



Lancaster University
Management School

Using Flexible Working Arrangements to Attract and Retain Older Workers

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Foreword

Stop someone in the street and ask them this question: “What big changes are taking place right now that will significantly impact the way we live in the future?” They will likely tell you about artificial intelligence, maybe global warming, but few people will mention demographic change. In the UK, we live longer and healthier lives than ever before. At the same time, we are having increasingly fewer children. The net effect is that older people are forming a larger proportion of both the population, and our workforce. This shift is having significant consequences for society, and creating questions that need to be answered. How do we fund a large and increasing number of retirees? As employers, how do we attract and retain the talent we need? As individuals, how can we make the changes which are vital to achieving long-term financial security? How do we re-imagine our relationship with work and leisure for modern lifespans?

In recent years, we have also seen significant changes in the way we work. The pandemic normalised remote working and irrevocably changed workplace culture. Our relationships as people with the way we work is also evolving. The concept of a ‘job for life’ has become a thing of the past. We change careers more frequently and we have new ideas about when and how we retire. More and more of us are looking for a better work life balance, one where we have time for ourselves and time to take care of those who are most important to us, while at the same time enjoying a fulfilling career.

The wheels are already in motion. Shifting demographics and changing attitudes towards work are realities we must all face. Forward-looking employers are already examining ways of developing attractive employee value propositions that move with the times. They’re figuring out what they need to make happen to compensate for radical demographic change and to attract and retain older workers. Flexible working arrangements have become pivotal in enabling employers to offer attractive benefits to staff, while simultaneously offering older workers the opportunity to work a schedule that accommodates their individual needs and affords them the tools they need to cultivate the work-life balance that is important to them.

With this goal in mind, you may be wondering what exactly flexible working entails. Are you offering the level and type of flexibility that potential and current employees are looking for? As a new and developing concept, flexible working can mean vastly different things to different people. This examination of flexible working arrangements aims to offer vital insights into this area, which will put any organisation well on their way to becoming an age-inclusive employer with a solid employee value proposition.

Authors



Mike Mansfield
CEO, ProAge



Uzair Shah
Lecturer, Lancaster University



Oliver Suett
Student, Lancaster University



Juan Navarro Rodríguez
Student, Lancaster University



Baiyang Zhao
Student, Lancaster University



Nicolas Salafranca
Student, Lancaster University



Evie Newett
Student, Lancaster University

Executive Summary

This report is part of a larger piece of research we are conducting with **Brave Starts** to Map the Way Forward to a Multigenerational Workforce. We want to understand how organisations are preparing for an ageing workforce, what they have done and what they are planning on doing to develop an employee value proposition that is attractive to older workers. In conducting this research, we learned that offering flexible working was one of the most common benefits employers were offering, yet we saw differences in what is being offered by employers and what older workers are looking for. We will be publishing the results of our larger research project later in 2024 and wanted to devote some time to looking at the topic of flexible working arrangements.

We began by reviewing academic literature and news articles to gain an understanding of the types of flexible working arrangements commonly offered by employers and how these are experienced and appreciated by employees. We subsequently interviewed seven HR managers to learn about the types of arrangements offered in their organisations and how these work in practice. Finally, we conducted 2 focus groups, where we spoke to 15 people over the age of 50 to obtain their views and to understand how flexible working arrangements could be better designed to meet the needs of people in this age group.

The UK government lays out seven distinct forms of flexible working arrangement, including remote working, flexitime and job sharing. We learned from our desk research that flexible working arrangements are one of the most important benefits an employer can offer in attracting and retaining older workers:

72% Almost three-quarters (72%) want some form of flexibility to achieve a better work-life balance.

32% Almost a third (32%) of those who would consider returning to work, after leaving during the pandemic, cite flexible working as an important factor in choosing a new job.

Research has also shown that flexible working can yield important benefits for an organisation, including improved employee satisfaction, increased productivity, and improved physical and mental health.

The employer perspective

All organisations interviewed offered flexible working options to their employees. The type of arrangements available depended on the organisation's sector and the individual's role. All respondents told us they offered part-time work and either fully remote or hybrid working to their employees. Fewer organisations offered compressed hours (71%) or flexitime (57%) and only three in ten (29%) offered job sharing as an arrangement for their staff to work flexibly.

The employers we interviewed communicated a strong commitment to making reasonable accommodations, such that flexible working arrangements benefitted both the organisation and the older workers within it. Several commented that more could be done to include these flexible options in job advertisements, and to extend these benefits to existing employees.

There has not been a significant change in requests for flexible working arrangements since the COVID pandemic. This could be attributed to the impact of the pandemic on public perceptions of remote and flexible work. Few people in senior roles work flexibly, meaning that career progression is less visible for flexible workers, and may occur at a slower pace.

The employee perspective

The most common reason for older workers to work flexibly is to achieve a better work-life balance. Interviewees spoke about flexibility giving them more time to pursue hobbies and other interests as well as allowing them time for caregiving responsibilities. Some expressed difficulty working full-time in the office and some discussed flexible working as a transition to retirement.

Part-time and hybrid or remote working were the most commonly mentioned forms of flexible working arrangement. While older workers enjoyed the benefits of commuting less often, they also observed that they had fewer opportunities to meet colleagues and widen their networks.

Older workers told us that they would be much more likely to apply for a job if it was clear what flexible working arrangements would look like in a particular role. When it was unclear what type of flexibility was available for a role, older workers found it difficult to assess when and how to ask what options might be available during the interview process.

