

A black and white photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a light-colored trench coat. She is smiling and looking upwards and to the right. She is holding a dark coffee cup in her right hand. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a modern building with large windows.

# FLEX FOR LIFE 2022

#FlexForLife

flexibilityworks >

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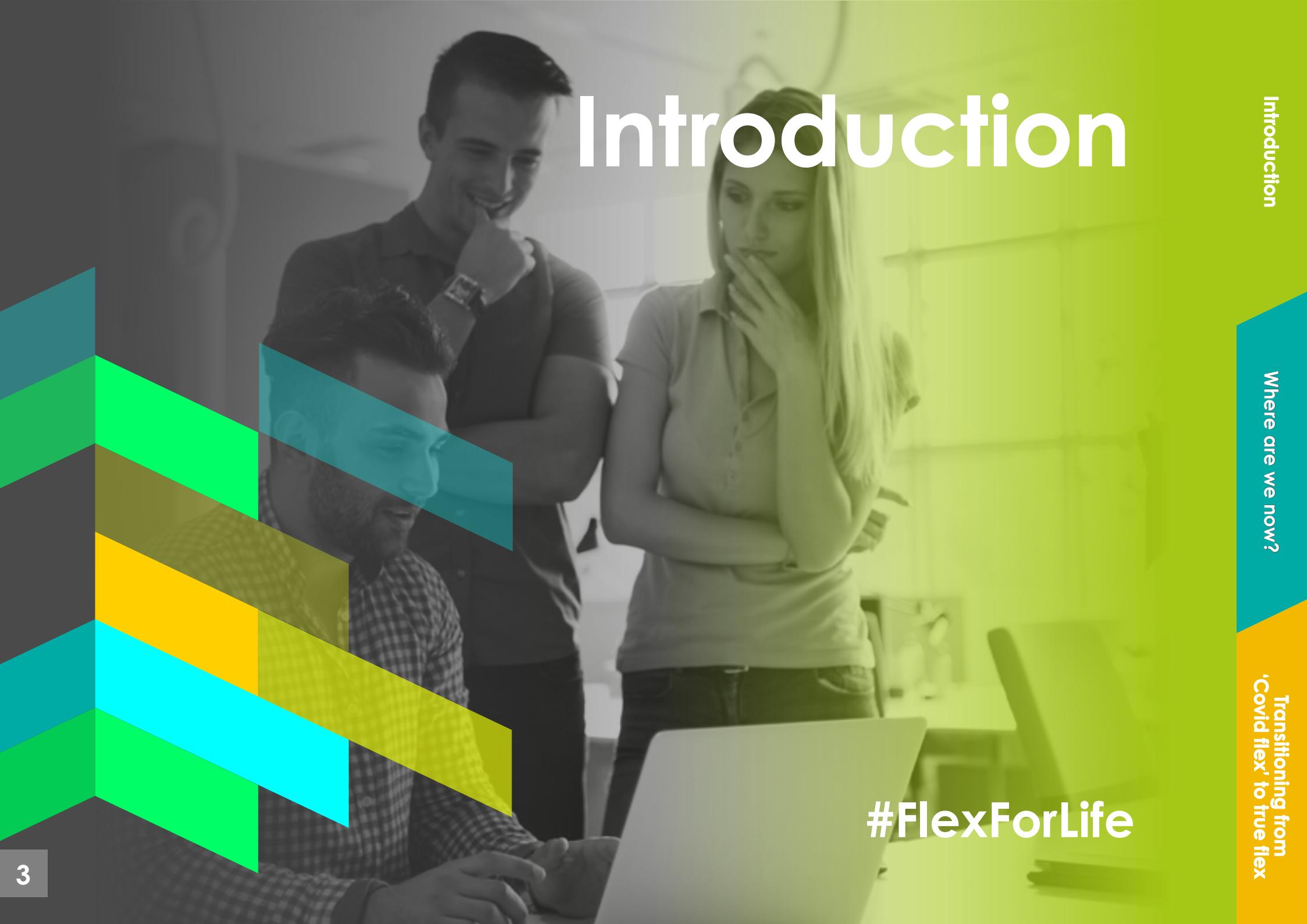
# Introduction

Introduction

Where are we now?

Transitioning from  
'Covid flex' to true flex

#FlexForLife





# For people. For business. For life.

**Two years on from the first Covid lockdown and we're seeing sweeping changes in how, when and where we work in Scotland, with more people than ever before working flexibly. No surprises there.**

But while our latest research shows many people and businesses are benefiting from greater flex, we can also see that some 'Covid flex' – which employers had no time to plan for, and often workers had little choice over – feels a bit crunchy in practice.

As the final Covid restrictions end, 2022 is a crucial time for companies to transition from hastily implemented 'Covid flex' to something more intentional and sustainable. Something that works better for everyone.

It's about giving people the best shot at finding work life harmony, and delivering for businesses with more engaged and productive workers who take less time off sick and are more likely to stay with their employer for longer.

Add to the fact that many sectors are struggling to fill skills shortages, and it's clear that flexible working is undoubtedly going to be an integral part of business strategy going forward.

We know this isn't always easy, and the way forward isn't always clear. But our report is designed to guide you through.

We'll show you the latest robust data on where we are now in Scotland. Behind the media hype, who really wants to work flexibly and what is the demand for flex and new ways of working? We will also show you who's already working flexibly, how that's different from pre-pandemic and what employers and workers expect to happen within their organisation in the next six months.



## For those of you who like to know the detail of our research:

- » We surveyed **1,021 workers in Scotland**.
- » A total of **42** people, (4.1% of our sample) were unemployed, in line with the current unemployment rate in Scotland. The total number surveyed who were currently in employment was **979**.
- » Our figures are also representative across age, gender, industries, income, those with children including single parent households, the proportion furloughed during lockdown and those with a disability or limiting long-term condition.
- » We boosted our survey sample of Scottish people currently **unemployed and seeking work**. In addition to the 42 respondents included in our main survey of 1,021 people, we obtained a further 69 responses, giving us a total of **111 unemployed Scottish adults** looking for jobs.
- » We also sought the views of **201 Scottish business leaders** including CEOs, directors, owners and founders, senior HR professionals and senior managers. The industries and sectors our employers came from closely matched our employee survey.
- » All surveys were carried out online by global research firm Panelbase between Thursday 20 January and Tuesday 1 February 2022.

The second part of our report highlights key areas where employers need to focus next, to overcome some of the challenges they face today, such as how to make flex 'fair' and prevent resentment between teams.

Extra flex during Covid was often a 'bolt on', separate from core business strategy. But the full benefits of flex are only unlocked when you have flex embedded throughout all business areas, from recruitment and retention, and training for management and leadership teams to employee wellbeing and company communications and culture.

Another part of the process is better understanding about how we can design

different types of flex for frontline workers and being aware of the experience of people across income bands and employment sectors, so we don't inadvertently create a two-tier workforce of 'flexers' and 'non-flexers'.

The vast majority of Scottish workers already work flexibly, or want to, and half say they're working more flexibly than before the pandemic. While nearly two thirds of employers say flex has had a positive impact on their business. Flex is undoubtedly here to stay.

There is no going back. But, if things aren't perfect, how do we best move forward? That's the crux of this report.

# A note on Flexibility Works

**Co-founded by Nikki Slowey and Lisa Gallagher,  
Flexibility Works is a social business.**

Our purpose is to enrich people's lives by transforming the way we work.

Specifically, we're here to accelerate the adoption of flexible and new ways of working in Scotland, by sharing advice, insight and best practice, which improves business success, employee engagement and wellbeing. And by building the evidence base that informs how we best achieve this, and why it's important.

We want to help employers and workers work together, co-creating a culture that truly values work life harmony, enabling all people and businesses to thrive.



Nikki Slowey



Lisa Gallagher

This report was supported by the Scottish Government and the Social Innovation Partnership.

## What we do

Experts in Scotland, supporting businesses to implement flexible or new ways of working.



### A Community for Change

Connecting you to a collaborative community of specialists and champions, all committed to improving the way we work



### Training & Consultancy

Providing consultancy and training to ensure a successful roll-out across your business



### Research & Insight

Providing the latest insight, and research, keeping you current and saving you time



### Thought-leadership & Expertise

Sharing our expertise and knowledge through webinars, roundtables, case studies and in the media

# What is flex?

There's still a lot of confusion about what flexible working is, in part because it can take so many forms.

Put simply, flexible working is a pattern or schedule that's not a rigid Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm in the same place. And, crucially, it's a pattern the employee has some **choice and control** over, and is agreed with the employer, because it works best for both parties.

Some roles have more scope for flexibility than others. But we'd argue some flex is usually possible in almost every role.

Here's how we defined flex for the workers and employers we surveyed



This is about 'ways of working' and / or flexible working approaches that can have an impact on your personal work life balance. No matter what your job role is, we want to know how little, or how much, you have access to things like this. We want to know how much control you feel you have over where, when and/or how much you work.

- This can include having input into working part-time, working from home, compressed hours, small adjustments to start and finish times, working term time only, job share etc
- For shift workers or frontline roles, this might look like the ability to swap shifts, self-rostering, predictability of shifts, the ability to adjust hours occasionally etc.
- It can be informal or formal (in your contract) or a mix of both.
- This does not include flexibility over which you have no control, such as zero hours contracts.

## What do we mean by frontline workers?

While we're defining things, here's how we describe a frontline role:

» A role that involves dealing with people in-person or face-to-face, such as retail or nursing. Or, that requires you to be on-site to complete practical hands-on tasks, such as manufacturing.



# Part one: Where are we now?

Introduction

Where are we now?

Transitioning from  
'Covid flex' to true flex

#FlexForLife

# Who wants flex? And who's got it?

It's been two years since much of our working lives changed overnight with the announcement of the first Covid lockdown. Now, almost half (49%) of all workers in Scotland say they're working more flexibly than before the pandemic. And currently, 84% either have at least some level of flex, or want it.

Six in ten (60%) Scottish workers say they've had access to flex in the last six months, compared with 49% pre-pandemic. Among workers with a disability or long-term condition, 64% have been working flexibly. Even half of frontline workers say they have had some flex.

And yet – most people still want more flex. Seven in ten, in fact. This includes people without any flex, as well as those who already have some flex but want more. This could be because they currently have flex as a response to the pandemic, which wasn't their choice, or they simply don't have enough flex to make their work and life harmonious.

**84%**  **73%**  
of Scottish workers  
have or want flex  
pre-pandemic

**60%**  **46%**  
had access to flex  
in the last six months  
pre-pandemic

**49%**  
of Scottish workers are  
working more flexibly  
than pre Covid

**53%**  
of frontline workers said  
they had access to some flex  
in the last six months

# Demand for greater flex

**69%**

of all Scottish workers  
would like more flex

Of those who don't currently work flex,  
or aren't sure, **59%** said they'd like flex.  
This represents **23%** of the whole  
Scottish workforce.

We found more men reported working  
flexibly than women. This may be because  
more women surveyed worked in frontline  
roles and industries, such as health,  
education, retail and social care, where  
flex is more challenging to introduce.



**64%**

of men work  
flexibly in  
some way



**56%**

of women work  
flexibly in  
some way

**59%** of our frontline workers were women  
and **41%** were men. For all employees  
including non-frontline workers,  
**55%** were women and **45%** were men.

Access to flexible working increases with  
salary, with workers in the top salary  
brackets most likely to have flex.

over  
**£50k**

**73%**

of people earning  
more than £50,000  
could work flex

under  
**£20k**

**50%**

of those earning  
less than £20,000  
could work flex

Some industries offered more flex than  
average. People working in professional,  
scientific and technical jobs have the  
most access to flexible working, followed  
by those working in information and  
communications, and then financial  
and insurance roles.

