



TIME TO FLEX

Embracing flexible working:
Benefits and barriers in the voluntary sector



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Foreword

Back in February 2021, at the height of the third national covid-19 lockdown, Becky Hewitt wrote [an article in Third Sector about the challenges of working flexibly](#) as a charity chief executive. Her article struck a chord with many people across the voluntary sector, including each of us.

We got in touch with Becky to ask how [NCVO](#) and [ACEVO](#) might support in addressing the issues around flexible working in the voluntary sector. Starfish Search generously offered to fund [a piece of work to explore the topic](#). We recruited a fantastically knowledgeable working group who volunteered to support and deliver the work, and the flexible working project began.

Growing interest in flexible working

We each have our own experiences of flexible working - as individuals and as leaders supporting our teams to work flexibly in order to support inclusion. We know from these experiences that there is no magic formula for successful flexible working: it's different for each organisation and individual. It's not always easy to make it work. What's most important is to start somewhere.

Increasingly, ACEVO and NCVO members tell us that they're interested in implementing more flexible working arrangements in their organisations. The subject is now particularly important given the changes to the way we organise work brought about by the pandemic and the need for a more inclusive culture. As this report explores, the voluntary sector culture does not currently lend itself to flexible working. As leaders of infrastructure organisations, we feel a strong responsibility to work alongside our members to change this.

Starting the conversation

Much has been written about flexible working. In preparing this report we're grateful to have been able to draw on the expertise and resources of organisations and movements such as Working Families, Job Shares Work, and Mother Pukka.

Flexible working is a very broad topic. While wide-ranging in scope, this report does not pretend to be complete in its overview of the challenges and opportunities for flexible working in the voluntary sector. For example, it does not cover important topics such as flexibility for volunteers in detail.

Instead, we hope to:

- start a conversation
- build momentum
- understand more about what each other is doing
- grow a shared understanding of what good looks like
- encourage organisations to experiment with new ideas
- break down stigma
- build our collective confidence and knowledge.

The report includes many practical tips, which we hope will support leaders, managers and individuals to approach flexible working in their organisations. Yet this report is just the start of a conversation, rather than the solution to flexible working in the sector. Plans are afoot for phase two of this work, which might include more in-depth training and toolkits to support voluntary organisations to implement flexible working.

Acknowledgements

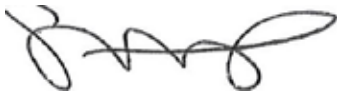
A talented working group of voluntary sector professionals has led this project, each with their own individual experience of working flexibly. The working group has hosted focus groups and undertaken interviews with dozens of people across the voluntary sector. We are hugely grateful to the group for their hard work and enormous contribution, and to everyone who has taken part in the research that has informed this report.

We would like to thank the working group and Becky for authoring the report, Gemma Davidson for editing and copy-writing support, and Rache Bowie for her design work. Thanks go to the teams at NCVO and ACEVO for their work on this project - especially Joanna Gray, Emily Peters, Sean O'Brien, Heloisa Righetto and Nabila Kassim. Finally, we'd like to thank Becky for having the vision, passion and determination to make this report happen.

We want to create a culture in the voluntary sector that values and champions flexible working. Flexible working promotes wellbeing in the workplace, and it increases productivity. It's critical for inclusion. It's important for attracting and retaining a talented, diverse pool of staff. Put simply flexible working for our teams will help the voluntary sector deliver more for the people and communities we support. We're looking forward to working with our members to make flexible working in voluntary organisations the norm.



Vicky Browning,
Chief executive, ACEVO



Sarah Vibert,
Interim chief executive, NCVO

Executive summary

Flexible working is fundamental to the future of work within charities - a sector with social justice and compassion at its heart. It's vital to attracting and retaining the most talented people in our sector, and essential for building inclusion, equity, diversity, wellbeing, and healthy trust-based cultures where everyone can thrive and do their best work.

Covid-19 has taught us that we can work differently - and more flexibly - when the will is there. There is now a unique opportunity to build on what we have learnt during the pandemic and move on from outdated ways of working - redesigning work in the voluntary sector so that supporting people's 'whole selves' and productivity can go hand in hand.

‘We as a sector should be the people who are thinking most about our people, and aspire to be world leading in our approach to flexible working. If we can understand more about what each other is doing and embed the best - and achieve a shared understanding what good looks like - then that would be a terrific platform to build on.’

PAUL FARMER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, MIND

Following research and interviews by the Flexible Working Group, including dozens of conversations with leaders and employees across the voluntary sector, we have identified the following key findings.

Inclusion

At its heart, flexibility is about inclusion for everyone. Flexible working should be a central part of conversations about social justice, social mobility and how charities become more inclusive, equitable and diverse. Best practice for employers is to take a 'reason-neutral' approach to decision-making - making flexibility available to all.

Take the onus off individuals

Too often, it's left to employees to 'make flex work'. Anxiety about seeming less committed can make people feel the need to 'over-compensate' for their working patterns by working too hard or accepting unrealistic roles or expectations. Many feel it's their responsibility alone to 'make things work'. Organisations need to step up proactively to make sure their culture, systems, policies, communication and structures support flexibility.

Job design

The starting point for successful flexibility is thinking differently and creatively about how we organise work and design roles. The priority is to start job design with 'yes to flex' as a first principle. This means proactively considering how flexible working could be possible for every role, thinking creatively about the different types of flexibility available, and planning how work can be distributed equitably and effectively when people have different working patterns.

Trust and empowerment

While having a strong flexible working policy can be an important starting point - it's just the start of the journey for a truly flexible culture. Ultimately flexibility isn't about policies or rules. It's a mindset and culture of trust and empowerment, that focuses on outcomes and impact over hours worked, that will build a successful flexible working culture.

Experimentation and innovation

No organisation will come up with something that works for everyone all the time. It's not always easy to make flex work, but the important thing is to try. The best solutions come from having the courage to experiment, take small steps, make mistakes, adjust, learn and improve, be honest about what is and isn't working and focus on individual needs.

Role modelling from the top

Role modelling from leaders really matters when it comes to flexibility. Choosing a work pattern that promotes your own work-life balance and wellbeing sends a strong message that this is how you do business here, and gives others confidence to make a request.

The report makes the following six recommendations.

1. Backed by ACEVO and NCVO, the voluntary sector to champion a default position of 'yes to flex' - where employers proactively consider how flexibility is possible in the job design for all roles, for everyone.
2. Flexibility to be advertised for all roles - so employers openly lead the conversation about how flexibility can work, and the focus isn't on the candidate to request it.
3. Organisations and individuals to openly share their stories of how flexibility is working - so that best practice, learning and inspiration are easily available in the sector, confidence is built, and stigma is reduced.
4. Organisations to embrace a position of trust - where individuals are more empowered to manage their time based on outcomes and impact, rather than when and where they work.
5. Organisations to have the courage to experiment, make mistakes, adjust, learn and improve, and be honest about what is and isn't working while keeping a focus on individual needs.
6. Flexibility to become a central pillar of equity, diversity and inclusion, and wellbeing strategies.

Introduction

Pandemic momentum

‘With covid-19 there’s a colossal opportunity to change the rules.’

PAUL FARMER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, MIND

Since the start of the pandemic the demands and complexities of our lives have become more visible. The children and parents we might be caring for, our physical and mental health needs, our personal circumstances, the moments that bring us joy and the times we struggle, and many of the other considerations and factors that make up our ‘whole self’ are suddenly in full view. While covid-19 made some of the challenges more extreme, these impossible demands of ‘doing it all’ have always been here. The inflexible working practices that have made it so hard for people to manage the different elements of lives in a healthy and positive way. The hidden messages that it’s up to part-time workers themselves to ‘make it work’ and over compensate for their shorter hours by working late at night or early in the morning.

The many workers who have been denied flexibility, missed out on roles, or not applied for a great opportunity because of overwhelm, stigma, and outdated ideas about how work and jobs should be designed.

At the same time covid-19 has taught us that we can work differently - and more flexibly - when the will is there. Ways of working that previously seemed impossible in roles where we thought flexibility ‘couldn’t be done’ are now routine.

‘Why do we need a 1930s working model for 2022? Let’s lead by example as a sector - and create organisations to include.’

SARABAJAYA KUMAR, TRUSTEE, NCVO

This moment, when we are both acutely aware of the many different parts of colleagues lives and are braver and more innovative about how we work, should be a critical opportunity to bring about lasting change and not fall back into our previous standard working practices. With the courage to build on what we have learnt we have a unique chance to redesign work in the voluntary sector so that wellbeing, inclusion, supporting people’s whole selves and productivity go hand in hand.

‘In my mind, flexible working is the future of working.’

MARCUS WRATTEN, SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER, HESTIA

What do we mean by flexible working?

WORKING PATTERNS	WORKLOAD	WORKPLACE	LIFE EVENT
Part-time	Reduced hours	Hybrid working (office/home)	Career break/ sabbatical
Term-time			
Annualised hours	Job share	Remote or mobile working	
Flexi-time			
Core hours/ staggered hours	Zero hour contracts	Work from home (WfH)	Shared parental leave
Mutually-agreed predictable hours			
Compressed hours	Phased retirement		
Self-rostering and shift-swapping			
Time off in lieu	Commissioned outcomes		
Agile working			

The pandemic has meant ‘home working’ has become something of a shorthand for flexible working, but in reality there are multiple forms of flexible working. It’s important that employers and employees don’t get too stuck on just one type of flexibility for a role - and explore different options that might work for each individual.

