Toolkit

INCLUSIVE FLEXIBLE WORKING

April 2024

TOOLKIT

BUILDING A CULTURE OF INCLUSIVE FLEXIBLE WORKING: PRACTICAL STEPS FOR EMPLOYER ACTION

Since the initial UK legislation came into effect in 2003, flexible working has become a key employee benefit. Yet all too often a stigma remains around flexible working, which can be seen as an inferior working pattern, associated with low pay, low productivity and low progression. Business in the Community (BITC) research shows that flexible working offers clear benefits to employers and employees alike. Drawing on research with our members, this toolkit identifies the benefits of flexible working and sets out practical action steps employers can take to build inclusive flexible working cultures for all.

Current flexible working practice

The ability to work flexibly is one of the most important features of employment,[i] offering important choices in how, where and when people work.[ii] The right to request flexible working was introduced over 20 years ago and employees increasingly see flexibility as the norm. BITC champions the key role that flexible working can play in establishing more equal workplace cultures.[iii] However, our recent research found that employers are still challenged by flexible working practice,[iv] and wider research shows that employees can struggle to access flexible working at all.[v]

> Flexible working is now the second most important workplace issue for employees when choosing a job.[vi]

Types of flexible work include job sharing, working from home, part-time working, compressed hours, flexitime, annualised hours, staggered hours and phased retirement,[vii] plus hybrid arrangements such as a balance of home and office working. New legislation will widen flexible working benefits, including access from day one in a job.[viii]

BITC research[ix] identifies a number of key insights regarding current UK flexible working practice:

Flexible working is a popular workplace option but employee experience of it is varied.

- Three-quarters of employees say that flexible working should be available to everyone. The ability to choose starting and finishing times is the most popular option.

- Over four in ten say that there is a stigma associated with working flexibly and over three in ten say that those who work flexibly do not progress as quickly in their careers.

- One in five say that those who work flexibly create more work for colleagues and over one in ten say that people cannot be trusted to work flexibly.

Flexible working stigma is an issue but can be felt differently by different employees.

- More men feel comfortable asking for flexible working than women throughout their careers.
- Flexible working stigma is higher for women (47%) than it is for men (39%).
- A third of people from an ethnic minority background have left or considered leaving a job due to a lack of flexibility, compared with a fifth of white people.

Age and earnings make a difference.

- Flexible working seems to be less available to older workers. More people aged 24-54 think that their job can be done flexibly than those aged 54-74. Older workers are less likely to make a formal request for flexible working and are more likely to have their request declined.
- More formally educated employees think that their job can be done flexibly. Shift workers are the least likely to feel that their job can be done flexibly.

Flexible working opportunities and challenges

Insights from BITC's members[x] identify key opportunities and challenges when establishing flexible working policies and practice:

- There is a need for and significant interest in flexible working amongst both employers and employees, but employers are facing practical challenges in operationalising flexible working which may be holding them back.
- Particular issues arise around transparency and data collection, especially when dealing with informal flexible working arrangements. Proper data collection and analysis is essential if employers are to be able to measure the uptake and impact of flexible working policies.
- Employers need support to understand how they can use flexible working as an effective

driver of inclusion. Flexible working is valued across demographic groups, and so employers need to ensure fairness and equity in how it is made available to employees of all job types, levels, teams and sectors across the entire workforce.

- To address stigma around flexible working employers need to drive a culture change, which will normalise and embed flexible working.
- Leadership on flexible working, both at senior and line manager levels, including sharing stories of how employees at all levels of the business have used flexible working arrangements, will be essential in achieving that culture shift.
- To future proof approaches to flexible working, employers need to be aware of the impact of emerging trends, for example, the future role of AI (artificial intelligence) in business.[xi]

Benefits of flexible working for employers

BITC research[xii] demonstrates a clear business case for flexible working. Embedding a culture of inclusive flexible working in your business will allow you to:

- **Improve productivity and business resilience** – making flexible working available for all will increase employee engagement and drive performance and productivity. By building more agile workforces, employers also benefit from increased resilience and adaptability to business change.
- **Reduce business costs** – offering flexible working can reduce salary costs, reduce sickness, turnover and recruitment costs, and cut office expenses. These benefits outweigh the cost associated with flexible working e.g. IT and operational investment.
- **Attract talent and drive retention** –employees see flexible working as a key benefit and reason for staying with an employer. Offering flexible working from the point of hire and throughout the employee journey will strengthen your ability to attract and retain a wider talent pool. This will also strengthen your employee value proposition and brand as an employer of choice.

- **Build a more inclusive workplace** – offering flexible working will help employers build and support a wider and more diverse employee base. Specific demographics who benefit from flexible working arrangements include parents and carers, disabled and neurodiverse employees, those with long-term health conditions including menopause, and older employees seeking to transition to retirement.

- **Enhance employee wellbeing** – the majority of employees find that flexible working supports a better work-life balance and enhances both physical and mental health. Supporting a thriving workforce underpins the success of a business.
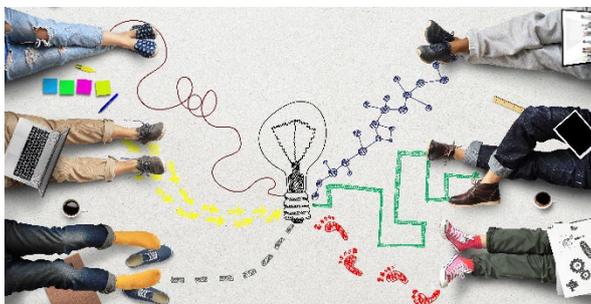
BITC's Six Point Plan for embedding a culture of inclusive flexible working

Insights from BITC research and our member businesses leading on flexible working practice, indicate key actions to take to develop and support a flourishing inclusive flexible working culture. BITC's [Advisory Services](#) can help you to plan and implement these actions.

