

Flexible working:

The benefits, the implications and
what you should know

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Flexible working may have been around for years, but it's now on everyone's lips like never before.

The trials and tribulations of 2020 effectively saw businesses change their working practices overnight. While some already had flexible working policies in place, many more rushed to enable their employees to work from home for the first time.

Now, flexible working – where an employee splits their time between the office and home, has the ability to change their hours, or otherwise enjoys a degree of flexibility in their role – is likely to be the default approach for most employers as restrictions are relaxed.

But adapting to changing circumstances yet again can feel like a challenging proposition, especially if you aren't sure how to achieve the right hybrid experience of in-office and at-home work.

In this whitepaper, we'll look at the trends surrounding flexible working, the impact it could have on your business and the experts' advice on how to adopt it effectively.

A growing trend

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, flexible working was on the rise. According to Labour Force Surveys, 22% of people worked from home occasionally as of June 2005, yet by June 2014 that proportion had increased to 25%.¹

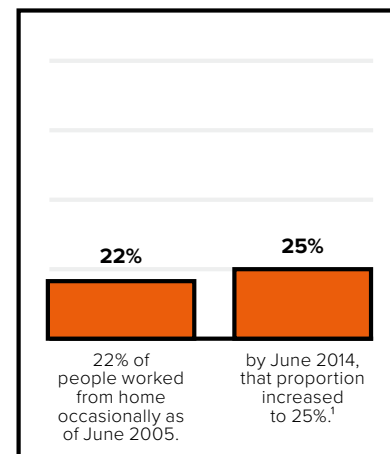
At first glance, that may seem a small increase. But the proportion of people for whom home was the main place of work also rose by 80% between 1999 and 2019, meaning 1.8 million people were mostly working from home the year before the pandemic hit.²

'Flexi-time' working has become more commonplace, too. There were six million part-time workers in the UK in 1992 but 8.59 million by 2019, a 43% increase compared to just a 23% increase in the number of full-time workers.³

And of course, coronavirus has accelerated this already-growing trend dramatically. When the BBC recently surveyed 50 of the country's biggest employers, 43 of them said they would be encouraging staff to work from home two or three days a week, with four other firms keeping hybrid working under review.⁴

Clearly, then, flexible working is no fad. It's here to stay.

Working from home



¹ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Central Survey Unit, Office for National Statistics, Social Survey Division. (2019). Quarterly Labour Force Survey, April - June, 2014. [data collection]. 6th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 7557, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7557-6>

² Megatrends, Working from Home: What's Driving the Rise in Remote Working?, CIPD, April 2020: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/working-from-home-1_tcm18-74230.pdf

³ Flexible working in the UK – Statistics & Facts, D. Clark, Statista, May 2020: <https://www.statista.com/topics/6419/flexible-working-in-the-uk/#dossierSummary>

⁴ No full-time return to the office for over a million, BBC News, May 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-56972207>



The benefits of flexible working

It's good for businesses

The good news for employers is that adopting flexible working can have a positive impact on your bottom line and your corporate culture.

For example, encouraging your teams to work from home at least some of the time could help you use your office space more efficiently, and maybe even allow you to downsize your premises. Research conducted in 2020 found that London SMEs could save as much as £75,312 a year in rent alone if half of their staff worked at home, or £30,120 per year if only 20% did so.⁵

Having fewer employees on site or allowing more flexibility with working hours can also reduce your overheads through reduced energy costs. In 2015, UK businesses spent a total of £22.5bn just on heating.⁶

Productivity can also get a boost thanks to extra flexibility, with employees working the hours when they're most motivated and comfortable to do their best work, not arriving late due to delays on their commute, or being better able to balance their professional and personal lives as a result. An American study in 2015 found that 77% of remote workers reported being more productive as a result.⁷

Lockdown saw absentee rates drop significantly, probably for a multitude of reasons, but the Office for National Statistics believes the ability to work remotely "could also allow people to work when they were a little unwell" because "they might not have travelled to a workplace to work but feel well enough to work from home".⁸

