



Part-time working after the pandemic:

The impact of the flexible furlough scheme

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Executive summary

The flexible element of the furlough scheme (Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for employers to experiment with using part-time working. This report presents findings from a research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, designed to examine whether this experience influenced employers' perceptions of the feasibility of part-time working and their openness to it.

Part-time working is important since it can increase workforce participation among those who are unable or unwilling to work full-time. Part-time working typically suits workers who have caring responsibilities, ill health or a disability, and may also encourage older workers to remain in, or return to, work. A quarter of the UK workforce works part-time.

The findings are drawn from a cross-sector employer survey, conducted in collaboration with CBI Economics, and a series of semi-structured interviews with line managers and senior HR professionals at two time points.

The research found that experience of using the flexible furlough scheme created opportunities for employers to learn about part-time working, suggesting that experimentation can be an effective way of influencing managers' thinking about different ways of working and demonstrating their feasibility.

Key findings include:

- Almost forty percent (39.7%) of survey respondents reported that using the flexible furlough scheme helped them to design and manage part-time working more effectively. Typically, this involved overcoming two challenges: how to calibrate workload in line with reduced hours; and how to deal with gaps in availability. These challenges were often dealt with collaboratively and might involve multi-skilling.
- More than forty percent (42.6%) of survey respondents reported that using the flexible furlough scheme helped them to better match human resources with variations in business demand. These employers responded to the disruption to their businesses caused by the pandemic by taking the opportunity to reflect on when staff were needed, and thereby create efficiencies.
- More than forty percent (42.1%) of survey respondents reported that use of the flexible furlough scheme made line managers more open to part-time working. In practice, this usually meant an increased willingness to consider requests from individuals, although there was also some evidence of managers proactively creating opportunities for part-time working.
- There was also evidence that other experiences during the pandemic had increased managers' openness to part-time working. Three in ten (30.4%) of survey respondents agreed that increased working from home had led to greater openness from line managers to part-time working. Almost three in ten (28.7%) agreed that changes to their business model prompted by the pandemic had fostered greater openness to part-time working.
- Perceived changes in worker demand for part-time working stemming from experiences of the pandemic operated in two directions. More than half (51.2%) of survey participants indicated that they felt the pandemic had led to more employees wanting to work fewer hours to achieve a better work-life balance. At the same time, 38.5% stated that they believed that working from home meant that fewer people wanted to work part-time because they saved time by not commuting.

- Labour shortages also had an impact on manager openness to part-time working. Some interviewees reported that labour shortages meant that they would be more likely to grant a request for part-time working, both from an existing employee if they would be difficult to replace, and from a job applicant if there were few alternative candidates.

Based on our analysis of these findings, we make three main recommendations for policy:

1. Guidance for employers on managing part-time working, reflecting these findings, should be made available through government bodies that provide advice to employers, such as ACAS, and through professional associations, industry groups and campaigning organisations. This should include advice on how to design work to facilitate part-time working in a range of different types of jobs, including high-skill roles. It should also contain advice on how to create a culture that encourages dialogue about preferred working hours, avoiding the assumption that a lack of requests signals a lack of demand and recognising that workers may be hesitant to ask.
2. A formal, funded pilot of part-time working should be set up, to promote different working arrangements, and enable the development of appropriate employment policy. There is a role for government in encouraging employers to experiment with different ways of organising work, in the same way that businesses are encouraged to innovate with product and service development. Such a pilot would allow employers to assess the costs and benefits of part-time working over a designated period of time, in a range of job types and industry sectors.
3. More research is needed to build a better picture of worker demand for part-time working, in order to promote workforce participation and contribute to job satisfaction and productivity. Existing largescale survey questions about working hours preferences may under-represent the nature and scale of demand because they do not account for respondents' perceptions of the opportunities available to them. There needs to be greater exploration of how part-time working could attract more older workers and enable those with ill health to move out of economic inactivity. Further research on the relationship between increased access to other forms of flexible working, such as working from home, and the demand for part-time working, is also required.

Finally, findings from the research raise some more general issues about the way in which work is defined and organised. Employers and policy makers need to recognise that there is a wide range of arrangements covered by the term "part-time", from a small number of hours to almost full-time. Discussion of policy and practice, and the matching of worker and employer needs, could be enhanced by avoiding the assumption that work "naturally" occurs in "full-time" units of 35-40 hours. More generally, there is 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.

Introduction

A long-standing and distinguishing feature of the UK labour market is that approximately a quarter of workers work part-time.¹ Part-time workers are predominantly female² and work in a limited range of jobs and sectors.³

How many hours people are able, or willing, to work is a function of both their individual circumstances and the opportunities available to them in the labour market.⁴ The evidence on working hours preferences indicates that there are significant mismatches, such that part-time working is not available to all those who want it.⁵ Since the opportunities for part-time working are often concentrated in low skill, low quality jobs,⁶ accessing part-time working is particularly problematic for those seeking quality jobs commensurate with their skills and experience.

Studies have shown that this lack of availability is, at least in part, due to reluctance from managers to employ part-time workers, often grounded in their perceptions of the difficulties associated with managing part-time workers, and a lack of management capability in designing and organising part-time working.⁷ Availability and uptake of part-time working can have important benefits for society and for the economy, including wider and more diverse workforce participation, greater efficiency in the use of labour and the protection of skills.⁸ Providing managers with the opportunity to experience and experiment with managing part-time workers might serve to challenge their existing perceptions. The flexible element of the furlough scheme (Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic provided such an opportunity. It offered financial support for employers to bring staff back from full furlough to work on a part-time basis, whilst furloughing them for the remaining time as their businesses recovered.

The research reported here was designed to examine whether the experience of operating part-time working when using the flexible furlough scheme had influenced employers' perceptions of the feasibility of part-time working and their openness to it.

The findings are drawn from a cross-sector employer survey, conducted in collaboration with the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), and a series of semi-structured interviews with line managers and senior HR professionals at two time points in the hospitality, manufacturing and service sectors (see Appendix for full details). The research design was informed by a review of the existing evidence on the influences on employer provision of part-time working.⁹

"All of the businesses we speak to have said they are looking at their employer value proposition and they know that for some groups that have left the labour market since the pandemic, part of what is attractive is the ability to reduce hours to balance home and work."

Jennifer Beckwith, Deputy Director - Employment, CBI

"I think you can see the shadow of the flexible furlough scheme in the skillset managers needed during the pandemic. The businesses that are furthest ahead are probably those that reacted to the stimulus that flexible furlough gave them. The risk is that firms lose focus on the need to support managers to manage part-time effectively."

Neil Carberry, Chief Executive, REC

What is part-time working?

Part-time working is usually defined in relation to what is considered to be full-time. While working norms vary between sectors, part-time working is often taken to mean working less than 30 hours per week. In essence, part-time working involves employees being contracted to work fewer hours than those considered as full-time and being paid less accordingly. This potentially covers a wide range of time commitments, from those who only work a small proportion of full-time hours (“marginal” part-time), to those who work almost full-time hours. Working a small number of hours is often associated with precarious, low skill, low paid jobs (and may take the form of zero hours contracts), whilst working a higher proportion of full-time hours is often associated with managerial and professional jobs.¹

Why part-time working is important for society and the economy

Part-time working is important since it can open up employment opportunities for those who are either unable to work full-time due to, for example, caring responsibilities, ill health or disability, or unwilling to do so for lifestyle reasons (e.g. retirement). Part-time working can therefore have the effect of increasing workforce diversity and the associated benefits.

