



- **Opinion piece**

Why every business should consider flexible working arrangements

● Introduction

Modern businesses in all industries are being encouraged to consider flexible working arrangements, not only because this will be beneficial for staff, but also because the technology and services are now in place to make this achievable.

In line with the government's new legislation, which gives workers employed by a company for 26 weeks or more the ability to request flexible working, UK businesses are anticipating a rise in the number of staff that ask for it.

Flexible working has the potential to endow companies with a variety of benefits, although of course it is necessary to understand the nature of the benefits before committing to any kind of plan. So what proportion of the private sector has adopted flexible working and why should companies consider it in the future?

● Growth of flexible working

A 2013 recent report from the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) found that 94% of British businesses have already deployed flexible working strategies, with 50% of respondents explaining that this was now common practice.

Figure 1: Informal and formal flexible working

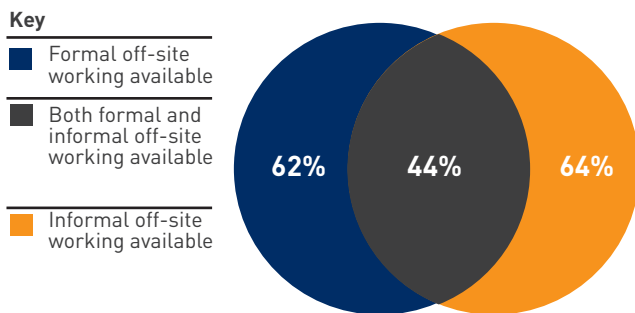
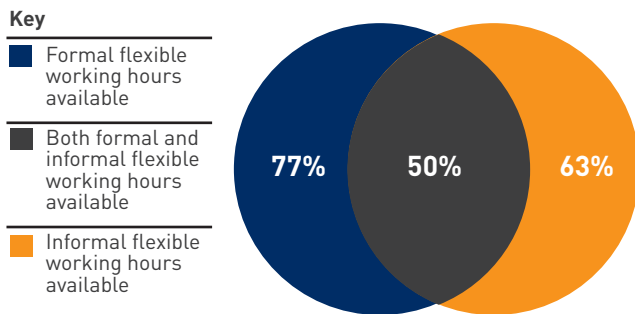
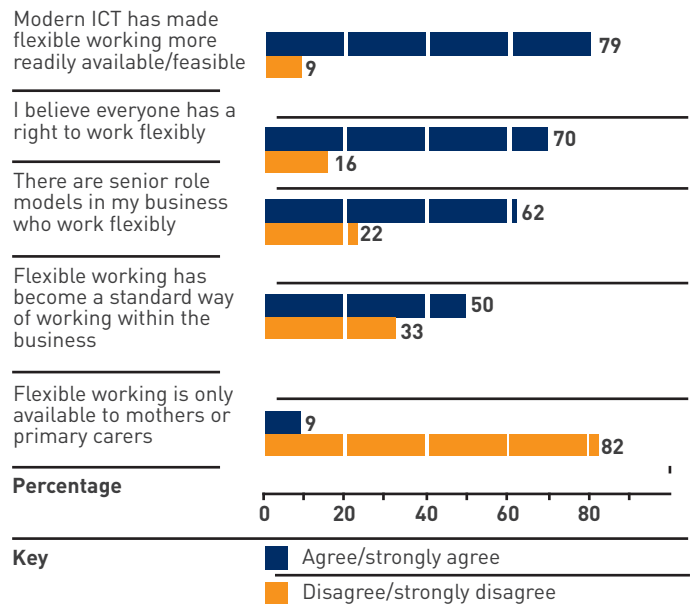


Figure 2: Attitudes to flexible working



Source: Flexible working: Goodbye nine to five, Institute of Leadership & Management 2013.
https://www.i-l-m.com/~media/ILM%20Website/Downloads/Insight/Reports_from_ILM_website/Research_flexibleworking_march2013%20pdf.ashx

The same study revealed that there is no gender divide when it comes to flexible working, since male and female employees are just as likely to harness this opportunity.

