UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

University of Kent

MANAGING EMPLOYEES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

Flexible working and the future of work

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FOREWORD

Gender inequality persists in UK workplaces. In 2019 the Gender Pay Gap was 17.3% and only 10% of executive roles are held by women in STEM companies and 7% in non-STEM companies. Driven in part by the Davies Review and the Hampton Alexander Report, Government and many Businesses have developed new policies and initiatives to start to break down the enduring barriers women can face in progressing their careers, particularly those around family. However, progress has continued to be incremental.

It is now clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed many working practices and led to a seismic shift in the number of employees working from home and working more flexible hours. Whilst many have faced huge difficulties, the pandemic does have the potential to act as a catalyst for a giant step forward in this area, to break down relentless gendered cultural norms around childcare to change the ways we work across the UK.

This important research project from the University of Birmingham and the University of Kent can help us move forward by developing the evidence base and providing momentum for ongoing change in working practices. The first report in the series showed that employees want more flexibility, most want to be able to work from home on a regular basis and even more importantly, they plan to ask to formalise these new arrangements when the pandemic is under control. Equally important, we see managers are embracing flexible working and in many cases developing a new-found trust and pride in their teams while working remotely during the pandemic. This is such positive news and provides the foundations for a step change in the ways we work in the future and the flexibility employees can expect. Of course, this agenda needs to be managed thoughtfully and sensitively, there are some sectors where working from home may not be possible but other forms of flexible working could work. There are many employees who would like to continue to work permanently in a traditional office space and even those who would prefer to work from home are likely to want to collaborate periodically in a physical office space. Crucially, flexible working is only beneficial to employers and workers if it is properly supported with effective tools, safe and comfortable remote working spaces, properly trained managers and wellbeing support. It is also important for businesses and policymakers to think about the wider impacts of these changes to ways of working for the economy and particularly what this means for cities and towns.

So now is the time to leverage these findings and use them to encourage organisations to be more actively supportive of flexible working by opening up discussions with employees about how they would like to work in the future and what would be of most benefit to both the employee and the organisation. In doing so we can support employee wellbeing generally and particularly support people with caring responsibilities and thereby help reduce barriers men can face to undertaking more caring responsibilities and which many women face in trying to develop their careers. Let's create more balance and more of a level playing field, helping to close the Gender Pay Gap and support more women to work their way into senior positions within organisations.

Professor Joanne Duberley
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 24th July and 11th August researchers from the Working from Home During the COVID-19 Lockdown Project, run by the University of Birmingham and the University of Kent, conducted a survey with UK managers with the aim of understanding the organisational perspective on managing homeworking since the COVID-19 lockdown. This research builds on previous published research from the project team on employee experiences since lockdown that showed a steep rise in the number of employees working from home with most (86%) employees working from home, and a remarkable 75.3% of parents reporting they would like to work flexibly to spend more time with family (Chung, Seo, Forbes & Birkett, 2020). This research on management experiences over lockdown produced the following key findings:

Most managers have had to manage staff remotely since lockdown

- The majority (58.2%) of managers in the sample report that less than 20% of their employees worked from home before lockdown. However, since lockdown, the majority (54.7%) of managers report that now over 80% of their employees have been working from home.

Managers are much more positive about working from home and flexible working since lockdown

- Fewer managers now believe that presenteeism and long working hours are essential to career progression within organisations. Before lockdown, 57.3% of managers believed that employees needed to be physically present in the workplace to progress, decreasing to 37.5% of managers since lockdown.
- Managers increasingly believe that working from home increases productivity due to their experiences in lockdown. 58.6% of managers surveyed said that working from home increases productivity, whereas only 44.1% agreed with this statement before lockdown.
- 50.9% of surveyed managers also believe that working from home improved concentration based on their experiences of managing since lockdown.
- Managers say they are more trusting of their teams since lockdown.
- Manager say they are much more aware of the work-life balance issues their staff face since lockdown.
- Managers believe working from home will become much more commonplace in the future, as company Directors have seen that it can work.

Lockdown has led to an increase in support provided for homeworking

- Organisations have significantly increased the support they provide to employees working from home since lockdown, particularly tools for working from home. For example, 80.6% of managers say their organisations have supplied computers and 70.1% supplied online meetings software to staff. There has also been an increase in the professional support employers have been offering, such as line manager support, software guidance and support for wellbeing. This was particularly true for large organisations with 250+ employees.
- The managers surveyed indicate that working from home would be encouraged and better supported in the future with more jobs advertised as available for flexible working (50.0%), improved support for working from home (70.5%), more tools to support working from home (71.4%) and improved support for working from home by the organisation (72.7%).

Managers intend to encourage more flexible working and homeworking in the future

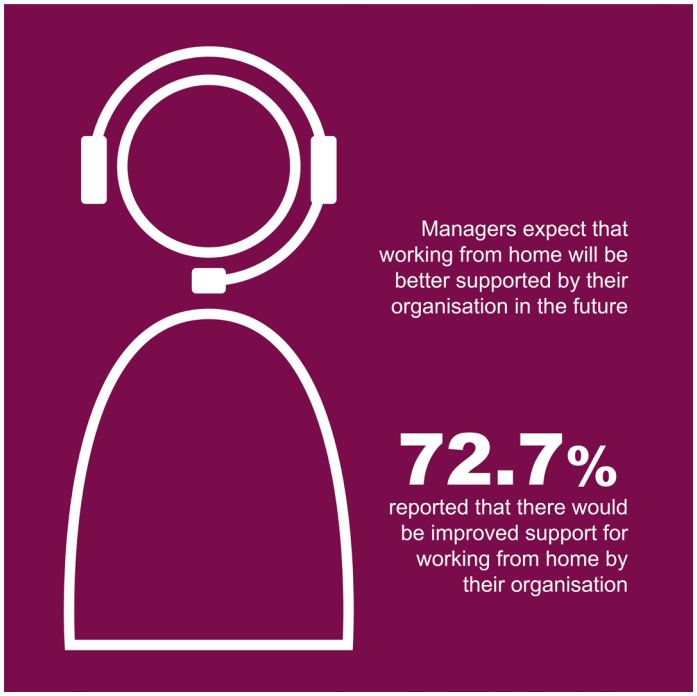
- Since lockdown managers are supporting more requests for flexible working, working from home and part-time work. 70.1% percent of managers said they are now supporting more flexible working requests.
- Managers say organisations will continue to provide more support and tools for working from home. 72.8% of managers agree that their organisation will now provide improved support for working from home.
- Managers believe there will be more support for senior roles to be done more flexibly in the future. This includes senior managers being given the opportunity to work from home (49.1%), utilise a job share (19.3%) and work part-time (19.0%).

- Managers realise they need to manage differently when their teams are working remotely and recognise they may need more training to do so.

Wellbeing and mental health of employees when remote working has been a particular concern for managers since lockdown

- Mangers were more likely to say that working from home leads to isolation since lockdown with responses rising from 46.5% before lockdown to 58.7% since lockdown.
- Overall, 36.3% of managers report that their organisations have provided wellbeing counsellors for staff and 55.7% of managers reported that their organisations provided guidance for wellbeing since lockdown.
- Managers felt they needed more support and guidance from their organisations on how to manage these issues.

Overall, the data included in this report shows that working from home has been commonplace since lockdown and managers have faced a steep learning curve regarding how to manage remote teams, often with very little support or guidance. Despite this, managers have been pleasantly surprised about the results with their teams generally performing really well during this time. While there have been some performance issues these were generally where this was already an issue prior to lockdown. Due to these positive experiences, managers are keen to support more working from home and flexible working in the future and for their organisations to develop the policies and process to facilitate this and give them the training they need to manage remote workers more effectively. It was generally recognised that working remotely over long periods of time can be very isolating and that some people much prefer working in an office environment. This suggests that in the future, organisations should seek a balance. On one hand, organisations need updated flexible working policies, good support and tools for those working from home and properly trained managers. However, on the other hand, organisations need to retain some office space to facilitate those who want to be office based and support group activities and events to bring remote teams together periodically to avoid isolation and other issues. These findings also raise broader questions about the future of work and the impact on the broader economy and environment that will be of interest to policymakers. Recommendations for Policymakers and Organisations are provided at the end of the report.



1 INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Comprehensive lockdowns were announced by governments worldwide, limiting all unnecessary travel and asking all non-essential workers to work from home wherever possible. In the United Kingdom (UK), approximately half of all employees worked from home, at least some of the time, since the initial UK wide lockdown (Office of National Statistics, 2020). By comparison, the European Working Conditions Survey in 2015 found that only one in six employees in the UK worked from home at least several times a month (Chung & van der Lippe, 2018). A previous survey of employees during lockdown showed 86% of those surveyed worked from home during lockdown, with 70% doing flexitime (flexible starting and ending times of work). This same survey also showed that approximately 55.1% planned to apply to work from home post lockdown with a further 10.5% undecided (Chung, Seo, Forbes, & Birkett, 2020). It is clear that lockdown has led to widespread working from home in a very short space of time and often in sectors where working from home was not previously the norm. These changes in working practices, during the pandemic, have provided an opportunity to consider how managers' and organisations' attitudes towards working from home and flexible working for the future have developed. These changes are important because, if they endure, they could potentially have multiple consequences, which could radically alter the future of work and significantly impact other aspects of our society. For example, large scale working from home in the future could lead to changes in car use, public transport, real estate markets, access to new geographically dispersed talent pools, gender equality and the division of unpaid work in the home, gender equality in the workplace, urban planning and impacts on ancillary industries in business districts.

The data underpinning this report was gathered through a national survey conducted between late-July and mid-August of 2020. The survey was undertaken with UK line managers, exploring their attitudes and support as well as general norms around working from home since the initial lockdown period. The overall aim of this research is to explore managers experiences of managing employees before and since lockdown as well as how perceptions and attitudes towards working from home and flexible working may have changed since the lockdown. The report is designed to provide insights for organisations and policymakers about likely changes in ways of working and the labour market in the future due to the experiences gained since lockdown. Recommendations for Policymakers and Organisations are provided at the end of the report.

2 PATTERNS OF HOMEWORKING BEFORE AND SINCE LOCKDOWN

Working from home has become much more prevalent since the COVID-19 lockdown and employees' attitudes to flexible working and working from home have also changed, with 55.1% planning to request some kind of flexible working arrangements on their return to work once lockdown measures end (Chung, Seo, Forbes, & Birkett, 2020). Managers in a variety of sectors have not been supportive of working from home in the past and employees working from home have often suffered a flexible working stigma (Williams, Blair-Loy & Berdahl, 2013; Chung, 2020).