The combined savings from flexible working, and remote working in particular, can in fact be huge. Kate Lister, President at US-based Global Workplace Analytics, argues that a typical employer is able to save about \$11,000 a year for every person who works remotely half of the time.⁹

⁵ London SMEs could save £75,000 in rent by embracing more remote working after Coronavirus, HR News, June 2020: <http://hrnews.co.uk/london-smes-could-save-75000-in-rent-by-embracing-more-remote-working-after-coronavirus/>

⁶ How businesses are increasingly backing clean energy, The Telegraph, August 2018: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/connect/small-business/operations-and-logistics/reault/businesses-backing-clean-energy/>

⁷ CoSo cloud survey shows working remotely benefits employers and employees, CoSo Cloud, February 2015: <https://www.cosocloud.com/press-releases/coso-survey-shows-working-remotely-benefits-employers-and-employees>

⁸ Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2020, Office for National Statistics, March 2021: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/labourproductivity/articles/sicknessabsenceinthelabourmarket/2020>

⁹ Work-at-Home After Covid-19 – Our Forecast, Global Workplace Analytics: <https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/work-at-home-after-covid-19-our-forecast>

It's good for employees

Flexible working naturally empowers your employees to feel more in control of their professional lives, which is little surprise when there are several wide-ranging benefits on offer to them.

A 2017 report by Timewise examined why the 64% of full-time workers who did not work flexibly wanted to do so, and found that 57% cited greater control over their work-life balance. Reduced commuting times (33%), extra leisure or study time (32%) and better capacity to help with caring for children or dependents (29%) were the other major benefits valued by employees.¹⁰



Working from home can also have a positive impact on employees' finances. Research by Money.co.uk calculated that the average worker would gain back £4,168 a year if they switched to permanent home working, with some better off by up to £6,800 a year, just from savings on petrol, car insurance and unpaid commuting costs.¹¹

And perhaps most strikingly, the Centre for Modern Family found that a quarter of UK workers would be willing to take a pay cut in exchange for more flexible working hours – indicating just how valued flexibility is among employees in general.¹²

Other benefits

Offering flexible working can make it easier for your business to attract the right talent by demonstrating your commitment to the things employees care about. In one study, job adverts that explicitly listed flexible working options garnered 30% more applications than those that did not.¹³

Similarly, enabling flexible working could also help you level the playing field and better meet your equality, diversity and inclusion objectives. By making roles available to those who would prefer to work part-time, during hours that can change regularly, or from home, you can give people with wider backgrounds and different lifestyles the opportunity to apply.

Indeed, insurance company Zurich discovered that women were 20% more likely to apply for senior roles if the positions offered flexible hours.¹⁴

There are environmental advantages to flexible working, too. For example, research at the University of Massachusetts Amherst found that if employees reduced their working hours by 10% or 25%, their carbon footprint would drop by 14.6% or 36.6% respectively.¹⁵

Giving employees the ability to work from home may also reduce their carbon footprint through reduced commuting or fewer car journeys.

¹⁰ Flexible working: A talent imperative, Timewise, September 2017: https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Flexible_working_Talent_Imperative.pdf

¹¹ Switch to homeworking could save employees more than £4,000, YourMoney.com, October 2020: <https://www.yourmoney.com/insurance/switch-to-homeworking-could-save-employees-more-than-4000-a-year/>

¹² One in four workers would take a pay cut for fewer hours, according to research, Independent, March 2016: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/one-four-workers-would-take-pay-cut-fewer-hours-a6907456.html>

¹³ Flexible working 'nudges' result in 30% uplift in job applications, Personnel Today, May 2020: <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/indeed-flexible-working-nudges-study/>

¹⁴ Jobs offering flexible hours attract 20 per cent more female applicants, HR Review, November 2020: <https://www.hrreview.co.uk/hr-news/senior-roles-that-offer-flexible-hours-attract-20-per-cent-more-female-applicants/129153>

¹⁵ Reducing Growth to Achieve Environmental Sustainability: The Role of Work Hours, Kyle Knight, Eugene A. Rosa and Juliet B. Schor, November 2012: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.590.5456&rep=rep1&type=pdf>



Best practices for flexible working

Getting the HR right

Making flexible working work in your organisation requires buy-in and co-operation at every level, and especially from your HR department.