**83%**

Professional, Scientific  
and Technical

**80%**

Information and  
Communications

**77%**

Financial and  
Insurance

Compared to **60%** survey average

**“** I tend to work core office hours every day, but with two school aged children I often need to be around for them later in the afternoons. I can do this by working either earlier in the morning or later in the evening. This helps enormously with the 'juggle' experienced by many working parents. It helps me be a better parent and to do my job better as I feel I am more focused when I do work because I am able to schedule and manage my time more productively to fulfil both roles. Win-win for me and my employer! **”**



female, public sector

over  
**£50k**

**74%**

Men earning more than  
£50,000 a year were the group  
most likely to have access  
to flexible working

# Who's not working flexibly?

There are still groups of people who say they don't work flexibly. Often, this is because they think flex isn't available or appropriate for their role, though one in five (20%) say simply their employer doesn't allow it.

Those with the least access to flex were women earning less than £20,000 a year. They were the only gender and income bracket in which less than half had access to flex – just 47%. A total of 45% said they had no access to flex.

Parents in households with an income of less than £30,000, and single parents, were less likely to work flexibly too.



**1 in 3**

Scottish workers say they don't work flexibly (33%)

**41%** of people earning less than £20,000 a year don't work flexibly

**39%** of frontline workers don't work flexibly

**38%** of parents in households with an income lower than £30K don't work flexibly

**38%** of single parents don't work flex

**29%** of workers with a disability or long-term condition don't work flex

Compared to 33% survey average

# Reasons workers didn't work flex:

**34%** Flex wasn't appropriate for my role or type of work

**20%** My employer doesn't allow flex

**19%** It wasn't available at my level

Employers told us that workers who couldn't work flexibly were mainly frontline or public facing roles (58%), and more junior roles (33%).

Education was the sector with the least access to flex, followed by social care, manufacturing, health, and construction.

**“**The nature of my job does not allow for flexible working, hence I feel the need for a new career path.**”**

**female, low-income frontline worker**

**“**I work in Early Years in a school. All the non-contact time work could be done from home, but the council doesn't trust workers to do this. As a result of the lack of flexibility in my role I am leaving the Early Years sector – even though I am a highly trained professional – to join the civil service where I can work remotely, with flexibility. This flexibility is important to me so that I can care for my elderly parents.**”**



**female public sector worker**

**49%** In Education have no flex

**42%** In Social Care have no flex

**39%** In Manufacturing have no flex

**38%** In Health have no flex (for women in health, **43%** have no flex)

**36%** In Construction have no flex



# Could non-flexers work more flexibly?

Six in ten (59%) Scottish workers who don't work flexibly would like to.

While it's true flexibility is easier to see in some roles than others, we think there's room for flex, or new ways of working, in almost every role.

We asked people who didn't work flexibly whether they thought they could.

Of those who don't work flexibly **in office-based roles**, more than half (51%) thought some parts of their job could be done from **home or another location** to normal. And the same portion felt that some parts of their job could be done at **different times** to their usual work patterns.

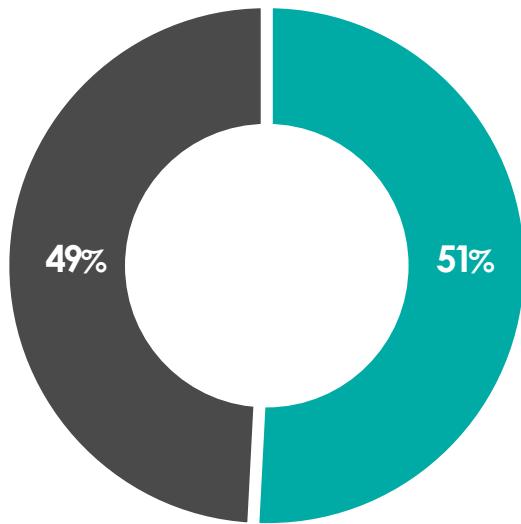
**“**As a front facing government worker, my thoughts are very rarely taken into consideration in terms of flexible working. The usual stance would be 'business needs [come first]' so I would very rarely get the chance to work from home, even though I'm perfectly capable of doing it there.**”**



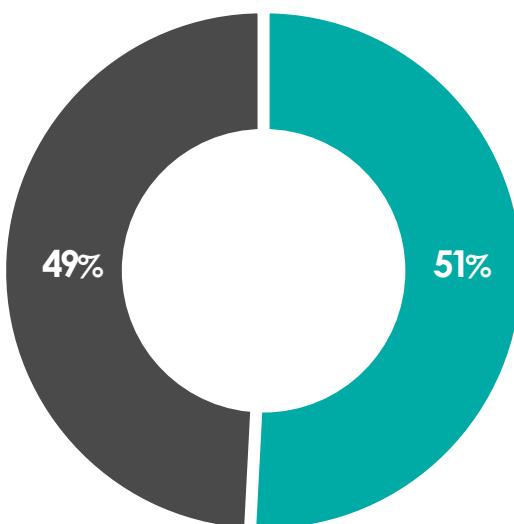
frontline public sector worker

## 'Office-based' workers without flex

Non-frontline workers who answered no flex (n=112) Yes No



**Do you think it could be possible that some parts of your job can be done from home or another location other than your usual workplace?**



**Do you think it could be possible that some parts of your job can be done at different times other than your current usual working patterns?**

A significant proportion of **frontline workers** who don't work flexibly also felt that some parts of their jobs could be done in a more flexible way. Four in ten (43%) thought their **hours** could be different. Nearly a third (29%) thought some parts of their job could be done from **home or another location**.

Encouragingly, many employers are becoming more open to finding new ways of working for frontline staff. Nearly half (48%) said it was likely they would give frontline staff extra time off, such as a day a month to support wellbeing, and 45% said it was likely they would take on additional staff to create bigger teams that could provide greater capacity and shift cover.

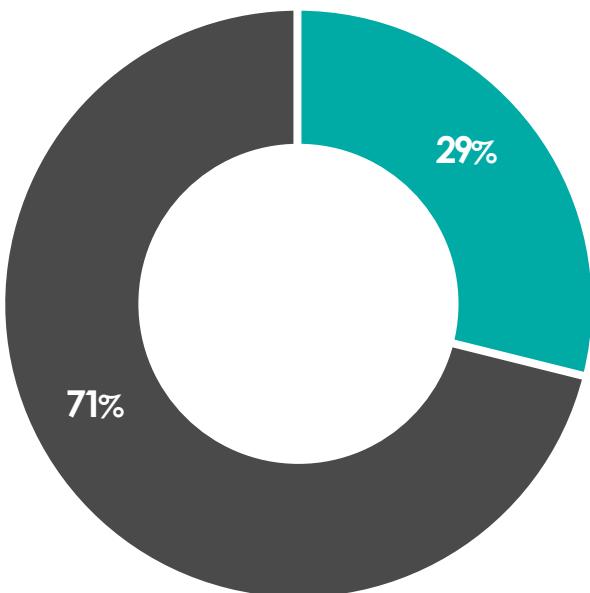
**“ Obviously, our frontline workers can't work from home, they need to be with the individual they support and they understand this completely. But we can give them more flexibility around their hours. We're currently looking at a range of new shift patterns, that might involve monthly, or fortnightly hours. There's a shift pattern where you work four days on, four days off, three days on and three days off, which means you work seven days over 14, which we're considering too.”**



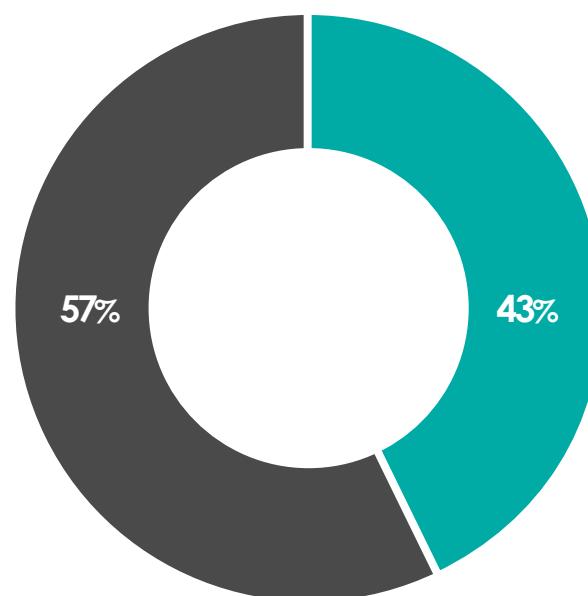
HR manager, health and social care charity

## Frontline workers without flex

Workers who answered No flex at Q14 (n=212) ■ Yes ■ No



**Do you think it could be possible that some parts of your job can be done from home or another location other than your usual workplace?**



**Do you think it could be possible that some parts of your job can be done at different times other than your current usual working patterns?**

# Do employers and workers agree on how much flex is available?

Many employers are now offering more flexibility than before the pandemic. But it's clear this isn't the case for everyone in Scotland. There is also a growing divide between what employers think is on offer, compared with what workers think.

More than half (53%) of employers think their organisation is in one of the two most flexible categories, up 13% on last year.

By comparison, 37% of workers think the same. This is down 2% on last year.

Four in ten workers (40%) think their organisation offers the lowest level of flex, up 5% on last year. It's more than double the figure for employers.

 = Worker

 = Employer

## Barely flex

 We have basic/minimum flex opportunities 

 19%  40%

## Flex lite

 Some people work flex but it's not yet embedded in our culture 

 28%  18%

## Pretty good flex

 Really good practices in place and many people work flex 

 24%  19%

## Exemplary flex

 Very flex work culture that's accepted as the norm 

 29%  18%

# How important is flex for job seekers?

Just over a third (35%) of all Scottish workers told us they were currently thinking about changing jobs, and so did 40% of working parents.