When managers were asked why they had not permitted employees to work from home before the COVID-19 lockdown (see Figure 1), the most prevalent reason given was the nature of the work being done with 23.2% of managers stating that it was not be possible for employees to work from home in these roles. This mirrors the findings of previous representative surveys across the UK, such as the Work Employment Relations Survey (Wanrooy et al., 2013). A lack of support from upper management/ the organisation (15.4%) and perceived difficulty in managing employees not in the office (11.7%) were also prevalent reasons offered. Closer inspection of Figure 1 reveals that those working outside London (usual workplace outside of lockdown) were less supportive of working from home compared to those that worked in London before lockdown.

Figure 1. Percentage of managers reporting reason why employees/ more employees were not working from home before lockdown by manager's work location

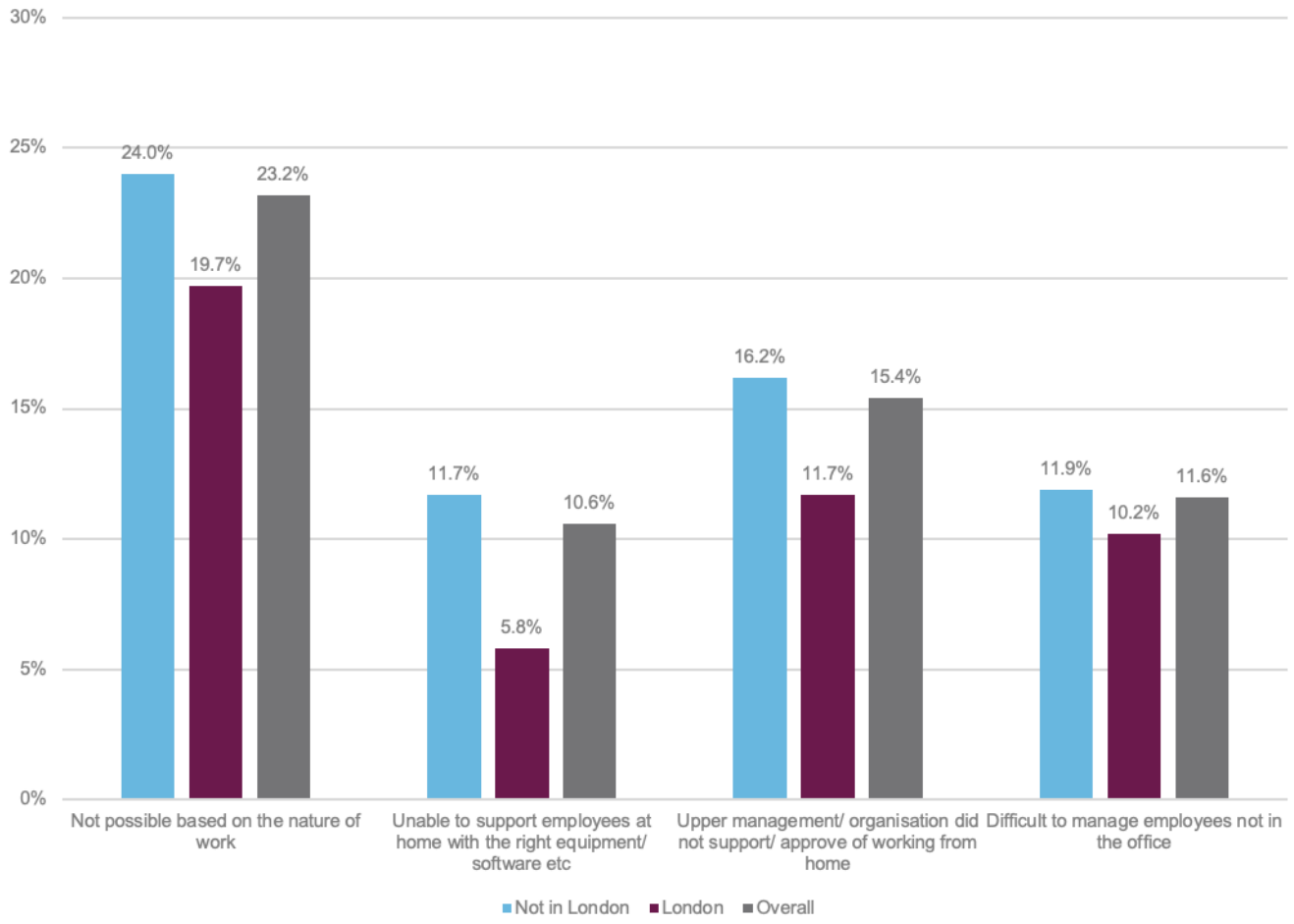
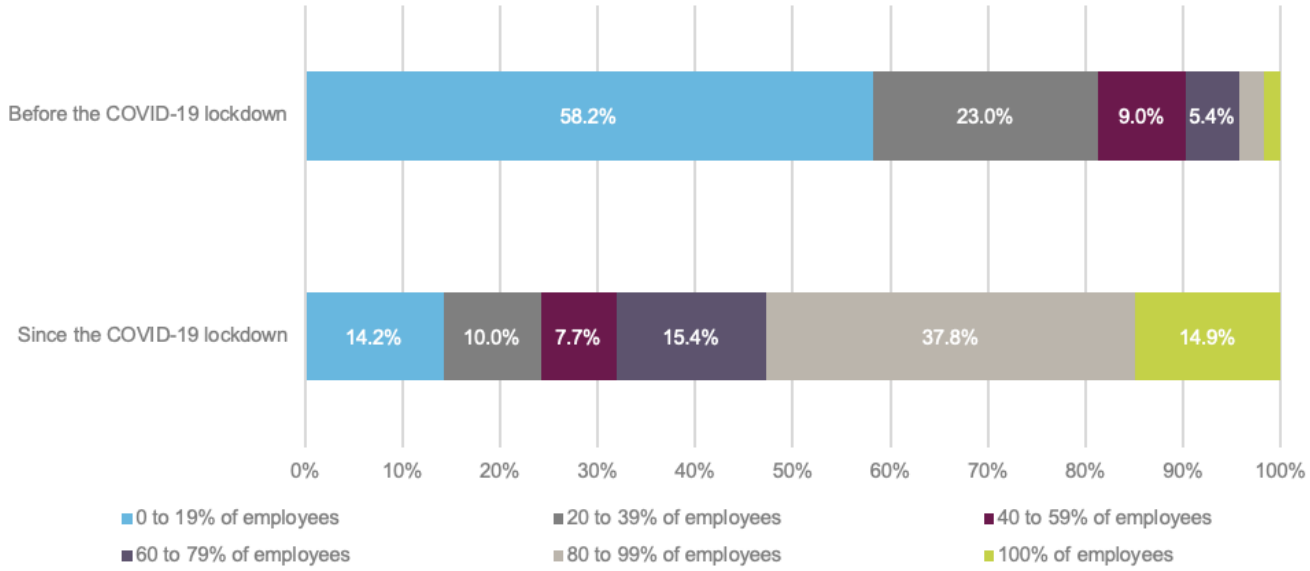


Figure 2 reveals that managers are now routinely managing people who are working from home. The majority (58.2%) of managers in the sample reported that less than 20% of their employees worked from home before lockdown. However, since lockdown, the majority (54.7%) of managers reported that now over 80% of their employees have been working from home.

Figure 2. Managers reporting the percentage of employees working from home before and during since the COVID-19 lockdown