It's vital to have the right policies in place, the appropriate approach to how your company culture may be affected, and to think about how you can ensure morale is high so you can reap the productivity rewards of high employee satisfaction.

For example, your HR team may wish to pay close attention to what flexible working could mean for your employees' mental health; research conducted during lockdown by Nuffield Health found that 36% of those working from home felt they always had to be at their computer to respond quickly, while 25% found it difficult to cope with the mental challenges of isolation from colleagues.¹⁶

While many in your team may benefit from being able to work when and where they like, it's wise to develop a wellbeing strategy and plan for how rolling out flexible working might affect everyone in ways they may not even expect.

¹⁶ Working from home taking its toll on the mental health and relationships of the nation, Nuffield Health, June 2020: <https://www.nuffieldhealth.com/article/working-from-home-taking-its-toll-on-the-mental-health-relationships-of-the-nation>



Communication and management

Flexible working can present new challenges to your line managers and directors, especially if they prefer to conduct meetings in person.

With more employees working to flexible hours, on a part-time basis or from home on occasion, you should think about how your teams can best communicate, whether by making use of video conferencing tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams or simply changing how you review performance.

According to Angela O'Connor, CEO of The HR Lounge, managing remote workers in particular has proven difficult for some businesses during the pandemic.

Angela told People Management: "There's a big issue around middle managers' ability to performance manage remote workers. Some of their skills will have been confined to saying 'I see you at your desk' and thinking that's performance management."¹⁷

Instead, managers should be encouraged to focus on output and less on evidence of input, like time online or in the office. Angela added: "This is a fantastic opportunity for HR to work with managers to develop skills around having commissioning conversations, and then quality checking them."

Promote your flexibility

Given all the benefits to employees we've already covered, this one seems obvious.

But research indicates that companies aren't doing themselves any favours, with job adverts that mention flexibility only increasing by 5% year-on-year after the first UK COVID-19 lockdown – and 78% of job ads posted between December 2019 and October 2020 failing to mention any element of flexible working, job sharing, part-time hours or late starts.¹⁸

If you do adopt flexible working, shouting about it from the rooftops could provide you with valuable marketing content and raise awareness of your new policies internally.

Plus, as we mentioned earlier, all the evidence points towards advertising your flexibility increasing the number of applicants your recruitment efforts garner. It's worth making it explicitly clear in your job descriptions – especially if you often reuse the same adverts to recruit for regularly vacant roles.

¹⁷ Skills HR will need in 2021: Making flexible working work, People Management, December 2020: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/long-reads/articles/skills-hr-need-2021-make-flexible-working-work#gref>

¹⁸ Three-quarters of job descriptions still failing to offer flexible working, People Management, December 2020: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/three-quarters-of-job-descriptions-still-failing-to-offer-flexible-working#gref>

Plotting the path ahead

Behind any successful flexible working rollout is an effective IT strategy.

That's especially pertinent when it comes to hybrid working; providing the right technology to your employees is a prerequisite for working from home to go well.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of deploying appropriate tools to staff, and also shone a spotlight on just how vital it is to maintain strong, robust infrastructure.



User productivity

For starters, think about your existing estate of devices and how compatible it would be with flexible working.

Do you have a lot of desktop computers? Are the laptops your employees use old or slow? Would your users be able to not only work with their current equipment, but do their best work? After all, introducing remote working should be an opportunity to improve productivity, not see it suffer.

Apple technology is brilliant for business, and it truly comes into its own when flexibility is a priority. Mac notebooks, iPads and iPhones are all incredibly lightweight and portable, making them ideal for users who may work from home one day and commute to the office the next. And under the hood, their performance makes all the difference.

A survey last year discovered that the biggest pain points users complained about for laptops were battery life (33% of respondents) and processor power (25%). Fortunately, Apple devices excel in both these areas; the latest MacBook Pro is powered – and powered is the right word – by the supercharged 8-core M1 chip, which offers up to 2.8 times the CPU performance of the (already impressively fast) previous model and 20 hours of battery life.

