To National Policy Forum 2018

Economy, Business and Trade: The Future of Work

Submission to consultation exercise by
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Introduction

Advances in mobile information and communication technologies (ICTs) have had a significant impact on employment practices over recent years. An increasing number of office workers can now work flexibly, that is, outside of the office and outside of traditional 9-5 office hours. All they need in order to do their job is a telephone, a computer and a reliable internet connection (which, incidentally, remains a barrier for many in rural areas of the UK).

While the benefits of flexible working for businesses, individuals and society are well known, the challenges associated with such working practices are much less established and certainly much less talked about. Our research, funded by the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust (award No. SG152296), has examined the realities of flexible working from the perspective of individual flexible workers. We expect that our findings presented below will help to inform the consultation on the key labour market challenges of the future.

For the benefit of all readers, we will continue by outlining the benefits of flexible working as established in the academic literature and as portrayed in more mainstream publications. We then discuss the challenges of flexible working identified in our research before concluding this submission with recommendations to the National Policy Forum.

Benefits of flexible working

Flexible working provides benefits for businesses, individuals and society. With fewer staff regularly in the office, businesses need fewer desks and can often close entire offices with significant savings on rent, maintenance and utility bills. This, in turn, contributes to maintaining or increasing their competitiveness. For many public-sector organizations, the closure or sale of office blocks has helped to mitigate the effects of austerity measures and preserve a higher level of frontline services than would otherwise have been possible. Flexible working has thus (albeit indirectly) benefitted many communities around the country over recent years.
The benefits of flexible working are mainly felt by carers – traditionally women and more recently also men. In an ageing society, carers can look after an elderly relative while engaging in paid work. In a country where childcare costs are beyond the financial reach of many families, individuals can work flexibly around school hours or other caring commitments. In a country in which pension provision is becoming ever more precarious, working while caring is no longer a choice for the majority but a necessity. In practical terms, flexible working enables individuals to catch up on work after traditional office hours when their working day was interrupted by, for example, a parent’s meeting at school or an appointment with a care provider.

There are potential benefits to society more widely, although a larger number of individuals would need to work flexibly before these can be fully felt. As flexible workers tend to reduce the number of commutes during a working week or month, some pressure is expected to be taken off the country’s stretched public transport and road networks. Moreover, fewer commutes may help Government to meet their climate change targets by reducing pollution while improving public health in the most polluted urban areas.

Challenges of flexible working

Flexible working is typically portrayed as the ability to work whenever and wherever. While such flexibility is certainly a major benefit, worryingly in our view, it is widely interpreted as being constantly available for work to the detriment of health and recreation. In our research, flexible workers from across industries and professions have reported curtailing day-time breaks (even short comfort breaks) and struggling to switch off in the evenings, on weekends and during annual leave. It is very common for flexible workers to have their work email streamed onto their personal smartphone and to have an alarm alerting them to incoming emails throughout the day and year. One of our research participants even failed to recognize that checking his work email in the evenings (after a full day in the office) is actually work. Overwork thus seems to be a common feature among flexible workers.

Other research participants reported feeling pressured to always perform at the highest level for fear of being ‘performance managed out’ (a cynical way of describing how individuals who are perceived to perform below par are dismissed). It seems that organizational expectations of flexible workers are unclear or, at least, badly communicated, leading to stress among individuals and related health concerns such as insomnia and burnout. Indeed, other studies have shown that many organizations that offer flexible working use more stringent control mechanisms for flexible staff than their office-based counterparts, which undoubtedly contribute to such feelings of pressure and inferiority.
Among health and wellbeing professionals, we have seen concern about the effects of flexible working on mental health and wellbeing. For many office workers, social interactions with their colleagues provide an important antidote to pressures and stress. When more staff work remotely on a regular basis, there are fewer opportunities for such interactions in the office. Consequently, individuals may feel isolated from their colleagues and wider organization with potential risks to their mental health. This is particularly pertinent for new staff who have limited opportunities to get to know their colleagues and to be properly socialized into the organization. Such concerns are especially valid as shorter tenures – and therefore more frequent job changes – are becoming normal. To date there is limited scientific evidence about these effects, but their potential dangers to individuals and society must be recognized at this early stage.

Recommendations for the Future of Work

Flexible working has given many individuals – particularly carers and those less able to commute – an opportunity to engage in paid work in a way that meets their needs. It should therefore be further encouraged. However, our research has indicated that a lack of mobile phone and internet connectivity in rural parts of the UK can be a barrier to flexible working as it prevents individuals from connecting remotely with their workplace, suppliers, customers and other stakeholders. As such, targeted investment in ICT infrastructure will be required to improve mobile phone and internet connectivity in rural areas and to provide free and, most importantly, reliable wifi access on trains and buses around the country. The latter has become standard in other European countries and enables flexible workers to turn public transport into a mobile workspace.

The challenges of flexible working relating to health and wellbeing (such as overwork, stress and isolation) cannot be addressed easily through legislative measures alone. We would like to offer the following suggestions about how these challenges may be tackled by businesses, individuals and other stakeholders.

Firstly, good practice must be developed for businesses and other organizations offering flexible working to mitigate against the challenges to health and wellbeing that our research has identified. The expectations of staff working hours – regardless of whether staff is office-based or working remotely – must be made explicit to give individuals permission to ‘switch off’ at the end of the working day and to take off some of the pressure that flexible workers are often feeling. Standard provision of any required ICT equipment (e.g. smartphones) by organizations to flexible workers may support this as individuals can then physically switch off their work smartphone and put it aside at the end of the working day and week.
Secondly, businesses and other organizations must provide effective structures for flexible workers to discuss any concerns about overwork, stress and isolation before their health and wellbeing is suffering. At present, a strong, suspicious discourse surrounds flexible working. There is an assumption that staff will not perform effectively when working outside of the office, when, in fact, research has found the contrary. However, as long as flexible working is generally considered as inferior and flexible workers are portrayed as lazy, meaningful discussions about health and wellbeing among flexible workers cannot take place. More needs to be done to create a culture in which all staff are valued for their contribution and in which concerns about health and wellbeing can be raised without fear of penalty, bias or discrimination. To this end, managers will require further training on how to manage staff effectively at a distance, including how to spot and address signs of stress and isolation.

Thirdly, individuals must be effectively prepared for flexible working. At present, training appears to be restricted to the use of mobile ICTs. Indeed, many mid-career staff may require some training to use such technology effectively in their increasingly flexible working practice. More importantly, however, flexible workers require the skills to manage their time and workload effectively to achieve a healthy balance between work and recreation. In particular, flexible workers must be in a position to complete a reasonable workload within core hours (howsoever they are distributed across a working day or week) while knowing when to stop and how to switch off. It is here that professional bodies and associations as well as trade unions can have a key role, supporting individuals and businesses to mitigate against the risks of overwork, stress and ill health brought about by flexible working practices.

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