

Recent research from Cranfield School of Management found that managers learnt how to manage part-time working more effectively and became more open to requests to work part-time as a result of using the flexible furlough scheme.

The research examined employers' experiences of using the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), specifically the 'flexible furlough' part of the scheme where staff could be used on a part-time basis and furloughed for the remaining time as their business recovered from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were collected through an employer survey, conducted in collaboration with the CBI, and semi-structured interviews with managers at two time points.

Part-time working is important since it can increase workforce participation among those who are unable or unwilling to work full-time. In the UK approximately one in four workers work part-time, however there is evidence that more people would like to work part-time but are unable to access it.

Findings

In addition to the CJRS's intended purpose of protecting jobs, the research found important unintended, positive, consequences from its implementation.

First, through using the scheme managers learnt how to manage part-time working more effectively.

- Almost forty percent (39.7%) indicated that using flexible furlough had helped line managers to design and manage part-time working more effectively. Typically, this involved more effective matching of workload to hours worked and dealing with gaps in availability.

Second, experience of using the scheme challenged managers' perception about the feasibility of part-time working, leading to greater openness to it.

- More than forty percent (42.1%) indicated that use of the scheme made line managers more open to part-time working, with an increased willingness to consider requests to work part-time from employees and potential recruits.

Third, other experiences during the pandemic increased managers' openness to part-time working.

- Thirty percent (30.4%) reported a 'trickle down' effect from widespread working from home, leading to a greater openness to part-time working and similar numbers (28.7%) agreed that changes to their business model prompted by the pandemic had fostered greater openness to part-time working.

Managers' openness to part-time working was also influenced by perceived changes in demand for part-time working, including more people wanting to work fewer hours for a better work-life balance. More recently, labour shortages were seen as an important driver for increased openness to part-time working.

Improved managerial capability in managing part-time working, taken together with increased openness to part-time working, created a resource which offers potential for change and which can be harnessed in response to challenges such as increasing workplace diversity, responding to labour shortages and avoiding redundancies in challenging business circumstances.

Recommendations from the findings

Our findings suggest a need to reconsider the relationship between work and non-work in contemporary society and recognise that time not spent in paid work may be used to make other contributions to society and the economy, such as caring and volunteering activities which support families and communities. Our specific recommendations to facilitate the greater availability of part-time working are:

1. Practical guidance for employers on managing part-time working effectively.

Using the flexible furlough scheme provided an opportunity for employers to experiment with part-time working and this helped them learn how to manage part-time working more effectively. It is important that these learnings are communicated to wider audiences who did not use the scheme.

The guidance should cover:

- how to design work for part-time working, including at higher skill levels and for quality jobs
- creating a culture that encourages dialogue about preferred working hours. It should not be assumed that a lack of requests signals a lack of demand, since some employees may be hesitant to ask for part-time working, especially in workplaces where it is not common.

This guidance could usefully be publicised through Government organisations such as ACAS and through professional and industry groups.

2. Interventions to encourage employer innovation and experimentation with part-time working.

The learning identified in this research happened as part of a response to a crisis. Employers should be encouraged to experiment with different ways of organising work, outside of extreme circumstances, to foster learning, in the same way that businesses are encouraged to innovate with product and service development. A pilot scheme covering different jobs and industry sectors would allow employers to assess the costs and benefits of part-time working over a designated period of time. The approach used in the UK trial of the four-day week in 2022 could act as a model.

3. Greater understanding of worker demand for part-time working.

Greater understanding of worker demand for part-time working is required to facilitate wider participation in work and contribute to job satisfaction and productivity. Existing largescale surveys which ask about working hours preferences (e.g. ONS) are limited in scope since they do not take account of respondents' perceptions of the opportunities available to them. For example, part-time working may be seen as only being available in lower skill jobs. Further research is also needed on the demand for part-time working among the economically inactive, particularly older workers.

The full report is available to download at
www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/expertise/changing-world-of-work/the-future-of-part-time-working

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