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LONDON

Flexible working: myth or reality?

Research and recommendations
from the FDA and the Global
Institute for Women's Leadership
at King's College London

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Introduction

The civil service has openly committed to becoming the most inclusive employer in the UK by 2020 and has put flexible working at the centre of its plans to encourage diversity and inclusion in all aspects of public service. Having a work-life balance that allows your working pattern to flex and change depending on the pulls of your day job, or indeed your personal life, is the gold standard that we believe all employers should aim for. However, after speaking to our members, the FDA has identified significant issues with the way flexible working is promoted and applied across the civil service. From squeezing a full-time job into part-time hours, to having to justify flexible working because your proposed working pattern is based on your individual choice rather than caring requirements, we know that our members are not getting the best out of what flexible working in the civil service has to offer.

We're incredibly proud to have partnered with the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London for this project. The conversations we have had with GIWL have helped us to develop our thinking in this area and I am incredibly grateful for the time and insight we've had from the brilliant team at King's College. This report is based on data collected in early 2019 from FDA and Keystone members, who were asked key questions about their experience of flexible working. We've anonymised the feedback from members but ensured that the key areas of concern are highlighted to help us shape change in workplaces across the country.

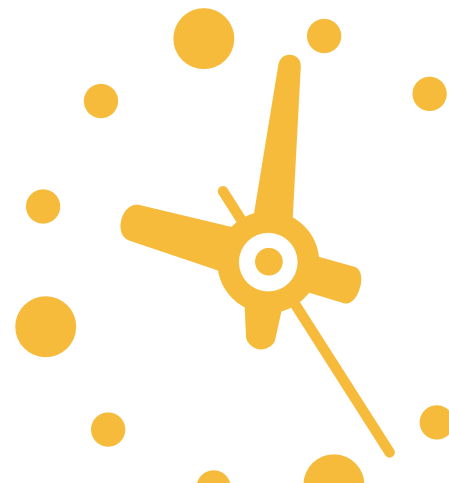
Flexible working is inherently an issue that impacts women, who still - typically - undertake additional caring responsibilities, be it for children, or elderly relatives. From the research we've undertaken it is clear that many of the issues around the implementation of flexible working impact women working in the civil service specifically. When we began our initial conversations with GIWL we posed some big questions:

- **How do you ensure that as a woman you can work flexibly, and reach the most senior roles?**
- **How do you adapt workplace culture to ensure that flexibility is truly embraced?**
- **How can we ensure that once you've secured flexible working, you don't lose it if you change roles in the future?**

While flexible working is an issue members of our Women's Network are passionate about, it is also something that cuts across gender. The feedback in this report is stark at times; a significant proportion of flexible workers indicated that since working flexibly they were more likely to worry about work when not at work and that work was more likely to spill over into other areas of their life. For these individuals, the flexible working offer is clearly falling short of their expectations.

We're calling on employers to adopt the recommendations that have come out of this research to improve work-life balance for all. Flexible working is about more than part-time working for parents; it's about making sure that you get a diverse, well supported workforce, at all levels of an organisation, that is able to truly balance their work around their lives. These recommendations help us to get there.

Victoria Jones, FDA National Officer



Recommendations

1

Recommendation

To beat the stigma of flexible working being primarily associated with women, flexible working should be truly available to all. All jobs that can be worked flexibly should be advertised as such, with rare exceptions justified based on business need.

2

Recommendation

Introducing a flexible working passport allowing people to take alternative working patterns to new roles, encouraging them to seek alternative roles and promotion.

3

Recommendation

Training for line managers in how to support flexible and part-time workers should be introduced.

4

Recommendation

A team approach to flexible working should be developed in order to create a positive culture that ensures awareness of the work-life balance of everyone in the team

5

Recommendation

Upon adopting a flexible working pattern, whether part-time or compressed, an evaluation of the role should be undertaken to ensure that it is appropriately weighted for the grade, and for the working pattern.

6

Recommendation

There should be an acceptance that despite constant access to IT, staff aren't available to work all hours. IT etiquette should be created and publicised to ensure that a culture of contact outside normal working hours doesn't become the norm.

7

Recommendation

As part of departmental quality assurance processes for performance management ratings, employers should be aware of trends for part-time or flexible workers receiving lower box markings. If found, employers should identify training support to ensure line managers are not viewing staff who are in the office less frequently as underperforming by default.

8

Recommendation

Actively support and develop part-time staff and staff working flexibly, to build a pipeline of leaders who feel able to do the same and become effective role models.



Flexible working in the civil service

Flexible working is a key driver to ensuring inclusive workplaces full of a diverse mix of staff, as the pool of candidates for each role won't be limited by their commitments outside of work. The benefits of flexible working are becoming increasingly visible, not only to the individual involved, but the business they are working in too,^[1] with the government legislating to extend the statutory right to request flexible working in June 2014.

Within the civil service there a number of different ways for employees to work flexibly. Most employers will offer flexi-time, a system of recording additional hours worked which can later be taken as time off at a later date, although this isn't available at all levels of the civil service. More traditional options, such as part-time or compressed hours – often characterised as working a standard weekly contractual hours over fewer days, such as a 4 day week, or a 9 day fortnight – are becoming increasingly popular among civil servants. Part-time workers also have the additional legal protection of being eligible for the same flexible working options as colleagues working full time too.

