

# **FLEXIBLE WORKING: LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC**

From the 'nature' of the work  
to the design of work

Guide for HR

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## Guide for HR

# Flexible working: lessons from the pandemic

From the 'nature' of the work to the design of work

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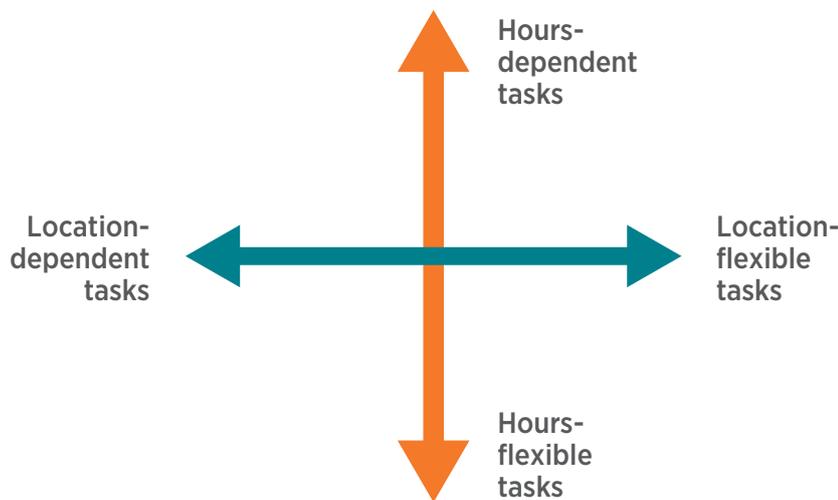
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## 1 Introduction

This guide is based on the research project *Flexible Working: Lessons from the pandemic*. Interviews and an employers' survey asked about all types of flexible working, but the pandemic focused attention mainly on flexible location rather than flexible hours. The research involved both HR and operational managers, in a wide range of sectors, including some that don't obviously lend themselves to flexible working.

The pandemic has drawn attention to the distinction between flexibility of location and flexibility of hours. On the location scale, some tasks can be done anywhere, while others have to be done in a specific place. On the hours scale, there are tasks that can be done at any time and tasks that need to be done at specific times.

**Figure 1: Identifying tasks that are location-flexible and tasks that are hours-flexible**



The guide is structured in two parts:

- 1 The first part covers flexibility of location, recommending seven strategies for effective and productive homeworking and hybrid working, and focusing on what HR can do in terms of policy, support and training.
- 2 The second part offers advice about using the experience of the pandemic to build the business case for flexibility of hours.

The guide should be used alongside the guide for line managers, which offers advice on improving working practices and behaviours and supporting teams to make these a reality.

There is more practical advice in the [case studies](#) arising from this research and the organisations involved are cross-referenced throughout.

## 2 Flexible location: seven strategies for hybrid working

Nearly all the interviewees in this project agreed that hybrid working – when the employee spends some time in the workplace and some time working from home – is a more practical option than total, five-days-a-week homeworking for most people. This stance is supported by a [review of the previous research evidence](#) on working from home. Based on interviews and survey data, we have identified seven strategies to support effective hybrid working:



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## 2.1 Develop the skills and culture needed for open conversations about wellbeing

During the pandemic, total, five-days-a-week homeworking was enforced on many people. Employers and managers had to pay close attention to wellbeing, not just because of homeworking but because of the broader anxieties around health and the lack of normal social and family contact. This has further underlined the need for line managers, in particular, to have regular, honest conversations about wellbeing with the individuals and teams they manage.

To facilitate open and regular conversations about wellbeing:

- Aim for an organisational focus on individual wellbeing (see [Fujitsu and Onecom case studies](#)), with support from the top and dedicated online resources. This helps to set the tone and reduce discomfort or embarrassment when talking about wellbeing.
- Set up webinars or special interest groups on wellbeing and mental health. Ask employees to volunteer their own experiences and strategies. It's especially powerful if directors or senior managers are willing to talk about their own wellbeing or work-life balance, because that gives other people permission to have these conversations.
- Train your managers to manage people effectively and spot the signs of poor mental health, such as changes in mood, appearance, performance or behaviour. More information is available in the [CIPD's guide on supporting mental health at work](#), produced with Mind.
- The employer remains responsible for the health and safety of an employee working at home, so make sure that display screen equipment (DSE) and risk assessments of home workstations are done.
- The enforced lockdown has to some extent normalised the idea that employers should pay for workstations, office chairs and IT kit for their homeworkers. Some employees go further, asking for broadband costs, home insurance or energy bills to be paid. Clarify your organisation's position on what support they can provide and what is regarded as a work expense, taking into account the security of both organisational data and the IT kit itself.
- For more information, see the [CIPD resources](#) on how people professionals can provide support for employee wellbeing.



## 2.2 Encourage boundary-setting and routines to improve wellbeing and prevent overwork

Some of our interviewees found themselves or their team members working longer hours when homeworking during the pandemic or failing to take regular breaks. Managers needed to be alert to individual needs and watch for overwork.