Part-time working may also provide a route into employment for those who are economically inactive (those not in or seeking work). The number of economically inactive people has increased following the Covid-19 pandemic, driven by long-term sickness and by older workers (aged 50+) leaving the workforce.¹⁰ In October 2022, 22% of people of working age were economically inactive.¹¹ Opportunities for part-time working could enable older people and those with long-term health conditions to stay in, or return to, work, thereby helping to address the labour shortages currently experienced by many employers. Notably, recent figures show that of the older people looking for work, more than two thirds (69%) want to work part-time, with only 9% wanting to work full-time.¹² For workers aged 65+, figures for early 2022 show a record increase in employment for this age group, with over 90% of the increase being part-time workers. Overall, 62% of the 1.5 million workers aged 65+ work part-time.¹³

Figures for 2022 show that more than seven million people of working age have a disability or long-term health condition: only half of them are in work.¹⁴

“When employers elevate people planning to a much more strategic level, part-time and other ways of engaging staff start coming forward much more clearly. The critical thing is to look to the pools of staff you haven’t previously been using. That does require a change of mindset.”

Neil Carberry, Chief Executive, REC

“Everybody in aerospace talks about the skills gap. Retaining older workers on a part-time basis, so the skills aren’t lost, has been very important. Training up new, younger talent to replace them takes time and can’t be done quickly enough.”

Aimie Stone, Senior Economist, ADS

¹ Part-time working differs from the four-day week, which usually refers to an organisation-level approach where a full-time workload is delivered in a shorter period of time through enhanced productivity, enabling working hours to be reduced while maintaining full-time pay and output. It also differs from the compressed working week, which involves working full-time hours, but spread across fewer days of the week.

“We are seeing an increase in early retirement, and employers are encouraging part-time working in that cohort, because there is a significant amount of technical skill, knowledge and institutional experience. Employers are increasingly thinking about part-time working over the long term too, not just in terms of this immediate trend we’re seeing coming out of the pandemic.”

Jamie Cater, Senior Policy Manager (Employment), Make UK

“Labour shortages have brought different groups into the labour market, and some employers have changed their views. Where they would have naturally preferred a full-time person, instead of two full-time staff they’re maybe happy to have perhaps five part-time staff.”

David Sheen, Public Affairs Director, UKHospitality

Part-time working before the pandemic

Just over one in four workers in the UK works part-time, and this proportion has been consistent for more than ten years.¹⁵ Notably, nine in ten of these work part-time through choice.¹⁶

In the UK part-time working is predominantly a female way of working: just under three quarters of part-time workers are female and just over a third of female workers work part-time.¹⁷ Although relatively small in comparison, the proportion of men working part-time has been rising, albeit slowly, from 9% in 2000 to 13% in 2022.¹⁸

It is worth noting that there is evidence that worker demand for part-time working may be underestimated. ONS figures show that 10% of the UK working population would like to work less (and be paid accordingly),¹⁹ yet other findings suggest that, if the marginalisation and downgrading which often accompany part-time working could be overcome, the figure may be closer to a quarter.²⁰

“The bigger picture is that part-time working is all about valuing women’s work, in occupations which always used to be called the five Cs – cleaning, catering, clerical, cashiering (retail), and caring. We need to properly value and reward those jobs, and make sure that part-time work isn’t just associated with low-paid, low-status jobs.”

Kate Bell, Head of Rights, International, Social and Economics, TUC

“We’ve done all the hard work to get women into the defence sector at the start of their careers, and ten years in, we’re going to need to have part-time working in place, to get them back if they take a career break.”

Aimie Stone, Senior Economist, ADS

Employers' views on part-time working

In order to provide a context for our findings relating to employers' experiences of using the flexible furlough scheme, our survey asked a number of more general questions about employers' use of, and thinking about, part-time working before the Covid-19 pandemic. These data were collected in February-April 2022.

More than a third (37.7%) of survey respondents indicated that they expected the number of people working part-time in their organisation to grow in the next two years (see Table 1). Alongside this, more than half (56.6%) expected an increase in the number of staff working from home and almost half (49.6%) an increase in other flexible working time options. Notably, only a small number expected a decrease in any of the forms of flexible working.

Table 1: Employers' expectations of change in flexible and part-time working in the next two years (%)

	Increase	Neither	Decrease
Part-time working	37.7	58.7	3.6
Other flexible working time arrangements	49.6	48.0	2.4
Working from home	56.6	35.2	8.2

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022

Our findings show that the principal reason employers offered part-time working before the Covid-19 pandemic was in response to requests from employees (see Table 2). More than three quarters (78.6%) indicated that, pre-pandemic, employee requests were an important influence on the decision to use part-time working. Attracting new employees was also an important reason for 44% of respondents. Other influences reported were covering peak periods of business demand (34.3%) and extended operating hours (24.7%), working practices which are typically seen in sectors such as hospitality and retail.

Table 2: Employers' reasons for using part-time working before the pandemic (%)

	Important	Neither	Not important
Requests from employees for part-time working	78.6	11.9	9.5
To be able to attract more employees	44.0	22.8	33.2
To cover peak periods of business demand	34.3	21.3	44.3
To cover extended operating hours	24.7	21.6	53.7
To reduce the hours of full-time employees during downturns	10.5	18.0	71.5
Part-time employees more productive than full-time ones	8.3	40.2	51.5

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022

Importantly, our findings show that pre-pandemic few employers had used part-time working as a response to business downturn by reducing the hours of full-time employees. This is a significant finding because if UK employers had not used reducing employees' hours and reconfiguring working arrangements as a response to business downturns previously, they were likely to be less familiar with the changes needed to accommodate staff working less than full time. In order to access Government support through the flexible furlough scheme employers were required to make these changes. As such, it might be expected that those who used the scheme would have gained experience and knowledge in organising work in different ways which would build a capability to be used on future occasions.

What employers learnt about part-time working through using the flexible furlough scheme

The flexible furlough scheme was designed to protect jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was not intended as a mechanism to change employer behaviour in relation to part-time working. However, while using the scheme employers were required to engage with part-time working in their organisations, effectively creating an (“enforced”) experiment for those who had not previously used part-time working, or had restricted it to certain types of jobs. This research explores what employers learnt about how to implement part-time working, and the impact of using the scheme on their future openness to requests from employees to work part-time.

The UK Government introduced the furlough scheme (the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) in March 2020. In July 2020, “flexible furlough” was introduced, allowing employers to bring employees back to work on a part-time basis, and furlough them for the remaining time. Overall, 11 million employees were furloughed, peaking in June 2020 and with subsequent smaller peaks in line with the second and third lockdowns. The scheme ended in September 2021.

