

Working Families

Benchmark Report 2023

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Introduction

With hybrid working on the rise, returns to the office ongoing, and new legislation in 2024 set to introduce a right to request flexible working from day one of employment, it's more important than ever that employers know how best to support their staff with family-friendly and flexible working practices.

This report explores best practice in family-friendly and flexible working amongst a group of employers who have entered this year's Working Families Benchmark. It showcases dynamic, innovative and thoughtful approaches to family-friendly working amongst employers who are highly committed to supporting the working parents and carers on their staff.

Every year, Working Families' employer members are invited to take part in the Working Families Benchmark. The Working Families Benchmark provides each organisation with an assessment of their flexible and family-friendly working policy and practice¹. Employers tell us about the policies they've adopted to create a family-friendly work environment, their experiences and attitudes toward flexible working, and the opportunities and barriers they face - and we ask them for the data to show how they put these policies into practice.

¹'Flexible working' is the term favoured by Working Families to describe a wide range of working arrangements, including where, when, and how people work (e.g. home-based, reduced hours, flexible hours). Other related terms, widely used by our employer members, include 'agile' or 'dynamic' working.

This report sets out the results of this year's Benchmark, showing how employers demonstrate best practice in areas ranging from flexible working to family-friendly recruitment, work to close the gender pay gap, and support for new parents and other aspects of the journey to parenthood. The report also looks at areas for further development, such as the need for even greater support and training for line managers to enable them to embed flexible working in their teams. It concludes with recommendations to support participants seeking to become family-friendly and flexible employers.

Who took part in this year's Working Families Benchmark

A diverse group of 64 member organisations took part in this year's Working Families Benchmark, ranging from finance, law, business consulting, and technology, to the charity sector, public sector and local government, and education.

Just under a third (30%) of the organisations who entered this year's Working Families Benchmark were smaller organisations with under 1,000 employees, while just over two-thirds (70%) had over 1,000 employees.



Creating a flexible and family-friendly work culture

While there has been a widespread shift to some forms of flexible working in the post-COVID world, there is still plenty to be done to make workplaces truly family-friendly, beyond hybrid and home-working.

As some workplaces navigate returns to office-based working at least some of the time, it's crucial that the gains in flexible working in recent years are not lost.

Flexible working beyond COVID

Previous Benchmark surveys showed that, following the COVID pandemic, there had been a triple-fold increase in flexible working in small organisations and six-fold increase in larger organisations compared to pre-COVID levels. In 2022, 86% of small organisations and 64% of large organisations reported that at least three quarters of their employees were currently working flexibly - compared to just 28% of small organisations and 11% of large organisations in the pre-COVID era.

This year's Benchmark entrants continue to report high rates of flexible working. Overall, 73% of Benchmark entrants report that more than 75% of their staff work flexibly. Interestingly, a slightly lower proportion of small organisations (79%) and a slightly higher proportion of large organisations (71%) report that staff are working flexibly compared to 2022.



