



FLEXIBLE WORKING: LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

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

Guide for line managers

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The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.



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Guide for line managers

Flexible working: lessons from the pandemic

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

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Introduction to the line manager support materials

Managers play a vital role in determining the health, wellbeing and engagement of their team. They also play an essential part in managing particular people management issues that arise in their team, such as bereavement, conflict, sickness absence and mental health problems, which can have a negative impact on employee health, wellbeing and engagement if not well managed.

[CIPD research](#) identified five key behavioural areas that are important for line managers to support the health, wellbeing and engagement of those who work for them:



Being open, fair and consistent



Handling conflict and people management issues



Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance



Building and sustaining relationships



Supporting development

A line manager's behaviour and the culture they create in their team is the biggest influence on an employee's work experience. Capability in these five behavioural areas, underpinned by an attitude of care, respect, compassion, wisdom and kindness, is vital for line managers to manage the health, wellbeing and engagement of their team. Such capability will also provide the foundation for line managers to manage particular people management issues and will enable managers to take a positive approach, recognise employee needs in these situations and manage them in ways that are sensitive, supportive and inclusive.

The CIPD has created a range of [support materials](#) to help you adopt a management approach that supports good health, wellbeing and engagement in your team by helping you explore and develop your management capability. Designed for anyone who manages people, the guidance and exercises are quick and easy to use. They can help you save time and get better results by managing people well – all of which is good for your own wellbeing as well as that of your team.

To build on these resources, the CIPD has also created a series of guides focusing on specific areas of people management that aim to support managers in dealing with particular people management issues. Each of these guides provides practical information and advice relevant to that particular people management issue, as well as linking it to the approach covered in the support materials. The intention is that managers use the five key behavioural areas as the basis for managing all the issues, and draw on specific relevant behaviours from within the framework to help with the particular issue in question. Look out for the icons to understand which of the behaviours is particularly relevant to the issues being discussed. You can then refer back to the [exercises](#) to develop these behaviours further.

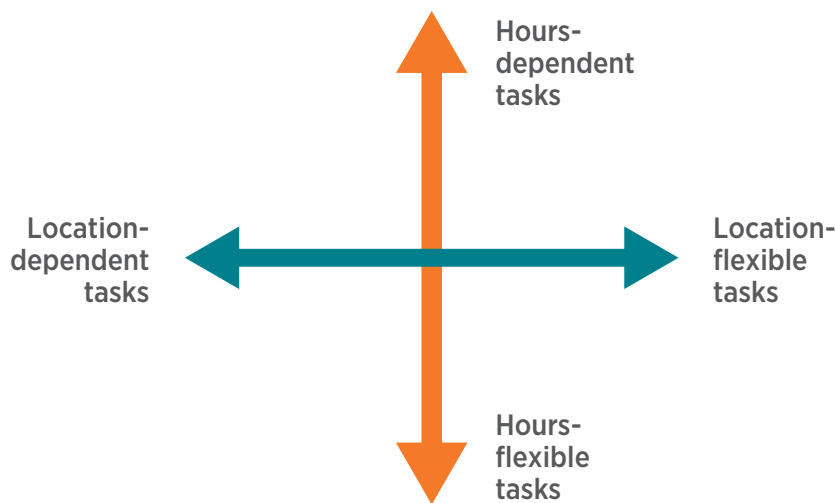


1 Introduction

This guide is based on the findings of interviews and an employers' survey that asked about all types of flexible working, but focused on flexible location as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research project *Flexible Working: Lessons from the pandemic* 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



This 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. The focus is on what line managers can do to improve working practices and behaviours, but also what teams and individuals need to do to make these a reality.
- 2 The second part offers advice about using the experience of the pandemic to better support flexibility of hours where possible.

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](#).



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. Our research revealed the need for more regular, open conversations about wellbeing when employees are working from home (see section 3.4 of the report for more information).

To facilitate open and regular conversations about wellbeing, line managers can:

- Prioritise regular one-to-ones and try not to cancel or postpone them (unless absolutely necessary). Tailor their frequency to the needs of the individual and try different intervals to find what works best.
- Normalise wellbeing conversations by making space for them in team meetings. You can overcome embarrassment with practice. Explore what people have been doing outside of work, how they feel both mentally and physically, and what strategies they're using to improve their own wellbeing.
- One good way to encourage people to talk about their wellbeing and work-life balance is to be open about your own. For instance, you could talk about how your work pattern allows you to juggle work and personal responsibilities and how you take regular breaks in your working day, to protect your wellbeing.
- Encourage your team members to help their colleagues by talking about the strategies they use to keep well.

The CIPD has published guidance for line managers on [supporting the health and wellbeing](#) of your team that provides more advice in this area.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Building and sustaining relationships**. Look at [Exercise 5](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

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, watching for overwork and ensuring there are boundaries between work and home life.

