



Working through COVID-19 and beyond: the perspective from employers

In September 2020, we asked Working Families' employer members to tell us how they had managed the many challenges the COVID-19 pandemic had presented.

26 employers responded, answering a detailed survey that explored their experiences during the pandemic and their future plans, with an emphasis on their support for employees who are parents and carers. The employers we heard from are based across the UK and they work across the public, private and third sectors, in a variety of industries.

This briefing draws on these employers' experiences to give a snapshot of employer best practice, showing how employers have risen to the challenge of supporting their staff.

The changing world of work during the COVID-19 pandemic

For these employers, there has been a huge leap forward in flexible working during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Before COVID-19, just under half said that at least half of their staff flexed their hours, and a quarter said at least half of their staff worked at least partly remotely.
- During COVID-19, 85% said at least half of their staff had flexed their hours, and 84% said at least half of their staff had worked exclusively remotely during lockdown.

Employers described many challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown:

Biggest challenges of COVID-19 for employers



In addition, like employers across the country, some of the employers we heard from had had to furlough staff or make redundancies.

But employers also described many positive learnings from the growth in flexible working during lockdown:



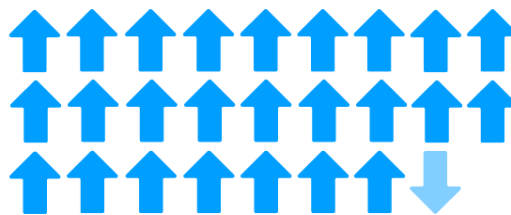
“Flexible working will attract a wider range of employees. You don’t need to be in the office 9-5 M-F. Technology is there to work in different ways” – Director of HR, insurance sector

“We were already very pro-flexible working but how well it’s worked has been a significant learning point” – Head of Employee Experience, training and education sector

“Office working will soon be a thing of the past, and if we equip our staff correctly, our productivity and client service isn’t affected negatively at all” – Responsible Business Executive (D&I), legal sector

“The vast majority (including senior leadership) have bought into remote and flexible working. Huge culture changes for us as a business” – HR Advisor, engineering and manufacturing sector

While some employers may initially have had concerns about productivity during lockdown, for most employers, productivity had not suffered – in some cases, it had even improved:



25 out of the 26 employers we spoke to felt that productivity had been the same or better than usual during lockdown.



Employers attributed employees’ ability to maintain or even improve productivity to many factors:

- efficient technology and ‘being digital first’
- reduced commute times
- working hours that suit employees
- employees wanting to show that working from home can be effective
- existing familiarity with remote and agile working
- lack of workplace distractions
- emphasis on trust and outputs rather than presenteeism
- emphasis on teamwork



With employees with children facing particular challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown, nearly all employers said they now had a better understanding of who those employees were, and overall support for parents and carers had improved:

Employer support for parents and carers



All employers had offered employees with children the opportunity to work from home and flex their hours. In addition, many employers had offered wellbeing support, paid leave, acceptance of children appearing on video calls, and changed deadlines and objectives to reflect caring responsibilities.

The future of work – to the end of 2020 and beyond

With the pandemic still ongoing, most employers expected a mix of working partly remotely and partly in the workplace through to the end of 2020:

- Two-thirds of employers planned to allow most staff to continue to flex their hours
- Three-quarters were planning to allow employees to work at least partly remotely
- Only a third expected more than a quarter of their staff to work exclusively remotely

Looking to the future, employers described many positive changes that had come from lockdown:

- The lockdown had shown that flexible working was available in many more jobs than previously thought possible
- Employees were now more likely to discuss their caring responsibilities in the workplace
- Most employers were not concerned that they would revert to presenteeism after the lockdown
- Employers were expecting to receive more requests for remote and flexible working from parents and carers

And while flexible working has often been primarily associated with working mothers, two-thirds of employers thought that since COVID-19, there is more interest in flexible working among their male employees who are parents and carers.



Most of the employers we heard from were planning to recruit in the coming year. Around half of them expected to make flexible working available in all roles, and a fifth said they expected to mention this at recruitment stage.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has obviously been a difficult time for employers and their staff. Concerns about challenges ahead remain at the top of many employers' and employees' minds.

At the same time, the employers we heard from had adapted to the tough conditions, discovered their employees' resilience and commitment, and forged new ways of working:

"It's obviously been a tough period but our engagement scores and level of pride in 'who we are' have risen a huge amount from February to July. In large part, this has been driven by how well supported people feel and our approach to flexible working. There has been a huge change in how we lead and the style and focus of our communications 'from the top' and huge emphasis on people (with demonstrable results through our regular engagement surveying) - my aspiration is that this does not slip back.

As an organisation, we don't want to move to 100% remote and the majority of our people also don't want to be 100% remote or 100% office-based. Instead, we are moving towards 100% informal flexibility where we don't need to change contracts but where people have the autonomy and trust to work where and how they like within certain job parameters. Covid-19 suggests this is achievable. We were already well over half way there before Covid-19 but it's been accelerated recently." – Head of Employee Experience, education and training sector

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