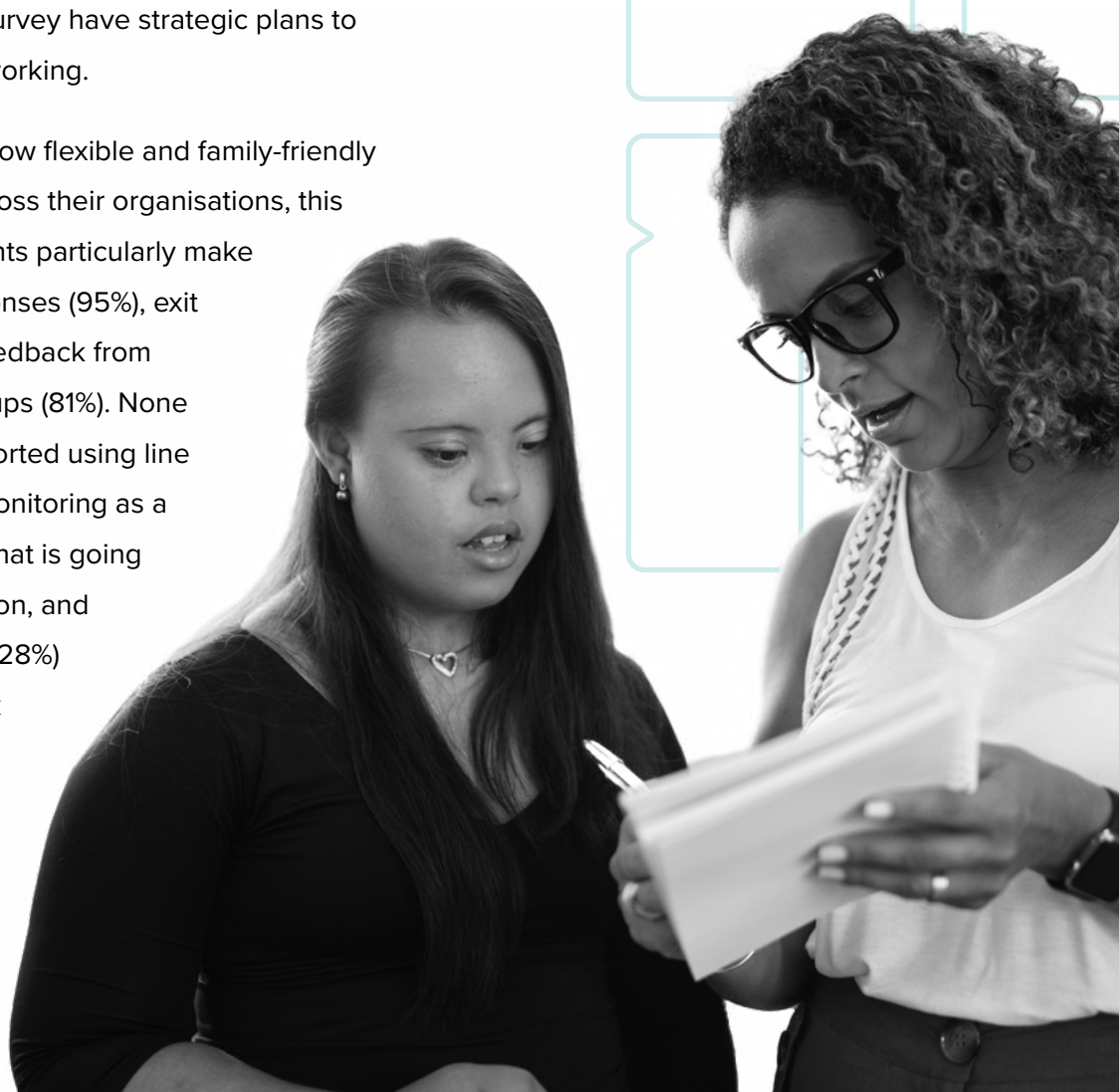
For many organisations, the forms of flexibility engendered by the COVID pandemic centred on remote working and variable start and finish times - and now, increasingly, hybrid working, as employees return to the office. As important as these forms of flexible working are for many working parents and carers, it's crucial that employers don't lose sight of the other kinds of flexible working and support for parents and carers they can offer.

Taking a strategic approach to flexible and family-friendly working

For flexible and family-friendly working to be at the heart of an organisation, organisations need a clear strategy to support family-friendly working, and ways of monitoring what is happening across the organisation.

As in previous years, nearly all organisations (96%) who took part in this year's survey have strategic plans to support family-friendly working.

In order to understand how flexible and family-friendly working is operating across their organisations, this year's Benchmark entrants particularly make use of staff survey responses (95%), exit interviews (95%), and feedback from employee resource groups (81%). None of the organisations reported using line manager feedback or monitoring as a way of understanding what is going on across the organisation, and only just over a quarter (28%) said they used feedback from unions.



The benefits of flex for employers

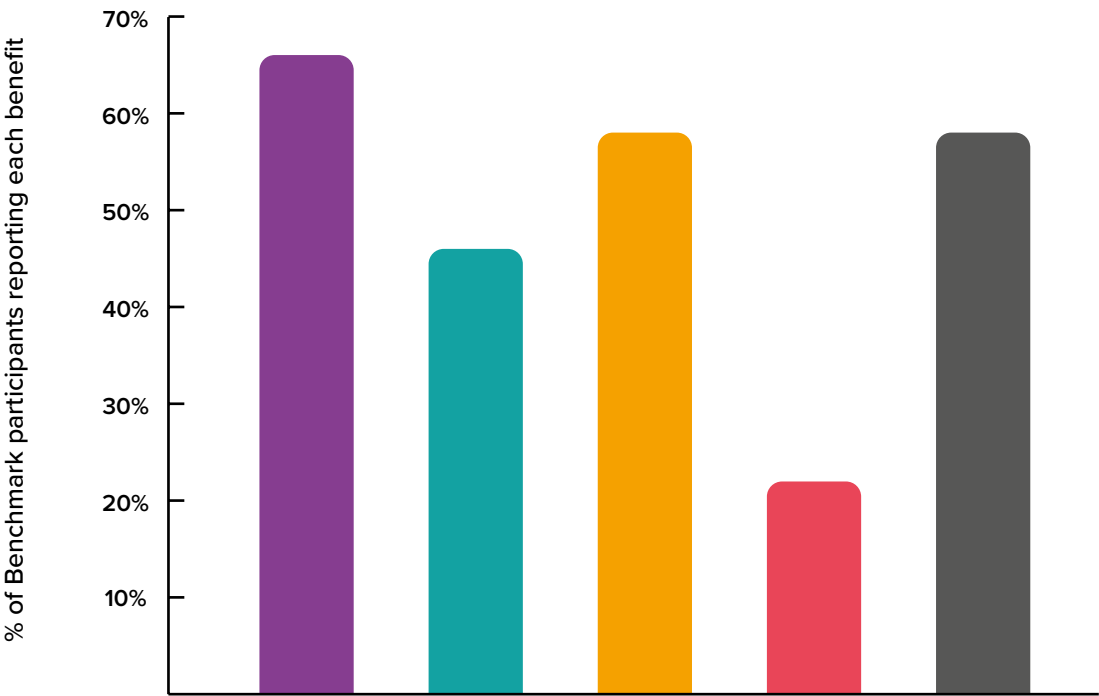
Flexible working continues to bring many quantifiable benefits to organisations who adopt it. This year, two-thirds of organisations (66%) reported reductions in real estate costs over the last five years, as well as reductions in business travel costs (58%) and increased productivity (58%) (see figure 1). As in last year’s Benchmark, the public service sector was most likely to report extended opening hours as a benefit of flexible working.

