

Flexible Working: Here To Stay

Key insights for talent executives

Flexible Working: Here To Stay

If anything has been accelerated through the global pandemic, it is the enablement and implementation of flexible working.

What does flexible working mean?

The UK .gov website defines flexible working this way: “Flexible working is a way of working that suits an employee’s needs, for example having flexible start and finish times, or working from home”.

In this report we will go beyond this definition to explore not only different working models, but also alternative ways of engaging and contracting to secure the skills needed to meet strategic goals and growth plans, as we work our way out of the pandemic and into a new employment landscape.

Pre-Covid, I was reporting on the increasing appetite for flexible working relationships amongst employees and candidates. The rising demand for work-life balance, the always on / always off expectations of Millennials, and a global need to retain older workers, were trends which were already shaking up the traditional employment relationship. When combined with the potential capability of technological advancements over the last 5 years, the key ingredients for more flexible working were already in place.

The speed with which many market sectors were able to move their staff to fully remote working, when necessary for business continuity, raises the question of whether organisations had previously been reluctant to introduce alternative working arrangements?

When the first lock down started, the EU Science



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Hub estimated that, across the region, between 33-44% of roles considered as “dependent employment” would be suitable for “telework”, predominantly in high paid, white collar roles. In the UK lockdown hit in March and, according to the Office of National Statistics, by April 46.6% of people in employment were working at home to some degree, 86% of which were due to the coronavirus pandemic.

This impact resonated globally; according to a survey conducted by Gartner, “88% of the organizations, worldwide, made it mandatory or encouraged their employees to work from home after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic”.

The transition of the workplace to homeworking seems to have been positively received by employees. A recent survey, carried out for Skillcast by YouGov, reported that 70% of UK employees felt they could be as productive working from home as they were in the office, regardless of company size, region, or market sector. In the US, this figure increased to 77%, according to CoSo Cloud. In Germany, the appetite is lower, but according to the World Economic Forum, 40% of the population wanted to work from home to some extent.

Employees seem keen to retain some level of remote working, but to what extent has employer reluctance been overcome by almost a year of remote workforce operations?

The Benchmark

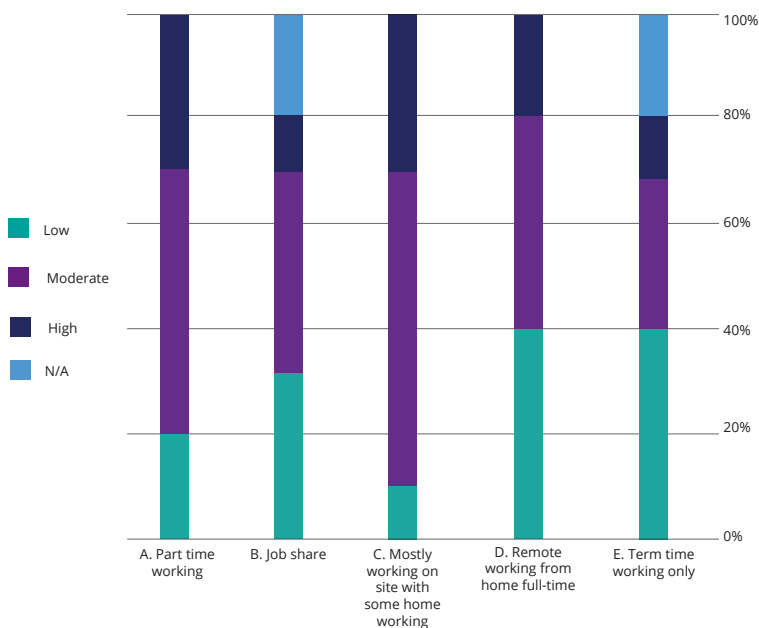
The results of the TALiNT Partners Benchmark survey, which closed at the end of October 2020, indicated that not all employers have changed their overall attitude towards remote working or variable working times.

