UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

University of Kent

MANAGING EMPLOYEES DURING COVID-19:

Flexible working and the future of work (Phase Two)

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FOREWORD

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic academics from Birmingham University Business School and the University of Kent started the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project, a research project exploring the impact of mass homeworking on future working practices. The first two reports from the project exploring the experiences of employees and managers at the beginning of the pandemic were released in late 2020 and demonstrated that working practices changed significantly for many during the early stages of the pandemic as a result of mass homeworking. These experiences impacted many worker's and manager's attitudes toward flexible working, as well as their future intentions to request flexible working and support flexible working requests (phase one). These findings have been echoed by results from the government sponsored Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) who found that offering flexible working explicitly in job advertisements increases applications by up to 30%, a sure sign that more workers aim to continue working flexibly (Government Equalities Office, 2021).

This new report builds on the phase one research to explore how managerial experiences have changed as the pandemic has continued and homeworking has become more normalised. The research highlights pressing issues surrounding quality support for flexible working and the implications for the future of work. Managers' attitudes to flexible working and working from home continue to be positive and the majority of managers continue to say their organisation will be more supportive of flexible working requests in the future, including in senior roles. However, it is clear most current flexible working is being done informally. The research also highlights that a large number of organisations have downsized and/or plan to repurpose their workspace, but much of this has been without employee consultation. This suggests a possible future mismatch between employees' working intentions and business planning.

The United Kingdom is at a critical juncture in the journey to create more equality in the workplace. Policymakers and organisations can learn a huge amount from these findings to help develop more inclusive workplaces and promote quality flexible working. The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified existing gender inequalities in the workplace with women more likely to be front line workers, furloughed or made redundant. However, on a more positive note the pandemic has also played a role in accelerating a shift in some norms around flexible working and gendered care. Importantly, and as the authors highlight, encouraging more men to work flexibly seems to be key in achieving more inclusive workplaces, and as more organisations adopt hybrid working patterns, it is crucial that all workers are supported in the use of flexible working. Ultimately, well-supported, quality flexible working that is accessible across industries and roles, and used by men as well as women, has the potential to help drive gender equality and reduce the gender pay gap. I am sure that you will join me in thanking the researchers for bringing these important findings to our attention and I hope that you enjoy reading this insightful report.

Professor Catherine Cassell
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Working From Home During COVID-19 Project was started by the University of Birmingham, in collaboration with the University of Kent, in April 2020, just as the first COVID-19 lockdown was taking effect in the UK. The overall aim of the project is to explore changing experiences of flexible working and working from home during the pandemic, and the potential impact of these changes on future attitudes and intentions regarding working practices. The data collected throughout The Working From Home During COVID-19 project is used to provide insights for organisations and policymakers about likely changes in ways of working and the labour market post COVID-19. Phase one of the data collection included surveys with managers and employees across the UK immediately after the first COVID-19 lockdown. This data was written up as two separate reports; one looking at the experiences of employees, including their future attitudes towards flexible working (Chung, Seo, Forbes and Birkett, 2020), and the second exploring the experiences of managers managing staff working from home during COVID-19 as well as managers' future attitudes and intentions regarding flexible working (Forbes, Birkett, Evans, Chung and Whiteman, 2020) both reports are available from the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project team.

For this report (phase two) the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project team undertook a second round of data collection with managers immediately following the third COVID-19 lockdown with the intention of exploring how experiences and attitudes have changed throughout COVID-19. We therefore return to some key areas of focus from phase one while also exploring new areas of interest that have become more apparent over the course of the pandemic. Key findings from this report are highlighted below:

Working from home and flexible working have become much more widespread during the pandemic but most pandemic related flexible working is being done informally

- Approximately half of all UK employees worked from home at least some of the time during the initial UK wide lockdown (Understanding Society, 2020) compared to only one in six employees working from home at least several times a month in 2015 (Chung and Van der Lippe, 2020).
- Most workers are currently working flexibly on an informal basis, with over 50% of managers reporting the majority of employees were working from home informally with no formal application made to the organisation. This suggests that employees are being allowed to work flexibly without having to make formal requests but does not provide certainty regarding future practices.
- Senior managers were the most positive about COVID-19 working with 67.1% of senior managers reporting feeling active and vigorous during the pandemic and only 51.1% of line managers reporting feeling this way.

Managers have been positive about flexible working since COVID-19 and are less likely to encourage long hours working and presenteeism

- Most managers surveyed agreed that flexible working increases productivity (71.0%) and is a performance enhancing tool (62.9%).
- Managers are less likely to believe employees need to be physically present or work long hours in order to advance in the organisation. Only 48.0% of managers now believe employees need to be physically present compared to 57.3% of managers before the COVID-19 pandemic. 35.2% now believe employees need to work long hours to progress compared with 43.3% before the pandemic.
- Flexible workers are now more likely to get promoted, 57.4% of managers surveyed reported that flexible workers in their organisations were just as likely to be promoted as their peers, an increase since phase one of the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project.

Managers and organisations intend to support more flexible working in the future

- 65% of managers reported their organisations as being more supportive of flexible working requests.
- More senior jobs are being made available as working from home (46.9%), part-time (26.5%) and as job share (23.9%). This is a continuing trend with the potential to help promote gender equality in the workplace and reduce the gender pay gap.
- Managers are more likely to work part-time in the future with 18.2% reporting they are likely to apply to work part-time.
- Organisations are reviewing and adapting their flexible working policies and practices. 67.7% of managers reported that their organisations have reviewed their flexible working policies and practices following the COVID-19 pandemic. They have made changes to communication systems (29.0%), introduced more training for managers around flexible working or hybrid working (28.7%), provided more resources and facilities (28.4%) and changed how tasks are allocated (16.5%).
- Managers also indicated that working from home would be much better supported in the future with more jobs advertised as available for flexible working (53.6%), an increase in the availability of working from home (60.9%), more tools to support working from home (62.4%) and improved support for working from home by the organisation (59.7%).

Organisations are making plans to decrease and repurpose office space

- 59.0% of managers reported that they are expecting employees to be in the office fewer than five days a week, once all COVID-19 restrictions are removed.
- Altogether 32.8% of managers reported their organisation as having planned/planning to reduce office space.
- Managers also reported how remaining office space would be repurposed, with 25.2% reporting that there would be fewer individual offices, 11.1% reporting there would be fewer shared offices, 15.1% reporting more space for events/workshops, and 13.6% reporting more space would be made available for wellbeing.
- Only 38.8% of managers reported that their organisation had consulted with employees about working preferences before making decisions regarding the volume and use of office space in the future.

Organisations are continuing to provide extra support to employees who are working from home

- Many organisations are continuing to provide extra support for those working from home, such as a computer or laptop (75.0%), access to online meeting software (61.2%) or headphones for computers (44.5%).
- Other support offered to employees has also continued, with organisations still providing wellbeing counsellors (32.5%) and guidance for wellbeing (43.4%).