However, there is not a consensus amongst business leaders as to its merits, which means there are still managers who need convincing that it is a power for good. Surprisingly 22% of the managers questioned in the ILM survey said that they believe flexible working has the power to limit the career progression of those who participate, while a quarter simply said that it was inappropriate.

This suggests that there is a disconnect between the figures, showing that an overwhelming number of UK organisations have given credence to the need for flexible working and those which are actually staffed by managers willing to support such strategies.

The good news is that 82% of decision-makers said that they were aware of the various benefits which would be available to businesses as a result of this arrangement, recognising that this is not something which should solely be considered because it makes life easier for employees. So as businesses continue to expand their acceptance of these employment conditions, scepticism can be further eroded by underlining the chief benefits of flexible working.

Figure 3: Benefits to business

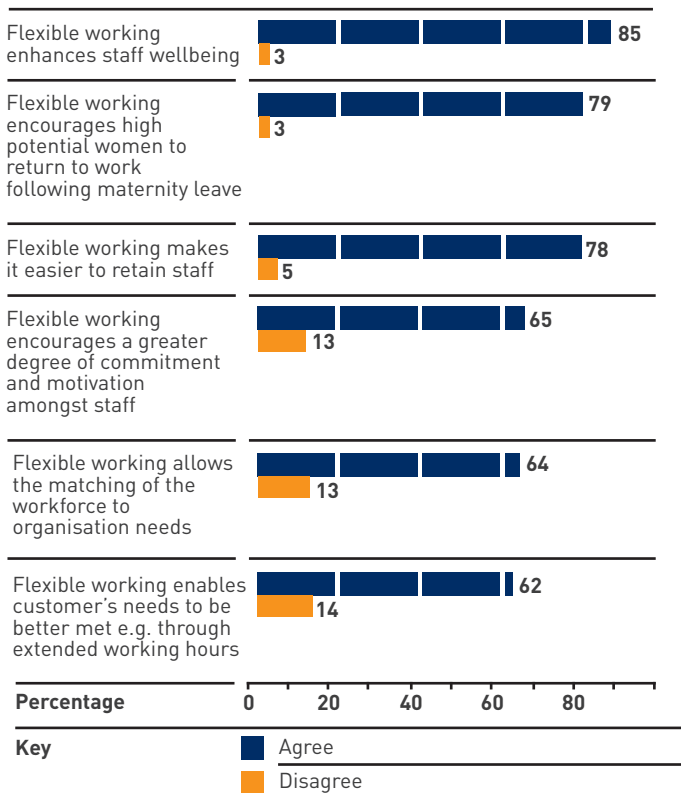
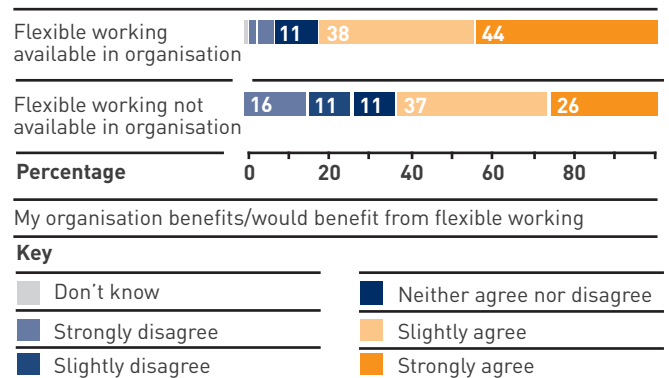


Figure 4: The impact of experience



Source: Flexible working: Goodbye nine to five, Institute of Leadership & Management 2013.

https://www.i-l-m.com/~media/ILM%20Website/Downloads/Insight/Reports_from_ILM_website/Research_flexibleworking_march2013%20pdf.ashx

● Business benefits

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) argues that British businesses should be even keener to make use of flexible working during times of persistent economic fragility, since this approach gives them the ability to improve staff morale and generally boost employee productivity.

