Shifting attitudes to flexible working – six months on

Contents

Foreword

Since we carried out our research in January 2020 into flexible working, working practices have changed considerably due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When the UK lockdown commenced on 23 March 2020 and employees were advised to work from home wherever possible, businesses had to adapt quickly to ensure that they had the systems and processes in place to enable employees to work from home. Large numbers of employees in the UK have been working from home full-time including those who had previously not undertaken any home working either because this was not allowed by their employer or there was an expectation that they should be in the office.

We decided to carry out further research at the end of June 2020* to look at how the attitudes of employers and employees towards flexible working have changed six months on and as a consequence of the pandemic. Lockdown provides a unique opportunity for employees and employers to reflect on new ways of working and we believe it has accelerated long-term changes in working arrangements; many employers are now considering whether they can offer increased flexibility around working arrangements and reduce their office requirements. In fact, 78% of employers are planning on long-term operational changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research covers what changes businesses and employees are considering in the longer-term and what businesses could be doing to improve remote-working, which will no doubt form part of a permanent way of working for more employees in the future.

Louise and Harriet

Executive summary

When we decided to carry out this new set of research we expected to find a dramatic change in both employees' and employers' views on flexible working six months on. In particular, we expected that many of the barriers, which had previously stood in the way of flexible working such as limitations in IT and a lack of trust, would have eroded as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and large numbers of employees being forced to work from home for a period of time. Interestingly, however, whilst our research shows that there has been a significant drop in the number of businesses who do not offer any flexible working (only 7%) and an increase in employees saying that there are no barriers to them working flexibly (up 8%), the main three barriers to flexible working that were cited in January, namely the ability to carry out the job effectively, concern over whether employees can be

trusted and limitations in IT, were still found to be key concerns for employers and even more so now.

What is also apparent from the recent research is that employees and employers have divergent views about the barriers to flexible working. In fact one of the key issues which employees raised in the survey was a lack of support from their employer to work flexibly or that it was perceived negatively. This is a surprising result given employees will have been given the opportunity during lockdown to prove to their managers that they can work effectively from home or work flexible hours and be trusted.

The unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is shown very clearly in our findings in respect of the long-term operational changes that employers are now considering. 28% of employers

said they were considering redundancies, which is unsurprising in a crisis of this scale, but the substantial shift towards home-working is more novel with 26% of employers now considering reducing their office space and 9% considering closing their office completely. There has also been a huge surge in employers saying they will offer increased flexibility in respect of working arrangements.

We found that in general employees would welcome a shift towards more flexibility and home-working, with a surprising 62% of employees saying that they would be happy if their offices closed and they were asked to work from home permanently on a full-time basis. That said, there are a number of challenges that come with working from home. The main concerns cited by employees were the lack

of contact with colleagues and the impact on their well-being. They also expressed the need to have the right IT and office equipment at home in order to carry out their job safely and effectively. On the employer side, the main concerns were the lack of communication and engagement with employees, less collaboration/cross referrals of business and the negative impact on employee well-being.

With such a dramatic shift in the working arrangements potentially on the horizon, a great deal of adjustment will be needed on both sides. Communication and culture will be key, as will putting in place the right policies and procedures to ensure that a healthy, safe and effective working environment can be achieved for all employees whatever their working arrangements.

9%
of employers are considering closing their office completely

26%
26% of employers are considering reducing their office space

62%
of employees would be happy if their offices closed and they were asked to work from home permanently on a full-time basis

28%
28% of employers said they were considering redundancies

Background

In February 2020 we published our report, 'Shifting attitudes to flexible working and childcare for working parents'. We decided to focus on this topic as we had observed a noticeable change in attitude with the workforce increasingly wanting more flexibility in how they work and employers being more receptive to flexible working. We decided to conduct research into both employers' and employees' views into flexible working to give us some concrete evidence to back up what we had seen anecdotally for years and help inform our clients as there can be challenges to making flexible arrangements work.

Our report in February 2020 drew on the following research:

- Surveying 1000 employees and 500 HR decision makers in a YouGov survey in January 2020. This was across a wide range of sectors and employers varied in size;

- Holding 12 in-depth interviews with HR decision makers and founders during January 2020; and

- Consulting with an expert in the field, Dr Jana Javornik, Associate Professor of Work and Employment Relations at Leeds Business School.

When we think about flexible working, we often think about remote working but our research covered all types of flexible working including part-time working, flexible hours, job shares and compressed hours.

Our key findings into flexible working were:

- There was an overwhelming positive response to flexible working in our research: Almost 60% of HR decision makers told us that flexible working arrangements had been highly successful within their business.

- Flexible working is a key factor in attracting and retaining talent: Nearly three quarters of employees and employers surveyed said how important it was in order to attract and retain the best talent.

- Flexible working is important regardless of age: Although the younger generation had greater expectations in respect of flexible working (77% of under 35s said that flexible working was important in choosing a new role to move to), the majority of employees aged over 35 said this was important too (53% for over 55s).

- More women than men stated that flexible working was important to them: 77% of women said it was important to remaining in their role as opposed to 66% of men. This was not surprising in view of the cultural norms, which still exist in our society of women predominantly taking on the role of primary child carer.

- When looking at the barriers to flexible working there was a disparity between employers' and employees' views. The top three barriers to flexible working according to employers were:

  1. The impact on the ability of employees to carry out their jobs effectively - 39% of employers said this was an issue compared with only 20% of employees.
  2. Concern about whether employees can be trusted – 23% employers cited this as an issue, whereas only 12% of employees said

they lacked motivation to work from home or would succumb to distractions.
  3. Limitations with IT - 20% of employers cited this as an issue compared with 14% of employees.

In addition, 21% of employers said there were no barriers to flexible working in their organisation, whereas 28% of employees felt there were no barriers to flexible working for them personally.

