BLENDED WORKING

This discussion paper outlines the concept of blended working and how it differs from flexible working. It discusses the benefits of blended working and some of the challenges that need to be overcome to bring about these benefits.

BLENDED VS FLEXIBLE WORKING

Blended working builds on the concept of flexible working that has become familiar in recent years. Flexible working is an umbrella term used to describe a number of different working patterns that fall outside of traditional 9-to-5 office hours, such as working from home, working compressed hours, part-time and job sharing. In contrast, blended working has been defined as a way of working that combines on- and off-site working, as well as flexibility in when, and for how long, workers engage in work-related tasks. While it encompasses the elements of flexible working, blended working goes beyond this; it is concerned with the impact that work flexibility has on work-life balance.[1]

ONS data over the past five years finds that the number of people working from home has been steadily increasing, but this shift has been accelerated by the Covid-19 crisis. As governments implemented 'lockdowns' and social distancing measures, employers have had to rapidly implement flexible working policies and make adjustments to support other responsibilities, such as caring for children or vulnerable family members. In our previous roundtable on inclusive leadership, we heard how this new way of working presents both opportunities and challenges for the Diversity & Inclusion agenda, especially since those from higher income households are more likely to have made the switch to home working during the lockdown.

BLENDED WORKING: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

"Good work consists of autonomy, fair pay, work life balance and opportunities for progression" - Thriving at Work report (2017).

Flexible working is an established practice that can have many benefits including improving employee wellbeing, boosting productivity, and helping to close the gender pay gap. Research has shown that blended working can boost work motivation and help maintain workers' abilities to cope with increasing job demands. CMI research with our members backs this up. In a recent survey we found that 91% of managers agreed that working for an organisation offering blended working motivates them to do their role well, 85% agreed they were more productive, and 77% agreed they were more satisfied in their role when practicing blended working.[2]

Before the Covid-19 crisis, commonly-cited methods of blended working included working from home at short notice (67%), flexible working times (63%), and working from a remote, non-workplace based location at least once a week (53%). However, flexibility in the workplace does

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[1] N. Yperen et al (2014), *Blended Working: for whom it may (not) work*, PloS ONE 9:7 https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/file?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0102921&type=printable
[2] Where this paper cites the CMI member survey it refers to the CMI Manager's Voice poll of 698 managers conducted between 16th and 19th June 2020

not necessarily mean a happier, more productive workforce with high quality jobs. Many roles in what we now refer to as the 'gig economy' have been argued to provide the [ultimate in work-life balance](link), but the reality for many is low pay, long hours, and instability[3]; the [Taylor Review](link) described this issue as 'one-sided flexibility'. Furthermore, even for those CMI managers aware of blended working, over half report that their senior leaders are not committed to the concept.

There is also research showing that while flexible working is intended to support better work-life balance, it can instead lead to longer working hours and make work 'spill-over' to other spheres of life.[4] This suggests that concerns expressed by CMI members in implementing blended working are well-founded. Our member survey found the top five concerns from managers in implementing blended working practices for their team were:

- missing out on important communications and in-person interaction with colleagues (71%)
- blurred lines between work and home (69%)
- increased work-home distractions (51%)
- the pressure to be available anywhere, at any time (51%) and,
- longer hours (48%).

THE FUTURE OF BLENDED WORKING

Despite the concerns above, the Covid-19 crisis may mean the shift to blended ways of working is irreversible. For example, at a [recent](link) daily Coronavirus briefing, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock MP, suggested working from home is here to stay, and that he would investigate whether legislation is needed to support and enable this move. Although this is yet to become a reality, the 2019 Queen's Speech signalled the intention to make flexible working the 'default', putting the onus on employers to offer flexible working rather than the employee to request it. We eagerly anticipate the detail on this, especially since job design plays a key role in making flexible working work well for employees, rather than result in the [flexibility to manage too much work](link).

