

Flexible Working for Older Workers

Executive summary

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in partnership with:

THE
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About us

Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR)

Founded in 1947, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) is an independent, not-for-profit, multi-disciplinary social science organisation dedicated to the study of human relations for the purpose of bettering working life and conditions for people within their organisations, communities and broader societies. Working nationally and internationally, the TIHR's core activities are: evaluation, particularly of complex programmes in a range of areas of public policy (including children and young people; health; transport; education, training and employment); applied research; and organisational consultancy. Our evaluation work also includes provision of bespoke evaluation training for a wide variety of organisations (local government, central government, third sector organisations), development of evaluation frameworks and guidelines, and support with managing and commissioning evaluations. The TIHR is committed to work with people and organisations to make sense of situations, apply learning from evaluation and research into practice, all in service of supporting ongoing learning.

Acknowledgements

The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) would like to thank the Centre for Ageing Better for commissioning this evaluation, and Guys and St Thomas Trust (GSTT) and Legal & General (L&G) for the opportunity to carry out this work. With the COVID-19 pandemic, their continued engagement and support have enabled us to use the evaluation also as an opportunity to understand flexible working in a new context. Our thanks also to Timewise for taking part in discussions throughout.

Without the people who participated in interviews we would not have been able to collect such rich data. Our special thanks go to all the pilot participants and other members of staff at GSTT and L&G who shared their experiences with us.

Executive summary

The Flexible Working pilot

The Centre for Ageing Better worked with the Timewise Foundation and two large employers to increase the availability and take up, by people over 50, of more flexible working arrangements.

“The collaboration between Timewise and the Centre for Ageing Better was designed as an 18-month programme to explore how over 50s can access the benefits of flexible working, bringing value to employers through improved employee wellbeing and motivation and, in the longer term, recruitment and retention.”

The Flexible Working Pilot project, delivered in Guys and St.Thomas’ Trust (GSTT) and Legal & General (L&G), aimed to increase the availability and take up, by older workers, of more flexible working arrangements. The pilot trialled changes to the working patterns of a cohort of over 50s with Timewise providing support and guidance to them and their line managers. The pilot completed in February 2020 (therefore before COVID-19).

The evaluation

The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) carried out an independent evaluation of the pilot. The overall aim was to understand and learn about what works in implementing and facilitating access to flexible working – for which people and in what kinds of situations – addressing the following questions:

- What do new flexible working practices look like in the pilot sites?
- What outcomes and impacts have these new practices had?
- To whom have these flexible working practices made a difference?
- What sort of organisational changes were required in the pilot sites to enable new flexible working arrangements to become a reality?

We initially answered these through:

- Reviewing Timewise, L&G and GSTT information
- Observing training sessions delivered by Timewise

- Asking pre- and post-training questions of pilot participants (both line managers and job holders)
- Carrying out initial interviews with pilot participants (both line managers and job holders)
- Circulating an online survey to pilot participants and older workers at GSTT and L&G who were invited to take part in the pilot but did not
- Holding follow-up interviews with pilot participants (both line managers and job holders)

Midway into the pilot COVID-19 took hold, which generated large scale and significant change as most participants moved to working from home, with some making additional changes to their working patterns. We moved to exploring not only what had changed because of the pilot, but also what impact the pandemic had on job holders' chosen flexible working arrangements and sought to understand what the impact of COVID-19 had been on working practices in both organisations outside the pilot.

What changed for pilot participants and their line managers?

Job holders highlighted that most flexible working arrangements trialled went well. However, their experience was shaped by the external context and, with COVID-19, the picture changed dramatically. Our learning suggested there were four broad pathways for job holders into and through flexible working:

- **Pathway 1:** where the **arrangement became no longer relevant** in its original form - particularly because of the shift to working from home following lockdown.
- **Pathway 2:** here original **arrangements continued to work as planned with no changes made**, but participants also 'acquired' the added (default) flexibility of working from home dictated by circumstances.
- **Pathway 3:** where **original arrangements remained largely unchanged, but participants made additional minor tweaks to them** (without changing their core features).
- **Pathway 4:** the most disruptive, which saw **some participants unable to continue with their planned arrangement at all** because COVID-19 increased demands on participants' time.

The significant changes in both pilot organisations included requiring home working (apart from clinical staff at GSTT) and that they then provided digital and remote working support, e.g. for those who might have felt isolated and amending line management and supervision mechanisms and style. Both organisations additionally developed ways and tools to support line managers as they moved to working remotely with their teams.