Building a deeper understanding of the wide range of options available will be crucial to embedding flexibility successfully in the voluntary sector. The need for flexibility also goes far beyond parenthood and caring responsibilities. It feeds into supporting mental and physical health, creating inclusive practices for disabled people, where people can afford or want to live, personal development, supporting portfolio careers, bereavement, and so much more.

‘Flexible working should be seen as the way work is organised - it’s not a benefit, concession or exception. It is how organisations carry out their work.’

KIRSTIE AXTEMS, HEAD OF EMPLOYER SERVICES, WORKING FAMILIES

Why does flexibility matter?

With so many people ‘falling into’ flexibility and homeworking because of the pandemic, and emerging discussions about the ‘new normal’, it is easy to see flexibility as a tactical reaction to new circumstances rather than a purposeful strategic choice. A choice that can promote deeper inclusion, wellbeing, access to talent, and a focus on productivity and impact over the number of hours worked within organisations. Prolonged homeworking due to covid-19 has rightly led to important conversations about what we have lost from not being in the office: connection, creativity, community, and culture. It is easy to focus on what we have lost, rather than what we have gained. There is a real risk we lose the progress we have made on flexibility through a knee jerk slip backwards to old ways of working. It is important not to see flexibility as a barrier to the benefits of connection and coming together as the best of face-to-face connection can still be done flexibly. Instead what is needed is a bold, human, and trust based response to how we organise our work in the future.

‘There is an opportunity post covid-19 to think deeply and courageously about how we reshape our workforce - and design things differently. We need to share and learn more about what’s possible.’

KATHARINE SACKS-JONES, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BECOME



Ama Afrifa-Tchie

HEAD OF PEOPLE, WELLBEING & EQUITY, MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID ENGLAND

In my role at MHFA I’ve been really aware of the need to not only create the space for flexible working but how important it is to equip people to have that conversation and change mindsets. It’s about working smarter and flexible working can help you do that. It’s not just about a good work/life balance, it’s also about how to engage people so that they can be productive. Everyone is different, so we have to recognise that that means everyone works differently. I know that I often work better at home because I’m less distracted and if I need to do

some creative or strategic thinking then I need a quiet space. It’s about recognising and appreciating how a person works best.

Personally, I went down to compressed hours (five days into four) in 2020 and at the time a lot of people said to me ‘oh you must work really long days’. However, it’s about setting boundaries and working smarter. I realised early on that I had to be really strict about stopping when my working day had finished. It’s also about empowering my team so that I don’t need to be in every single meeting. We need to change mindsets so the focus is more on outputs rather than presenteeism.

So many people have had to work differently during the pandemic and I think a big part of making flexible working a success is providing people with the tools and guidance to support them. For example, guidance on self-care, setting boundaries, how to lead virtual teams and stay connected as well as how to cross collaborate across your organisation. If you get these things right it can make such a difference.

I think one of the hardest things for people during lockdown was that they had to suddenly open up their homes to their colleagues, suddenly there was no option to go the office and that was hard for many. Healthy boundaries have been really important as well as ensuring people don’t feel isolated. One of the things we started at MHFA at the beginning of lockdown, amongst many other activities, was a ‘stay connected’ Teams channel. We also introduced online quizzes and a MHFAE radio station which we have decided to keep going as they are so popular. We also launched a Ways of Working playbook last year as a framework and guide for staff to use and navigate through our hybrid way of working.

For some of our employees, working from home can feel quite isolating and disconnected. They miss those ‘water cooler’ moments and connecting with colleagues in real life. Most organisations have multiple generations as employees - it’s important to be aware that there will be some shared/similar needs and some different ones too. At the core of your culture, you need to understand the different groups in your workforce and the intersectionality across them. We talk about the importance of trust in an organisation and I’ve had people ask me: ‘how can we build trust if we don’t see each other face-to-face?’. But building trust and relationships is possible virtually - you just need to be intentional

and proactive in the relationships you build, have an open mind and think about how to connect and check-in differently.

My advice is to really get to know and understand your workforce, don't just assume you know what they want. Some people may say they want to be in the office because they want to feel more connected to the team and/or colleagues and have a different/change of environment to work in. If you are encouraging employees to come back into the workplace, think about how you utilise your workspaces for better connection, collaboration and productivity. If you've adopted a hybrid model, think about how you can be inclusive and connected online through technology and also in person, but remember to role model good/positive behaviours, boundaries and downtime. If you're fully remote, is there an opportunity for your workforce to come together in real life to connect - whether that be once or twice a year?

For leaders and people managers, ask yourself, what does being an inclusive leadership look like and how do we role model that? What space have you allowed for trial and error to help you and your employees learn from mistakes made and make improvements.

Whatever it is you choose to do, the decision-makers in organisations must ask themselves how equitable they are being, and how inclusive are you in involving your workforce to co-design your workplace culture.

Sector culture: Flexible working and the challenges for charities

‘Charities run on donated labour, people work more than they should and that needs to be considered by leaders.’

ANDREW BAZELEY, POLICY, INSIGHT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS MANAGER, FAWCETT SOCIETY

While many of the perceived barriers to flexible working in the voluntary sector are similar to the private and public sectors, there are also some unique cultures and challenges. The very nature of our work - which is often about lives, livelihoods and the hopes and fears of people and communities - goes beyond a financial transaction for doing a job. We are a sector where overwork is often normalised and flexibility is seen as more challenging.

Many charities are facing a moment where the need for their work is greater than ever before but their resources and funds are increasingly stretched. Our passionate, committed and mission driven workforce often 'lean in' themselves, working long hours in service of the cause and not wanting to 'let anyone down'. Jobs are often designed to cover far more work than is reasonable in a single role as the funds aren't there for the multiple roles that are really required.

Our incredible volunteer workforce mean that unpaid service is baked into our psyche, which can make it harder for paid staff to set boundaries. Many of our staff are motivated by lived experience of the cause, making it even harder to switch off. In this specific context creating truly flexible, part time, manageable roles where people can thrive becomes even harder. But in a sector that values social justice, fairness, care, compassion, and inclusion, it is even more important.

Cause led organisations

- **A WORLD IN WHICH EVERY CHILD ATTAINS THE RIGHT TO SURVIVAL, PROTECTION, DEVELOPMENT AND PARTICIPATION**
- **A WORLD FREE OF MS**
- **OUR VISION IS THAT FEWER PEOPLE DIE BY SUICIDE**

These are just a few vision statements from UK charities. Each reflects an urgent need in society. The complex emotional transactions at the heart of our work - between ourselves and our jobs, between our donors and our beneficiaries - can make incredible things happen and can bring out the best in us all. Yet aspirational visions, coupled with a workforce driven by a passion for the cause, can also create a stumbling block to building flexible and inclusive workplaces. For some people working and volunteering in organisations because of their own lived experience there can be another layer of blurred work and life boundaries.

Covid-19 has intensified this. Voluntary organisations, where overwork was already normalised, went into overdrive. More need equals more work, or so the logic went. But this was often without adequate thought as to how that additional work would be resourced.

Size and funding

‘Looking back a couple of years to when I was CEO of a small charity, I can see how much our level of ambition was totally out of synch with our level of resource. I can see now what an ableist culture this created.’

SARAH VIBERT, INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE, NCVO

- There are 163,150 voluntary organisations in the UK
- 44% have an income of less than £10,000 and are unlikely to employ any paid staff
- 36% have an income of £10,000-£100,000
- 16% have an income of £100,000-£1m
- Just 4% have an income of over £1m

SOURCE: [UK CIVIL SOCIETY ALMANAC 2021](#), NCVO

According to the [Office for National Statistics](#), most of us working in the voluntary sector, almost three fifths, work in organisations with less than 50 employees. Many organisations are entirely volunteer led and every charity is led by a volunteer trustee board. Many working in the sector will be the sole employee for their organisation. Approaches to flexible working in voluntary organisations therefore need to take account of both paid staff and volunteers, and the relationship between these two groups in a blended workforce.

The nature of funding can add another layer of pressure to overwork in the voluntary sector. Short-term funding awards and few opportunities for full cost recovery can create pressure to reduce core or staff costs and piecing together roles from different funding sources can lead to jobs being too big. Needing to deliver specific outputs and outcomes within a specific timeframe can also mean people work long hours to deliver.

A lack of diversity

‘Supporting flexible working just makes sense; job share, flexible working hours and flexibility on location will mean that the widest pool of people will be reached in recruitment, hopefully leading to a more diverse organisation.’

JULIE BENTLEY, CEO, SAMARITANS

A lack of diversity in the voluntary sector, in terms of ethnicity, disability and sexuality, is both a symptom and a cause of a lack of flexible working. It is from a position of privilege that individuals can stay late with no notice, afford to live in London, be able to commute into an office on a daily basis, or do a 70-hour week to get a project finished.