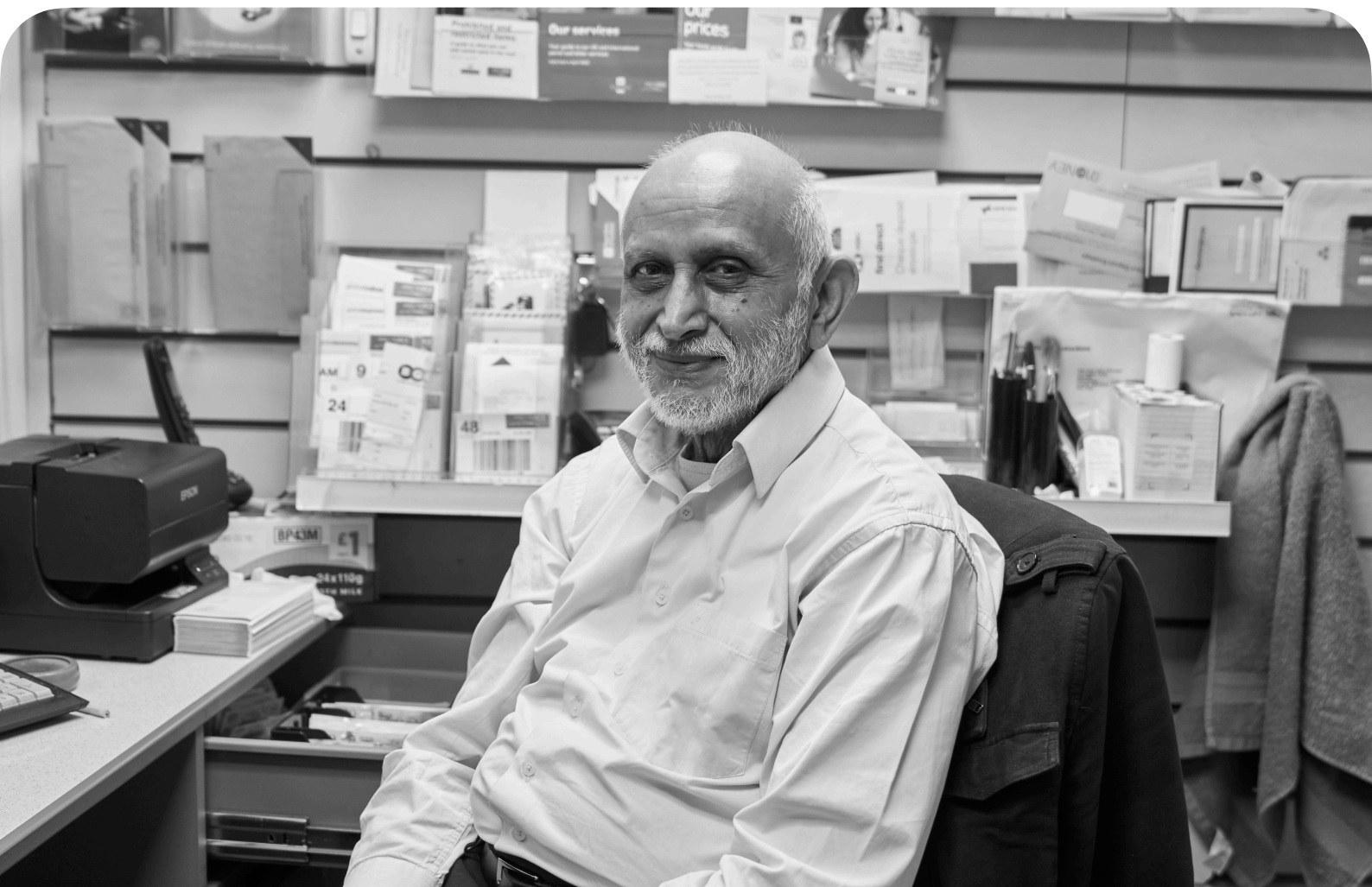
Mismatches in supply and demand of flexible working

All organisations we spoke with offered some form of flexible work. All offered their staff either part-time work or partially or fully remote work. Fewer offered compressed hours (71%), flexitime (59%) and job sharing (29%), despite these forms of work being considered attractive for older workers.

The demand for part-time work is higher than the perceived supply and older workers found it more difficult to find fully remote work than hybrid work.

Conclusion

While the experience of HR professionals was that the demand for flexible work was being met by the supply, our research has shown that older workers regard flexible working as an important and in some cases a 'must have' benefit when looking for a job. We learned that older workers find it difficult to know when and how to start a conversation around flexible working. They feel they need to have a 'justifiable reason' for requesting it, and fear that asking may impact their career progression. These concerns may be affecting the perceived demand for flexible work arrangements among HR professionals, which may be negatively impacting organisations' ability to attract and retain the talent they need to be successful long term.



Introduction

ProAge is a member-driven UK charity focused on promoting age inclusion in the workplace. Through facilitative leadership, we help organisations create working environments where the skills and experiences of older workers are valued and intergenerational collaboration is leveraged to improve profitability and create strong innovative teams. By learning from each other, we create leaders across generations and a culture where all can thrive.

During the months of January and February 2024, ProAge teamed up with five undergraduate students from Lancaster University and their academic advisor to research flexible working arrangements in the United Kingdom. We asked the students to investigate what types of flexible working arrangements are most frequently offered by employers and what arrangements are most sought after by older workers, to identify potential mismatches.

