

Future-Proofing Your Flexible Workforce

Lockdown Lessons from Managers who are Parents

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Executive Summary

Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020, the world of work has faced an unprecedented combination of social and economic crises and rapidly increasing flexibility at work. Working parents and carers have been particularly affected by these changes. For many whose work could be performed from home, the experience of juggling work and caring responsibilities was more intense than ever. On the other hand, the normalisation of flexibility in the workplace – particularly homeworking and flexitime – has opened the possibility of family-friendly work practices becoming more widespread.

This report outlines how the extraordinary work-from-home 'social experiment' during the pandemic affected working parents, and how organisations and line managers sought to minimise the impact of the pandemic through using flexible working to support their staff. The report will focus on the lessons that can enable organisations to be better prepared for any future crisis, particularly with the likely turmoil the UK faces in the coming years. The report draws on a two-year research study comprised of 65 in-depth interviews with working mothers and fathers who

had worked from home during the Covid-19 crisis. The first wave of 42 interviews was conducted in spring 2021, with 23 follow-up interviews conducted a year later in spring 2022. Our specific focus was on parents who had line managerial responsibilities because line managers have a crucial role in enabling parents to balance conflicting work and non-work demands. Our aim was to understand how they managed multiple obligations to their own families, their employers, and the staff they managed.

The interviews generated nuanced insights into how managers balanced their own workload, looked after their employees, and experienced changes in the workplace during and post the Covid-19 crisis. While some of the issues explored in our interviews were distinct to periods of lockdown, they highlight the crucial importance of consistent and available childcare and flexible working arrangements for parents to develop their careers and for organisations to maintain productivity.

Overall, our interviews show that, when well implemented, flexible and remote work can have positive outcomes for both employers and employees.

Key themes:

- Prolonged flexible working has significantly increased expectations among parents to work flexibly. Flexible work was a lifeline for many parents during the Covid-19 crisis. Even though it was tough working from home during periods of lockdown, most of our respondents had a very strong desire for flexibility to be the default post-pandemic.
- In crisis and beyond, organisational support for line managers is key to enabling positive outcomes for employees. Line managerial discretion shapes parents' experiences. However, support for managers during the pandemic was not always consistent across or within organisations. We found that culturally embedded flexible working arrangements were therefore decisive in establishing organisational preparedness and resilience for dealing with the crisis and enabled line managers to role-model flexibility.
- Homeworking and hybrid work are possible in more industries and jobs than previously realised. Our interviews show that many jobs that previously involved

performance management 'by hours' and required office presence could be done remotely and flexibly, suggesting that management 'by output' may be just as, and often more, effective. However, such new working arrangements must be well-planned and sustainable for them to work well.

- The experience of flexible working had a particularly positive effect on fathers, who highly valued the benefits of flexible work arrangements for their family and work life. In the second wave of interviews, all fathers reported that lack of access to flexible work would be a deal-breaker when considering employment in future. Now is a good moment to enable flexible work for working fathers as well as mothers as a key pathway to facilitating further gender workplace equality.

The following section of this report sets out recommendations for organisations on how to build resilience and protect against future crises and challenges, while also creating a more inclusive workplace.

Key recommendations:

Planning for new challenges and future crisis management



Parents

- **Not all** working parents are dealing with the same circumstances. Recognise and address the diverse circumstances and needs of employees with regard to caregiving, health and disability.
- **In crisis** situations, flexibility in hours does not alleviate stress without workload support. Strategic task prioritisation and temporarily reducing the pressure to achieve targets are more likely to result in best outcomes for both employees and organisations.
- **Prevent** burnout, talent attrition and well-being issues post-crisis by reviewing and monitoring long-term effects on employees' physical and mental health – for example, through surveys, review forums with line managers, and by monitoring data on sick leave and time off.
- **Support** parents' – particularly fathers' – requests for flexibility, to challenge gendered assumptions and improve workplace inclusion and equality. This goes beyond the right to request flexibility to positively valuing and encouraging flexible working as the norm, with performance management based on outcomes achieved.
- **Review** job design to explore the possibility of moving performance evaluation from 'hours' or visibility in the workplace to 'output' for working parents and others. This can lead to more effective job design but should involve assessment and reassessment of tasks, and continuous consultations with staff and across management structures.

