Influences on employers' provision of part-time working

An evidence review

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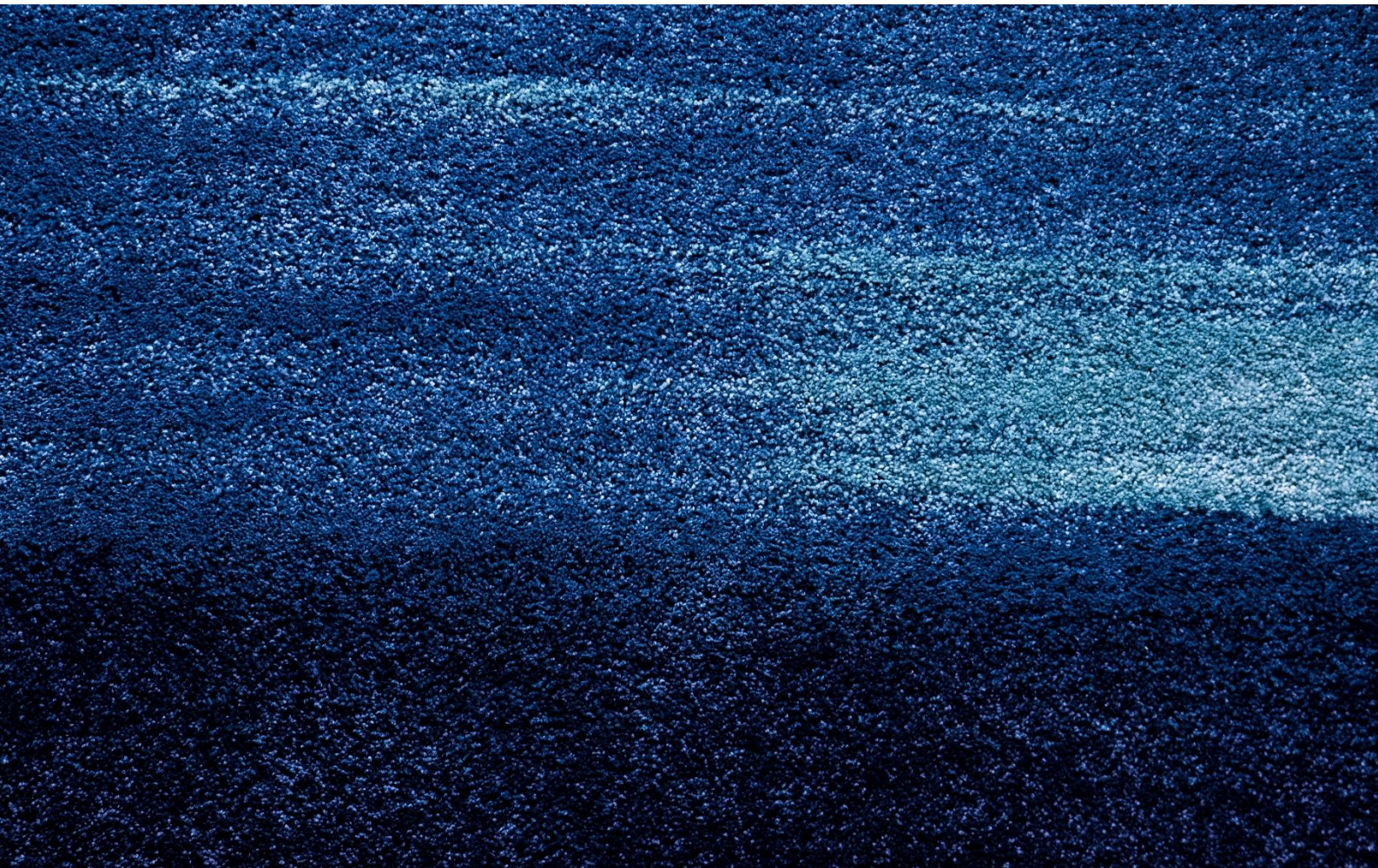
July 2021



Acknowledgement

This research is funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research & Innovation's rapid response to Covid-19.

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Executive summary

Part-time working accounts for one in five jobs across Europe, and one in four in the UK. However, part-time working from the employer perspective has been under-researched. The employer perspective is important because currently, part-time jobs are often poor quality jobs, and because some full-time workers would prefer to work part-time but feel that the option is not open to them. Better quality part-time jobs across a broader range of types of work could improve labour market participation, social inclusion and progression for certain disadvantaged demographics, which in turn will maximise skills and productivity.

Part-time working is defined in relation to a full-time norm, but part-time jobs are not uniform: part-time working may be designed to meet employer needs or workers' work-life needs; it may be high-quality or low-quality; and it may vary from one day a week to almost full-time. Influences on employers' provision of part-time working may operate at the national, sectoral, occupational or organisational level. Within organisations, provision may vary depending on the nature of the work and the attitudes of line managers and co-workers.

National legislation and cultural expectations provide the context within which employers make their decisions about the provision of part-time working: the prevalence of part-time working across Europe varies from 48% in the Netherlands to less than 10% in many eastern European nations. This context may affect employers in several ways. First, it may affect employer policy – not just the legal rights of part-time workers, but the cultural expectations about 'the right thing to do' for demographic groups such as parents and carers. Secondly, it may influence line managers' views on how to implement employer policy; and thirdly it may affect workers' preferred working hours, which in turn affect employers' provision of part-time working.

Sectoral and occupational context also influence employer decisions about the provision of part-time working: there is wide variation across sectors and occupations, with much higher prevalence in service sectors and in low-paid, female-dominated occupations in the UK. However, there is insufficient evidence to assess how the nature of the work, the people doing the work, the skills and gender balance in the sector, and the economic position of each sector or occupation contribute to the variable provision of part-time working.

At the organisational level, employers, and line managers, must balance the costs of part-time working against the need to attract and retain workers. There are quasi-fixed costs such as recruitment and training, which rise with the number of employees, rather than hours worked, and costs associated with the adaptation of working practices for part-time employees, such as team communication and the coordination of work. There are two principal advantages for employers: using part-time working to match supply and demand for labour during extended operating hours and peak periods, and, where organisational success depends upon the knowledge and talents of the workforce (human capital), using part-time working to attract and retain workers. The perceived productivity of part-time working is also part of the calculation.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on employer attitudes to flexible working, particularly homeworking. At the same time, the flexible furlough scheme has provided a natural experiment in part-time working. Although the use of short-time working schemes during economic downturns is well established in other developed economies, their impact on longer-term part-time working has received little research attention, possibly because part-time working is often considered from the perspective of workers' reasons for working part-time, while short-time working schemes are largely involuntary for workers. The redesign of work to facilitate 'part-furlough, part-working' may have provided opportunities for managerial and organisational learning: the next stage of this project is to research any changes in employers' perspectives on the feasibility of part-time working in different types of work.

Introduction

This evidence review is part of an ESRC-funded project entitled 'The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and employer perceptions of part-time working: the implications for economic recovery and future working'. The project examines whether and how employers' perceptions of part-time working have been influenced by their experience of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS). For many employers, the flexible furlough scheme has effectively been an experiment in part-time working. If this experiment has altered employers' perceptions of part-time working, there may be implications both for workforce diversity – enabling wider participation in employment by those unable or unwilling to work full-time – and for economic recovery, by avoiding the downgrading and marginalisation often associated with a switch to part-time working. The project asks the following research questions:

- How, if at all, has experience of the flexible furlough scheme altered employers' perceptions of the feasibility of part-time working?
- What actions have employers taken, or are employers planning to take, as a result of their experience of using flexible furlough and is there any resulting change in perceptions of part-time working?

This introduction considers the rationale for the project as a whole, and the methodology for the evidence review.

Why is the employer perspective on part-time working important?

Part-time working has been a growing phenomenon over the past 30 years in Europe. The proportion of part-time workers in the EU was 13% in 1985 (Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014), growing steadily to 18% in 2005 and has hovered around 18-20% between 2009 and 2020 (Eurostat, 2021). In the UK, part-timers make up 27% of the workforce (ONS, 2021a). However, the proportion of part-time workers has levelled off, and there is evidence of barriers at the employer level (Dick, 2009; Tomlinson, 2006).