- Voluntary sector staff are considerably more likely to be on part-time contracts (35%) than employees in the public (27%) and private (24%) sectors.
- 8% of voluntary sector employees report being on temporary contracts
- 67% of voluntary sector employees are women
- 27% of voluntary sector staff are aged 16 to 34 compared to 29% of public and 34% of private sector workers
- The voluntary sector workforce is less representative of BAME people (9% of the total workforce) compared to the public and private sectors (both 12%)
- 23% of voluntary sector workers identify as disabled

SOURCES: UK CIVIL SOCIETY ALMANAC 2021, NCVO, LABOUR FORCE SURVEY, OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS

Organisations such as Charity So White, Charity So Straight, #NonGraduatesWelcome, #ShowTheSalary and others lead vital campaigns for the voluntary sector to be more inclusive. Much of our work in the sector is about social justice, so it follows that we must become a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable sector if we are to stay relevant and deliver for the communities we serve. Enabling flexibility is an important action to address one of the causes of a lack of diversity. It is also important to remember that for traditionally marginalised groups, structural disadvantage and discrimination in the voluntary sector may present an additional barrier to having conversations about flexible working.



Teri Stephenson

CEO, AGE UK LANCASHIRE

In one of my past roles, I'd start at 5am and often wasn't home until 8pm. When I moved to a 9-day fortnight, with every 10th day off, it made my life much more manageable (as well as making me less begrudging of the long hours!). Having benefitted from flexible arrangements like this, I wanted to be sure that in my first role as a CEO, I encouraged a culture of flexible working.

Aware of the benefits that flexible working can bring, including helping us to recruit from a more diverse pool of

applicants, I wanted to be sure that our policies facilitated this. In our recent Annual Colleague Survey, 51% identified the flexibility of our working offer as either the most or second most important element of our reward package.

We were already on a path of introducing increased flexibility prior to COVID-19. I'd recruited a Director of People in January 2019 who shared my vision, and we had started to shift our focus to measuring outputs and getting the job done. My belief is that 'It's what you do, not where you do it that matters'.

Trust comes from being open about flexibility. Working from home during COVID-19 turbo-boosted some of our thinking. It helped to encourage those who may have been worried about trust and productivity to become more comfortable with managing a flexible workforce.

Our flexible working offer (additional to our statutory responsibilities) includes;

- Working from home or remotely (fully or blended with office)
- Flexible start and finish times
- Compressed working, such as 9-day fortnights
- Short-notice leave days - (up to 5 per year) - this allows staff to request a day off, using their annual leave entitlement, at very short notice and for any reason. You don't have to state the reason - we all have times when we just want a day off!

When staff complete a request for flexible working (statutory or informal), they are encouraged to identify how it will impact the business and how any risks or issues can be mitigated. Managers are asked to approach requests from staff with a 'how can I say yes to this request?' attitude and to discuss and negotiate suitable alternatives if we can't agree to a request for business reasons.

Accepting that the line between a flexible working culture and an 'always available' culture can be tricky to tread, our email signature states 'At Age UK Lancashire, we work flexibly and respect a healthy work-life balance. So, whilst it works for me to personally contact you at this time because of my working patterns, I don't expect a reply or action to be taken outside of your own working arrangements.'

It's not always plain sailing and it can be hard selling a vision when not everyone agrees. We had a mix of opinions within our management team in relation to the level of flexibility that they wanted, or felt they could accommodate in their own teams, but I kept focussing on achieving my vision, knowing it was the right thing to do, and now most people are on board. Our People Team are also there to oversee that we have a consistent approach. Unfortunately, not all options will work for all roles and we are open about that. I don't want to create a 2-tier workforce, and we do try to make as much available for everyone as we can.

We keep all agreements under review, which means that if something doesn't work anymore, we find a different way. One thing that has worked particularly well for us is the use of Workplace (by Facebook), which facilitates a sense of connectedness and community regardless of location.

My advice for those wondering whether they should introduce flexible working beyond the pandemic- do it. Your staff are your greatest asset and the benefits of flexible working outweigh any challenges; develop a vision for your organisation, communicate it and then reinforce it.

We need a new normal, not a return to the old one. The past 20 months have been a great opportunity to learn what works well, not so well, and to develop new flexible norms based on that learning.

The need for flexibility

Valuing people as individuals

“Offering flexibility says “we value you as an individual, we believe in you, and we respect what you need. As an organisation we will support you to use your skills”.”

KATHRYN HOWARD, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, OD AND HR, SAMARITANS

Valuing people in our sector as individuals, who can integrate all the different areas of their lives at work, should be a core principle of successful flexible working. Essentially this is about welcoming people’s whole selves in the workplace. And flexibility should be for everyone, not just available for a limited number of ‘reasons.’ Opening up flexibility for all reduces stigma and builds equity and buy in across organisations. But there is no one solution that works for us all, it’s down to responding to people as individuals at different moments of their lives. Responding with trust and empathy around flexible working will support inclusion, belonging, equity, and wellbeing so everyone can thrive.

“Flexibility is not just about a good work-life balance, it’s also about how to engage people so that they can be productive. Everyone is different, so we have to recognise that that means everyone works differently.”

AMA AFRIFA-TCHIE, HEAD OF PEOPLE, WELLBEING AND EQUITY, MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID ENGLAND

Stigma and barriers

“One of the objections we sometimes hear to flexibility, when it is only offered for specific reasons, is - it won’t be fair on everyone else. But the resentment and stigma goes if flexibility can be for everyone.”

SARABAJAYA KUMAR, TRUSTEE, NCVO

There is still considerable stigma, shame and misconceptions surrounding flexible working which can make it hard for people to ask for the working patterns they need to thrive and do their best work.

“Although my organisation enabled me to go from full to part-time with ease, I remember worrying that I was going to lose my job if I asked to change my hours and would have to take on the added stress of job hunting as I prepared to start my degree.”

MARCUS WRATTEN, SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER, HESTIA

Even with the huge shift in working practices we have seen due to covid-19 - it is important to remember that misconceptions and negative perceptions remain.

“We are definitely not there yet! We need to keep our eye on the ball. We know that flexible working was previously seen as something that makes our lives more difficult. So, we need to take people on a journey with us.”

KATHRYN HOWARD, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, OD AND HR, SAMARITANS

Negative attitudes towards flexibility are too often a barrier to people applying for new or more senior roles. This means the sector risks missing out on a wider diversity of talent because the structures and mindset isn’t there to support them.

‘When I started thinking about being a chief executive my single biggest anxiety was the conversation about flexible working. I was already a first-timer - how could I be taken seriously as a part-timer too?’

BECKY HEWITT, FORMER CEO, CHANGING FACES

‘The more flexible working is done by men - it will benefit men, and chip away at the stigma that can attach to working mothers.’

KIRSTIE AXTEENS, HEAD OF EMPLOYER SERVICES, WORKING FAMILIES

Putting it all on the individual

‘It’s not the flexible worker who is the “problem” - organisations become the problem when they are not designed to include people and support them to work in their best way.’

SARABAJAYA KUMAR, TRUSTEE, NCVO

Too often it is left to employees alone to ‘make flexible working work’. Organisations must step up to make sure their culture, systems and structures support flexible working. Anxiety about seeming less committed can make individuals seeking flexibility feel the need to ‘over compensate’ for their working patterns by working too hard. Many feel it is their responsibility alone to ‘make things work’ - and are reluctant to ask the organisation for structural or systemic support. Organisations who truly value inclusion, equity and wellbeing need to be visible and proactively step in to support flexibility in their organisations, for example by proactively considering issues like communication, timings of meetings, wellbeing, and adequate and equitable cover, and relocation of work.

‘Employers should provide guidance to employees on putting together a good proposal for working flexibly - the onus shouldn’t all be on the employee.’

KIRSTIE AXTEENS, HEAD OF EMPLOYER SERVICES, WORKING FAMILIES

Inclusion

‘There needs to be a stronger social justice narrative around flexible working.’

ANDREW BAZELEY, POLICY, INSIGHT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS MANAGER, FAWCETT SOCIETY

At its heart, flexibility is about inclusion for everyone. Flexible working should be a central part of conversations about social justice, social mobility and how charities become more inclusive, equitable and diverse.

We might typically associate flexible working with parents and carers, but there is growing understanding of how flexibility in employment can be of benefit to individuals of all ages, and in many different circumstances, across the voluntary sector.

For example, remote working can mean charity workforces don’t have to live in areas of high cost accommodation or spend time and money on long commutes, so they can be more reflective of the communities that they serve.

Flexible hours can also support those managing health conditions like cancer treatment or their mental health and wellbeing. For example, removing the need to make a rush hour commute with a variation to working hours or locations, as well as offering a variety of ways to connect - both online and in person - can make a workplace more accessible for all, including people with disabilities and neurodivergence.

‘We know that if you have anxiety or panic attacks then getting on the tube on a Monday morning is not the place to be, so it’s sensible to say “actually if it’s better for you to come in an hour later and miss the rush then that’s fine”, let’s think about what makes sense from a mental health point of view.’