Managers should aim to:

- Encourage your teams to embrace boundary-setting and the use of routines to create appropriate start and finish times, and build in breaks to the working day. Make time in team meetings for sharing strategies.
- Lead by example. If it suits you to do your emails late at night, add a note on your email footer to make it clear that you don't expect others to do so. If you take time out during the working day for personal reasons, be open about your non-work commitments.
- Make sure you have good measurements of output in place so you can trust your team to deliver. Check on workload as part of regular one-to-ones.
- Be clear about expectations of hours as well as outputs. If you just rely on measuring outputs, people can end up working longer hours.



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- If you notice someone regularly starting early or working late, check out what's going on. Be aware of how someone is using their former commute time so you can be sure they're not overworking.
- Agree team-based guidelines so that colleagues can assist each other to stick to them. These might cover things such as expectations of availability within the team and times for start, finish, lunch and breaks.
- Set a rule that team video calls will end five minutes before the hour or half-hour, so that people can take five minutes before their next call or meeting.

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.

To allow for effective task co-ordination and communication, managers should look to:

- Ensure that everyone has clearly defined and measurable objectives. This is easier for short-term, transactional goals, but essential for longer-term project performance or service goals too.
- Adopt more formal, deliberate communication, often at pre-arranged times. The frequency depends on the nature of the work. Fast-moving, time-sensitive or interdependent work might require team meetings several times a day, but in slower-paced work it might be once a week. When setting frequency, consider not just the need to accomplish tasks, but also the need to build relationships and ensure team cohesion (see section 1.5).
- Manage online meetings carefully, especially hybrid ones where some people are on screen and some people physically present in the meeting room. Make sure that everyone uses the video function: it instantly improves the degree of engagement and makes people feel they're connecting, and you can pick up on body language and social cues. Be alert to when someone wants to join the conversation, in order to ensure that both talkative and quiet participants can make their contribution. Monitor attention span and engagement; close the meeting if focus is lost.
- Keep larger meetings short: if there are too many people to see everyone on screen at once, it becomes more of a presentation than a discussion.
- Think about how tasks are co-ordinated when everyone's co-located in the workplace. How much is left to assumption and chance? Do you rely on just casually bumping into people to tell them what needs doing, or to share information and updates about tasks or customers? Homeworking can be an opportunity to review how effective or productive that is.
- Try to avoid 'presence bias': talk to the person who's best suited to do the work, or discuss the issue, not the one who's sitting next to you.
- Share your availability with colleagues if you're working at home and encourage your team to do the same. If you don't have a system that shows people's availability on screen, keep open calendars and agree how to indicate availability, so that nobody feels reluctant to contact you when you're working at home – and everyone knows when not to contact you.
- Establish team rules about the use of different communication methods for different types of tasks – for example, using a chat function for short-term and real-time exchange of information, email for formal and external communication, and video calls for problem-solving.
- Agree team guidelines about where and how to store information. Keep databases, file stores and project management apps up to date, and agree how to label files so that everyone can find information.



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- Agree group rules about online meeting etiquette. For example, it can be distracting and inefficient if some people on the call are multi-tasking, and it's hard to interact effectively if some team members don't use the video function.
- Ensure that everyone in the team learns all the functionality of your online meeting software. Might it be helpful to have the sub-titles on if someone's struggling to hear the other participants? Can you use emoticons to give reactions, or share how everyone is?

There is more information in the CIPD's guide on [managing remote workers](#).



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**. Look at [Exercise 4](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

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. But if you have to do these tasks online, there are ways of making them more effective.

Managers should consider the following to enable creativity, brainstorming and problem-solving tasks:

- Identify which tasks are more effective face-to-face and organise time in the workplace for these.
- People tire more easily in screen meetings than face-to-face ones: if these types of tasks need to be done online, keep them shorter.
- Whenever possible, facilitate meetings for these kinds of tasks as you would a training workshop. Be clear about objectives. Build in preparation time, with questions circulated in advance so that participants can do some of the thinking before the meeting and arrive with something to contribute. Organise different types of activities. Use online break-out meetings for smaller group discussions.
- Use team chat functions to share ideas and ask for help with problems as they arise – but switch to video calls to go into a problem in more depth.

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, in order to create the personal and social connections, and the trust, which are an essential factor in engagement and productivity.

To improve team cohesion and organisational belonging, managers should:

- Plan what types of online team events work best for the personalities and preferences of your team: while online team jollity was accepted as necessary during lockdown, it might feel forced or regimented in the hybrid world. During lockdown, a wide range of such events were used: pub quizzes, fitness initiatives, charity fundraisers, and all types of social event involving games, food and drink (see [Onecom case study](#)). Think about how you can adapt these going forward.
- Reserve sections of team meetings for relationship-building and sharing non-work news.
- Be sensitive to people's needs: it's unlikely that everyone in the team will appreciate the same kind of online social event. Some people may not want to talk, and that's fine. Don't make assumptions about individual needs: introverts may be less talkative, but they still need connection and engagement.