This research is based on 1,599 responses¹ to a survey of the FDA's 18,000 members working across the public sector. The sample was self-selecting, meaning that it is difficult to know to what extent the findings are generalizable from the respondents to the wider civil service population. For this reason we avoid inferential

statistics such as confidence intervals and significance tests. However, comparison of the sample with civil service statistics held by the ONS [2] reveals that it is broadly representative of the wider civil service with respect to gender², the gender composition of each grade³, and full-time/part-time status⁴, however it under-represents part-timers in the SCS⁵, and in line with FDA membership, our sample is weighted towards SCS and Grades 6 and 7 compared to the wider civil service⁶.

The survey reveals generally positive results about the visibility of flexible working culture within the civil service. 76% agree that “there is a culture of flexible working visible at all levels in my organisation”, and among those who indicate that they have submitted a formal request for flexible working acceptance is high – at 92%. Flexible working is clearly highly valued by FDA members and many commented that they were very happy with their arrangements. However, the data also reveals some ways in which flexible working isn't current working as well as it might in the civil service. These have been grouped into 3 key themes:

Accessing flexible work

Accommodating flexible work and;

Advancing in flexible work

1 1,599 responses in total, sample sizes for individual questions vary. All data included in this research is produced by GIWL analysis of FDA survey data

2 Our sample was 52% female versus 48% in the wider civil service (figures for the wider civil service include SCS, Grades 6 and 7, Senior Executive Office (SEO) and Higher Executive Officer (HEO) grades only)

3 Of our sample 43% of SCS, 53% of Grades 6 and 7 and 47% of SEO/HEO (including fast streamers) were female, compared to figures of 43%, 46% and 49% in the wider civil service

4 14% of our sample work part-time, compared to 15% from the wider civil service (figures include grades SCS, 6 and 7, and SEO/HEO).

5 7% in our sample, compared to 11% in the wider civil service

6 Our sample: 13% SCS, 60% Grades 6 and 7 and 18% SEO/HEO (including fast streamers) and 8% other. Wider civil service: 4% SCS, 29% Grades 6 and 7, 67% SEO/HEO

Accessing flexible work

Who gets to work flexibly?

Flexible working requests are least common among those at the most senior grades (SCS) and those on the fast stream (fig 1), and these grades are also the most likely to say that 'flexible working is not encouraged at my grade' (fig 3).

At almost every grade women are more likely than men to submit formal flexible working requests, with SCS and Fast Stream men particularly unlikely to submit requests (fig 2).

This suggests that flexible working may still be seen as something that is primarily associated with women, and which is less in evidence in the highest grades.

This was echoed by the findings from the free text questions, which emphasised the idea that in some places at least, flexibility is still seen solely as the preserve of the working mother.

“Seen at first hand active discouragement of flexible working among SCS (specifically for male SCS members to access it)”
Woman, BEIS, grade 6

“People work a compressed week or fortnight. I would like to but feel pressured as several colleagues do it already. I'm gay and don't have children so feel there is pressure/expectation on me to work full time.”
Man, HMRC, full-time

“While my department offers and facilitates flexible working for a great many people, my department will not even consider an application for flexible working for me because I am not a parent.”
Woman, Procurator Fiscal Service (Crown Office), Grade 7,

While greater access to flexible working is often thought of as a 'family friendly' policy, the wider evidence base suggests that promoting it as such and limiting access to parents (and particularly mothers) can be detrimental. [3] The easiest way to destigmatise alternative working patterns is to normalise them. This means seeing them as the norm rather than the exception, communicating that they are for everyone, not just parents, and having visible senior roles models who work flexibly.

“Flexible working is encouraged at all grades and for all posts where I work. I've worked flexibly since my first day in the job”
Woman, DfE, HEO

“A reasonable amount of senior managers try to set the right example. Flexible working is strongly encouraged and modelled”
Man, FCO, SCS



Fig 1: Have you put in a formal flexible working request to your employer?

If you have put in a formal flexible working request, was this accepted?

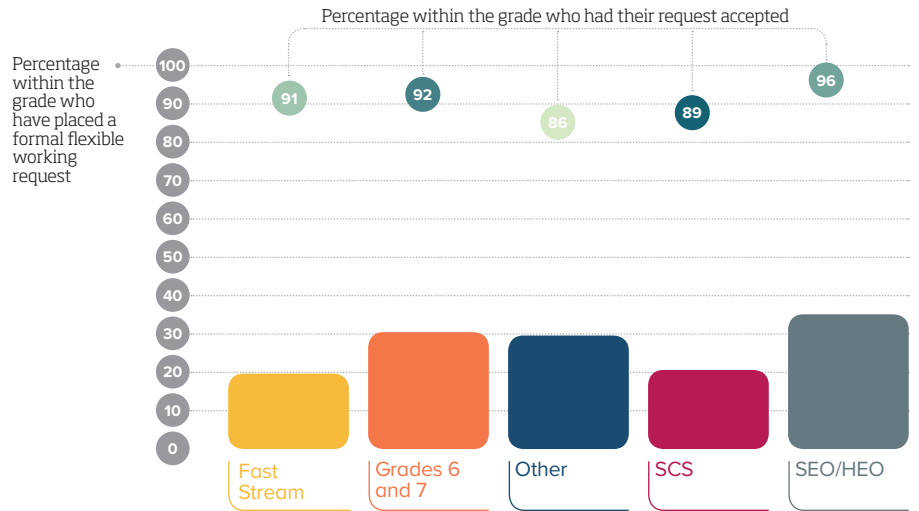


Fig 2: Have you put in a formal flexible working request?

Formal flexible working requests by gender and grade.