Our findings show that there were three reasons why employers chose to use the flexible rather than the full-time version of the furlough scheme: to maintain employee engagement, to preserve skill levels, and to treat all employees fairly (see Table 3). Four in every five survey respondents (81.2%) indicated that maintaining engagement across as wide a range of employees as possible (rather than bringing some employees back to work on a full-time basis and furloughing others on a full-time basis) was an important reason for choosing the flexible version of the scheme. Just under three quarters (71.3%) indicated that avoiding skills loss due to the inability to practise skills on a regular basis was important. Two thirds (66.5%) indicated that it was important to treat all employees fairly, such that the “pain” of income loss (the proportion of salary not covered by the furlough scheme) and other work-related benefits were shared amongst employees.

Table 3: Reasons for using the flexible, rather than full-time, furlough scheme

	Important	Neither	Not important
Treating all employees fairly	65.5	22.7	11.8
Avoiding skills loss	71.3	18.5	10.2
Maintaining engagement	81.2	14.3	4.5

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022

Designing and managing part-time working

Existing studies of part-time working often cite a lack of line manager capability in organising work as a barrier to the development of high-quality part-time jobs.²¹ In our study, more than a third (39.7%) of survey respondents who had used the flexible furlough scheme agreed that it had helped line managers to design and manage part-time working more effectively (see Table 4).

Table 4: Skills learnt from using the flexible furlough scheme: more effective management of part-time working

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
More effective management of part-time working by line managers	39.7	45.5	14.9

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022

Managers typically face two challenges when organising work to allow some employees to work part-time. These are first, the need to have adequate staff cover for the organisation's or department's operating hours (e.g. to meet client service needs) and second, the redistribution of a part-time worker's "missing" workload elsewhere. The learnings about part-time working during the use of the flexible furlough scheme reported here reflect strategies to overcome these two challenges.

Organising availability patterns to suit business needs

Interviewees described a need for a more collaborative approach to scheduling working hours between workers during the operation of flexible furlough. When several people were working part-time, managing cover became a more overt, team-based process, rather than leaving it to the individual part-time worker. *"We needed to make sure we were operational five days a week to be available for customers, but we didn't need that full capacity out of everybody. So the message out to managers is, 'Create your rotas, understand who will be out on which days, but make sure there's always a core capability every single day of the week'... A bit of self-determination within the teams, they worked together to agree how that would work, and meeting other constraints from people's personal lives"* (operational director, manufacturing).

Some interviewees also reported learning that giving employees the opportunity to influence their working pattern, to avoid clashes with their non-work commitments, can increase loyalty. *"Another thing we learnt is the power of choice. So we gave [staff] parameters to make choices... as much as possible, and that created quite a high level of loyalty... quite a lot of goodwill... We might say, 'You can't have Monday off because we've got nobody coming in on Monday, but what other day might you want?'... So they felt included, in control, and they felt that they could be part of the solution rather than just being dictated to"* (operational director, services).

Several of the interviewees who managed production facilities referred to the importance of avoiding a "single point of failure" – a point when the absence of someone with a particular skillset might jeopardise the continued operation of the production line. Multi-skilling the workforce was seen as a solution to deal with such absences (and for business resilience more generally): *"We try and train, and design the work schemes, so that we don't have a single point of failure... We talk of 'three deep', making sure that there's always a back-up and another back-up for any particular process."* During the flexible furlough scheme, *"There were occasions where somebody who had a specific skill set, the manufacturing engineer who was our expert on that particular manufacturing process, that's the day he's out... So it was just about managing the capacity, so they could rotate the day off through the week and make it work"* (operational director, manufacturing).

In a service context, a “single point of failure” might mean the failure to deliver high-quality client service. In some contexts, multi-skilled team members could substitute for each other. An operational manager in a services firm ensured client service by *“making sure that we did have cover, people were there responding to emails and responding to phone calls.”* In order to achieve this, he managed his multi-skilled team to *“spread those non-working days across the week... It wasn’t really a rota, but we just had to be respectful that it couldn’t be the same day [for everyone] every week.”* However, it was recognised that it was not always possible for colleagues to fully substitute for each other, so where specialised skills or personal relationships were involved, there might only be a level of “maintenance cover” for an absent colleague: *“You can’t deep dive into someone else’s work, but you can do a maintenance piece. You could arrange a meeting, but you wouldn’t be able to pick up the nuances, or have a deep conversation... [Clients] want to speak to someone who really understands what’s going on”* (operational director, services).

“One of the barriers to part-time working was a fear of complexity, how you go about organising shift systems and rotas. Anecdotes from around the industry indicate that employers found out through experience and necessity during the pandemic that, actually, it was fine.”

Alex Hamilton, Head of External Communications, ADS

“A lot of the concern from our members about part-time working was how you would ensure that those lost hours are made up throughout the rest of the workforce. Who has which day off, and how do you ensure you remain productive throughout the working week, and order books are fulfilled and clients’ needs are met?”

Jamie Cater, Senior Policy Manager (Employment), Make UK

“When we speak to members about part-time working, they’re always looking at what outputs and services they need to provide, and the availability of other workers to do the work. A production line typically runs continuously, so they have to cover the hours, or in services, it’s whatever their client base needs.”

Jennifer Beckwith, Deputy Director – Employment, CBI

Redistributing workload and managing performance of part-time workers

During the flexible furlough scheme, managers had to learn how to define workloads for those working fewer hours, calibrating workload to working hours. In one manufacturing company, the HR manager identified that managers lacked this skill, and felt the need to ensure that employees' workloads were appropriate: *"It was important that, if people were being brought back on 60% of their previous working hours, the managers reflected that... So when someone was moved on to flexible furlough, there was a level of process, around checking that the hours that they were going to be working were realistic; what was the project requirement; was that going to be achievable...? It was quite a different way of working for them."*

Interviewees reported that it was easier to identify an appropriate workload for some types of jobs than others. An HR manager in a services business reflected that it was easier to determine a part-time workload for consultants delivering technical training than for their support team: *"A consultant, you know what they're delivering and if they've got five days of delivery work then that's very easy to determine."* For the support team, however, *"It's really difficult to measure for a particular role... Sometimes when you've got multiple requests from one client, that might be an easier admin task than it might be to have that same number of requests from multiple clients. That was a bit more of a judgement."* Transactional and routine tasks were easier to measure, and to calibrate to working hours, than for example knowledge work. In another service business, sales targets provided a straightforward measure of performance, but there was no previous experience of part-time working. The shift to remote operation during the Covid-19 pandemic, at the same time as the introduction of the flexible furlough scheme, provided the opportunity to monitor targets using technology, which allowed line managers to interrogate the data on the performance of part-time workers and learn what was appropriate: *"It became really important to know what the outputs looked like in shorter periods of time... We didn't know what good looks like, but then we could start to see it... I think we got quite good at that, off the back of flexible furlough as well, measuring it"* (operational director, services).

"Effective job design is an important part of getting flexible and part-time working right. All too often full-time roles are shoe-horned into part-time hours, making them unsustainable. HR teams need to support their line managers to work with team members in designing realistic part-time roles that can be regularly reviewed and evaluated."

Claire McCartney, Senior Policy Adviser, CIPD

"There's an employer capability gap in part-time job design. Redistributing workload in an appropriate way, and making sure that workload is fair."