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- Be aware of how needs change over time: teams that tire of one type of online social interaction may appreciate a different kind, or may want to return to the previous one after a break.
- Engineer frequent visual contact with colleagues. During the pandemic, this had to be via video calls, but communication through a screen is less nuanced and easier to misunderstand. In a hybrid working world, look to build in regular face-to-face meetings, to develop relationships and encourage people to feel they're engaged in a common purpose.
- Set guidelines about how much time the team needs to spend co-located working, post-pandemic. This might be one day per quarter, or four days a week, depending on the team and the way that work is co-ordinated.
- Try face-to-face 'keeping in touch' events or days with no work purpose, purely for social relationships and team-building. Globally distributed teams, mobile teams or those with long commutes use these sorts of events because they recognise the importance of human and social connections in underpinning engagement and productivity.
- Plan a team-based schedule of office days and homeworking days, so that the whole team can work together regularly, and maximise the opportunities for informal, impromptu contact.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Building and sustaining relationships**. Look at [Exercise 5](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

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.

To maintain networking and inter-team relationships, managers should:

- Identify which teams you need to interact informally with and roster the overlap of days in the workplace – maybe once a quarter, maybe several days a week, depending on need.
- 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.
- Suggest that long-term homeworkers join company-wide steering groups, projects or special interest networks to maintain their connections across the organisation.

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.

To help your team establish and maintain informal learning:

- Recognise the points when more informal learning is needed, for example when joining the organisation (at any level), after a promotion, when taking on a new task or area of responsibility, or when switching project team.
- Organise a wider formal support network instead of a single buddy at points of intense learning.



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- Create more formal documentation of information, to meet learning needs, and ensure it is organised in an accessible way and kept up to date.
- In project-based work, mix people up on consecutive projects to create greater opportunities for sharing knowledge.
- When a new person joins the team, rota colleagues' time in the workplace, to avoid a new starter feeling unsupported by remote-working colleagues.
- Long-term homeworkers will need to be more deliberate about seeking out opportunities for learning and development. Discuss their needs and be proactive about approaching people they can learn from. Share out learning tasks with everyone, not just those you are co-located with.
- You can find more information about previous research evidence on the career impact of working from home [here](#).



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Supporting development**. Look at [Exercise 6](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

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 explore flexibility of hours for your team.

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 could be an issue: you should look for ways to improve the motivation and engagement of these workers by offering greater flexibility of hours where possible. With support from your HR team, think about the following:

- Consider fairness across the team (see [Skanska case study](#)) to avoid risk of resentment or conflict.
- Within each job, 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.
- Trial flexibility of hours, where possible, for team members and regularly review how the arrangement is going for the individual and team. Make any necessary changes or adaptations.



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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. Managers can play a role by doing the following:

- Proactively embrace a team-based approach to designing work, co-ordinating patterns of availability between team members to cover the required time slots.
- Work with HR to develop multiple skills and build 'substitutability' between team members (see [Compass case study](#)).
- To cover specific hours of service, involve the team in agreeing and then rostering shifts and working patterns. Wherever the hours of operation are longer 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.
- Take responsibility for proactively asking your team members about their flexibility needs – maybe at development reviews or regular one-to-ones – rather than reactively waiting for individuals to make requests.
- Build in an understanding of everyone's preferred working patterns. Present this as a consultation, not a right, 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.
- Consult with HR 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. You need to understand organisational policy and impact on formal terms and conditions.

3.3 Consider the impact of lockdown on parents in your workforce

School closures 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:

- Think about your team: have parents and non-parents been differentially impacted by the pandemic? Have mothers been more likely to take furlough or reduce their hours, or even leave the workforce? Or have fathers working at home become more involved in childcare and keener to apply for flexible working? What about those with other caring responsibilities?
- Think about your team's attitudes towards flexibility of hours and those who ask for it: how has this changed?
- Do you fully understand your organisation's approach to flexibility of hours? Do you understand your role in designing work in a way that doesn't differentially impact on parents as compared with other workers? Seek out case studies and examples of how flexible working could work in your team.
- Make it clear to your team members that the right to request flexible working should be open to all and is not reason dependent.

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.



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- 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.

Consider using the full range of support materials if you haven't already done so

If reading this guide has highlighted areas of people management capability that you would like to develop, why not use the full range of support materials to help you adopt a management approach that supports good health, wellbeing and engagement in your team?

You can get insight into your management capability across all five behavioural areas by completing the [quiz](#) and then use the [step-by-step guidance](#) to help you get feedback, identify strengths and areas to develop, and plan the action you will take. There is also an [action plan sheet](#), which can be used to note down and track your actions; a [quiz](#) to help you identify potential barriers and develop strategies to overcome them; and a [series of exercises](#) to provide ideas and inspiration relevant to each of the behavioural areas, some of which have already been highlighted above.





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Incorporated by Royal Charter
Registered as a charity in England and Wales (1079797)
Scotland (SC045154) and Ireland (20100827)

Issued: April 2021 Reference: 8119 © CIPD 2021