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Flexible working essentials in the COVID-19 context

Essential flexible working practices considerations to support your employees and business during the coronavirus pandemic

Flexible working is more vital than ever before

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen businesses adopt flexible working practices like remote working at an unprecedented rate. Not only does this protect the workforce and provide business continuity, they support broader, official measures to curb the outbreak.

But the situation is developing rapidly. It's crucial that employers and people professionals keep up with the changing context and make the most of these unusual circumstances. Outcomes from our investigative work on [good flexible working practices](#) could be adapted and applied to best support organisations and their workers.

Opportunities arising from flexible working to apply in the current context

Our research has highlighted opportunities on offer from flexible working methods which could be useful to consider in the current context:

- **Balancing caring and non-work responsibilities with work** Our prior research shows that flexible working allows employees to take on caring responsibilities without having to give up work. Employees who might have otherwise had to leave their jobs are able to stay in work, and this can only be a good thing. In these unprecedented times where employees may be caring for children (due to school closures), taking on caring responsibilities for vulnerable people, and attempting to balance competing needs and adapt to uncertain circumstances, allowing flexibility such as adapting working hours or enabling temporary job shares will allow employees to keep working while balancing these new demands.

- **Adjusting resourcing and skill deployment** flexibility enables employers to balance their workforce in line with the organisation's needs. As one of our case studies in our *Cross-sector insights on enabling flexible working* guide said, 'There are busy times and quieter times and with flexible working you can respond to that.' (guide p.8). At this uncertain time, as well as taking advantage of the new government support schemes, employers should look to offer flexibility to build their workforce in line with evolving needs. For example, furloughed workers are able to attend training courses (and still receive pay) so employers could look to develop skills to support business continuity.
- **Adapting to life's emergencies** Flexible working enables employees ad hoc flexibility to deal with emergencies when they arise. This type of adaptability is crucial at a time when many employees will be caring for (and potentially home schooling) children. It also allows the flexibility needed in case family members or colleagues fall ill. Allowing flexibility will enable organisations to quickly adapt to accommodate sudden caring responsibilities and illness.
- **Motivation** Our findings suggest employees working flexibly go beyond the call of duty and feel more motivated to work hard and to give back to the organisation (for example training other staff): 'Sometimes I work way beyond my hours to get the job done, but the benefit for me is that I can flex that back at another time ... It does benefit both ways.' (guide p.7). At a time when employees will be facing many competing pressures and mounting anxiety, employers should provide the flexibility these employees need. This will also allow employees the space to consider their own well-being, which is crucial at this uncertain time.

Barriers to overcome

Organisations need to consider the barriers at manager, team and individual levels to help them successfully implement flexible working. The key barriers that need addressing are as follows:

Overcoming barriers for managers

People professionals should provide support and advice to managers, while encouraging them to offer flexible working options as much as is possible (in line with current government advice).

- Managers may be unclear about how to 'measure' work and output during this time, especially if remote or flexible working is new. It's vital to have a trusting relationship for flexible working to be successful. Ensure managers understand that visibility is not the key to performance and that they explore new ways of communicating,

delegating and working with their teams to meet targets and deadlines.

- Advise line managers to set clear expectations for their team. This could mean sharing examples of how they expect tasks to be done and being clear about deadlines and priorities.
- Good communication is vital. In addition to regular catch-ups, advise line managers to ask open questions such as 'are you feeling fulfilled in the work you do?' and 'how can I support you better?' to overcome any barriers or communication problems.
- Managers need to find a balance between allowing flexibility and facilitating collaboration; if team members have opposing hours you will need to find ways to overcome this.

Overcoming barriers for teams

People professionals should review ways of working to optimise team performance, relationships and flexible working opportunities. Pay close attention to:

- **Team skills and flexibility** Having a team of multi-skilled workers within the department means flexible working can be accommodated more easily, because employees can be flexible according to the business needs and skills required for the job. This is crucial at a time when workforces will be reduced, and business functions and priorities will be changing. Consider sending employees a questionnaire asking them to highlight other skills they can offer or asking people to volunteer for roles outside of their usual work remit.
- **Lack of team relationships and networking** Flexible working may contribute to a lack of colleague interaction and team connections, which was found to lead to flexible workers feeling isolated. This will be especially true while we adapt to widespread remote working and social distancing measures. Encourage teams to connect using online tools, having regular catch ups and making use of technology to keep others informed of their progress on projects and their current workload. Support a healthy level of communication and collaboration, but ensure that employees do not feel under pressure to be 'always on'.
- **Success stories** Ensure that learning is captured and transferred from the implementation of flexible working elsewhere in the organisation. Take note of what has worked well and what has not worked well and why, so that managers learn from successes and mistakes.
- **Additional workload** Support managers with the perceived 'additional' load of

managing flexible and remote workers: help managers think through how best to manage the team using technology and other ways to capture progress.

Overcoming barriers for individuals

- Help individuals understand what flexible working opportunities are appropriate and available at this time. Ensure that individuals who are required to attend a workplace also have flexible working opportunities (for example, the ability to avoid peak hours). You may want to refer to the [flexible working poster](#) for ideas on the type of arrangement that will suit the evolving situation.
- Communicate with individuals regularly about altering flexible working when necessary, creating boundaries (to ensure they aren't working too many hours, are having appropriate breaks and have the resources they need).
- Share flexible working stories from across the business to inspire individuals to try new ways of working.
- Think about setting up groups on communication channels to share tips and ideas (for example, ideas for working parents who are trying to juggle childcare).
- Help individuals understand that they can say 'no' and maintain a schedule that suits them as well as the organisation.
- Try to allay any career progression concern by highlighting any training opportunities employees could take advantage of at this time. This may also help with reskilling employees.

Case studies to learn from

. As part of the research for the [Cross-sector insights on enabling flexible working guide](#), the CIPD looked at flexible working in several organisations. During this time employers and people professionals may find the insights from the following [case studies](#) particularly useful:

- **Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust** (who found that one-size doesn't fit all and that flexible working doesn't automatically mean reducing hours).
- **Lendlease** (who learned important lessons about communication and trust between line managers and staff).
- **Schneider Electric** (who gained insight into the importance of the relationship between line managers and their teams in making flexible working successful).

Tried-and-tested flexible working methods

Organisations may wish to consider implementing the following methods:

- **Team-managed flexible working schedules** A construction company uses a flexible working rota within a project team (16 team members): each week one member of the project team takes ownership for the weekly rota and team members pick a morning where they can come in late or an afternoon where they leave early (flexitime). The general culture on a project site was described as ‘we don’t watch the clock either’, so that employees feel they can be flexible if needed (Lendlease).
- **Split shifts and job-shares in customer-facing roles** In a car rental organisation, branches and depots are being encouraged to be creative when it comes to flexible working – for example, implementing split shift options and job-shares. Some branches have deliberately extended their hours to enable more shift working, thereby creating a win-win for both employees and customers (Enterprise Rent-A-Car).
- **Flexibility and homeworking in call centres**
 - **Enterprise** allows its call centre workers to work flexible schedules. The call centre is entirely staffed by homeworkers, who control their own flexible work patterns. The organisation analyses call volume and schedules accordingly.
 - **Pharmaceutical Research Associates** offers flexible working in their customer services team, which needs to provide 24/7 support to clients. Customer service employees can pick specific shifts that work for them, such as a mixture of early and late shifts. Some customer service staff are also able to work from home, through online portals that provide access to internal and customer systems, allowing them to respond to customer needs.

Other useful resources

[Getting the most from homeworking](#)

[Preparing your organisation for homeworking](#)

[CIPD Community](#)