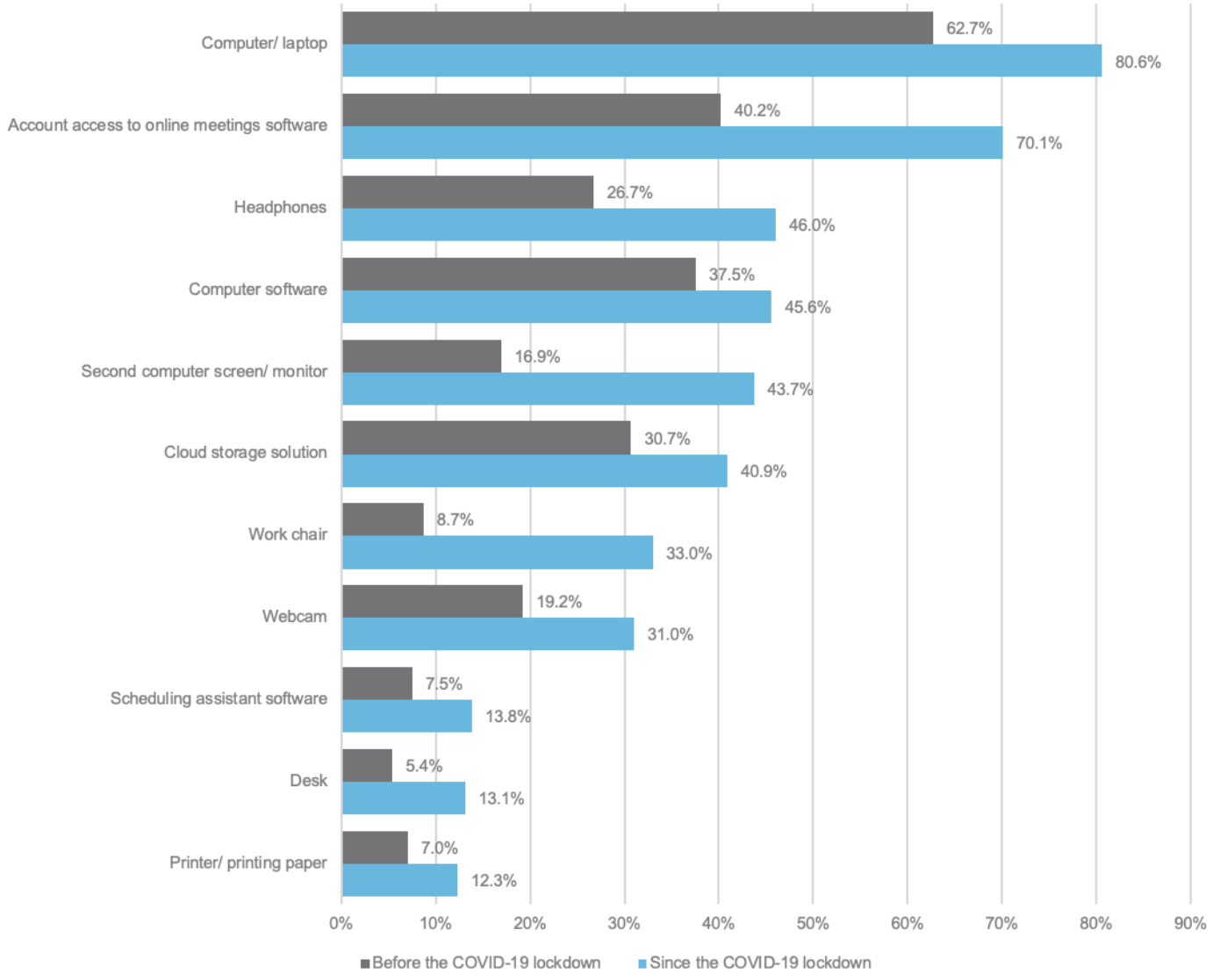


3 SUPPORTING WORKING FROM HOME

Many organisations are providing extra support for those working from home

Organisations generally supplied employees working from home with some tools to support them, prior to lockdown. However, this has significantly increased since lockdown, as can be seen in Figure 3. The majority of managers reported that prior to lockdown their organisations supplied employees working from home with a computer (62.7%) but this increased to 80.6% since lockdown with 43.7% even providing employees with a second computer screen/monitor. In addition, 33.0% of managers reported that their organisation supplied employees working from home with a work chair since lockdown, compared to only 8.7% prior to lockdown. Access to online meetings software, such as Skype, Microsoft Teams and Zoom, has also increased with 70.1% of managers reporting that their organisation supplied these types of software since lockdown compared to only 40.2% prior to lockdown. Similarly, 46.0% of managers reported that their organisation supplied employees with headphones since lockdown compared to 26.7% prior to lockdown. These findings all suggest that organisations are providing more support for employees working from home to ensure productivity levels are maintained.

Figure 3. Percentage of managers reporting tools supplied by their organisation to employees to assist with working from home before and since the COVID-19 lockdown



Other support was also offered to employees

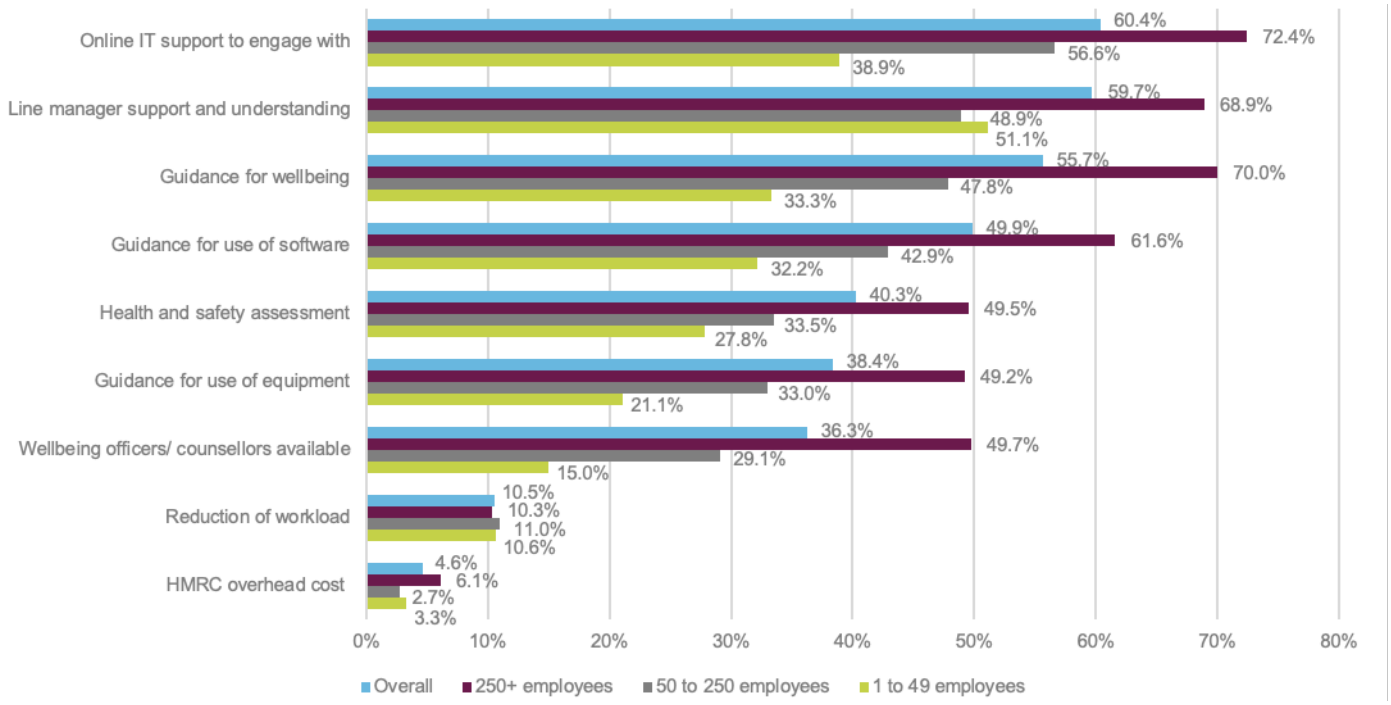
Organisations have provided a variety of additional support to employees since lockdown, as shown in Figure 4. Large organisations provided the most support, particularly software, guidance and support for wellbeing. Support provided is likely indicative of the greater resources available in larger organisations. Overall, 81.0% of managers reported that they were more aware of the work-life balance issues their employees face every day. Also, 36.3% of managers reported that their organisations have provided wellbeing counsellors for staff and 55.7% of managers reported that their organisations provided guidance for wellbeing since lockdown (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 shows overall, only 40.3% of organisations have undertaken health and safety assessments with employees working from home since lockdown, up to 49.5% for large organisations (i.e., 250+ employees). Similarly, only 4.6% of managers reported their organisation as having claimed the HMRC overhead cost of £6 per month that can be passed on to employees working from home[1]. Figure 4 shows the breakdown of these claims since lockdown by size of organisation (i.e., number of employees). This again was higher for large organisations with 250+ employees who are more likely to be aware of the scheme, with 6.1% of these businesses claiming costs from HMRC. These low numbers are likely to reflect low levels of awareness of the HMRC scheme and low numbers of employers paying employees overhead costs while they are working from home during lockdown.

Managers' qualitative responses: Most significant struggles during lockdown

Managers also provided qualitative responses to questions around their most significant struggles with managing staff working from home since the COVID-19 lockdown. Key themes to arise from this data included issues around poor tools for employees, IT issues, the need for support around wellbeing and the requirement for managers to alter their management style in terms of communications and motivating some employees. Managers also noted the need to ensure workers retained a healthy work-life balance and maintained a healthy boundary between work and other aspects of their lives (also see Lott & Chung, 2016). Managers suggested that some of the most significant concerns of their staff were around balancing caring responsibilities and work, concerns about the virus, feeling isolated and being forced back into the office before it was safe as well as feelings of isolation. These themes mirror some of the concerns raised by employees in our earlier survey (Chung, Seo, Forbes, & Birkett, 2020).

Figure 4. Percentage of managers reporting their organisation as supplying support to employees since the COVID-19 lockdown by organisation size (number of employees)



[1]The HMRC scheme allows an organisation to pay employees working from home. The organisation can claim this back from HMRC as long as it is for overhead costs an employee has incurred while working from home (e.g., increased electricity costs, work-related phone calls). Found here: https://www.gov.uk/tax-relief-for-employees/working-at-home

IT equipment and support is challenging

Managers argued that IT equipment and support was not effective when people were working from home and some employees had problems using the available technology.

> *"Some employees are less proficient at using the technology [and a key issue has been] technical equipment failing and not being able to get the support from our in-house IT team as quickly as they normally would in the office."*

> *"Equipment is the big challenge. Working with just a laptop screen is doable for short periods but is a significant problem when working from home on a permanent basis, as are the slower internet connections some employees have."*

Employees were struggling with caring issues

Managers also reported that their employees sometimes struggled with caring issues and balancing care and work.

> *"My team have many childcare issues and have been splitting their days around children and work, leading to exhaustion and scheduling conflicts for calls. Very challenging for them."*

> *"Balancing requests related to childcare across a relatively small team, especially making sure that those without children don't always end up picking up to fit in with everyone else."*

> *"Staff having to care for sick loved ones, staff having to isolate both resulting in staff shortages."*

Isolation and mental health

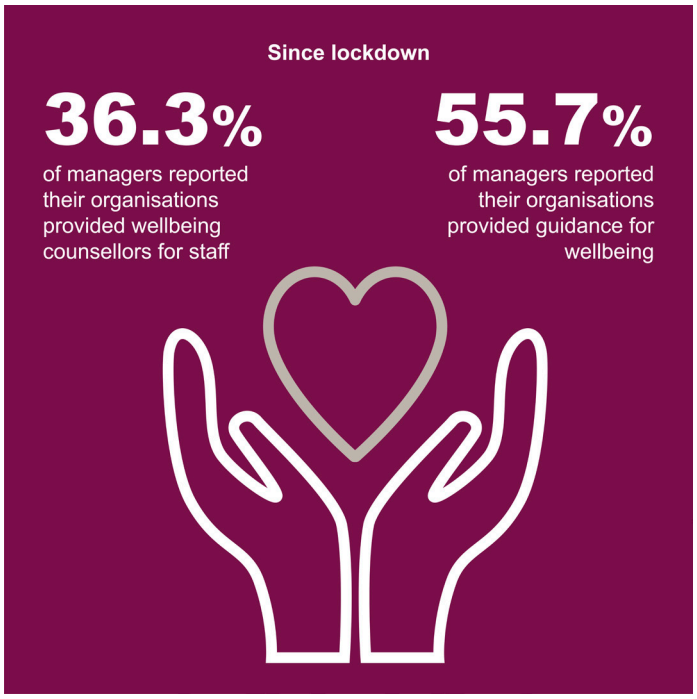
A consistent theme was around the mental health and wellbeing of employees during the lockdown and managers struggling to support their employees in this area often with very little training or experience in this area.