The aim of this report is to provide HR managers with actionable recommendations to help them design, communicate, and manage their flexible working arrangements in a way that benefits the business and meets the needs of older workers. To ensure that our conclusions and recommendations are realistic, the students conducted a review of current literature on the topic, interviewed HR managers, and conducted focus groups with employees over the age of 50.



Literature Review

What is flexible working?

Flexible working has been defined in academic literature as the “ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks”¹.

According to the UK Government website², the main flexible working arrangements offered in the workplace are:

- Job sharing
- Remote working
- Compressed hours, working contracted hours over fewer days
- Flexitime, agreeing with your manager when you start and stop working
- Annualised hours, agreeing the hours you work during the year but have flexibility about when you work
- Staggered hours, starting and ending at different times than your colleagues, and
- Phased retirement, reducing or changing the hours you work as transition to your retirement.

New regulation in the UK regarding flexible working was introduced in April 2024, affording employees the right to request flexible working arrangements from their first day on the job³. Despite this, according to data taken mere months before this was implemented, 70% of employees were not aware of this right⁴.

70% of employees were not aware of this right.

1. E. Jeffrey Hill , Joseph G. Grzywacz , Sarah Allen , Victoria L. Blanchard , Christina Matz-Costa , Sandee Shulkin & Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes. (2008). Defining and conceptualizing workplace flexibility, *Community, Work & Family*, 11(2), 149-163.
2. GOV.UK (2024). Flexible working.
3. GOV.UK (2024). Flexible working.
4. Acas. (2023). 7 out of 10 employees are unaware of new day one right to request flexible working.

The business case for developing a flexible working arrangement that appeals to older workers

Older workers represent a growing segment of the UK labour market. Increases in longevity and falling birth rates are resulting in fundamental demographic changes in the United Kingdom and around the world. These changes are observed both in society and in the workforce. In April 2024, the Office for National Statistics reported that, in the United Kingdom, employees over the age of 50 represent one third of the workforce⁵ and that this proportion is set to increase in the future.

By 2030, 150 million jobs will have shifted to older workers globally.

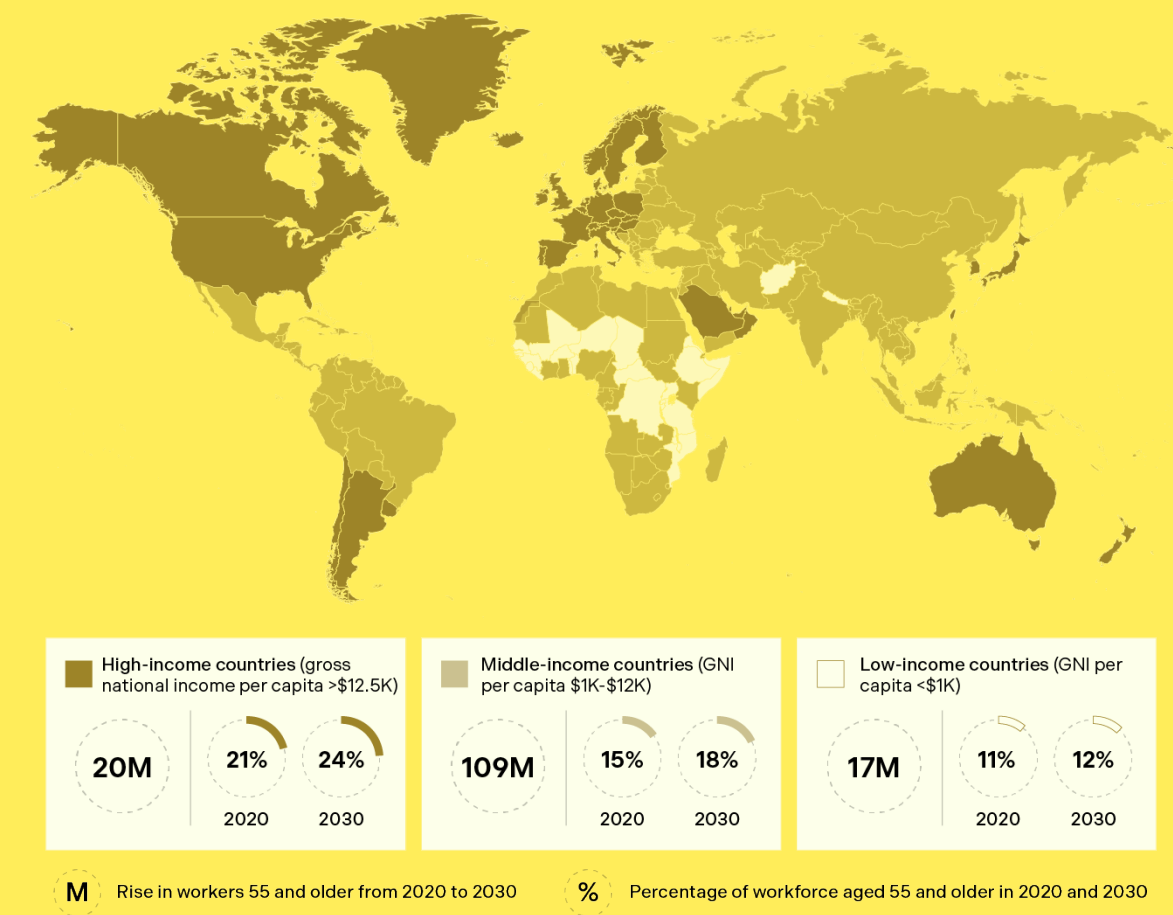


Figure 1. Source: Bain⁶

5. Office for National Statistics A01: Summary of Labour Market Statistics published April 16, 2024.
6. Figure 1. Bain (2023). Better with Age: The Rising Importance of Older Workers.