We decided not to repeat our questions regarding the importance of flexible working to the recruitment and retention of talent in our recent research as we consider this is a given in view of the overwhelmingly positive results we received in our January survey and our experience. Instead, our recent research in June focussed on:

- How the barriers to flexible working have changed six months on and in light of the COVID 19 pandemic;

- What long term operational changes employers are considering making; and

- Home working as a more permanent way of working, including the key challenges of home-working and how to overcome these.

JAN 2020 STATS

57%
Almost 60% of HR decision makers told us that flexible working arrangements had been highly successful within their business

23%
of employers said a lack of trust in employees was a barrier to working flexibly

12%
of employees said they lacked motivation to work from home or would succumb to distractions

39%
The impact on the ability of employees to carry out their jobs effectively - 39% of employers said this was an issue compared with only 20% of employees
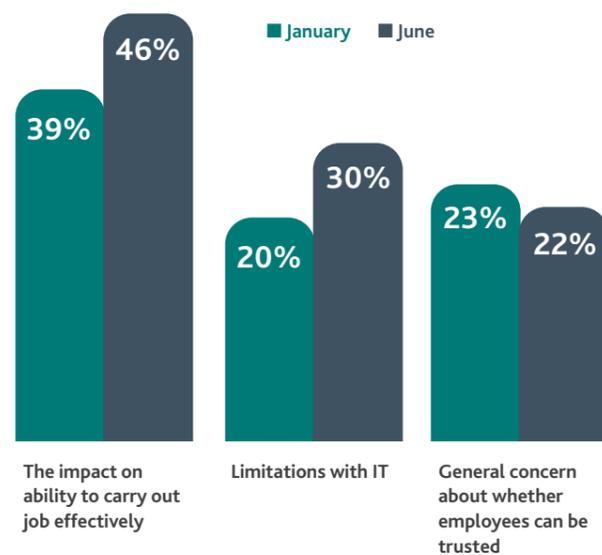
Barriers to flexible working: How have these changed six months on?

The number of businesses who do not offer any flexible working to their workforce has more than halved from six months ago (only 7% said in June that they do not offer any flexible working compared to 18% in January). This is not unexpected with the government guidance during the first stage of lockdown that employees should work from home wherever possible and employees undertaking other forms of flexible working such as staggered hours or flexi-time during lockdown.

It is positive that 36% of employees consider there are no barriers to flexible working for them personally, which has increased from 28% in January. This compares to 20% of businesses who consider there are no barriers to flexible working in their organisation – a decrease of only 1% from January.

THE EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE

Which if, any, of the following do you think are barriers to employees working flexibly in your business?

■ January ■ June

The impact on ability to carry out job effectively	Limitations with IT	General concern about whether employees can be trusted
39% / 46%	20% / 30%	23% / 22%

Overall the number of employers who consider there are barriers to flexible working has increased. Employers cited the top three barriers to flexible working as:

1. Ability to carry out the job effectively

When we surveyed HR decision makers in January, the top barrier to working flexibly was the 'ability for employees to carry out their job effectively' (39%). This may be because employees are not able to carry out their role flexibly due to the nature of the role, or because employees are not as productive from home or when working flexibly.

We assumed that this barrier would decrease as a result of lockdown with employers being forced to introduce systems and processes swiftly to enable employees to work from home; adjust working practices to manage transmission of COVID-19 in the workforce (e.g. staggered hours); and employees demonstrating that they can work effectively from home and be adaptable. In our latest survey, however, this concern still came out as the top barrier to working flexibly and was even higher this time around with 46% of HR decision makers saying it is an issue.

Whether employees can undertake their role effectively on a flexible basis very much depends on the role e.g. certain roles cannot be undertaken from home such as warehouse or retail roles and some require the work to be undertaken at certain hours during the day. Having said that, flexible working comes in a number of different forms and our view is that with some additional effort from employers to put the right arrangements in place, the majority of jobs should be able to be carried out flexibly.

Some employers have told us that they feel productivity has dropped despite employees working longer hours from home and this may be the reason for the result. However, not all employers have reported this with some finding no difference or higher productivity levels.

The figure may also be higher this time around because of schools and nurseries being shut during lockdown and many employees having to juggle childcare and work, and as a result undertaking part-time working or flexi-hours. The lockdown has also been a very difficult and unsettling time for many and there could be a perception that employees have not been able to perform their roles as effectively as a result. Our expectation is that in the longer-term this figure will decrease and it would be interesting to see what the position is in six or 12 months' time.

2. Limitations in IT

The second most significant barrier identified in June (which was third in January) is around limitations with IT, for example, internet connectivity, accessing databases etc. In January, 20% of HR decision makers said this was a barrier to working flexibly, which increased to 30% in June.

Employers have had to invest in IT to facilitate home working during lockdown, for example, video conferencing, webinar platforms and communication systems and this statistic seems at odds with the changes that businesses have had to implement. This may be the result of expectation being modified by experience due to employers encountering unexpected problems in rolling out new technologies. Employers may also be frustrated by internet connectivity for employees working in certain areas.

3. Trust

The third most significant barrier to flexible working in our recent survey (which was second in January) is a general concern about whether employees can be trusted to work flexibly. Again, we had expected this barrier would decrease as a result of lockdown and employees demonstrating that they can work effectively from home, but surprisingly the result is only 1% lower six months on (22%).

It is important for businesses to recruit the right talent in the first place and be clear on employees' deliverables to avoid this being an issue. Trust ultimately comes down to the relationship between the employee and their manager and this is why communication between them is so key.

THE EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE: DO EMPLOYEES HAVE MATCHING OR DIVERGENT VIEWS TO THEIR EMPLOYERS?

When looking at the barriers to flexible working, fewer employees consider there are barriers to flexible working than six months ago. This is in stark contrast to employers where overall the figures have increased.