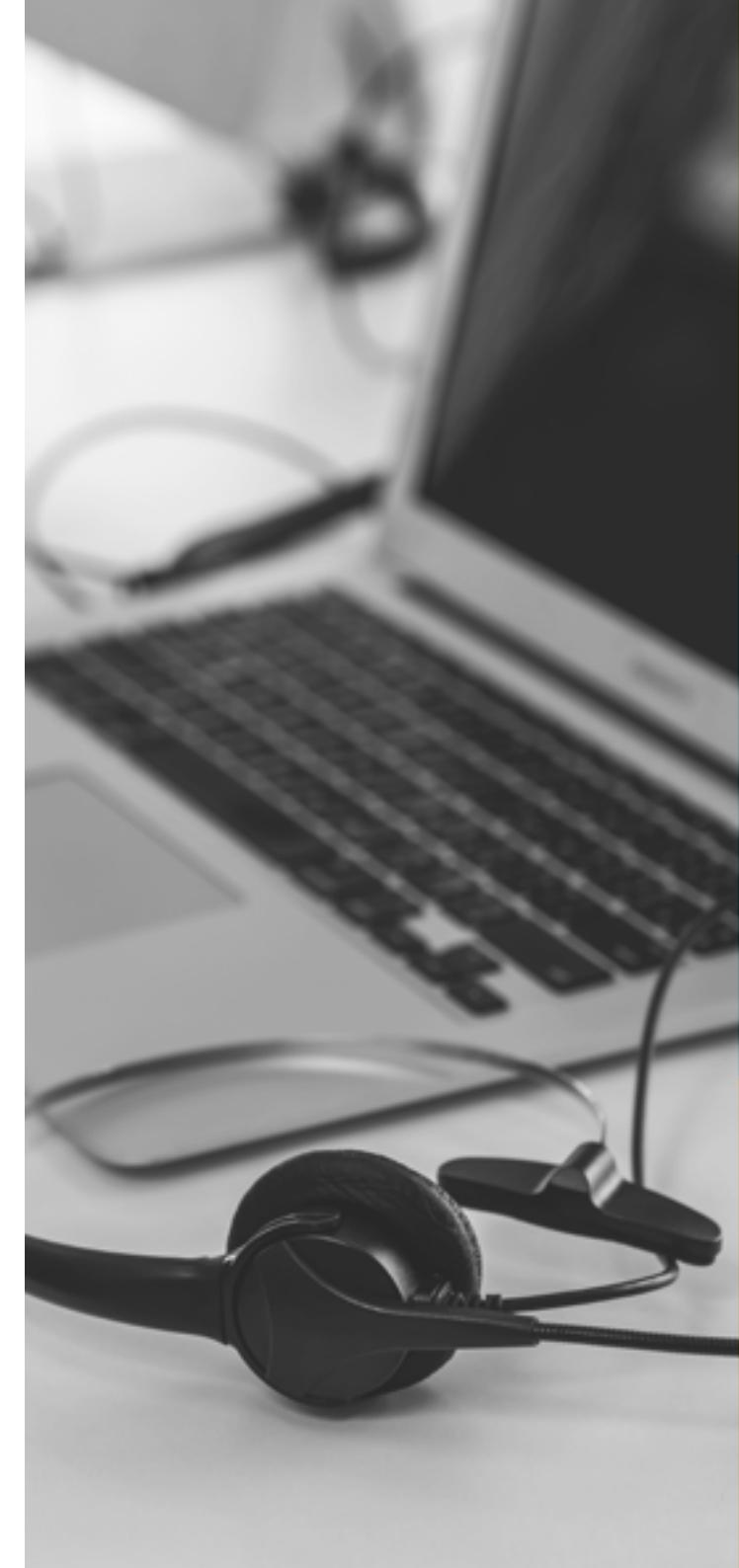
Of these active job seekers, nearly two thirds (64%) said flexibility on time or location was one of their most important criteria when considering applying for, or accepting, a new role. In comparison 60% said salary was. These proportions were mirrored across frontline and non-frontline roles and shows just how much people thinking of changing jobs value the prospect of greater flexibility.

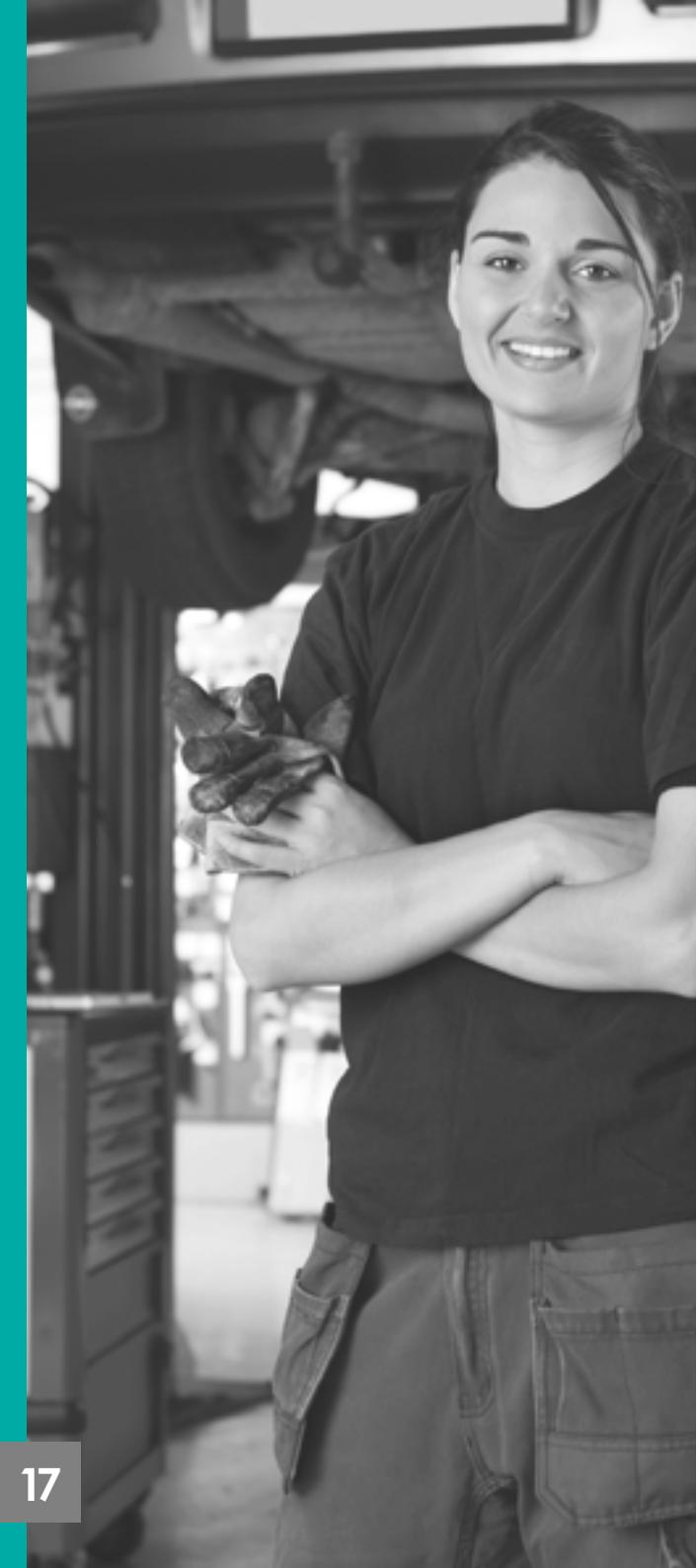
The figures rise among working parents. Two thirds (66%) said flex was important, compared with 61% who selected salary.

While flex is even more important for workers with a disability or long-term health condition. Seven in ten (70%) rate flexibility as important for any new role, compared with just 47% who said salary.

This offers a strong message to employers about the importance of advertising job roles with the flexible working opportunities clearly available. Without this, they will be missing out on key talent.

Overall, our figures show many people currently looking for work don't just value flexibility, it's a necessity. Increasing flexible job opportunities can play an important part in widening access to the labour market, reducing unemployment, benefitting the economy more widely and tackling inequality.





## Unemployed need flex most

But the greatest desire for flexibility comes from people who are not currently working and are looking for a job. Nearly nine in ten (86%) said flexibility was important, compared with 63% who said salary. This suggests that many unemployed Scots really need a flexible job, otherwise they're simply not able to work. This is especially true for unemployed people with caring responsibilities, such as parents – 44% said flex was the single most important criteria to them when accepting a job – double the number who said salary.

**“Flexible working means everything to me. I need it to keep me in post doing the job I love alongside delivering football coaching for a couple of kids' teams. Having this flex has helped me to turn my life around.”**



male public sector worker,  
no children

# 1 in 5

Scottish workers have already changed jobs since the start of the pandemic (22%)

**27%**

Of these said they moved for more flexibility and a better work life balance.

**“For me being able to work flexibly means being able to work at all. I wouldn't be able to manage childcare and work around school and nursery times otherwise.”**



low-income single parent,  
third sector worker

**“I love flexible working and my new workplace is very supportive of it. It's a lot better than my previous job at a marketing agency which had us in the office, full time with no flexibility allowed.”**



finance and insurance worker

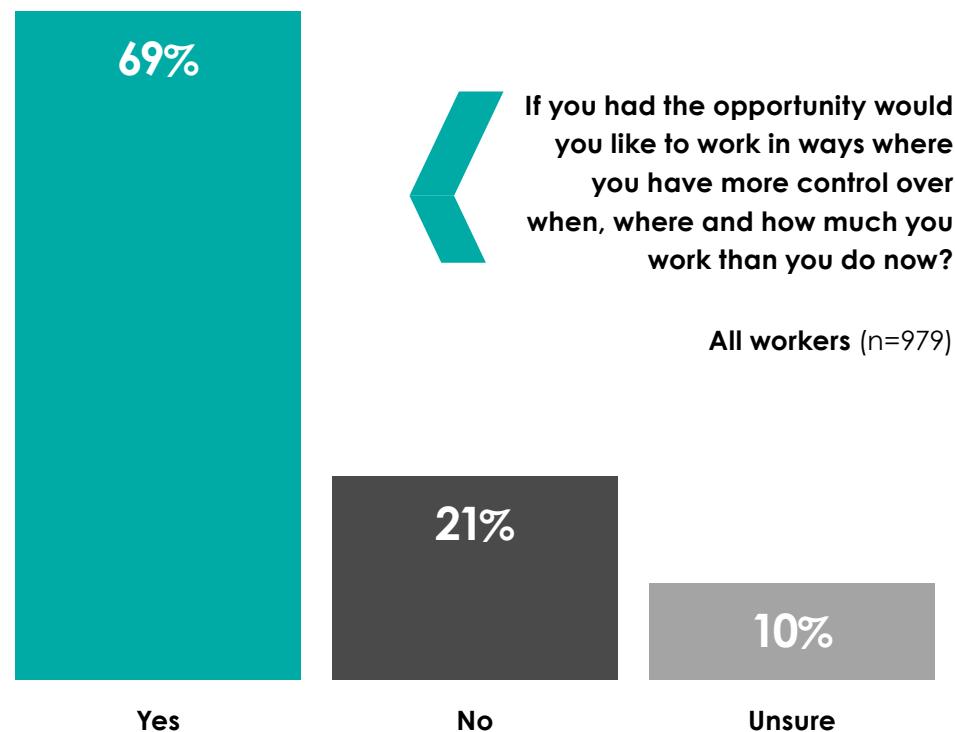
# What type of flex do people want?

This year, the type of flexibility that workers want more of is centred around time. A third (33%) are interested in shorter working weeks on the same pay, which may reflect the increased conversation on this by the Scottish Government and in the media. More than a quarter (27%) would like compressed hours where they work their usual hours in fewer, longer days, and the same portion would like flexitime where they can make small amends to their start and finish times.

Last year, the overriding interest was in home working, with 45% of workers telling us they wanted to work from home more. This year, hybrid and home working are still popular, a total of 32% say they want more of this. But the figure has fallen from last year, perhaps because so many firms have introduced more hybrid options and workers are benefiting already.