A better understanding of the influences on employer provision of part-time working is needed for three reasons: first, because employer facilitation of part-time working could improve labour market participation and social inclusion for certain disadvantaged demographics; secondly because the lack of quality part-time jobs makes it hard for part-time workers to progress into more senior jobs, with consequent wastage of skills and productivity; and thirdly because the unmet demand for part-time working from full-time workers who feel that the option is not open to them has implications for worker wellbeing and job quality.

1. **Labour market participation and inclusion**

Three demographic groups are particularly associated with part-time working and may be excluded from the labour market if quality part-time jobs are not available: women, older workers and those with disabilities or long-term health conditions.

Women, and particularly working mothers, are the group most closely associated with part-time working. The growth of part-time working in the later 20th century has largely been attributed to women entering the labour market, often fulfilling employer demand for low-paid service sector roles (Bridges and Owens, 2017; Euwals and Hogerbrugge, 2006). Across Europe, 33% of working women work part-time, compared with 10% of men (Eurofound, 2017). In the UK, the

proportion of women working part-time was 37% at the start of 2021; the figure for men was 12% (ONS, 2021a). There is widespread evidence of women's preference for part-time working, particularly in connection with childcare (Booth and van Ours, 2008; Bridges and Owens, 2017). However, women's part-time working is concentrated in gender-segregated, low-wage occupations such as retail and social care (Manning and Petrongolo, 2008).

There is a widespread assumption in much of the practitioner literature that part-time working is a preferred choice for those aged 50-70, as a means of retaining the sense of purpose and social connection that comes with doing paid work, while simultaneously integrating work with caring responsibilities and managing health conditions (Cavendish, 2019; Centre for Ageing Better, 2020; Institute for Employment Studies, 2017; Oakman and Howie, 2013; The Economist, 2011). However, Loretto and Vickerstaff (2015) caution against assuming that this pattern is universal or preferred, noting that very few people actually follow a 'gradual retirement' pattern: those that do are mostly men in higher-skilled jobs.

Part-time working may also facilitate labour market participation for people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, with benefits not just for the economy and skills development, but also for social and community engagement (Schur, 2003; William, 2016). Across Europe, workers with a disability or chronic health condition are more likely to work part-time than full-time (Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014), although again this may not represent a straightforward preference, but rather a compromise with employer needs (William, 2016).

More broadly, part-time working can bring a sense of autonomy and freedom to all demographics, and improve wellbeing by allowing time for other life priorities such as community, family, learning and leisure (Balderson et al., 2021).

2. The poor quality of much part-time work

There is evidence of a lack of high-quality part-time jobs in the UK (Lyonette, Baldauf and Behle, 2010; Warren and Lyonette, 2018). This is not just a problem for women: part-time jobs tend to be lower quality than full-time jobs for men as well as women (Warren and Lyonette, 2020).

Although part-time working allows workforce participation, many studies have shown that it can also hinder progression into more senior roles (Connolly and Gregory, 2008; Durbin and Tomlinson, 2010; Hall et al., 2012; In-Work Progression Commission, 2021; Manning and Petrongolo, 2008; McDonald, Bradley and Brown, 2009; Tomlinson, 2006; Women and Work Commission, 2006). A large-scale analysis of part-time workers in the UK between 1991 and 2001 found that a quarter had had to downgrade in order to work part-time (Connolly and Gregory, 2008). Part-time workers have also been found to have less access to training than their full-time counterparts (Eurofound, 2017; Lyonette, Baldauf and Behle, 2010) and may be paid less per hour than full-time workers (Devicienti, Grinza and Vannoni, 2020; Nightingale, 2019). Rather than part-time working being a 'stepping stone' into more skilled, higher level or higher paid work, part-timers in the UK between 2010 and 2017 were less likely than full-timers to progress out of low pay; those part-timers who switched to full-time roles suffered no such penalty, suggesting that the problem may not be part-timer workers' lack of skills or work motivation, but the poor quality of many of the available part-time jobs (Nightingale, 2020).

3. Unmet demand for part-time working

There is evidence that some full-time workers would prefer to work less, and would accept lower pay, but believe that part-time working is not available to them. Estimates of the size of this section of the working population vary. The proportion of the UK workforce that was 'overemployed', based on ONS figures in 2018, was 10% (Bell and Blanchflower, 2019), but a

survey in 2017 found that 25% of a sample of 1,250 full-time workers wanted to work less, and would accept less pay, if it didn't affect their pay per hour or career progression (Timewise, 2017). A rare longitudinal study of working time preferences in the UK between 1991 and 2008 (Reynolds and McKinzie, 2019, p.454) identified 'chronic' overemployment ('in most years, roughly one-third of men and one-fourth of women want to work fewer hours') and proposed that this may arise from the inability of most workers to control or predict their schedules: the much lower average proportion of people wanting to work more (6% for both men and women) suggests that a preference for working less is harder to achieve than a preference for working more.

Achieving quality part-time working can be constrained by a lack of individual bargaining power, or by a perceived stigma. Where work is not designed in a way that facilitates part-time working, particularly in managerial and professional jobs (Correll et al., 2014; Perlow and Kelly, 2014), part-time working has to be negotiated individually, and may only be available to those with high individual bargaining power, such as rare skills or high performance (Gascoigne and Kelliher, 2018; Hornung, Rousseau and Glaser, 2009; Riva et al., 2018; Rousseau, 2005). Meanwhile, stigma persists, especially for men (Sheridan, 2004): fathers often believe that flexible working policies, even when written in gender-neutral language, are targeted at mothers (Burnett et al., 2013; McDonald, Brown and Bradley, 2005), and part-time working has been found to be more gender-constrained than other forms of flexible working (Cook et al., 2020). There is also stigma associated with part-time working in occupations where long hours and constant availability to client or organisational needs are the norm (Lawrence and Corwin, 2003; Tsouroufli, Ozbilgin and Smith, 2011).

Methodology for the evidence review

This evidence review was conducted in preparation for the empirical stages of the project, and addresses the following questions:

- How is part-time working defined?
- How are work-sharing, short-time working and furlough defined?
- What influences employers' provision of part-time working?

Our search strategy involved both academic papers and 'grey' literature such as government and institutional reports and media articles. For the academic literature, we concentrated on two databases, ABI and Ebsco, and conversations with leading academics in the field. We included grey literature in order to capture current thinking on a live and rapidly developing topic, particularly the development of 'retention' part-time working in the twenty-first century: our search strategy (Adams, Smart and Huff, 2017) was to consult a range of practitioners and policy experts in related fields, and then search the business press, and a range of specialist sources and websites. More information about our search strategy can be found at https://doi.org/10.17862/cranfield.rd.14974032.

Definition of terms

Definition and categories of part-time working

Part-time working is defined in relation to a norm of full-time working. It involves employers contracting workers to work less, and be paid less, than full-time workers. The EU's Framework Agreement on Part-Time Work (1997) and the International Labour Organization define part-time working in relation to a norm within a particular setting (Gomez, Pons and Marti, 2002), although some statistical agencies use a threshold of a certain number of hours per week, with different countries using different numbers, typically less than 30 or less than 35 hours per week (Fagan et al., 2014; Kalleberg, 2000).

The full-time norm of 35-40 hours per week has arisen as a result of social trends and collective bargaining (Arrowsmith, 2002; Pfau-Effinger, 1993) and may not mirror the hours of operation of many organisations: for example retail or hospitality may operate 120 hours per week, and healthcare or emergency services the full 168. Moreover, for knowledge workers, full-time is increasingly defined not by a contracted number of hours, but with reference to specified outputs (Kalleberg and Epstein, 2001; Rubery, Ward and Grimshaw, 2005). In these contexts, it has been suggested that the term 'part-time' should be replaced by 'reduced load' (Lee and Kossek, 2005). In more routine jobs, or shift based jobs, the use of specified hours is more normal for both full-time and part-time workers.

Within the definition of 'less than full-time', part-time working has been analysed in various different categories.

Employer-led and employee-led part-time working

A common distinction in the flexible working literature is between employer-led and employee-led flexible working: employer-led flexible working is driven by organisational needs, while employee-led flexible working is driven by work-life balance needs. For part-time working, however, research has focused more on the employee and the reasons for wanting to work 'less than normal', rather than the employer: voluntary vs involuntary part-time working is a more frequent distinction in the literature. The focus on employee motivations for working less foregrounds the 'standard employment relationship' (SER) – the full-time, permanent employment contract which is typical of male workers – and marginalises women, parents, carers, older workers and people with disabilities: it has been called 'SER-centric' (Vosko, 2007).