Which, if any, of the following are barriers to flexible working for you personally?

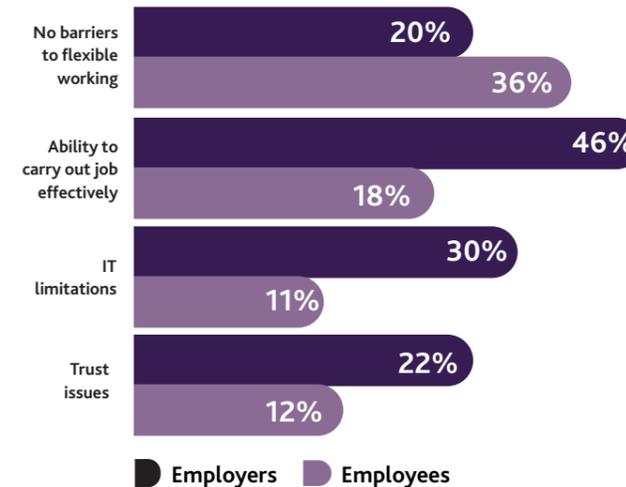|	
Not applicable - there are no barriers to flexible working for me personally	36%
It is not offered by my employer	22%
It would impact my ability to carry out my job effectively	18%
Lack of support form my employer to do so	18%
It is percieved negatively by my manager	14%
Lack of motivation to work from home/ distractions at home	12%
IT limitations (e.g. not being able to connect to servers etc.)	11%
It would be damaging to my career progression	9%
Other/ don't know	9%
It is perceived negatively by my team	8%
It would mean a reduction in pay	7%

In the main, employers and employees have divergent views on the barriers to flexible working:

	Employers	Employees
No barriers to flexible working	20%	36%
Ability to carry out job effectively	46%	18%
IT limitations	30%	11%
Trust issues	22%	12%

● Employers ● Employees

The biggest disparity is in relation to the perception of whether flexible working has an impact on the employee's ability to carry out their job effectively. Only 18% of employees said that flexible working would impact their ability to carry out their role effectively compared to 46% of HR decision makers who believe it is an issue. Interestingly, there is a significant gender imbalance with 22% of men considering that flexible working would impact their ability to carry out their role effectively compared to 13% of women. Some employers have also reported that men are keener to return to the office than women.

Employees said the other main barriers to them working flexibly are a failure by their employer to offer it (22%) or a lack of support for flexible working (18%). Unfortunately a number of employees still feel that flexible working would be perceived negatively (8% by their team and 14% by their manager), which is only marginally reduced since January when the figures were 10% and 16% respectively. A number of employees commented on a lack of support from the leaders of their organisation and that there is an unspoken stigma even if flexible working is "allowed". This type of feedback highlights why ensuring businesses have the right culture which is led from the top is fundamental to the success of flexible working. Our research found that despite trust being one of the top three concerns for employers in respect of

flexible working, relatively few employees believe they abuse the system with only 12% saying that they are distracted when working from home or are unmotivated.

The barrier results were relatively similar by gender except that a larger number of women consider there is a lack of support from their employer towards flexible working than men (21% of women compared to 16% of men).

In terms of generational differences, our research found real differences with the younger generation stating that IT limitations and lack of motivation to work from home are significantly more of a barrier to them than the over 35s:

- IT limitations - 17% of under 35s said this is an issue compared to 10% of 35-44, 7% of 45-54 and 9% of over 55s.
- Lack of motivation to work from home - 18% of under 35s said this is an issue compared to 11% of 35-44 and 45-54 and 7% of over 55s.

POTENTIAL FOR DISPUTES?

Our research has clearly identified that there is a disparity between employers' and employees' views about the success of flexible working with higher numbers of employers considering there is a detrimental impact on productivity and effectiveness than employees. A key driver for employers' perceptions may be the juggling that employees have had to carry out with childcare and work, which should not be an issue from September.

This could give rise to a raft of future disputes if employers impose old methods of working in the long-term, which employees do not want to return to. If an employee has proven they can successfully work flexibly and they make a formal request for flexible working to their employer, it will be difficult for the employer to reject this based on one of the eight statutory reasons, which an employer must rely on for rejecting a formal flexible request within the scheme. It could also give rises to constructive unfair dismissal and indirect sex discrimination claims.
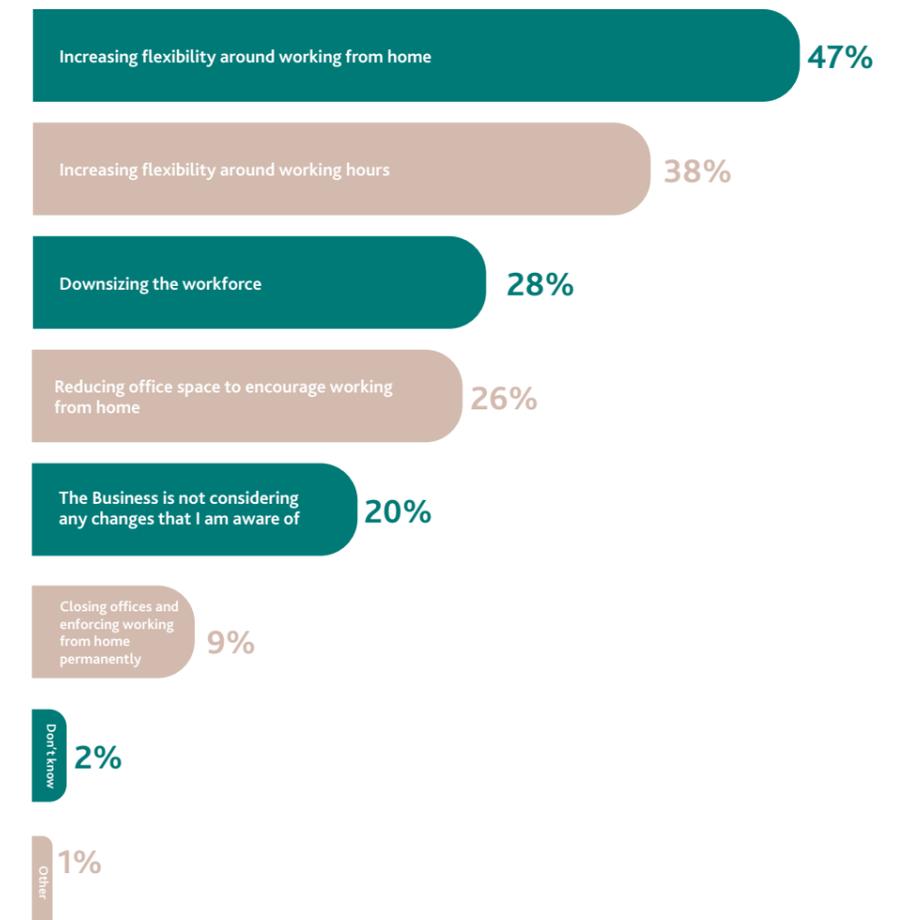
What long-term operational changes are employers considering making as a result of COVID-19?