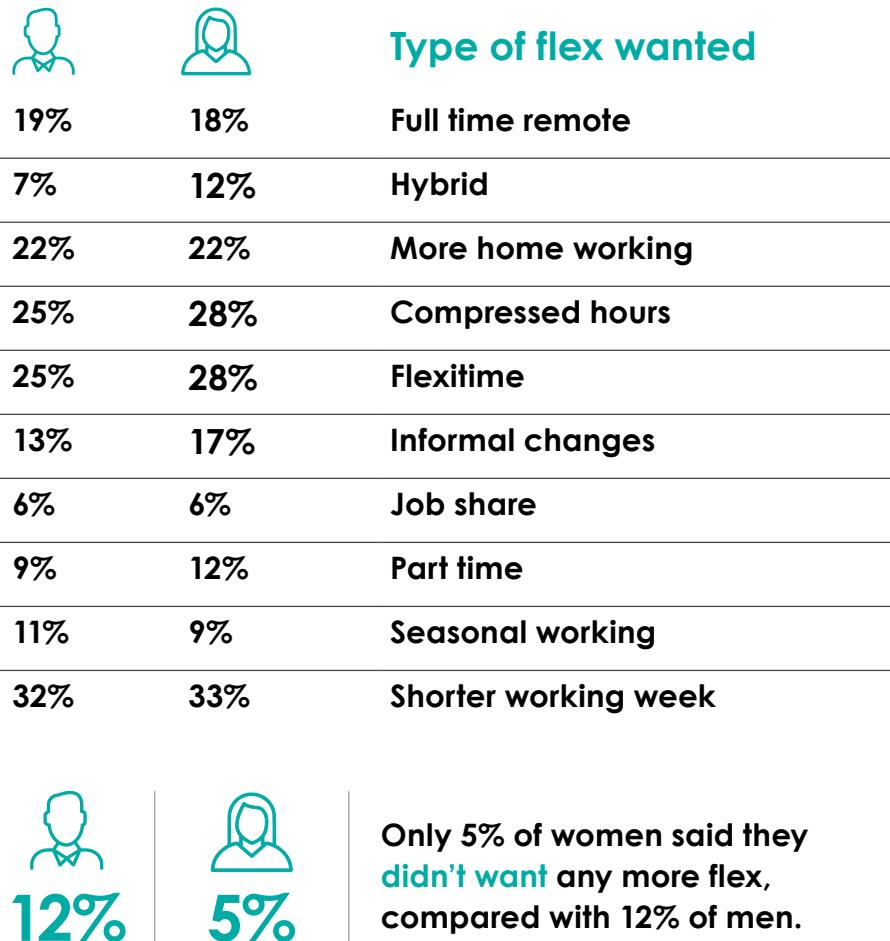
Only 11% want to reduce their hours, such as working part-time and only 6% would like a job share. Demand among parents in low-income households was very similar across all categories too. This all shows that – with the exception of shorter working weeks on the same pay – most people want relatively small amounts of flexible working.

Ultimately, there is a variety of flexible working options that are of interest to people. There is no one size fits all.



# Flex for men and women

Women tended to want more flexibility than men across the majority of types of flex.



# Scottish 4-day week pilot

The Scottish Government has a commitment to trial a 4-day working week in both the public and private sectors later this year and into 2023. Several Scottish businesses are already involved in the UK pilot, co-ordinated by the 4 Day Week Global campaign group. They will benefit from mentoring as well as working with researchers at Cambridge University, Oxford University and Boston College who will help measure the impact on productivity and the wellbeing of workers, as well as the impact on the environment and gender equality.

The 4-day working week could be a great solution for some businesses and already in Scotland there are a significant number already using or trialling this approach. We expect an increased interest in the 4-day week going forward in Scotland. However, we can see that Scottish workers are also interested in lots of other forms of flexible working. So it's important we keep an open mind on what greater flex could look like.

**“ We introduced a 4-day week in 2016 as we believe work life balance is so important for staff morale and productivity. Our productivity has been up 26% since then. ”**



SME, private sector

# Why do people want more flex?

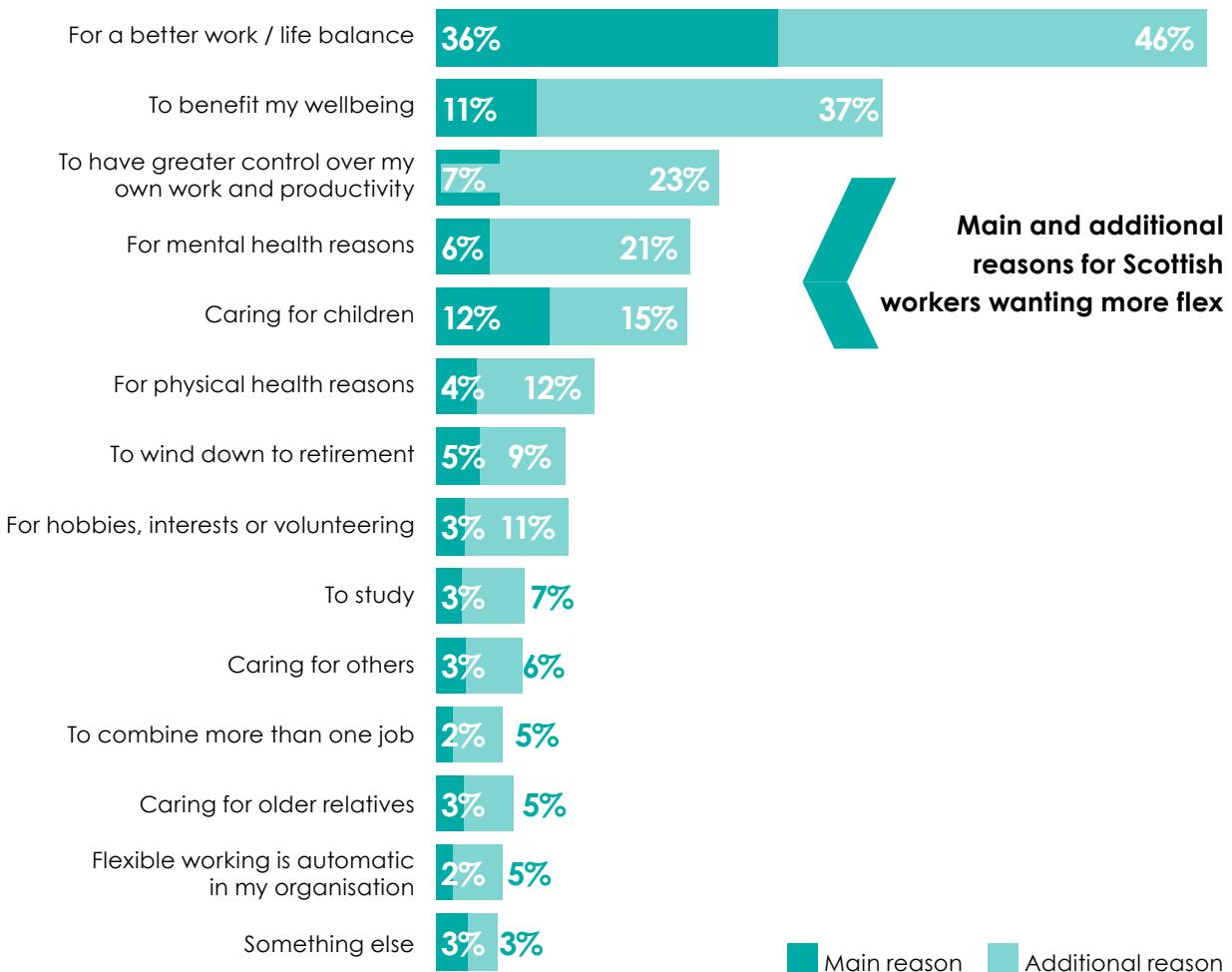
The reasons people want more flexible working continues to shift away from just being for caring responsibilities towards more universal wellbeing.

More than eight in ten (82%) people said they wanted more flex for a better work life balance, compared with 65% we recorded pre-pandemic.

Nearly half (48%) of Scottish workers said greater flex would benefit their wellbeing. While nearly a third (30%) said it would give them greater control over their work and productivity.

A total of 27% said more flex would help them care for children and 8% said it would help them care for older relatives. Caring responsibilities are still a big factor in why people want flex. Our question asked specifically why people wanted 'more' flex, so it's likely many carers already have flex in place to help them balance their responsibilities outside work.

But the leap in how many people want flex for a better work life balance is significant.



# Disabled workers and parents

Among disabled workers and people with a long-term health condition, work life balance (60%) and wellbeing (48%) were still the biggest reasons for more flex, though physical health (40%) is another significant reason.

Eight in ten parents who are currently thinking of changing jobs would like to explore working more flexibly in the next six months. When asked to select their main reason for this, the top three most popular reasons were; for a better work life balance (29%), to care for children (26%), and to care for others, such as an older relative (11%).

Among lower income workers (earning less than £20,000), by far the most common reason for wanting to work more flexibly was caring for children, at 47%.

**“ My body might be a bit broken but my brain functions just fine. Working from home most of the time is ideal. I don't lose time commuting to the office, which can also be tiring, and I can work around appointments, or take a break, if I need to and finish tasks later.”**



female stroke survivor working in the voluntary sector

**“ We have three young children and I feel bad for my wife who has to take care of most of the duties for them. I have an interview today for a new job which would mean I'd be able to take on a fairer share. This would reduce stress on my wife and benefit our relationship..”**



male, low-income worker



# What do employers think about flex now?

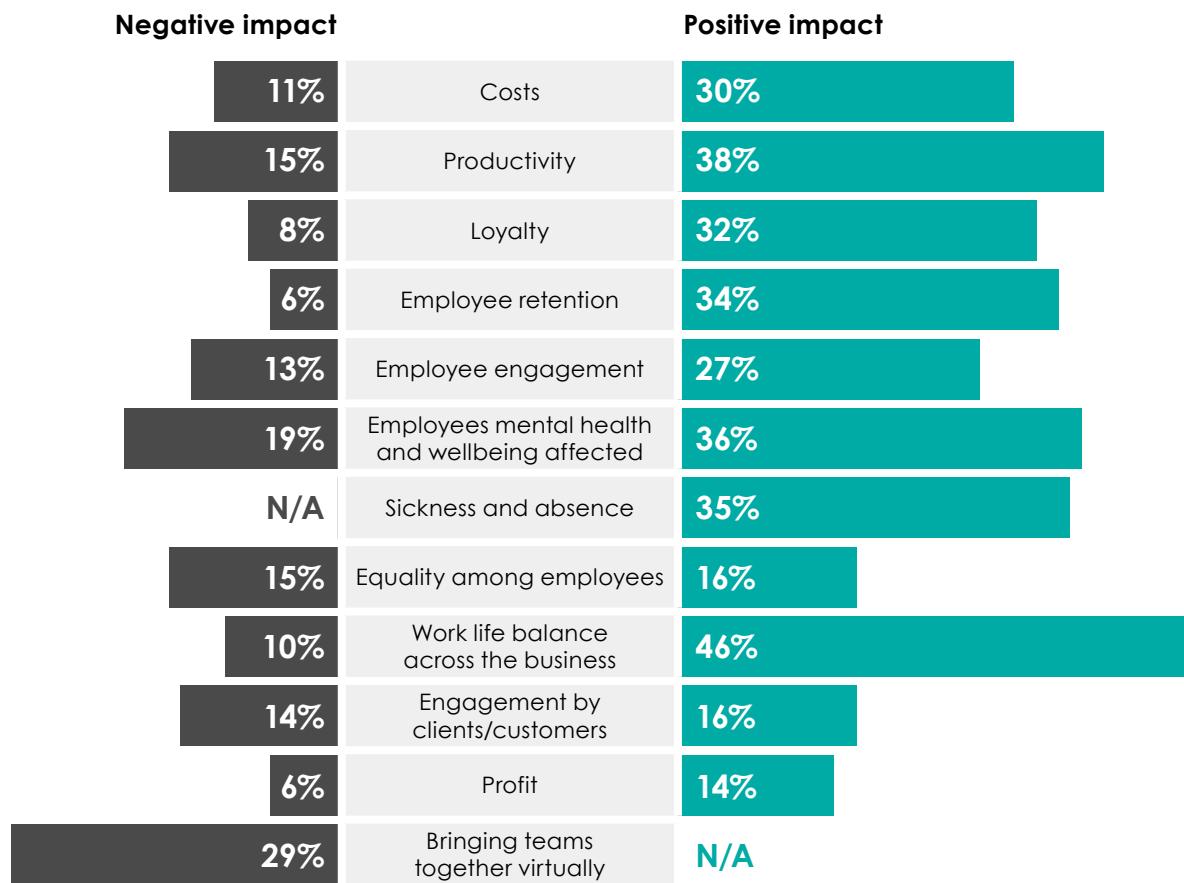
Employers generally feel flexible working is good for business, though they did note some challenges.

