

There are more than 300 ways to work flexibly—here are four tips to make it work for you

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Did you know that, according to [a recent study](#), there are more than 300

ways to work flexibly? The list of possible flexible work practices used by an increasingly diverse and aging workforce has grown significantly since many people were forced to work from home during COVID lockdowns.

Before the pandemic, you may have associated [flexible work](#) with things like working from home, part-time work, or reduced hours. Now? You might work a compressed week or reduced hours, job share, or take flexi time or special leave, such as a sabbatical. There are also location-based forms of [flexibility](#), like flex-place and hybrid working.

Generally speaking, a flexible work [arrangement](#) refers to any kind of schedule or workspace without the typical constraints of a traditional 9-5 work arrangement in an office or other location hosted by your [employer](#).

The recent boost in [flexible working](#) practices brings benefits for both employers and employees. When done properly, work flexibility makes lives easier for many employees, improves their job satisfaction, and reduces absenteeism and [commute-related stress](#). [For employers](#), it increases their ability to attract, retain, and motivate employees, boosts diversity and inclusion, and is associated with [lower overhead costs](#) and even [carbon emissions](#).

But not all flexible working arrangements are created equal. The increased autonomy that flexibility brings can blur the boundaries between work and private life. Working flexibly can result in longer working days or create the expectation of employees being available at all times, which can increase feelings of work pressure or even lead to burnout.

Our [research](#) shows that flexibility regulations and frameworks at the national level help create the "rules of the game" for flexible work

arrangements, in essence ensuring that flexible work does not become [\(self\) exploitative](#).

Is flexibility the new norm?

The COVID pandemic might have virtually expanded the availability of flexible work arrangements, but this does not mean that they are accessible to everyone. Our [research](#) suggests that access to flexibility continues to depend heavily on a country's employment relations, policies, and regulations—elements that are rapidly changing in many countries.

Some countries are introducing new regulations to keep pace with the sweeping changes to post-pandemic work practices. In 2024, for example, the [Employment Relations \(Flexible Working\) bill](#) is likely to come into effect in the UK. It will increase the number of times an employee can request flexible working each year and reduce employers' decision period about such applications. Collective bargaining between [trade unions](#) and employers can [offer an important additional layer](#) of flexibility and protection, above and beyond such national regulations.

Indeed, flexibility is shaped by employers' commitment to offer and enable access to flexible working arrangements. It's also based on their willingness to learn from people's experiences (like during the COVID pandemic) to develop more flexible ways of working that advantage both the organization and its employees. Of course, line managers shape real capabilities on the ground.

But even if employers are committed, in practice, flexibility is highly dependent on job characteristics. Some jobs, such as cleaning or maintenance, simply cannot be performed remotely. Other work may require set shifts, such as nursing and policing.

Societal expectations—particularly assumptions about what women and men "should do" in terms of paid work, caring responsibilities, and housework—also matter when trying to make flexibility a reality. Women are often expected to use flexible arrangements to fulfill more traditional roles, like being a homemaker or primary caregiver. But the use of flexibility among men has been often interpreted as a lack of commitment to work, creating a so-called [flexibility stigma](#).

But, if implemented well, flexible arrangements can help both men and women make work (more) compatible with other responsibilities. So, what should you look for when trying to find flexible work?

1. Be flexible about flexibility

Flexibility is not a one-size-fits-all work arrangement. How attractive a given flexible work arrangement is to you likely depends on the life stage you're at, as well as that of your family or partner (if you have one). Think about what fits and why. Yes, flexibility can be advantageous. But also be aware that society expects different things from us as men and women—remember, it's OK to go against the flow.

2. Find out what is available to you

Access to flexible work arrangements might be regulated through your employer, a collective agreement between your union and workplace, or national law. Talk to an HR representative, your line manager, or a union rep about the options available to you. Tell them about your particular circumstances, for example, if you have an invisible disability or illness or if you have caring responsibilities.

3. Plan ahead and communicate well

Maybe you want to try a flexible work arrangement for a limited period of time. In that case, check the conditions attached. How often a year can you request flexible working, for example, or any prerequisites (like tenure requirements) or any potential employer contribution for equipment costs and electricity/heating bills? You can usually negotiate these conditions.

Also, watch for reversibility, which means you can return to your previous working arrangement if needed or desired.

4. Get equipped for flexible work

Lastly, get a sense of what you need to work flexibly and/or remotely. You might be cutting out commuting costs, but flexible working could lead to different work-related, out-of-pocket expenses. Many employers will cover some of these costs within reason, or your work may provide the equipment you need to work flexibly, such as a laptop.

With more than 300 types of flexible work arrangements out there, working out how to make your working life more flexible can be daunting. By being informed, planning ahead, communicating, and being flexible about flexibility, you can start to grasp the upsides and downsides of new working practices in the post-pandemic world of work.

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