Organisations continue to support parents and carers at work during COVID-19

- Nearly half of managers (46.0%) reported receiving training or advice to help them support employees who need to balance work and caring responsibilities, with 85.7% of managers reporting that they feel confident in responding to the needs of employees with caring responsibilities.
- Organisations are beginning to support fathers to take on more caregiving responsibilities, with 43.4% of managers believing their organisation provides support to do this.

Managers changed their management style and practice throughout the pandemic

- Managers discussed how they had adapted their feedback techniques and focused more on employees wellbeing and work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has the potential to help promote gender equality in the workplace and reduce the gender pay gap.
- Managers detailed how they are now comfortable with employees working from home with little or no face-to-face contact or direct communication.
- The percentage of managers having performance feedback conversations at least once a week with their team or department dipped slightly after the first lockdown but has since returned to levels higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organisations are communicating informally with employees and using surveillance and monitoring facilities

- Organisations are relying heavily on informal

employee engagement (50.1%) rather than formal channels such as Trade Unions (27.1%).
- 26.5% of managers reported the use of surveillance and monitoring software.
- Forms of surveillance are varied, including monitoring employees' work emails, files and browser history, monitoring phone logs and calls, monitoring and recording employee location in a building and monitoring employee use of social media outside of working hours.

This report clearly demonstrates that experiences of working from home and flexible working during the COVID-19 pandemic have been broadly positive and managers are expecting their organisations to encourage more flexible working in the future, even in senior roles. Indeed, many organisations are already implementing new hybrid working practices and have begun to repurpose or reduce office space in preparation. The initial picture here is positive considering how quickly employees in many industries have adapted to working from home, often with resultant increases in productivity, work-life balance, motivation and autonomy. At the same time there has been an increased interest in future flexible working from employees. We now have clear evidence to suggest COVID-19 is changing attitudes around flexible working, reducing flexible working stigma and beginning to influence attitudes towards presenteeism and the long hours culture which have been prevalent in the UK. If these changing attitudes are harnessed appropriately there is a once in a generation opportunity to create more inclusive workplaces and help tackle gender inequality. However, the current situation is only found in some areas of the economy and is precarious with flexible working overwhelmingly linked to COVID-19 and based on informal work practices agreed with individual managers. It cannot be assumed that these new attitudes and practices will continue when COVID-19 subsides, without a concerted effort from a broad range of stakeholders.

Crucially, some significant questions arise from this phase two data regarding the future of work, inclusion and gender equality in the workplace. For example, how do we ensure all industries embrace the journey to more accessible flexible working and for jobs at all levels? How do we ensure the focus on productivity and flexible working doesn't lead to work intensification as people work through commuting times and find it difficult to switch off when working from home? Related to this, will employers expect the same level of productivity on days employees are in the office in the future, essentially extending commuters' workdays, as they are expected to work through their normal commute times but still have to commute? In addition, how do we ensure new opportunities for flexible working are not only taken up by female carers, further gendering the concept of flexible working and creating a two-tier workforce? Also, importantly, what will these changes in working practices mean for other areas such as the Government's leveling up agenda, town planning, city centre employment, public transport, road traffic, and the environment more broadly? For example, while mass homeworking is arguably leading to fewer car journeys and a reduction in pollution, working from home means increased use of gas and electricity throughout the day in people's homes which also has an impact on the environment. These are all important questions that policymakers and employers need to consider, and some initial recommendations to deal with these issues can be found at the end of this report.

1 INTRODUCTION

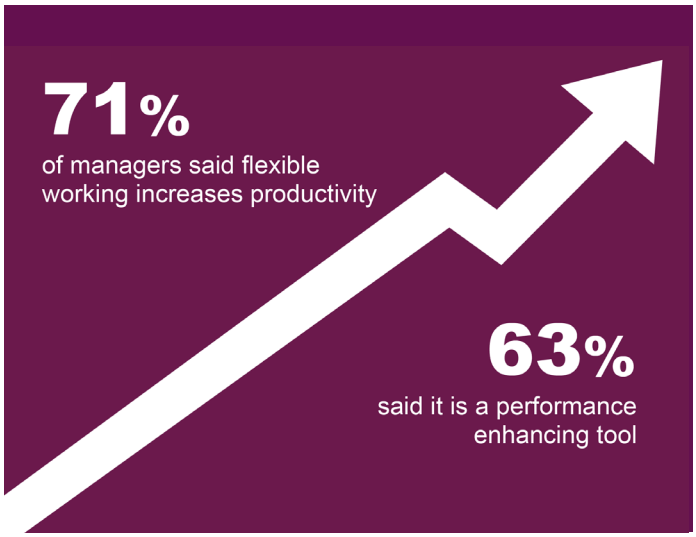
The World Health Organization declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020. This resulted in comprehensive lockdowns announced by governments worldwide, which limited all unnecessary travel and required all non-essential workers to work from home wherever possible. To date, England has entered three national lockdowns which have seen industries shut down; March 2020 to June 2020, November 2020 to December 2020, and January 2021 to March 2021. Clearly not all workers have been able to work from home, with an uneven distribution between the highest and lowest earning workers. Data collected by the University of Cambridge in 2020 (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020) found that 33% of workers earning less than £20,000 a year worked from home in the week surveyed, compared with 72% of those earning more than £40,000 a year. However, existing research still says very little about managers experiences of managing staff working from home during COVID-19. Nonetheless there has been a huge shift towards homeworking with approximately half of all UK employees working from home at least some of the time during the initial UK wide lockdown (Understanding Society, 2020). In comparison, in 2015, a European Working Conditions Survey found that only one in six employees worked from home at least several times a month (Chung and Van der Lippe, 2020). What is clear is that the UK lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 have led to a huge expansion of homeworking in a very short space of time and often in industries where homeworking has not previously been the norm. This change has provided an opportunity to understand how these new working practices may have altered managers' and organisations' attitudes towards flexible working for the future. Research already exists demonstrating that flexible working can improve the performance outcomes of companies (Kelliher and de Menezes, 2019). In this context, a huge expansion in homeworking is important as if this and the related changes in flexible working discussed throughout this report endure, they could have far-reaching consequences with the potential to radically alter the future of work and have consequences for other aspects of society, such as gender equality, town planning and the environment.

This report returns to areas of interest from phase one of the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project (Forbes, Birkett, Evans, Chung and Whiteman, 2020; data collected July/ August 2020) but also takes a closer look at new factors which have become more important throughout the pandemic, such as changes to office space, surveillance and the role of Trade Unions. The findings of this report, therefore, generate fresh insights about the longevity and embeddedness of those changes highlighted in phase one and some new findings relevant to our understanding of the future of work.

The data underpinning this report was gathered through a national survey conducted following the third national lockdown between May and June 2021. The survey was undertaken with UK managers, exploring their norms, support and future attitudes around working from home and flexible working. The overall aim of this research is to explore managers experiences of managing employees during lockdown and how their experiences, perceptions and attitudes towards working from home and flexible working may have changed during this period. The report is designed to provide insights for organisations and policymakers about likely changes in ways of working and the labour market post COVID-19.