Almost two thirds (63%) of Scottish employers say flex has had a positive impact on the business. More than two thirds (69%) think flex can help boost Scotland's economy, while three quarters (75%) think it can help create a healthier society.

Almost half (45%) say flex has improved work life balance across the business, mirroring similar feedback from workers. While 37% say it has improved employee productivity.

Roughly a third of employers say flex has been good for supporting employee wellbeing, reducing sickness and absence, retaining workers and boosting employee loyalty.

In which, if any, of the following ways does flexible working have an impact on your business





## Challenges for employers

Nearly one in five (19%) acknowledge there have been positive and negative impacts. Just 7% of employers felt flex had been negative overall.

Negative impacts were recorded at much lower levels. The main challenge, noted by 29% of employers, was the difficulty in bringing teams together virtually. Around one in five (21%) employers say there has been some confusion about when people are working, and 19% of employers say flexible working has had a negative impact on employee mental health and wellbeing.

Some employers noted a lack of understanding about how to implement greater flex and others noted how they are influenced by government legislation.

**“ Implementing new ways of working in manufacturing presents us with some practical challenges but we are willing to look at what could be possible as we want to be an employer of choice, keeping and attracting the best people to our business while having happy and healthy employees.”**



SME, manufacturing sector

**“ [The benefits are] access to a lot more staff, more loyal employees, increased engagement, more buy in to the company vision and values. We can attract the superstars that we would otherwise miss. We are also able to give a job to people who otherwise would never get a chance (childcare, mental health or disabilities).”**



online travel tech firm

# What types of flex have increased?

**Employers have offered more of all types of flexible working since the start of the pandemic.**

Unsurprisingly, hybrid and home working make up the largest share, with more than two thirds (68%) of Scottish employers saying they've offered more of this. Nearly a quarter (23%) have offered more full-time home working.

But a quarter (25%) have offered more flexitime, where workers can amend their start and finish times slightly. One in five (21%) have offered more informal and ad-hoc flex, such as occasionally leaving work early and making up the time later. And 15 per cent have offered more shift swaps.

When we asked employers of **frontline workers** specifically, a third (33%) said they'd offered staff more home working, nearly a quarter (23%) said they'd offered more full-time home working, and the

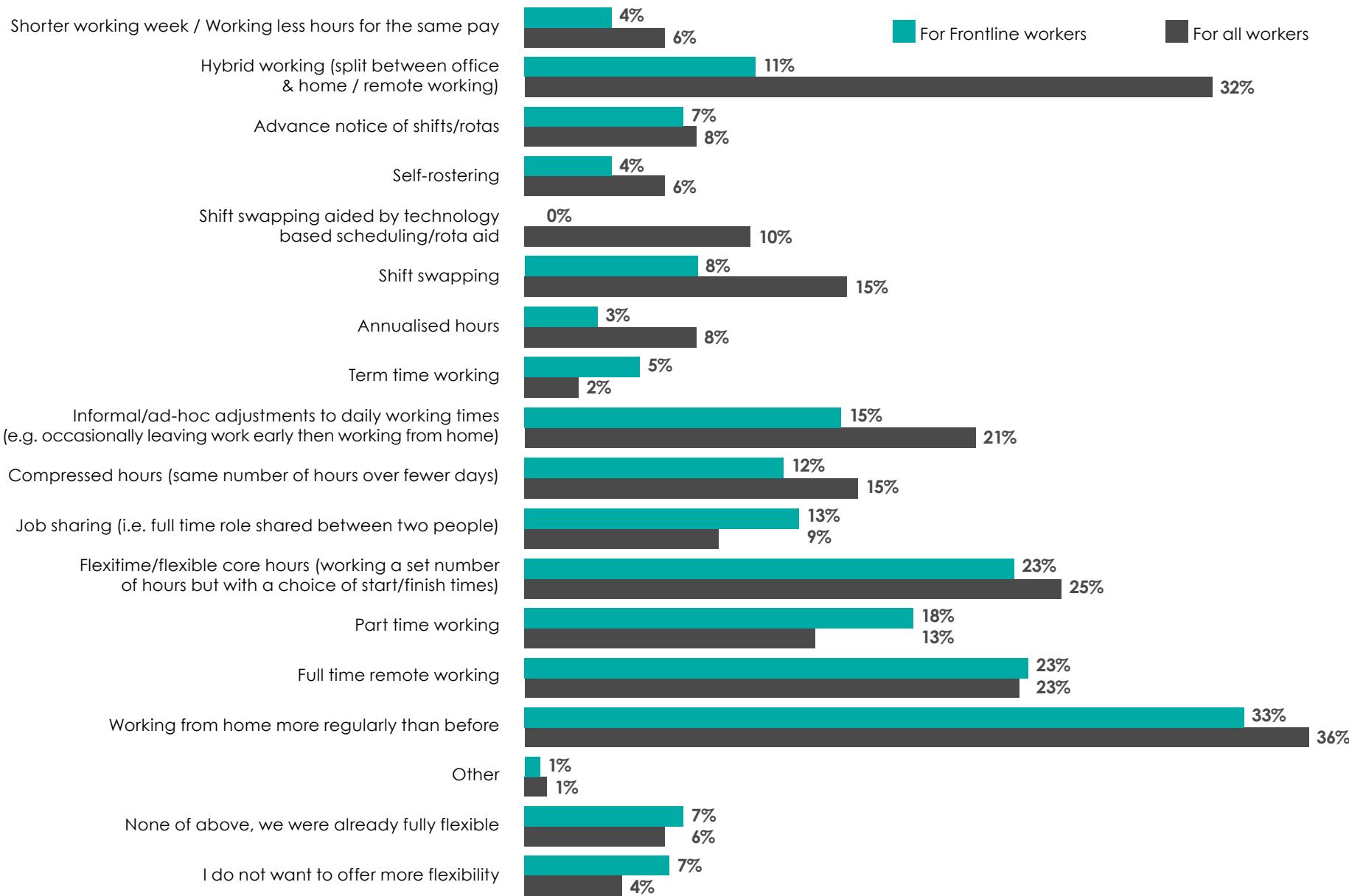
same portion said they'd offered more flexitime. Nearly one in five (18%) offered more part-time hours.

Only 8% offered frontline workers the chance to swap shifts more often. This is nearly half the figure for all employers. These figures suggest frontline employers followed Government guidance about working from home but could be missing out on the benefits of a happier, more engaged workforce because they're not exploring small but valuable forms of flex such as being able to swap shifts easily.

Going forward we need to ensure that all roles are considered for greater flex, or new ways of working, not just jobs that can be done from home and were forced to evolve because of the pandemic.



# Types of flex employers expect to offer more of

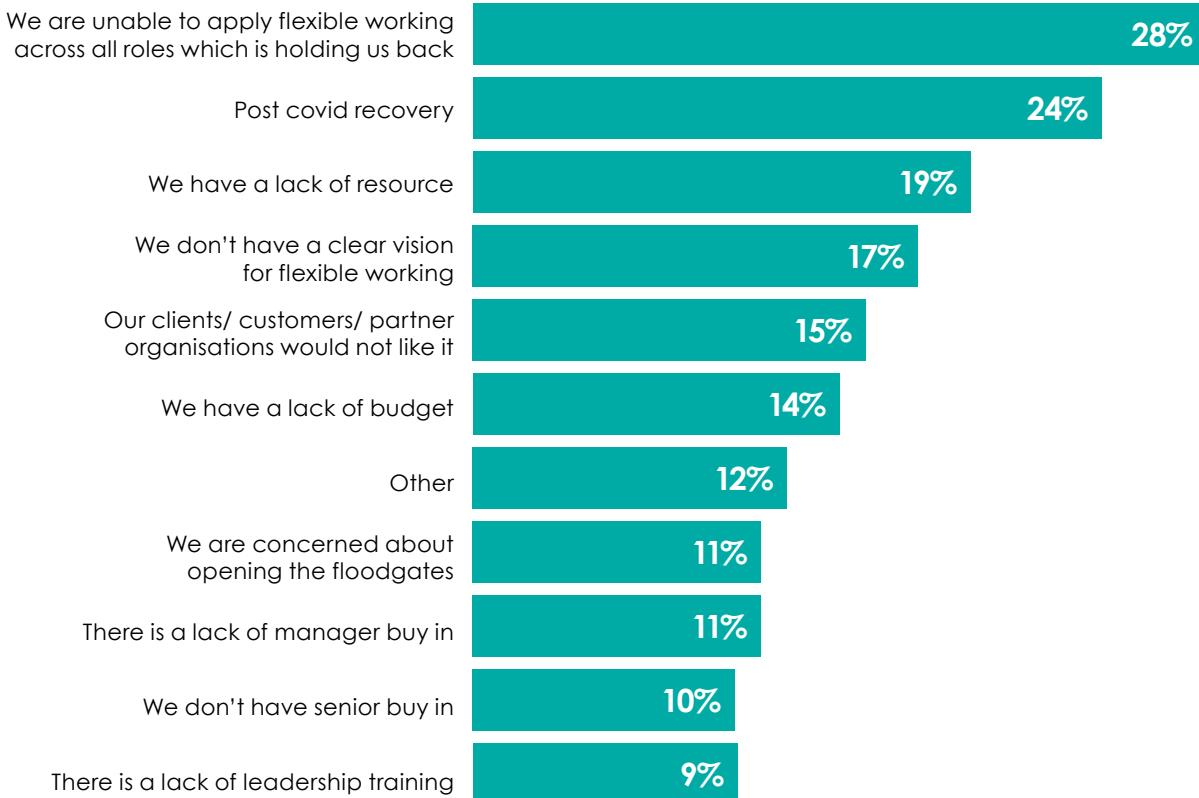


# What barriers to flex still exist for employers?

**Concerns about fairness are the biggest barrier to increasing flex, alongside the post-Covid recovery operational needs, say employers.**

Nearly one in three (28%) say the fact they can't give flexibility to all workers is holding them back from introducing greater flex anywhere. It's interesting that employers clearly want to be 'fair'. We noted on page 25 that many employers are likely to introduce changes to ways of working for frontline staff, such as more time off and recruiting larger teams, that would help make things more 'fair'. But clearly, many employers still can't square fairness with the realities of flexible working that looks different in every role.

## Perceived barriers to increasing flex, all employers





## Barriers for employers

**1 in 4**

**said the operational needs  
and focus of dealing with  
the post-Covid recovery  
prevented them offering more flex,  
while a similar portion said a  
lack of resource or budget  
was the problem**

A significant number (17%) said the lack of a clear overarching vision for flexible working in their organisation was stopping greater flex, showing the importance of including flex in business strategy and objectives.

**1 in 10**

**employers say there's not enough  
buy-in from senior leaders and  
managers, and more leadership  
training is needed first.**

Some employers are still concerned about what customers and partners might think, and some are worried they will be deluged with requests if they start offering more flex. We know from this research, and much more beforehand, that most people generally want relatively small changes, such as a bit more home working, or to make slight amends to their start and finish time, showing that offering greater flex won't require a major revolution for employers.

# What will the next six months look like?

**As the last remaining Covid restrictions come to an end, the next six months will mark a transition for many employers away from Government mandated working patterns to what works best for each business.**

In terms of flexible working opportunities, employers are more optimistic than workers.