The benefits of the pilot that **job holders** described included:

- Better work life balance
- Less time commuting
- Better mental health
- Greater sense of focus when at work
- Greater sense of value and recognition

Although they did not find either the trialled arrangements or the changes resulting from COVID-19 difficult to implement and spoke to the benefits of the post-COVID-19 expansion of flexible working arrangements (discussed in more detail below), a few **found themselves working longer hours**. They described the challenges of being able to manage work/life boundaries (because of regularly working from home), also raised by some line managers, with concerns of how to deal with its implications.

Some suggested that COVID-19 had enabled them to feel more confident about asking for a modification to their flexible working arrangements or to have an even better understanding what flexible working options are possible.

Very few shortcomings to the pilot were mentioned by job holders. Some described difficulty acclimatising to working flexibly, due to concerns that they may be perceived as not pulling their weight in their teams. For others, their hands-on management style felt incompatible with having to delegate responsibility to junior staff when they were not at work. However, these issues were generally temporary and resolved once the job holder had acclimatised to their new working pattern.

The benefits **line managers** reported seeing centred on:

- Greater productivity
- Improved employee satisfaction
- Improved recruitment and retention
- More effective distribution of staff resource.

What worked well about the trial

Piloting was clearly important and it was suggested that having external support and facilitation was an additional factor when introducing, promoting and rolling out flexible working. Timewise had considerable knowledge and expertise, knew what options would be appropriate and provided a legitimacy that in turn may have helped the pilot organisations to take the initiative seriously.

The pilot was an opportunity for both organisations to develop their existing flexible working practices. At L&G, a general and organisation-wide flexible and agile working policy for everyone appeared to work well, but practice differed across managers. At GSTT, practices varied across services and the pilot helped to raise the profile of flexible working as well as supporting managers to shift perceptions and consider different ways of working. The specific **added value of the pilot** was that it:

- Provided a safe and contained opportunity to trial new working arrangements that could be reversed if unsuccessful or modified.
- Publicised flexible working, helping managers and job holders understand the available options and provide them with a space explicitly designed to focus their thinking.
- Enabled participants to connect with others facing similar circumstances, which validated their difficulties.
- Legitimised flexible working by offering a route to ask for a change that some job holders did not think would be accepted or did not think they were entitled to.
- Challenged attitudes and organisational cultures and helped explore new ways of working and collaborating, all of which were then accelerated due to COVID-19.

Timewise have argued that any new flexible working arrangement will benefit from a pilot or trial period. This enables the individual, their line manager and their team (if relevant) to become accustomed to new arrangements, review their appropriateness and leave the door open for further change. This pilot conformed with good practice in the process almost regardless of what people might have thought about the training. Thus the intervention itself was the principal facilitating factor.

What needs to be in place to make flexible working successful?

The conditions for success appeared to be reliant on three core interconnected elements – job holders, teams and organisations – with the characteristics of each needing to be in place at the outset. The emergent picture was complex and the evaluation findings suggest that there are many factors, from individual wishes through to ensuring teams can dovetail their activities to meet the requirements of the organisation. The learning here also suggests that there are essential elements that can enable the promotion of flexible working – now more than ever on many organisations’ agendas.

For individuals

Individual characteristics, as well as the characteristics of their roles, appeared to be important factors in whether flexible working felt plausible, successful or was even desirable. In practice, this was often due to the specifics of working arrangements that involved different set of demands on individuals, line managers and the wider organisation. At the same time, they were likely to include a mixture of personality types, work/office set ups and the need for customer/public contact.

For teams

Ideally, it is teams that make flexible working feasible. In the pilot, teams often worked on the basis of collective understanding, coming together in the delivery of the core work. We learned from line managers that some were not as enthusiastic about 'new' practices but recognised that (and even more so as a result of COVID-19), it would be difficult to avoid incorporating flexible practice into their teams even where there had been apparently negative impacts.

Line managers said they recognised that not every individual would want to work flexibly and agreement to requests would also be dependent on how this would fit with the demands of the business. Beyond this, participants in the evaluation suggested that for flexible working to succeed in teams, four elements were critical:

- **Buy-in from managers:** although job holders had variable experiences, participation in the pilot training appeared to have been an important factor in ensuring line management commitment.
- **Trust:** this became increasingly important as more people moved to working from home and job holders said they did feel trusted by line managers. Some referred to the importance of team trust and strong team relationships as enablers for successful flexible working. Openness and transparency were considered essential where team members understood why people worked flexibly and would therefore be more likely to cover for them when needed. Concerns about productivity appeared to be unfounded.
- **Reciprocity, equity and in-team flexibility:** Job holders and line managers recognised the need for 'give and take' and this was more noticeable during the pandemic. Some jobholders were concerned that others may see them as privileged, but managers understood the need to demonstrate fairness and encourage fairness and tolerance. Where reciprocity and trust were embedded in a team and in relationships, access to and implementation of flexible working was easier.