PAUL FARMER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, MIND

Normalising flexibility has the potential to be life changing for disabled employees and candidates by levelling the playing field and stimulating much needed investment in IT and other infrastructure. It also sparks a vital - long overdue - conversation about power dynamics and culture.

‘Changes during covid-19 led to a massive levelling of the playing field. People felt included for the first time...not having to travel opens up jobs to disabled candidates who can homework entirely, or predominantly.’

LOUISE YOUNGMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, SCOPE

Flexibility can also play an important role in tackling systemic forms of racism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia in the workplace.

‘It’s important to listen to what people have to say generally about flexible working but we particularly need to reach out to people of colour about some of the issues they may experience.’

PAUL FARMER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, MIND

People who already experience structural discrimination will face additional barriers to accessing flexibility, so it is critical that we listen carefully to understand the specific barriers that people of colour, and other marginalised groups, experience so they can be addressed. For example, of those who adopted home working as a result of the pandemic, [40% of Black, Asian and ethnic minority workers](#) reported working more hours than they had before (compared to 29% of White workers) but 37% of the same group said they were more productive (compared to 24% of White workers).

Flexible working can be a tool for reducing pressures placed [disproportionately on women](#). This is particularly important in the voluntary sector where female workers make up [67% of the workforce](#) and where covid-19 has brought additional pressures such as home-schooling and unpredictable absences from education.

Flexibility, job shares, shifts and compressed hours, can allow working parents and people with other caring responsibilities to stay in the workforce and take on more senior roles that work around the rest of their lives.

‘Sometimes flexible working keeps women in smaller roles than they could do - because they feel “fortunate” to have flexibility that they might not get elsewhere or in another role. That’s fine if that’s right for the individual of course - but it should be a choice if they want to move to a bigger role.’

KATHRYN HOWARD, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, OD AND HR, SAMARITANS

It's also critical for [supporting LGBTQ+ staff](#). For example, flexible working can support individuals who may otherwise feel compelled to change their appearance or mannerisms, or to hide part of their identity, at work. Working reduced or flexible hours, working from home, and job sharing could also be [ways in which transgender employees are supported](#), especially during a period of gender transition.

‘Early on in my career trust empowered me to feel able to schedule appointments related to my gender transition - which often needed to be done at relatively short notice - without having to seek permission or share the details of these with my manager.’

PIP GARDNER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, THE KITE TRUST

Ensuring flexibility is open to all means people don't need to 'disclose' issues or needs that they don't necessarily feel comfortable sharing. It can be traumatising and stigmatising to feel the need to justify flexibility by giving a 'good enough' reason.

Best practice for employers is to take a 'reason neutral' approach to decision-making when employees make a request. Flexibility is for everyone, and done right it has the potential to make a critical contribution to equality, diversity and inclusion.

Flexible working could make a significant difference to the most underprivileged young people. We know that talent is spread right across the UK but opportunities aren't. Flexible working gives us an opportunity to break down those socioeconomic barriers.

Young people are less likely to work for employers that don't offer flexible working, they are more conscious about having a healthy work/life balance and they are more likely to apply for jobs further afield if flexibility is considered.

Flexible working also gives employers a practical and well rehearsed way to source talent and access a rich pool of skilled and motivated young people. If we seize this moment, we could take a major step towards addressing inequality and creating a generational rise in social mobility. Let's help them start their careers and make their mark on the world.

SAEED ATCHA MBE, CEO, YOUTH LEADS UK

Wellbeing

‘More flexibility would make for a happier sector - we don't talk about that enough.’

SARABAJAYA KUMAR, TRUSTEE, NCVO

Done well, flexible working should be a key to unlocking better wellbeing at work. It should help remove the stress and worry about balancing caring responsibilities with work. It should help people managing a health condition or undergoing gender transition surgery to do this with dignity and privacy.

It should also allow everyone the time to take proper breaks, have genuine work/life balance, and do more of the things they enjoy. [The Office for National Statistics](#) shows that remote workers have sickness absence rates of 0.9%, compared to 2.2% for employees without a flexible working arrangement.

The importance of a carefully tailored individual approach to flexible working was mentioned again and again through our conversations across the sector.



Pip Gardner

CHIEF EXECUTIVE, THE KITE TRUST

Graduating in 2012 and looking to start a career in the charity sector was tricky in wake of the financial crash and austerity. I moved through short-term contracts in the private sector, museums and arts organisations with each feeling like I really had to work more hours and prove my worth for the slim chance of a contract extension. Aged 24, I started studying for a PhD and as I came to my final year, I looked to return to the charity sector.

I took on a role within Hull 2017 City of Culture and was open from the start of needing an arrangement that would allow me to complete my studies, travelling to Sheffield (where I was studying) for meetings and having time each week to write my thesis. My managers agreed to this flexibility but we didn't have any formal agreement in place and I was expected to still complete all of the duties of a full-time role. As a time limited festival, it was very easy for a culture of over-working to dominate even though we were a reasonably large team. I experienced feelings of guilt and a need to prove myself so early in my career (as well not wanting to miss out on fun parts). Our hours were not tracked and I didn't have a formal agreement for my flexible working. Whilst I could step away to attend PhD meetings, I ended up working more hours to make up, usually with the encouragement of colleagues and managers.

Towards the end of that contract, I had a fall which led to ongoing problems with my back. It was an accident which made me pause and reflect on what was sustainable for me, and also shaped my needs going forwards. Around this time I also came out as trans and began a social and medical gender transition.

I took my desire for flexible working to my next post at Woodcraft Folk where, from the start, it was clear there was organisation wide support. At the interview stage I understood that many of the team were supported to work part or all of their hours remotely - for some that was relevant to their role, but for others it supported caring responsibilities or quality of life. It was a unionised workplace, but underpinning the culture was a sense of caring about each other's wellbeing and a great degree of trust. Though that trust was aligned with clear workplans and tools for accountability. My hours were logged and in supervisions I'd reflect on how I was using a flexi-TOIL (time off in lieu) system to balance the needs of the project and the team, alongside other demands on my time.

This empowered me to feel able to schedule appointments with a chiropractor and those related to my gender transition (which often needed to be done at relatively short notice) without having to seek permission or share the details of these with my manager. Although, I was always made to feel I could be open about what was happening outside of work. When I needed to start counselling on a weekly basis close to my home (an hour's commute from our office), my manager was supportive in documenting an informal agreement that I would work from home on those days which we reviewed every month to check it was still working for both sides.

The support of flexible working made me feel valued and enabled me to develop my skills, earning a promotion and contributing to initiatives wider than my role. Ultimately, I have moved on to become CEO of a different organisation, The Kite Trust. The positive experiences I had mean that I still often look to collaborate with my former colleagues, and I have used what I learnt to provide a similar flexible approach for my team.

Talking flex: Top tips for employees from Working Families

Sometimes the most difficult thing can feel like starting the conversation. Here are some tips on what to consider.

There's no wrong way to ask for flexibility in your role. There's no wrong time to ask. It's all about starting a conversation with the people you report into to (your employer). When you're starting your conversation, keep it human. It's likely your conversation will be an exchange of ideas.

Looking for flexibility in an existing role

Think through your current working pattern and what you're looking to put in place. What impact will this new pattern have on the organisation? Think through the concerns your line manager, colleagues and service users may have. How do you think your new pattern could work on a daily basis? You might draw on examples of other people who do a similar job to you and how they have been able to do it flexibly.

There are a number of different ways of working flexibly that you might want to suggest: a job share partner, agreeing an allocation of work with another colleague so that you are the point of contact for each other when the other person is not there. For example, this might work if you were to work 08.00-16.00 and your colleague worked 09.00-17.00. You could offer to help train a job share partner, and perhaps a job share partner could contact you at home if required to clarify any issues.

If suggesting working from home, then think about the activities of your role and if it is something you want to do. Do you have the necessary home environment and work equipment so you can work effectively from home? Can you change your weekly work pattern or have part time cover during holidays?

How will your new pattern work in a crisis situation? You may want to offer being available by phone to deal with emergencies or urgent requests.

Remember to point out the benefits to the charity: two heads are better than one (job share positives), flexible work helps keep employees happy and retains them, and it doesn't cost the business anything more.

When talking to your line manager, suggest giving your new pattern a try. What looks good on paper, might need some changes and if you agree a trial you'll both be able to make the changes you both need, and you'll give the new pattern the time it needs.

Looking for flexibility in a new role

You've seen a job advertised, and it's a role you want, but there's only one issue: no mention of the flexibility you need.

Right now, there's no legal right for anyone to have flexible working. But there's no harm in asking at any point in the recruitment process. Always start with a conversation and follow all the tips above.

Maybe even focus your job search on recruitment agencies specialising in ethical recruitment.

SOURCE: [WORKING FAMILIES](#)



Marcus Wratten

SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER, HESTIA

I started working in communications at Hestia, a crisis charity, back in 2017. The storytelling element of charity communications, particularly collecting case studies, piqued my interest. In early 2020, after much internal deliberation, I applied to start a Master's degree in Journalism. Flexible working allowed me to take the biggest step in my career so far. It's benefited me constantly over the last year.