The vast majority of employers (78%) reported that they are planning on making long-term operational changes to their workforce arrangements as a result of COVID-19.

FLEXIBLE WORKING

It is very positive that nearly half of businesses (47%) are planning to increase flexibility around working from home i.e. making this option more available to employees than it was before. In addition, over a third (38%) of businesses are considering increasing flexibility in working hours. The COVID-19 pandemic has therefore been a catalyst for a significant number of employers planning to offer more flexibility in respect of working arrangements in the long-term. Our research in January showed that flexible working was vital in attracting and retaining talent and we believe this is even more so now, with employees who may not have undertaken any flexible working before lockdown now seeing the benefits and wanting to incorporate flexible working into their future working arrangements.

Which, if any, of the following long-term operational changes is your business now considering in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Change	%
Increasing flexibility around working from home	47%
Increasing flexibility around working hours	38%
Downsizing the workforce	28%
Reducing office space to encourage working from home	26%
The Business is not considering any changes that I am aware of	20%
Closing offices and enforcing working from home permanently	9%
Don't know	2%
Other	1%

38%

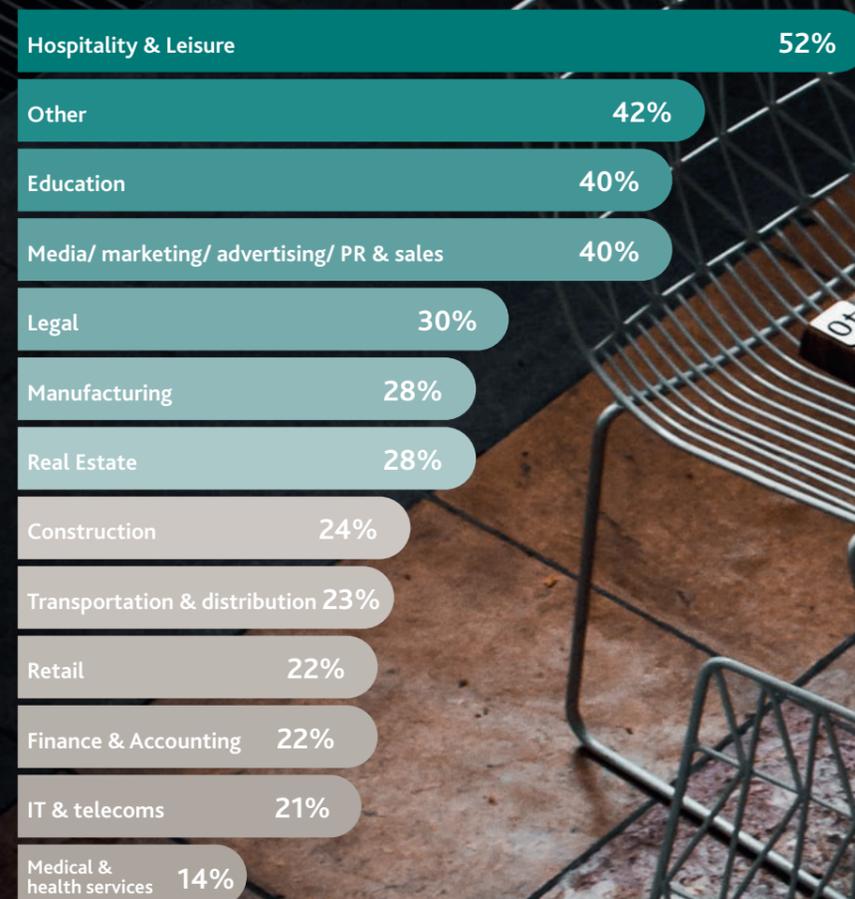of businesses are considering increasing flexibility in working hours

OFFICE REQUIREMENTS

We know that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic a number of businesses have reviewed their office space requirements with 26% now considering reducing their office space to encourage working from home and 9% considering closing their office and enforcing working from home permanently. The figures vary significantly depending on the size of the business, which is not surprising with larger businesses having bigger and more costly workspaces: 14% of large businesses (more than 250 employees) are considering closing their workplace and 40% are considering reducing their office space. This signals an unprecedented shift in working life with many employers planning for their employees to work from home either all or part of the time going forward and on a permanent basis. Employers are also considering re-designing offices spaces to meet their future needs such as designating more meet-up space to allow for collaboration across teams.

REDUNDANCIES

For many employees this is an uncertain and anxious time. The economic impact of the pandemic has meant that unfortunately 28% of businesses are considering making or have already made redundancies. Our research shows that this figure varies widely depending on the sector, for example, more than half of employers in the hospitality sector, which has been badly hit as a result of the pandemic, are planning redundancy exercises.