To encourage boundary-setting and establishing routines that improve wellbeing, people professionals should aim to:

- Treat routine-setting and work-life boundary management as basic life skills that need to be learned – like brushing your teeth. Offer training in how to set work-life boundaries and avoid being 'always on', particularly for those doing knowledge-based work or with managerial responsibility. Explore the reasons why individuals are finding it harder to set boundaries when homeworking: in addition to blurred work-life boundaries, there could be a workload issue or an over-developed sense of responsibility for helping customers or colleagues.
- Train managers in core people management skills which will include setting realistic objectives, managing workloads and being aware of signs of stress or overwork. This is particularly important if you work in a sector where long hours have become a normal expectation.



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### 2.3 Ensure effective co-ordination of tasks and task-related communication

Managers who, in the workplace, relied on informal 'management by walking around' had to take a different approach to the co-ordination of tasks and the sharing of task-related information when the team was homeworking. People professionals should support managers to continue effective methods discovered during the pandemic and improve these going forward.

To support effective task co-ordination and communication in teams during hybrid working, consider the following:

- In a hybrid or homeworking world, technological tools are essential equipment, just as much as a desk and a chair are. With your IT colleagues, explore the apps that will help managers with efficient co-ordination of work and task-related communication, such as Kanban or project management software, and train managers and teams in how to use them.
- Offer training in how to manage an online or hybrid meeting, such as establishing etiquette guidelines so that everyone has a voice, repeating questions, engaging participants regularly and being explicit about actions and summarising meeting outcomes. More information is available in the CIPD's top tips for effective [online meetings](#).
- Provide training in the use of your online meeting software to ensure that everyone is able to use its full functionality.
- The role of line managers in communicating with clarity with individuals and their teams, setting clear objectives, and providing constructive ongoing feedback is central to effective co-ordination of tasks. Just as important, managers need to consult with their staff and be open to other perspectives and ideas for better ways of doing things. Consequently, it is important managers are provided with the necessary support and training to help them fulfil this aspect of their job.

#### People management skills are key to managing and supporting home and hybrid workers

[CIPD research](#) has highlighted five core people management competency areas that line managers need to demonstrate to build trust, motivate and support their staff, and manage and prevent stress.

Managers will usually have less time and fewer opportunities for interaction with people who work from home or in a hybrid capacity, so it is even more important that when talking to their staff, either in person or virtually, they aim to adopt the following behaviours:



Being open, fair and consistent



Handling conflict and people management issues



Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance



Building and sustaining relationships



Supporting development

For more information, read the [introduction to the line manager support materials](#).



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### **2.4 Pay special attention to creativity, brainstorming and problem-solving tasks**

Problem-solving and deep, strategic thinking came top of the list of tasks that managers would prefer to do face-to-face. If these tasks have to be done online, there are ways of making them more effective.

To facilitate creativity, brainstorming and problem-solving in your organisation, people professionals should think about the following issues:

- If your staff are required to do these types of tasks remotely, provide the most appropriate apps to facilitate tasks such as idea-sharing and workshop management (see [Coleg y Cymoedd](#) and [Fujitsu case studies](#)).
- Offer training in facilitating workshops both online and in person so that teams can make the most effective use of time.



### **2.5 Build in time, including face-to-face time, for team cohesion and organisational belonging**

Most interviewees felt that team cohesion and organisational belonging was another area that demanded some element of face-to-face meeting, to create the personal and social connections and the trust that are essential factors in engagement and productivity.

HR can play a key role in supporting team cohesion and organisational belonging by doing the following:

- Build people's connection with organisational goals by organising large-scale company-wide events such as town halls or Q&A sessions with directors. Senior organisational figures can connect directly with a much wider range of people online than face-to-face. Their increased visibility and accessibility can help engagement.
- Supply a series of ideas for team-building social events that line managers can choose from according to the needs and personalities of their team.



### **2.6 Facilitate networking and inter-team relationships**

Interviewees often found it easier to maintain connections within teams than between teams, but it's important not to forget about inter-team relationships and networking across the organisation.

People professionals can support networking and inter-team relationships by doing the following:

- Organise cross-company social, charity or fitness initiatives to create opportunities for inter-team networking and relationship-building (see [Onecom case study](#)).
- Some organisations mandate a minimum amount of time in the office in order to ensure that informal networking can still happen (see [Wychavon and Malvern Hills District Councils case study](#)). However, each organisation is different and will have different focuses, so it's important to think what would work best for different areas of your organisation.
- Encourage those who spend a lot of time homeworking to maintain their personal and inter-team networks over the long term. They will need to be more deliberate in seeking out networking opportunities.



### **2.7 Organise a wider support network to compensate for the loss of informal learning**

Informal learning was hard in the period of total, five-days-a-week homeworking imposed by the lockdown, but interviewees believed that it could be managed better in a hybrid world.



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HR can facilitate informal learning through the following actions:

- Share the stories of people who have onboarded remotely and what has worked for them.
- In organisations with formal graduate or apprentice schemes, create groups of buddies with previous intakes, making it explicit that it's their job to help develop the new starters.
- Try speed networking sessions for those who want to get to know people across the organisation.