Older workers, defined in this report as employees over 50, possess vital organisational knowledge and skills necessary to preserve business continuity, improve productivity, and stimulate economic growth⁷. However, the Department of Work and Pensions reported that there were 3.5 million people aged between 50 and 64 who were economically inactive in the UK in 2023⁸. At a time when many sectors of the economy face skills shortages, it has become critical to develop an employee value proposition that appeals to experienced older workers.

Despite many older workers facing age-based discrimination⁹ and 36% of people over 50 feeling they are in less a favourable position in recruitment processes than their younger counterparts¹⁰, many still want to continue working. In 2022, the Office for National Statistics conducted a survey of adults aged 50 to 65 who have left their job since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. They found that the majority (58%) would consider returning to work, and that the factors they considered most important when choosing a new job were: flexible working (32%), good pay (23%) and being able to work from home (12%)¹¹.

A recent report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (2024) highlighted the rising popularity of flexible working among older workers:

- 72% of over-50s wanted to have flexibility in their work to achieve a better work-life balance, with 34% motivated by caregiving responsibilities.
- Home working arrangements rose to 22.4% in 2023 (a 12.4% increase from 2020).
- 12.9% of participants availed of flexitime arrangements.

7. Nagarajan, N., Wada, M., Fang, M. et al. (2019). Defining organizational contributions to sustaining an ageing workforce: a bibliometric review. *Eur J Ageing* 16, 337–361.
8. Department of Work and Pensions: Economic labour market status of individuals aged 50 and over, trends over time: September 2023.
9. Roscigno, V. J., Zheng, H., & Crowley, M. (2022). Workplace Age Discrimination and Social-psychological Well-being. *Society and Mental Health*, 12(3), 195-214.
10. Centre for Ageing Better (2020). Too much experience: Older workers' perceptions of ageism in the recruitment process.
11. ONS: Reasons for workers aged over 50 leaving employment since the start of the coronavirus pandemic: wave 2.

Flexible work arrangements are among the most common motivating factors in encouraging older workers back to employment.

Flexible work arrangements are among the most common motivating factors in encouraging older workers back to employment. They enable organisations to profit from the skills and experience of talented employees and offer older workers the opportunity to stay economically active. Flexible working arrangements have become extremely popular after the pandemic outbreak¹². A recent poll by the Institute of Directors (2023) found that 91% of organisations offer flexible working arrangements, with 70% offering part-time jobs¹³.

Despite the ostensibly widespread offerings of flexible working arrangements post-covid, there is a significant mismatch between the availability of flexible working arrangements and the preferences of workers over 50. This is a problem both employers and employees face.

The benefits for employers of offering flexible working arrangements

Research has shown that promoting flexible working arrangements with staff leads to improved employee satisfaction, increased productivity, and better physical and mental health¹⁵. Offering flexibility is also an important way for employers to retain older workers who want to continue working, benefiting from their experience and transferring their knowledge to others on the team.

12. Nicole V. Shifrin & Jesse S. Michel (2021) Flexible work arrangements and employee health: A meta-analytic review. *Work & Stress*, 36(1), 60-85.

13. Institute of Directors (2023). Flexible working: Policy Voice results, September 2023.

Gap between supply and demand of flexible jobs

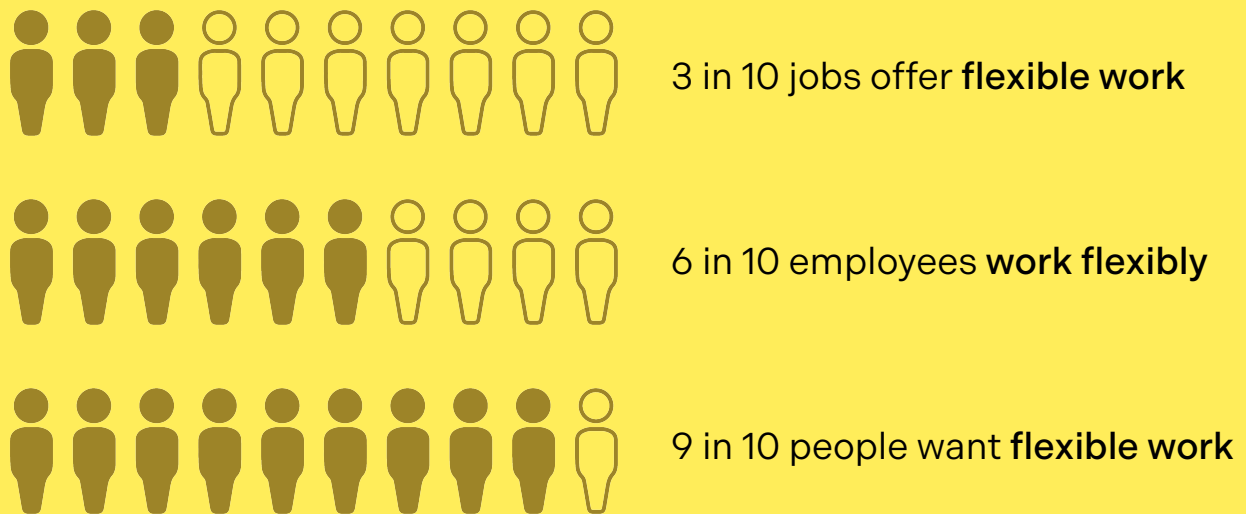


Figure 2. Source: Timewise¹⁴

Furthermore, offering flexible working arrangements ensures that other work-related responsibilities are covered by enabling workers to spend the reduced time and energy where they deem necessary¹⁶. Health is also improved as employees can allocate more time to engage in healthy behaviours^{17 18}.