Managers

- **Support** line managers, whose role in a crisis is key. To protect managers and ensure they're able to support their teams in a crisis, it is vital that their workloads are recognised and monitored. Implement leadership training on setting strategic and workload priorities.
- **In crisis**, quick policy creation may not be feasible. Encourage consistency of management support in crisis by creating communities of practice to spread best practice quickly.
- **Enable** and encourage line managers to lead by example by role-modelling flexibility and prioritisation, to clearly signal what is acceptable and build a broader cultural acceptance of flexible work. Without this explicit encouragement, line managers may not feel entitled to modify their own workloads in a crisis, leading to unmanageable workloads that are detrimental to well-being.
- **Offer** high quality training to line managers on leading and managing flexible and hybrid working. This could focus on challenges, like managerial uncertainty and how to manage the new hybrid workforce. Pandemic learning indicates that training should also focus on empathy, emotional intelligence and developing skills to scrutinise assumptions about which aspects of a job are essential, such as visibility versus output.
- **In addition** to training, enable communities of practice when implementing new flexible arrangements and hybrid work, and/or set up a forum where line managers can share good practice and seek advice on dealing with issues.



Organisations

- **Preparation** is central to crisis management. Organisations with an established or proactive culture of embracing flexible work were perceived by interviewees as performing better in crisis as well as being better places to work. Discuss and make use of line managers' and employees' pandemic experience for future crisis preparedness.
- **Being proactive** in a developing crisis rather than responding reactively or too slowly helps reduce employee stress and instils confidence. Clear and supportive communication is also key, with straightforward messaging and assurances to minimise anxiety and stress.
- **Policy** and practice without wider systemic change has limited impact. When embedding greater flexibility, explicitly commit to culture change initiatives in core thinking, undertake strategic planning and enact change in all organisational systems.
- **If hybrid** work becomes prevalent, reassess processes such as onboarding, performance management, promotion and appraisal to ensure career support and job satisfaction around flexible work.
- **If moving** from performance evaluation based on 'hours' to 'output', review and monitor workload policies. Evaluate, monitor and reappraise what is a 'manageable' job design and workload to ensure work-life balance and well-being. Ensure a senior leader takes responsibility and accountability for this.
- **Explicitly** acknowledge and challenge gendered assumptions about family and work roles and responsibilities to ensure that flexible work changes are effective and beneficial for both fathers and mothers. Normalise flexibility in organisational culture by showcasing case studies that are not typical, e.g., managers who are fathers working flexibly.

Managing through crisis

– key finding

Managers' perspectives

Line managers are key in administering flexible work and other policies. During the pandemic, their role became even more important. Our interviews showed that in the absence of fixed policy, it was line managers who largely determined parents' experience of the crisis.

Good managerial practice in a crisis

There was a considerable range of good practice demonstrated by managers:

- effective workload adjustments or strategic prioritising
- quick accommodation of parents' flexibility needs by moving shifts or changing work hours to accommodate childcare
- establishing open communication with line reports
- ensuring an individualised approach to each employee's situation
- performing a more pronounced pastoral role
- picking up extra work to help the team

Effective workload adjustments or strategic prioritising through determining what tasks were less important or could be postponed, were the key practices that made a significant difference in reducing stress and increasing well-being, as well as sustaining performance.

“Lowering expectations seems really negative when I talk about the team that work for me, but I did essentially hold them to a different standard, given everything else that was going on in terms of performance and that kind of thing... [the company directive was that] your initial focus should be checking in with your teams, making sure they're okay, supporting their well-being. And then think of strategies, if they're not.”

Heather, financial industry

It was apparent that working flexibly without attention to workload increased stress and undermined well-being.

Many reported that having a manager who was also a parent helped, but empathy and trust in general were very important for positive experiences.

However, when reporting positive experiences, many referred to being 'lucky', indicating that support across many organisations may not have been consistent:

“My line manager was incredibly supportive and flexible. So, I was really lucky. She had children but much older... But, again, was very supportive and was quite flexible in terms of when and what I had to do. [...] I suppose the wider organisation was a really mixed experience”

Natasha, public sector

Good practice was often not effectively shared within organisations, typically because there was no process for doing so quickly. At least a third of interviewees explicitly stated that they experienced a lack of support from their superiors for their duties as line managers. This tended to increase stress, reduce organisational commitment and diminish the desire to go the extra mile when managing their own teams.

Role modelling flexibility

Interestingly, many line managers who supported their own teams and promoted flexibility and workload management rarely felt able to apply the same thinking to their own situation or wellbeing, and so did not role-model flexibility and strategic prioritisation of their own work tasks.

“I don't think about myself, I have to think about the other people. We're very good when it comes to flexible working, although, to be honest I didn't take advantage of it for myself I suppose. [...]”