- **Capacity to provide additional support:** For the pilot participants, line management was largely unaffected. With COVID-19, some line managers found themselves increasing the number of occasions, both formal and social, on which they met staff – related to trust, but also for many a genuine desire to ensure individuals were still connected to teams and colleagues. They recognised that flexible working (and if/when people return to their workplace) needed to be supported and individuals needed to be reminded on how to access this.

For organisations

Widening conversations beyond a team within and across organisations was considered essential. Pilot participants described the importance of ensuring that flexible working was deemed an acceptable and integral part of work practice. Key considerations also included:

- **Providing formal definitions and flexible working practice:** For some people, a recognised agreement was very important. However, retaining a less formal process remained important in some situations where a small number of participants here abandoned their formal agreement for a more ad hoc approach.
- **Offering an open culture with shared values:** This required ensuring conversations were had across organisations and, in some instances, providing role-modelling to enable flexible working. There was also a recognition of the need to move beyond individual to team objectives, which helped create a collective sense of purpose round contribution to the organisation.
- **Ensuring a structure and systems in place:** This required having access to relevant IT systems and providing for individuals who wished to start work particularly early or work particularly late by having offices that were open and staffed (pre-COVID-19). Some offices had carpooling policies, which limited an individual's choice about when to get to and from work, especially if public transport was less freely available (for example, if buses or trains are infrequent or begin at a particular time in the morning), which needed to be considered.

The age specificity of flexible working

The pilot was explicitly targeted at those who were aged 50 and over. However, most participants in the evaluation, and in the light of COVID-19 that created large-scale change in working practices, queried whether flexible working should be restricted to older workers. At the same time, some acknowledged that the age-related element did offer:

- Showing the value that the organisation gives to older workers and their experience/expertise
- Opening conversations about and normalising ‘ageing’
- Making participants feel less “alone” in their need to change their patterns (highlighted above).

There was consensus that flexible working was a good thing for all employees, with provisos related to the core business of the organisation or service, department and team requirements, and that individual roles could accommodate flexible patterns. At the same time, and within this broad agreement, there was recognition that an age-sensitive approach was helpful as job holders experience life differently dependent on their stage within a working life-cycle.

Flexible working into the future

For flexible working to be sustainable and for organisations to plan for the future, the findings from the evaluation suggest a range of key lessons for employers:

- **Having a point in time when ‘business as usual’ practices were questioned, and new ways of working implemented, is valuable in implementing flexible working.** Both the pilot intervention and the impact of COVID-19 demonstrated this. It was not necessarily the pilot that made the difference but rather the act of providing time and space to make changes and question working patterns.
- **Offering over 50s specifically the opportunity to consider flexible working may make them feel more involved and valued by their employer.** The stage in an individual’s life and/or career may be important to consider in implementing flexible working. But flexible working does not need to be only targeted to or supported for people over 50 for them to benefit.
- **Flexible working does not need to mean wholesale change; small-scale changes can make a significant difference to individuals** without adversely affecting others or the workload.
- **Trust within teams and between line managers and employees** is critical to successful flexible working – even more so post-pandemic where home working has significantly increased. This may now involve a greater investment of time in relationships that may result in benefits for employers and employees.

- **Successful flexible working needs a personalised approach.** This involves line managers having an in-depth awareness and understanding of what employees need by ensuring intentional, flexible-working focused conversations
- At the same time, it is important to move the conversation focused on how flexible working can benefit individuals and teams to the **broader, “visionary” conversations** about how an organisation can redesign and deliver in the future. This implies always thinking at ‘scale’, e.g. if one person requests a change, what would this mean for the team or if the entire team wanted to change their working arrangements?
- Encouraging staff to **share their team-based approaches to flexible working** will facilitate change by adding to the evidence on how different ways of working can be successful (and therefore continue to shift the culture). Role models – including at a senior level – can show what is possible.
- **There may be inequalities in who can work flexibly** and organisations can explore this through conversations with staff about flexible working on what would work for individuals and the employer.

Some key considerations emerged in light of the pandemic:

- **Home working policies need to be reviewed** because they may no longer be fit for purpose. The expectation is that many people will work remotely or from home some if not all the time, which needs to be explicit in organisational policies.
- **Organisations can take the opportunity to focus on how jobs are designed** that recognises that not every job needs to be full-time.
- People did not want to go back to ‘how things were’ and the way forward is to capitalise on the learning and transformation brought about by COVID-19.

Flexible working often happens informally. In some situations, formalising the process and practice will help to reinforce the values that many described as critical to its success. These encompassed transparency and trust, which may also lead to equity and fairness. The evaluation findings showed that reciprocity was also a foundation to good practice where line managers acknowledged that job holders gave back as much and sometimes more than they were given.

Let's take action today for all our tomorrows.
Let's make ageing better.



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