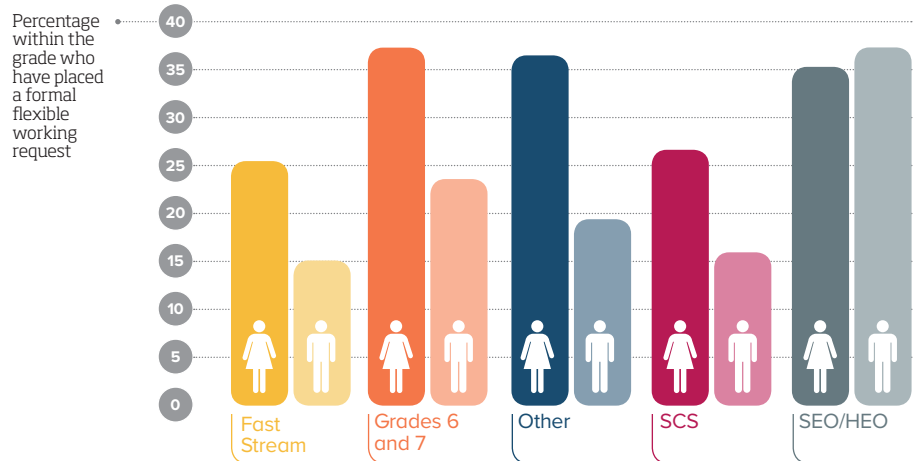
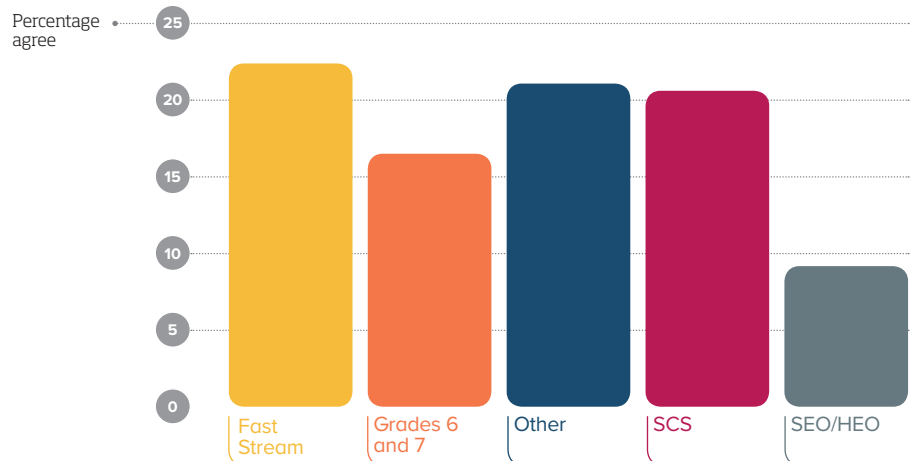


Fig 3: If any, what do you feel are the barriers to obtaining flexible working in your department/agency?

Percentage of members who agreed with the statement 'Flexible working is not encouraged at my grade'.



Recommendation

1

To beat the stigma of flexible working being primarily associated with women, flexible working should be truly available to all. All jobs that can be worked flexibly should be advertised as such, with rare exceptions justified based on business need.

Reliance on managerial discretion

While in general acceptance of flexible working requests seems to be high, it is clear that there are pockets where it is discouraged, leaving the success of requests down to line managers' discretion.

“No central policy or consistent approach and culture and approach of different line managers in different parts of the department can be completely different and without a fully functioning HR Department to ensure fair treatment it can be random. I am fortunate where I am now to be in a part of the Department with supportive line managers where flexible working is the norm but in a previous job my requests to work more flexibly were turned down and there was an inconsistent approach between staff with a lack of any support from HR.”

Woman, DfE, grade 7

“The policies exist but there is inconsistent application due to poor line management capability”

Grade 7, GLD

When there is an inconsistent approach between line managers, access to flexible working can feel precarious and its success is dependent on the individual employee's bargaining position, meaning that flexible working is not available to less 'valuable' employees. This precarity can limit the job mobility of flexible workers, who are loath to lose hard-won flexibility, thereby restricting their opportunities.

Evidence from the private sector suggests that line managers rarely receive training in how to deal with flexible workers [4] and they can sometimes be unwilling to grant access. Training for line managers can be effective in ensuring that they are able to support flexible and part-time workers. [5] 1 model is to develop case studies of line managers successfully working with part-time and flexible employees. Another is to provide training to part-time or flexible staff in order to help them rebalance their workload, and then have those staff train their own managers. [6]

Recommendation

2

Introducing a flexible working passport allowing people to take alternative working patterns to new roles, encouraging them to seek alternative roles and promotion.



Recommendation

3

Training for line managers in how to support flexible and part-time workers should be introduced.

Flexibility in long hours environments

Many of the respondents to the survey put in long hours of unpaid overtime, and these long hours can serve as a barrier to accessing flexible work. Respondents to the survey who worked medium or long hours of overtime tended to perceive more barriers to obtaining flexible working, including fear of being seen as uncommitted and placing extra pressure on their colleagues (fig 4).