Voluntary part-time working is chosen by the individual, while involuntary part-time working occurs when workers are unable to access full-time working. However, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary part-time working assumes a free and binary choice. Working hours choices may be constrained by context. For working parents (especially mothers) and carers, part-time working may be the only option available in the absence of affordable childcare (Gash, 2008). Thus, the claim that women 'choose' part-time working may perpetuate the full-time norm, rendering as 'other' those whose caring responsibilities make full-time work difficult or impossible (Blair-Loy, 2003; Tsouroufli, Ozbilgin and Smith, 2011).

Involuntary part-time working is related to 'underemployment', a quality of work indicator within the International Labour Organization's decent work framework defined by two components – working below skill level (a mismatch of occupation and education) and working fewer hours than wanted (a mismatch of preferred and actual hours) (Brown and Pintaldi, 2006). The time-

related element involves both willingness and availability for work. In addition to part-timers who want full-time work ('PTWFT'), and part-timers who want more, but not full-time, hours, underemployment can also sometimes include those full-timers who would like work even more hours (Bell and Blanchflower, 2019). The criterion of 'availability for work', which is part of the definition of underemployment, is contested because part-time work, especially low-waged part-time work, is more likely to be scheduled to take place at non-standard hours: the organisational need for non-standard hours is a key driver for employers to create part-time jobs.

The quality of part-time jobs: secondary 'bad' jobs and retention 'good' jobs

A further distinction concerns the emergence of higher-quality 'retention' part-time jobs (Tilly, 1996). Late twentieth-century part-time working was often limited to certain segments of the labour market: many employers used part-time working as a source of cheap (mostly female) labour in poor quality jobs (Fagan and O'Reilly, 1998). Tilly (1996) identified the emergence of 'retention' part-time jobs in more senior, managerial and professional work, and defined these by four characteristics: higher pay and benefits; higher skills, training and responsibility; lower turnover; and opportunities for promotion. More recent work on 'bad' part-time working has focused on the growth of jobs with hours which vary from week to week, either in volume of hours, making pay unpredictable, or in the scheduling of working hours, making non-work commitments harder to manage for full-time and part-time workers alike (Jacobs and Padavic, 2015; Living Wage Foundation, 2018; Timewise, 2018).

Kossek & Lautsch (2018) argue that there is a shortage of both theory and empirical studies of the differences in flexibility (including part-time working) at different occupational levels: employers may want to retain highly valued managers and professionals by individually negotiating high-quality part-time working, but where part-time working is an employer mechanism for reducing costs or extending operating hours in lower-skilled jobs, employers may be less concerned with training or promotion opportunities for their part-time workers.

Short (marginal) and long (almost full-time) part-time working

The degree of part-time – or closeness to the full-time norm – is also an important dimension of part-time working. Although part-time working is a continuum, 'marginal' part-time is often defined as less than 15 hours/week, or sometimes less than 20 hours/week (Messenger and Wallot, 2015).

Marginal part-time working has been studied in various contexts and with reference to various outcomes. For example, in developed economies, it is much more common for women than men to be working in marginal part-time jobs (Messenger and Wallot, 2015). It is associated with the youngest and oldest age groups, lower skill levels, and employment in particular sectors, particularly service sectors (Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014). The number of hours per week can impact on current and future hourly pay, with minimal part-time having a strong lowering effect on pay, while long part-time has almost none (Paul, 2016). On the other hand, even working 1-8 hours a week has positive benefits for individuals' mental health and wellbeing (Kamerāde et al., 2019).

Marginal part-time working also intersects with zero hours contracts and other forms of employer-led flexible and precarious working, in which the employee's working hours, and pay, may vary depending on employer demand (Messenger and Wallot, 2015).

Definition of work-sharing, short-time working and furlough

Employers may manage a business downturn by temporarily reducing the number of hours worked per worker (intensive margin) and/or the number of workers employed (extensive margin) (Borowczyk-Martins and Lalé, 2019). Known as short-time working, this strategy may be an organisational-level initiative, but governments may also introduce short-time working or furlough schemes to support workers whose hours and pay have been cut by their employers.

Government-led schemes

Grape and Kolm (2014, p.30) define short-term working schemes as 'labor market programs that allow employers to temporarily reduce the working time of employees while the government pays part of the compensation.' Governments intervene to solve a market imperfection by preventing the termination of otherwise-productive employment relationships during economic downturns, and avoiding the social and economic costs of unemployment. For workers, although this is an involuntary part-time arrangement, they do, at least, receive a proportion of their pay for the unworked hours (typically 70-100% in European schemes, although this may vary with the length of the recession, and may be capped), while also avoiding redundancy. There is usually a limit on the length of time the benefit gets paid for, but this may be extended where the downturn is prolonged, such as during the covid-19 pandemic (European Trade Union Confederation, 2020). Other differences are whether pension and social security contributions are paid by the state or the employer; and whether parents are treated differently from non-parents. Long-standing schemes in countries such as Germany may be adapted for different sectoral requirements, and may involve a degree of collective bargaining; firms may also be required to gain approval by the relevant government department (European Trade Union Confederation, 2020).

Organisation-led schemes

Irrespective of government support for workers, employers may use short-time working during a business downturn to avoid redundancy and retain skills. Workers remain employed, with an expectation of returning to normal hours of work when economic circumstances allow. Short-time working may be organised as, for example, two non-working days per week for a specified period of time, or alternating working weeks with non-working weeks. For workers, short-time working may be a more acceptable option than redundancy, but it is usually involuntary, and involves a reduction in pay (Chubb, Re riilly and Usher, 2010).

Work-sharing: the shorter working week

Work-sharing in the form of a shorter working week is not part-time working, but a permanent reduction in full-time weekly working hours, with no reduction in salary for workers. It has been suggested at a national level as a means of reducing unemployment, and at an organisational level as a means of redistributing the benefits of increased productivity to workers.

The only example of a national-level shorter working week was the French government's reduction in the standard working week from 39 to 35 hours in 2000, with mixed impact on unemployment but some work-life benefits for workers (Coote, Harper and Stirling, 2021; Rafi Khan, 2018). Many economists have been sceptical of the idea that work-sharing will reduce unemployment over the long term, based on both the 'lump of labour fallacy' and suspicion that

the unemployed do not have the skills to substitute for the employed and fill any slots vacated by work-sharing (Rafi Khan, 2018).

At the organisational level, some employers have experimented with this shorter working week, partly as an attraction and retention strategy, and partly in the belief that increased productivity can compensate for fewer hours (Autonomy, 2019; Coote, Harper and Stirling, 2021; Skidelsky and Kay, 2019).

What influences employers' provision of part-time working?

Part-time working is considered in the labour economics literature, and also as a sub-section of the flexible working literature, alongside flexibility of time and place (Hill et al., 2008). Broadly speaking, the labour economics literature is concerned with the costs and benefits of part-time working to both the economy and the employer, while the HRM literature tends to assume a business case for part-time working as an attraction and retention strategy, and so has focused more on its implementation. There is also a relevant literature which considers the impact of institutions on employers' adoption of work-life policies (flexible working, but also state support for care leave, childcare and eldercare), but this literature is mainly concerned with the impact on employer policy rather than implementation.

We assess these literatures by reviewing both institutional-level and organisational-level factors influencing employers' provision of part-time working: we have not identified any studies which explore the relative importance of the different levels of analysis. We also present data on the prevalence of part-time working in different sectors and occupations in the UK, and consider the impact of the covid-19 pandemic.

An extensive literature has considered the factors which drive worker demand for part-time working, particularly for women (Booth and van Ours, 2013; Bridges and Owens, 2017; Campbell and van Wanrooy, 2013; Gash, 2008; Reynolds and McKinzie, 2019), but this literature is only of relevance to the present review in so far as it drives employers to provide part-time working.

Institutional factors

The Netherlands had the highest proportion of part-time workers in Europe, at 48% of the workforce in 2020, with Switzerland at 39%, then Austria and the United Kingdom at around 27%, while Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Sweden all have levels of 20-25%. At the opposite end of the scale are many of the eastern European nations, with levels of less than 10% (Eurostat, 2021).