## 3 Flexible hours: seizing the opportunity?

Flexibility of hours has changed less than flexibility of location during the pandemic: employers have not experienced an 'enforced trial' of flexible hours. Because there has been no mass trial, opportunities for mass learning on flexibility of hours have been fewer – but there is an opportunity to build your organisation's business case for flexibility of hours.

### 3.1 Analyse tasks for flexibility of hours – separately from flexibility of location

A wide range of sectors and types of work were covered in this research project. Interviewees reported that, if their tasks were at the hours-flexible end of the spectrum (see [Introduction](#)), working from home provided more opportunity to choose the timing of personal activities and work activities. However, others found that the work demanded hours similar to those worked in the workplace, although of course without the commute: in those jobs, the barriers that prevented hours flexibility were largely still in place when working from home:

- For those workers whose jobs prevent homeworking, resentment or unfairness may be an issue: can you improve the motivation and engagement of these workers by offering greater flexibility of hours?
- Consider fairness across the whole organisation as well as across the team (see [Skanska case study](#)).
- Within each job, work with team managers to analyse the tasks that can be done at different hours and the ones that need to be done at specific hours. To maximise flexibility of hours, think about how tasks can be shared or covered at the team level as well as within jobs.

### 3.2 Embrace the team-based approach to flexibility of hours

The 'nature' of the work is often used as an excuse to not offer flexible hours. However, flexibility of hours lies not only in the 'nature' of the work but the way it's designed. More flexibility of hours can often be created with a team-based approach to work design:

- Proactively embrace a team-based approach to designing work, supporting managers to co-ordinate patterns of availability between team members to cover the required time slots.
- Multi-skilling, or building 'substitutability' between team members, could help to create more flexibility of hours, even in jobs with very specific hours requirements (see [Compass case study](#)). Look to develop multiple skills and provide training to support teams to fill in and substitute for one another.
- To cover specific hours of service, support managers to involve the team in agreeing and then rostering shifts and working patterns. Wherever the hours of operation are longer



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than the employees' contracted hours, this can be a useful principle. It's obvious in 24/7 environments, or in those with long operating hours such as retail or customer contact centres, but even in organisations that operate Monday–Friday, 8am to 6pm, it may be helpful to roster the 'shoulder' periods.

- Make it an organisational responsibility to ask people about their flexibility needs – maybe at annual review or budget time – rather than reactively waiting for individuals to make requests. Particularly in hours-dependent types of work, this gives people a framework for thinking through the options that work for your organisational needs.
- Work with managers to build in an understanding of everyone's preferred working patterns. Present this as a consultation process and manage expectations about what is possible. Where the work allows little flexibility of hours across the team, find out what each individual's most cherished requirement is – the thing that would make the most difference to them and their lives.
- Wherever teams need to share the cover of operating hours, invest in team rostering software and apps that give individuals as much input as possible into their working patterns. Individual input is critical for creating work–life balance in these environments.
- Be clear about the degree of formality involved in any change to flexibility of hours, and whether this is a permanent arrangement or a change to terms of employment. Employee consultation is the key principle and your policy needs to articulate your expectations and practice. The CIPD publishes guidance on the [considerations involved in changing working hours](#).

### 3.3 Consider the impact of lockdown on parents in your workforce

School closures and disruption to childcare during the pandemic have created problems for parents, and potentially reinforced a connection between flexible hours and parenting that many employers had previously been trying to shed. It's important to move away from this connection and ensure that flexible working requests are not reason-dependent, but it is also important to think as an employer how you can support working parents and working carers in the round:

- Consult your workforce: have parents and non-parents in your workforce been differentially impacted by the pandemic? Have mothers in your workforce been more likely to take furlough or reduce their hours, or even leave the workforce? Or have fathers/partners working at home become more involved in childcare and keener to apply for flexible working? What about those with other caring responsibilities?
- Consult your managers: how have line managers' attitudes towards flexibility of hours – and towards those who ask for it – changed?
- Has the pandemic changed the attitudes of senior leaders or the priority they give to flexibility of hours? Some who experienced homeworking for the first time might have become more aware of the challenges of balancing work and family – and potentially more open to supporting flexible working.
- Does your organisational approach to flexibility of hours imply that people need a 'good' reason for requesting a different schedule? Remove all mention of reasons from your policy: flexible schedules shouldn't depend on line managers' views about the appropriate balance of work and family. Instead, make it an organisation-level responsibility to design work in a way that doesn't differentially impact on parents as compared with other workers. And make sure that your organisational case studies reflect the wide range of situations in which flexible working might be appropriate.



## 4 Conclusion

Overall, when thinking about flexible working for your team, consider which options are possible on both scales – flexibility of location and flexibility of hours. Use the seven strategies for hybrid working to enhance wellbeing, maintain productivity, and ensure learning and development for your homeworkers.

Use the advice on flexibility of hours to build the business case and maximise the opportunities by analysing tasks across the whole team, as well as at individual job level. You can also find further examples of how to implement flexible working in the [organisational case studies](#) from this research, which cover employers in education, hospitality, professional services, IT, telecoms, construction and local government, and in the cross-sector [case studies](#) on enabling flexible working from previous research.



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