Experts argue that the UK now operates an economy that is constantly in action, which means that sticking to rigid structures of work is not only unhelpful for staff, but also potentially problematic for the success of a business in the international market.

The EHRC also makes the point that most businesses that have embraced flexible working have done so because they have made an assessment of the positives and negatives and concluded that the entire organisation will be better off after it is implemented. This has been proven in a number of recent case studies, many of which involve some significant companies which took the leap and decided to give flexible working a chance.

SMB suitability

The EHRC points to the example of the West Bromwich Tool and Engineering Company based in the Midlands, which shows how this type of initiative can be particularly effective in a manufacturing environment. Ensuring staff are able to get the right balance between work and life means that they are more focused when they are on the job and actually keen to come to work, rather than feeling that it is an immovable obstacle that needs to be navigated and tolerated.

This particular business, which employs just 100 people, has about 50 different arrangements for working and achieves parity and balance because managers hold an open dialogue with employees, so as to work out the best possible scenario for both parties.

Although the firm went through a tough spell in 2009, when the recession forced it to switch to a four-day week and reduce salaries to avoid closure, it was this trusting relationship built up with staff as a result of flexible working which meant that the workforce was willing to accept these moves and stick with the company as it extricated itself from the problems facing it.

Owner Stuart Fell explained that flexible working was definitely a two-way street and employees appreciated that there was a need for some leeway on their part in order to make the system work. But because a company can foster this degree of engagement with employees, they are all the more willing to make sacrifices and work hard when it is required, which is obviously good for the business.

Corporate responsibilities

Of course firms which employ many more people are just as able to benefit from flexible working as those which operate on a smaller scale. Mobile network provider O2 has been particularly keen to showcase its willingness to take advantage of flexible working and has run a number of pilot schemes in which it requires all staff from its Slough headquarters to work remotely for a day. This means that staff do not need to commute to work, which saves them hours each day, whilst also giving O2 the chance to benefit from improved employee productivity.

In spite of O2's own enthusiasm for remote working, it recently published a study in which it was discovered that there are still issues with British companies offering support for it. 2,000 workers and 400 business leaders were questioned about this topic in early 2013. Although over three quarters of the companies involved in the study said that flexible working was encouraged, only 20% of staff said that this was actually the case. It may be that some companies are publicly expressing support for flexible working in spite of the fact that they harbour private reservations. But with mounting evidence suggesting that businesses of all sizes can benefit from this approach, it seems foolish for companies to ignore it.

Flexible working technologies

Flexible working is not just about enabling staff to operate from home, but also takes into account the mobile tools which allow them to remain productive while outside of the office, employees must be provided with the hardware and technology that makes flexible working possible.

Smartphones are the most widely-recognised examples of technology that help ensure staff can work effectively on-the-go. In line with the rollout of next generation of mobile connectivity, more commonly known as 4G, UK mobile users can now access, edit and upload resources through their mobile devices. These resources are commonly stored online through the Cloud, enabling users with an internet connection to immediately access networks, applications and documents.

While cloud computing and 4G connectivity are widely recognised as supporting flexible working policies, businesses should also be aware that there are also much simpler and cost-effective options available to them, such as mobile bolt-ons. Calls to mobiles from the office no longer have to cost the earth, which is a common deterrent for many to flexible working policies. Bolt-ons which facilitate communication allow businesses to pay a flat fee and make as many inter-company calls from landlines to mobiles as they like. This means workers no longer have to feel restricted when calling field-based colleagues.

The work-life balance can be redressed through flexible working, while businesses need not be prey to employee apathy generated by an apparent lack of engagement with their needs at a management level. If the reality of flexible working is able to eventually match up to the surface enthusiasm expressed by companies in these studies, then the UK's economy will be the beneficiary of the results.