Alice Arkwright, Equality Policy and Campaigns Support Officer, TUC

Matching resources to periods of peak demand

In sectors with fluctuating business demand patterns across the day, week or year, such as retail, hospitality and some services, the matching of resourcing to business demand requires careful management, and part-time working can help employers deal with peak periods. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many organisations experienced significant fluctuations in business demand, influenced, for example, by government regulation, supply chain disruption and public confidence in leaving the home. The flexible furlough scheme enabled managers to improve their skills in managing staffing in line with such fluctuations. Over a third (42.6%) of survey participants reported that use of the flexible furlough scheme had helped line managers to better match resourcing with periods of peak demand (see Table 5).

Table 5: Skills learnt from using the flexible furlough scheme: more effective matching of resourcing with demand peaks

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Line managers are now better at resourcing in demand peaks	42.6	41.0	16.4

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022

Interviewees reported having to decide how many staff to bring back from full furlough, and at what times they would be needed, which led them to rethink their staffing patterns during more normal times: *“It was only really by looking through the data, which flexible furlough was making me do, it was like, OK, we can have part-time people here and full-time people here. You definitely have peaks and troughs, but when everything was grouped together, you couldn’t see the wood for the trees really, you just thought it was busy all the time”* (operational director, services). Even in hospitality businesses, where part-time working was often well-established pre-pandemic, there were nonetheless learnings from using flexible furlough, which *“may have opened our eyes a little bit more to how we can utilise time, people, and other efficiencies... So you’re not overstaffing certain areas, by employing too many full-time staff. It’s just making sure that you’ve got the right amount of hours at the right time of day to cater for the requirements of the business”* (operational manager, hospitality).

“It seems to me that firms used flexible furlough a bit like they use zero hours contracts, responding to fluctuations in employer demand, rather than part-time working, which responds to employees’ demand for greater flexibility.”

Kate Bell, Head of Rights, International, Social and Economics, TUC

“Part-time working in hospitality is driven by both employers’ trading patterns and by the demand from employees. We have relatively odd shift patterns catering to different customer bases – pubs, nightclubs, coffee shops, hotels. Trading patterns will determine shift length, and there are some tipping points: if you’re open 12 hours, you probably want someone to cover eight hours and someone to cover four hours. On the employee side, hospitality traditionally attracts those who perhaps are doing it as a second job, or alongside caring responsibilities or studies.”

David Sheen, Public Affairs Director, UKHospitality

Managers' openness to part-time working

Managers' openness to part-time working depends on a range of factors, including the balance of perceived costs and benefits and their own capability in designing and organising the work. Our research demonstrates how an experiment or trial can increase managers' capability in managing part-time working, which may in turn make them more open to part-time working. Over forty percent (42.1%) of survey participants agreed that using the flexible furlough scheme had made their line managers more open to part-time working (see Table 6). Interviewees reported that the practical experience of managing different ways of working had essentially shifted the focus from why the organisation might facilitate part-time working, to how the organisation could do so: *"I suppose when you see the reality of what you need to deal with [on flexible furlough], it's less of a choice and it's a question of how can we do this, not whether we can do this. So I think it forced more open-mindedness"* (operational director, manufacturing).

Table 6: Changes in line manager openness to part-time working as a result of using the flexible furlough scheme

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Line managers are more willing to consider part-time working requests	42.1	39.7	18.2

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022

Use of the flexible furlough scheme demonstrated the feasibility of part-time working to managers who had previously believed that it was not possible. One remarked that part-time working had *"always been in the psyche, always been in the awareness"*, but that line managers had *"been stopped by this presumption that it won't work. So you don't try it."* The flexible furlough scheme had *"forced you to do it and it's disproved your bias, I suppose... It's broadened the horizons, broadened the conversation, to something we'd never have done before"* (operational director, services). In other cases, the increased openness involved extending part-time working to different parts of the business. In one hospitality business, part-time working was already well-established in front line operational roles, but in office jobs, the expectation of client continuity and technical specialisation meant that part-time working had not been seen as feasible. However their experience of using the flexible furlough scheme *"changed our view of what could work in certain areas of business. In operations, part-time working could have always happened obviously, [but]... it's enabled other managers to see that. The very nature of having flexible furlough... has given people the opportunity to see that you don't have to just employ full-timers"* (HR director, hospitality).

Analysis of the interview findings suggests that there was a close association between increased openness to part-time working and changes to working practices made during the use of the flexible furlough scheme. Those interviewees who had not made changes to working practices tended not to report increased openness to part-time working: these were typically those that had used zero hours contracts to deal with fluctuating business demand for resourcing before the Covid-19 pandemic, and those who operated flexible furlough in the form of a partial shutdown, closing the workplace for a few days each week and only operating on the remaining days.

It is important to note that those who reported being more open to part-time working also acknowledged that business needs still had to be taken into account when considering a request for part-time working. These included the nature and organisation of the work being done, the availability of other staff to cover when needed, and the cost of the increased people-management time needed for a larger staff. Equally, the absence of an increase in openness to part-time working did not necessarily mean that interviewees were hostile to part-time working: for example, some indicated that they were already open to considering requests for part-time working, while others believed that there was little demand for part-time working from their workforce.

Responsive and proactive approaches to part-time working

Our research also explored whether employers went beyond responding to workers' part-time working requests, to actively promote part-time working. While more than forty percent (42.1%) of survey respondents reported that line managers were more open to part-time working requests as a result of using the flexible furlough scheme, slightly less than a quarter (23.3%) reported that the flexible furlough scheme had encouraged line managers to proactively create part-time roles (see Table 7).

Table 7: Proactive and responsive approaches to part-time working as a result of using the flexible furlough scheme

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Line managers are more open to part-time working requests	42.1	39.7	18.2
Line managers are now proactively looking to create part-time jobs	23.3	37.5	39.2

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022

Evidence from the interviews further informs the distinction between responsive and proactive approaches to part-time working. The responsive approach involved reacting to individual requests for part-time working, but not initiating either organisational activities to promote opportunities for part-time working, or conversations with individuals about their working hours. Those who described their approach as proactive promoted part-time working through, for example, organisational change and training initiatives, banners on job adverts, or internal communications featuring case studies of part-time workers. The most common proactive strategy was stating the availability of part-time and flexible working options in job advertisements, but this was often an organisation-wide policy and did not necessarily mean that the line manager had considered the feasibility of part-time working for a particular job.

“In manufacturing, when we talk about openness to part-time working, people think of that as openness to considering requests from employees, rather than proactive encouragement. What might change that is if employers want to encourage older workers to move to part-time as a way of keeping them in the workforce for longer.”

Jamie Cater, Senior Policy Manager (Employment), Make UK

“The legislation is rooted in the request-based model, and that drives employer thinking about part-time working. We need to think more broadly about how employers can be more proactive about part-time working and create more opportunities.”