Responses also suggested a certain amount of resentment directed against flexible workers by colleagues working long hours:

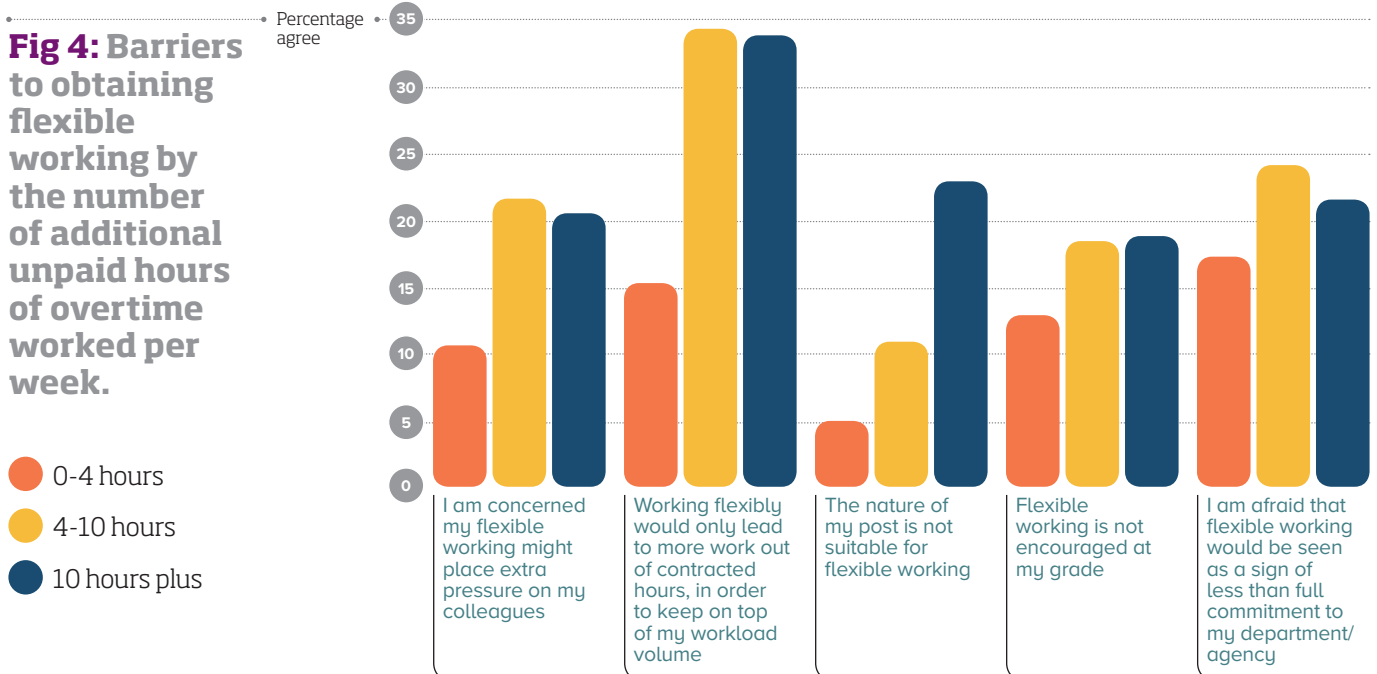
“Where flexible working is in place it creates a mixed economy of those with flexible working privileges who get to leave at fixed times or have compressed days off and those left without such privileges to pick up the slack.”
Woman, DFID, SCS, full time working 14+ unpaid overtime/ week

“So some people have negotiated a deal whereby they work compressed hours, which means they work the same hours as me Mon-Thurs and then get Friday off. This doesn't help really.”
Man, DfE, SCS, Full-time

This highlights the fact that implementation of flexible working policies and the acceptance of flexible workers can be trickier in long hour working environments. Efforts to promote flexible working need to go alongside those to realign working cultures away from a norm of long working hours.

“There is a culture of managers checking in with staff and ensuring they are not working excessively and being clear that people should not be working overtime (on a regular basis). My team are clear about respecting different people's working patterns.”
Woman, MHCLG, Grade 7

Fig 4: Barriers to obtaining flexible working by the number of additional unpaid hours of overtime worked per week.



Recommendation 4

A team approach to flexible working should be developed in order to create a positive culture that ensures awareness of the work-life balance of everyone in the team.

Accommodating flexible work

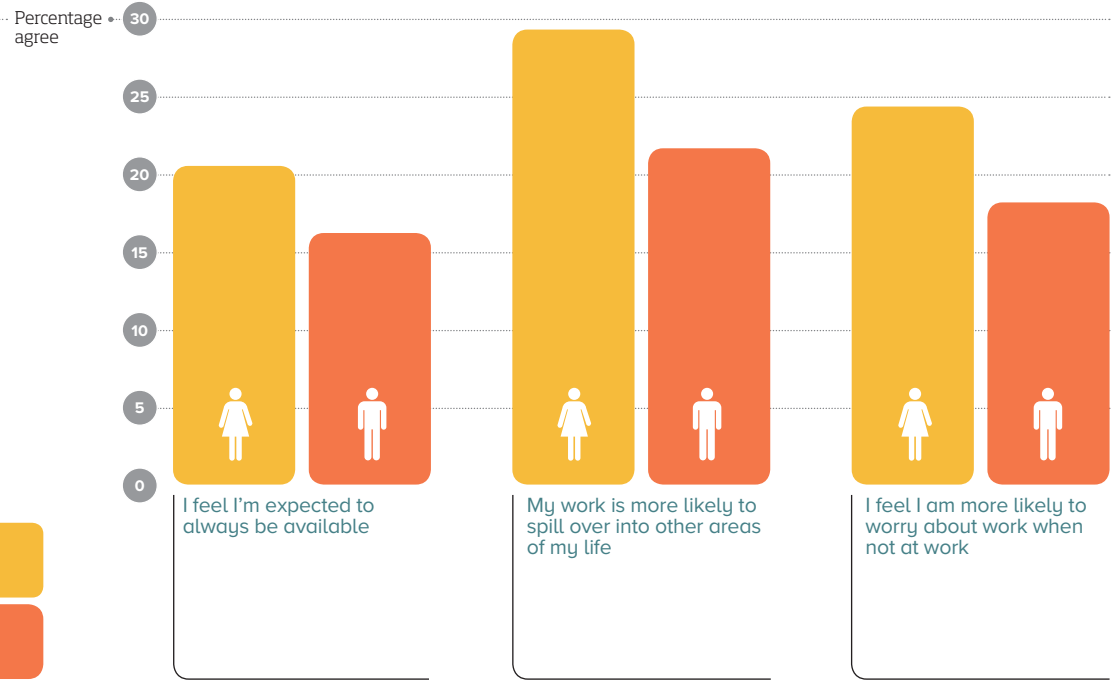
Expanding access to flexible work needs to go alongside efforts to reform workplace culture and/or workload allocation in order to truly include it. The data indicates that, for many flexible workers in the civil service, this is not the case.