Figure 1:

Looking back over the last 5 years, are you able to ascribe quantifiable benefits resulting from flexible working practices in the following areas?

Key:

- Reduction in business travel costs
- Lower staff turnover
- Increased productivity
- Extended operating hours
- Reduction in real estate costs



Barriers to flexibility

Despite these benefits to working more flexibly, even the most committed organisations continue to face a range of internal and external challenges in creating the family-friendly and flexible workplaces they aspire to.

As was also the case in last year's Benchmark, the most cited barriers were lack of budget (mentioned by 25% of organisations this year) and lack of resources (mentioned by 17%). Perhaps reflecting broader post-COVID cultural change, there has been an increase in the proportion of organisations reporting hybrid work as a challenge, mentioned by 14% of organisations this year (compared to 9% last year). However, other external pressures such as Brexit or the cost of living were not mentioned by any organisations this year.

Different sectors report different challenges in establishing a family-friendly work culture; for instance, public service organisations perceived hybrid work as their main challenge, whereas for both the charity sector and the technology and engineering sector, lack of budget was reported as the main challenge. As the Benchmark participants constitute very small samples of these sectors, these results cannot be taken to represent trends within the sectors in question more widely, but nonetheless these differences between industries remind us of the importance of understanding the context for individual sectors in moving towards family-friendly working.

Supporting line managers to create family-friendly work cultures

Line managers are at the heart of an organisation's family-friendly work culture - they have a huge impact on employees' ability to work flexibly and their experience of the workplace. It's therefore crucial that line managers receive the training and support they need.



14%
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year

84% of this year's Benchmark participants report that they provide their managers with training in the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to develop and lead teams that deliver both high performance and the flexibility required to support good work-life balance and wellbeing. As in previous years, charity sector employers are the least likely to offer such training.

However, despite these organisations widely offering this training, only a third (33%) reported that more than three-quarters of their managers had received the training - this suggests that more work could be done to ensure that managers access the training available.

Of the organisations surveyed this year, 92% actively encourage their managers to work in a flexible or family-friendly way - this can be an important way to role model flexibility and demonstrate to employees that an employer truly believes in a family-friendly work culture.