Alice Arkwright, Equality Policy and Campaigns Support Officer, TUC

Survey participants who reported proactively seeking to create part-time roles as a result of their experience with flexible furlough may have been doing so for a number of different reasons. It is notable that more than half (53.8%) of those who used part-time working to reduce the working hours of full-time workers during downturns pre-pandemic also agreed that line managers were now looking to proactively create part-time jobs (see Table 8). In contrast, only one in five (20%) of those who did not use part-time working to reduce hours during downturns pre-pandemic said that their line managers were now looking to proactively create part-time jobs. This significant (33.8 percentage point) difference raises the question of whether those employers who became more proactive about part-time working might have been doing so not to support employee work-life balance, but as a means of driving efficiency.

Table 8: Difference in proportion agreeing that line managers are proactively creating part-time roles post-pandemic, by pre-pandemic use of part-time working to reduce the hours of full-time employees during downturns

		Pre-pandemic reasons for using part-time work	
		To reduce the hours of full-time employees during downturns	
		Disagree/neither	Agree
Line managers are now proactively looking to create part-time jobs	Disagree/neither	80	46.2
	Agree	20	53.8

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022. Significance: $p < .05$

A proactive approach to part-time working needs to be supported by a culture which normalises the discussion of working hours preferences. Some interviewees suggested that initiating a conversation about part-time working with an individual might be seen as awkward, both for themselves and for the worker. An HR manager from a service business remarked that *“Even having a conversation about, ‘Does your role need to be full-time?’, I would imagine people would find that quite unsettling.”* She explained that this approach reflected an assumption about a lack of worker demand: *“That might feel a bit uncomfortable for that person if it hadn’t been something that they ever considered or wanted.”* An operational director from a service business felt that he lacked the skills to have such a conversation: *“You’ve got to make it a safe conversation, but I don’t know how you do that... or make it part of your culture, that becomes a constant discussion, rather than something that’s left field, that’s odd.”*

Several interviewees said they would only initiate a conversation about part-time working in specific contexts such as following maternity leave or ill health. An HR director from the services sector reflected that *“Maybe this is still a rather traditional view that... when a couple start a family... that’s when we’ll often get part-time working requests. So, we’ve got information that we send out to both men and women who are thinking about going on maternity leave, or shared parental leave, or extended paternity leave, about their opportunities for part-time working. That’s probably the most proactive that we are in terms of promoting part-time working. In other respects, it’s probably employee-led.”*

“If you’re the boss, you can say, ‘My door is open’, but it takes a lot of courage for someone to walk through it and ask for part-time working, because there’s a power disparity.”

Neil Carberry, Chief Executive, REC

“What we hear a lot from members is that there’s still so much hesitancy around asking for part-time. If employers can initiate more open conversations, and offer part-time and flexible working arrangements in job adverts, it relieves the unspoken tensions between the worker and the employer, and creates a common understanding of what’s actually available.”

Alice Arkwright, Equality Policy and Campaigns Support Officer, TUC

“It’s not always easy for candidates or workers to ask for part-time work so we would encourage employers to advertise roles with flexible and part-time options wherever possible and adapt their policies to make the right to request flexible working from day one of employment.”

Claire McCartney, Senior Policy Adviser, CIPD

Differing approaches to part-time working and remote working

In contrast to their approach to part-time working, many interviewees reported that they were more comfortable being proactive about hybrid and home working. An HR manager from the hospitality sector suggested that organisational proactivity about hybrid working is *“definitely”* greater because it had been *“fully embraced within the business. And there’s never a challenge or a question about [non-operational] people working from home or the amount of time people work from home... That’s now very much part of our culture.”* In a service business where almost all employees were desk-based, the HR director suggested that homeworking had become a *“strategic priority”* because *“it’s affecting everyone, and not everyone wants to work part-time.”* He perceived greater demand for hybrid working because it’s *“very topical, it’s in the news all the time, everyone’s writing about it, and therefore our people are asking about it. And that’s across the board. Young and old, professional and non-professional... Part-time working, whilst we have a lot of part-time workers in our organisation, it’s often employee-led rather than employer-led.”* Interviewees described organisational initiatives on hybrid working during or since the Covid-19 pandemic which contrasted with their responsive approach to part-time working. Examples included new policies, trials, senior management interventions, and in one case, a complete redesign of the building and workflow, involving the removal of allocated desks and the introduction of quiet spaces, shared desks and collaboration spaces.

“Employers are more proactive about hybrid because there are big, near-term financial and business drivers, because firms are thinking about their physical space. It’s a clear and present discussion, coming out of two years of a pandemic. Staff clearly want to maintain hybrid, so for employers it’s a big flashing light, a question of, ‘We need to settle what our approach is here.’”

Neil Carberry, Chief Executive, REC

“Compared with working from home, employers are less proactive about part-time working. I would put that down to the difficulty of integrating part-time working into the business. It’s a lot easier to say that where you do your work can be flexible, but reducing the hours, you would need to put in alternative staffing and wider team support mechanisms around that.”

Jennifer Beckwith, Deputy Director – Employment, CBI

Further drivers of increased employer openness to part-time working after the pandemic

Changes in employer openness to part-time working following the Covid-19 pandemic were recognised as being influenced by other factors in addition to experiences of using the flexible furlough scheme. Some of these were pandemic-related: for example, the disruption to many organisations' business models, and the growth of working from home. Employers also reported their thoughts about the impact of the pandemic on worker demand for part-time working, and about changes in openness to part-time working driven by labour shortages.

Increased openness to part-time working because of disruption to normal working practices

In addition to the flexible furlough scheme, our survey identified two further drivers of managers' increased openness to part-time working arising from disruption to normal working practices during the Covid-19 pandemic: the experience of working from home, and changes to the business model resulting from the pandemic.

Table 9: Other drivers of manager openness to part-time working post-pandemic

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Working from home means that line managers have become more open to part-time working requests	30.4	47.9	21.8
Changes in the business model have made line managers more open to part-time working requests	28.7	45	26.4

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022

The "trickle-down effect" from widespread working from home

Just under a third (30.4%) of survey participants agreed that working from home had led to greater line manager openness to part-time working (see Table 9). The "great working from home experiment" challenged perceptions of what could be done remotely and, for some, this experience led to more open thinking about part-time working: *"You're pushing against a more open door now, because more people realise that just because we've always done something one way, doesn't mean that if we make a huge change, it won't work, because we all saw that it could"* (HR director, services). Interviewees identified three different mechanisms by which more open attitudes to working from home might "trickle down" to openness to part-time working: the breakdown of "separate spheres" of work and home life; line managers' increased trust in their staff; and the introduction of collaborative working practices for remote workers which also benefited part-time workers.

First, some interviewees noted an erosion of the boundary between the two “separate spheres” of home and work, resulting from the experience of widespread working from home. An HR manager from a service business commented that pre-pandemic, *“The thinking at the top was, ‘It’s none of our concern what people are dealing with at home... You sort your home life out, and you come here and do your job.’”* However, online meetings while working from home had opened up a window into workers’ home lives: *“I think you’re connected more with people as individuals and actually their personal life has fed more into our world, the work world.”* She commented that this, along with other factors, had increased openness to part-time working: *“I would say it’s the hybrid working and the flexibility and the working through the pandemic and just having that home/work divide diminished a little bit, that’s probably changed the perception around whether or not we could be a bit more flexible in full-time/part-time.”*

Second, some interviewees commented that line managers had been required to become more trusting of employees who were working from home. This in turn could affect openness to part-time working because line managers had to move away from presenteeism and think more about outputs. An HR director from a service business suggested that *“To make an experiment like working from home work, you’re forced to trust people to do their jobs... We forced [line managers] to change their thinking. And so that’s where I think the link with part-time working is. I actually think it’s given an opportunity for some people to not be hours-based.”*

Third, it was suggested that the more collaborative working practices developed for employees who were working from home could also support part-time working. An HR director in the hospitality sector described how working from home had forced a colleague to develop better communication practices, such as sharing availability patterns and location, and more regular information sharing across the team. These benefited both part-time and remote team members.