Employees using Apple hardware will enjoy lightning-quick tools that make working from anywhere, at any time that much easier. Add into the mix the ability to use an iPad not only as a practical working tool in its own right, but also as a second screen for a Mac notebook, and suddenly the potential for Apple technology to boost flexible working productivity becomes even clearer.

With hardware covered, you can look at the software and cloud solutions that may make everyday tasks quicker and easier. How will your teams access central documents from your server? What apps will they use to keep in touch with one another? Are there any tools that can help them collaborate on the same projects at different times?

You may wish to ask your staff what will help them work most effectively as part of your initial flexible working conversations – they, of course, will know better than anyone what helps them to be more efficient.

¹⁹ The New Normal: Lenovo study offers insights into worker productivity, Computer World, July 2020: <https://www.computerworld.com/article/3567098/the-new-normal-lenovo-study-offers-insights-into-worker-productivity.html>

Device management

Out of sight, out of mind.

That can be a big problem for IT managers when it comes to flexible working. When devices are off the premises or your staff are hot desking with flexible hours, keeping track of where all your company's hardware is at any one time can be a complex task.

One option is to launch a 'bring your own device' (BYOD) policy, whereby employees are allowed or even encouraged to use their personal devices for professional purposes, but while it can reduce your hardware costs it could introduce cybersecurity threats due to the shared use and unknown connection histories of devices now accessing your networks.

Instead, our top recommendation is to use mobile device management software to stay in control of your company-owned equipment, which can make things so much easier. Your employees use their devices as normal, but your IT experts are able to oversee, upgrade and even disable them as needed to maintain performance and security.

Jamf are the industry leaders when it comes to Apple MDM. Their software enables zero touch deployment, meaning you can quickly get employees up and running with their new macOS device without your IT team having to lay a finger on it.



The solutions are available in a range of products:

jamf | PRO

Jamf Pro offers a zero-touch, hands-free deployment experience and improves security by providing access to manage settings and configurations across the whole company, saving your IT team time and stress. It also makes it easier for users to install pre-approved apps and programs without having to log a support ticket.

jamf | CONNECT

Jamf Connect lets businesses streamline Mac authentication and account management by eliminating the need to bind devices to an active directory. End users can simply unbox their Mac, turn it on and access all of their applications after signing on securely with just one set of credentials.

jamf | PROTECT

Recently made available in the UK, Jamf Protect leverages native Apple tools to extend security and privacy in your company – all while maintaining the brilliant experience your end users know and love.



Conclusion

In the course of reading this whitepaper, you'll have hopefully come to a not-too-surprising realisation: it's time to invest in flexible working.

If your competitors haven't already done so themselves, you can bet that it will be high on their agenda as they prepare for hybrid working as lockdown restrictions (hopefully) continue to ease.

In fact, the year ahead is arguably a seismic moment for businesses when it comes to flexible working. Without the right policies, technology and strategy, you could be left behind as the modern workplace and attitudes to work-life balance continue to change even further.

Enthusiastically embracing flexible working – as opposed to merely adopting it reluctantly – could help your organisation position itself strongly for decades to come.

How we can help

Any flexible working rollout requires careful thought and planning, so seeking expert help is a wise move.

As a leading B2B technology solutions provider, we've been helping businesses adopt the tools and systems they need for effective remote and hybrid working for decades.

We're an Apple Authorised Enterprise Reseller, so we can help you adopt Apple products ideally suited to flexible working, offer affordable purchasing models, and deliver a wide range of specialist services to help you get the most out of your devices.

We're also a Jamf Gold Reseller and a Jamf Jumpstart Integrator, with our device management experts here to help your IT team manage and administer every Apple device in your estate, no matter its location.

Plus, we can provide insightful advice and consultancy on all matter of IT issues related to flexible working, from maintaining cybersecurity to achieving hassle-free identity authentication that keeps your users productive.

Ready to get started with flexible working? Speak to our experts via the details below to discuss how your organisation can provide the right technology for a smoother future.