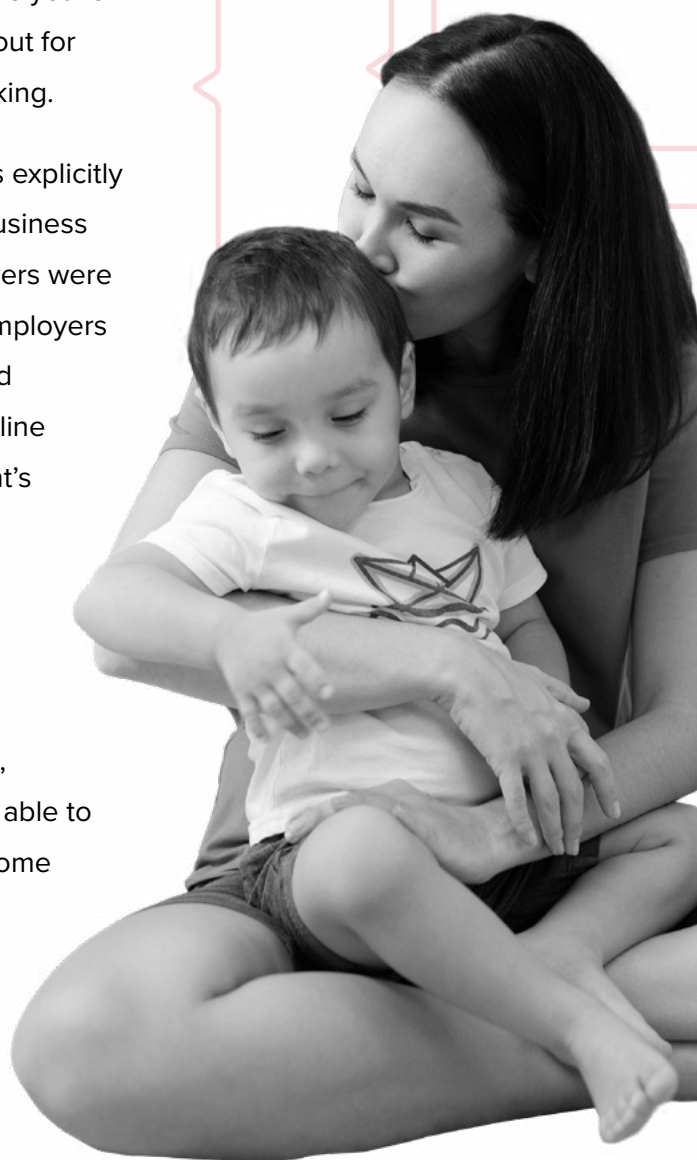
Embedding flexibility from day one

An organisation's culture of flexible and family-friendly working begins before an employee even starts work – thinking about flexibility and family-friendly working at all stages of the recruitment process embeds family-friendly working in an organisation.

Best practice by this year's Benchmark entrants demonstrates how far organisations can go to ensure that flexible working is considered throughout the recruitment process. 92% of this year's Benchmark participants said that a job analysis is carried out for some or all roles to determine the options for flexible working.

Three quarters (75%) of this year's Benchmark participants explicitly include a statement about flexibility in their job adverts. Business and consulting, public services and finance sector employers were more likely to do so, while education and charity sector employers were least likely to do so. Employers are also making good use of the [Happy to Talk Flexible Working logo](#) and strapline developed by Working Families alongside the Government's Flexible Working Taskforce; 48% of employers use this on all of their job advertisements, and a further 22% use it on some.

Over three quarters (78%) of Benchmark participants provide details of options to work flexibly on their website, giving parents and carers the confidence they need to be able to apply for jobs that offer flexibility. But where there is still some scope for development is in detailing parental leave and pay policies on their websites - an approach that is adopted by only two thirds (64%) of this year's Benchmark participants.



Flex from day one

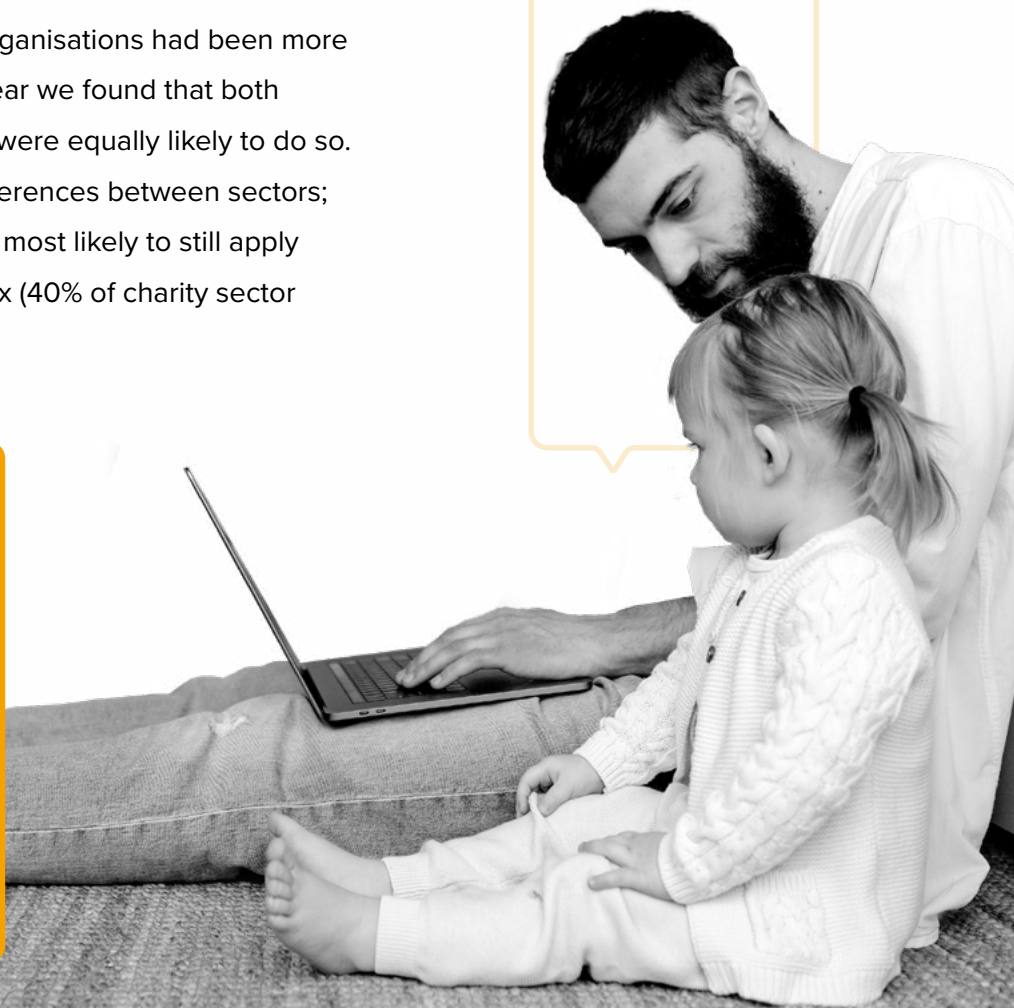
New legislation is due to be launched in 2024 that will require employers to offer flexibility to employees from day one of their employment, rather than having to wait 26 weeks, as is currently the case.