Firstly, my organisation enabled me to reduce my hours from full to part-time with ease. I remember worrying that I was going to lose my job if I asked to change my hours, and would have to take on the added stress of job hunting as I prepared to start my degree. I was so pleased when I was told I could switch to part-time, as it meant I could continue working in a field related to what I was studying. It was a big relief.

I started my degree in September 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. I swiftly learnt that if it weren't for the fact that I was homeworking, I would not have been able to complete my Master's degree at all. My lectures were spread out across the whole week, and I realised that it simply wouldn't have been possible to work from the office and attend lectures on the other side of London all in the same day. I also realised that I wouldn't have been able to afford travelling across London, every day, on a part-time salary.

Even now, as the world has started to open up, I've been afforded the flexibility to work from where I like. There have been days where I've spent the morning on my work laptop, and come lunchtime, I've switched to my university laptop. This wouldn't have been possible in a pre-pandemic world. I can't imagine how difficult it would have been trying to organise my schedule if I'd needed to be in the office whenever I was working. Removing the barriers of office-based, 9 to 5 working, has enabled me to smoothly start a new chapter in my life.

The nature of my degree has also meant that, on occasion, I've had to swap my working days around to take an exam, or take an hour or two out of the working day to log onto an online lecture. My team have been so supportive, allowing me to make up the hours as and when is suitable for me. Sometimes, I'll work in the evening if I've taken time out of the day, but I actually feel more energised and motivated to do the work I'm doing, because it feels like I'm doing it on my terms. It alleviates the pressure.

Of course, there are downsides to everything. It can be harder to keep up with emails or what needs doing when I swap my days around, as there's less routine. Sometimes, I feel I need to work more hours than necessary when I'm taking advantage of flexible working. I also know a lot of people don't like to receive emails outside of traditional working hours, but I never expect a reply until they are working.

All of the downsides are minor in comparison to the astronomical benefit I've felt from flexible working. I can see now how the flexibility to work from home or at 'unconventional' hours could enable so many more people to go and study, or get a pet, or start a family. In my mind, flexible working is the future of working.

Leading the Way

‘We as a sector should be the people who are thinking most about our people, and aspiring to be world leading in our approach to flexible working. If we can understand more about what each other is doing, embed the best, and achieve a shared understanding what good looks like, then that would be a terrific platform to build on.’

PAUL FARMER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, MIND

The behaviour and attitudes of leaders was seen as one of the biggest enablers or barriers to flexible working by an overwhelming number of the people we spoke to. While many are increasingly committed to flexibility, fears around losing control, complexity of creating policies, and concerns about fairness, consistency or ‘getting it wrong’ mean it is easier for leaders to fall back on what they know. Building cultures of trust, running small pilots, empowering teams to trial and develop their own solutions, sharing stories about what has worked and the benefits of flexible teams, and less over-working ‘at the top’ is key to moving forward with flexibility.

Ultimately this is about leaders actively ‘leaning in’ to provide individuals with structural and systemic support to make flexibility work, as well as championing the importance of flexibility for building inclusive, diverse, highly impactful teams - with wellbeing at their heart.

Business planning and job design

Flexibility isn’t just about ‘working from home’ or a four day week. It is not about expecting people to do a full time role in fewer days with less pay. It is about leaders and managers truly thinking differently and creatively about how they organise our work and design roles, and focussing resolutely on outcomes above hours worked.

The fundamental starting point - but so often the hardest thing in mission driven charities - is to prioritise and write a business plan which matches the resources the organisation has available. This might mean making difficult decisions about what the organisation does not do, or at least not until additional resources are available. With this in place manageable jobs can then be designed and realistic objectives set for individuals.

There is a real risk of ‘[fake flex](#)’ - where roles are part time in name, contract, and pay but full time for workload - unless charity leaders make bold, purposeful decisions about priorities, focus, capacity, job design and saying ‘no’. By setting boundaries for themselves they give permission for others to set boundaries too.

The priority is to start job design with flexibility as a first principle and to ask managers to proactively consider how flexible working could be possible for every role. For example, say you are open to job shares, part time or different working patterns. This also helps take the anxiety of ‘having the flexible conversation’ away from the candidate and opens the role to a much broader and more diverse field.

‘Find the flexibility in every role by breaking it down into the key activities to see which are location or time specific and how much time is needed. Then you can advertise the role with its flexible options.’

KIRSTIE AXTEMS, HEAD OF EMPLOYER SERVICES, WORKING FAMILIES

Advertising all roles as flexible is the next critical step for creating a mindset of ‘flexibility first’ in organisations. It encourages everyone to have an open mind from the beginning.

Job shares, or multiple part time roles, can be very helpful options where a job is really too big for one for role but there isn't enough budget for two full time post. They help avoid building overwork into positions at the start. Really good practice involves employers actively supporting individuals to think about how their specific roles can be done differently and stepping up to put proper support and back-up in place for them. The onus absolutely should not all be on the individual to make things work.

“At JobSharesWork we get the chance to work with and learn from job share partners at all levels and across many roles. What we hear time and time again is that job sharing can be transformative. Not just for individuals but for the organisations they work with. Job share partners report having better balance in their lives and feeling happier at work. Many job sharers form lasting partnerships and often seek new roles and promotion together.”

HELEN REED, CO-FOUNDER, JOBSHARESWORK

You need to look at flexibility systematically in terms of job design so that you don't bake overwork into roles.

So instead of just saying ‘part time considered’ during recruitment for what is actually a full-time role - you actually need to think about designing the job differently if someone does do the role part time. You need to ask, if this person is doing three days of a fulltime role, how and where is the rest of the job being done?

Sometimes we hear ‘this role needs to be done full time’ because its busy! It's totally understandable if you've got the budget for a full-time role - and you need that capacity to support other people or run a service. But this is the moment to think creatively. Is this two part time roles? Or a job share?

Unless the system leans in you either have an individual being asked to do an impossible role, or a team that is having to absorb an unreasonable workload. The organisation needs to share the responsibility to make flexible working successful.

KATHRYN HOWARD, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, OD AND HR, SAMARITANS

Talent and opportunity

All too often, lack of flexibility, and the challenges of ‘juggling’ the different elements of people's lives can feel like an insurmountable barrier to career progression. At a time when we need a diverse pool of exceptional, motivated, passionate people working in the charity sector more than ever before, it is even more important that we shift our mindsets about how work can be done.

“It is about finding, attracting and retaining amazing colleagues who are going to help you achieve your mission and ensuring genuine diversity of voice.”

CHARLOTTE HILL, CEO, THE FELIX PROJECT

Offering proper flexibility can be a very important way to attract and retain talent - supporting people throughout their career and at different stages of their lives so we don't lose the skills of people who can't do ‘standard’ hours.

‘Since the pandemic, we have seen a marked shift in candidates’ desire to achieve more agile ways of working in leadership roles. Boards are responding to this and there is an increasing openness to flexibility and the value it can add in securing, retaining and broadening talent. But it is still evolving - the more visible role models we have, the more it will give others the confidence to follow suit.’

KATY GIDDENS, DIRECTOR, STARFISH SEARCH

This is particularly important for the charity sector, which needs the best people but often has less budget headroom to attract and retain high quality talent. Crucially, this isn’t about old systems of flexibility that rely on behind the scenes overworking and burnout. This is about properly designed flexible roles, supported by truly flexible and high trust cultures, that mean flexibility happens in practice and not just on paper.

‘Offering part time roles, reducing the number of days we expect staff to come into an office, flexing working hours around other commitments, has given us an edge in a very competitive recruitment market. As a smaller charity without a huge public profile, we’ve attracted and retained highly skilled staff because of our flexibility and that is great for our performance.’

KAT LEE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, THE FAMILY HOLIDAY ASSOCIATION

‘Job sharing was an excellent solution for me when I needed to reset the balance of a full time leadership role with personal commitments. Not only could I continue to grow and develop as a leader, sharing the role brought double the skills and perspective to the team. Together we were able to lead the team, balance our lives and still develop our careers.’

KATIE HILLITT, CO-FOUNDER, JOBSHARESWORK

A survey of 297 charity sector professionals reveals that 76% have not applied for a role because it didn’t offer enough flexibility, and 62% have changed roles to gain more flexibility. (#Jobshareswork survey of 298 charity sector professionals, March 2021).

[One study found](#) that 87% of workers either work flexibly or want to, rising to 92% of 18-34 year olds. And flexible working is here to stay. The [Future of Work Report 2021](#) found that 90% of people working in UK non profits believe flexible working is here to stay, with 80% stating that they would like to work from home more often in the future. The charity sector needs to embrace this if it is to be an attractive place to work.

Avoiding a two-tier workforce

‘What does this look like culturally? How do we ensure people working flexibly are fully included. What are the power dynamics? Is someone on two days viewed as valuable as someone full time? What structures do we put in place to support belonging for people who work fewer days - and how do you support building relationships? Important to think about the risks of a two tier workforce.’

KATHARINE SACKS-JONES, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BECOME

The pandemic has opened our thinking about roles where flexibility seems harder. Even though large proportions of frontline delivery roles may need to be carried out in a certain place at a certain time, it's likely that a proportion can be done anytime, anywhere. Maybe you can't do the whole of your job remotely or flexibly, but perhaps can you do part of it.