“Most employers have put a framework around hybrid working, requiring some time in the workplace for collaborative, creative or culture building activities for roles that can be done remotely. If you’re encouraging staff to have a dialogue about what their home arrangements are to maximise support for a sustainable hybrid working approach, that has probably enabled more individuals to think that they can request a reduction in hours.”

Jennifer Beckwith, Deputy Director – Employment, CBI

Changes to the business model resulting from the pandemic

More than a quarter (28.7%) of survey participants agreed that changes in their business model prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic had led line managers to become more open to part-time working requests (see Table 9). Interviewees identified three such changes in their business model: a more efficient matching of labour resources to periods of peak business demand (as reported above); a continuing low level of business demand which meant that part-time working requests enabled employers to reduce costs; and improvements in productivity which meant that workers could maintain full-time-equivalent outputs in part-time hours.

Where a business was experiencing reduced demand, fewer staffing resources were needed, which, combined with their experience of using flexible furlough, had changed one employer’s thinking about how to respond to requests for part-time working: *“That experience [of flexible furlough] has enabled the business to think, ‘Actually, part-time can work.’ Before, we were like, ‘We have to have full resource, otherwise how would we possibly service our clients?’... Whereas, we’ve seen that demand has fallen, so maybe [part-time working] is advantageous to the business as well”* (HR manager, services). However, where business demand had recovered, part-time working could be seen as less advantageous: *“We didn’t keep [short-time working] going... We need to get the product out, and we need to have 40 hours a week plus overtime... Our orders are shooting up now”* (HR director, manufacturing).

Disruption to their business also prompted some interviewees to embrace better work organisation and use of technology, which in turn allowed people to work fewer hours while maintaining productivity at full-time-equivalent levels: *“I think all of us had to just stop and think, ‘How can we do this differently? How can we maximise technology?’... We have definitely become much smarter and more efficient... We really, really stripped back and really, really honed our processes to a point that it’s far more efficient than I ever thought we’d get to”* (HR manager, hospitality).

These changes in the business model resulted in what might be described as employer-led part-time working, since the changes were driven by employer needs, rather than support for employee work-life balance. However, such changes are not necessarily negative for work-life balance, if employer and employee needs can be matched.

Increased openness to part-time working because of perceived changes in worker demand

Perceived worker demand for part-time working was found to be a key element in employer openness to part-time working. Research participants identified two opposing trends in worker demand for part-time working as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic: first, that more employees want to work fewer hours in order to achieve better work-life balance as a result of their experience during the pandemic, and second, that fewer workers wanted to work part-time because they saved commuting time by working from home. Notably, the drivers of worker demand for part-time working were seen to be gender- and age-related: in male-dominated workforces the demand was assumed to be low, and several interviewees mentioned that a younger workforce was less interested in part-time working. Interviewees also identified the impact of the cost of living crisis on demand for part-time working: a higher cost of living might cause some workers to prefer full-time working, but simultaneously increase the demand for second or additional part-time jobs.

Table 10: Perceived change in worker demand for part-time working as a result of the pandemic

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Post-Covid-19, more employees want to work fewer hours for a better work-life balance	51.2	21.9	26.9
Saving commuting time by working from home means that fewer people want to work part-time	38.5	40.9	20.6

Source: CBI-Cranfield survey, 2022

Drivers of increased worker demand for part-time working

Just over half (51.2%) of survey participants agreed that the pandemic had led to more employees wanting to work fewer hours to achieve better work-life balance (see Table 10). Many interviewees noted a re-evaluation of life priorities, and of how workers wanted to use their time. One interviewee described a *“change in the social psyche around working, which has happened over the pandemic. Work-life balance is a much bigger conversation”* (operational director, services). In a few cases, including in lower-paid roles, interviewees mentioned workers making an explicit choice to prioritise time over money: *“People have got used to relying on less money in some instances, and realise that actually that additional 20% doesn't give them that value of life and they'd prefer a three-day weekend”* (HR director, hospitality).

A further trend influencing the growth in worker demand for part-time working was the need for some workers to take on second jobs, in response to the rise in the cost of living. Such part-time jobs might be in addition to other full-time or part-time jobs, or self-employment. In hospitality, a rise in workers taking on part-time additional jobs on late or night shifts had been observed: *“They might have taken another job, and so they want to do ours part-time, so they can fit that one in as well... We've had quite a few cases of people asleep on the job, which again is making me think they're doing more than one job because they're tired”* (HR manager, hospitality).

Drivers of reduced worker demand for part-time working

More than a third (38.5%) of survey respondents believed that working from home meant that fewer people wanted to work part-time because they already saved time by not commuting (see Table 10). Interviewees also mentioned that working from home provided the opportunity to fulfil some types of family responsibilities during working hours, which might in turn decrease demand for part-time working: *“I wonder whether because people have the flexibility of working from home now, part-time working will become less important to people, because they are reducing their working hours because they're not commuting, and because they are able to do that flexibility such as pick up a child”* (HR manager, manufacturing). However, working from home could not replace part-time working in all circumstances. Some non-work tasks, such as caring for younger children, might be incompatible with full-time work, regardless of its location: *“Obviously if all day you're caring for a child, that doesn't work. But if actually, it's about dropping off in the morning, picking up from school in the afternoon, then they can do that around their work... I don't have the hard facts about it, but I suspect what's happening now is people are able to do more things at home that in the past would have required a change in working pattern”* (HR director, manufacturing).

Increased openness to part-time working and labour shortage

Labour shortage was the most common explanation cited by interviewees for increased openness to part-time working following the Covid-19 pandemic. It was noticeable that the emphasis placed on labour shortage increased between the first (October 2021-February 2022) and second waves of interviews (May-July 2022). Some interviewees reported that they would be more likely to grant a request for part-time working, both from an existing employee if they would be difficult to replace, and from a job applicant if there were few alternative candidates.

An HR manager in hospitality described how the labour shortage had led to increased willingness to embrace part-time and other forms of flexibility: *“The marketplace was totally different then; you would be inundated with people who were looking for jobs. So it was very easy to say, ‘This is what I need; is this what you can match with?’ As opposed to now, the tables are completely swapped, the marketplace has shrunk significantly in terms of the number of available candidates, and actually, the first question should be, ‘What are you looking for? How regularly would you like to work? What would be the pattern of work that you prefer?’, and see how we can match to it, as opposed to the other way around. So it’s been a complete shift in pitching, in the last two years.”* Others took a more reluctant, “full-time first” approach to part-time working. Their preference was for full-time employees, but they would advertise for part-time workers if a vacancy could not be filled with a full-time person: *“If we put out vacancies, we will put out a full-time role... If that doesn’t get a response within a certain period, we would then consider putting out two part-time roles. But it’s led by the candidates really. That’s what it comes down to”* (operational director, hospitality). The labour market therefore in their sector or location was key to the provision of part-time working.