With this landmark change for flexible working, it's crucial that employers start preparing now to offer flex from day one.

It's clear that many of the employers who entered this year's Benchmark will be well-prepared for the new legislation. 86% of this year's Benchmark entrants already offer flexibility as a day one right - showing just how doable it is for employers to implement flexibility from the start.

While in previous years, larger organisations had been more likely to offer day one flex, this year we found that both smaller and larger organisations were equally likely to do so. Nonetheless, there are some differences between sectors; the charity sector is currently the most likely to still apply the statutory 26 week wait for flex (40% of charity sector organisations said they do so).

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Gender equality and progression in the workplace

With the UK's gender pay gap currently forecast to remain in place until 2044, employers need to actively work now to close the gender pay gap in their organisations, and ensure that women thrive and progress in work².

Figure 2 shows how this year's Benchmark participants are planning to address the gender pay gap within their organisation. The most cited plans are asking senior leaders to publicly role model their flexible working arrangements (100%), ensuring all job adverts indicate the flexible options available (98%), and encouraging take up of equal parenting leave or shared parental leave amongst fathers (92%). Fewer organisations are looking at job shares, encouraging men to work flexibly and part-time, or developing measures to track flexibility and career progression, suggesting that these are areas where organisations could still develop their practice.

² TUC, 'Gender pay gap means women work for free for two months of the year', 23 February 2023, <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/gender-pay-gap-means-women-work-free-two-months-year-tuc>



Figure 2:

How Benchmark participants plan to address the gender pay gap

100%

Ask senior leaders to publicly role model their flexible working arrangements

82%

Develop measures that track flexibility and career and pay progression

92%

Encourage take up of equal parenting leave or shared parental leave amongst fathers

72%

Encourage the use of shared parental leave through enhanced pay

98%

Ensure all job adverts indicate the flexible options available

85%

Specifically encourage men to work flexibly and part-time

82%

Encourage job-shares at all levels

61%

Other method of addressing pay gap

87%

Recruit returners



As part of addressing the gender pay gap and fostering gender equality within their organisations, employers need to take steps to ensure that women are able to progress to senior roles. There remains some way to go on this for most employers. Across this year's Benchmark participants, most people in senior roles are men. Looking at differences between sectors, only in the charity sector are there more women than men in senior roles, with women making up 58% of senior managers in the charity sector. Smaller organisations and those with more than 50% women employees tend to have higher proportions of women in senior roles (figures 3 and 4):

Figure 3:

Gender of senior managers,
by organisation size

Women
Men

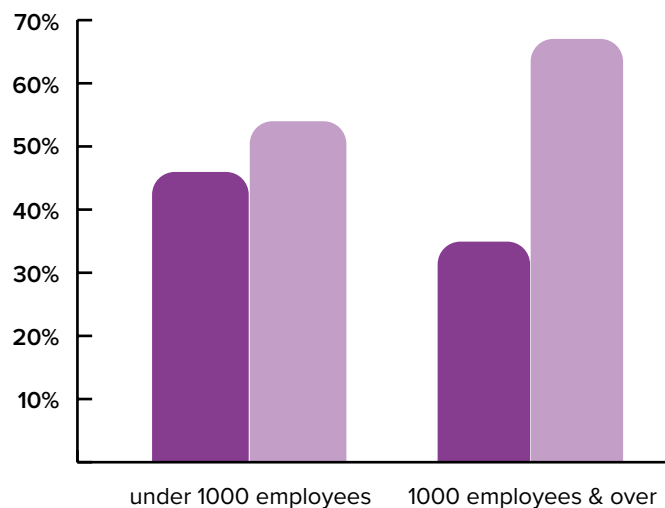
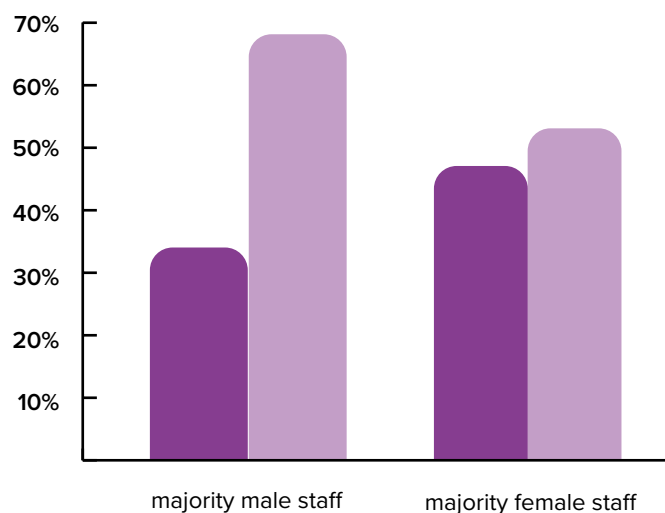


Figure 4:

Gender of senior managers,
by the gender balance of
the whole organisation

Women
Men



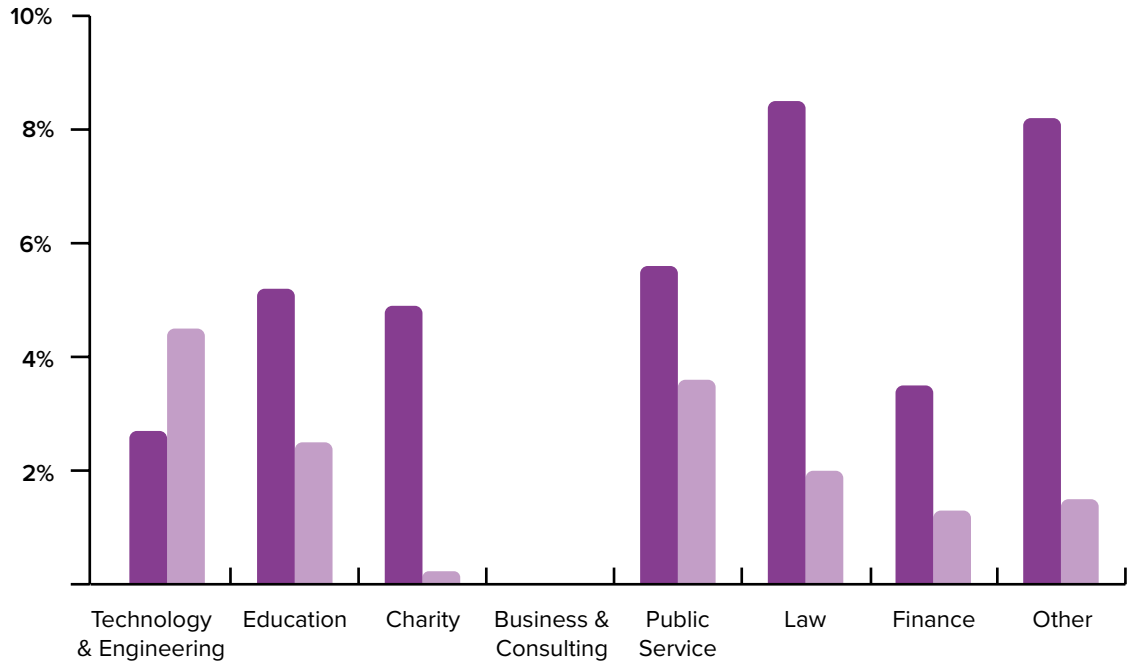
Part-time workers succeed in workplaces that are set up to support part-time work at every level. With women being more likely to work part-time than men, in order to reduce the ‘part-time penalty’ and the gender pay gap, it’s crucial that organisations make senior roles available on a part-time basis for those who want them - otherwise part-time workers will be locked out of senior roles.

And yet, there has been little change in the proportion of senior managers working part-time - this year, 8% of senior managers work part-time, compared to 7% last year. In all sectors apart from technology and engineering, there are more women in part-time senior manager roles than men.