Employers who are considering implementing redundancies categorised by sector

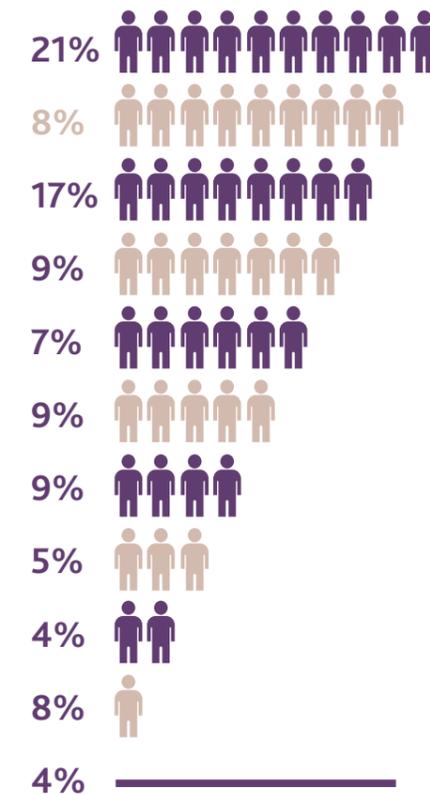| Sector	Percentage
Hospitality & Leisure	52%
Other	42%
Education	40%
Media/ marketing/ advertising/ PR & sales	40%
Legal	30%
Manufacturing	28%
Real Estate	28%
Construction	24%
Transportation & distribution	23%
Retail	22%
Finance & Accounting	22%
IT & telecoms	21%
Medical & health services	14%

28%

of businesses are considering making or have already made redundancies

How do employees want the future of work to look?

62% of employees that can work from home* said they would be happy if their office remained closed indefinitely so they can work permanently from home. 21% claimed to be 'extremely happy' at this prospect. The figures were lower for under 35s with 54% stating that they would be happy compared to 66% for over 35s.

This figure seemed very high to us – we had expected some employees to want this to happen but anticipated that most would want a balance between remote working and office working, and increased flexibility around working hours. Certainly, in a number of the comments to the survey, employees fed back that they missed having face-to-face time with their colleagues and that a work life balance is difficult to maintain while working from home.

It is clear that some employees have loved working from home full-time whereas others have found it has had a negative impact on their well-being and are desperate to get back to the office. We recommend that employers find out what their employees want.

Many employers are considering having a set of flexible working principles for the future e.g. employees can work from home two days a week but a one size fits all approach may not be appropriate in all cases and may need to be tailored depending on employees' personal circumstances. It would be a positive step forward in our view if employers offered increased flexible working in the long-term with employees being able to choose what is right for them.

*survey of 761 employees

Overall, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is "Extremely upset" and 10 is "Extremely happy", how would you feel if your employer permanently closed your workplace and enforced home working as a permanent solution as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic??

21%

8%

17%

9%

7%

9%

9%

5%

4%

8%

4%

62%

62% of employees that can work from home* said they would be happy if their office remained closed indefinitely so they can work permanently from home

What challenges do employers and employees face in relation to home-working and how do we combat this?

Despite the government now encouraging employees to return to their workplaces, many employees will still feel anxious about returning, particularly if they need to take public transport to work. The return to the office environment will be a slow process with businesses needing to ensure that they have managed the risks of COVID-19 transmission and worked with employees to allay their concerns. In addition, it will be some time before employees return to work full-time in an office environment (if at all), especially given that our research shows that nearly half of employers are planning to offer or increase home-working arrangements in the longer-term. Our research has also shown that a large proportion of employees would prefer to be based at home either all or part of the time.

SO WHAT ARE THE KEY CHALLENGES FOR BUSINESSES IF EMPLOYEES WORK FROM HOME EITHER ALL OR MOST OF THE TIME?

Aside from the negative impact on the employee's ability to carry out their job effectively, which we
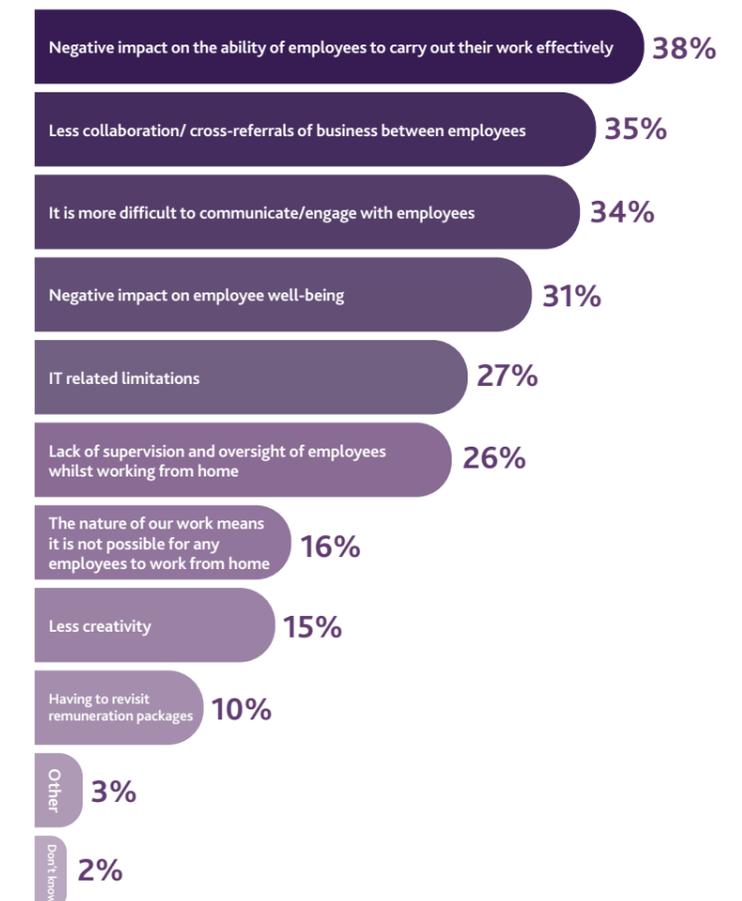
have already covered and which will very much depend on the role, the main concerns employers have are:

1. Less collaboration/cross referrals of business between employees – 35%
2. It is more difficult to communicate/engage with employees – 34%
3. Negative impact on employee well-being – 31%.