> *"Lack of social interaction between colleagues and some colleagues feeling isolated whilst working from home alone."*

> *"Managing this remotely, via video-screen, has been exceptionally challenging."*

A small number of managers explained how their organisations had foreseen these issues and HR had provided guidance around supporting mental health and wellbeing to line managers.

> *"A number of my staff live alone in small flats in London. During lockdown, many of them reached out to me to say they were isolated and one suffers from depression. I had a range of health and wellbeing tools from HR to provide guidance and lessen workload. Also, allowed team members to work the hours that suit them, if they need to take a nap in the afternoon or do baking during lunch break to de-stress."*



Managers also found that employees were anxious that they may be forced to return to the office before the pandemic was under control.

> *"Anxiety among staff about the potential for them to be made to return physically to the office before the Covid-19 crisis has been resolved properly."*

One unexpected effect of lockdown for management was the need for managers to ensure staff were maintaining a healthy work-life balance and not just logging into work emails whenever they had the chance.

> *"Making sure staff have holidays and breaks and work-life balance."*

> *"Getting them to take lunches and breaks. My team all forget how important it is to disengage from work once in a while."*

Previous research identifies a similar phenomenon when workers use flexible working arrangements the boundaries between work and other aspect of life become blurred and the employees often end up working longer (overtime) hours (Glass & Noonan, 2016).

> *"Wellbeing due to there being no clear division of spaces for work and downtime due to work and relaxation spaces being in the home."*

> *"The biggest challenge has been ensuring the team maintain a good work-life balance as initially when they moved to working from home they would switch on the laptop to work if there was nothing on TV."*

Managing remotely

Many of these issues were more difficult for managers to deal with remotely than they would have been face to face. Issues of performance management and recruitment were particularly difficult to deal with remotely.

> *"Some people can work very well on their own, others need a nudge. It's those people that I find it hard to explain things to when you don't do it in person."*

> *"[It's difficult to] plan online meetings with our team members or employees, since everyone may have other commitments and would be harder to find a suitable time/date where everyone is available."*

> *"Recruitment and induction of new staff has been extremely difficult. It has taken much longer and I feel that the new staff have felt isolated. Where normally they would sit with an experienced member of staff and be able to ask questions to support their understanding of tasks this has not been possible so I do feel that they have been isolated and it has caused more difficulties for me as a manager, as other staff do not feel that it is their responsibility to 'train' new staff."*

Many of the managers discussed issues they and their employees had faced at the beginning of lockdown which they had then ironed out as a team, suggesting that teams have been learning how to support one another and manage the negative impacts of homeworking as lockdown has progressed.

> *"Establishing working patterns and IT requirements in the first couple of weeks was the major challenge but since then everybody is working happily."*

> *"[Employees struggled with] isolation and feeling disconnected in the early days but we found our feet pretty quickly and put in place social things and regular Teams meetings (daily). Kept in touch with Furloughed staff weekly with company updates and made sure they didn't feel forgotten about, which was a worry to start with."*

> *"Anxiety and isolation were prevalent at the start of lockdown. Staff are now more accustomed to [work from home] and demonstrate less of this."*

4 MANAGERS EXPERIENCES OF MANAGING EMPLOYEES WORKING FROM HOME

Managers' have had generally positive experiences of staff working from home since the COVID-19 lockdown

As can be seen in Figure 5, attitudes of managers towards working from home have greatly improved since the COVID-19 lockdown. Whilst 44.1% of managers believed that working from home increased productivity before lockdown, this has increased to 58.6% since lockdown. Before lockdown 41.6% of managers believed that working from home improved concentration and this has increased to 50.9% since lockdown. These findings confirm previous arguments that managers could be swayed by evidence and the experience of supervising employees using flexible working policies (Sweet, Pitt-Catsouphes, & James, 2017). Also, since lockdown, managers are far less likely to believe that working from home decreases mutual learning and cooperation amongst employees. Therefore, the general picture was one of positive change in managers' perceptions of working from home resulting from their experiences since lockdown.

Figure 5. Percentage of managers reporting they agreed or strongly agreed with attitudinal statements about working from home by place of work

Attitudes around career and advancement within the organisation also appear to have significantly changed since lockdown, where we see a decline in the ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990) - namely the idea that productivity and commitment can be measured through working long hours in the office. As Figure 6 shows, the majority of managers (57.3%) believed that employees needed to be physically present in the workplace to progress their careers before lockdown. This belief has dropped to 37.5% of managers since lockdown. Similarly, prior to lockdown 43.3% of managers believed that employees needed to work long hours to progress within the organisation, since lockdown this has fallen to 38.7%. Interestingly, 68.1% of managers have come to see flexible working as a performance-enhancing tool since lockdown.

Figure 6. Percentage of managers reporting they agreed or strongly agreed with attitudinal statements about working conditions

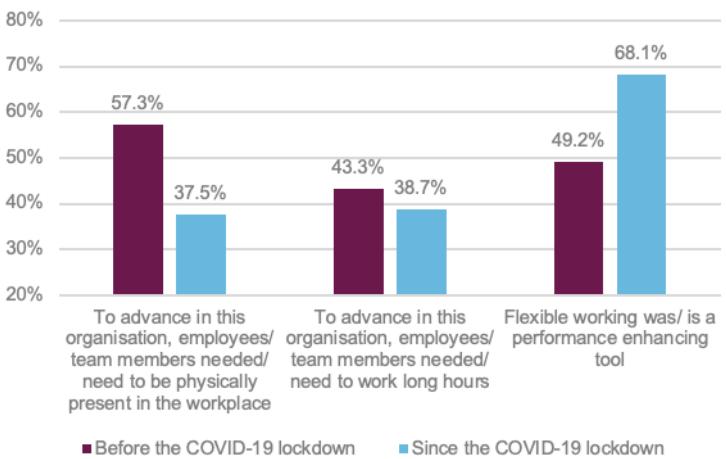


Figure 7 shows that according to 56.6% of managers, employees working flexibly will now be just as likely to get promoted as their peers and this is even higher in larger organisations (60.8%). Flexible working can improve the performance outcomes of companies (Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019) and improve equality and diversity within companies by ensuring more workers have access to jobs (Chung & van der Horst, 2018). Figure 8 breaks down the percentage of organisations that view flexible working as a performance enhancing tool versus those that view it as an equality/ diversity tool. 70.7% of line managers agreed that flexible working is a performance enhancing tool since lockdown versus 59.8% of line managers who agreed that it is an equality/diversity tool. Therefore, it appears that managers are more focused on flexible working as a mechanism for improving performance rather than a mechanism for driving equality in the workplace.

Figure 7. Percentage of managers reporting that flexible workers are just as likely to get promoted within their organisation by organisation size (number of employees)

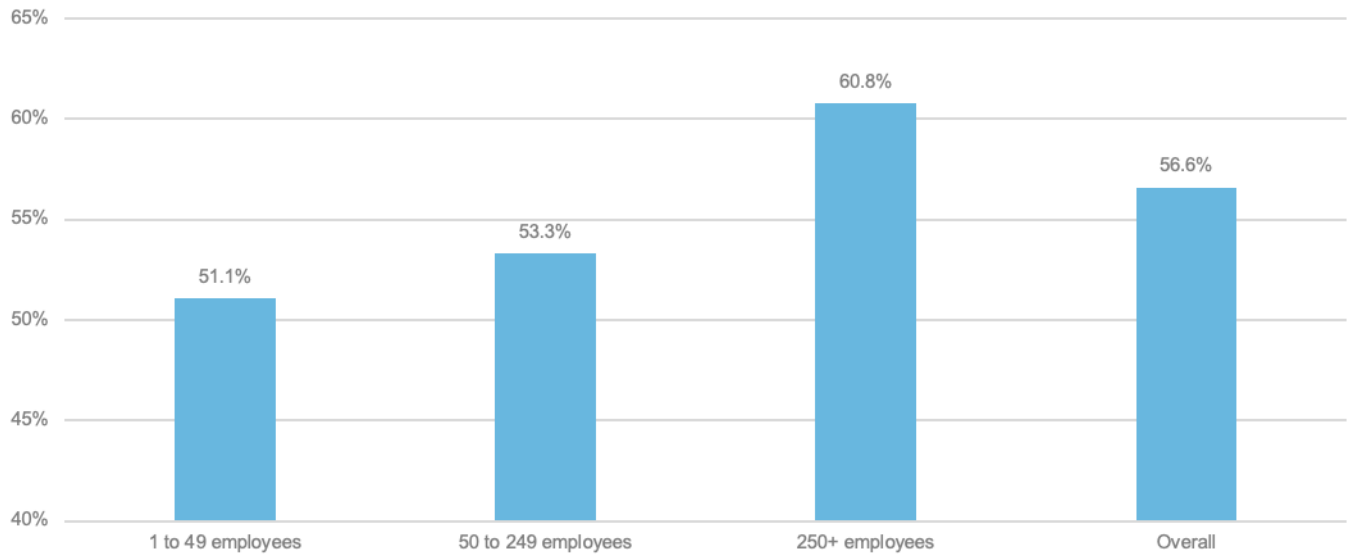


Figure 8. Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements regarding flexible working by role