2 MANAGERS' EXPERIENCES OF MANAGING EMPLOYEES WORKING FROM HOME AND FLEXIBLE WORKING

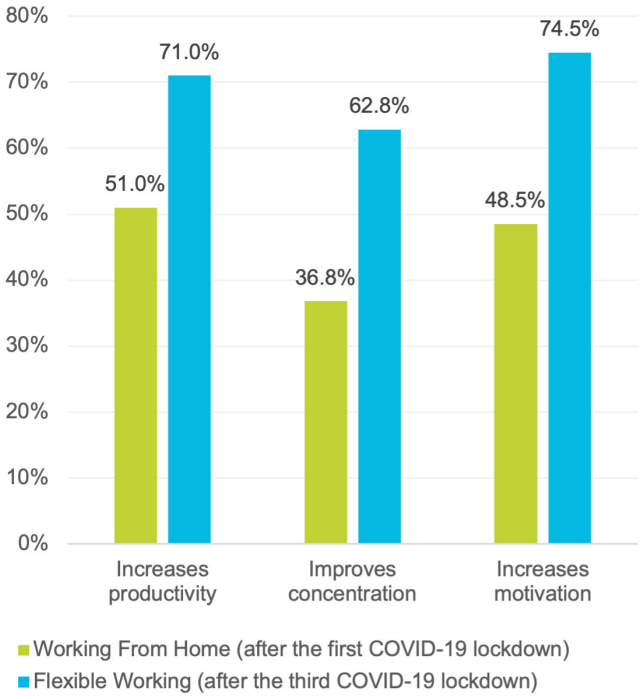
Working from home has become much more prevalent since the 2020 and 2021 UK lockdowns. At the same time, employees attitudes to flexible working and homeworking have also changed, with the majority planning to request some kind of flexible working arrangements on their return to work (Chung, Seo, Forbes and Birkett, 2020). In the past, managers across a range of industries have generally offered lukewarm support for flexible working or maintained that flexible working is incompatible with their business, leading employees working from home to suffer from a flexible working stigma (Chung 2020). However, evidence from both phase one of the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project and the phase two data collections suggest attitudes are changing.



Managers report positive consequences of flexible working during COVID-19

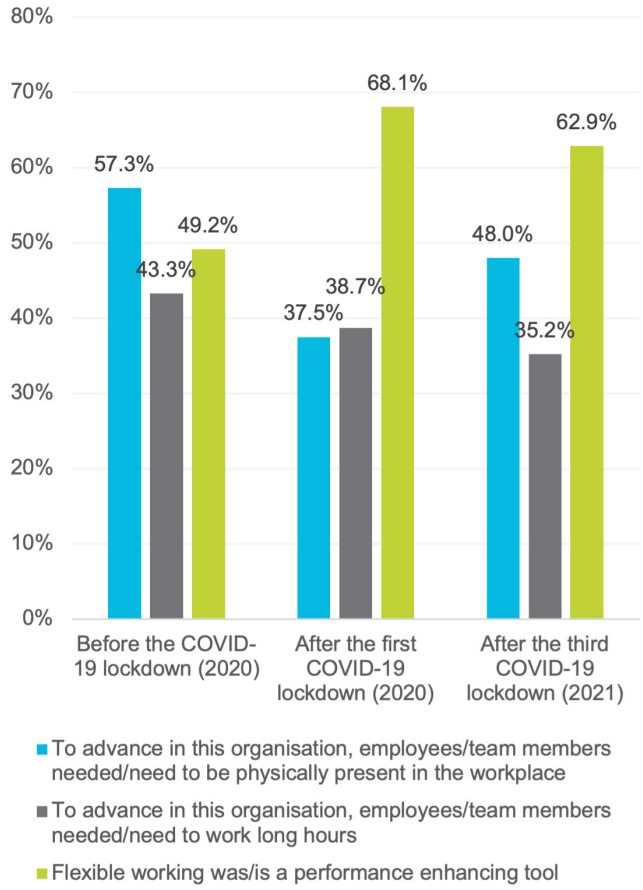
Both phases of data collection from the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project have shown attitudes towards flexible working and homeworking have improved. Figure 1 shows positive attitudes of managers around the link between flexible working and working from home and productivity, concentration and motivation. Over half of managers surveyed (51.0%) agreed that working from home increases productivity, with 71.0% agreeing that flexible working increases productivity. Similarly, 36.8% of managers agreed that working from home improves employee concentration, with 62.8% agreeing that flexible working improves concentration. Finally, almost half of all managers surveyed (48.5%) agreed that working from home increases motivation, with nearly three quarters (74.5%) agreeing that flexible working increases motivation.

Figure 1: Percentage of managers reporting they agreed or strongly agreed with attitudinal statements about working from home and flexible working



Managers' attitudes towards flexible working and career advancement also appear to have significantly changed during lockdown. Phase one data showed that managers were much less likely to believe employees needed to be physically present to advance in the organisation after the first lockdown. The percentage agreeing with this has increased slightly since the third lockdown but is still much lower than in pre-COVID times. Figure 2 shows that before COVID-19, 57.3% of managers believed that employees needed to be physically present in the workplace to advance in the organisation. Following the first 2020 lockdown, this number fell significantly to 37.5% (Forbes, Birkett, Evans, Chung and Whiteman, 2020). Following the third lockdown in 2021, this number went back up to 48.0%. This suggests some managers might be returning to old patterns and preferences. However, the pattern is different in other areas, before COVID-19, only 49.2% of managers believed flexible working was a performance enhancing tool, rising sharply to 68.1% following the first 2020 lockdown (Forbes, Birkett, Evans, Chung and Whiteman, 2020).

Figure 2: Percentage of managers reporting they agreed or strongly agreed with attitudinal statements about presenteeism and flexible working

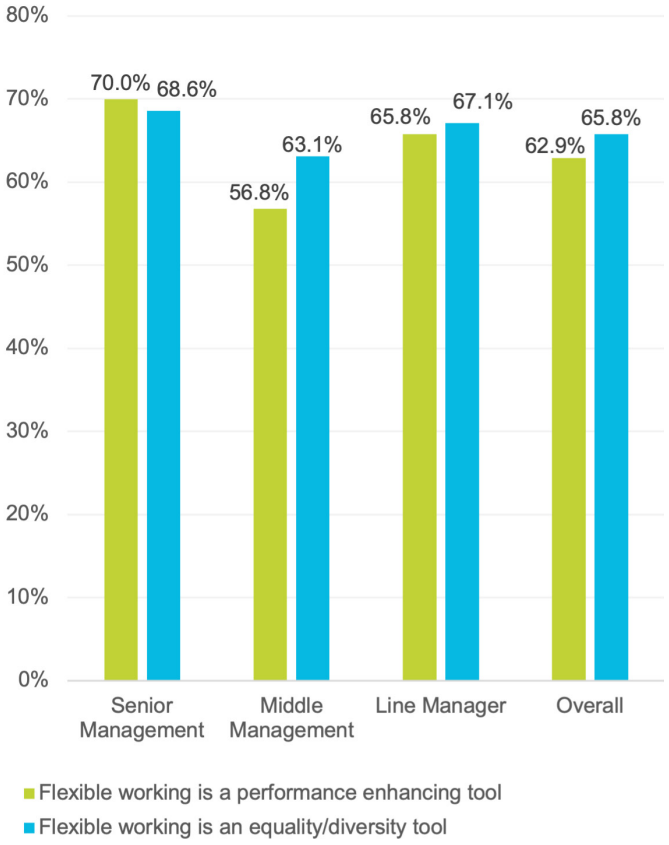


This number has also fallen slightly by the third lockdown to 62.9% suggesting this is starting to level off at quite a high level. Finally, we see that with each successive lockdown managers have been less likely to believe employees need to work long hours to progress in their organisation suggesting a possible challenge to the UK long hours work culture.