The current literature has shown that flexible working arrangements are a benefit sought after by workers over 50. They should be a core element of an organisation's employee value proposition, if they are to appeal to older workers. In this report, both employers (supply) and workers (demand) were given the opportunity to offer their views on the current stage of flexible working arrangements.

14. Figure 2. Timewise. (2023). Flexible Jobs Index 2023.

15. Kelliher, C., & Anderson, D. (2010). Doing more with less? Flexible working practices and the intensification of work. *Human Relations*, 63(1), 83-106.

16. Voydanoff, P. (2004). The effects of work demands and resources on work-to-family conflict and facilitation. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(2), 398-412.

17. Grzywacz, J. G., Casey, P. R., & Jones, F. A. (2007). The effects of workplace flexibility on health behaviors: A cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 49(12), 1302- 1309.

18. Moen, P., Fan, W., & Kelly, E. L. (2013). Team-level flexibility, work-home spillover, and health behavior. *Social Science & Medicine*, 84, 69-79.

Findings, analysis and discussion

The employer's perspective

During the pandemic, we all had to adapt to different ways of working. This accelerated the pace of change when it came to the options offered by organisations around flexible working. Remote working became the norm, and for many roles, we were able to adapt work patterns to accommodate people working in different locations. This change in mindset has opened conversations about flexible working and work life balance.

We interviewed seven HR leaders, from organisations in different sectors of the economy, to understand what types of flexible working arrangements they are offering. For consistency, we asked each leader the following questions:

1. What flexible working options does your company offer and is there a pattern in who takes these up?
2. How would taking flexible work arrangements affect the probability of promotion?
3. What's the most likely response to an employee submitting a flexible working request?
4. Where do you see flexible working being in the future?
5. Is the demand for flexible work too high for your company to handle?

Most common types of flexible work arrangements offered by employers

All the organisations we interviewed offered their employees flexible working options. The options available depended on the sector an organisation was working in and the role that the individual had. For example, organisations in the manufacturing sector required some of their employees to be physically present at their work location, while other employees had more freedom to choose where and how they worked. It may not be possible to offer all forms of flexible working to all employees, however even workers who need to be physically present at a work site can be offered other forms of flexibility like compressed hours or job sharing.

All the organisations offered their staff the opportunity to work part-time and to engage in either hybrid or remote work. Fewer organisations offered compressed hours or flexitime and only three in ten offered job sharing as an option. However, even the companies that do offer job sharing said it was taken up mainly by working parents, rather than people over 50.

Companies who offer/have part-time workers in their company



Figure 3

Companies who offer hybrid/fully remote working

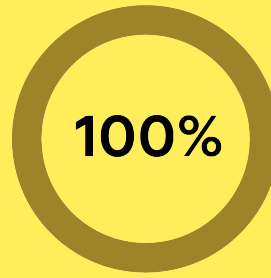


Figure 4

Companies who offer compressed hours

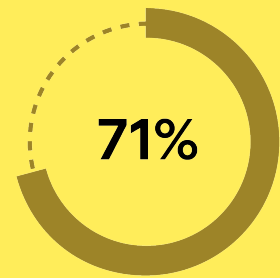


Figure 5

Companies who offer flexi-time

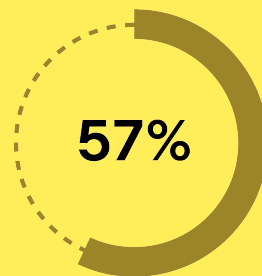


Figure 6

Companies who offer job sharing

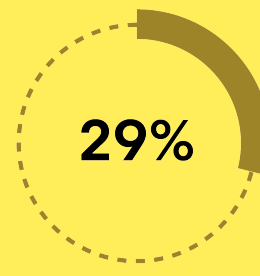


Figure 7

Several of our interviewees also commented that a better job could be done to make sure that job descriptions reflected the flexible work options that were available. Too often, job ads are written based on templates, which don't take account of flexible options that could be integrated into the job's design. This small change could make jobs significantly more appealing to a wider audience. Clarity on what is on offer and what is negotiable is essential. One cited example was that advertising a job as either being only full-time or part-time may put some applicants off applying, especially if they are not sure that the company is open to negotiation.

All organisations offered some form of hybrid or remote work. While the opportunities for remote working are dependent on the nature of the work performed, many roles are now performed by people working exclusively from home or coming to the office on a periodic basis. Older workers are more likely to request some form of remote working arrangement compared with younger workers.

Remote working offers many benefits for organisations as well as their staff; employers can move to desk sharing arrangements to save on office space and employees can save on time spent commuting.

As more people work remotely, areas to monitor closely include the following: the level of collaboration and engagement in teams working in different locations, how staff navigate building the professional networks, enabling career advancement, and issues of loneliness and isolation among staff who may not be coming to the office on a regular basis.