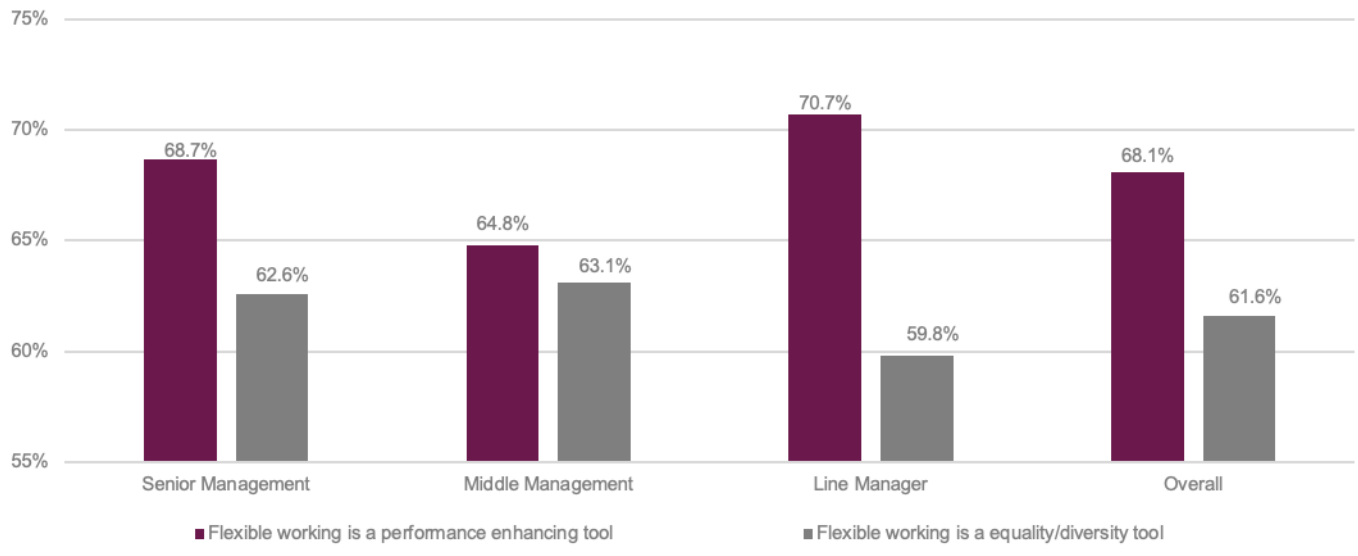
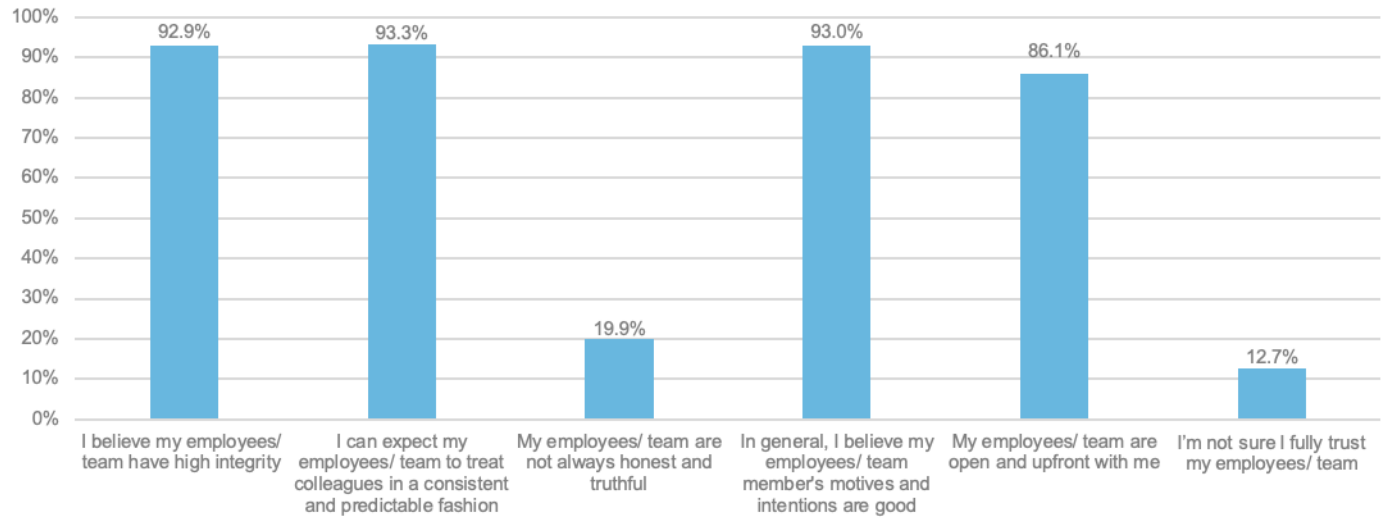


Figure 9. Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing to statement regarding trust toward employees since lockdown



Managers agreed they had high levels of trust in their employees since the lockdown as shown in Figure 9. Also, levels of distrust were low with only 12.7% of managers agreeing to the statement 'I'm not sure I fully trust my employees/ team'.

Negative experiences of managing homeworkers since lockdown

Some managers identified a key problem of managing employees working from home since lockdown. Figure 10 demonstrates that before lockdown 46.5% of managers believed that working from home leads to isolation, since lockdown this number increased to 58.7% of managers.

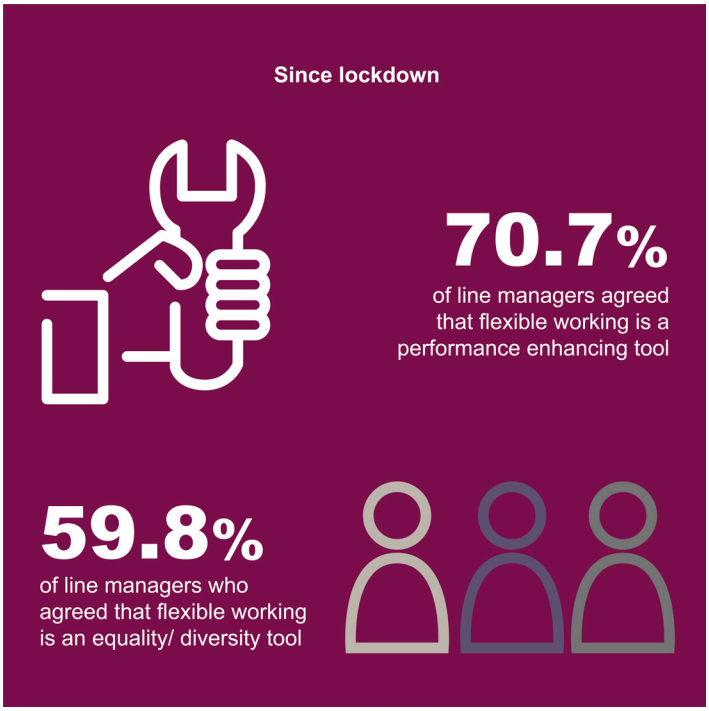
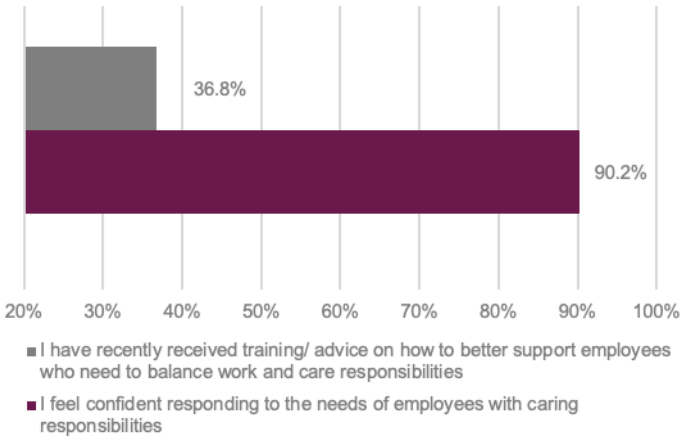


Figure 10. Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing that working from home led to isolation

Managers support for parents

Managers provided data about how parents have been supported in their organisations since lockdown. Figure 11 shows overall, 90.2% of managers felt confident responding to the needs of employees with child caring responsibilities since lockdown, however, only 36.8% had received training on how to support employees balancing work and care responsibilities.

Figure 11. Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing to statements about supporting employees and training



Overall, there appears to be more support for working parents in the Professional, Scientific and Technical industries than other areas. Figure 12 shows 35.6% of managers in Professional, Scientific and Technical organisations had a parenting group and only 9.5% of Public Administration and Defence organisations supported parents in this way, far below the average for all industries.

Figure 12. Percentage of managers reporting that their organisation has a parenting group by industry

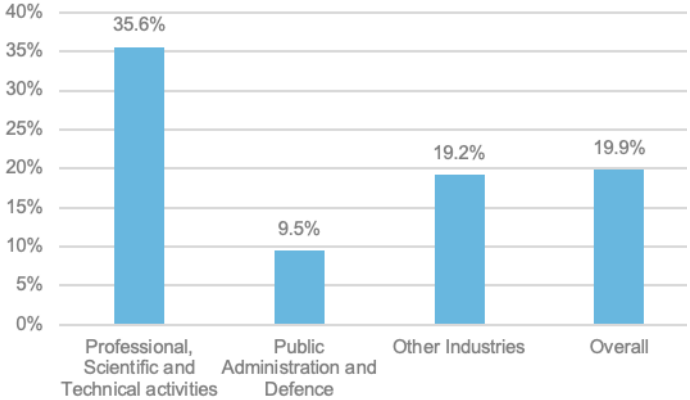
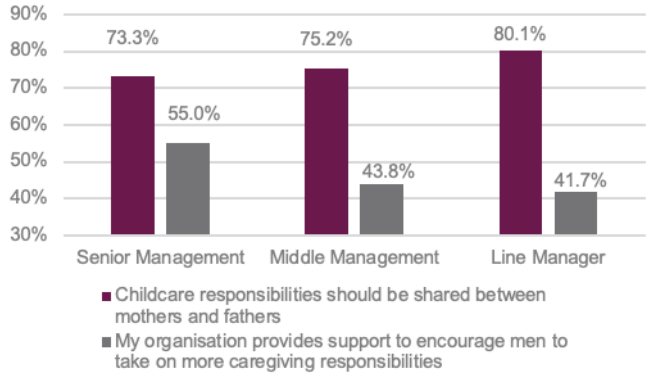


Figure 13 shows the percentage of managers who believe childcare responsibilities should be shared between mothers and fathers since lockdown and whether their organisation provides support to encourage men to take on more caregiving responsibilities. The figure shows that a large percentage of managers believe that childcare responsibilities should be shared. This belief is especially shared among line managers, where 80.1% surveyed agreed with this statement compared to 73.3% of senior management.

The figure also suggests that organisations are beginning to support fathers to take on more caregiving responsibilities to achieve this. In this case, we see more senior managers agreeing to this statement, with 55.0% of senior managers believing their organisation is providing support to do this.