Interestingly, some interviewees started to reflect on the potential for part-time working to overcome labour shortages during the interview. An operational director from the hospitality sector explained that she had never employed a part-time hotel receptionist because of the need for client continuity and the lower return on investment in training for a part-time worker. As she considered her current recruitment difficulties, she remarked that *“We’re looking for two full-time receptionists... But maybe if we put one of those into a part-time position, we might get somebody that just wants to do a couple of days a week. So actually, it is a little bit of a prompt and food for thought today, to be honest.”*

“We believe that organisations should be proactive in offering a range of flexible working options to employees, including part-time work, to support active labour participation. Forward-thinking employers will be actively offering flexibility to secure a diverse talent pool, particularly when experiencing on-going skills shortages.”

Claire McCartney, Senior Policy Adviser, CIPD

Dealing with the fixed costs of employing more part-time staff

Where employers had responded to labour shortage by employing more part-time workers, they were aware of the extra management burden: where using part-time meant having more staff, additional time had to be spent on recruitment, induction and training, as well as line management. Investment in recruiting and developing part-time staff is sometimes seen as less cost-effective than a similar investment in full-time employees. One HR manager in hospitality reported that line managers were employing part-time workers because of the labour shortage, but had *“multiple more team members that they’ve got to be responsible for. They’ve got more to think about when it comes to planning and rostering work. They’ve got an additional team to train, develop, manage their performance. So it’s not an easy ask, but they know that actually, it is a solution to the recruitment challenge.”*

One way of dealing with the extra management burden was to remove some of it from the line manager and regard the costs incurred as an organisation-level, long-term investment in workforce capability and planning. The HR manager quoted above had taken some of this activity away from line managers so that costs were borne in the central HR team: *“I think that is a fair challenge that [the line managers] are raising, so within my [HR] team... I’ve appointed a talent and development manager to help us with the induction... and a really easy-to-use learning management system... We’ve got extra people within our resourcing team to take some of that burden away from our managers, so that they’re only having to really get involved at final interview stage... We’re trying to put this solution in place so that the time pressures are kept to an absolute minimum, despite the fact that there would be extra people within the team that you’d be responsible for.”*

"I think the labour shortages or skills shortages are what's most likely to push employers to think about encouraging part-time working, maybe advertising jobs differently. If employers can't find the staff, that combination of labour shortage and knowing how to do it could lead to more promotion of part-time working."

Kate Bell, Head of Rights, International, Social and Economics, TUC

"From a purely mathematical perspective, putting a nine-hour shift into the rota is easier than finding and rostering two four-and-a-half-hours people. It's just force of habit, but that means half the management and people issues."

David Sheen, Public Affairs Director, UKHospitality

The impact of labour shortage on the availability of better quality part-time jobs

In addition to giving more consideration to part-time working requests, some interviewees felt that labour shortages put workers in a position to negotiate better quality part-time jobs. Interviewees from the hospitality sector reported that they had noticed an increased reluctance to accept zero-hours contracts with weekly changes to the number and schedule of hours worked. One HR director noted an increase in staff leaving pubs and restaurants for catering roles in schools or care homes in order to get a more stable work schedule: *"We're seeing it through our attrition data, so some of that data talks about people moving to roles where they can fix hours in a way that we are currently unable to do... I think the reality is, employees' expectations are different."* Several also noted that workers' tolerance of unsociable hours had reduced, making it harder to compete for labour with other sectors: *"People have had that opportunity [during the pandemic] to spend time at home with the kids. And because hospitality is a very long hours business, because it's 24/7, chefs sometimes don't finish till 11 at night, they've never seen the kids go to bed... And so I think people's boundaries have changed"* (HR director, hospitality).

"Many of the people working part-time have poor-quality jobs, and making those more stable would improve the perception of what part-time working is. It's important to think about part-time working and security of hours in the same bucket."

Kate Bell, Head of Rights, International, Social and Economics, TUC

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The research reported here examined employers' experiences of using the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), specifically the "flexible furlough" part of this scheme. Flexible furlough enabled employers to access government support by using staff on a part-time basis as their businesses recovered from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and furlough them for the remaining time. The particular focus of the research was to examine whether this experience influenced managers' perceptions of the feasibility of part-time working, and their openness to it.

The CJRS was designed to protect jobs where businesses experienced a downturn during the pandemic. However, this research found that, in addition to its original purpose, there were important unintended, but positive, consequences from its implementation. These were, first, learnings for managers about how to manage part-time working more effectively and second, an increased openness to part-time working. These findings demonstrate that interventions, in this case by government, can encourage organisations to experiment with different ways of working and can act as a lever for more general change.

Learning about how to manage part-time working more effectively

Using the flexible furlough scheme created opportunities for managers to learn about managing part-time working. The findings from this study show that managers learnt about both more effective management of part-time working and better matching of part-time employees to variation in business demand.

Learning how to manage part-time working more effectively included how to calibrate workload with hours worked and manage cover, handovers and gaps in availability. Approaches included more collaborative work organisation and the multi-skilling of staff. More efficient matching of staffing levels to demand was achieved through closer analysis of variations in business patterns.

Notably, learning was associated with the way in which the flexible furlough scheme was used. Learning took place where employers actively redesigned work for staff working on a part-time basis, rather than, for example, choosing to close operations for part of the working week. This suggests that there is a need to encourage employers to be more innovative in the organisation and management of work and to experiment with alternative approaches.

Importantly, these learnings created a capability amongst managers about how to manage staff working less than full-time, which can be drawn upon in the future.

Increased openness to part-time working

Use of the flexible furlough scheme challenged perceptions about the feasibility of part-time working, leading to greater openness to part-time working. In practice, increased openness tended to mean an openness to consider requests to work part-time from existing employees and/or potential new recruits. However, there was also some evidence of managers proactively creating opportunities for part-time working.

Increased openness was linked to the line manager capabilities developed through using the flexible furlough scheme and was also associated with the way in which the flexible furlough scheme was implemented. There was also evidence that managers' experiences more generally during the pandemic had increased their awareness and openness to alternative ways of working, with a "trickle-down" effect from the greater prevalence of working from home to other forms of flexible working, including part-time working.

Managers' openness to part-time working was also influenced by perceived changes in demand for part-time working, particularly where it was felt that the pandemic had led to more employees wanting to work fewer hours to help achieve a better work-life balance. However, it was also acknowledged that increased working from home, which saves commuting time and which might offer some flexibility about when work is done, could result in fewer people wanting to work part-time. More recently, labour shortages were seen as an important driver for increased openness to part-time working.

Notably, however, there were employers who did not perceive a need for greater openness to part-time working, either because they saw themselves as already being very open, or because they did not recognise an unmet demand for part-time working. In these latter cases the absence of requests was interpreted as a lack of demand for part-time working and was often linked to a view that part-time working was atypical and only relevant to certain demographic groups and/or life stages.