40%

Employers reluctant to offer remote working on a permanent, full-time basis



Please indicate your effectiveness at being willing to offer the following work practices for your vacancies



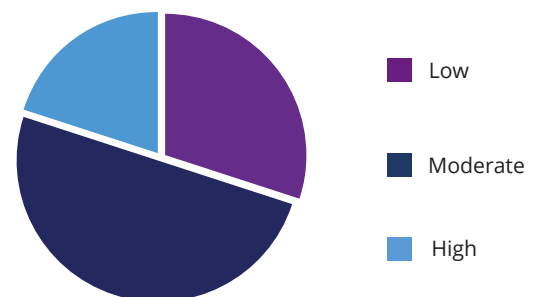
40% of employers reported being reluctant to offer remote working on a permanent, full-time basis, although 90% were willing to consider limited home working, where most time is spent on company premises. There were positive indications for job-share and part-time working with 50% and 80% moderate to positive ratings, respectively.

Although not everyone is convinced, this feels like a positive shift, yet the survey results told us that only 30% of respondents see flexible working as an integral part of their employer brand, others only discuss flexible working where it is expressly requested by an applicant. If attitudes have changed, employers are not yet talking about it.

Looking more closely, there were differences between management and non-management roles in offering flexibility. 50% of benchmark participants rated their offers of flexibility as low against target for non-management employees, whilst at management level, 70% considered themselves as average or good in offering flexible working arrangements.

[Click here for a copy of the full Benchmark Report.](#)

How would you rate job offers on flexible contracts to managers?





Sectors most feeling the skills-pinch

There are differing challenges between market sectors with not all roles lending themselves to more flexibility. Retail, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, warehousing and in-person trades cannot operate from their kitchen or home office. Yet even here, the pandemic has been a conduit to change. Personnel Today reported “seeing an increase in ‘non-traditional’ industries entering into the flexible working space, moving away from White Collar office environments, into Engineering, Healthcare and Retailers.”

Undoubtedly, the change in working relationships has added a new complexity to an already challenging candidate market in which skill shortages prevail. Despite an increase of candidates available for work due to headcount reductions or business closures.

With the increased demand on technology solutions as an enabler to business continuity and growth, the need for IT talent has soared, and so has the gap in skill availability. In this context, creative workforce planning is the difference between attracting the skills needed, or not. Flexibility, not just in workplace location, but in methods of contracting with alternatives such as service packages or fixed term contracts becoming even more crucial to secure the skills needed for urgent change programmes.

Of course, the scarcity of global talent is not limited to technology. The pharmaceutical and health sectors have seen an unprecedented rise of both short and longer-term skill shortages. These high-skill roles are specific, specialist and cannot be easily substituted with alternative talent. Organisations have worked creatively to

draw from alternative pools, such as retirees and those who have moved away from operational, hand-on roles, offering flexibility in return for a boost to resource levels.

What is clear, is that flexibility in the working relationship has become an imperative for organisations who want to retain their employer of choice status, competing for the most talented in the market. At the same time, it has become a hygiene factor for employees; no longer is flexibility a perk, accessible to the privileged few.


Flexible Working – What is shaping the new landscape?

Appetite for legal mandate

In the UK it is already the case that all employees have the legal right to request flexible working - not just parents and carers. Now Germany is set to draft new legislation making working from home a legal right. In some regions and sectors there is pressure, as People Management so succinctly put it, to make “flexible working the default unless employers have a good reason not to”. Is mandate the answer? It would have impact, but it also runs the risk of turning a sound business strategy into a box-ticking exercise.

Improving access to niche skills

Taking a more creative and flexible approach to both workplace and working patterns can make a hard-to-fill role more attractive to the market. Not only this, but flexibility might make opportunities more available or accessible to untapped talent, such as parents seeking a better balance between family and work life.



