



# Flexible Working

## ‘Deeper Dive’ for SME employers and employees

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### What is flexible working?

Flexible working can take many forms, ranging from informal, occasional adjustments to formal or long-term arrangements. It may involve changes to how long (working hours), when (start and finish times) or where (location) employees work.

- **Informal flexibility** is often used to respond to unexpected situations, such as leaving work early to pick up a sick child from childcare.
- **Formal flexibility** usually involves a written request and a longer-term arrangement.

### Why does it matter?

Flexible working is a key support tool in many SMEs, especially where more costly benefits, such as enhanced parental leave and pay or subsidised childcare, aren't affordable. It can help:

- boost staff motivation
- improve staff wellbeing and reduce absenteeism, and
- retain experienced employees.

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*“My employer said, ‘If you have to look after her you look after her, as long as the job gets done, I don’t care when you do it or how you do it!’, and by giving me that backing, he’s going to get 10 times more out of me in terms of work.” (Phoebe – Employee, 1-9 staff)*

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**Flexibility as a lifeline:** for parents and caregivers, flexibility can make juggling work and family more manageable and, in some cases, make it possible to stay in the workforce in the first place.

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*"At the moment [my partner] does drop off at nursery and then I pick them up in the afternoon, and that's how we're making full-time work possible."* (Sian, Small business employee)

*"He works mainly from home which, yes, is a godsend."* (Nell – Employee, 50-249 staff)

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## Unique selling point for SMEs

- **Offering flexible workplace options do not have to be costly: small steps can lead to big changes**
- **Parents value flexible working just as much as enhanced maternity and paternity leave!**  
Our study showed that SME employees even valued informal (41.7%) and formal flexible working (36.2%) slightly more than enhanced maternity (34.8%) and paternity leave and pay (32.2%).

### Types of Flexible Working

**Flexible hours** – adjusted start and finish times

**Remote or hybrid working** – allow employees to work remotely for part or all of their contracted hours

**Compressed hours** – working the same number of hours on fewer days

**Job sharing** – splitting one role between two employees

**Part-time working** – reducing contracted working hours

**Term-time only working** – available employment during school terms

**Flexi-time** – working the same number of hours according to the employee's schedule (working agreed hours within a flexible schedule or allowing employees to create their own schedules while fulfilling required hours)

**Shift swapping** – allowing employees to swap shifts to cover planned absences

**Childcare flexibility** – providing time off for school runs, emergencies, or family commitments (see [Childcare Support](#)).

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*“It’s pretty much all informal arrangements [in my workplace] at the moment. Parental leave is codified but not that parents can flex their time around to accommodate family things. Nobody will question you about ducking out early to go to football practice, if you’re then working another hour some other time.”* (Patrick – Employee, 10-49 staff)

*“It wasn’t a formal flexible working request with a formal response it was a conversation in the office, kind of thing, that was just accepted....I think in a larger company it probably would have been a lot more formalised.”* (Nathan – Employee, 10-49 staff)

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**We recognise that SMEs can face specific challenges** when offering flexible working, including:

- Ensuring adequate cover and continued workflow in smaller teams
- Tight budgets limiting options such as job sharing or investing in technology to support remote work
- Some roles being less suited to remote work
- Concerns about fair access to flexible options across different roles

## How does flexible working work for both employers and employees?

The key to successful flexible working is ensuring arrangements meet the needs of both the employer and the employee.

### Supportive practices

- Normalising flexible working for men as well as women.
- Ensuring fairness and inclusivity by supporting all staff through flexible working options – parents and non-parents (see [‘Deeper Dive’ on How to create a supportive workplace culture](#)).

## Importance of employers' 'can do' approach to flexible working support to 'bring out the best in people':

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*"I think it's generally this cultural thing of trying to not see things as a challenge, it's actually seeing it as an opportunity to get that staff loyalty. And we have a very low turnover rate of staff because people actually do value that flexibility, whether it's for horses or children or adult and older care." (Mike – Employer, 10-49 staff)*

*"And also, it helps performance doesn't it, [...] people knowing that their work-life balance, family balance is respected, makes you want to work better for the business as well". (Stewart - Employer, 10-49 staff)*

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**Multi-skilling** (i.e., training more than one person to cover key tasks) is a useful strategy to reduce dependence on a single role holder and can help with flexible working. It is a particularly useful approach in:

- Lower-skilled roles,
- High-turnover environments,
- Operational or customer-facing functions,
- Place-based settings where the provision of certain types of flexible working (e.g., working from home) is difficult or not an option.

### What can employees do to help?

They can help identify solutions that work for all affected parties, i.e. for them, their colleagues and the business.

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*We ask our employees to suggest a workable solution that meets their needs and neither harms the business nor their colleagues [...] we get them to talk to their colleagues and get their agreement if they want to change their working arrangements.*

(Employer 1, medium)

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This 'Deeper Dive' on Flexible Working is part of the [Supporting Parents in SMEs Toolkit](#).