National legislation and culture provide the context within which employers make their decisions about the provision of part-time working. The concept of a national 'working-time regime' describes 'the set of legal, voluntary and customary regulations which influence working-time practice' (Rubery, Smith and Fagan, 1998, p.72) and includes working-time regulations and limits, collective agreements, 'normal' hours of work, and rates of overtime, non-standard hours, and part-time work. The institutional context may affect employers' provision of part-time working via three different mechanisms: first, it may affect employer policy; secondly, it may influence line managers' views on how to implement policy; and thirdly it may affect worker preferences, which may in turn drive employer provision.

Regarding the first mechanism, employer policy on many issues is influenced by the institutional context (Oliver, 1991). Although we identified no studies looking specifically at part-time working through this lens, there are studies of institutional pressures on employers' work-family policies in the USA (Goodstein, 1994), work-life policies in Canada (Wang and Verma, 2012) and family-friendly management in the UK (Wood, de Menezes and Lasaosa, 2003). Institutional pressure was found to be particularly strong for large employers and public-sector employers, who sought to secure public legitimacy by responding to social pressure (DiMaggio and Powell, 2000; den Dulk and Groeneveld, 2013); the proportion of women managers in the workforce

also figured, as employers responded to workers' family responsibilities (Ingram and Simons, 1995); and employers were strongly influenced by normative practice within their industry sector or region (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram and Simons, 1995; Wang and Verma, 2012). Part-time working may acquire legitimacy due to the norms and practices within a sector or society; it may be seen as 'the right thing to do' in order to promote diversity or demonstrate Corporate Social Responsibility to clients, workers or investors (Been, den Dulk and van der Lippe, 2017; van Dijk, van Engen and Paauwe, 2012; Naghavi, Pahlevan Sharif and Iqbal Hussain, 2020).

Secondly, there is a well-established literature on the gap between employer policy and practice in flexible and part-time working. Unlike HR policies on for example holidays, redundancy or parental leave, line managers have a wide degree of discretion in the implementation of flexible and part-time working (Lirio et al., 2008; Ryan and Kossek, 2008). Line managers are individuals who may respond to an organisational policy, or a worker's request for part-time working, based on their personal experience, views about work or social attitudes prevalent in their national or sectoral context. Although the evidence shows that flexible working is much less accessible in practice than employer policy would suggest, line managers may nonetheless want to 'do the right thing' for individuals, particularly those in disadvantaged demographic groups (Been, den Dulk and van der Lippe, 2017; Cooper and Baird, 2015; Daverth, Hyde and Cassell, 2016; van Dijk, van Engen and Paauwe, 2012; Den Dulk et al., 2011).

Thirdly, the national context, both structural and cultural, may directly influence workers' preferences for part-time working, which in turn influence employer provision. Workers' preferences may be influenced by national culture and legislation (Fagan, 2001; Gash, 2008; van Wanrooy & Wilson, 2006) or by the prevalence of part-time working in their national environment (Wielers, Munderlein and Koster, 2014).

The legislative framing of part-time working

Governments vary in the degree to which they intervene in working hours decisions or promote part-time working, with the UK, USA and Australia generally taking a less interventionist stance, while the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and France regulate working time more closely and promote part-time working via financial and tax incentives, in order to fulfil social and community needs, especially for parents (Fagan et al., 2014). In some European countries – particularly the Netherlands (Den Dulk et al., 2011; Plantenga, Schippers and Siegers, 1999) – the encouragement of part-time working in the late twentieth century had the explicit agenda of bringing into employment women who would otherwise be economically inactive: a high proportion of part-time workers is often associated with a higher overall employment rate (Booth and van Ours, 2013; Eurofound, 2011), and the provision of part-time working can increase women's labour market participation in countries where female employment is low (Barbieri et al., 2019).

The UK 'right to request' legislation frames all flexible working arrangements, including part-time working, as a negotiation between the individual and their employer. The employer's responsibility is to formulate a policy, and then give due consideration to individual requests with specified grounds on which they may reject requests; according to a TUC poll in 2019, 30% of formal flexible working requests were refused (TUC, 2021). In contrast, European countries such as the Nordic nations and France place more emphasis on government responsibility for work-life support mechanisms (den Dulk, Peters and Poutsma, 2012; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). The right to work part-time in many European countries originated with a right for parents, particularly mothers, to take parental leave in the form of part-time work. In these countries, where this right has existed since the 1990s, part-time working has become an established norm, most extensively in the Netherlands, where just under half of the workforce works part-time (Eurostat, 2021) and employers refuse part-time working requests only in rare

and very specific circumstances (Den Dulk et al., 2011; Plantenga, Schippers and Siegers, 1999).

There may also be unintended consequences for part-time working from tax and benefits legislation, although recent evidence for this is sparse. Earnings-based benefits systems may alter employers' cost-benefit calculations if there is a threshold below which the employer is not required to pay the benefit, as in Germany and the UK in the 1970s-1990s (Smith, Fagan and Rubery, 1998). Hours-based thresholds can have the same effect: in the USA, the 2010 Affordable Care Act ('Obamacare') might have led employers to avoid this cost by creating part-time jobs below the 30-hour threshold (Even and Macpherson, 2019), although others have disputed the causal effect (Mathur, Slavov and Strain, 2016; Valletta, Bengali and van der List, 2020). Clearly, the development of employment protections for part-time workers can mitigate this effect, as has been the case in many European countries since the late 1990s (Hipp, Bernhardt and Allmendinger, 2015).

National welfare provision

The welfare-state regime (Esping-Anderson, 1999, in den Dulk, Peters and Poutsma, 2012) concerns the role of the state, the family, civil society and the market in providing welfare. Flexible working arrangements form part of the welfare-state regime, alongside state support for childcare, eldercare and parental and caring leave. A social-democratic welfare-state regime (which promotes gender equality and employment via work-family support policies and institutions) is broadly prevalent in the Nordic countries and is associated with higher employer provision of flexible working arrangements, possibly because the normative environment created by state support encourages employers to support the work-life balance of their employees (Den Dulk et al., 2013; den Dulk, Peters and Poutsma, 2012).

Expected gender roles, and the degree to which childcare is regarded as a maternal responsibility, have driven female workers' demand for part-time working (Gash, 2008; Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004; Hipp, Bernhardt and Allmendinger, 2015; McDonald, Bradley and Guthrie, 2006), while expectations of the male breadwinner have reduced it from men (Burnett et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2020; McDonald, Brown and Bradley, 2005; Sheridan, 2004). Part-time working thus remains dominated by women in most countries, with men generally working part-time only at very early or very late career stages, even in the Nordic countries where part-time working has been encouraged (Den Dulk et al., 2011; Nicolaisen, 2011; O'Reilly and Fagan, 1998).

However, women's preference for part-time work is not universal, but varies with national cultural context: Pfau-Effinger's (1993) seminal study showed how differing cultures and institutions shaped Finnish women's preference for full-time work, and West German women's preference for part-time working. State provision of affordable childcare is associated in some countries with a less constrained choice of working hours (Gash, 2008; Hipp, Bernhardt and Allmendinger, 2015).

Sectoral context

Sectoral context also influences employer decisions about the provision of part-time working, but there has been little research on the relative importance of different factors. Literature on institutional pressures on employers suggests that sectoral pressure can be strong: for example, evidence from the USA and Canada shows that employer involvement in work-family issues can be strongly influenced by other organisations' practice in the same industry group or geographic region (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram and Simons, 1995; Wang and Verma, 2012). Sectoral norms may be relevant to the variable uptake of part-time working in the UK, but there

is insufficient evidence to assess how the nature of the work, the people doing the work, the skills and gender balance in the sector, and the economic position of each sector contribute to the variable provision of part-time working.

The use of part-time working in the UK varies significantly by sector. Sectors with high proportions of part-timers tend to employ large numbers of women, lending some weight to the argument that worker demand has been a strong driver of employer provision of part-time working. Service sectors with extended operating hours and peaks in demand also employ large proportions of part-time workers.