Figure 5:

Percentage of male and female senior managers who work part-time, by sector

Women
Men



Other support for working parents and carers

Flexible working is a crucial part of a family-friendly work environment – but the best employers go beyond flexible working alone to consider how they can support working parents and carers throughout their careers.

Enhanced parental leave is a crucial form of support for new parents - and we are pleased to see the most family-friendly employers recognise the importance of well-paid leave for new parents. This year, employers offered as a day 1 right, an average of 20 weeks of fully-paid maternity leave, 7 weeks of fully-paid paternity leave, and 19 weeks of fully-paid shared parental leave (SPL). Those organisations that offered equal parenting leave (EPL) offered on average 13 weeks of fully-paid leave as a day 1 right³. Beyond this day 1 right to fully-paid leave, many organisations offered even longer periods of fully paid leave for staff who had worked there for longer.

Amongst Benchmark employers, there is a relatively high rate of take-up of shared parental leave and equal parenting leave amongst fathers and partners, with 20% of eligible fathers and partners taking SPL, and 32% of eligible fathers and partners taking EPL⁴.

³ Equal parenting leave is where the same amount of pay and leave is available to either parent, whether they are the mother or father/partner. It is different to shared parental leave which requires the mother to give up some of her leave - equal parenting leave, by contrast, is a standalone entitlement.

⁴ This is a much higher rate of take-up of SPL than the national average; the Department for Business and Trade's 2023 evaluation of SPL found that only 5% of eligible employee fathers/partners have taken up SPL:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/shared-parental-leave-spl-evaluation>



Figure 6: Other Support for parents and carers, by organisation size



Family-friendly employers are also increasingly recognising the importance of providing support at all stages of the journey to parenthood. The majority of employers we surveyed in this year's Benchmark offer employee support for miscarriage, fertility and surrogacy.

Figure 6 shows some differences by organisation size: whilst larger organisations are less likely than smaller organisations to provide support for fertility treatment, the opposite is true for surrogacy support.

Working parents and carers also benefit more generally from employers' support for their wellbeing and work-life balance. As in previous years, nearly all the organisations who took part in this year's Benchmark (97%) report that they take measures to support their staff's physical and mental wellbeing, and to prevent burnout and over-working. These range from employee assistance programmes, occupational health, counselling and mental health champions, to meeting-free days, extended breaks, wellbeing days and stress audit tools and surveys. It is heartening to see that employers are recognising the importance of wellbeing at work and supporting their staff to manage workloads and their wellbeing. This is a crucial part of the support offered for parents and carers so that they can thrive at work.

Recommendations

♥ Flex from day one

- Employers can start preparing for the new flexible working legislation coming into effect in 2024 by reviewing their flexible working policy. They need to be prepared for requests to work flexibly from day one of employment, and undertaking analysis on every role to determine its suitability for flexible working will mean that managers know how to assess and identify flexibility not just when they receive a request, but at the recruitment stage too. This will ensure that jobs are designed with flexibility in mind.
- Flexibility is possible in most roles across a diverse range of sectors and job functions, and we encourage employers to start from the assumption that any role can be done in a flexible way. This is important for those sectors where it's difficult for employees to work remotely and requires managers to think creatively about what might be possible.

♥ Flexible recruitment

- Employers should advertise roles that specify the flexible options available, and state their openness to a conversation about flexible working options with candidates. Hiring managers should be prepared to discuss the flexible options for the role at interview stage and throughout the recruitment process.
- We encourage employers to use the [Happy to Talk Flexible Working logo](#) and strapline on their job adverts, which Working Families developed alongside the Government's Flexible Working Taskforce to support employers on their journey to designing more flexible roles. Prominently displaying the logo and strapline shows that the role is available to those wanting to work flexibly.



- Training on role analysis and flexible role design will give managers the skills they need to find the flexibility in every role, and this could be incorporated into the wider topic of leading flexible teams. Take-up of this training could be increased by making it part of a mandatory programme of manager training.