1. **Offer a range of flexible working options:** offer as many different types of flexible working as you can and make sure everyone is aware of the options available. Raise awareness of the benefits of flexible working for both employers and employees and share stories of how it is being used by a range of employees, across all levels.

2. **Collect, analyse, review and share your data on flexible working:** this is essential to understand and measure demand, uptake and impact. Try to collect data on informal as well as formal flexible working arrangements but ensure that any informal arrangements are monitored sensitively. Share stories alongside your data to illustrate how employees make flexible working a reality for them.

3. **Talk to your employees:** they are the best people to help you shape your flexible working offer and design jobs with flexible working built in. Use listening and focus groups plus pulse surveys and other engagement processes. Make sure you also provide conversations between employees and their line managers to help individual employees shape their own working patterns.

4. **Train line managers to manage flexible working:** effective training is vital to support your flexible working offer at recruitment and across the employee journey, including job development and career conversations. Enable line managers to have sensitive conversations with team members which will allow employees to co-create their working patterns.

5. **Get senior buy-in:** ensure senior level endorsement and investment that actively supports the adoption of flexible working across your business. This needs to go alongside role modelling and sharing stories from the highest level, demonstrating how flexible working is a working pattern which works for everyone.

6. **Build and embed a culture of inclusive flexible working:** flexible working can be a powerful driver of inclusion, so actively promote flexible working to build inclusion in your business. Challenge senior management, line managers and employees to think 'why not?' rather than 'why?' in order to eliminate stigma and normalise flexible working as a standard working pattern for anyone who wants it, regardless of age, gender, race, location, team or seniority. The [BITC Workwell model and tool](#) can help you understand how you can use flexible working to support good work and employee wellbeing for all.

Flex Case Studies

Phoenix Group

The 'Phoenix Flex' policy at BITC member Phoenix Group aims to enable everyone to create a working week with the best experience and balance between work and personal lives, and looks across all aspects of flexibility including where, when and how you work.

Confident that customer and business needs can be met in a number of different ways, Phoenix make flexible working a core part of their employee offering. All jobs are advertised as flexible, whatever the contract type, and flexibility can be discussed throughout the employee journey.

The Phoenix flex approach also continues through to retirement options, including a programme which allows employees to offer their skills and experience after leaving full-time employment.

Sage

BITC member Sage put people and cultures at the core of their values, and flexible working is a central element of this. With buy-in from a supportive leadership team, they have co-designed with their employees a flexible working framework covering all types of flex.

The framework focuses on 3 pillars: work mode or how you work, where popular hybrid team agreements are built to ensure an effective and collaborative approach; work location, including options to work from abroad for a set number of weeks in the year and work time, where different types of flex options can be explored and flex is built into job design.

Sage are keen to model the use of flex at all levels of the business and are working to ensure flexible working arrangements are applied fairly across their teams and critically enable great outcomes for our customers through high performance culture.

Links & further support on flexible working

BITC has lots of resources to support you in taking action on flexible working, and our Advisory Services team can support you in planning and implementing action. If you are a member, please reach out to your relationship manager. If you are not a BITC member, find out about how to join us on our website.

BITC's Gender Route Map champions flexible working as a key action for gender equity, and our Who Cares Report shows you how best to combine work with caring responsibilities.

BITC's Workwell Model & Tool and 'Your job can be good for you' report will help you to use flexible working to build employee wellbeing.

Our Age Friendly Employer framework highlights the importance of flexible working for older workers, and we have toolkits for supporting working carers and those transitioning through menopause. Our mid-life MOT can help with mid-life career conversations.

BITC recently contributed to a new report supported by BITC member Phoenix Group Flexible After Fifty.

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You might also like to:

- Find out more about our gender, health & wellbeing and age work
- Learn more about our advisory services
- Join us for one of our upcoming events

Talk to one of our expert team today to learn how membership of BITC can help you take your responsible business journey further and drive lasting global change.

[i] Business in the Community (2022) 'Who Cares? Transforming how we combine work with caring responsibilities' https://www.bitc.org.uk/report/who-cares/

[ii] Business in the Community (2022) 'Revolutionise Your Workplace: Your Job Can Be Good For You' https://www.bitc.org.uk/report/your-job-can-be-good-for-you/

[iii] Business in the Community (2021) 'Gender Equality Route Map: 8 steps for gender equality for employers' https://www.bitc.org.uk/report/route-map-to-a-more-gender-equal-future/

[iv] Business in the Community (2023) 'The Times Top 50 Employers for Gender Equality 2023' https://www.bitc.org.uk/the-times-top-50-employers-for-gender-equality-2023/

[v] UNISON (2024) 'Women in the UK's public services repeatedly denied flexible-work requests, says UNISON' https://www.unison.org.uk/news/2024/02/women-in-the-uks-public-services-repeatedly-denied-flexible-work-requests-says-unison/

[vi] Business in the Community (2024) International Women's Day webinar

[vii] GOV.UK (2024) 'Flexible Working: types of flexible working' https://www.gov.uk/flexible-working/types-of-flexible-working

[viii] GOV.UK (2024) 'Millions to benefit from new flexible working measures' https://www.gov.uk/government/news/millions-to-benefit-from-new-flexible-working-measures

[ix] Business in the Community commissioned surveys for 'Who Cares?' (2022) and Race at Work (2021) research

[x] Business in the Community (2023) member round table insights event on flexible working

[xi] Business in the Community (2024) International Women's Day webinar

[xii] Business in the Community and Bain and Co research (2023)