In a recent CMI [webinar](link), we heard how there is an opportunity to use the crisis as a catalyst for change and that the door is wide open for us to allow greater flexibility. There certainly appears to be an increased appetite for greater flexibility at work: as of June 2020, 55% of CMI managers said their organisation will increase the use of blended working practices post-Covid-19 and 93% of managers said it was important for them that an employer offered blended working for their employees in the future. But what will this look like? And what will managers and leaders need to do to make a success of increased flexibility?

Some have suggested that the future of blended working is a reduced working week, with advocates pointing to [research](link) that shows no clear positive correlation between working more hours and creating a strong economy. Productivity, they say, is higher in some countries where they work fewer hours relative to the UK; international case studies highlight additional benefits for mental health and wellbeing, and in tackling gender inequalities.[5] Others have suggested that technology may hold the answer - a growth in [WorkerTech](link) could provide flexible workers with benefits and access to employment rights and protections.

If blended working becomes the norm, good Management and Leadership will be more important than ever if we are to ensure flexible work is also secure and good quality work. A '[Living Hours](link)'

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[3] House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2017), *Self-employment and the Gig Economy*
[4] For example see, Lott, Y. and Chung, H. (2016) *Gender discrepancies in the outcomes of schedule control on overtime hours and income in Germany*. European Sociological Review 32(6) and H. Chung (2017), *Work Autonomy, Flexibility and Work-Life Balance*
[5] For productivity and hours worked see [ONS](link) cited in Autonomy (2019), *The Shorter Working Week: a radical and pragmatic proposal*

contract, which could provide predictability and the right to a guaranteed minimum number of working hours, is something all good managers and leaders should seriously consider. Flexibility alongside job security will be particularly important as we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis, given the already high number of people in the UK in low paid and insecure work, and the likely increase in these numbers as the economy recovers slowly.

CALL TO ACTION

We are interested in your thoughts and opinions on the topic of blended working and what CMI, together with other organisations, can and should be doing to promote a blended approach to work.

THE ROLE FOR CMI
CMI has published research and guidance on flexible working. For example, see our Blueprint For Balance report and our joint guidance with the Government Equalities Office (GEO). However, blended working is an emerging topic. **What should blended working mean in practice? What advice or support do managers and leaders need to make a success of blended working?**

POLICY PROVOCATIONS
Not all of these policy provocations are official CMI policy positions, but are included to stimulate conversation and debate. **Will these support better work-life balance? What concerns might you have if these are implemented? What else can be done?**

1. **Implement flexible working by default.** To ensure this is effective, Government should also encourage employers to **take an organisation-wide, strategic approach to job design,** through guidance on the GOV.UK website and promotion of the 'Happy To Talk Flexible (or Blended) Working' campaign.

2. **Government must encourage managers and leaders to upskill.** For example, by setting expectations that managers require a minimum level of training and commitment to CPD, and making government funding and investment conditional on these requirements. Regulation can only go so far in making flexible working work. Better line management is essential - to remain focussed on outputs not hours, empathy, agility, and employee well being.

3. **Extend shared parental leave to all workers, not just those who meet the qualifying tests. Introduce an additional, individual, non-transferable entitlement to 12 weeks of leave and pay for fathers and partners to spend time with their new child.**

4. **Establish a new ministerial position to oversee the 'good work' agenda and shorter working week policy, with a view to introducing a shorter working week by 2025 at the latest.** The Government should pilot four-day working week policies in different areas of the country and use learnings to inform a national policy.

5. **Implement a right for workers to have a 'Living Hours' contract to help address the issue of 'one-sided flexibility'.** This should provide workers with the right to a contract that reflects actual hours worked, a guaranteed minimum amount of hours per week, at least 1 weeks' notice of shift patterns and guaranteed payment if shifts are cancelled within this period.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES
We are looking to develop an evidence base of organisations that have adopted blended working. Please get in touch at editorial@managers.org.uk if you have a story or example you would like to share.