Since COVID-19 only **35%** of managers believe working long hours is important for employees to progress their careers and this continues to decrease throughout the pandemic

Figure 3 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. Phase one found that line managers were more interested in the potential of flexible working to be a performance enhancing tool than an equality/diversity tool, with 70.7% of line managers agreeing that flexible working is a performance enhancing tool since lockdown versus 59.8% of managers who agreed that it is an equality/diversity tool (Forbes, Birkett, Evans, Chung and Whiteman, 2020). This attitude appears to have shifted since the 2021 lockdown, now with a slightly higher percentage of line managers viewing flexible working as an equality/diversity tool versus viewing it as a performance enhancing tool, albeit both figures remain high (67.1% versus 65.8%). Overall, it appears that middle management and line managers are more focused on flexible working as being a tool to drive equality and diversity in the workplace, whilst senior management are likely to view it as both a performance enhancing tool and an equality/diversity tool.

Figure 3. Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements regarding flexible working by role



We also explored managers' wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 4 details how managers felt during COVID-19. Overall, 63.4% of managers reported feeling cheerful and in good spirits, 51.3% reported feeling calm and relaxed, 54.8% reported feeling active and vigorous and 41.0% reporting feeling fresh and rested when they wake up. This paints a fairly positive picture of managers' experiences during COVID-19. However, when looking closer at the experiences between different management levels, senior management appear to experience more positive feelings, whilst line managers appear to experience these positive emotions less frequently. This pattern repeats when we look at negative experiences of managers, with 55.7% of senior managers reporting they have felt rushed or pressed for time compared with 60.9% of line managers, and 41.4% of senior managers reporting they have felt nervous or stressed compared with 44.0% of line managers.

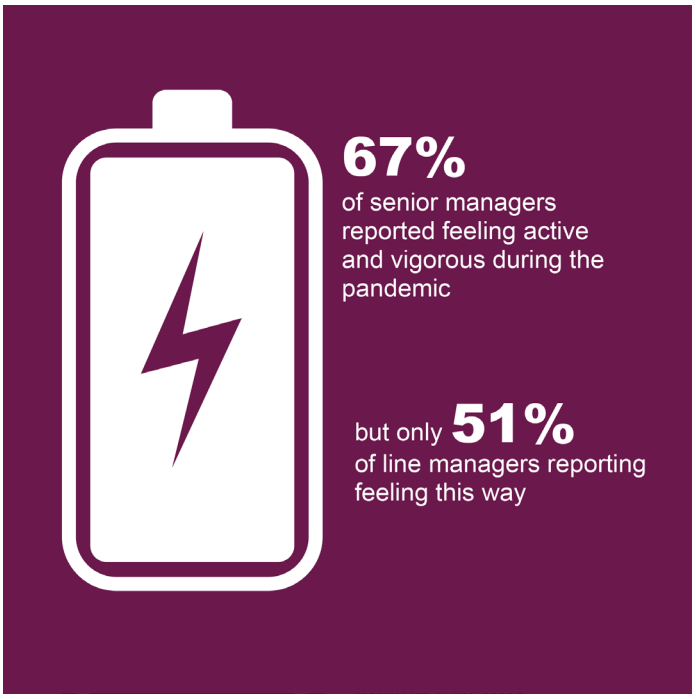
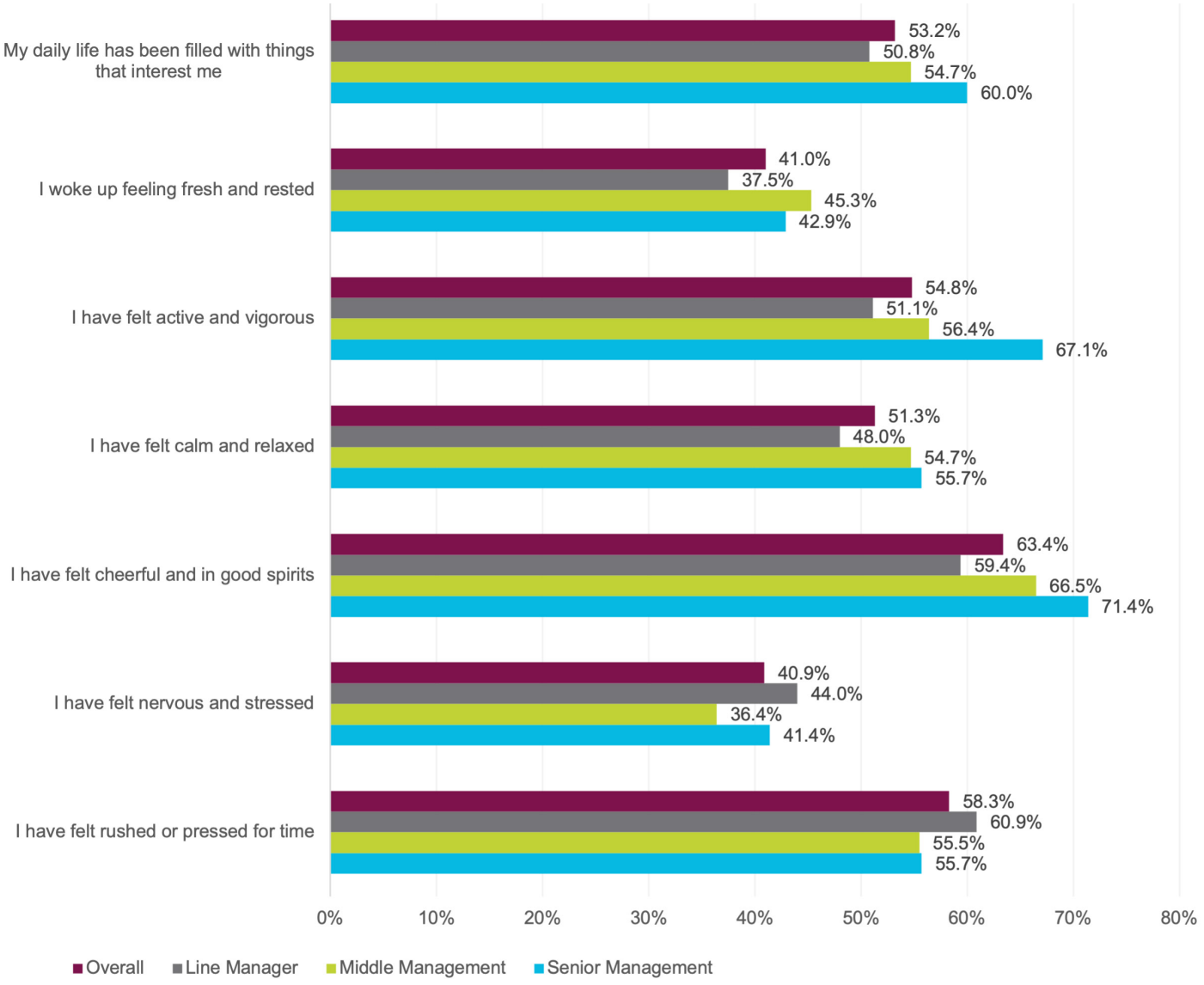