For front line staff, rather than location flexibility, it might be about hours worked and working patterns. Working in shifts has a similar outcome to any job share - there are two or more people who can do the same role - so it is essential that managers talk to individuals about their own personal goals and preferences. Measures such as phased shift start times to avoid rush hour, staggered hours, and breaking up shifts are all ways to offer flexibility. Enabling front line staff to swap shifts or self roster also offers autonomy, demonstrates trust, and allows a greater degree of flexibility on a week by week or even day to day basis. The key is to think creatively and be open to alternatives, to find an option that works for everyone concerned.

A good exercise for roles where a flexible option seems less obvious is to write down which parts of your job are location specific, which are time specific, and then you will be able to see the flexibility that remains. You need to be granular and break roles down.

Let's take a receptionist. This is someone might need to be in the office for a full day, but it could still be a job share (which are not given nearly often enough!) or people on shifts. In organisations like the NHS, maybe 80% of a role has to be done at a certain place at a certain time, but 20% can be done anytime, anywhere. Maybe you can't do the whole of your job remotely, but can you do part of it from home? If you can't offer one type of flexibility you can offer another. There's a bit of a fixation on just one type of flexibility, but there are lots of types.

KIRSTIE AXTEMS, HEAD OF EMPLOYER SERVICES, WORKING FAMILIES

It is also important to ensure equity once flexible working is in place. The pandemic has presented opportunities to work differently which has benefited people who want more flexibility. Yet, the concern is that as people do start to return to offices, those who choose to remain as home based may be overlooked for promotion and other opportunities. This has highlighted a long term challenge for people who work flexibly if organisations do not put the right support in place.

Leaders and managers have a critical responsibility to overcome the creation of a two tier workforce where flexibility is concerned. Fairness and equity should be at the heart of all decision making. For example, full time, office based staff should not be always the ones asked to do a new project. For bigger decisions, an equality impact assessment can ensure that people who work flexibly are not inadvertently disadvantaged.



Lisa Freshwater

DIRECTOR OF ORGANISATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS, BLOOD CANCER UK

I can still remember in my very first management job being told that I could not start 15 minutes later one morning a week so that I could take my young children to school. They went to breakfast clubs the rest of the week and I just wanted to take them into school on one day. When my request was refused, I thought that is just wrong, 9 to 5 is not a good fit for everyone and it really made me think about what sort of organisation I wanted to work for.

The next company I worked for was very different - the focus was on 'outcomes' not how long you sat at your desk.

Those two experiences have meant I have always championed flexible or agile working throughout my career. I have always fought against the view that 'if you can't see them they are not working'.

I was attracted to my current role at Blood Cancer UK because it was clear as soon as I met the new CEO, Gemma Peters, that she was someone that really cared about people. It's so important that leaders set the tone for an organisation and lead by example. Gemma wanted to build a high performing, caring organisation where people were supported to do their best work and deliver for people affected by blood cancer

I'm not saying it was always easy. When I first arrived in March 2018 there was a lot of mistrust, and morale was quite low. I carried out various pulse surveys and in December 2018 only 41% would recommend Blood Cancer UK as a good employer. So, we knew it would take time to make a shift but it's been worth it. A year later in 2019 our pulse survey showed that 95% of staff would recommend us and that trend has continued throughout the pandemic.

So, what did we change?

A key part to our approach was that senior staff modelled flexible working from the start. In most organisations people watch the senior team and then tend to follow their approach. In my second week I worked remotely one day a week and then most of the senior team worked one or two days remotely each week. We encouraged hot desking, having meetings away from the office. There was some resistance at first and it took a good twelve months for things to really start to change. I remember one person saying to me 'but there's no-one from the senior team in the office on a Friday' and I questioned why does that matter? What do you need to see them in person for on a Friday? We really had to push back against that assumption that you were 'less available' if you weren't physically in the office.

Another big thing we put in place was giving people control over their hours and that if they wanted to work different hours to what was seen as 'normal' that they didn't need to ask permission. Yes, they needed to communicate with colleagues and put it in their diary but they didn't need to ask.

So, by the time the pandemic hit, in many ways we were very ready. Everyone had the tech they needed and people were already used to working from home or at locations that weren't our main office. And in many ways the pandemic and lockdown enabled us to do more to change our organisational culture and embed flexible working even more deeply. We introduced five wellbeing days in addition to annual leave and every six weeks we have a focus day where there are no internal meetings or emails, people do something for their own development.

And I would say it's changed us as an organisation. We have seen a real shift in confidence levels of staff from our regions and I think they feel much more part of the charity. Now when we have our Wednesday meeting when we share organisational updates, it's no longer just the managers or senior team who speak. Everyone is online and everyone contributes. It feels almost like a new organisation and the enthusiasm for what we are doing is just brilliant to see.

Not everything we have done has worked and in the early days we did have a few people who decided the way we were working wasn't for them and they left the organisation. But we learnt from things that didn't work, adjusted and now we have people actively approaching us because they've heard that it's a great place to work.

My tips on how to embed flexible working effectively are:

1. Trust is so important. You can write all the policies you want but if people don't feel trusted and empowered then it's never going to work.
2. One size definitely doesn't fit all. You have to recognise that people have different skills and needs, so your approach from day one needs to be flexible.
3. Give your leaders and managers the skills to understand how to get the best out of people. We have a coach for everyone on the leadership team.
4. Make it clear when recruiting that you are open to job shares or flexible working.
5. Lead by example and role model flexible working in the senior team.

Building cultures of trust and empowerment

While having a strong flexible working policy can be an important starting point, it is just the start of the journey for a truly flexible culture. Ultimately, flexibility isn't about policies or rules. It is a mindset and culture of trust and empowerment, that focusses on outcomes and impact over hours worked, that will build a successful flexible working culture.

“Another big thing we put in place was giving people control over their hours and that if they wanted to work different hours to what was seen as “normal” that they didn't need to ask permission. Yes, they needed to communicate with colleagues and put it in their diary but they didn't need to ask.”

LISA FRESHWATER, DIRECTOR OF ORGANISATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS, BLOOD CANCER UK

Building a culture of trust isn't easy and takes time, honest conversations and a concerted effort to bring people with you. [Forever Flex](#), a report by Mother Pukka, found that fear of loss of control over outcomes, working patterns and habits is a key barrier to leading with trust around flexibility for many managers.

“A lack of trust often comes from fear of losing control. If we want people to be more open to flex, first we need to empathise - what are they afraid is going to happen once the reins are loosened?”

FLEXAPPEAL REPORT, MOTHER PUKKA

For charity managers required to deliver complex, sensitive, critical work with vulnerable people in a highly regulated environment - often at increasing volumes with decreasing resource post pandemic - the desire for control, and being able to 'see' your team, can understandably feel even more acute. It is not easy to think differently and creatively when there is so little time to get the work done.

‘Trust is key - there’s a fear about moving away from how we’ve always done things.’

KATHARINE SACKS-JONES, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BECOME

Often, this fear of what you might lose can lead to a default position of creating rules, policies and handbooks that can appear so complex that it seems easier to do nothing at all and default to ‘standard’ ways of working.

‘It’s understandable that some people will want all the details and have all the questions. But don’t design for them. Design for trust.’

LISA FRESHWATER, DIRECTOR OF ORGANISATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS, BLOOD CANCER UK

It takes trust to have the conversation in the first place, and again to explore new ways of working and allowing those to flourish. Managers need to listen to the experiences and needs of others to understand people’s different working preferences and strengths. Only through safe and honest conversations can we make the most of individual talent and individual work styles.

‘It’s our job to treat our colleagues like grown ups. That doesn’t mean there won’t be some difficult conversations and negotiations along the way. It isn’t always going to be easy and we’ll definitely get things wrong sometimes and need to learn as we go. But starting with trust is the best way to engage people and find something that works.’

JOHN HITCHEN, CEO, RENASI

Within all these considerations, putting outcomes and impact ahead of fixed ideas of when and where work should be done, will make all the difference to mindsets and help maintain focus on what really matters.

Role modelling from the top

‘My working pattern means I can flex around my children, I get to see them more, and I work in different ways to achieve that. One way doesn’t suit everyone. Flexibility allows us to honour the other parts of who we are.’

JOHN HITCHEN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, RENASI

Role modelling from leaders really matters when it comes to flexibility. Choosing a work pattern that promotes your own work-life balance sends a strong message that this is how you do business, and gives others confidence to make a request. Just make sure you communicate clearly that this is a working pattern that suits you and not additional, unpaid working hours on top of your core hours. Otherwise, you could unwittingly set an expectation that all staff work longer hours.

‘There just aren’t enough role models and examples out there, which makes it feel scary and then people aren’t willing to risk doing things differently. Good examples build people’s confidence to experiment.’

TANYA STEVENS, PRINCIPAL, SOCIETY

Yet it is not as simple as leaders just deciding to work ‘more flexibly’ themselves, especially in smaller organisations where leaders straddle both strategic and operational roles. It is not unusual, especially since the pandemic hit, to hear leaders say that they spend the working day in back to back meetings. Everything else - report writing, administrative work, thinking time - must take place outside of their working hours. When need and workload is so high, the pressure to do more, lean in, and shoulder the load can feel overwhelming.