Taken together, learnings about how to manage part-time working more effectively and increased openness to part-time working create a resource which offers real potential for change. This resource can be harnessed by employers in response to other circumstances, including, for example, offering part-time working opportunities to increase workplace diversity, as a response to labour shortages, or to avoid redundancies in future challenging economic circumstances.

Recommendations

Guidance for employers on managing part-time working

This research has shown that use of the flexible furlough scheme provided employers with an opportunity to experiment with part-time working and that this helped them to learn about how to manage part-time working more effectively. It is important that the employer learnings identified by this research are made available to wider audiences, including those employers who did not use the scheme.

Practical guidance is needed on how to manage part-time working effectively. This needs to include two key components. First, line managers need to understand how to design work for part-time working (including at higher skill levels and for quality jobs), recognising the heterogeneity of different part-time working arrangements and the need to provide opportunities for in-work progression. Second, there is a need to create a culture that encourages dialogue about preferred working hours. Employers should not assume that a lack of requests signals a lack of demand, since some employees or potential recruits may be hesitant to ask, especially in workplaces where part-time working is not common.

This guidance could be made available and publicised through government bodies providing advice, such as ACAS, and also through professional and industry groups and campaigning organisations. The provision of better guidance and resources to support part-time working was the intervention most commonly requested by participants in the study.

“We know that strategies that improve conditions in low-paid jobs will particularly benefit people who’ve been segregated into poor quality part-time work. Raising the floor of those jobs, rather than just telling people you should get a different part-time job, is one of the most important things we can do to raise the status and potential of part-time work for everybody.”

Kate Bell, Head of Rights, International, Social and Economics, TUC

“We know from experience, and from a growing body of evidence, that getting part-time working right requires well trained managers who are skilled to think about job design, to support good working practices and to excel at communication. Now is the time for greater proactivity to make this a priority.”

Daisy Hooper, Head of Policy & Innovation, Chartered Management Institute

Interventions to encourage employer innovation and experimentation on part-time working

The employer learnings identified in this research were made possible by a government scheme designed as a response to a crisis. To foster learning and openness to different ways of working, outside of extreme circumstances, governments should encourage innovation in relation to working arrangements. Employers should be encouraged to experiment with different ways of organising work, in the same way that businesses are encouraged to innovate with product and service development. A formal, funded pilot scheme covering a range of job types 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 with the UK trial of the 4-day week in 2022 might act as a model.

An outcome of a large-scale part-time working pilot might be a campaign, supported by government, employers’ and employees’ organisations, to promote different working arrangements, similar to the Work-Life Balance campaign launched in the early 2000s. The dissemination of learnings from employer experimentation with part-time working could be used to inform government positions on the role of work in society and enable the development of appropriate employment policy.

“The opportunity facing us collectively, as labour market policymakers, is to create a part-time labour market that exists across the whole of the labour market, and not just in certain sectors and demographics.”

Neil Carberry, Chief Executive, REC

“We need to keep up the momentum on high-quality part-time working to ensure that the changes made during the pandemic last. We don’t want to shift back to part-time working being stigmatised.”

Alice Arkwright, Equality Policy and Campaigns Support Officer, TUC

More nuanced understanding of worker demand for part-time working

An in-depth understanding of worker demand for part-time working is required to increase participation in work and to contribute to job satisfaction and productivity. Existing largescale survey questions about working hours preferences lack nuance. For example, the questions asked by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) do not take account of respondents' perceptions of the opportunities are open to them (e.g. downgrading may be seen to be necessary to secure part-time working) and as a result the scale of demand may be under-represented.

There is some evidence to suggest that greater availability of opportunities to work part-time might help attract those who are economically inactive into employment. For example, recent evidence of a demand for part-time working amongst older people considering a return to work²² could usefully be explored in more depth, as could the relationship between increased access to other forms of flexible working, such as working from home, and the demand for part-time working. Examination of employers' reasons for rejecting part-time working requests could shed light on the barriers facing those considering making a request and how this might impact on their preference to work part-time.ⁱ

"In the longer term we need to change the perceptions around who looks after children, and who might need to do part-time work. When we're thinking about how we value and reward part-time work, changing the perception of who does it and why could be an important part of that."

Kate Bell, Head of Rights, International, Social and Economics, TUC

Finally, the findings from the research raise some more general issues about the way in which work is designed and organised. Experiences during the pandemic challenged many established ways of thinking about work and working and the assumptions that underpinned that thinking. Although part-time working is normally defined in relation to full-time working, in practice it covers a wide range of arrangements, from a small number of hours to almost full-time. As such, it is hard to generalise about part-time working. Linked to this, the underpinning assumption that work "naturally" occurs in "full-time" units of 35-40 hours is unlikely to reflect the reality of all businesses and potentially limits the opportunities for matching worker and employer needs. As a result, it would be helpful to move away from defining part-time working in relation to full-time working, and instead consider actual hours worked (or at the very least categorisation of hours) in future discussions about policy and practice.

More generally, there is a need to reconsider the relationship between work and non-work in contemporary society, particularly in the light of social changes such as the widespread participation of women in the labour force and the removal of the default retirement age. Time not spent on paid work may be used for other, often unrecognised, contributions to society and the economy, such as caring (e.g. for children, older people, those with health issues or disabilities) and volunteering activities to support communities.

ⁱ The rejection rate for flexible working requests has been variously estimated at 9% (NIESR Management and Wellbeing Practices Survey, unpublished) and 30% (TUC (2019)), but in both cases the evidence on part-time working is not separated from other types of flexible working request.

Appendix: Research methods

This research used a mixed methods approach and collected data via a series of semi-structured interviews and an online survey.

Interviews were conducted at two time points. The first wave was between October 2021 and February 2022, with 35 directors and line managers with experience of using the flexible furlough scheme or a company-specific equivalent during the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose was to understand: their use of, and attitudes towards, part-time working pre-pandemic; their experience of using the flexible furlough scheme; and its impact, if any, on openness to part-time working. A second wave of interviews was conducted with 26 of the original interviewees, in May-July 2022, in order to understand whether, and if so how, openness to part-time working had changed over this time period. Participants worked in HR or operational roles in three sectors – hospitality, manufacturing and services. Interviewees were drawn from locations across the UK, and different sizes of organisation: approximately a third came from SMEs with fewer than 250 employees.

The online survey was designed to investigate employers' use of, and views about, flexible working arrangements before the pandemic; their use of, and reasons for using, the furlough and flexible furlough schemes; changes in both use of and views about flexible working arrangements after the pandemic. It was conducted between February and April 2022 among member organisations of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) across all sectors, organisation sizes and geographies of the UK. Fieldwork and questionnaire design was carried out in collaboration with CBI Economics. HR and other central functions, as organisation representatives, as well as line managers, were invited to complete an online questionnaire.

Final sample size consisted of 356 whole-organisation representatives, and 190 line managers. About two thirds of respondents came from SMEs with fewer than 250 employees. Just over a third (37.4%) of organisations had used the flexible furlough scheme.

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Project website:

www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/expertise/changing-world-of-work/the-future-of-part-time-working