Christina, customer service sector

Yet line managers who did feel able to role model flexibility spoke of the benefits and the importance of doing so, as it sets implicit norms and expectations:

“The flexibility that had been given to me by the senior manager, I just applied it in the broadest possible way to my team, and basically said to them, just do what you can. ... And... we all got really good at escalating the important things and not worrying about the minutiae of stuff”

Alison, banking and finance sector

The value of role modelling was an important learning experience in some cases:

“I think [in future] ... I’ll lead by example by doing the three days in the office and two days at home. [...] Because I don’t want people to be feeling alienated if they’re more on the hybrid side of the hybrid working and their being at home”

Julie, R&D sector

The experience of being able to achieve targets and complete the work, even if this involved prioritising and discarding certain unnecessary tasks, confirmed managers’ beliefs that flexible work does not reduce productivity – and may even increase it.

“[It was] frowned-upon, working from home, and it’s funny, they started to realise that people working from home, actually do work! And that they can trust people... and their results started to go up, because people were working from home. And so, they have now joked, and said - you can’t come back in the office because you’re doing so well, as you’re working from home.”

Steph, construction and engineering sector

The hybrid workplace

In the second wave of interviews in spring 2022, the majority of line managers continued to offer and advocate for flexible work for their employees. Notably, interviewees working in industries where flexible work was not previously the norm, like construction or customer service, reported that focusing on ‘deliverables’ rather than hours worked was a positive change. For most parents, this was a relief and for some, it meant they were able to apply for more senior or more demanding roles without detriment to their work-life balance.

However, the hybrid workplace brought new challenges associated with maintaining workplace culture, and new

ways of assessing and planning team interactions:

“[...] the objective now, is how do you find a balance between all the perks and benefits of flexible working. Because certainly I think there was no sense of productivity going down but it’s finding that balance between community and people and retention, people wanting to stay and it being a good place to work. And giving people the flexibility they want to work from home for whatever reason they choose to work from home”

Heather, banking and finance industry

All interviewees said they are beginning to tackle the new challenges of hybrid work, so what good working practices will look like in future remains an open question.



Parents’ perspectives

All families experienced the Covid-19 crisis somewhat differently – depending on whether it was a couple or a single parent household, whether and how much both parents worked, the age of dependent children, the sector in which parents were employed, and their location.

“I do think that the impact on single parents was quite different to that on people in couples where you could tag team a bit and think, well I’ll do the work now and you do the home schooling. ... I would go days where I didn’t speak to another adult and it was just really lonely and exhausting and the pressure from work.”

Lauren, third sector

Growing acceptance of flexible working – for fathers as well as mothers

Despite their differences, however, interviewees described many shared impacts of flexibility. In particular, the increased visibility of home and family demands allowed working parents to be better understood by their colleagues and managers. Suddenly having caregiving recognised as a legitimate demand upon one’s time felt liberating for many of interviewees, particularly fathers.

“I found, also, people in the workplace were very quick to understand, especially men, I would say who didn’t traditionally... who didn’t do the school pick up or were slightly from a different generation... They suddenly got it, in my industry, that, ah, right, well, 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”

Jay, tech sector

Homeworking benefits were reported by both mothers and fathers, but for fathers especially there was a tangible increase in positive experiences of flexible work.

“[W]orking from home has been really good for feeling like I’m still involved in my son’s life, because if I was going to the office... I miss out on most of his day ... I have a really good relationship with him, which I think I wouldn’t have got if I had been working from the office full-time.”

Michael, retail sector

These positive experiences strengthened bonds with children and led to a significant change in expectations for flexibility to be available to men and fathers in future.

Workload concerns remain

For some parents, juggling work with looking after young children during periods of lockdown revealed that long hours were not as necessary for effective performance as they had believed. However, others found that flexibility in working time was rarely matched with flexibility in terms of workload. Workloads during lockdown often remained at pre-pandemic levels, or even increased sharply.

“[My manager] just said to work whatever hours I needed to work. I think the organisation as a whole had said to just ‘do what we had to do’ and not pressure ourselves but the problem was... having said that, the work was still there, you still had to do it, so the pressure was still there. It’s not like it had been taken away from you and someone else was doing it.”

Shireen, education sector

So, while flexibility in hours was appreciated by employees, workload was the overriding concern and thus needs to remain closely monitored in hybrid arrangements. In heterosexual couple households, fathers often benefitted from higher levels of flexibility available to their female

partners (because mothers more often worked part-time or held less senior or less demanding jobs). These factors contributed to the disproportionate effect of lockdowns on mothers, perpetuating gender inequalities and possibly impacting career progression.