‘On the whole, people who work flexibly overdo it rather than underdo it. We need to think about how we set boundaries and switch off. There is a risk of working too hard because people are grateful for flexibility and are overcompensating.’

KATHARINE SACKS-JONES, CEO, BECOME

There is potential for flexible working to lead to a negative impact on wellbeing if it is not carefully managed. There is a risk that, if people are empowered to manage their own time, it may actually be more difficult for them to give themselves permission to stick within their contracted hours. This is particularly true in charities - when staff are highly motivated by the cause they are supporting.

‘Presenteeism has changed, it’s no longer coats on the back of the chair, now it’s about having permission to turn off your devices and not be answering online chats in the evenings and over the weekend. This low level, in the back of your mind expectation, to be “always on” is really not good for mental health.’

KIRSTIE AXTEMS, HEAD OF EMPLOYER SERVICES, WORKING FAMILIES

Wellbeing considerations can be very different depending on roles, circumstance and life stages: a working from home arrangement that works for a working parent, might not work for a younger person, people in shared accommodation, or someone delivering complex support roles like counselling or helplines.

Establishing strong peer networks of other supportive leaders who also work flexibility can be incredibly helpful in moving away from defining worth and status by ‘busyness’. Such networks provide opportunities to share good practice, give each other ‘permission’ to balance and show their ‘whole selves’, all of which can be incredibly helpful. Visibly setting aside time for school pick up, going for a walk and setting an out of office on holidays are simple but important places to start.

‘When I have worked flexibly in senior positions, a talented team of fantastic part time workers has grown alongside me, bringing huge value and skill.’

BECKY HEWITT, CHAIR, FLEXIBLE WORKING GROUP

In our research, the organisations that were most advanced in terms of a flexible working culture were the ones in which flexibility was the default position.

‘It’s not ‘put a business case and we will assess it’. It’s ‘we start from the point of view of yes and work backwards’. We don’t see asking for flexible working as a benefit, it’s the way we do the work!’

KATHRYN HOWARD, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, OD AND HR, SAMARITANS

This starts from the point of advertising roles as being flexible but it’s important that high expectations and the courage to do things differently are set at the top of organisations, to support consistent practice. The senior team needs to ensure that flexibility is seen as normal practice and available to everyone in some way: it’s not a benefit or an exception, but just the way work is done.

‘Flip it round, why wouldn’t you, not why should you.’

DIANE LIGHTFOOT, BUSINESS DISABILITY FORUM

The role of the trustee board

‘Taking on a chairing role can be daunting. In our latest survey 62% of chairs were spending four days or more on their chairing role, with 32% spending more than seven days per month. It’s worth exploring how to support the chair, for example, by reducing or sharing the load. Vice chairs and admin support can help.’

ROSALIND OAKLEY, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ASSOCIATION OF CHAIRS

Trustees have an important role to play in setting up the conditions for CEOs and executive leaders to work flexibly. Trustees also have a role in thinking carefully about what organisational support leaders need to work differently and challenging the executive to set realistic goals and plans.

‘As a mum of two young kids myself, I know how important the flexibility to sometimes be at the school gate, or be at school assemblies is for me. Having the flexibility in my role to be able to do that is something I now expect from an employer, otherwise I simply wouldn’t take a role.’

CHARLOTTE HILL, CEO, THE FELIX PROJECT

Beyond support specifically for leaders, the board has a wider role in overseeing a flexible working culture. This doesn’t mean reviewing all flexible working requests - something we came across in our research - but rather taking a scrutiny approach. The board’s role is to ask the right questions: what is our approach to flexible working, how many people are working flexibly in practice, what else can we do?

Perhaps most importantly of all, leaders - both executive and trustees - need to be vocal and visible champions of flexible working. They should be advocating for why it matters, walking the talk through promoting flexible cultures, sharing their experiences, experiments, and learnings, and speaking out about what works. The more we normalise flexibility, the less stigma and exclusion will exist.

Organisations need to support trustees, and particularly chairs, to have flexibility in the way in which they undertake their roles. Many chair roles are advertised as requiring 20+ days unpaid time per year, which for many people is an impossible requirement, and one of the reasons for a lack of diversity at board level. Consider whether you can reduce the pressure by having one or more vice chairs or admin support for the chair to reduce the burden.

The board, and where relevant executive team, should work together to understand what flexibility looks like for individual trustees. For example, what times of the day work best for meeting, should the timing change for alternate meetings. Covid-19 has led many boards to meet solely online in recent months which has arguably increased accessibility. As boards start to consider meeting in person once again, having facilities for hybrid meetings is a consideration to ensure ongoing flexibility.

Support, education and inspiration for managers

‘We asked people what the barriers were to flexibility - often it was line managers.’

KATHRYN HOWARD, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, OD AND HR, SAMARITANS

It is so easy for line managers to be put off flexible working as it feels too complex, too policy heavy, too difficult to be fair and consistent, and too easy to get wrong. Many are taking great strides, but it is easy to feel overwhelmed by complexity, loss of control, aversion to change, or a fear of ‘getting it wrong’.

Some managers are more inclined towards flexibility, others run services or teams where flexible working options seem more straightforward to implement. Differing attitudes and team circumstances can lead to different practice in different teams. Managers told us they feel the pressure of needing to balance providing equitable access to roles, ensuring that flexible options are fairly available for all staff and making sure workload is shared equally across roles and teams.

The detail and complexity of implementation can make it all-too-easy to lose sight of the huge benefits of flexible teams in terms of productivity, impact, wellbeing, talent and inclusion.

‘Our flexible working arrangement - a combination of remote working, part-time hours, compressed hours, and flexing around caring and other commitments - have had no bearing on the quality, creativity and impact of our work. It wasn’t even in question. That high level of trust in us to deliver, and not ask about the where and how, is incredibly empowering and motivating.’

CLAIRE REYNOLDS, HEAD OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION, CHANGING FACES

It’s vital that leadership provides not only high expectations about flexibility being for everyone, but also practical support for line managers to implement flexibility in their teams. Coaching, training, encouragement to experiment, story sharing, access to examples of good practice, workshops, and the time to have conversations with other managers about what’s working are all key.

‘Provide support to line managers, they want to do the right thing and want to be fair. Education and training can boost confidence levels.’

LAURA BENNETT, CARERS TRUST

Managers need support to understand the different types of flexibility available, have honest and empathetic conversations that respect people as individuals, think creatively about job design, tackle proximity bias, and think about good practice that supports teams who are working flexibly.

For example, it is good practice for managers to support their teams with clear flexible working protocols that the whole team can sign up to: this is how we will communicate, this is when I am available, this is how I will take responsibility for asking for help with my wellbeing if I need it, this is how we use our tech etc. This helps create a level playing field - and gives a clear structure for new team members too.

‘Our approach was to say to managers, this is a non negotiable - if you don’t think flexibility can work, let us work with you to show you how it can be done.’

KATHRYN HOWARD, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, OD AND HR, SAMARITANS

Experimentation and innovation

Managers shouldn't feel pressure to come up with perfect or fixed model. No organisation will come up with something that will work for everyone all the time. And no one has yet found the ideal model for balancing life, work, community and productivity. But that shouldn't stop us trying.

‘One person's flexibility can be someone else's rigidity depending on home circumstances, type of role, front line versus office based. Timing and breaking up the day can help everyone.’

LAURA BENNETT, CARERS TRUST

There isn't one solution, different approaches will work in different situations. The best solutions come from having the courage to experiment, take small steps, make mistakes, adjust, learn and improve, be honest about what is and isn't working, and focus on individual needs.'

‘It feels like a journey, it shouldn't be a bounce from one way of working to another.’

SARAH MILSOM, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT, RELATE

When transitioning to new ways of working we need to be willing to test, consult and regularly review. Otherwise, we risk either finding a new form of inflexibility or excluding people in new ways. Sharing stories about different approaches widely is critical for building confidence and knowledge.

Smaller organisations may find it easier to rapidly test and implement new models of working, while larger organisations may have more resources and capacity to draw on. Often it is teams themselves, who are experts in their areas, who are best placed to develop and experiment with flexible ways of working that work for them, and the outcomes they need to deliver.

‘You should ask the experts: the people actually doing the job! I saw a great example of pandemic good practice in a housing association where several teams delivered the same services. They told the teams to work out among themselves how they wanted to organise the work which they did. Teams all came up with different ways of delivering that were equally successful.’

KIRSTIE AXTEMS, HEAD OF EMPLOYER SERVICES, WORKING FAMILIES

Setting boundaries

Both organisations and individuals need to understand that it's OK to say 'no', to set boundaries, and to suggest different approaches to how flexibility can work. Sometimes there are practical constraints and organisations providing services need to balance the needs of both the people providing and receiving the service.

‘The challenge is more for those on the frontline delivering services, where the need for flexibility for staff needs to be balanced with delivering for beneficiaries.’