This is not new, but now there is a much greater sense of what a blended lifestyle might look like; after all many employees have had virtually a year to get used to it. I love this quote from Ian Dinwiddy from Inspiring Dads,

“Covid has exposed the myth that widespread remote and flexible work will be the death of business. There are challenges around wellbeing and connectivity. But, those firms who embrace the new normal will continue attract the best talent and break the paradigm of presenteeism.”

I was a working parent at a time when there was much less awareness of balance, but even more recently attitudes have been slow to change. An article in Business Matters from 2017, reported that “2/5 of low-paid young parents” were “being punished for requesting access to flexible working – receiving fewer hours, being signed on to worse shift patterns, and even being laid off entirely”. Any shift which re-engages this population and their valuable contribution to the workforce resonates with me as something entirely positive that could come from the pandemic.

“And whereas in the past, demand for flexible working most typically arose from female employees saddled with the task of juggling work with childcare, this gender boundary is also beginning to break down as greater numbers of male employees call for greater flexibility within their working lives too”. (handhcomms.co.uk)

Expand this shift to carers, students (early in career or mature), semi-retirees, etc, etc. Suddenly a rich and potentially untapped source of talent becomes an option. The possibilities created by openness to flexible working become increasingly attractive in the light of the global ticking time bomb of an aging workforce population.

Employee expectations / demands

Regardless of employer appetite to embrace flexibility, many accept that the pandemic has altered the expectations of employees and contractors on a permanent basis and at a global level.

It would be an unbalanced report if I did not state that employee appetite to return to a company workplace has not disappeared. There are consequences and bi-products to the liberty

of home-working; isolation and absence of connection, loneliness, mental health concerns and video meeting fatigue are all real and well documented. Not everyone has the luxury of a designated workspace in their home, nor privacy to focus on work task; some are working from the kitchen, or their bed, others are trying to entertain or educate their kids, or avoid work-collision with their partner. Employers tell us that some employees are desperate to go back to the workplace.

Not everyone has loved working from home, but that does not detract from the fact that people have got used to some aspects of it. People have not had to commute, whether that means packed tubes trains, sitting in traffic, or getting up a bit earlier. It has been a bit easier to spend time with family and to get home jobs done to free up the weekend. There has been less focus on presenteeism and more on output. Whilst working from home has its stresses, a return to the workplace has new consequences. The majority of employers recognise that employee views have been irrevocably altered by the events of 2020.

In a recent Citrix poll, one in four respondents of 2,000 US knowledge workers indicated they have abandoned their city dwellings, or plan to do so because:

- Their job is now 100 per cent remote and will be permanently (37 per cent)
- They now only need to go into the office once a week (25 per cent)
- The pandemic has proven that they can do their job from anywhere (22 per cent)

There is a sense of permanent change in employer-employee collaboration.

There is a challenge for employers in the very scale of impact on the employee relationship. Since very few have been unaffected, the differences in employer response have been more noticeable and more talked about. With so many documents telling us how to support a remote workforce, be proactive about employee well-being or create virtual team dynamics, it becomes obvious when an employer is not taking appropriate action. Ultimately in 2021, employers will be judged, by the external and internal talent they need, on their response to the pandemic.



The talked about “Hybrid Model”

The web is buzzing about a new and blended way of working – a Hybrid way. This seems to be a sensible response, although no solution will fit all industries.

Employers are therefore facing a continuation of workforce transformation as they look to navigate which roles will be onsite, remote or “hybrid”. Collaboration across their organisation will be needed to understand the opportunities and constraints of each team.

Workforce planning will need to include new safety factors, such as the impact of social distancing on desk plans, cleaning routines, PPE, and employee testing, screening, or vaccination schemes.

HR and TA leaders are engaging in new discussions on maintenance of productivity, facilitation of working collaboration, shaping “hybrid” team identity, and addressing needs for all employees in regard to mental health & wellbeing.

There are rewards for getting the balance right:

“Flexible working is coupled with several desirable benefits – including greater employee commitment and well-being, reduced absenteeism, and increased productivity”.
(handhcomms.co.uk)

There is a world of transformation ahead for all of us; what we do with it is up to us.

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