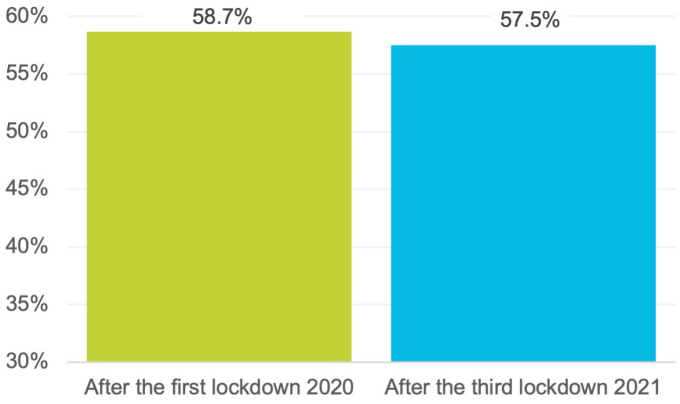
Figure 4: Percentage of managers agreeing with statements about their wellbeing by role



There were also some less positive managerial experiences of managing homeworkers during the COVID-19 lockdowns

Respondents identified several key negative consequences of managing employees working from home during lockdown. Following the 2021 lockdown 40.3% of managers believed that flexible working leads to isolation and 57.5% of managers believe that working from home leads to isolation. This has fallen slightly since the 2020 lockdown (Figure 5), demonstrating that issues with isolation and wellbeing may be decreasing as employees and managers acclimatise to working from home, processes are put in place to better support homeworkers as the country opens up following the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021.

Figure 5: Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing that working from home led to isolation



Support for parents and carers

Managers also provided data about how those with caring responsibilities, including parents, were supported in their organisations since the lockdowns. Figure 6 shows that overall only 46.0% of managers have received training or advice to help them support employees who need to balance work and caring responsibilities. Despite this, 85.7% of managers reported feeling confident in responding to the needs of employees with caring responsibilities.

As a means of addressing gender equality in the workplace, it is important that more fathers and men with caring responsibilities are supported. Phase one of the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project demonstrated that fathers were particularly likely to request flexible working in the future based on their experiences of working from home and caring for children during lockdown (Chung, Seo, Forbes and Birkett, 2020).

Figure 6: Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing to statements about supporting employees with caring responsibilities

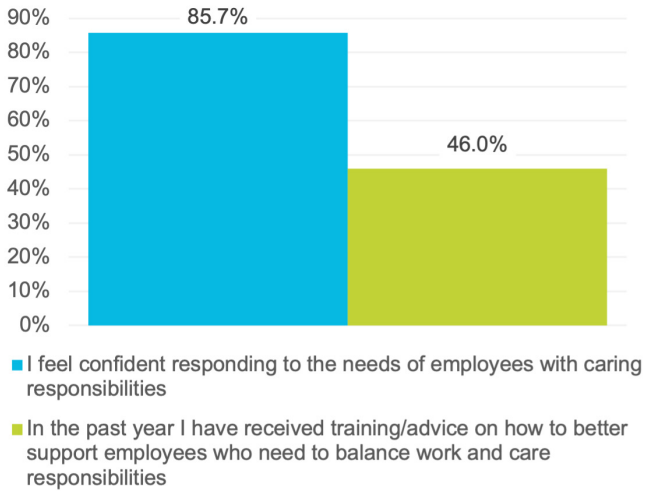
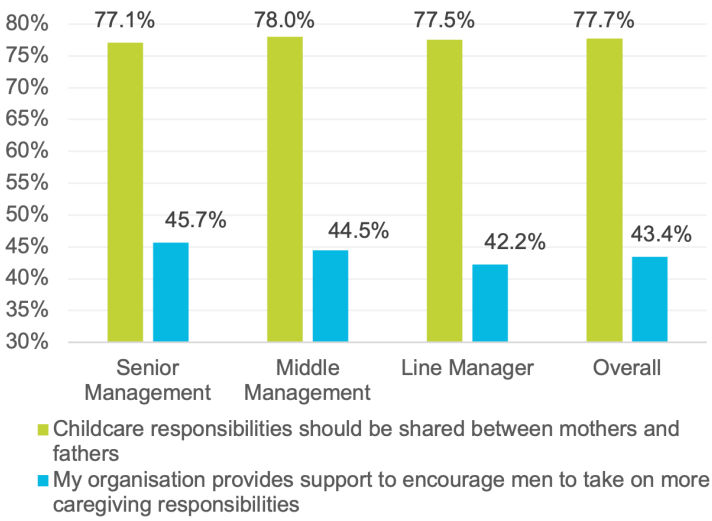


Figure 7 shows the percentage of managers within the 2021 sample who believe childcare responsibilities should be shared between mothers and fathers and whether their organisations provide support to encourage men to take on more caregiving responsibilities. The figure shows that a high percentage of managers believe childcare responsibilities should be shared, 77.5% of line managers surveyed agreed with this statement. The figure also suggests that organisations are beginning to support fathers or men with caring responsibilities in order to achieve this with 45.7% of senior managers believing their organisation provides support to do this. However, there is still a clear mismatch between managers view that caring responsibilities should be shared and organisations supporting fathers to take on more caring responsibilities.

Figure 7. Percentage of managers agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements on caring responsibilities by role



Managers changed their management style and practice throughout the pandemic

Managers also provided qualitative responses to questions around how their management styles have changed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key themes to arise from this data included providing feedback online, issues of health and wellbeing, changes to trust between employees and managers, and a greater awareness of work-life balance issues.