PAUL FARMER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, MIND

Not everything is possible, and everyone involved needs to be open minded.

‘It is okay to say no, and set boundaries, and suggest alternatives - on both sides. Just because one way of being flexible won’t work - it doesn’t mean there isn’t another option.’

KIRSTIE AXTEMS, HEAD OF EMPLOYER SERVICES, WORKING FAMILIES

It is also important to consider other needs in the workforce, for example younger people whose learning may benefit from working with colleagues in person, and the benefits face to face connections can have on team culture, moral, mental health, and creativity. Within all these considerations, putting outcomes ahead of fixed ideas of how work should be done will make all the difference.

Below we highlight what we heard in our conversations with leaders and managers about the most common barriers and misconceptions about flexible working and how to overcome them.

Top barriers and myths about for managers and how to overcome them

‘For employers, turn it from “why should I say yes?” to “why shouldn’t I say yes?”’

DIANE LIGHTFOOT, BUSINESS DISABILITY FORUM

1. ‘Our productivity will suffer’

There is a concern that people will work less in a less controlled structure, but statistics show that offering flexibility can actually result in [higher levels of productivity, but also retention \(Forbes, 2016\)](#). Flexible working increases morale and loyalty which can lead to more, and better quality, output.

‘There is a perception that if you work from home, you are less present, and less productive which is actually not the case at all. As senior leaders we will always need to champion trust. As I say, if you don’t trust your colleagues, why are you employing them?’

RUTH BLAZYE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF RETAIL AND COMMUNITIES, SCOPE

2. ‘It won’t be fair on frontline staff’

Flexibility needs to be viewed as not just about geography and hours. That is the starting point. It also needs to be seen in terms of adapting to individuals’ changing needs and scope for autonomy alongside business needs. One form of flexibility is also unlikely to work organisation wide, or consistently across all teams and roles, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t scope for a different form of flexibility to be offered in its place.

‘If you’re in A&E, you need nurses in A&E. So, you’ve got to recognise that there are practical constraints about what you can do as an organisation, and if you’re providing services with people, you need to balance between those providing and receiving the services. But that doesn’t mean you can’t actively think and consider what a flexible working policy or approach might create the opportunity for.’

PAUL FARMER, CEO, MIND

3. 'I am so overwhelmed with how much I have to do, I don't know where to start with role modelling flexible working.'

Role modelling can feel daunting and difficult, especially when leading an organisation. But ultimately it is one of the biggest enablers of change. Leaders and managers need to think about how they meaningfully demonstrate flexibility on their own terms. Setting boundaries around availability and respecting the boundaries of others sends a strong signal that enables others to do the same.

‘When I became interim CEO I made a decision to stop working weekends. It had been my only option when I was home schooling my children for part of the week. But I had got into the habit and carried on even when they went back to school. The impact was immediate: when I stopped working at the weekend, everyone stopped working at the weekend.’

SARAH VIBERT, INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE, NCVO

4. 'It's too expensive'

Sometimes flexible working can be seen as an expensive luxury. Additional costs often cited are costs related to technology or home working spaces, and the perception of extra costs for extra head count. Yet [flexible working reduces absenteeism, improves performance and reduces staff turnover \(CIPD 2018\)](#). Alongside opportunities for cost savings from reduced office footprint, can we really afford the hidden costs of being inflexible?

5. 'There is too much work to do - our beneficiaries depend on us'

Often the hardest thing in mission driven charities is to prioritise, accept you can't do everything, and write a business plan which matches the resources the organisation has available. With this in place manageable jobs can then be designed and realistic objectives set for individuals. It is understandable for hiring managers to default to one full time role - if they have the budget and work to match this. But offering flexible or part-time roles does not need to mean that less work gets done. The organisation and system need to lean into planning where the rest of the work should go. Is another part time role required? Is it a job share? This avoids having an individual being asked to do an impossible role that is too big for contracted hours, or a team that is having to absorb an unreasonable workload.

‘I have always found that by trusting colleagues to deliver in a way that works for them and the organisation - allowing as much flexibility as is possible and practical for the role and the team - colleagues deliver in spades and repay the flexible approach with brilliant work and loyalty to the organisation.’

CHARLOTTE HILL, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, THE FELIX PROJECT

6. 'It won't be fair on staff who don't work flexibly'

A key message here is that flexibility is open to everyone, and working patterns and practices that treat everyone as humans and individuals can benefit us all. It's key to have proper planning and protocols in place so that ways of working are clear to everyone, and any additional work is carefully allocated within the organisation so expectations are fair.

‘Sometimes people are opposed to compressed hours because everyone else is working until 19:00 too and it doesn’t seem fair. But the answer isn’t to level down to less good practice and prevent or limit flexibility because of systemic issues, it’s to address workload elsewhere.’

KATHRYN HOWARD, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, OD AND HR, SAMARITANS

7. ‘It is too complex - I don’t know where to start’

Don’t feel pressure to come up with perfect or fixed model. No organisation will come up with something that will work for everyone all the time. The best solutions come from having the courage to experiment, take small steps, make mistakes, adjust, learn and improve. Be honest about what is and isn’t working and focus on individual needs.

Conclusion

Flexible working is fundamental to the future of the voluntary sector as we move beyond the pandemic with inclusion, social justice, and compassion at the heart of how we want to work and thrive together. But this will require courage, creativity, trust, and a willingness to experiment, learn and share our experiences openly with each other. This report is just the start of an exciting and overdue conversation in our sector. Our hope is that the recommendations below will help to create and support the necessary shifts in mindset, energy, commitment, and knowledge sharing that will take us to a place where flexibility is deeply embedded in our cultures for the long term.

Recommendations

1	Backed by ACEVO and NCVO, the voluntary sector to champion a default position of ‘yes to flex’ - where employers proactively consider how flexibility is possible in the job design for all roles, for everyone.
2	Flexibility to be advertised for all roles - so employers openly lead the conversation about how flexibility can work, and the focus isn’t on the candidate to request it.
3	Organisations and individuals to openly share their stories of how flexibility is working - so that best practice, learning and inspiration are easily available in the sector, confidence is built, and stigma is reduced.
4	Organisations to embrace a position of trust - where individuals are more empowered to manage their time based on outcomes and impact, rather than when and where they work.
5	Organisations to have the courage to experiment, make mistakes, adjust, learn and improve, and be honest about what is and isn’t working while keeping a focus on individual needs.
6	Flexibility to become a central pillar of equity, diversity and inclusion, and wellbeing strategies.

Resources

Reports and further reading

Sink or Swim	The Impact of Covid and how to bridge the widening equalities gap
Forever Flex	Making Flexible working work beyond a crisis
Flexonomics	The Economic and fiscal logic of flexible working

Resources

Working Families	The UK's work-life balance charity
Pregnant then Screwed	The leading charity working to end the motherhood penalty.
Maternity Action	The UK's maternity rights charity
Business Disability Forum	Resources on disability employment law, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplace adjustments proof points • Writing a reasonable adjustment policy for your workforce • FAQs - COVID-19 and returning to the workplace • Tailored adjustment plans, passports and agreements
Role Share	An organisation that matches people to share jobs
Working Dads	A jobsite and community connecting dads with employers
JobsharesWork	An organisation that provides advice and creates opportunities to raise the profile and availability of job sharing in charities

Methodology

The ACEVO and NCVO Flexible Working Group was announced in August 2021 - to galvanise lasting positive change about flexible working in the charity sector post pandemic. The Working Group was chaired by Becky Hewitt former CEO of Changing Faces and sponsored by Starfish Search.

Eleven working group members were recruited via an open selection process out of over 60 applicants to build the strongest strength, depth and diversity of knowledge and experience around flexible working. Working group members are listed below. The working group met three times during October and November 2021 - and their research included focus groups, wide-ranging expert interviews, many informal conversations and desk research. We are enormously grateful to everyone who shared their experiences, perspectives and knowledge.

Working group members

Akiko Hart , CEO, National Survivor User Network
Alice Klein , assistant director of communications, Shelter
Ama Afrifa-Tchie , head of people, wellbeing and equity, Mental Health First Aid England
Claire Reynolds , head of digital and data, Changing Faces
Darren Knight , CEO, George House Trust
Helen Reed , co-founder, JobsharesWork
Jane van Zyl , CEO, Working Families
Lauren Seager-Smith , CEO, Kidscape
Katie Hillitt , co-founder, JobsharesWork
Michael Maddick , director of people & culture, The Children's Trust
Pip Gardner , CEO, The Kite Trust

Expert interviewees

Rosalind Oakley, Association of Chairs
Katharine Sacks-Jones, Become
Lisa Freshwater, Blood Cancer
Claire Walker and Hannah Essex, British Chambers of Commerce
Diane Lightfoot, Business Disability Fund
Laura Bennett, Carers Trust
Katherine Wilson, Carers UK
Clare Moody, Equally Ours
Kathryn Howard, Samaritans
Andrew Bazeley, Fawcett Society
Paul Farmer, Mind
Sarabajaya Kumar, trustee, NCVO
Ruth Blazye and Louise Youngman, Scope
Tanya Stevens, Society
Kirstie Axtens, Working Families
Victoria Benson, Gingerbread