“Mothers definitely seem to always get the short straw. It’s hard, because I didn’t want to fall into the trap of it with us, but my work being so intense and my wife’s work offering time off, it’s like, well, it’d be stupid not to take that one”

Steven, construction and engineering sector

Flexibility is crucial in the post-Covid workplace

The parents we interviewed – including fathers – had a very strong desire to continue working from home at least some of the time post-pandemic. Even those few who said they were likely to return to the office wanted the option of flexible or hybrid working. All of the fathers in the sample felt strongly about this. This shift in attitudes generates the potential for greater gender equality in working arrangements and fathers’ involvement in family life.

“I have no intention of ever returning to the office five or even four days a week, frankly. And I am no longer prepared, I would say, to sacrifice that time with my family for no other reason than that somebody wants me to be visible in the office. Because I now know, from the past year, that there is no other reason for it because it doesn’t affect my productivity or work output at all.”

Mark, advertising and marketing sector

During our interviews in spring 2021, there were some concerns among parents about how flexible their organisations would remain, or how hybrid working would affect their career progression. However, in spring 2022, most of our interviewees were able to continue working flexibly. Almost all fathers reported that flexibility was a deal-breaker when searching for employment.

“I’ve been looking at some available jobs and it [flexibility] will definitely be something that I’m looking for in a job... I certainly wouldn’t pick a job that meant I had to be in the office all the time and couldn’t work flexibly...”

Adam, ICT sector

In our final interviews, there was a strong sense that the apparent increased flexibility-friendly cultures were very welcome and appreciated by parents.

Organisational response

The Covid-19 pandemic was a shock to most organisations. However, while no-one could have predicted its scale and longevity, those organisations in which flexible working had been culturally embedded before the pandemic benefited most from having those systems in place, resulting in employees feeling the organisation had responded more positively.



What we mean by 'preparedness' was that organisations in which flexible working had been culturally embedded before the pandemic benefitted from systems in place when the crisis struck.

"We were extremely fortunate that we... completed a massive project... to decentralise all of our infrastructure [just before the pandemic began]. So ... it meant that people were able to work from anywhere; there was no reliance on any office location... I guess the lesson there was to be prepared. I can't say that we predicted what would happen but having that flexibility in place was really key."

Anthony, ICT sector

This pre-emptive thinking was praised by employees, as was senior leadership who had proactively addressed the crisis. Interviewees commented that sharing good practice had the potential to be more valuable than policy in a crisis, whereby the line manager role can be pivotal. In the absence of policy, senior teams that had been assembled to respond to the pandemic often missed opportunities to take advantage of good practice developed by mid-level and line managers.

Maintaining employee wellbeing

Organisational wellbeing initiatives, such as online yoga or mindfulness or stress-management courses, did not feel relevant to most parents we interviewed and did not compensate for lack of managerial empathy, flexibility and workload management. Furthermore, the impact of sustaining a team under difficult conditions for a lengthy period began to show in the second round of interviews in spring 2022, with many reporting exhaustion. If this effort goes unrecognised, there may be significant repercussions for wellbeing and morale.

"I will definitely be looking to go to another organisation because I don't like working for [my employer] at all. ... they've shown me that I am not important to them or valued by them at all. And neither is my child's mental health and that's really put me off."

(Lauren, third sector)

Post-covid workplace culture change

In spring 2021, most of our interviewees were not confident about their organisational policy going forward but most wanted flexibility to remain an option. However, in spring 2022 it was a more positive story with most organisations seemed to have retained and/or embedded flexibility into their culture, with some adopting new formal policy to effect these changes.

Many were consulted about flexibility through employee surveys, which they appreciated. While in some sectors there were discussions of difficulties in terms of how to make hybrid arrangements work better, interviewees highlighted that flexibility going forward was critical to retaining talent and organisational competitiveness.

"[...] people we interviewed were looking for hybrid working so we were losing out on good staff because we didn't have that policy in place off the back of the pandemic... so I'm pleased to say the business went for it. They have actually adopted a hybrid working strategy."

Steph, construction and engineering sector

Overall, there was a sense that there may be new challenges that organisations would need to consider when navigating the new world of hybrid work. However, the change of attitudes to flexibility was welcomed by our interviewees both in their capacity as line managers and as parents.

Want more gender equality? Support flexibility for fathers.