Interestingly these concerns came out higher than IT limitations or a lack of trust in employees to undertake their jobs.

All businesses regardless of size reported similar challenges with communicating and engaging with their employees which is surprising as it may have been thought that smaller organisations would have found this less of a challenge.

Which, if any, of the following are key concerns for your business when allowing employees to work from home either all or most of the time?

Concern	%
Negative impact on the ability of employees to carry out their work effectively	38%
Less collaboration/ cross-referrals of business between employees	35%
It is more difficult to communicate/engage with employees	34%
Negative impact on employee well-being	31%
IT related limitations	27%
Lack of supervision and oversight of employees whilst working from home	26%
The nature of our work means it is not possible for any employees to work from home	16%
Less creativity	15%
Having to revisit remuneration packages	10%
Other	3%
Don't know	2%

THE EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

The top concern for employees in working from home all or most of the time on a permanent basis is the lack of team work/communication with colleagues followed by the negative impact on their well-being. Lack of a proper workspace, office equipment and IT related limitations are also in their top five concerns.
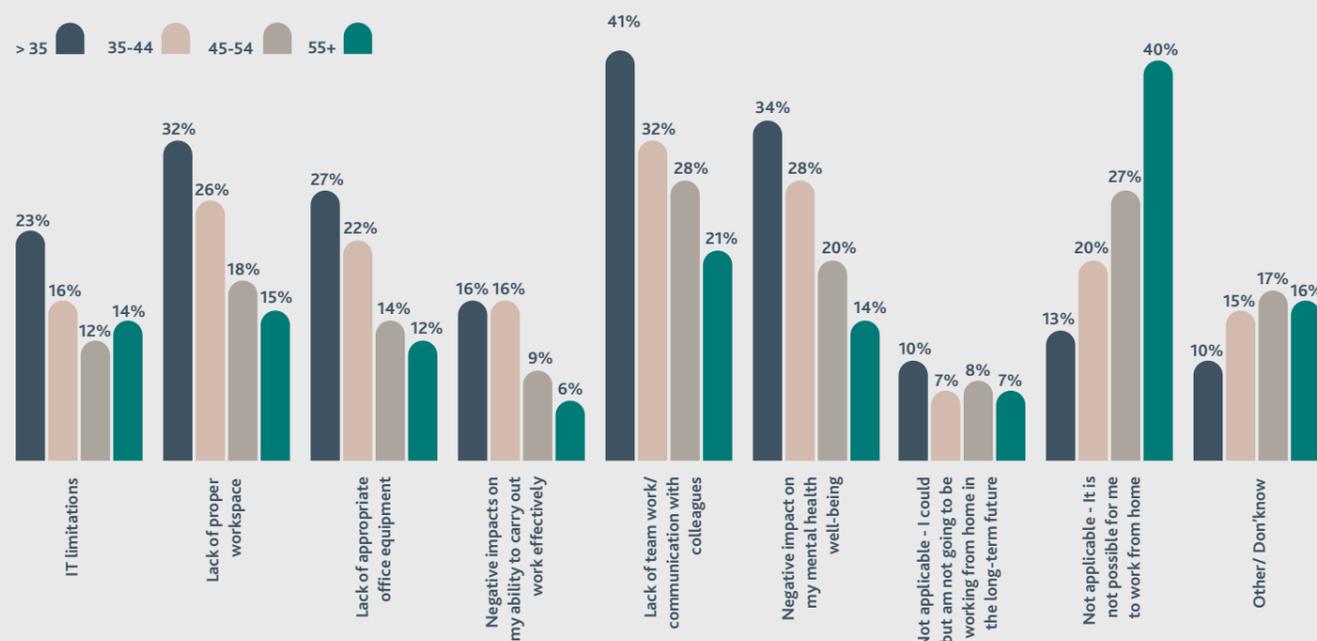
Which, if any, of the following concerns do you have about the possibility of working from home all or most of the time in the long-term future?

Lack of team work/ communication with colleagues	31%
N/A - It is not possible for me to work from home	25%
Negative impact on my mental health and well-being	24%
Lack of proper workspace	22%
Lack of appropriate office equipment	19%
IT related limitations	16%
Negative impacts on my ability to carry out work effectively	11%
N/A - I could but am not going to be working from home in the long-term future	8%
Don't know	8%
Other	7%

There are significant generational differences in relation to employees' concerns about working from home whereas there is relatively little difference in terms of gender:

Generational differences in relation to employees' thoughts on permanent home working for all or most of their working time

Legend: > 35 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55+

IT limitations: 23%, 16%, 12%, 14%
Lack of proper workspace: 32%, 26%, 18%, 15%
Lack of appropriate office equipment: 27%, 22%, 14%, 12%
Negative impacts on my ability to carry out work effectively: 16%, 16%, 9%, 6%
Lack of team work/ communication with colleagues: 41%, 32%, 28%, 21%
Negative impact on my mental health well-being: 34%, 28%, 20%, 14%
Not applicable - I could but am not going to be working from home in the long-term future: 10%, 7%, 8%, 7%
Not applicable - It is not possible for me to work from home: 13%, 20%, 27%, 40%
Other/ Don't know: 10%, 15%, 17%, 16%

As demonstrated by the chart, the younger generation (under 35s) are significantly more concerned about IT related limitations, lack of a proper workspace and office equipment than the other age groups. With many younger workers having flat or house shares or limited living spaces, they may have to undertake home-working from their bedroom or in a shared space, which can give rise to health and safety issues as well as confidentiality issues.