Figure 13. Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements on caregiving responsibilities by role

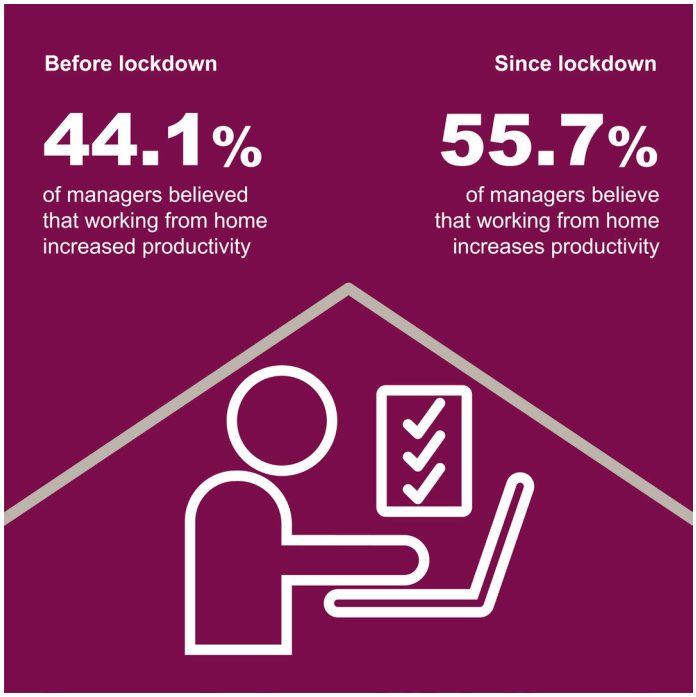


Interestingly, fewer line managers believed this to be the case with only 41.7% agreeing. This result could be indicative of the fact that although senior managers at the top level believe that organisations are providing support for fathers, line managers who are more likely to be directly involved in providing support do not feel this is the case in practice (also see Cooper & Baird, 2015).

These results suggest there are likely to be organisations that think they are supportive in this area but that the message may not be making its way to fathers. This reflects previous research that found communication and workplace culture were important barriers to parents, and in particular fathers requesting and taking flexible working options, and argues Shared Parental Leave could lead to an increase in fathers requesting flexible working arrangements (Birkett & Forbes, 2019).

Managers' qualitative responses: Most significant learning experiences

Managers provided qualitative responses to questions around their most significant learning experiences when managing during lockdown. The key theme here was around how surprised managers were that homeworking had been effective and productivity had for the most part remained stable or even improved. It was clear that managers struggled to recalibrate their roles, effectively manage communication, and combat isolation particularly at the start of the lockdown and had learned how important these areas were for managing a remote workforce.



Effectiveness of working from home

The first key theme in the qualitative data was around how effective homeworking had actually been. Large numbers of managers noted that their employees have managed well with the new ways of working and productivity had not been impacted in most areas, indeed in some areas it improved.

Their teams were generally more motivated than they thought they would be, and most interestingly homeworking was proving to be a viable alternative to working in an office with many benefits.

> *"[A key learning was] realising that people are more trustworthy than first thought." The productivity has been way higher than expected - my team have worked fantastically from home."*

> *"[I would] probably give my employees more credit now for doing work at home where as I was a little cynical previously as to how motivated they would be."*

> *"My team can function as well out of the office as in it and in the case of one department actually perform better."*

Despite the general picture being positive, some managers had employees who were not working effectively at home. However, it was also clear that this was generally the case with members of the team who had already been difficult to motivate when working in the office.

> *"Productivity has improved but can't trust some members of the team."*

> *"I feel that if you had performance concerns before lockdown they may well be exacerbated by remote working but if you had confidence in staff performance before lockdown their work ethic is unlikely to have changed significantly."*

This suggests these cases of poor performance were more about fit and motivation than working from home itself.

Many employees enjoyed working from home

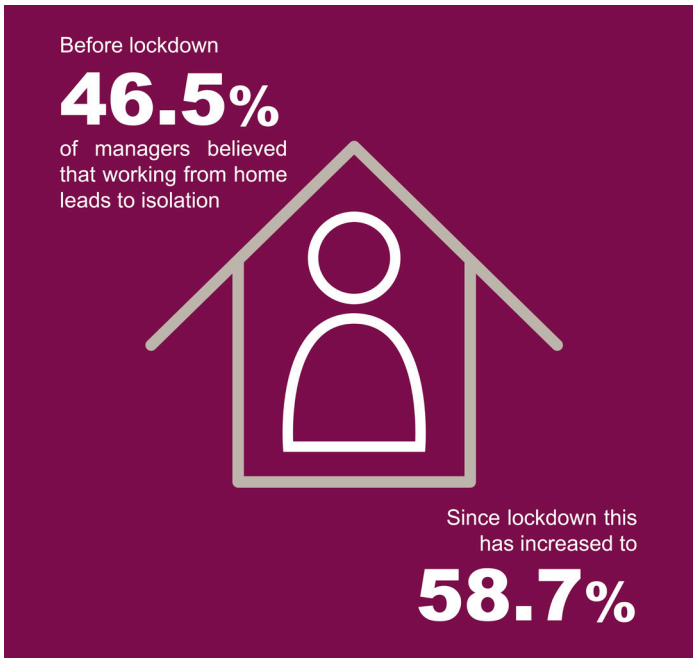
Another theme managers raised was their perception that while it had not been right for some, employees have generally enjoyed working from home and having more flexibility about when they do their work leading to improved wellbeing. Manager's levels of trust in their terms also seems to have improved.

> *"I learnt that my team were more relaxed, more focused, more attentive and gave positive feedback, especially during online meetings [when they were working from home]."*

> *"[Homeworking] makes everyone happier, mental and physical health has improved for my whole team."*

> *"Working from home had a lot of benefits for everyone involved. My team members no longer have to pretend to look busy if they have no work to do. I've informed them that as long as they stick to the deadlines of deliverables, they can spend the rest of their day doing training or whatever they think will help them progress."*

> *"People work best when they feel supported, and are given flexibility to work in the way that works best for them."*



Importance of communication

Managers were clear that managing remotely required different skill sets which could prove to be difficult. Many had to change the way they managed and communication became more important than ever, both to ensure the right work was undertaken and to ensure team members did not feel isolated. This included speaking to staff about issues outside work and giving time in the working day for employees to interact socially.

> *"Good communication is even more important and is key to getting the job done from home with everyone staying in the loop to achieve the objectives being more important than before."*

> *"[It is] important to keep in touch with people and make them feel like they are still part of the team…[it is] important to speak to people, rather than just email them."*
> *[It is important] to keep regular contact with the team and have more chat based conversations about how they are getting on in their daily lives."*

> *"I've learnt it has been important to allocate time for social activities and for staff to let off some steam [during] work hours."*

In general, weekly meetings were very popular and better attended than when people worked in the office, perhaps in response to the strong feelings of isolation employees felt initially.

> *"[I am surprised by] how willing everyone is to call in for weekly video meetings, when there was little to no engagement in our weekly shop-floor ones!"*

> *"[It is important to] communicate and have weekly team meetings so everyone can share feedback of what is going well. This also increases motivation as employees don't feel as isolated working from home."*

> *"Home workers experience isolation a lot worse than I expected."*

Avoiding micro-managing

Many managers found that their teams were more motivated and more productive when they stopped micro-managing, and that constantly checking up on staff working from home often backfired.

> *"It is best to trust your employees to work instead of micromanaging them every hour of the day."*

> *"[I have learnt] to trust my staff more. I have actually done less micro-managing, and seen an increase in productivity."*

> *"The process has helped me identify areas where I previously was overbearing as a manager due to proximity, and now that there has to be a greater level of trust, it has allowed the team to really flourish."*

> *"Daily calls to check up on people are not a good thing, it gets peoples backs up as if [you're] checking on their work rather than trusting them."*

Importance of understanding

However, understanding employees' personal situations and the factors they are balancing such as elderly care, childcare, health issues and other priorities, has become central to the employee/ manager relationship.

> *"People have various situations going on in their lives some worse than others, I've had to be considerate of their issues."*

> *"[I have had to be more] understanding of how personal circumstances differ and are often unavoidable."*

> *"Everyone is different. Some love working from home, some love working in the office, some enjoy both."*

5 FUTURE PREFERENCES AND ATTITUDES TO HOMEWORKING

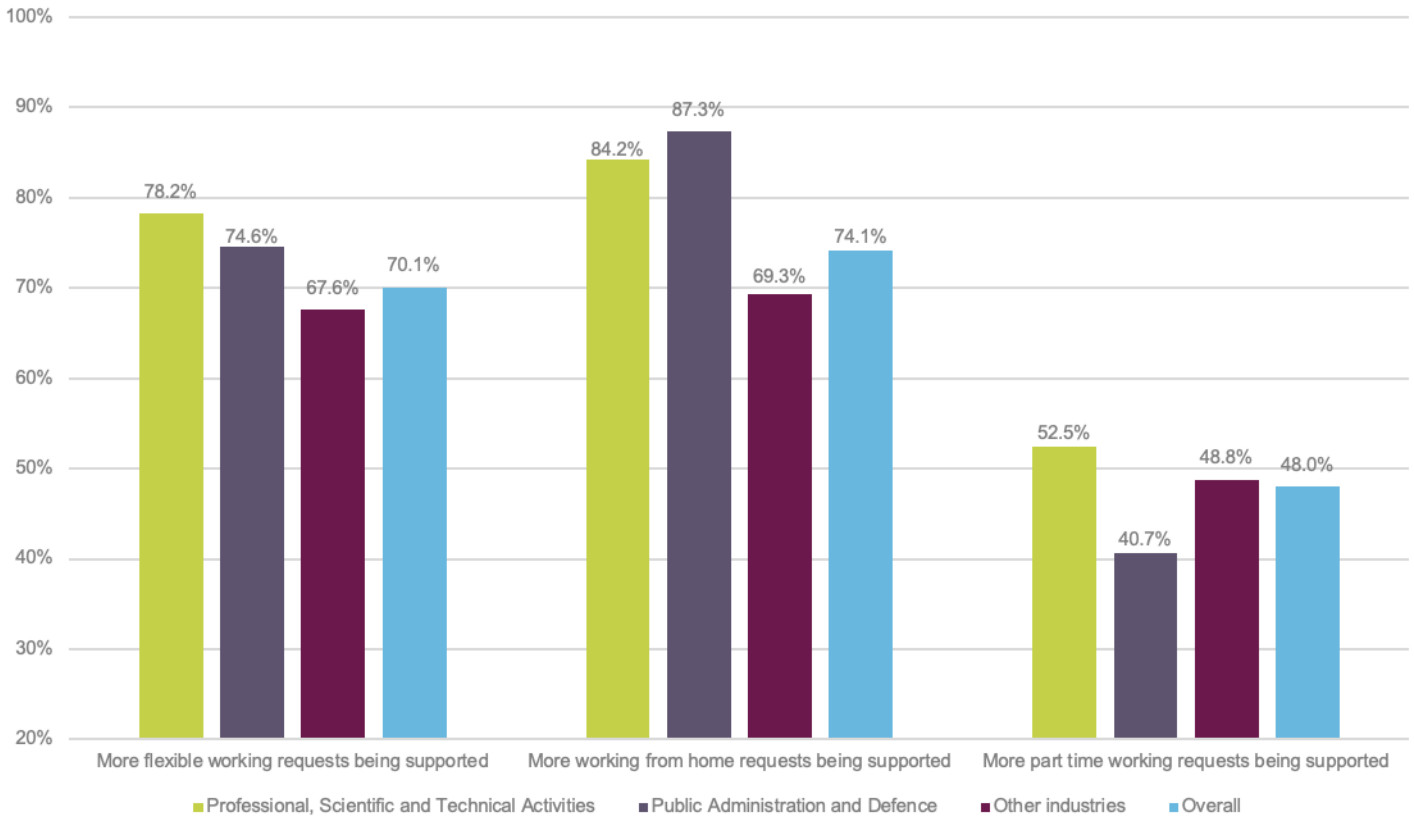
Managers are more supportive of working from home in the future