Managers discussed how they adapted the way they provided feedback to team members, including how they used technology and became increasingly aware of team member experiences while working from home, as demonstrated by the quote below:

> *"I have had to learn how to provide feedback over the phone or video call rather than face to face. I have become more understanding that people are in a difficult situation meaning I have had to adapt how I give feedback"*

Health and wellbeing was another key theme which came up in the managers' responses, with managers committing more time and attention to teams' health and wellbeing. Managers also discussed how they are less reliant on employees instigating conversations around health and wellbeing, and are becoming more aware of their teams' non-working needs, for example:

> *"[I have been] more proactive in checking in on others and ensuring everything is ok rather than relying on them coming to me"*

Trust was a prevalent theme amongst the qualitative responses, with managers detailing how they are now comfortable with employees working from home with little or no face-to-face contact or direct communication. Managers trust employees to act more independently and manage themselves, thus giving team members more responsibility. For example one manager argued:

> *"Due to working from home and no face-to-face and less direct communication, I am comfortable with and trust subordinates to use their own discretion when making some decisions without actively involving me."*

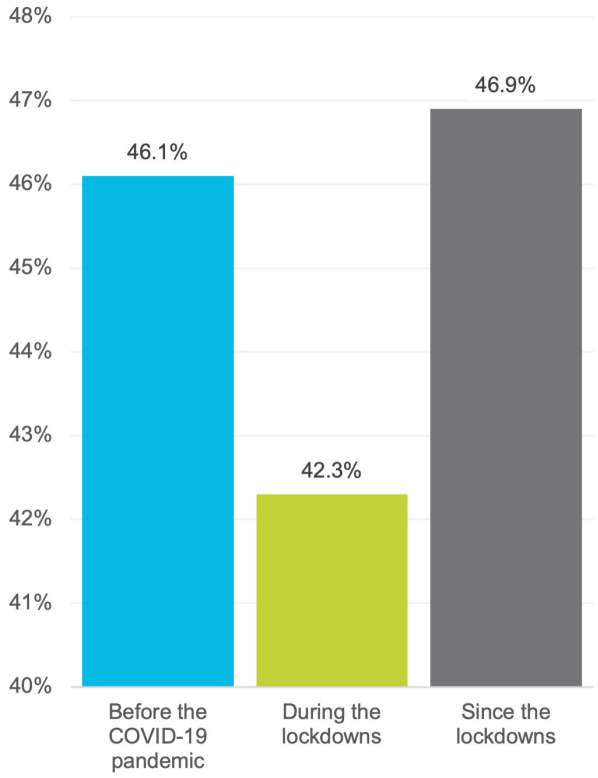
Finally, managers discussed how a greater awareness of work-life balance had developed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Managers feel better able to support their teams now that they have a greater insight into their personal circumstances as demonstrated by the quotes below:

> *"I would say it is more informed and I am able to support my team better now that I have an insight into their personal circumstances. I am probably more accommodating than before but [this] has not negatively impacted the team"*

Performance Feedback

The data is encouraging as we can see that the percentage of managers having performance feedback conversations at least once a week with their team or department has returned to levels higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that managers, now more than ever, are checking in with their teams and communicating with them about performance. However, in some cases this increase in frequency of communications with teams about performance could potentially indicate a lack of trust.

Figure 8: Percentage of managers reporting engaging/having engaged with members of their team/department to provide feedback on performance at least once a week

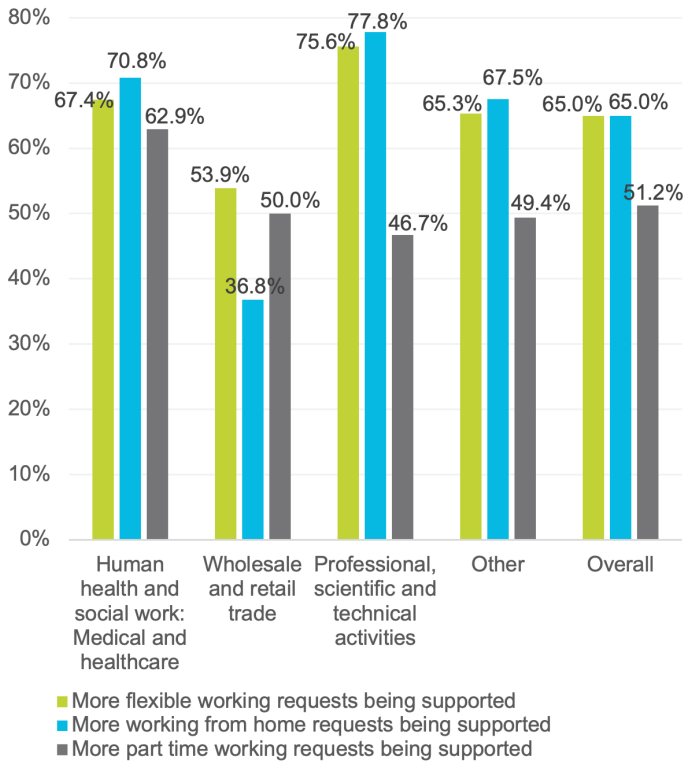


3 FUTURE PREFERENCES AND ATTITUDES TO HOMEWORKING AND FLEXIBLE WORKING

Managers will be more supportive of working from home and flexible working in the future

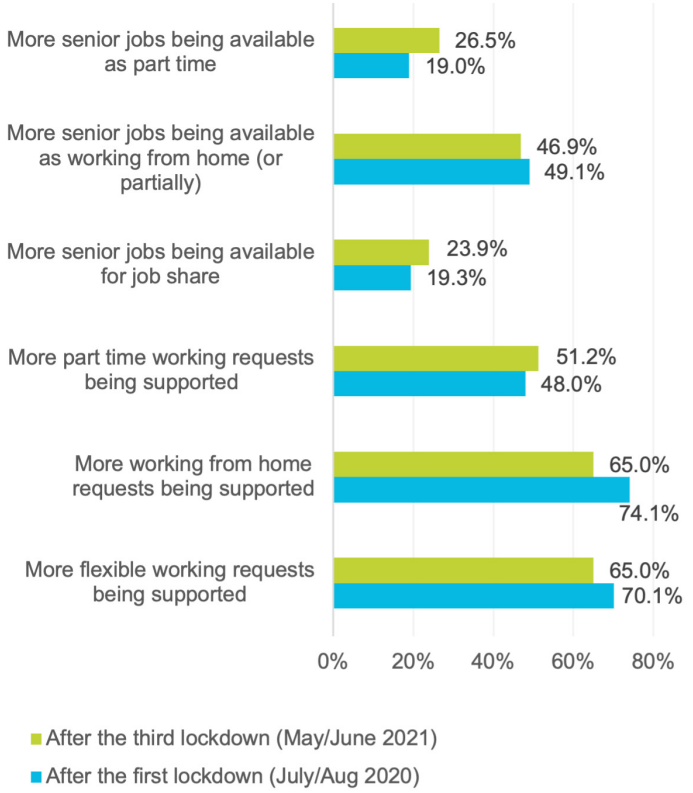
Managers are much more likely to support requests for flexible working across their organisations in the future, due to their positive experiences of managing homeworkers during lockdown. Figure 9 shows requests for flexible working, such as working from home, job sharing, and part-time working, are increasingly being supported. There are, however, some clear differences between industries. For example, requests to work part-time are more likely to be supported by Human Health and Social Work industries, whilst Professional, Scientific and Technical activities industries are more likely to support requests for flexible working or working from home.