The younger generation are also more concerned than the over 35s about the lack of team work and communication with colleagues as a result of working from home and the negative impact on their well-being. There are significant benefits to employees who have recently begun their working life or started in a new role of having face to face time with colleagues and being in the workplace in order to learn and undertake training. This cannot necessarily be replicated in a home working environment and our research supports the idea that it is the younger generation who may be most impacted by a long-term shift towards home-working.

Many employers have shared with us their worry about the detrimental impact on the wellbeing of employees working from home full-time and that, as a consequence, wellbeing has been an important area for them to focus on during lockdown. A number of employers also reported to us that they felt a balance between home working and remote working would be better from a wellbeing perspective.

HOW DO WE COMBAT SOME OF THESE CHALLENGES?

With employees having less or no face-to-face time in the office, including socially such as meeting in the kitchen or going for a coffee, many businesses feel there has been a detrimental impact on collaboration and cross-referrals. Some businesses have implemented ways to counter-act this such as changing their remuneration structures to encourage collaboration, encouraging employees to have 30 minute virtual coffees with their colleagues, holding lunch clubs, virtual social events e.g. quizzes and regular team meetings as well as cross-departmental meetings. Businesses are also considering this issue when deciding what working arrangements to implement in the long term i.e. whether they specify that certain teams have to be in the office on certain days to ensure more team collaboration.

In terms of engagement with employees, this needs to be led from the very top with the Board listening to employees' views directly through surveys or town hall meetings or from employee representatives e.g. having a staff forum or a staff representative on the Board. Employees do not want lip service paid to their views – they want their employers to actually make changes as a result. There have been (and continue to be) so many uncertainties that employers need to constantly adapt.
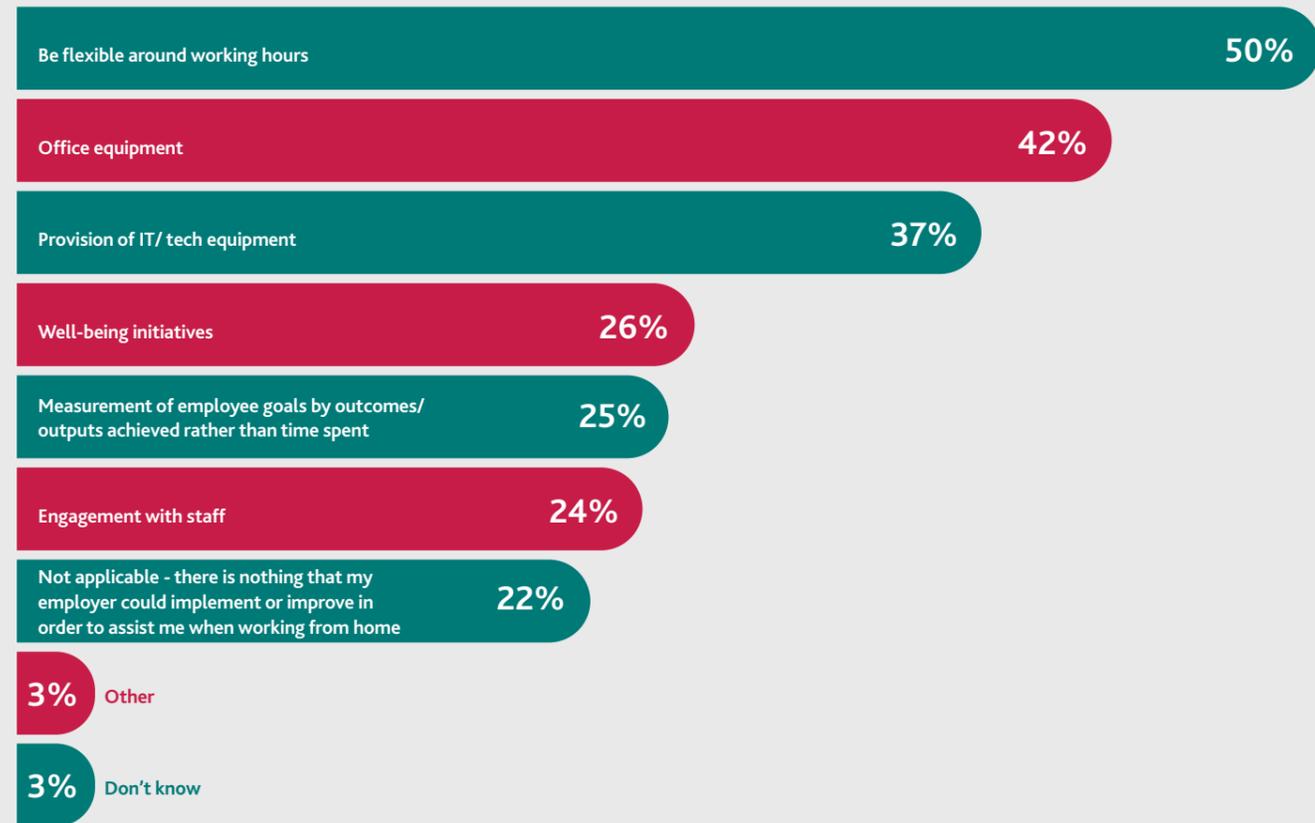
A key area for employers to consider will also be the on-boarding process for employees if employees are working from home all or most of the time. To ensure that employees feel a part of the organisation, employers may want to consider a buddy system as well as encouraging new recruits to speak at various meetings across the organisation so they increase their visibility and their colleagues get to know them.

What do employees consider employers should be doing better to enable them to work from home?