A significant proportion of flexible workers indicated that since working flexibly they were more likely to worry about work when not at work, that work was more likely to spill over into other areas of their life, and that they are expected to be always available (fig 5). These effects were most pronounced for women, however further analysis suggests that the majority of this is

likely down to the fact that part-time workers are much more likely to report these effects and that almost all of the part-time workers in our sample were women (fig 6).

Part-time workers reported receiving no adjustment in their workload, while those who had negotiated compressed hours indicated that they were unable to take their day off due to work pressure and were expected to be available on non-workdays.

Fig 5: If you are a flexible worker, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?



 Woman
 Man

“I am part time but it simply does not work, there is no adjustment to the workload. The expectation is you just do all that is thrown at you.”

Woman, HMRC, Grade 6, part-time

“I work 3 days and inevitably work on my non work days. This has an impact on my health. I am stressed and sleep quality is poor. I work part time as I have 2 young children and my husband works away.”

Woman, CPS, SCP, part-time

“My dept is very good at agreeing to flexible working requests and employing part-time/flexible staff, but less good at ensuring workloads are decreased proportionately”

Woman, DfE, Grade 7, part-time

“I work an alternative working pattern of reduced hours, however my job is not achievable on the reduced hours so I work substantial excess hours”




Woman, HMRC, Grade 7, part-time

“It accommodates childcare but remote working promotes longer hours expected of you. Medical appointments to be made up in own time, especially if working part time. The concept of part time working does not exist.”

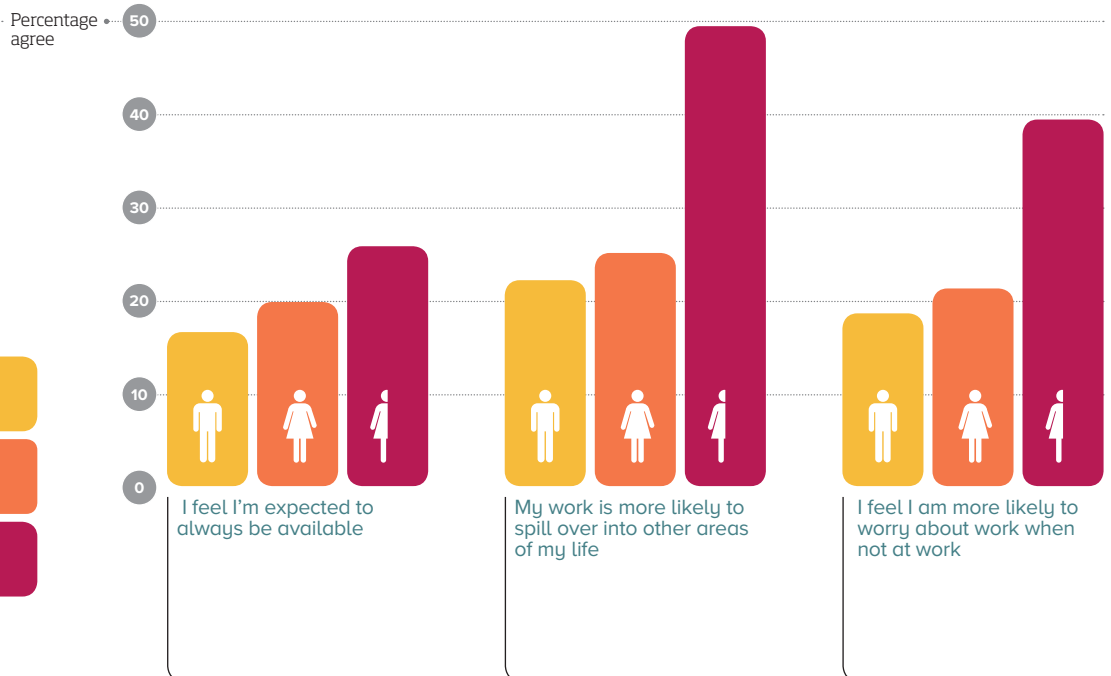
Woman, CPS, Grade 6, part-time



Fig 6: If you are a flexible worker, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

-  Full-time man
-  Full-time woman
-  Part-time woman

NB: Part-time men were not included because there were too few in our sample.



Recommendation

Upon adopting a flexible working pattern, whether part-time or compressed, an evaluation of the role should be undertaken to ensure that it is appropriately weighted for the grade, and for the working pattern.

Smarter working?

A recent reduction in office space in central London and other high footfall areas, has resulted in an increase in departments encouraging staff to work remotely as offices struggle to cope with increased demand for meeting spaces and desks. Although very different, flexibility in working time and flexibility in working location are often grouped together under the broad umbrella 'flexible working'. However, it's important that employees have access to both, and not simply the ability to work their usual office hours from an alternative location.

