

## Flexible working

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically accelerated a pre-established trend away from traditional ways of working. Data collected by the CIPD in January this year showed just over half of UK employees working flexibly in one way or another. Within the insurance sector, that proportion was likely much higher.

Since spring last year, our collective shift towards flexible working has been driven by necessity. But, as the pandemic pressures ease, we all have important decisions to make about whether, when, and how far we want to roll back the ad hoc changes that were often implemented with minimal planning or preparation.

In many ways, flexible working has gone well. Most firms experienced remarkably little loss of productivity - the opposite in many cases. The fact that the CIPD found two-thirds of employers are planning to continue or expand their use of some form of flexible working appears to support this.

Employees mostly report a positive experience too. A survey carried out by Aviva, earlier this year, found that 69% of employees now see the opportunity to work flexibly as important to their future career choices - rising to 76% among those aged 18-44. Going forward, for any firm not wishing to hinder its chances of attracting and retaining the best talent, making some degree of provision for flexible working looks sensible.

But before we all rush to sell off surplus office space and plunge into a fully flexible future, we should think long and hard about its full implications. Flexible working hasn't suited everyone. Nor is it likely to any time soon.

Some employers have been quick to appreciate the benefits of reduced overheads, lower absence rates, increased productivity, and an enhanced ability to match demand to resources. Others have worried about a negative impact on work quality, customer service and about a potential loss of oversight opportunities and other operational challenges.



Meanwhile, whilst some employees have relished an enhanced work-life balance and the chance to spend less time and money commuting, others have found it a struggle working from flats or houses not always well suited to home-working. They may have missed the comfort, convenience, and companionship of the office or, in some cases, found themselves feeling overworked and isolated.

The first step for any organisation thinking about going further down the flexible working path, is to take proper stock of its experience through the pandemic. What has worked well - and what hasn't? How sustainable are the apparent upsides, and how easily resolved are the various challenges encountered?

An impressive 64% of employees questioned in the Aviva study said their productivity had benefited from time spent working away from their usual workplace. But should employers take such statements at face value? Do you have the tools in place to measure remote employees' productivity effectively? You will also need to consider what significance - if any - you attach to less clear-cut effects of remote working'. For example, the Aviva study found that 47% of employees now feel 'less career-focused' than before (up from 36% in August 2020).

While offering greater opportunity to work flexibly will often be welcomed by employees, it can also create a range of potential HR headaches. You'll need to review your firm's recent experience to identify - for example - where inequalities or issues around inclusion might have arisen, where employees have felt unsupported, where those in roles less suited to flexible working might have felt disadvantaged, or where employees in managerial or supervisory roles may have quietly resisted new ways of working.

You will also need to assess which roles within your business (and which aspects of those roles) are amenable to various types of flexible working. You should overlay this with an assessment of whether the personal circumstances and characteristics of the employees currently in those roles, make them suited to taking up whatever opportunity for flexible working you present them with.

Consultation is crucial - but not before you have formed a reasonably clear idea of what will and won't work for your business. It is important to understand and take account of employees' priorities, but in a world of work where demand for flexible working will likely outstrip supply for some time to come, it is also important to avoid raising hopes or expectations you can't satisfy.

Key priorities for employees in the current climate are: clarity on what is expected of them, a realistic idea of what they can expect in return, and a clear dividing line between work time and downtime. Today, it is more important than ever for employers to provide that clarity. Once you have decided what you are seeking to achieve, in terms of creating benefits and managing challenges for your business and for its employees, you'll need to communicate clearly and concisely exactly what you're doing and why.

Within certain parameters, you can take as formal or informal an approach to flexible working as you see fit. However, you need a clear policy one way or another. In particular, you need a properly documented procedure for reviewing flexible working requests. Most employees have the right to submit these and more than ever will be doing so in future. You will need to be clear about how these requests have been handled and the basis for any rejection.

Done right, embracing an element of flexible working can boost loyalty, engagement, and productivity. However, with any changes you make, you need to ensure that all employees are treated fairly, inclusively, consultatively, and in a way that demonstrates real concern for their wellbeing and their ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance. This requires having a considered and coherent policy in place; one that contains the appropriate support for everything from communication and training, to the provision of equipment, and health and safety issues beyond the workplace.

If you would like some help with developing your own firm's flexible working policy and procedures, our expert team at Insurance HR Solutions (IHR Solutions) will be happy to help. Contact our team today and take the worry out of your day. Email the team at [HRhelp@ihrsolutions.co.uk](mailto:HRhelp@ihrsolutions.co.uk), call our helpline on **01604 709509** or visit our website [www.insurancehrsolutions.co.uk](http://www.insurancehrsolutions.co.uk)

## About the Author

### KATHERINE WATKINS

Katherine has over 20 years' international experience working in HR, across various sectors, including financial services, insurance, and regulated environments. Over the years, she has collaborated with some exceptionally talented HR professionals, with whom she has joined forces on special projects. Her network of HR professionals provides advice and training to companies and other HR teams.

In her role with UKGI Group, Katherine heads up the Human Resources Consultancy and provides objective support to firms on employment law and HR issues. She uses her extensive skills and knowledge to work with firms to help them develop strong and resilient HR strategies and establish healthy organisational cultures.

Katherine holds a degree in Business Administration and Management from the University of Northampton and a Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Strategies from London Metropolitan University. She is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (FCIPD).

