provide rich insights into how line managers with children balanced their own workloads while looking after their employees and organizational interests.

The study found that prolonged flexible working since the pandemic has significantly raised expectations among parents to work flexibly—particularly fathers, almost all of whom said it was a dealbreaker when searching for [employment](#). Crucially, the report emphasizes the importance of consistently available childcare and flexible working arrangements, not only for parents to maintain their careers, but also for organizations to maintain productivity.

However, it also found that intense workloads meant line managers who afforded [flexibility](#) to their staff didn't feel able or entitled to use it themselves. When implemented well, the research shows that flexible and remote work can have positive outcomes for both employers and employees.

The report makes recommendations on how line managers can be supported to lead flexible and hybrid working teams effectively. Recommendations for employers include:

- Support parents'—particularly fathers'—requests for flexibility, to challenge assumptions about [family](#) and work life as well as improve workplace inclusion and equality;
- Normalize flexibility in organizational culture by highlighting

case studies that are not typical, e.g. managers who are fathers working flexibly;

- Ensure effective workload management and strategic prioritization; this is key to protecting employees from burnout and ensure well-being and sustainable productivity;
- Empower managers to lead by example and role-model prioritization, with specific training on how to manage a remote and hybrid workforce;

Be prepared and proactive in crisis situations, to reduce stress and instill confidence.

Lead researcher Dr. Maria Adamson, Senior Lecturer in Organisation Studies at Queen Mary's School of Business and Management and Co-Director of its Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity, explained, "Flexible working was embraced and normalized due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it cannot be 'business as usual' in crisis. We found that simply offering flexible working hours is not the best solution for employee well-being, particularly when they have managerial responsibilities and/or children at home; the key is how that flexibility is administered.

"Lockdowns were tough on parents and managers—but best practice ways of working through that crisis can be applied to any high-pressure work environments post-pandemic, or when implementing hybrid working arrangements. By building on these lessons, like focusing on effective workload management and strategic prioritization, employers can ensure that flexible work benefits both organizations and employees as well as improving gender equality."

Christina, a single mother of two working in customer service, told researchers, "I don't think about myself; I need to be there for [my team] to support and listen to them. We're very good when it comes to flexible

working—although, to be honest, I didn't take advantage of it."

Jay, a father working in tech, added, "I found, also, people in the workplace were very quick to understand—especially men, I would say, who didn't traditionally do the school pickup or were slightly from a different generation... They suddenly got it, in my industry, that now my kids are home because someone else isn't looking after them. I now understand what my more junior employees are working towards and what they're having to do."

Provided by Queen Mary, University of London

Citation: New research reveals COVID lessons for employers to better support working parents (2023, March 30) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-03-reveals-covid-lessons-employers-parents.html>

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