Table 1: Proportion of employees working part-time by sector, 2019 (ONS, 2021b)

Sector	% of employees working part-time, 2019
Retail	59
Accommodation & Food Services	57
Education	45
Health	43
Business Administration and Support Services	34
Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	26
Property	26
Public Administration	24
Professional, Scientific & Technical	20
Transport & Storage (inc Postal)	19
Motor Trades	16
Construction	14
Information & Communication	14
Finance & Insurance	14
Wholesale	13
Manufacturing	9
Mining, Quarrying & Utilities	8
Other	47

Occupational context

Occupation may also influence employers' provision of part-time working. Using a typology of upper, middle and lower occupations based on salary and skills (Williams and Boushey, 2010), Kossek and Lautsch (2018) reviewed the research on different types of flexibility and occupational status. The upper level broadly equates to managerial and professional work, and applies to 20% of US workers. 'Middle' occupations – christened the 'missing middle' because of the paucity of studies of work-life issues for this group – make up 50% of US workers, including nurses, security guards, semiskilled administrators, medical residents, and tourism services. The lowest 30% are the low-paid, low-skilled workers, for example in retail and hospitality.

While this classification lacks detail, and was designed to consider work-life outcomes for workers rather than provision of part-time working for employers, there are some crossovers. For example, Kossek & Lautsch (2018) found that upper-level workers tended to negotiate their part-time working patterns individually, and were subject to work intensification and career penalties, which might imply some employer cost or inconvenience in providing part-time working for these occupations (Dick, 2009), and an expectation that part-time workers will reciprocate by working harder (Kelliher and Anderson, 2009).

Kossek and Lautsch (2018) found very little literature examining part-time work for middle level workers, speculating that this may be because they have the least access to it, while in lower-level jobs, part-time working is associated with characteristics of 'bad jobs' such as unpredictable schedules and job insecurity: here, employers may be compensating for the quasi-fixed costs of employing part-timers by reducing job quality (Devicienti, Grinza and Vannoni, 2020).

In the UK, part-time working is clustered in particular types of occupations, particularly low-paid, female-dominated ones. Four occupational groups – sales and customer service, elementary occupations, caring, leisure and other service occupations, and administrative and secretarial occupations – account for 63% of the part-time jobs in the UK, although they make up only 37% of the total number of jobs (ONS, 2020).

The proportion of jobs carried out on a part-time basis also varies by occupation: as shown in the table below, three of the four lowest-level occupations – elementary occupations, sales and customer service, and caring, leisure and other service occupations – offer 50% or more of the total number of jobs on a part-time basis. At the opposite end of the scale are managers, directors and senior officials at only 14%.

Table 2: Proportion of part-time jobs by occupation, 2020
(ONS, 2020)

Occupational classification	% of jobs worked part-time, 2020
Sales and customer service	56
Elementary occupations	55
Caring, leisure and other service	50
Administrative and secretarial	39
Professional	22
Associate professional and technical	15
Process, plant and machine operatives	15
Managers, directors & senior officials	14
Skilled trades	13

Organisation-level factors

At the organisational level, employers may pursue an approach to part-time working that is rooted either in cost-benefit analysis, or in the use of human capital. In cost-benefit terms, there are quasi-fixed costs of employment, such as recruitment and training, and costs associated with the adaptation of systems and working practices for part-time workers. These costs might be perceived to outweigh the efficiency benefits of part-time working, such as the matching of supply and demand for labour during extended operating hours and peak periods. However, where organisational success depends on the knowledge and talents of the workforce (human capital), employers may use part-time working as a work-life balance strategy to attract and retain workers. The productivity of part-time working may also form part of the calculation, although the evidence here is mixed.

It is also important to note that employer provision of part-time working may not be consistent across an organisation: even when the long-term, organisation-level cost-benefit analysis looks positive, some of the direct, short-term costs of part-time working may fall to line managers' budgets at the business unit level (Dick, 2009). Thus, line managers and co-workers play a part in the actual provision, regardless of organisational policy (Cooper and Baird, 2015; Daverth,

Hyde and Cassell, 2016; Eaton, 2003; Edwards and Robinson, 2004; Kirby and Krone, 2002; McCarthy et al., 2013; Moore, 2020).

Perceived organisational costs

This review has identified three principal costs for employers in providing part-time working. First, there are quasi-fixed costs of employment, such as recruitment and training. Secondly, there are costs associated with the adaptation of systems such as HR. Finally, the cost of redesigning work to meet the needs of both employer and employee has received more research attention in recent years, particularly in relation to managerial and professional work.

Quasi-fixed costs

There is longstanding evidence that fixed or quasi-fixed costs, which operate on a per-person basis rather than on the basis of the number of hours worked, act as a disincentive to employ part-timers (Anxo, Hussain and Shukur, 2012). These include the administrative cost of supervising and maintaining records for each worker; the cost of recruitment and training; and any employee benefits (such as healthcare or company car) which are not pro-rated to match the hours worked (Oi, 1962, in Montgomery, 1988). A large survey of private sector employers in the USA in the 1980s showed that high quasi-fixed costs decreased the relative attractiveness of part-time workers (Montgomery, 1988). There has been little more recent empirical work on these quasi-fixed costs: modelling of employer demand for part-time working by labour market economists assumes that firms will compensate for quasi-fixed costs either by paying less per hour (Devicienti, Grinza and Vannoni, 2020), or by restricting the provision of part-time working to lower-skill jobs where training needs are minimal (Anxo, Hussain and Shukur, 2012).

Quasi-fixed costs in professional jobs may relate not just to formal training, appraisal and performance management, but also to networking, workplace social events, team meetings and informal learning (Edwards and Robinson, 2004; Epstein et al., 1999; Gascoigne and Kelliher, 2018; Meiksins and Whalley, 2002). Pas, Peters & Dooreward (2011) present the dilemma for employers in the Dutch healthcare system in terms of two competing HR strategies: on the one hand, the desire to retain highly skilled female doctors might drive the provision of part-time working, but on the other, hospitals may be reluctant to employ part-time doctors because of their (relatively) higher costs of employment and training, which render full-time working a more cost-efficient use of human capital.

Costs of adaptation

Adaptation of working hours may make sense as a retention strategy, but it also brings costs: standardisation of systems such as benefits calculations and holiday entitlements, and management processes such as setting performance targets, involve lower costs (Lawler, 2011). Bell and Blanchflower (2019) observe that the persistence of the full-time norm suggests that employers find it more cost-effective to negotiate working hours collectively with workers, rather than negotiating separately with each individual, even though this might compromise individual workers' preferred working hours.

Adaptation costs may occur where systems assume full-time as the norm and do not accommodate part-time working. For example, where shift-management software or training rotations only allow full-time slots, part-time workers create inconvenience (Edwards and Robinson, 2004; Medical Women's Federation, 2008) although more advanced technology may mitigate the problem. The use of headcount, rather than full-time-equivalent, as a basis for measuring a business unit's productivity, or tracking labour costs, can reduce managers'

willingness to employ part-timers (Appelbaum and Firpo, 2003; Cooper and Baird, 2015; Lyonette and Baldauf, 2010; Meiksins and Whalley, 2002)..

We might speculate that larger organisations with more sophisticated systems would more easily accommodate the costs of adaptation, although they might also be subject to a wider range of requests for working arrangements (Lawler, 2011). On the other hand, small organisations where part-time working is organised on a more informal basis, and possibly with a strong focus on community relations and doing the right thing (FSB, 2019), may find it easier to adapt.

Work designed for full-time workers may need redesigning for part-time working

Both individual jobs and group working practices have often been designed to suit a full-time norm (Perlow and Kelly, 2014). Part-time working may incur both costs of change and, potentially, ongoing costs associated with alternative working practices – costs which are likely to fall on line managers and co-workers at the business unit level.

There is evidence of these costs particularly in managerial and professional work: there is often a perception that the essential 'nature' of the work requires long hours, so part-time working contravenes both commercial and professional standards. Occupation-specific studies confirm this perception in professions such as law (Epstein et al., 1999), IT (Meiksins and Whalley, 2002), accountancy (Smithson et al., 2004), the police (Dick and Cassell, 2004), management consulting (Donnelly, 2006; Merilainen et al., 2004; Perlow and Porter, 2009), civil engineering (Watts, 2009), medicine (Tsouroufli, Ozbilgin and Smith, 2011) and scientific research (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2012). Redesigning work either to encourage more part-time working, or in response to individual requests, requires managers and co-workers to grapple with changes to communication and the coordination of work (Briscoe, 2007; Donnelly, 2006; Lee et al., 2002; Lee and Kossek, 2005; Meiksins and Whalley, 2002; Perlow and Porter, 2009).