A third (34%) of employers expect to offer more flexibility on location, and the same portion expects more flex on hours over the next six months.

By comparison, just 12% of workers think their workplace will be more flex on location, and only 11% think there will be more flexibility in terms of when and how much people work.

Some of this difference may be down to employers not communicating their plans

effectively and may offer an opportunity for employers where workers are thinking about leaving the organisation.

The same pattern exists – but with a smaller gap – when you look at who thinks opportunities for flex will shrink.

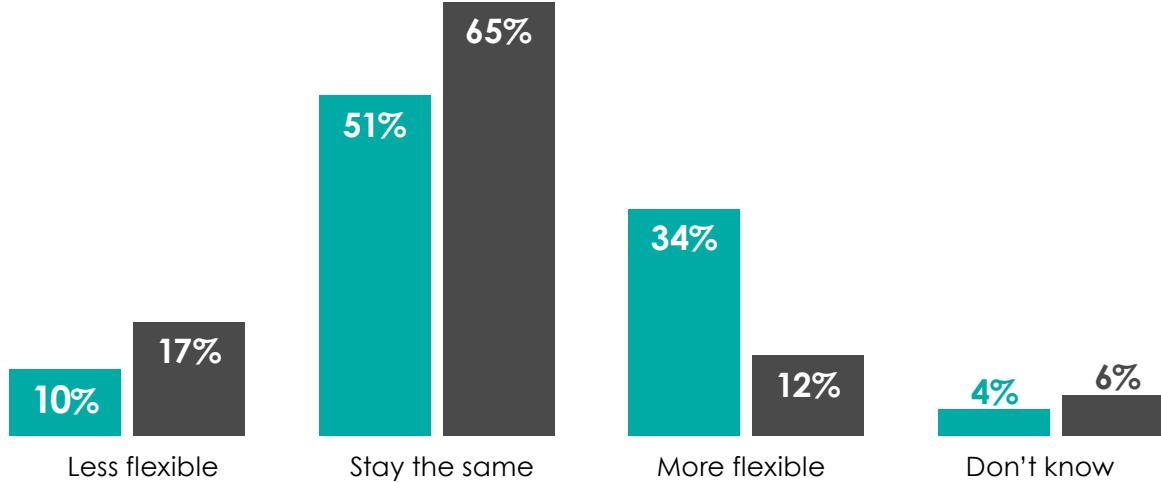
One in ten (10%) of employers think there will be less flex on where staff work, compared with 17% of workers. While 9% of employers think there will be less flex on time, compared with 15% of workers.

Two thirds of employers and seven in ten workers think the level of flexibility available will stay the same.

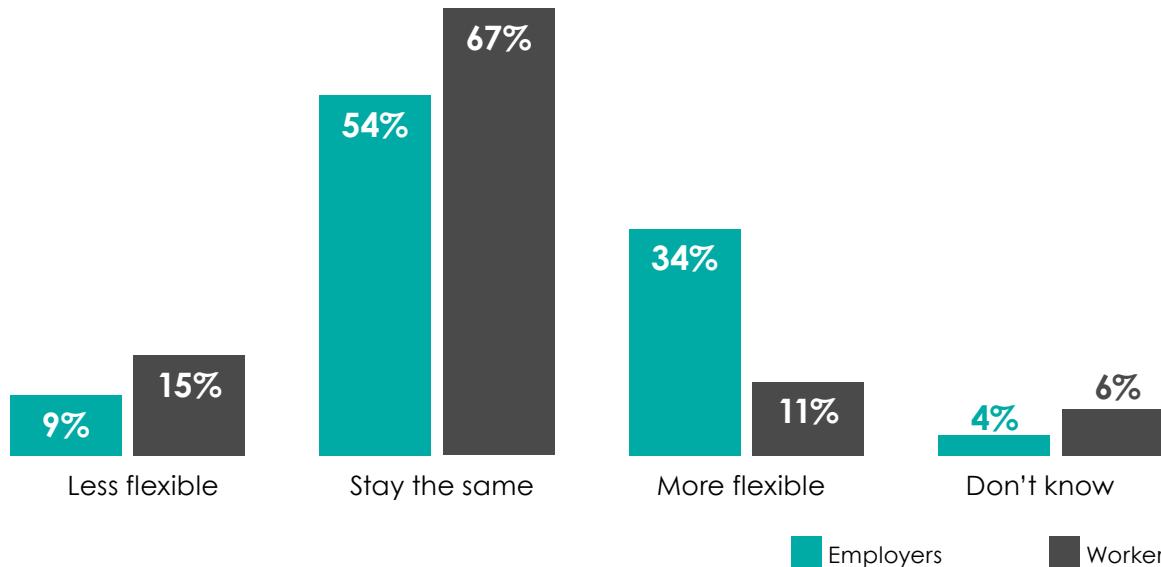


# Employer and worker expectations

## Flex on location – employer and worker expectations for the next six months



## Flex on hours and time – employer and worker expectations





# Part two: Transitioning from 'Covid flex' into true flex

#FlexForLife

# The difference between 'Covid flex' and true flex

Our latest research shows that for some employers, greater flex has been a 'bolt on' project, separate from other strategic business aims, and this approach is causing problems.

Companies had no time for plan for different ways of working during the pandemic. They simply had to react – instantly – to Government guidance. They had to impose flex on workers, rather than co-create greater flexibility.

But for the best results, flexible working needs to be created **with** workers, by listening to their opinions and feedback. And flex needs to filter through all business areas, from recruitment and retention, and training for management and leadership teams to employee wellbeing and company communications and culture.

As we finally emerge from Covid restrictions, we're urging companies to think about how well they're working with workers to create more flex, and consider whether they've really embedded flexible working throughout all business practices.

Without this second stage, to transition from a crisis-driven change to something sustainable, some employers will likely give up on the most challenging parts of flexible working. But as we've seen, workers' expectations are high. Employers that don't make the transition, risk lagging behind as top talent moves elsewhere.

And we also risk creating a two-tier workforce of flexers and non-flexers, which will ultimately widen existing inequalities around gender, unemployment and in-work poverty, disability, and for people with caring responsibilities.

In this section, we explore six key areas where our research shows some employers are facing challenges right now. We'll show you exactly where some employers are going wrong, why it matters, and steps you can take to overcome these challenges and unlock the full benefits of flex for your organisation and your people.

# Why employee wellbeing matters to employers

Employee wellbeing has shot up the corporate agenda like nothing else in the last two years. The pandemic has undoubtedly made many employers much more aware of how their people are feeling, and more understanding and empathetic of people's lives outside work.

Multiple lockdowns have shown that giving teams a little more flexibility and autonomy over where, when and how work gets done, usually leads to less stressed teams and little, or no, impact on delivery. The fact that nearly half (47%)

**“Everyone has different responsibilities and life can throw all sorts of obstacles at you. Work should be able to help you by offering work from home/flexible start finish times to help you through any difficulties you may be experiencing. I think workers would be thankful and overall perform better.”**



low-income worker

of workers think their management team cares more about their life outside work compared with pre-pandemic show's there's an opportunity for employers to build on this growing trust.

There are variations on this by industry. For example, in finance and insurance almost two thirds (64%) of workers think their management team cares more about their life outside work, while just a third (33%) working in social care do.

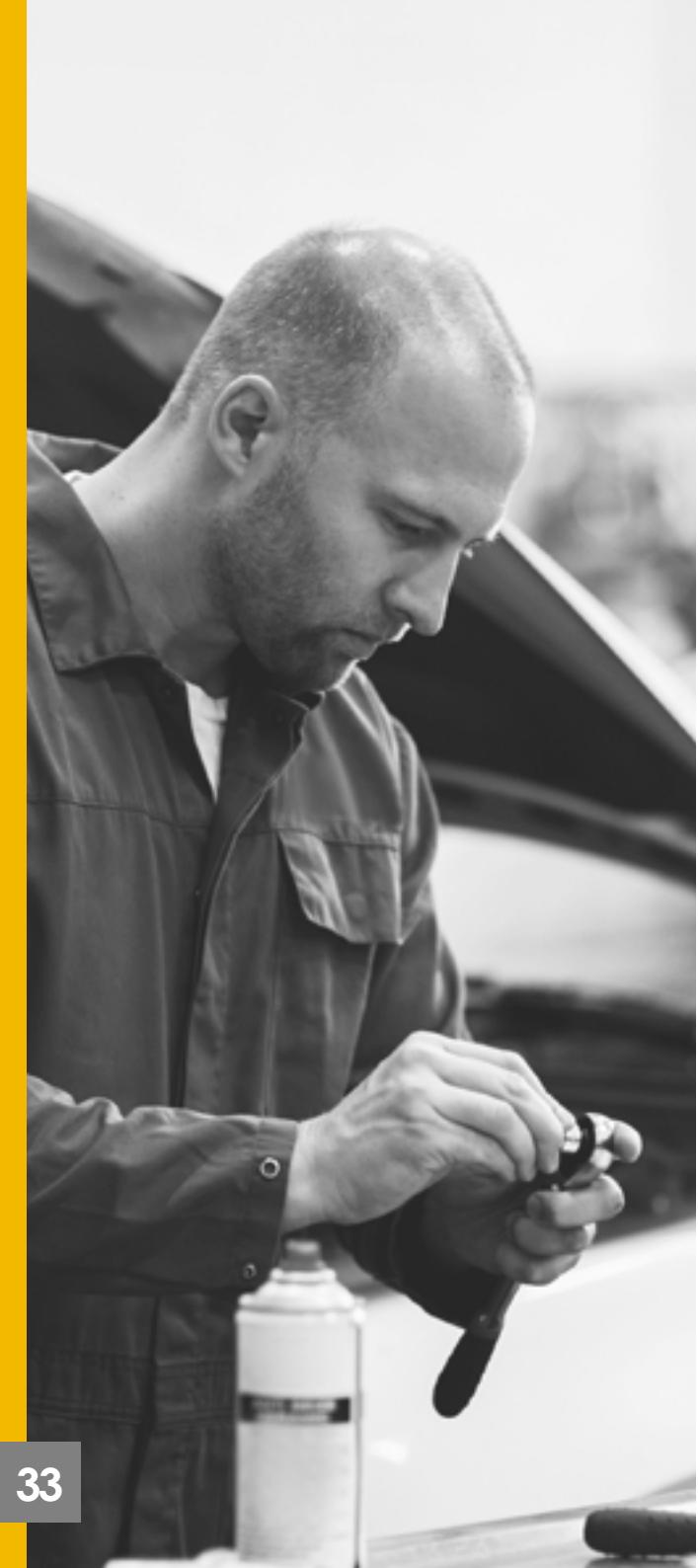
70%

of all workers think flex is good for health and wellbeing

**“As an employer we have a duty to look after our people. They are our greatest asset and their effort is what makes the business a success or failure. If someone's worried about how they're going to collect their children on time, or they're struggling with menopause symptoms, or they've lost a loved one, they're going to find it much harder to concentrate and do their best work. It makes absolute sense for us to help them if we possibly can. It's just the right thing to do.”**



senior manager, global insurance firm



## How flex supports wellbeing

With wellbeing in the spotlight, we'd like to highlight our research that shows how flexible working and wellbeing go hand-in-hand, so it's absolutely clear why flexibility should play a key part in any corporate wellbeing strategy, and arguably your overall business strategy.

Let's first take a look at what workers said. Nearly half (48%) said more flex would benefit their wellbeing, while another 22% said it would help their mental or physical health.

We also found that people who worked flexibly were much more likely to feel their job had a positive impact on family life, compared with people who didn't work flex.