Areas to monitor closely include the following:

- the level of collaboration and engagement in teams working in different locations,
- how staff navigate building the professional networks,
- enabling career advancement, and
- issues of loneliness and isolation among staff who may not be coming to the office on a regular basis.

One of the organisations we spoke with sent out periodic surveys to their staff as a way of checking in and ensuring that employees had an opportunity to voice concerns that could be addressed in a timely manner.

The impact of flexible working arrangements on career progression

We observed a strong commitment from HR leaders to work with staff members working flexibly, to ensure that they don't miss out on opportunities for career progression and advancement. More senior roles within an organisation have more responsibilities, which have traditionally been filled by someone working on-site in a full-time capacity. An open question is: "Can a job be redesigned so that it can be performed by someone working flexibly?"

To date, people on flexible work arrangements have experienced slower career progression when moving to more senior positions within the company, but less so when making lateral moves.

One challenge, and a potential best practice for the future, is to have senior people in the organisation lead by example in showing how roles can be done by people working flexibly.

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How are organisations dealing with requests for flexible working? How do they anticipate doing this in the future?

All HR leaders we spoke with were able to provide examples of how flexible working arrangements were in operation in their organisations. They also spoke

about how they deal with flexible working requests from employees. In all cases, they were committed to seeing how they could make the arrangement work for the individual and the organisation. They were also prepared to consider reasonable accommodations to job roles and ways of working.

The pandemic normalised many forms of remote and flexible working that were unthinkable beforehand. Since the pandemic, working has offered many employees the flexibility they need, which they wouldn't have been afforded before. Consequently, there has not been a significant change in requests for flexible working. The HR leaders we spoke with felt able to accommodate many of the requests they received and did not foresee a significant change in the demand for flexible working in the near future.

HR leaders observed that when they market a role as flexible, they receive a higher number of applications.

Creative ideas and best practice

Remote and hybrid working often offers employees more flexibility in the hours they work. By working a bit later or starting a little earlier, people can live their life around their working hours. Small changes in working times allows employees the freedom during the day to tend to the demands of their personal lives, like picking up kids, exercising, or running errands. For some, the line between work and personal life becomes blurred and people may have trouble switching off, which can lead to stress. Standard Life spoke to us about their "Right to Disconnect" whereby employees are not required to answer emails or be available for work after regular office hours.

Many jobs in manufacturing, healthcare and other industries are physically demanding and take a toll on people's ability to work over the length of a person's career. The impact is that someone can be forced to leave the workforce before their planned retirement date due to health issues or their diminishing ability to continue doing their job. Cadent Gas told us about their flexible working options where an individual can cut back on the number of hours they work to reduce physical strain on their body. This can enable them to continue working for longer.

Rostering staff to meet the workload, in a way that allows workers to take longer breaks during the day, can be a way to offer the flexibility an older worker is looking for while at the same time helping employers manage costs. Senior Response operates an inbound and outbound call centre which helps organisations connect with the mature market. They frequently roster people with split shifts during the day, so that staff are available when customers are calling, but enjoy time off during the day to do other things.

Standard Chartered advertise all their jobs as 'fully flexible,' making this explicit in their job descriptions. Consequently, over half of their staff work some form of flexible work arrangement, mostly hybrid or remote working. They have found that their staff over the age of 50 appreciate the benefits that come with home working.

Organisations that offer round-the-clock service have more opportunities to accommodate people who want to work outside of the traditional working hours. The Metropolitan Police, for example, are always on duty. Saga, a travel company, operates across multiple time zones. Both organisations have found that being able to offer the opportunity to work at a wider range of times than other organisations have been a benefit in attracting and retaining talent.

For many jobs, workers need to be physically present at a job site, either to perform an activity or offer a service. For these people, remote working is not an option. Castle Technology, who manufacture payment terminals, require staff to work in their factory, but they do offer compressed hours, whereby staff can finish work early on Friday.

They have found that their staff over the age of 50 appreciate the benefits that come with home working.



Metropolitan Police Service

A case study in how to make flexible working work for an institution who must always be on call.



The Metropolitan Police Service aims to offer all their staff the ability to work flexibly where business needs can support it. It appreciates that some parts of the Met may encounter operational difficulties when processing flexible working requests and they are committed to doing their best to overcome those difficulties.

The Met understands how flexible working supports employee recruitment and retention. They also know that individuals all have different needs and commitments as they progress through life and their career. The flexibility an individual needs now can be very different to what they may require in the future.

The Met offers different types of flexible work such as annualised hours, compressed hours, job share, part-time work, term-time work, work away from usual location and informal (ad-hoc) requests.

Annualised hours is a form of flexible work where an individual may work longer hours during certain times of the year and then fewer at other times. The period of flexible working is pre-agreed for the whole year rather than a short amount of time. This is to ensure an individual's pension and right to annual leave are not affected.

Compressed hours involves an employee working their usual hours over a shorter period of time. This is useful for employees who may need to be home certain days of the week, for personal reasons or family commitments, while still enabling them to manage their workload. An example of this could be working full-time hours over the space of 3-4 days in a week.

A job share arrangement is where a designated full-time position is shared between two or more part-time workers. They fulfil the obligations of one job collaboratively. This form of working is popular among partners or those with health issues that need to be managed.

Part-time work is when an individual works less than 40 hours per week. The hours are agreed locally, but do not exceed full time hours. Part-time work is much sought after by those with dependants seeking to improve their work-life balance.