The increase in remote working was also singled out as having the potential to lead to a blurring of the boundaries between work and home, an expectation of constant availability and an encouragement of digital presenteeism.

“Flexible working is not the answer, if just puts more strain on you to work at other times. The ask of us now we have technology is just all consuming.”

Woman, HMRC, Grade 6, part-time

“Flexible working and more working from home due to reduced office and desk availability is supposed to have led to better work life balance however the reality can be longer hours worked, doing email late at night for example and isolation from colleagues.”

Woman, MoJ, Grade 6, full-time

“General message that emails out of hours should be avoided but increasing flexibility around working patterns (which can be really positive) means that these messages are blurred; Email culture is exponential - days off lead to literally hundreds of unread emails which then take the bulk of a day to clear when you're already in meetings etc. No proactive steps taken to alleviate workload or reduce stress - just wait for people to tip over.”

Woman, HMRC, SCS, full-time

“Flexibility in terms of location is realistically available and well-used (not least because we no longer have enough office space!), but in terms of time flexibility the expectation is that SCS will be “always available”, and part-time working is by and large only possible through job-shares or by people working on their own time.”

Man, DHSC, SCS, full-time

This highlights the 'double edged sword' of flexibility - while IT means that work can increasingly be done remotely it can also lead to a rise in digital presenteeism, a blurring of the boundaries between work and home, and the expectation that employees will be constantly available. [7]



6

Recommendation

There should be an acceptance that despite constant access to IT, staff aren't available to work all hours. IT etiquette should be created and publicised to ensure that a culture of contact outside normal working hours doesn't become the norm.

Other research has confirmed that those working remotely tend to work longer hours, perhaps in order to demonstrate their commitment, and that those who work long hours tend to view flexible working as being more career limiting. [1]

“ I am definitely more likely to work late in the evening and at weekends to demonstrate my commitment to the job. Upon taking the role I was informed outright that my compressed hours were frowned upon as a sign of a lack of commitment and would not make me a very good role model. It is a fight every week to demonstrate that I am getting the work done.

Woman, Moj, SCS, full-time

What this suggests is that for flexible working to fulfil in its promise of resolving issues of work-life balance efforts need to be made to not just implement flexible work, but to support its implementation by reorienting away from a culture of presenteeism. Experimental research has demonstrated that this approach can be successful. In 1 randomised control trial with 867 IT workers half of the workers took part in a structured training programme called 'STAR'. The programme consisted of 8 hours of workshops in which teams and managers identified new ways to give employees more control of when they worked, and to focus on results (as opposed to simply being present in the office). All STAR employees were then given the freedom to work flexibly and from home. Secondly managers were given 4 hours of training to encourage them to support work life balance, including a video message from a senior executive. After 1 year the employees who took part in the STAR programme reported greater job satisfaction, and lower burnout, perceived stress and psychological distress compared to the control group. These effects were most pronounced for women. [5]

“ Smarter working works well for me. Our unit approach was set out by a working group and balances our working needs and personal needs. It includes the words 'We judge performance by what we do, not where and when we do it'.”

Man, DfT, Grade 7, full-time



Fig 7: If you are a flexible worker, to what extent do you agree with the following statement?

