

Making flexible work sustainable

Why supporting line managers is key

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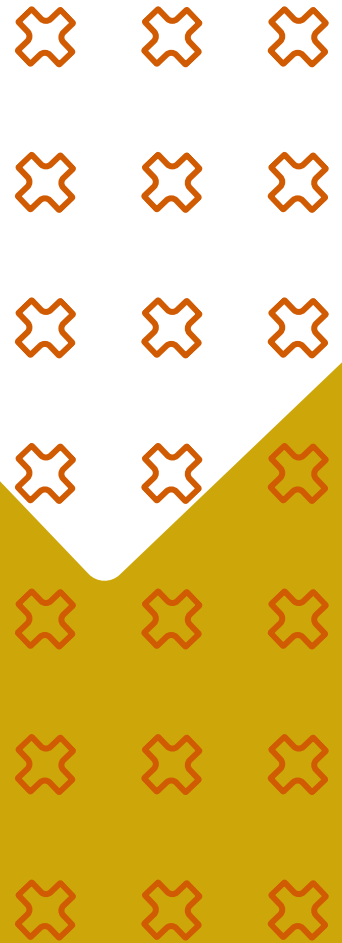
15 February 2024

Research Insights #5

Flexible working practices can benefit large corporate and public organisations by preventing staff from burning out, fostering loyalty and enhancing equality in the workplace. Line managers play a pivotal role in modelling flexible working and integrating it into organisational culture. It is crucial that employers support line managers to model good flexible working, especially during periods of change and crisis that characterise today's corporate landscape

**Centre for Research in Equality
and Diversity**

Cite as: Adamson, M., Beauregard, A., Lewis, S. (2023). Making flexible work sustainable: Why supporting line managers is key, Research Insights #5, School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London. Available at www.qmul.ac.uk/busman/research/research-insights.



Flexible working: lessons from lockdown

The Covid-19 crisis led to significant changes in the workplace, including a rapid shift to flexible working. Working parents and carers were particularly affected by these changes. Most evidence about how people experienced lockdowns was generated through large surveys.

Instead, we carried out in-depth qualitative and longitudinal research to generate robust evidence about organisational responses to the pandemic and to understand how these were experienced by working parents. We focussed on those with line managerial responsibilities.

Our research offers important lessons for human resource managers and senior leadership teams at large corporate and public organisations looking to embed more sustainable flexible working. In an era of social and economic challenges and rapid technological change, insights from our research can enable organisations to be better prepared for the future.

Recommendations

1

In high-intensity working environments and during periods of change **monitor line managers' workloads and set strategic priorities** to protect their wellbeing and ensure they are able to effectively support their teams.

2

Ensure **consistent support from senior management for line managers** when implementing new flexible working initiatives.

3

Encourage a workplace culture where **line managers are able to role model flexibility**. This signals to employees what is acceptable and contributes to a broader flexible work culture.

4

Prioritise **training for line managers on effectively managing flexible and hybrid work**, particularly on addressing challenges such as workload management, strategic priority setting, and reevaluating assumptions about what is essential for jobs.

5

Create **forums or communities of practice** where line managers can share and swiftly disseminate effective managerial practices.

6

Challenge gender stereotypes about flexible working by actively **supporting male line managers to embrace the benefits of flexibility**. This will help to promote gender equality in the workplace.

Benefits of sustainable flexible working

Supporting working parents and caregivers to balance their work and family responsibilities is a key priority for employers. The post-Covid normalisation of flexible work arrangements, including remote work and flexitime, presents an opportunity for family-friendly practices to flourish at work.

The pandemic showed that flexible work does not reduce productivity, and may even increase it. When implemented and supported well, flexible work can have positive outcomes for both employers and employees.



Line managers have a vital role in supporting flexible work

Line managers play a crucial role in facilitating flexible work, especially during times of crisis or change, when organisations grapple with competing demands.

Our research confirmed that it was often line managers who determined how working parents experienced flexibility in the workplace during the Covid-19 crisis.



Benefits of strategic workload management

Effective line managers recognised that in a crisis and in high-intensity environments, not all work can or needs to be done.

Taking steps to identify strategic priorities and adjust workloads made the most difference to the well-being of working parents, helping to reduce stress.

Strategic prioritisation enabled line managers to:

- distinguish between essential and non-essential work tasks
- support their workforce flexibility with no detriment to productivity.



Line managers faced lack of support

Some line managers experienced poor management from their superiors and a lack of support from senior leadership. This:

- increased their levels of stress, particularly for female managers who may have been taking on the burden of childcare responsibilities
- reduced their commitment to the organisation
- reduced their willingness to go the extra mile when managing teams, including administering flexible working policies.



Good practices demonstrated by line managers

Our research showed that line managers demonstrated a range of good practices during the pandemic, such as:

- accommodating the needs of parents for flexibility during lockdowns
- providing personalised and pastoral support
- picking up extra work to help the team
- strategic prioritisation of tasks and effective workload management.

However, good practice was often siloed and not effectively shared across organisations.



Mismatch between flexible hours and workloads

We found that while flexibility in working hours was encouraged by employers, it was rarely matched by flexibility in workloads.

Expectations of the amount of work that had to be done often remained unchanged or even increased from pre-pandemic levels, making workload unsustainable despite flexitime.

Therefore, flexitime alone may not be the most effective way to support working parents in high-intensity environments and crises.



Role modelling flexibility

We found that managers who promoted flexibility for their teams, rarely felt able to apply the same principles to their own work. As a result, most line managers did not role model flexible working to their teams, due to intensity of their workloads.

Empowering managers to role model flexibility and lead responses to challenging external situations, cultivating a supportive and efficient culture of flexible work within your organisation.



Our research methods

Our qualitative research focused on working parents who had line managerial responsibilities during the Covid-19 crisis. We aimed to understand how they managed multiple obligations to their families, their employers and the staff they managed.

Research overview

We conducted:

- **65** in-depth interviews with working mothers and fathers who had worked from home during the Covid-19 crisis
- **42** interviews in spring 2021
- **23** follow-up interviews in spring 2022.

Underpinning research

Adamson, M., Beauregard, A. and Lewis, S. (2023). *Future-proofing your flexible workforce: Lockdown lessons from managers who are parents*. Working Families report.



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Dr Adamson holds a PhD from the University of York, specialising in gender and sociology of work. Her research delves into topics of gender inequalities in professional work, work-life balance, and role models, seeking to advance our understanding of the gendered workplace barriers in organisations.



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Professor Lewis’s research focuses on gender and work-life balance issues and workplace practice, culture and change, in diverse national contexts. She has led many national and international research projects on these topics and has worked with employers and policymakers on work-life issues in Europe, Asia and North America.



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Professor Beauregard’s research interests are centred on the work-life interface, flexible working arrangements, and diversity management, with a focus on gender identity and gender equality. She has published widely on these topics in top academic journals and in practitioner outlets, as well as authoring chapters in scholarly books and teaching texts.

Acknowledgments

This project was carried out with the support and involvement of Working Families, the UK’s national charity for working parents and carers. Their mission is to remove the barriers that people with caring responsibilities face. Working Families provides free legal advice to parents and carers on their rights at work and advocates on behalf of UK parents and carers, influencing policy through campaigns informed by ground-breaking research. www.workingfamilies.org.uk



Editor: Nick Sarson
Design: [Research Retold](#)