Term-time work is an arrangement where an individual works only during school terms, allowing time off during school holidays. Daily hours of work may be eight or more to satisfy accumulated hours an employee is contracted for over the course of a year. This supports those who work in a role where their demand peaks and troughs.

Working away from a usual location means that an individual can regularly work away from their ordinary place of work. This can be a police station or agreed location with their line manager. This is accommodating for those that find they can work remotely and need to be closer to home.

The Met tries to facilitate the needs of all individuals as they request flexible working. However, some of these may not require formal requests. These can be managed locally to accommodate individuals going through a difficult period in their lives.

The employee's perspective

We wanted to understand how important flexible working arrangements are to older workers, what they look for and what their experience has been like. We conducted two focus groups in February 2024, the first with eight members of [Brave Starts](#), a charitable organisation helping older workers think through the next steps in their lives, and the second with members of the [Greater Manchester Older Persons Network](#). For consistency we asked both groups the following questions:

1. What type of flexible working do you look for the most?
2. What can companies do more in terms of marketing their jobs and offering more flexible work?
3. Are you put off applying for a job due to lack of flexible work offered?
4. Do you feel looked down on by requesting flexible work?

Participants in both focus groups told us that it had become more common for employers to offer flexible working arrangements since the pandemic, and that this was a trend that they appreciated and would like to see continue. The people we spoke with had a variety of reasons for wanting to work a more flexible schedule. The most common reason was to achieve a better work life balance than they had in the past. People spoke about flexibility giving them more time to pursue hobbies and other interests as well as time for caregiving responsibilities. Some people spoke about finding it difficult to be in the office from nine-to-five, five days a week, and how flexible working arrangements provided them with the opportunity to continue working. A few people spoke about flexible working being a stage in the transition to retirement.

Types of flexible work arrangements most sought after by employees

Hybrid/remote working and part-time work were the most commonly reported forms of flexible working arrangement.

Participants felt that they were more productive when they were able to do hybrid or remote work, due to the time saved in not having to commute to an office or work location. Many said that they only wanted to go into the office if there was a good reason, that they valued the freedom remote working conferred - to set one's own schedule. A few observed an increasing tension

when employees doing hybrid work were encouraged to come back to the office more frequently. Like the finding of the employers we interviewed, focus group participants also said that it was more difficult to build a professional network and a relationship with your colleagues when you worked remotely. Some also commented that it can be isolating and stressed the importance of having hobbies and other interests.

It was more difficult to build a professional network and a relationship with your colleagues when you worked remotely. Some also commented that it can be isolating and stressed the importance of having hobbies and other interests.

Compressed hours is another common form of flexible working arrangement that appeals to older workers. Here, an employee can work a full-time job in fewer days by working longer hours on the days they do work. Common examples are 9/80 schedules, where employees on a 40 hour per week contract work 80 hours over 9 days and receive every second Friday off.

In our Manchester focus group, only two out of the seven participants said that they were offered flexitime and job sharing. Both options were seen as highly desirable forms of flexible working arrangements as they offered the opportunity not to be tied to a nine-to-five schedule.

Creating a flexible working culture that appeals to older workers

Flexibility is an important factor for older workers in considering applying for a job. Many participants said that they would be much more likely to apply for a job if it was clear what types of flexible working arrangements were available for a particular role. A few workers mentioned that they would not consider applying for a role if it did not state that there was an opportunity to work a flexible schedule.

When it was unclear what type of flexibility was available with a role, participants found it difficult to assess when and how to ask what options might be available for them to work flexibly. They felt that asking too soon in the interview process may jeopardise the chances of them being called for a second interview and leaving it too late meant that it was a potentially awkward conversation to be had at the time an offer was being made or after they had accepted the job. Once an individual was hired, they felt too awkward to ask about flexible working arrangements, often feeling they needed a 'justifiable reason', to request a change in their working pattern. The feeling was that asking to work flexibly because they wanted more time for themselves may result in them being seen as a less committed employee or someone who was less serious about their career.

The participants we spoke with were looking for more information on an organisation's website about the culture around flexible working. They would feel more inclined to apply for a role if they saw examples of people working a flexible schedule and saw that such work arrangements did not hinder an individual's opportunity for career progression within the organisation.

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Mismatches between supply of and demand for flexible working

Employees now have the legal right to ask for flexible working arrangements from day one of their employment. Among workers over the age of 50, demand is high for flexible working and it is sometimes a critical factor in deciding whether to apply for a role.

The observation of the HR professionals we spoke with was that there is not an unmatched demand for flexible working arrangements, and they were very willing to speak with employees about how a request for flexible working could be accommodated. We found that 100% of companies we interviewed offered hybrid/fully remote and part-time working, supporting the demand for these types of flexible work.

The mismatches we identified from the interviews we conducted are as follows:

- 71% of employers offer compressed hours, with 57% offering flexitime, and 29% offering job sharing. This could indicate that organisations are not defining flexible working widely enough to appeal to the demand from older workers.
- The demand for part-time work is higher than the perceived supply. Part-time work was very attractive to older workers, yet it was not clear when applying for a job if it was possible to work on a part-time basis.
- Fully remote work is harder to find than hybrid. Focus group respondents felt that, in most industries, work can be done at home permanently for at least some roles. Older workers would like a valid reason to go into the office, even if it is occasionally.
- Flexitime is in high demand for people over 50 but it is not commonly offered by companies. Many respondents have health problems, caring responsibilities, and hobbies, so they do not want to be restrained by a nine-to-five timeframe. People over 50 are tending to opt for freelance jobs due to the lack of time flexibility.
- Job sharing was an attractive way of working for many over 50 but was the least common form of flexible working offered by employers.

