



Let's keep mum!

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24th February 2020

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Does flexible working retain working mums and close the gender pay gap?

Flexible working is a phrase that continues to be talked about a lot in lots of organisations but encompasses a range of different working arrangements. In essence, flexible working means any working arrangement which isn't just working full time at usual working hours and in the office, for example:

Working remotely (often referred to in corporate speak as "agile working") some or all of the time

- Part-time working (including term-time only working)
- Job-sharing (where two people do one job)
- Compressed hours (working full-time hours over fewer days)

Any employee who has 26 weeks' service on the date of applying for flexible working can submit a flexible working request (as long as they haven't made a flexible working application in the past 12 months).

Often, the words "flexible working" are assumed to go hand in hand with working parents, but it does (and should) apply to all employees, and the more non-parents who work flexibly, the more level the playing field it will be for the whole workforce. But does it help retain those who it is most stereotypically associated with – working mums? And will this in turn help to close the gender pay gap?

The answer to this question is by no means straightforward and can partly depend on which type of flexible working we are talking about (which is why we set out some of the different types above!).

Some research suggests that women who continue to work full-time but are able to do so via flexitime or remotely are more likely to stick with the job they had before childbirth and may also feel that they can still effectively progress their career. However, this may not prevent such employees feeling conflicted between their home and family lives if they are continuing to dedicate as much time to their jobs as they were before they had children.

And what about part-time working? Whilst some businesses still struggle to see how part-time working can work within their organisations, many are now supporting part-time working requests. But simply agreeing to a part-time working request is only the beginning of it and how that arrangement operates in practice can be critical for retaining that employee long-term.

A common complaint with part-time working is that the employee feels they have to squash a full-time role into part-time hours whilst only getting paid a part-time salary (a particular hazard when someone works a four day week). Employers can help address this by ensuring they reduce someone's workload in line with the reduced hours (or otherwise cover their workload on their non-working day) and trying to schedule meetings around their part-time team member's availability – employees feel less supported if meetings are regularly arranged on their non-working day!

Another challenge with part-time working is ensuring that there is still scope for a part-time worker to progress their career. Many feel that the price they pay for working part-time is that their career stagnates within their organisation and that they can't vote with their feet because it is difficult to find another job where they can work part-time (there still being a strong perception that part-time working is reserved for employees who have done a stint full-time to earn internal support for going part-time). If employers make sure more senior roles are open to part-time workers and the broader workforce can visibly see senior people performing their roles on a part-time basis, this will help to inspire and engage those lower down the ranks who are already working part-time or would like to at some point in the future. Equally, if organisations actively advertise roles as open to being done on a flexible basis, they may benefit from attracting quality talent who might otherwise feel trapped in a part-time role which is going nowhere, or unable to work part-time in their current role.

The above necessarily only briefly considers a couple of challenges associated with part-time working. But if organisations can properly support part-time working and the progression up the career ladder of part-time workers as part of broader cultural support for flexible working across their workforces, this can only be a good thing for seeing more women progressing to more senior roles with higher salaries which will tangibly impact on those organisations' gender pay gap.