A study of part-time professionals and managers in management consultancy and IT (Gascoigne and Kelliher, 2018) identified two working practices which, while suitable for full-time workers, would need to change to create feasible part-time professional jobs. First, the expectation of constant availability (Perlow, 1997; Watts, 2009), which relies on 'ideal workers' (Acker, 1990) who are always willing to prioritise work over non-work, would need to be changed to facilitate 'predictable time off' for all workers (Perlow and Porter, 2009; Rapoport et al., 2002). However, if workers are willing to work long hours and be constantly available for the same pay as 'ordinary' full-time hours, restricting one's working time may appear a costly option. Secondly, the individual approach to resourcing, which leaves part-time workers responsible for responding to clients and colleagues in periods when they are not being paid, would need to be replaced by a more collaborative, team-based approach to resourcing, allowing greater substitutability between workers (Briscoe, 2007; Rapoport et al., 2002). However, a more collaborative approach to resourcing in complex professional work might involve additional coordination and longer handovers (Briscoe, 2007).

For the employers of workers whose jobs are defined by hours, and where staff are easily substitutable for each other – for example in shift-based roles in some kinds of manufacturing, retail, call centres, or hospitality – the cost of work redesign is less of a problem. Here the challenge may be meeting individual work-life balance needs as well as the employer's shift requirements (Kossek et al., 2016; Kossek, Rosokha and Leana, 2020; Timewise, 2019).

The need to redesign the work – and sometimes colleagues' work too – each time a part-time worker progresses into a more senior role (Gascoigne and Kelliher, 2018) means that

employers of part-time workers may incur further costs. For example, a supermarket worker might be able to work part-time in a team of 40-50 on a shift rota of substitutable colleagues covering perhaps 120 hours/week of store operations; but taking the first step up the career ladder might require covering those same operating hours between three or four supervisors, creating a gap in the coordination of work which cannot be covered by colleagues. The absence of studies of part-time working in this 'missing middle' (Kossek and Lautsch, 2018) may reflect some of these difficulties; and the business case for part-time working may be less obvious for mid-level jobs (Tomlinson, 2006).

Perceived organisational benefits

This review has identified three organisational benefits of part-time working. First, part-time working may be seen as a form of employer-led flexibility which can save costs. Secondly, employers may use part-time working to attract and retain diverse talent. Thirdly, some employers may also believe that part-timers can be more productive than their full-time counterparts, although the evidence here is inconclusive.

Employer-led flexibility

Employers' motivation for providing part-time working from the 1970s onwards has often been attributed to their need for flexibility (Bolle, 1997; Reilly, 1998; Smith, Fagan and Rubery, 1998). This can be divided into two principal types: first, a permanent matching of labour supply to employer demand by using part-time working to cover extended operating hours and peak periods, and secondly a temporary reduction in full-time workers' hours (short-time working) during business downturns – a reduction which is usually involuntary for workers. In situations where part-timers lack employment protections, or bargaining power, part-time workers may also be seen as more 'flexible' because they are easier to make redundant.

Scheduling: covering peaks in labour demand and extended operating hours

Part-time working can be used to cover peak periods, and to cover hours of operation which extend beyond normal full-time working hours, particularly in service sectors (Smith, Fagan and Rubery, 1998). The employer's objective is to maximise efficient use of resources, rather than improving job quality or workers' work-life balance, although for some workers there may be a good match: non-standard hours may, for example, suit those with caring responsibilities, those who are studying, or those who have multiple jobs.

Older surveys in Europe and Canada found that managers ranked this as the most important driver for employing part-time workers, especially in service sectors such as healthcare, retail and hospitality (Bielenski, 1994, in Smith, Fagan and Rubery, 1998; Zeytinoglu, 1992), while a 2008 survey of Finnish employers in four service sectors – retail, hospitality, buildings maintenance and cleaning, and security services – identified fluctuations in workload as a key driver (Kauhanen 2008). Long operating hours are prevalent in retail: a survey of Dutch pharmacies (Künn-Nelen, De Grip and Fouarge, 2013) found that employers benefited from using part-time working to cover peak hours such as lunch time and non-standard hours such as late opening.

While most studies of part-time working as a means of covering peak or extended operating hours involve lower-skill jobs, one survey of American post-secondary educational institutions (Liu and Zhang, 2013) showed that they employed part-time staff specifically to teach the evening classes which were less attractive to full-time staff.

Temporary work-sharing (short-time working) in response to difficult economic conditions

When employers expect reductions in demand for labour to be temporary, they may turn to short-time working, temporarily reducing the hours worked by full-timers, and potentially reducing the hours of part-timers too. Bell and Blanchflower (2019) concluded that UK employers used underemployment as an alternative to unemployment during the 2008 financial crisis, based on the steady rise in underemployment from 9% to 12.3% between 2008 and 2013, and then its decline to 9.7% by 2018, although some of this may also be due to the unemployed taking part-time jobs because they were unable to find full-time ones. A similar strategy has been used by US employers: over the past five decades, most transitions from full-time to part-time employment in slack labour market conditions occurred within the same employer, suggesting that employers manage downturns by reducing the number of hours per worker, as well as the number of workers (Borowczyk-Martins and Lalé, 2019).

Existing evidence does not establish whether the experience of temporary short-time working has any impact on employers' propensity to use part-time working more generally. Anecdotal examples of UK employers encouraging part-time working during and after the 2008 financial crisis were found to be driven by short-term cost-saving, without consideration for the longer-term costs of employing part-timers (Lyonette and Baldauf, 2010). The same authors found that most employers in their study saw no change in requests for part-time working, and there was some (anecdotal) evidence that employers were less likely to grant such requests, perhaps regarding part-time working as a more expensive form of employment at a time of downsizing, recruitment freezes, pay freezes or staff redeployments. There is also some evidence that economic uncertainty may reduce employer support for flexible working in general (Sweet et al., 2014).

Where part-timers lack employment protection, they can be easier to make redundant

The flexibility of part-time work from the 1970s onwards is often mentioned in the same context as temporary or precarious work, as an opportunity for employers to respond to a downturn by making part-time workers redundant (Friesen, 1997; Reilly, 1998; Zeytinoglu, 1992). A study across five European countries (Cuesta and Carcedo, 2014) found that female part-time workers were more likely to move into non-employment than female full-timers in 1994-2001, but that part-time workers in the Netherlands and Denmark had greater legislative protection against this 'part-time penalty' than those in Spain, France and Italy.

The cost advantage of being able to make part-time workers redundant only applies where part-time workers lack the employment protections, or bargaining power (Berg et al., 2014), of their full-time counterparts. The EU directive on part-time work (1997) and legislation in some countries has been designed to counteract the growth of precarious or 'bad' part-time jobs (Vosko, 2007). However, an increasing trend towards employer-led flexibility to reduce costs and increase efficiency in sectors such as healthcare (Coyle, 2005) and the growth of zero hours contracts in sectors such as hospitality (Taylor, 2017) may have become an alternative employer strategy for dealing with economic uncertainty and variability in labour demand.

Labour supply: the attraction and retention of diverse talent

Where the supply of skilled workers is limited and those workers want part-time working, employers may perforce provide part-time working in order to attract or retain them. Part-time working can be seen as part of a broader trend towards adapting talent management strategies to meet individual worker needs, particularly among employers who depend on human capital for their competitive advantage (Lawler, 2011; Pas et al., 2011; Wang and Verma, 2012). Individuals with high human capital (skills and expertise) may thus have more bargaining power

to achieve a part-time working arrangement (Gascoigne and Kelliher, 2018; Hornung, Rousseau and Glaser, 2009; Riva et al., 2018; Rousseau, 2005).

However, there is a shortage of studies which empirically test the idea that employers encourage part-time, as opposed to flexible, working; or that they actively promote or facilitate part-time working, as opposed to having a policy and responding to worker requests. Many UK and European employers have work-life and flexible working policies, which may include part-time working (Den Dulk et al., 2013; Eurofound, 2013), but as shown above, part-time working has different costs and benefits from flexibility of time or place, and poses different management and work design challenges from other forms of flexible working. The policy-practice gap may therefore have a different profile for part-time as compared with other types of flexible working.

Despite academic evidence of some positive impacts of flexible and part-time working on workers' attitudes and wellbeing (Bessa and Tomlinson, 2017; Bridges and Owens, 2017), the evidence for employers actively promoting part-time working in the UK is limited, and mostly comes from practitioner case studies. One recent initiative from large employers of highly skilled knowledge workers is the creation of internal agencies or platforms via which individuals and managers can negotiate project-based work, often on a part-time basis, and frequently working from home as well (Working Families, 2016, 2018). While these schemes offer a degree of flexibility on both sides, they also risk 'othering' part-time working, positioning it alongside schemes such as maternity coaching, returners' programmes and women's support networks, and separate from the core business. They do not question the basic design of managerial and professional work to suit the full-time norm (Correll et al., 2014; Perlow and Kelly, 2014).