Many managers expect more requests for flexible working will be supported within their organisations in the future, due to the positive experiences of managing homeworkers since lockdown. As we can see from Figure 14, requests for flexible working (70.1%) and working from home (74.1%) have strong levels of support, however, support for part-time requests are lower in comparison. Levels of support varied by industry, for example, requests to work from home or to work flexibly more generally are more likely to be supported in Professional, Scientific and Technical activities industries as well as Public Administration and Defence. On the other hand, we can see that requests to work part-time are less likely to be supported in Public Administration and Defence compared to other industries.

70.1%

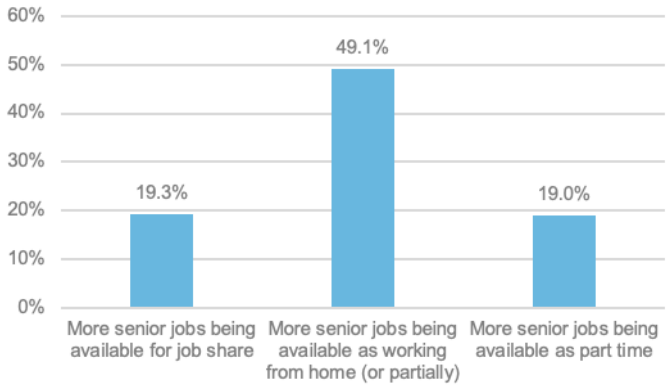
of managers expect **more** flexible working request to be supported across their organisation' in the future

Figure 14. Percentage of managers who expect organisations to be more supportive of various flexible working arrangements in the future by industry



Interestingly, Figure 15 shows that managers believe there will be more support for senior roles to be done more flexibly in the future. This includes senior managers being given the opportunity to work from home (49.1%), utilise a job share (19.3%) and work part-time (19.0%).

Figure 15. Percentage of managers reporting their organisations being likely or very likely to make changes to senior jobs



The managers surveyed indicated that working from home would be much better supported in the future, with more jobs advertised as available for flexible working (50.0%), improved support for working from home (70.5%), more tools to support working from home (71.4%), and improved support for working from home by the organisation (72.7%) as shown in Figure 16.

Figure 16. Percentage of managers reporting their organisation as likely or very likely to make changes around flexible working/ homeworking

Managers' qualitative responses: Future attitudes to working from home

Managers provided qualitative responses to questions around their most significant learning experiences from managing since lockdown, some of which illuminated future preferences and attitudes towards homeworking. Key themes included the value of homeworking and the fact that senior managers had seen the benefits and would promote it. Further themes included the need for new policies, procedures and training for managers to make homeworking more effective and the need to develop a culture of trust. However, managers also emphasised the importance of recognising that homeworking would not work for all staff and revealed patterns of overwork resulting from homeworking, suggesting any future approach to homeworking needs to be responsive to individual circumstances.

Working from home has been successful and will be commonplace in the future

Managers generally believed working from home had been very successful during the pandemic and would become more commonplace in the future.

> *"It works! I have always been pro-working from home in an office based company culture, however, now the CEO has seen that it works, I think it will be continued in the future."*

> *"[It is important to be] flexible with the hours - as long as the work is being done, it doesn't matter when."*

> *"Actually, for those who can work from home, working from home is much more efficient and people are much more motivated than I thought, and it is actually a very good option for many people and they manage their workloads well, so there is not a decrease in productivity and this should be implemented more in the future."*

However, managers were also quick to point out that working from home was not suitable for everyone.

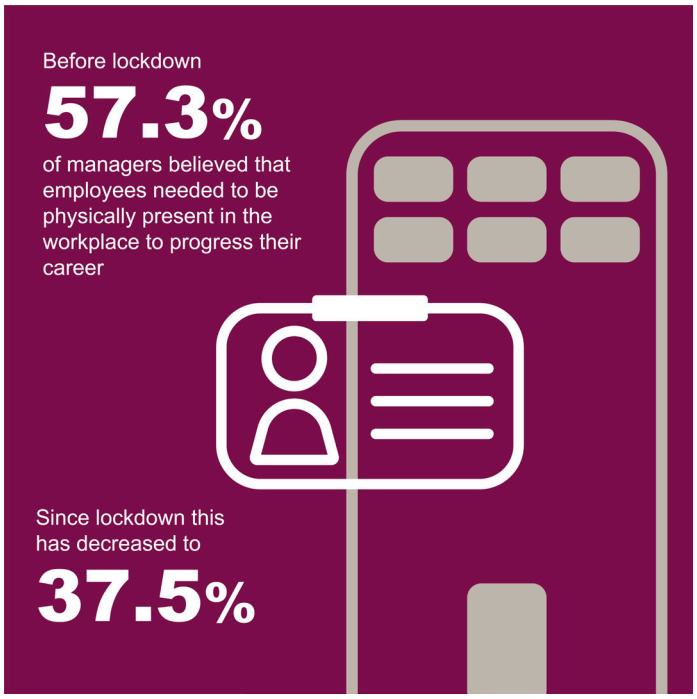
> *"Working from home is not suitable for everyone and some really struggle with it. Helping manage people who do not feel like they are supported in their home environment has been a steep learning curve."*

Managers considered ways they could make homeworking commonplace in the future. This included, for example, focusing on the need for proper policies, leadership and performance management training for managers, support and a culture of trust so that more extensive working from home could be even more effective in the future.

> *"It could work if we put some proper policies/ arrangements in place but I would need to look carefully at my role and how I could manage my team and I would need some training to do this well."*

> *"Finding ways to lead well virtually and maintain trust and support will be key to securing effective performance in future."*

> *"There has to be a culture of trust when working from home."*



6 CONCLUSION

In summary, a key social and economic consequence of lockdown has been a nationwide move towards working from home across the economy, including many industries that had not previously embraced working from home. The data presented here suggests that employers have had predominantly positive experiences of managing staff who have been working from home since lockdown. This has subsequently influenced the likelihood that managers and organisations will be supporting more flexible working and working from home in the future. What is more, we see evidence to show that there has been a decline in the stigma around flexible working and reduced concern about working from home negatively affecting employee performance (Chung, 2020). Organisations have also significantly increased the support available for employees working from home by providing tools and professional support, and this is something they plan to continue in the future.

The shift in attitudes towards working from home has influenced how managers expect to approach flexible working requests in the future. Organisations are likely to show greater tendencies to support flexible working, working from home, part-time working and job share requests at all levels of the organisation including in senior roles. Our data also suggests that employers will be more likely to advertise future posts as available for homeworking. This has the added advantage of opening up new pools of talent to companies. These changes could lead to a real shift in the location and structure of work in the longer term as people return from lockdown related homeworking. As we have seen in our employee survey (Chung, Seo, Forbes, & Birkett, 2020), we expect workers to request flexible working in greater numbers than ever before, and as shown in this report, managers expect and would support such changes.

What is more, future requests to work flexibly are likely to come from men and women and at all levels of the organisation. As more people across the board start working flexibly and from home, there are likely to be broader implications for the economy and society as a whole. For example, more men working flexibly in the future could potentially improve gender equality in the workplace by promoting greater gender equality around childcare and unpaid work at home (Carlson, Petts, & Pepin, 2020) particularly if stigma against the use of flexible working for family purposes can be eliminated. The good news is that stigma against flexible working is generally on the decline, meaning that we will see more people requesting to work flexibly and more people, including more men, working flexibility for caring reasons. In addition, large-scale homeworking in the future could lead to broader societal and economic changes, for example, in the use of public transport and private vehicles, in the real estate market, in urban planning and impacts on ancillary industries that support offices such as coffee and sandwich shops. These potential changes would have significant impacts, for example, potentially reducing carbon footprint and tackling the environmental challenges we face but could also impact the job market and economic growth. These are all potential outcomes that policymakers and employers will need to consider and we offer some policy recommendations to this effect below.

7 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for organisations/managers

1. Improve communication around flexible working policies to all employees ensuring that the benefits of flexible working practices are included. Especially focus on delivering the message to groups of workers who may not have previously used flexible working but have appreciated the opportunity to work flexibly since lockdown such as fathers and senior managers. Consider including champions that have used the policies, at all levels of the organisation, to overcome concerns regarding how policy take up may negatively impact careers.

2. Encourage line managers to start a conversation with team members about ways of working and flexible working before they return to the office, to work out the best way forward for all parties.

3. Think of new ways to ensure key performance outcomes are met by rethinking work productivity and effectiveness as a team to ensure those working flexibly are not disadvantaged. New measures for performance need to be incorporated, with less emphasis on presenteeism and long hours.

4. Think about how to better support employees working from home and taking up other types of flexible working. Consider how to tackle potential unintended consequences of flexible working for wellbeing such as overworking, blurring of boundaries, isolation, stress, loneliness and burnout. Put measures in place to support those suffering from these unintended consequences before they become an issue for your workers and the company.

5. Ensure appropriate training is available for HR and line managers around flexible working policies and highlight the importance of flexible working as a performance enhancing tool as well as a tool to enhance equality and diversity within organisations.