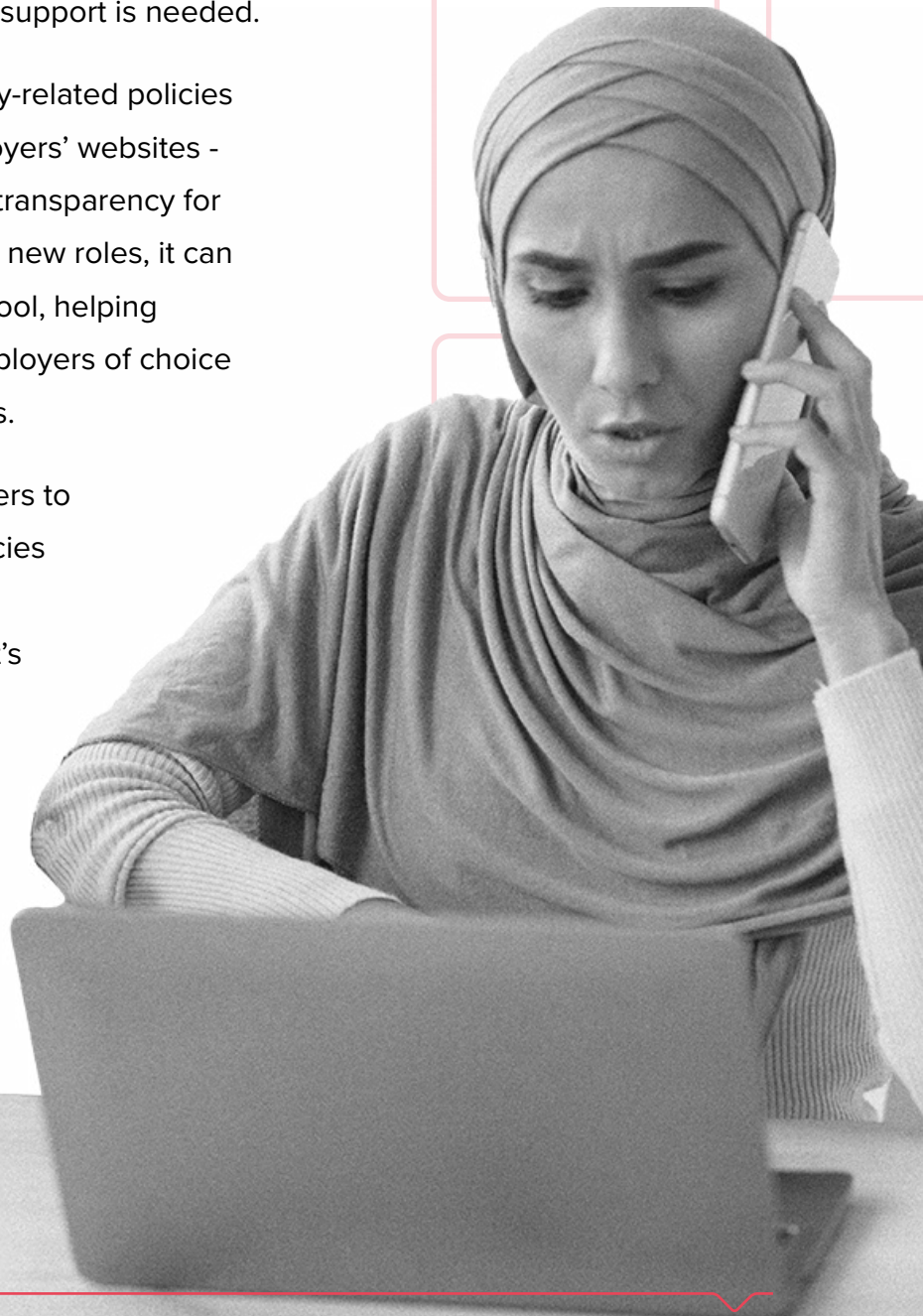
Gender equality and progression

- Employers should ensure there are career progression opportunities for flexible workers and not assume that employees working part-time or in a flexible way do not want to progress to more senior roles. Tracking flexibility and career progression will help organisations to identify whether further intervention is needed to help flexible workers to achieve their career ambitions.
- Opportunities for personal development should also be made easily accessible to part-time workers so that they can take part within their working hours or access learning on demand.
- Showcasing and celebrating different working patterns at all levels, and in a range of roles can help raise awareness and may increase take-up of flexible working. People working part-time or job-sharing in senior roles can act as role models, showing that it is possible to progress within the organisation when working flexibly and highlighting that flexible working is encouraged and supported by the organisation. A range of role models working flexibly for different reasons will help emphasise the fact that flex is for everyone, not just mothers returning from maternity leave.



Family leave provision

- Employers should continue to take steps to provide more equal support to new parents, including better paid leave for fathers and partners. With the new Carers Leave Act coming into force in 2024, employers should also ensure they are ready to offer carers their yearly entitlement of one week's leave.
- Employers could seek feedback from employees, via employee networks or focus groups, to ensure that policies and support for parents and carers at different life stages remain fit for purpose, or to identify areas in which further support is needed.
- Parental leave and other family-related policies should be promoted on employers' websites - not only will this offer greater transparency for parents and carers looking for new roles, it can also be a powerful attraction tool, helping employers to stand out as employers of choice for working parents and carers.
- It is also important for employers to proactively promote their policies and support internally, so that parents and carers know what's available to them and how to access it, and this may also drive take-up.





Get in touch

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