These mismatches support our desk research that some older workers believe the job market is closed to them applying for roles because the jobs offered don't align with their desires, especially for those who require less common flexible working options like job sharing.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, while the experience of HR professionals was that the demand for flexible work was being met by the supply, older workers spoke of flexible working as an important and in some cases a 'must have' benefit when looking for a job. We learned that older workers find it difficult to know when and how to start the conversation around flexible working, feel they need to have a 'justifiable reason' for requesting it, and fear that it may impact their career progression. These concerns may be suppressing the demand for flexible work arrangements which may in turn be impacting an organisation's ability to attract and retain the talent they need to be successful over the long term.

We would like to offer the following recommendations to help organisations on their journey in developing an offering around flexible working that is appealing to their older workers:

1. **Organise focus groups, town hall meetings, and one-on-one conversations with your older workers.** Use this as an opportunity to understand what types of flexible working arrangements are appealing to them, and how flexible work could help them balance responsibilities at work and in their personal lives, and allow them an easier transition into retirement. Ask them if they are experiencing barriers to availing of flexible options, or whether they have concerns about requesting these options. Discuss what can be done to create an employee value proposition and a workplace culture that recognises the contribution of employees on flexible work arrangements.
2. **Review job roles** to see how they can be adapted to a flexible work arrangement. Ensure that the job description clearly states what options are available for performing the job on a flexible basis.
3. Where job roles require an on-site presence, **investigate which other types of flexible work arrangements can be offered** in place of remote working to give the employee the options they are looking for.
4. **Review the careers page** on the organisation's website to ensure it contains information about the policy and culture surrounding flexible working. Where possible showcase employees who are working a flexible schedule, talking about the work they do, their work life balance and career progression. If appropriate, provide a breakdown of the number of employees who are working on a flexible working arrangement alongside other demographic information on the organisation's workforce.



5. When conducting employee engagement surveys, **evaluate responses from workers on a flexible working arrangement** to see how they differ from workers on a traditional working arrangement. Use this information to modify the types of flexible working arrangements offered to employees.
6. **Interview managers and supervisors** who have team members working on a flexible working arrangement to identify areas for improvement.
7. Based on the feedback from employees and managers, **design pilot flexible working arrangements** to evaluate what works before rolling options out to the entire organisation.

Appendix

Research Methodology

Timeline

Desk research and fieldwork for this research project were conducted in January and February 2024. Key dates were:

- In January and early February 2024, we conducted desk research of academic and news articles.
- Between February 14 and 23, 2024, we conducted online interviews with HR Managers via Teams or Zoom.
- On February 19 and 23, 2024, we conducted two online focus groups with older workers.

Desk research

Our desk research consisted of reading academic papers as well as articles in the public press about flexible working. The purpose was to gain an understanding of the topic; to learn which forms of flexible working are found to be the most widely offered by employers and which are the most appealing from the employee's perspective. This research was very useful in providing us the background we needed to prepare for interviews with HR managers and our focus groups of older workers.

Interviews

As part of our primary research, we interviewed Human Resource Managers from various companies across the UK to gain an insight into their flexible work offerings. The seven companies we interviewed were:

- Saga
- Castles Technology
- Standard Life
- Cadent Gas
- Senior Response
- Metropolitan Police
- Standard Chartered

The duration of these interviews were 50 minutes on average. To help us prepare for the interviews and ask relevant questions, we collected as much information as possible from each company's website and careers page to understand the types of flexible working arrangements they offered and to learn about best practices the company may abide by, relating to age inclusion and older workers. We prepared a list of standardised questions and recorded each interview. The standardised approach provided structure and consistent and reliable data that was easily comparable. The questions we asked are listed below.

1. What flexible working options does your company offer? a. Is there a pattern in who takes this up?
2. How would taking Flexible Work Arrangements affect the probability of promotion?
3. What's the most likely response to an employee submitting a flexible working request?
4. Where do you see flexible working being in the future?
5. Is the demand for flexible work too high for your company to handle?

Focus groups

We also conducted two focus groups with people over the age of 50 to get a better understanding of the type of flexible work arrangements they are looking for. Our focus group with [Brave Starts](#) lasted an hour and had eight participants. Our conversation with the [Greater Manchester Older People's Network](#) lasted one hour and thirty minutes with seven participants.

To prepare for these focus groups, we created a list of four questions that we could ask both focus groups. We started by getting everyone to introduce themselves, so that we could learn about their experiences with flexible working. The questions we asked are listed below.

1. What type of flexible working do you look for the most?
2. What can companies do more in terms of marketing their jobs and offering more flexible work?
3. Are you put off applying for a job due to lack of flexible work offered?
4. Do you feel looked down on by requesting flexible work?

After completing our primary research, we analysed the data thoroughly, to find out what the most offered flexible work arrangements were by companies, and

what people over 50 sought the most in flexible work. This allowed us to identify the mismatches in the supply and demand of flexible work arrangements. We used our secondary research to supplement the findings from our interviews and focus groups and highlight new insightful findings we discovered from our research.

Limitations

We conducted our seven interviews and the two focus groups within a two-week timeframe. The findings and the conclusions we drew reflect the sentiments of the respondent at that point in time.



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Lancaster University
Management School