# 45%

of workers with flexible working think work positively impacts family life. Compared with only 23% of people who don't work flexibly.

**“If you have a good product and look after your customers, profit will usually take care of itself. But if you don't look after your people, they're going to leave and that's not good for business. What's more, if someone's having a hard time, it's the right thing to do to help them if you can. You will get more back from them in loyalty and goodwill too.”**



managing director, technology firm

# Reducing burnout and sickness

As well as improving work life balance, our research shows flexible working can specifically help reduce burnout and exhaustion too. Flexible working isn't the only solution to reducing burnout and overwork, but it can make an important contribution, that boosts employee wellbeing and makes good business sense by reducing time off unwell.

**62%** Almost two thirds of workers with no flex said they'd experienced burnout or exhaustion in the last six months, compared with 55% of workers who do have access to flexibility.

**68%** Burnout and exhaustion were more common among frontline workers. Nearly seven in ten of those with no flex said they'd experienced burnout or exhaustion, compared with 62% of frontline colleagues with some flexibility

**67%** More than two thirds of all workers who felt burned out or exhausted by work think more flexible working would help them feel less exhausted.

**36%** Among all employers, more than a third said flex helped workers' mental health and wellbeing, and one in three (35%) said it reduced sickness and absence.

**47%** Nearly half of employers said flex improved work-life balance across the business, while 38% think it increased employee productivity and 35% say it increased staff retention.

**“** I think compromise and understanding to the needs of individuals and their family life are paramount and a priority. Happy workers means less sickness and absence. **”**



male frontline worker

**“** [We've] benefited from hugely reduced staff sickness and turnover. We are a membership organisation and survey our members each year. There is an increased satisfaction rate in our work across the board. **”**



small voluntary sector

# Are you communicating effectively?

Good communication is an area many employers can still improve on when it comes to getting the best from flexible working teams.

In this year's research, we found a greater disconnect between what employers and workers think about the amount of flex available than this time last year. And a large portion of our employee sample made specific comments about communication issues when we asked what practical steps could be taken to increase flexibility and enhance workplace culture.

**“The enforced working from home has allowed people to adapt and to see that it can work and I think some things will stay remote, with recordings of meetings you can catch up on later etc. There is going to be a tricky transition bit where we need to figure out how to run hybrid meetings.”**



middle-income worker

Employers' views were consistently more positive than workers' about the amount of flex on offer right now, and what was likely to be on offer in the next six months. (See pages 25 and 28 to 29 for more details)

Nearly one in three (30%) workers say they don't have, or are not sure they have, a clear understanding of what their organisation offers and their manager expects from them in terms of flexible working. More than one in 20 (7%), a relatively small but significant proportion, weren't sure they if they personally could work flexibly.

Half (50%) of employers admit they don't check to see if messaging about flexible working has been understood at all levels.

**“We have communicated our approach across the organisation through a series of webinars. And from the start of the pandemic, we have listened to feedback through our three working groups – for workers, managers and leaders, as well as engagement with our recognised trade unions, and through regular all-staff surveys. These all helped us create and hone our approach, the guides and training. This isn't a 'one and done' exercise, it's a journey, so we'll keep listening and responding by updating and sharing information as we go.”**



senior manager, public sector employer

# Practical, relatable communication

**“We are due to start a flexible working trial in March. General principles have been circulated and staff focus groups are taking place, but there hasn't been any detailed communicated about what this can look like for my role and team.”**



middle-income worker

Our research also showed four in ten employers (42%) think one-to-one meetings between line managers and workers are used to update people about flexible working options. But only 21% of workers agreed.

In the employee comments we gathered, many said that even when new policies and guidance had been produced, there was still much variability and, often, a lack of confidence about what new arrangements meant practically at the individual level. Many workers still felt that any flexibility was still largely dependent on the disposition of the line manager.

**“Communication is the most important thing. Open discussions to ensure people are clear on why they can or can't work more flexibly.”**



higher-income worker

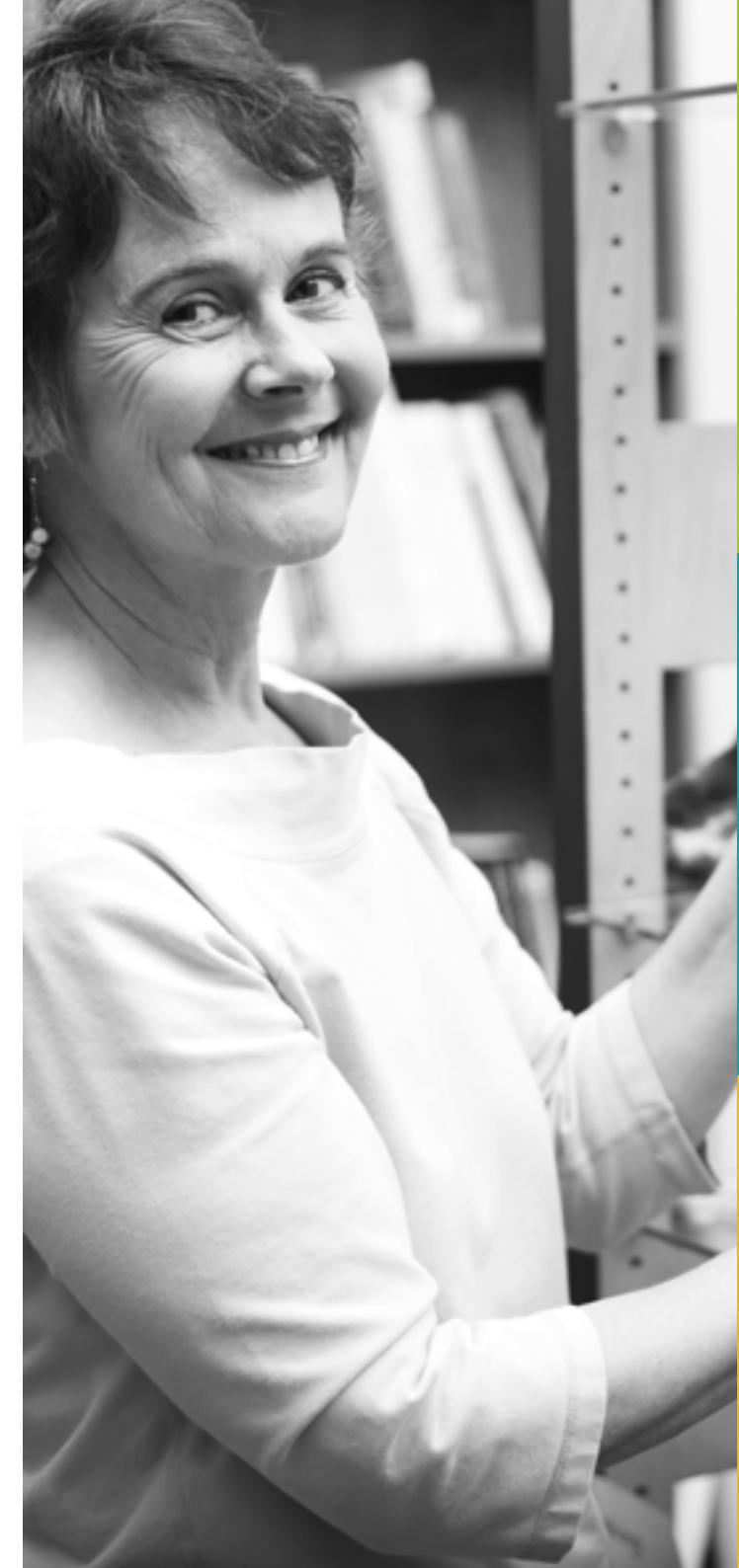
This suggests some employers need to communicate in a more practical and relatable way with their staff about what flex is available right now, and what the company's plans are for the future. Some workers may be reticent to embrace changes if they've been used to working in a more rigid way for a long time, or if they worry their line manager won't like it, so it's crucial employers then check that their messages are understood at all levels.

This could make a big difference to employee wellbeing and productivity if teams are clearer about what's available, what's possible and what's likely to change in the future.

**“Flexible working needs to be a more open conversation because I think the majority of people at the company I work at, would not be comfortable with bringing up the conversation with managers.”**



female retail worker



# Is flex integrated with leadership and management priorities?

We know lots of employers are trying to do the right thing by offering greater flexibility to people. But if these changes aren't being measured, you'll be none-the-wiser about whether it's all worth it.

Likewise, if your teams are working differently but you haven't given your managers any extra training or support, then at best you're surviving flex, rather than flying with it. At worst, you could be stacking up new problems for the future.

**“It doesn't matter what fantastic principles you come up with, success stands or falls on the real-time conversation between a line manager and employee. That's why we need our managers to feel confident and equipped to have different conversations with their teams about performance and focusing on the customer whilst working flexibly. And they need to feel supported and equipped to do this.”**



senior manager, multinational energy services company

Despite huge changes to working patterns during the pandemic, fewer than three in ten (29%) employers say they are measuring the impact of flexible working on their organisation. And a similar number (30%) say they have a senior sponsor for flex while only half (50%) say flex is a strategic priority for their organisation.

**3 in 10**  
employers are measuring  
the impact of flex

**4 in 10**

employers are not offering any support or training to line managers

**“The senior management in my workplace communicate clearly and make every effort to aid workers especially post pandemic however lower down the ladder within middle management it is not reflective of senior management views.”**



male working in education

When it comes to supporting line managers – who are often the lynchpins for successful flexible working – four in ten (41%) employers don't offer any specific support or training to help them discuss flexible arrangements and manage more flexible teams.



**“In my experience, many managers are technically qualified for the job but lack the people skills to create a good work culture where workers can feel heard and can feel able to discuss flexible working.”**



female low-income worker

Good training includes practical tips to ensure colleagues always know when and how to contact each other, as well as inclusion measures, to ensure line managers don't prioritise people sat next to them in the office. This will be especially important for women and disabled workers because they are more likely to continue working from home more often.

Of the 58% of employers that are offering extra support to line managers, nearly half (47%) said this was via sharing company policy, 41% said via specific training on flexible working and 38% said one-to-ones and guidance documents were used.

**“It needs to start from the top and be shown that it can be done even by managers, and helping other staff know what they can do.”**



public sector worker

**“We realised early on that working more flexibly could be a huge opportunity for wellbeing, inclusion and business productivity, and that supporting our leaders and people managers was fundamental to making it a success within their teams. Reaching agreement about how flexibility will work in teams is a key part of implementing this approach effectively and ensuring that business needs are met.”**



senior manager, public sector

# Are you getting the best from flex for recruitment and retention?

As we saw earlier in this report, the majority of active Scottish job seekers value flexibility more than salary in any new job.

Yet less than half (44%) of employers mention flexible working in job adverts all the time, or most of the time. While nearly a third (31%) never do this. And this is the employers' perspective. Flexible consultancy Timewise analysed more than 340,000 Scottish job adverts last year and found just 27% mentioned flexible working. Much lower still than employers themselves told us in our own research.

A third of employers told us that offering flexible working had improved employee loyalty and retention.

And we know around one in three (35%) of Scottish workers are considering changing jobs right now, so if you're an

employer with staff and skill shortages, or you need to find the best possible talent for your teams, it makes sense to mention that roles could be done flexibly and state explicitly what type of flexibility could be on offer.