Figure 9: Percentage of managers reporting organisations as supporting more flexible working requests in the future by industry



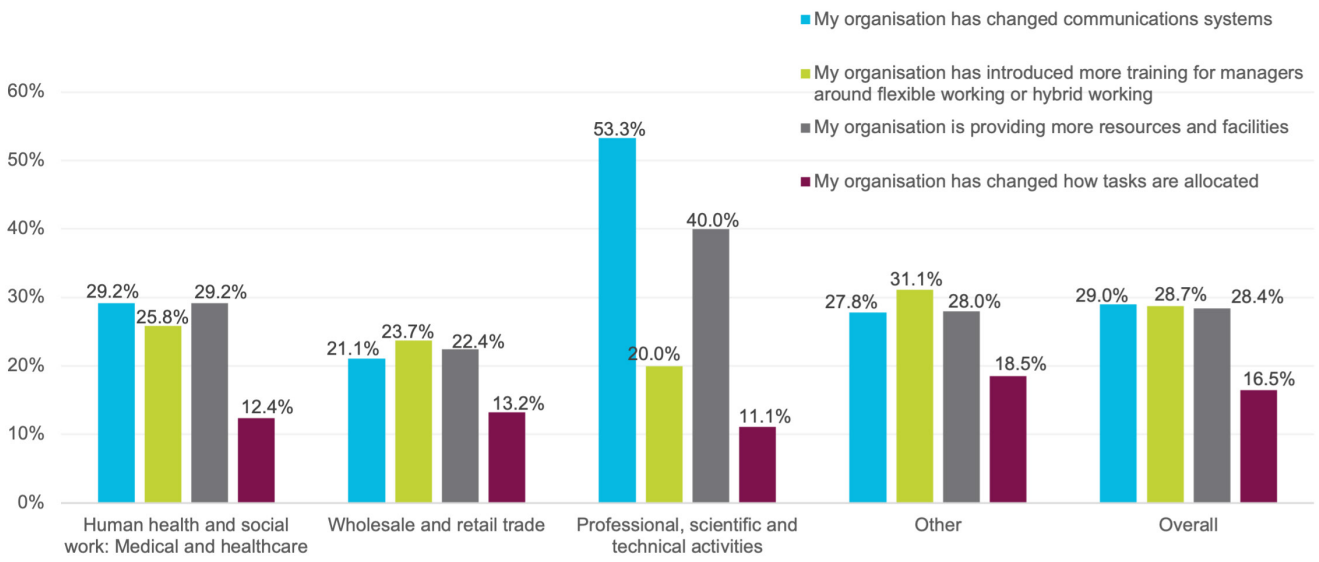
Phase one and phase two data show many more flexible working and working from home requests are being supported than before COVID-19. Figure 10 shows a slight decrease in the report of more requests being supported for flexible working and working from home generally between lockdown one and lockdown three, however, in the same period more part-time working requests are being supported, and crucially for senior women, more senior jobs are being made available for job share and part-time working. So, we begin to see a pattern where general support for homeworking has increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic and started to level out but support for other forms of flexible working, particularly for senior roles, continues to increase.

Figure 10: Percentage of managers reporting their organisation as being more supportive of different types of flexible working requests in the future



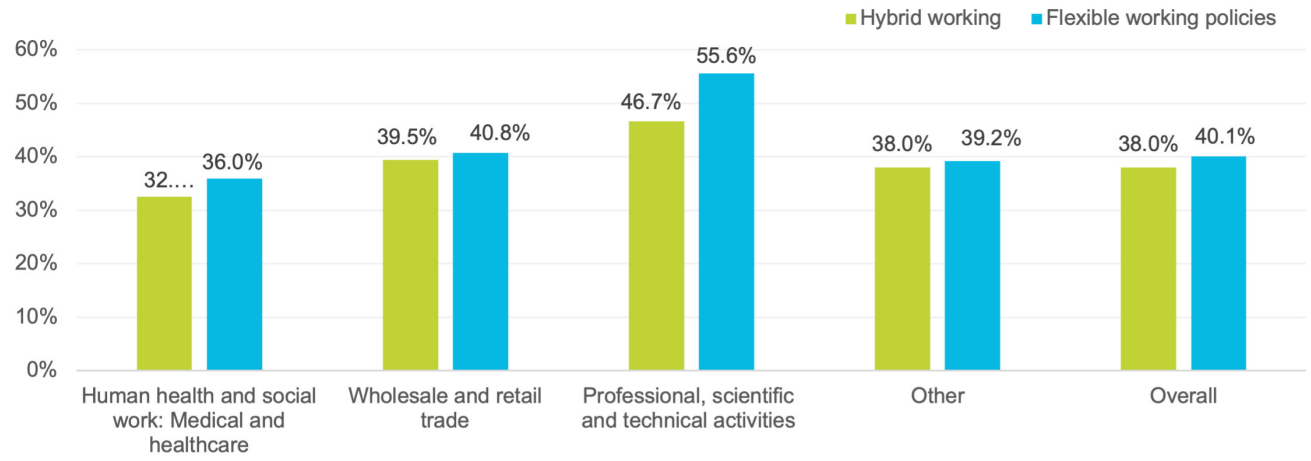
Managers were also asked if their organisations had made any changes to flexible working policies and practices, with the results shown in Figure 11. We can see that across a variety of industries, changes are being made to communication systems, training for managers on flexible or hybrid working is being introduced and organisations are providing greater numbers of resources and facilities. Changes are also being implemented as to how tasks are allocated, with the professional, scientific and technical activities industry seeing the greatest amount of change and investing heavily in communications systems and resources and facilities to support flexible working.

Figure 11: Percentage of managers reporting the changes made after reviewing their flexible working policies and practices[1] by industry



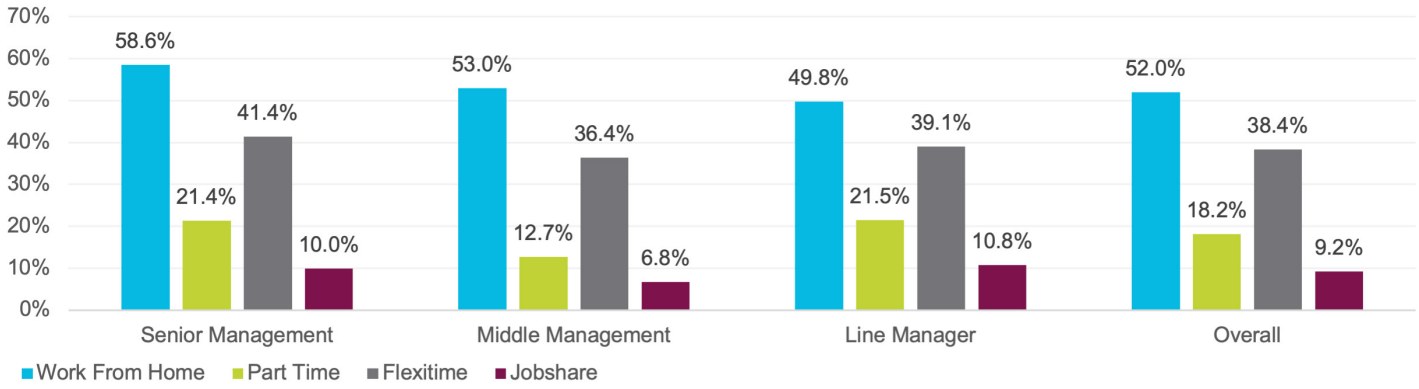
Managers also report receiving advice or training on how to better support employees making use of hybrid and flexible working across all industries, as seen in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Percentage of managers reporting receiving training or advice on how to better support employees using hybrid working and flexible working policies in the past year by industry



[1] Note: the percentage in the figure is of the total sample (n=631).