What we found:

- Increased use of communications technology rendered the family life more visible, enabling caregiving to be normalised for both mothers and fathers.
- Fathers in particular felt that recognising care as a legitimate demand upon their time challenged the 'flexibility stigma'.
- Fathers reported clear benefits of and increased desire to spend more time with children.
- In Spring 2022, 98% of fathers interviewed reported that flexibility was a deal-breaker when searching for employment.

Recommendations for managers:

- ✓ Support all parents' requests for flexible working arrangements, including fathers.
- ✓ Explicitly acknowledge and challenge gendered assumptions about family and work roles and responsibilities.
- ✓ Challenge 'flexibility stigma' by normalising it, for instance, by showcasing fathers working flexibly, including senior leaders.
- ✓ Monitor career progression of all flexible workers, to avoid the career penalties for both mothers and fathers.

Now is a good moment to build on fathers' increased desire to work flexibly. Why do it?

- To facilitate gender workplace equality
- To attract and retain talent
- To sustain organisational productivity
- To futureproof your flexible workforce

“Those guys who are traditionally quite traditional, suddenly had their children at home all the time, and I think they saw, right, I do have a noisy family next door, whilst I'm trying to do a Zoom call... They suddenly got it, in my industry.”

(father, business consultancy sector)

“I have no intention of ever returning to the office five or even four days a week... I am no longer prepared to sacrifice that time with my family.”

(father, marketing and advertising sector)

“Working from home has been really good for feeling like I'm still involved in my son's life, because if I was going to the office... I miss out on most of his day...”

(father, retail sector)

It cannot be management as usual in a crisis.

Workload

Protect your line managers by recognising and monitoring their workloads

Role Modelling

Enable line managers to lead by example through role modelling flexibility

Senior Executive Support

Support for middle and line managers translates into sustainability of best practices at each level

Training

Implement training on workload management and strategic prioritisation of tasks

Communities of Practice

Create communities of practice to share line managers' best practice

To ensure line managers effectively support flexible and hybrid work in their teams

Line managers' role is key for employee experiences of flexible working, especially in crisis situations. We found that:

- 1 Despite flexibility, 62% of line managers cited intensified or unmanageable workload as a key stressor.
- 2 Strategic prioritisation and workload management is what makes flexible work sustainable in high pressure work environments.
- 3 Managers who afforded their staff flexibility did not feel entitled to use it themselves. 67% of line managers said this.
- 4 Senior management support and role modeling of flexible working resulted in line managers doing the same for their teams.
- 5 Good practices are often not spreading well or consistently.

Protecting and supporting line managers is crucial for effective performance.

"I have to think about the other people [...] we're very good when it comes to flexible working, although, to be honest I didn't take advantage of it for myself"

(Line manager, customer service sector)

"I found stressful the workload didn't change. there's still five days' work there.... And condensing that into three days doesn't make that any easier."

(Line manager, creative industry)

Sampling and method

This report is based on the analysis of 65 qualitative interviews collected as part of a longitudinal study. The call for participants was advertised in February 2021 after the third UK lockdown. It was advertised through the Working Families network and social media platforms. In Wave One, 42 working parents and carers (23 mothers and 19 fathers) were interviewed. Interviews took place between April and July 2021 via Zoom and lasted on average one hour. Wave Two of interviews was held a year later between April and June 2022, to explore changes during this time. The 'come back' rate in the second wave was over 50% with 23 follow-up interviews conducted (10 mothers and 13 fathers). Interviews took place via Zoom and lasted on average 40 minutes. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis via NVivo.

All our respondents were working parents who had one or more children under the age of 18 living with them during the pandemic, had experienced working from home during the pandemic and held line management responsibilities at work. Participants lived in England, Wales or Scotland during the pandemic (we did not exclude Northern Ireland, but no individuals from this region volunteered to participate).

Participants were between 30 and 59 years of age. Thirty-six participants identified as white, one as Black and three as mixed race.

Twenty-three participants had one child at the time of the interview, 16 participants had two children and three participants had three or more children. Children's ages ranged from one to 16 years old, with the majority (33 participants) having at least one child of school age, which meant they experienced home schooling. While most participants lived in two-parent households, there were five single parents, both mothers and fathers, and there were two participants whose children had special needs.

Our participants worked in a range of industries and occupations including law, banking, marketing, construction, engineering, ICT, consultancy, research and development, academia and third sector organisations. Out of 23 mothers, 12 were employed full-time, 10 part-time, and one was on furlough but was normally employed part-time. All but one father in our sample was employed full-time, and one was briefly on furlough, but was normally employed full-time. In the second wave of interviews, all participants remained employed; however, six had changed jobs.



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