6. Advertise all positions (where possible) as open to flexible working as a strategy for improving employee attraction and inclusion. Encourage the advertisement of senior roles as open to flexible working.

7. Ensure appropriate provision of homeworking tools and support to ensure that employees are able to carry out work from home to the best of their abilities.

8. Offer employees compensation for their overhead costs related to working from home and claim this back from HMRC.

9. Avoid the temptation to move towards working from home as a purely cost cutting exercise and closing down the majority of office spaces. Recent studies have shown, and this research suggests, that many employees want to be in the office at least some of the time.

10. Update recruitment processes in order to access new talent pools across the UK and beyond, which have opened up due to the move towards remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. Provide stronger rights for flexible working for all workers from day 1 of their job.

2. Encourage the assumption that all jobs will be available as flexible working by default with the onus on the organisation to provide a case for why a role is not suitable for flexible working.

3. Provide better support and protection against discrimination for those working flexibly or requesting to work flexibly to ensure they do not face negative career implications, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Develop a simple return to work module employers can use to support employees on their transition back to the workplace (not at home) post lockdown (recognising that some may not be returning for a while). Within this module emphasise the key business benefits of flexible working.

5. Develop and launch a campaign to promote flexible working for all, including fathers in particular, as well as non-parents and senior managers, who have particularly benefited from working flexibly since lockdown. This should include the benefits of flexible working for employees in terms of flexibility, mental health, and work-life balance, and for employers in terms of increased productivity, performance enhancement, and enhanced recruitment and retention.

6. Look at ways to support organisations to deal with wellbeing and mental health issues caused by the COVID-19 lockdown and long-term homeworking.

7. Conduct research into the practicalities and the social and economic and environmental consequences of longer term large scale home working as well as new approaches such as a 4-day week.

8. Provide more support for companies in providing adequate tools and infrastructure for employees working from home to ensure that all employees can work efficiently and sufficiently from home. For example, promote the HMRC scheme for reimbursing companies who pay their employees working from home overheads and consider schemes like tax breaks for fast broadband and hardware/software for home use.

9. Review policies as they relate to fathers to ensure to break down barriers to fathers sharing childcare and to reduce stigma around fathers working flexibly for work-life balance reasons.

8 METHODOLOGY/ABOUT THE PROJECT

Working From Home During the COVID-19 Lockdown is a joint project by Dr Sarah Forbes and Dr Holly Birkett based at the University of Birmingham, and Dr Heejung Chung based at the University of Kent. The project has received full ethical approval. The project was set up to understand what impact the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdown and resulting large scale working from home has had on working practices and to explore the likely implications for the future of work. Two surveys were undertaken by the research team, one with employees and one with managers. These explored how lockdown working has influenced a range of work-life issues, attitudes to flexible working and future preferences around flexible working from the perspective of both employers and managers across the UK.

The employee survey was undertaken between 22nd May – 15th June 2020 with 1,160 employees from across the UK and explores a range of work-life issues, attitudes towards flexible working and future preferences for working from home in the future (to name a few). A full copy of the report on the findings from that survey can be found here: http://www.wafproject.org/covidwfh

The University of Birmingham and Kent undertook the managers survey underpinning this report by asking managers about their experiences of managing employees working from home throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The research explored the impact of working from home on performance and managers' attitudes towards and preferences for flexible working in the future. The data was collected between 24th July and 11th August 2020. The goal was to investigate how managers have managed staff since lockdown, working patterns, levels of trust and changing attitudes to homeworking across the organisation since lockdown.

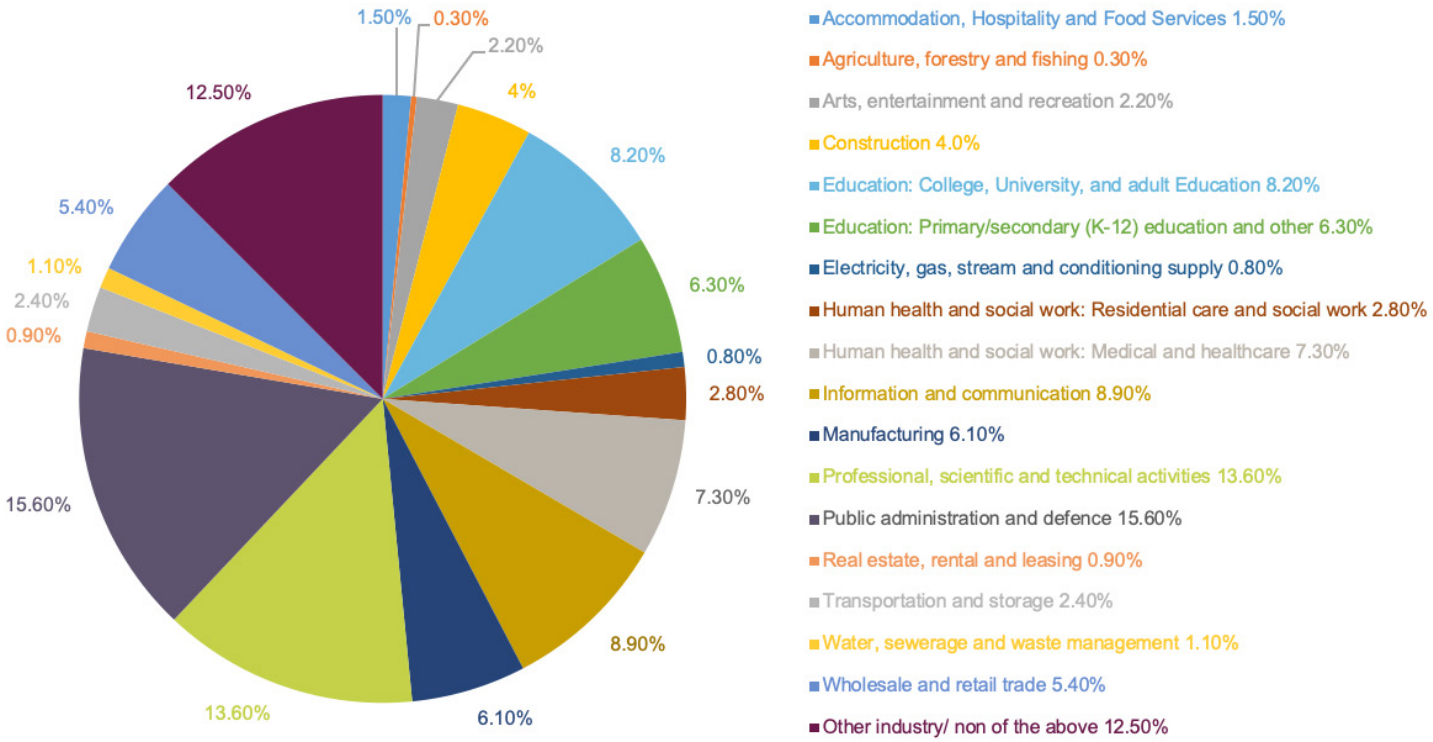
This report is based on the manager survey. The survey was restricted to participants at least 18 years of age, residing in the United Kingdom, in paid employment (not self-employed or on furlough) and that were line managing staff. A combination of different sampling procedures were applied to gather a total of 742 completed survey responses. To gather this sample, we used the online survey panel company Prolific Academic to gain access to 551 respondents, and third sector organisations supporting managers to gain access to a further 154 respondents. The remaining 37 respondents were gathered using convenience sampling.

Amongst the sample, 55% identified as female, 25.2% reported the Midlands (England) as their normal work location outside of lockdown and 60.1% reported having less than half of their senior management as women (see Table 1). Respondents were from an array of industries, with 'Professional, Scientific and Technical activities' and 'Public Administration and Defence' making up 13.6% and 15.6% of the sample respectively (see Figure 17). This sample presents valuable insights on the experiences of managers since lockdown and their perceived intentions to support flexible working in the future. However, as the sampling technique included convenience sampling, the sample cannot be declared as representative of the UK population of managers.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

		Senior manager (n=131)	Middle manager (n=290)	Line manager (n=321)	Overall (n=742)
Gender	% Female	52.7%	50.7%	59.8%	55.0%
Age	% aged under 40	37.4%	56.6%	64.8%	56.7%
Size of organisation (employees)	1 to 49 employees	31.3%	23.8%	21.8%	24.3%
	50 to 249 employees	13.7%	28.6%	25.2%	24.5%
	250+ employees	55.0%	47.6%	53.0%	51.2%
Gender makeup of the organisation	Mostly women	23.7%	22.1%	25.5%	23.9%
	Mostly men	24.4%	24.1%	20.9%	22.8%
	About half women and half men	51.9%	53.8%	53.6%	53.4%
Gender makeup of senior management	Less than half are women (0-39%)	53.4%	62.4%	60.7%	60.1%
	More than half are women (60-100%)	16.0%	14.5%	16.2%	15.5%
	About half are women (40-59%)	30.5%	23.1%	23.1%	24.4%
Normal location of work outside of lockdown	London	21.4%	21.7%	14.3%	18.5%
	South England	24.4%	22.4%	23.7%	23.3%
	Midlands England	32.8%	26.2%	21.2%	25.2%
	North England	14.5%	18.6%	26.2%	21.2%
	Wales	2.3%	3.1%	4.0%	3.4%
	Scotland	3.1%	5.9%	9.3%	6.9%
	Northern Ireland	1.5%	2.1%	1.2%	1.6%

Figure 17. Percentage of respondents by industry



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AUTHOR INFORMATION

The Working from Home (WFH) During the COVID -19 Lockdown project is a collaborative project undertaken between the Equal Parenting Project at the University of Birmingham and the Work Autonomy, Flexibility and Work-Life Balance Project at the University of Kent. The WFH Project is made up of two distinct but complementary packages of work, one covering employees' experiences of homeworking since lockdown and one covering employers and managers' experiences of homeworking during lockdown and beyond.

The research team for the managers package of work and authors of this report include:

Dr Sarah Forbes is the Co-Director of the Equal Parenting Project, member of the Responsible Marketing Group, the Work Inclusivity Research Centre and the Centre for Responsible Business at the University of Birmingham. Dr Forbes's research focuses on encouraging voluntary behavioural change and her methodology research has received recognition with prizes awarded by Harvard University and the Academy of Marketing. She is a member of the Government Equalities Office WAGE research programme and has actively advised the government review of Shared Parental Leave as well as the measures included in the 2020 Maternity and Paternity Rights survey.

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