Another attempt by employers to encourage part-time working involves creating platforms on which individuals can search for job share partners: the Civil Service Job Share Finder, launched in 2015, is the largest (Working Families, 2017), but other large employers have also embraced the idea. However, job sharing requires very large numbers of people in order to create a match and figures for successful matches have not been published.

UK employers have also been reluctant to proactively encourage flexible and part-time working at the point of hire. Only a small proportion of quality job adverts mention flexible or part-time options, although recent evidence shows that this attracts more applicants (Government Equalities Office, 2021).

Performance

Organisational performance

The impact of part-time working on organisation performance is complex to measure, and this very small literature is inconclusive. Some possible explanations for variable results include the proportion of 'long' versus marginal part-time working (Garnero, Kampelmann and Rycx, 2014); the need for workers to cover extended operating hours and peaks in demand (Künn-Nelen, De Grip and Fouarge, 2013) and whether part-time working is structured as a reduced number of days per week or hours per day (Devicienti, Grinza and Vannoni, 2018). Overall, the paucity of studies on part-time working and organisation-level performance makes it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions.

Despite practitioner claims (McKinsey, 2015), the academic evidence on gender diversity and organisational performance has shown similarly mixed results (van Dijk, van Engen and Paauwe, 2012; Naghavi, Pahlevan Sharif and Iqbal Hussain, 2020), as has the evidence on work-life policies and organisational performance (Akter, Ali and Chang, 2021; Beauregard and Henry, 2009).

It is worth noting that studies of the shorter working week demonstrate a similar lack of clarity: a small number of continuing examples are justified on the grounds that workers will respond to shorter working hours by delivering as much in four days as in five, but there have been questions over whether the reported increases in productivity have been achieved through work intensification (creating more time pressure for workers during working hours), longer hours worked on the four days (effectively a compressed working week rather than a shorter one) or other simultaneous changes in management or market conditions (Booth, 2019; Coote, Harper and Stirling, 2021; Delaney, 2018; Euronews, 2017; Skidelsky and Kay, 2019).

Individual performance

It has commonly been asserted that part-timers produce the same outputs as full-timers in less time. For knowledge workers in particular, there is evidence that, on transition to a part-time working arrangement, workload and outputs are often maintained at the previous, full-time-equivalent level (Cooper and Baird, 2015; Gascoigne and Kelliher, 2018; Kelliher and Anderson, 2009; McDonald, Bradley and Brown, 2009), making such part-timers attractive to employers. The mechanism may be reciprocal exchange: workers may intensify their work effort in return for being afforded the opportunity to work part-time (Kelliher and Anderson, 2009). Part-time knowledge workers may also bring non-hours-related human capital, such as the same number of contacts or client networks, or the same degree of specialist expertise, as full-time colleagues (Epstein et al., 1999; Liu and Zhang, 2013), providing in effect a per-person or quasi-fixed benefit to employers.

However, there is also a common perception that part-time workers, especially professionals and managers, lack the commitment of their full-time counterparts (Lawrence and Corwin, 2003; Tsouroufli, Ozbilgin and Smith, 2011). Employers might prefer ‘ideal workers’ (Acker, 1990) who are unencumbered by personal, domestic, family, community or health concerns, while part-time workers, especially working mothers, may be particularly associated with such non-work commitments and restrictions on their availability (Chung, 2020; Kmec, O’Connor and Schieman, 2014; Leslie et al., 2012), although of course this is not true of all part-time workers, and full-time workers may also have such constraints.

The evidence in relation to the impact of long working hours, or days, on performance is inconclusive (Collewet and Sauermann, 2017), partly because of the complexity of assessing both quality of work and outputs in different types of work. Worker fatigue as hours increase might lead to impaired judgement or increases in unforced errors (Ng and Feldman, 2008; Vila and Moore, 2008), but on the other hand, ‘practice-efficiency’ (tuning out non-work thoughts and tuning in to work) may increase productivity as the day progresses (Vernon, 1921, in Collewet and Sauermann, 2017), and there may be ‘start-up costs’ at the beginning of each day which could reduce the efficiency of shorter working days (Barzel, 1973, in Devicienti, Grinza and Vannoni, 2018)

Overall, existing evidence on the link between part-time working and individual performance is mixed, preventing firm conclusions (de Menezes and Kelliher, 2019). There may be a link via an indirect effect on wellbeing (Medina-Garrido, Biedma-Ferrer and Ramos-Rodríguez, 2021), or on employee attitudes (de Menezes and Kelliher, 2017) or it may be that the perceived usability of particular flexible working practices in different settings, as opposed to the existence of the policy (Eaton, 2003), has received insufficient weight in existing studies. Another possible variable is job status congruence, or the extent to which people are working part-time by choice (Loughlin and Murray, 2013).

Part-time working, flexible furlough and the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on flexible working. Although limited to certain types of jobs, the enforced trial of homeworking has been found to alter employers' perceptions of its feasibility. Many workers and employers have embraced a degree of hybrid working for the future (CIPD, 2021; Parry et al., 2021; TUC, 2021). There is also a common perception that employers have had to pay more attention to workers' non-work needs during the pandemic, and become more adept at dealing with flexible hours, for example during school closures.

The impact of the pandemic on part-time working has received less research attention. The number of part-time workers in the UK has gradually decreased since the pandemic began, with 10% fewer part-timers in the first quarter of 2021 than in the first quarter of 2020 (ONS, 2021a). The reasons for this are not clear, although flexible working has previously been found to decline during economic downturns (Sweet, 2014). The decline in the number of female part-time workers has been sharper, at 11%, than for men, at 8% (ONS, 2021a), which may be connected with women's caring responsibilities, or the variable impacts of the pandemic on different sectors.

The pandemic may also have altered worker demand for part-time working. Financial hardship resulting from furlough or redundancy is likely to have reduced the demand for part-time working, particularly among lower-paid workers. It is also possible that increased access to homeworking and reduced commuting time may have decreased the desire for part-time working (Chung and van der Horst, 2018). On the other hand, health and social shocks can lead to an increased awareness of the importance of personal and family time and a desire to reduce working hours (Balderson et al., 2021), which might be expected to increase demand for part-time working after the pandemic.

One government intervention during the pandemic that changed employer practice is the UK's flexible (partial) furlough scheme, which allows employers to part-furlough their staff, providing a natural experiment in the feasibility of part-time working, albeit one that is enforced by circumstances. The redesign of work to facilitate 'part-furlough, part-working' has potentially provided opportunities for managerial and organisational learning about part-time working (Lee, MacDermid and Buck, 2000).

The rationale for government short-time working schemes

Short-time working schemes have been used widely across Europe and OECD countries in previous recessions for both social and economic reasons. The economic reasons include avoiding redundancies, enabling employers to rapidly increase production as demand recovers without incurring recruitment, induction and training costs, and promoting employability, enabling individuals to retain their skills and connections with work, thereby contributing more to the economy in the long run (Cominetti et al., 2021). There are also social reasons for maintaining employment. Von Wachter (2020) argues, based on US data, that covid-induced unemployment will scar workers' long-term economic contribution, as well as their health and wellbeing, affecting young people's careers particularly, and even increasing mortality. Rafi Khan (2018) lists the social and economic costs of unemployment as a loss of employability, particularly for older and less skilled workers, the psychological problems that result from a loss of status, identity and self-esteem, social problems such as crime and interracial tension, reduced social participation, and negative impacts on the children of the unemployed, including violence, nutritional losses, psychological problems and a decline in educational attainment.

While this analysis includes the impact of longer-term unemployment, it serves as a reminder of the drivers for governments to minimise unemployment during economic downturns.