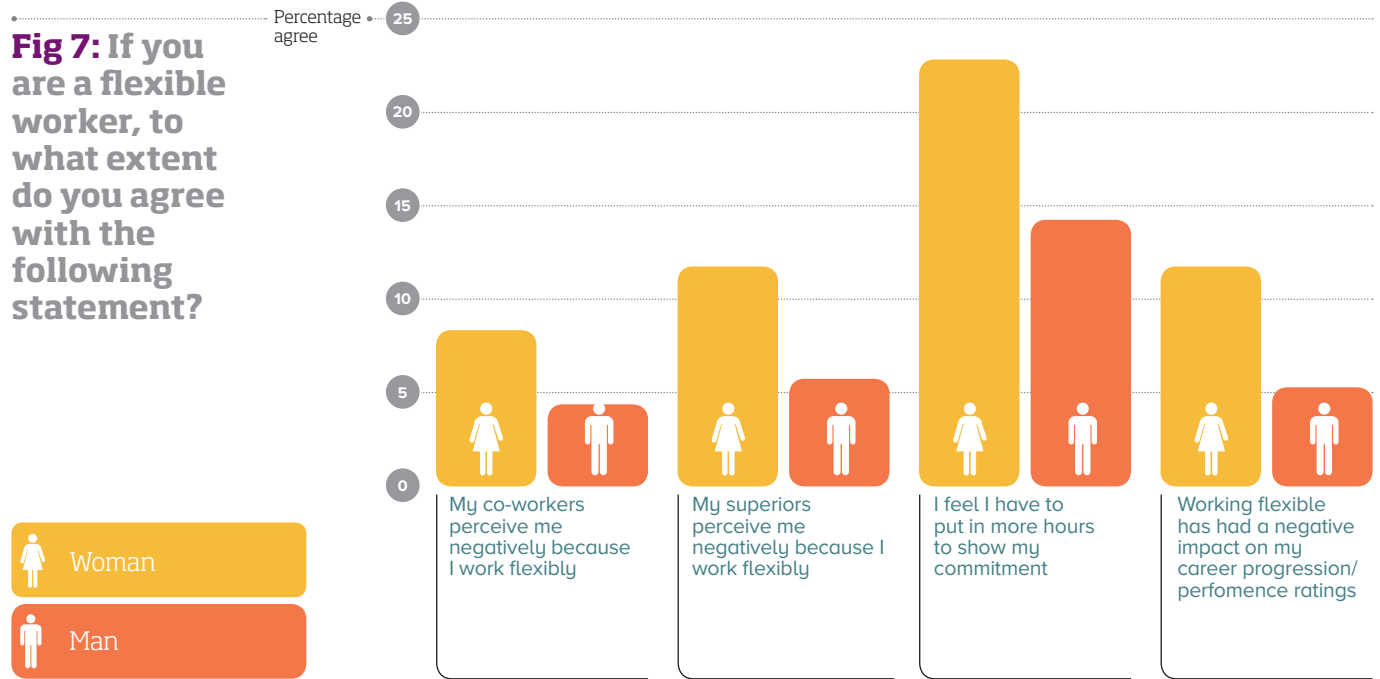
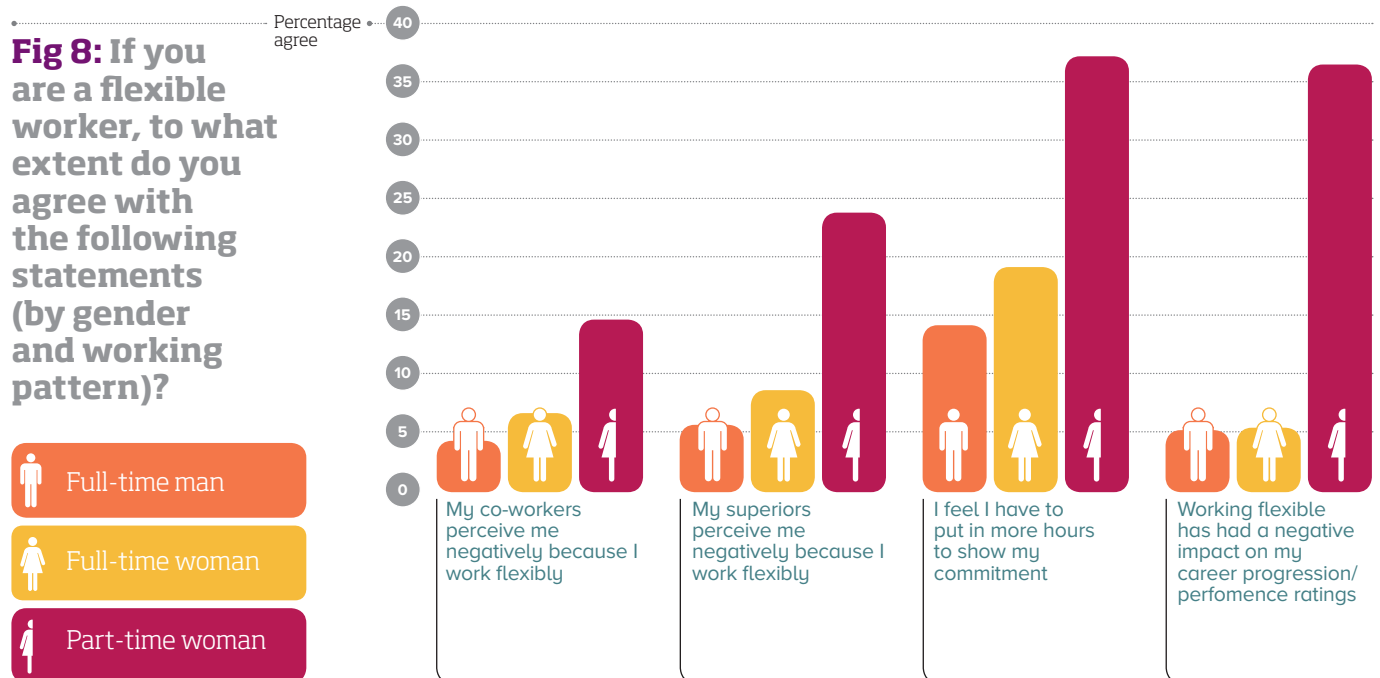


Fig 8: If you are a flexible worker, to what extent do you agree with the following statements (by gender and working pattern)?



NB: Part-time men were not included because there were too few in our sample.

Fig 9: Working flexibly has had a negative impact on my career progression / performance ratings



NB: Only SCS and Grades 6 and 7 are included as there are too few part-time workers in our sample from other grades.

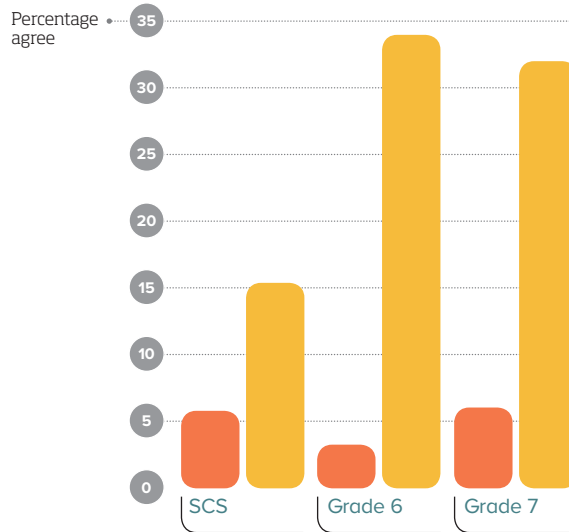
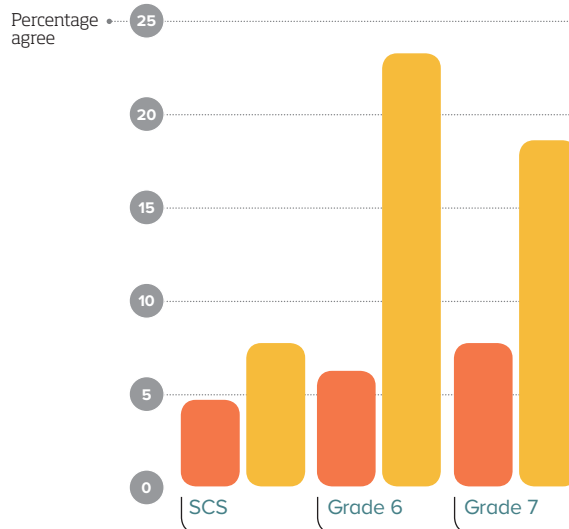