**34%**  
of employers say flex has improved staff retention

**32%**  
say it has improved employee loyalty

**“ Retaining and attracting a diverse range of workers in aviation can be challenging. It's really important that even in sectors like ours where flexible working may not be as common, that we continue to find more creative ways of working that keep our people healthy and motivated, and better able to manage their lives outside of work. This way we'll also attract workers from a wider talent pool. ”**



female senior manager, aviation

# Making flex fair and inclusive

Good quality, flexible job roles at all levels are a force for good. They can help people enter the workforce and progress in their careers. They help people with caring responsibilities, or those with a disability or long-term health condition. And we know the vast majority of people not in work really need flexibility, otherwise they simply can't work.

But we've also seen that many employers find it difficult to make flex fair, when the type and amount of flex possible in every role varies. From our conversations with workers themselves, we know they generally don't mind if colleagues can work differently to them, so long as the process by which the working pattern was agreed is fair and transparent.

**“Allowing some weekend days off [would help] instead of making everyone take their days off midweek when their children are at school. Management staff are allowed weekend days off but sales staff aren’t.”**



female working in retail

For example, a plumber doesn't mind not being able to work from home like admin colleagues if the plumber can amend their start and finish time. Vice versa, the admin colleagues whose hours may be fixed to customer opening times, don't mind the fact the plumber has more control over hours because they can work from home more often. The solutions often come from asking teams themselves about the type of flex they think could work and matching this against business needs. Flex that is co-created by the employer with workers is usually the most successful.





## Reducing inequalities

An important element of this is ensuring *all* workers feel they are being listened to, and that what can be done for their roles is being done. Otherwise, some workers, such as frontline workers, may switch off from discussions around new ways of working because they think it's simply not for them. This could lead to resentment and impact workplace morale, as well as increase the challenges around recruitment and retention.

There are other risks too. Without some careful planning, greater flexibility risks increasing inequality, and managers need to be proactive to ensure this doesn't happen.

Managers need to make sure flexible workers are properly included in team discussions, and when good projects and promotions are being considered. There's a risk those who work more from home, or different hours, could be overlooked.

We found women generally wanted more flexibility than men across almost every flex category, including 34% of women who want hybrid or more home working, compared with 29% of men, suggesting more women are likely to be away from the office than men.

We also need to make sure we don't create a two-tier workforce where lower paid roles rarely include flex that could help people to progress.

**“Educating and training our leaders and managers in how they can be more creative when putting together rotas is a big piece of work for us. For example, we might have someone we’re supporting who loves to go out in the evening, and an employee who prefers to work evenings, so we can match them up.”**



senior manager, health and social care charity

# Why company culture can help or harm flex

Company culture can be difficult to define. But it matters. It permeates all aspects of an organisation, and is brought into focus when considering new approaches to flexibility and different ways of working.

Flexible working boils down to trust, respect and valuing people. But in relation to culture, it's also about things like listening, being transparent in how you communicate and being open to new ideas.

Organisations that already have a culture where staff opinions are proactively sought out, and taken on board, where anything can be discussed without fear of being marked as 'difficult' in the future, and where managers and companies genuinely care about their workers are those that take to flexible working much more easily. And feel the benefits more readily too.

We know that people with flex feel significantly more valued and trusted than those without flex. These figures varied across different industries. Workers working in social care were much less likely to feel valued by their employer (45% v 62% average), as well as those in education (51%).

**68%**

of flexible workers feel valued by their employer

**46%**

of non-flexible workers

**83%**

of flex workers feel they are trusted by their line manager

**71%**

of non-flexible workers

**“The majority of our colleagues have told us they like having the flexibility to balance working from home and office, and we can see it's having a positive impact on engagement and attracting people to work for us. We now want to embed this culture change for the long term and look for ways we can retain this flexibility, whilst meeting the ongoing needs of our customers. It's no longer about responding to Covid, it is about creating a great place to work for our workers whilst meeting customer needs.”**



senior manager, multinational energy services provider

# Trust and empathy

In terms of trust, 87% of people working in professional, scientific and technical roles felt trusted by their line manager, compared with an average 78%. Health workers also reported high levels of trust from line managers (82%). But only 68% of workers in education, and 69% of social care workers felt trusted.

The pandemic has prompted a more caring and empathetic way of working. We've already looked at how wellbeing has become a strategic priority for many. People who work flexibly are much more likely to feel that their employer cares more about their work life balance and life outside work than before the pandemic.

**56%**

with flex think management cares more about their life outside work and work life balance than before the pandemic

▼  
**34%**

of non-flexible workers

**“The view that if you are not in the office, you are not a team player is awful but widely accepted and encouraged where I work.”**



female, low-income property worker

Across industries, more people working in finance and insurance noted an increase in how much managers cared about their life outside work (62% compared with 47% average), followed by people in professional, scientific and technical roles (55%).

Six in ten workers say they are comfortable talking about work life balance issues with their manager. But nearly four in ten (39%) are not comfortable, or not sure they're comfortable, talking about working more flexibly, which suggests many employers need to look at their working culture. Workers often come up with creative, practical solutions when it comes to flexible working and if they don't feel able to talk about these, employers will miss out.

Only half of workers felt their organisation sought their views on how to implement flexible working. Interestingly, 76% of employers thought they did this.

When we looked at how workers with and without flex answered this question, there was a large difference. Nearly two thirds (64%) of those with flex agreed their employer took employee views on board, compared with just 28% of those with no flex.

Four in ten people are worried that working flexibly might negatively affect their chances of promotion. This is higher among men – 47% were worried, compared with 41% of women.

Understanding how workplace culture impacts flexible working – as well as morale, motivation, productivity and staff retention – is an important part of making greater flex, and your broader organisation – a success.

**“We need to be role modelling flexible working at all levels of the business, letting each other know it's ok and supporting managers to manage their teams in a more flexible way. This is good for people, the business and inclusion within the business.”**



male partner, legal sector

# Top tips to help you now

We've shown you the enormous groundswell of interest in flexible working among workers, and how it continues to benefit employers. But we're keenly aware there are still challenges for many organisations, often off the back of introducing greater flex at lightning speed in response to Government restrictions.

**“Management should send surveys out to gather information about flexible working and the wants and needs of their staff. Then sit down and see if they can accommodate a more flexible working environment. I would happily work longer hours per day but only work a four-day week, or change my shift pattern to evenings, allowing me to carry out some of my own work and errands like going to the post office and bank, which is very difficult to do when you work 9am-5pm Monday to Friday.”**



male, working in construction

This is the year organisations will make or break finding a sustainable flexible future. And we want to help as many as possible through some of their challenges because the benefits across morale, work life balance as well as productivity and reducing costs are well worth it.

While the risks for businesses who let flex falter include losing top talent, and even clients, to competitors.

To help your organisation negotiate some of the current challenges around embedding flexible working for the long term, here are our top tips on what to do now.



## 1 Prioritise wellbeing

Your people are your most important asset. If you haven't already, think about how you can incorporate measures to improve employee wellbeing – and flexible working is a vital strand of that – in your overall business strategy. Happy, healthy workers will be more motivated and productive, take less time off sick and stay with you for longer, all of which is good for your bottom line.

## 2 Listen to your people

People often want only small amounts of flexibility and come up with team solutions themselves. Workers know what needs to be delivered, and they're generally realistic about the flex that's possible for their roles, teams and the wider organisation. Managers don't need all the answers, and co-created solutions are much more likely to last.

## 3 Get things straight with everyone

Involve all workers in discussions about how flex will work in practice and set up team protocols. These set out team and operational objectives and deliverables and cover how, when and where people are working and how to contact them. Be clear about who is available when and where. Use digital diaries and e-signatures as reminders. The team can agree how frequently everyone needs to meet face-to-face formally and informally and set core hours/slots for this. The protocol can be reviewed regularly as circumstances change, and helps everyone feel included and informed.

## 4 Encourage honest communication

Workers need to know you're being transparent. And they need to know they can ask questions and have conversations without worrying whether it may affect their chances of progression in future. This fosters trust, loyalty and commitment among workers to drive your business forward.

## 5 Check that new approaches are being fully understood at all levels

Even when a new policy or guidance is published, it is important to check that that is being understood and implemented as intended across organisations. Some staff, particularly if they have been used to certain ways of working for many years, may initially find it tricky to have confidence in what the expectations of management truly are.

## 6 Invest in training and support for line managers

They may have coped managing teams working remotely and at different times when this was mandated by Government. But if they don't buy in to the benefits of flex for employers as well as workers, and understand how to get the best from people working in different ways, this could stymie team motivation and leave managers and direct reports feeling isolated.

## 7 Recruit with flex

Flex is a powerful motivator for job seekers. Consider whether roles are dependent on location or time, or whether workers could have more choice and control, and make this clear in your job adverts and through all stages of recruitment.

## 8 Avoid 'flex haves' and 'have nots'

Another reason to work with line managers. Because we need to avoid a new divide between remote and office workers, so tasks are not divvied first among those in the office and latterly to remote workers, who are more likely to be women. Make sure your meetings are when everyone can attend (in person or virtual) and that out of sight does not mean out of mind.

## 9 Nurture your culture (and reputation)

Increasingly organisations with more ethical practices are winning more business. If you can show how you consistently meet customer needs while also being a modern, flexible and caring employer, you're more likely to attract top new talent and clients.

## 10 Model 'good' behaviour from the top down

Ensure you have senior buy-in and normalise flexible working by showcasing executive flexible work patterns in every day conversations (make sure your leaders shout 'goodbye' loudly if they're leaving 'early') and via your internal communication channels.

## 11 When frontline flex is hard, try these

We know increasing flex is more challenging in some roles, such as for frontline workers. But allowing people input to rotas, or at least understanding individual preferences, as well as providing rotas well in advance and making it easier to swap shifts, can all make a huge difference to how people feel, and how well they work as a result. Consistent, reliable shifts with preferences taken in to account helps people organise childcare or appointments, or just know if they can make a birthday party. In turn this reduces stress and burnout, and time taken off sick.

## 12 Consider imaginative solutions for frontline roles

When it is impossible to offer some roles the same level of flex as others, make sure that frontliners still feel included in discussions and processes and feel listened to. Their work-life harmony is equally important. Where possible, look at providing them with an extra day off over a given period, and perhaps some extra perks that are explicitly in recognition of this.

## 13 Measure the impact

Monitor whether flexible working is having an impact, and measure everything you can. Do you know what portion of your workforce is working flexibly? How are staff feeling? Is there any impact on team deliverables and KPIs? Does this vary across teams and roles?

## 14 Try before you buy

Flexible working is different in every organisation, and for every person. You don't have to commit to wholesale change upfront. Run a small trial first, measure the impact and see whether the change is helpful.

# Takeaway thoughts

One of the few good things to come from our Covid experience was the chance to try out greater flexibility at work. Many people and their employers have discovered the benefits for themselves in terms of boosting work life balance, staff morale and productivity, as well as helping organisations attract and retain their best staff.

The speed of change, and lack of choice or planning, has inevitably led to some challenges. We hope this report has helped highlight where you may have some gaps in your approach, and what you can do to fill them and move forward successfully.

The future of work is undoubtedly more flexible. The majority of Scottish workers already have flex, or they want it. And two thirds of employers say it's had a positive impact.

The next six months will mark an important transition for employers, from a long-held crisis footing on to something with more solid foundations. It's an opportunity for employers to re-set their organisation ready for future needs.

Our collective approach needs to be strategic and inclusive.

In particular, finding new ways of working for people in roles where flexible working is harder to implement, such as frontline and low-income workers, will be essential if we want to avoid a two-tier workforce of 'flexers' and 'non flexers', which ultimately hurts our wider economy and society at large.

We know this kind of change isn't easy. But it is well worth the effort. And we're always here to give you a little extra support too.



Thank you to all the people and businesses who contributed to this report, helping to create a more flexible Scotland.

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