Short-time working means some loss of income for workers, but the evidence shows positive effects in preventing unemployment (Boeri and Bruecker, 2011; Brey and Hertweck, 2020; Cahuc and Carcillo, 2011; Pavlopoulos and Chkalova, 2019). During the 2008 financial crisis, countries with pre-existing short-time working schemes benefited more, because they could respond more swiftly and target their efforts more precisely (Brey and Hertweck, 2020; Zwickl, Disslbacher and Stagl, 2016). The size of the economic shock also matters: the impact on unemployment is harder to sustain in deeper, longer recessions (Brey and Hertweck, 2020) and not all of those on short-time working schemes eventually escape unemployment (Boeri and Bruecker, 2011). Schemes such as the German one, which involve firms closely in the financing of the scheme, are better at avoiding the temptation to use short-time working subsidies to cope with structural problems, which simply postpones the need for redundancy (Boeri and Bruecker, 2011). Others have sounded a note of caution about the long-term impact of such schemes if they are insufficiently targeted, and end up propping up unsustainable businesses, or if higher tax rates are needed to finance the scheme (Grape and Kolm, 2014).

The review identified no research on the connections between short-time working schemes and long-term employer provision of part-time working, possibly because part-time working is more usually considered from the perspective of workers' reasons for wanting to work part-time, while short-time working schemes are largely involuntary for workers. Our focus is instead the employer's perspective on the feasibility of part-time working in different types of work.

In general, there is little theorising about part-time working at the organisational level of analysis, but one relevant exception is a study of US and Canadian employers' responses to worker requests to work part-time, using an organisational learning framework (Lee, MacDermid and Buck, 2000). Three different approaches to organisational learning were identified: accommodation is characterised by employer reluctance and acquiescence; elaboration involves developing organisational policies and programmes; while transformation is characterised as an experimental approach, usually undertaken to facilitate the retention of a high-performing individual. Employers' responses to enforced 'part-furlough, part-working' may share some similarities with these three strategies.

The UK's flexible furlough scheme

The UK had no government short-time working scheme prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, launched in March 2020, initially only allowed full rather than flexible (partial) furlough, but this was amended in July 2020. The scheme covered 80% of pay up to a maximum of £2,500 per worker per month and was extended several times during the pandemic: a total of 11 million jobs were furloughed by 1.3 million employers between April 2020 and February 2021 (House of Commons Library, 2021). After some initial confusion, the government clarified in mid-2020 that employees could be furloughed for childcare reasons during school closures, meaning that the decision to furlough or part-furlough was not just about the needs of the employer, but also the needs of the employee.

The number of employees on full furlough has varied more than those on partial furlough as the pandemic and lockdowns progressed. Full furlough numbers declined from a high of 4.5m in July 2020 to about 1.5m in November 2020, rising again with the third lockdown from December 2020 (House of Commons Library, 2021). Part-furlough numbers have stayed more constant, rising from 1.2 million in July 2020 to almost equalise with full furlough at 1.5 million in November 2020, and then remaining relatively constant at that level through the third lockdown (House of Commons Library, 2021).

Overall take-up of furlough (both full and flexible) has been highest in the sectors hardest hit by lockdowns, such as hospitality and entertainment. However, flexible furlough as a proportion of total furlough has varied by sector, with manufacturing showing the highest proportion. Reasons for this are unclear, but could include employers' desire to increase production rapidly as the economy picks up, to avoid losing highly-skilled workers, or a tradition of spreading the impact of economic downturn through work-sharing.

Table 3. Take-up of furlough by sector; number and proportion of employments on partial (flexible) furlough by sector (HMRC, 2021)

Sector	Employments take up rate (full and partial furlough as % of eligible employments)	Number of employments on partial furlough	Employments on partial furlough as % of total employments on furlough
Manufacturing	12%	142,400	52%
Water supply, sewerage and waste	6	4,600	41
Education	5	59,500	41
Health and social work	4	62,900	41
Professional, scientific & technical	11	90,400	37
Transportation & storage	13	64,300	36
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	9	5,800	34
Finance & insurance	3	9,800	34
Information & communication	8	32,700	33
Households	2	900	33
Construction	15	62,200	32
Real estate	13	18,200	32
Mining & quarrying	3	500	31
Wholesale, retail, repair of motor vehicles	19	258,900	31
Administrative & support services	13	103,700	31
Public admin & defence; social security	1	2,100	25
Energy production & supply	2	500	21
Arts, entertainment & recreation	54	60,000	20
Accommodation & food services	55	200,000	19
Other service activities	39	37,900	18
Unknown & other	-	6,900	15
TOTAL		1,224,000	29

Conclusion

This review of the influences on employers' provision of part-time working brings together labour economics and HRM literatures. Here we draw conclusions on the evidence we found and on areas for further research.

Findings from this review

The influences on employers' provision of part-time working operate at several levels – national, sectoral, occupational and organisational.

Part-time working is often considered as part of a bundle of flexible working or work-life practices, but there is a need to distinguish between influences on employers' provision of flexible working in general, and part-time working in particular. There has been research on the influence of national legislation and cultural expectations on employers' flexible working and work-life balance policies, but part-time working is a small element of this much broader field, with a different cost-benefit profile for employers, and different work design challenges for line managers. The differences in rates of part-time working across developed economies attest to the influence of national context, such as working time legislation, and attitudes to gender and childcare.

There are also varying rates of part-time working in different sectors and occupations: the nature of the work, the gender balance in the sector or occupation, the availability of skilled workers and the normal operating hours may all influence employers' provision of part-time working. The complex interrelationships of these factors may partly account for the policy-practice gap, which is sometimes under-represented in quantitative studies of work-life balance and flexible working.

At the organisational level, the key benefit for employers concerns the attraction and retention of talent, although there is a lack of evidence that employers encourage part-time, as opposed to flexible, working; or that they actively promote part-time working, as opposed to having a policy and responding to individual workers' requests. There is also evidence that employers use part-time working to cover peaks in labour demand or extended operating hours in sectors such as retail or hospitality; the driver here is the efficient use of resources rather than the creation of good jobs or work-life balance for workers, but such working hours are not necessarily negative for all workers. The evidence on the performance of part-time workers is inconclusive: while qualitative studies report that part-time workers, particularly knowledge workers, often deliver similar outputs to full-time workers, this has not been studied in depth.

These benefits need to be set against the costs of part-time working for employers. Two obvious and easy to quantify costs, frequently mentioned in the older literature, are the quasi-fixed, per-person costs of employment, such as recruitment and training, and the administrative costs of adapting HR and management systems designed for full-time workers. The quasi-fixed costs of employment in managerial and professional work are particularly significant, not only because of the higher ongoing need for training and development, but also because of the time spent in activities such as networking, organisational learning and team meetings. Much harder to quantify, but still significant, particularly in managerial and professional work, are the costs of redesigning working practices such as the coordination of work, or team communication, to suit part-time incumbents.

Further research

Overall, we can conclude that there is a need for further research on employers' experiences of part-time working and what influences their decision to provide it. The need is for research on both HR perspectives and line managers' perspectives, as there is evidence of difference. There is little existing evidence on how employers' decisions are made in practice, how much weight is given to the different influences, and how proactive employers and line managers are in providing part-time working.

These questions need to be addressed with sensitivity to different sectors and occupations, as the costs and benefits may be different. Evidence shows that the retention case for offering part-time working to highly skilled professionals may be strong because of the costs of replacement, but the quasi-fixed costs may also be high, and it may be hard to redesign work to ensure that their colleagues and customers are served during their non-working time. In more routine kinds of work, for example in retail or hospitality, it is easier to design a part-time job if it is defined by hours and the individual is a substitutable member of a larger team; there may also be resource efficiency benefits for employers who need to cover extended operating hours or peak periods. However, the quasi-fixed costs of employment may still be relevant where margins are low, and the retention case for part-time working may be less convincing where low-skilled individuals are easier to replace. Between the two extremes of high-level managerial and professional jobs on the one hand, and low-skilled, time-defined work on the other, there may be a 'missing middle' of part-time working in sectors and occupations which have not been the subject of research study.

We found no studies of the impact of flexible (partial) furlough schemes on part-time working. Given the evidence of employers' and line managers' difficulty in implementing part-time working uncovered in this review, this is surprising: one possible explanation is that the literature tends to focus on the reasons for workers' choice to work part-time rather than the employer perspective. It seems feasible that employers will have learnt from their experience of using flexible furlough; an experiment which is involuntary can nonetheless be instructive. There is therefore an opportunity to explore how employers have made decisions about whether and who to part-furlough, whether and how that decision-making differs from decision-making about part-time working, and whether and how employers' perceptions of the feasibility of part-time working have changed in different types of work.

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