Fig 10: My superiors perceive me negatively because I work flexibly



NB: Only SCS and Grades 6 and 7 are included as there are too few part-time workers in our sample from other grades.



Advancing in flexible work

A significant proportion of flexible workers surveyed perceived that flexible work had led to a number of negative effects related to career progression and workplace relations (fig 7). On average, women tended to report more of these than men, but much of that is down to the fact that part-time workers (primarily women) are particularly affected (fig 8).

More junior part-time workers perceive worse effects of flexible working on career progression/performance rating, and on their superiors' perceptions of them (figs 9 and 10).

Responses in the open text section of the survey revealed concerns among some home workers about a lack of visibility harming performance ratings, or being seen as a sign of lower commitment.

“A piece of feedback that lots of our home/flexi workers get is that they ‘aren’t visible enough’ - this often prevents them from getting the top box marking, which I think is unfair.”

Woman, Home Office, Grade 7

“I think there are sub-cultures within the MOD, particularly away from Head Office and particularly within military led establishments, where flexible working is not supported and where those who push for alternative patterns are labelled as ‘shirkers’ as in the oft heard saying ‘shirking from home’.”

Man, MOD, SEO

A significant proportion of respondents indicated that they felt that flexible working would be seen as a sign of less than full commitment to their department/agency (20%).

Recommendation

As part of departmental quality assurance processes for performance management ratings, employers should be aware of trends for part-time or flexible workers receiving lower box markings. If found, employers should identify training support to ensure line managers are not viewing staff who are in the office less frequently as underperforming by default.

Perhaps most worrying, almost 40% of part-time women felt that flexible working had had a negative impact on their career progression/performance weighting (fig 8). This fits with other research which suggests that while in recent years the number of senior part-timers in the UK has increased, this remains largely down to employees who previously worked full-time reaching senior levels before managing to negotiate a reduction in hours. [8] A lack of senior part-time roles models, combined with a culture of long hours at higher grades, is a barrier to part-time progression.

“I’m worried that people think I don’t pull my weight because I have childcare commitments and can’t put in extra hours. I don’t see reduced hours at senior levels.”
Woman, Cabinet Office, Grade 6, part-time

“I feel that I can work flexibly, but there is a lack of role modelling at more senior levels, where people work while on annual leave and sick leave, and have less flexibility.”
Woman, Grade 7, full-time

“I feel very fortunate to work in a department with a strong culture of flexible working across many grades, but it is somewhat undermined by long working hours among many SCS. It can also be very difficult for staff who use flexible working practices because they have children or other caring responsibilities, compared to those who have it more as a luxury (e.g. to work longer hours Monday-Thursday and take a half day on a Friday). We need to make sure that we make it work for a range of needs.”
Woman, ONS, Grade 7, full time

While only 11 part-time respondents from the senior civil service responded to the survey, reflecting their scarcity (only 11% of the Senior Civil Service works part-time, compared to 14% at Grades 6 and 7 and SEO/HEO), [2] 2 of them indicated that they worked more than 14 hours of unpaid overtime in an average week, and 2 more reported that they worked between 8-10 hours unpaid overtime a week, suggesting at a senior level part-time work may exist more in theory than in practice.

This, combined with the small, but significant, minority who say that flexible working has had a negative impact on their career progression, has implications for the potential for flexible work to support the career progression of women in the senior civil service. It is clear from the data in this survey that flexible work is hugely valued by workers - both men and women - in helping them achieve a better work life balance, and yet women were more likely than men to say that they had placed a formal flexible working request (35% of women compared to 23% of men), were much more likely to work part-time (20% of women versus 8% of men), and (perhaps consequently) were much more likely to indicate that they felt working flexible had negatively impacted their career progression.



Recommendation

Actively support and develop part-time staff and staff working flexibly, to build a pipeline of leaders who feel able to do the same and become effective role models.

To counteract this, it is important to move away from a culture of long-hours, especially at a senior level, and senior part-time role models, or figures who openly talk about balancing work and family life are facilitators for reducing the stigma associated with flexible work.

“I am very keen to achieve more equal representation within the SCS. Unfortunately, many talented G6s from underrepresented groups are telling me that they see what I and other SCS have to do and are saying that the small increase in salary does not warrant the additional pressures experienced. The problem therefore is not just staff wellbeing, it also impacts other wider civil service goals.”

Woman, DWP, SCS full-time

“Dept promotes work/life balance and Director blogs comment on what DDs/ADs are doing in their spare time or have taken on alternative working patterns to help with childcare/ spend more time with family. So some role modelling in evidence.”

Woman, HMRC, Grade 6, full-time



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The FDA commissioned this work to fully understand the barriers to flexible working that our members are facing. Our 8 recommendations will now be used to start conversations with employers and deliver improvements. If you'd like to get involved with our campaign to improve flexible working in your workplace, visit our website: www.fda.org.uk/flexibleworking





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