We asked employees what they consider their employer could improve to enable them to work from home. Less than a quarter of employees feel their employer does not need to make any improvements. Overall, more employees aged over 55 feel their employer does not need to implement any improvements compared to those under 55 (with employees under 35 wanting the most changes). The majority of employers could therefore be doing more for their employees. This is a time when businesses need to be adaptable - to listen to their employees' needs regarding what works and what does not work, and adapt their policies, procedures and practices accordingly.

Which, if any, of the following, do you think your employer could implement/ improve to assist you when working from home?

Be flexible around working hours	**50%**
Office equipment	**42%**
Provision of IT/ tech equipment	**37%**
Well-being initiatives	**26%**
Measurement of employee goals by outcomes/ outputs achieved rather than time spent	**25%**
Engagement with staff	**24%**
Not applicable - there is nothing that my employer could implement or improve in order to assist me when working from home	**22%**
3% Other	
3% Don't know	

WORKING HOURS

The change that most employees want in the long-term is for their employer to be flexible around working hours (half of employees said this). More women than men wanted this (54% compared to 47%) which is likely to be because of childcare responsibilities. It was pleasing that over a third of employers intend to increase flexibility around working hours as this is clearly what many employees want and it will therefore be vital for employers to remain competitive and be able to attract and retain the best talent. Although there may be some roles where flexible hours would not be possible due to the requirements of the role, employers may need to be more receptive to trying flexible working.

MEASUREMENT ON OUTCOMES

There is a shift towards employees wanting their employer to measure them on the outcomes/ outputs they achieve rather than time spent, with 25% wanting this change. Some of the founders and HR professionals that we interviewed for our February report had successfully implemented outcome based flexible working and reflected that the key to this is trust. In our view, the success of flexible hours and/or outcome based measurement is dependent on a trusting relationship between the manager and employee where good communication is fostered; employees being clear on what objectives they need to achieve; and employers providing them with the necessary support.

EQUIPMENT

The second and third most important changes that employees want their employer to implement are the provision of office equipment (42%) and IT/ tech equipment (37%). Employers may not have had the time at the beginning of the lockdown to assess each of their employees' needs and undertake risk assessments. However, employers have a duty of care to ensure that employees are working in a healthy and safe environment and this extends to those working from home. It is therefore really important that employers undertake risk assessments for their employers working from home and provide them with the equipment that they need to work safely and effectively from home (subject to cost restrictions which will have to be balanced against the employees' needs). Some employees also commented that they would like help with some of the additional costs of working from home e.g. gas, electricity, home office supplies and are hoping for a home working allowance.

WELL-BEING

26% of employees said that well-being initiatives could be implemented or improved such as having wellbeing sessions e.g. on resilience or mindfulness, online yoga or exercise classes, mental health champions and first aiders, and providing free counselling. Employers should be prioritising and monitoring the well-being of their workforce as part of their duty of care. This includes regularly keeping in touch with employees to check on their welfare and having a culture where employees feel able to talk about their feelings and concerns. Managers should also be trained to spot warning signs that their team may be suffering from mental ill-health (which will be harder to spot if employees are working from home) and have appropriate conversations with their team.

ENGAGEMENT

Nearly a quarter of employees said that engagement with staff needed to be improved, for example by their employers using staff surveys, having town hall meetings and management taking on board employees' views. Many employers have implemented regular virtual team meetings and social events already but some employees still think that employers could be doing more. As well as reaching out to employees, employers need to take on board employees' views and make changes to working arrangements as a result.

Recommendations

1 Undertake health and safety risk assessments for employees working from home to ensure that they are working in a safe and effective environment. Once the risks have been identified, consider what equipment and technology needs to be provided to employees to minimise the risks to their health.

2 Consider data protection and confidentiality issues of employees working from home, update your contracts of employment and data protection and confidentiality polices to cover home-working risks and issues, and implement measures to ensure the protection of business and client sensitive data. This will ensure that employees are clear what their obligations are and you have put in place appropriate protections e.g. IT security measures and provision of shredders/small lockable cabinets for employees' homes.

3 Ensure well-being is at the heart of your workplace culture. Managers should lead by example and champion mental health initiatives to break down stigma and gain traction across the organisation so that employees feel comfortable to share their feelings and concerns. Think about how your organisation will ensure effective engagement with home-workers so they do not feel isolated or unsupported.

Put in place a stress and mental well-being at work policy which provides guidance on what to do if employees are suffering from mental ill health and what support you will make available in the circumstances. Having this policy as well as implementing training and well-being initiatives will demonstrate your commitment to identifying and eradicating sources of work-related stress and providing a working environment which supports mental well-being.

4 Encourage and foster communication and collaboration between employees and their managers and colleagues. Listening to employees and taking on board their feedback is key to ensuring effective engagement with employees and that businesses adapt to make home working a success. It important that staff still feel part of the team and are not excluded by virtue of their working arrangements. As well as better day-to-day communication, consider taking proactive steps to monitor effectiveness of home working and collate feedback, for example, by conducting a staff satisfaction survey.

5 Implement a flexible working or agile working policy which sets out your flexible working principles. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many employers are considering having a set of principles for their entire workforce or certain departments in relation to home working in the long-term e.g. that the expectation is that employees can work from home two or three days a week. This will ensure that employees understand what is expected of them. A one size fits all approach may not be appropriate in all circumstances so may need to be tailored depending on employees' personal circumstances.
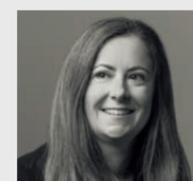
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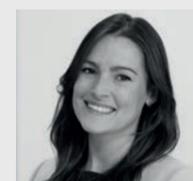jkeddie@wslaw.co.uk
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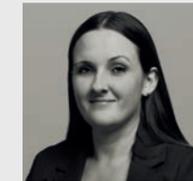
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