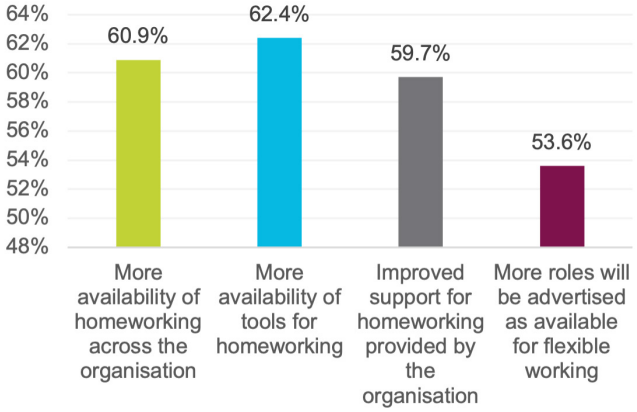
Figure 13: Percentage of managers reporting they are likely or very likely to apply to work using each form of flexible working in future by role



As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, more managers have worked flexibly which may influence their likelihood to apply for/continue to use the policies in the future. Figure 13 shows a high percentage of managers working at different levels in the organisation with the intention to continue working from home in the future (58.6% of senior managers and 52.0% of managers overall). Similarly, a high proportion of all managers intend to make use of flexi-time in the future (38.4% overall). Interestingly, 18.2% of managers overall report they are likely to apply to work part-time in the future which would mean a considerable change in working practice in the UK and potentially a change in terms of norms around flexible working. These results indicate that management's attitudes towards flexible working have changed and not only have their attitudes towards employees working flexibly changed, but also their attitudes towards their own working patterns.

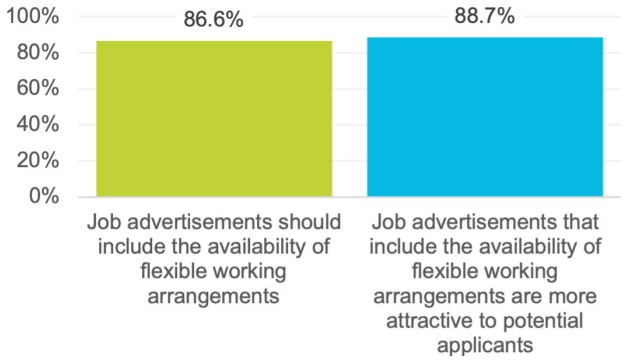
The managers surveyed indicated that working from home would be much better supported in the future with more jobs advertised as available for flexible working (53.6%), more availability of working from home (60.9%), more tools to support working from home (62.4%) and improved support for working from home by the organisation (59.7%) as shown in Figure 14. These figures have decreased since the lockdowns of 2020 by up to 10%. Despite this, it should be noted that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of homeworking and support for homeworking was relatively low and it is encouraging to see that these figures remain high despite a small decline over the pandemic.

Figure 14. Percentage of managers reporting their organisation as likely or very likely to make changes around flexible working/homeworking



An increased interest in flexible working has led many organisations to advertise the availability of flexible working in job advertisements. Figure 15 shows the percentage of managers who believe job advertisements should include the availability of flexible working (86.6%) making them more attractive to potential applicants (88.7%).

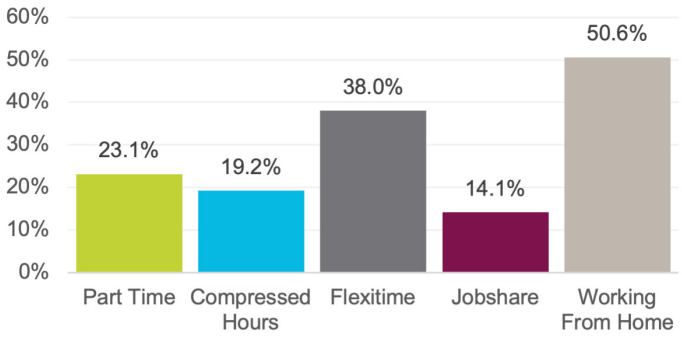
Figure 15: Percentage of managers reporting agreement to statements involving flexible working and job advertisements



Over 50%
of managers said the majority of their employees working home are doing so informally

Figure 16 shows that where staff are using flexible working policies they are very often doing this informally, particularly for working from home (50.6%) and flexitime (38.0%), but also for part-time working, compressed hours and job shares. It is noteworthy to see over 50% of managers reported the majority of employees working from home informally with no formal application made to the organisation, which suggests that employees are being allowed to work flexibly without having to make formal requests. This finding also highlights that, moving forward, organisations may not require formal approvals for employees to work more flexibly. However, this also potentially raises issues when employees return to work or change line managers and could lose the opportunity to work flexibly unless these arrangements are formalised.

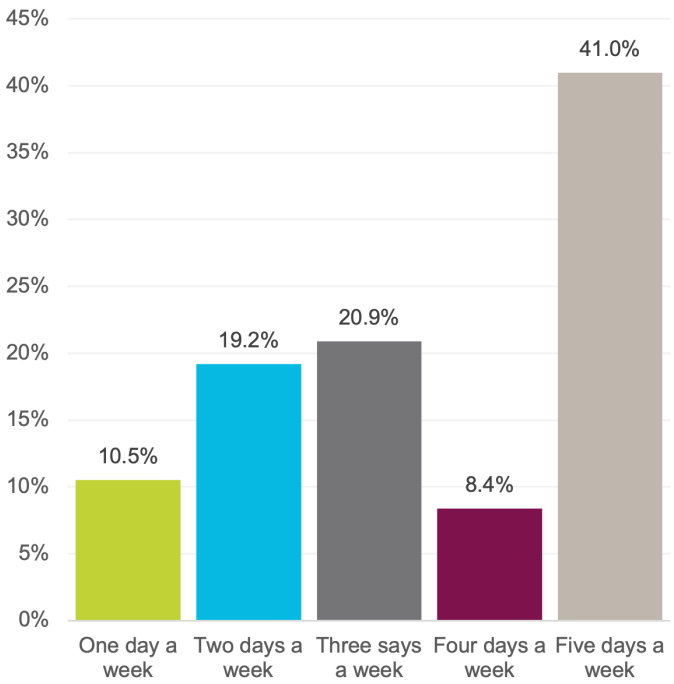
Figure 16: Percentage of managers reporting the majority of employees who have been working in this way have been doing so informally (no formal application made to the organisation) in the past six months



Organisations plan to repurpose office space

Many managers reported that they were not expecting staff to come back into the office five days a week and were downsizing or repurposing office space to take account of these longer-term changes in working practices. 59.0% of managers reported that they are expecting employees to be in the office fewer than five days a week once all COVID-19 restrictions are removed (see Figure 17). At the same time 32.8% reported their organisation planned to decrease their office space; 16.3% somewhat (between 1 and 19%) and 16.5% significantly (20% or more).

Figure 17: Percentage of managers reporting how many days per week, on average, their organisation is expecting employees to be in the office once all COVID-19 restrictions are removed

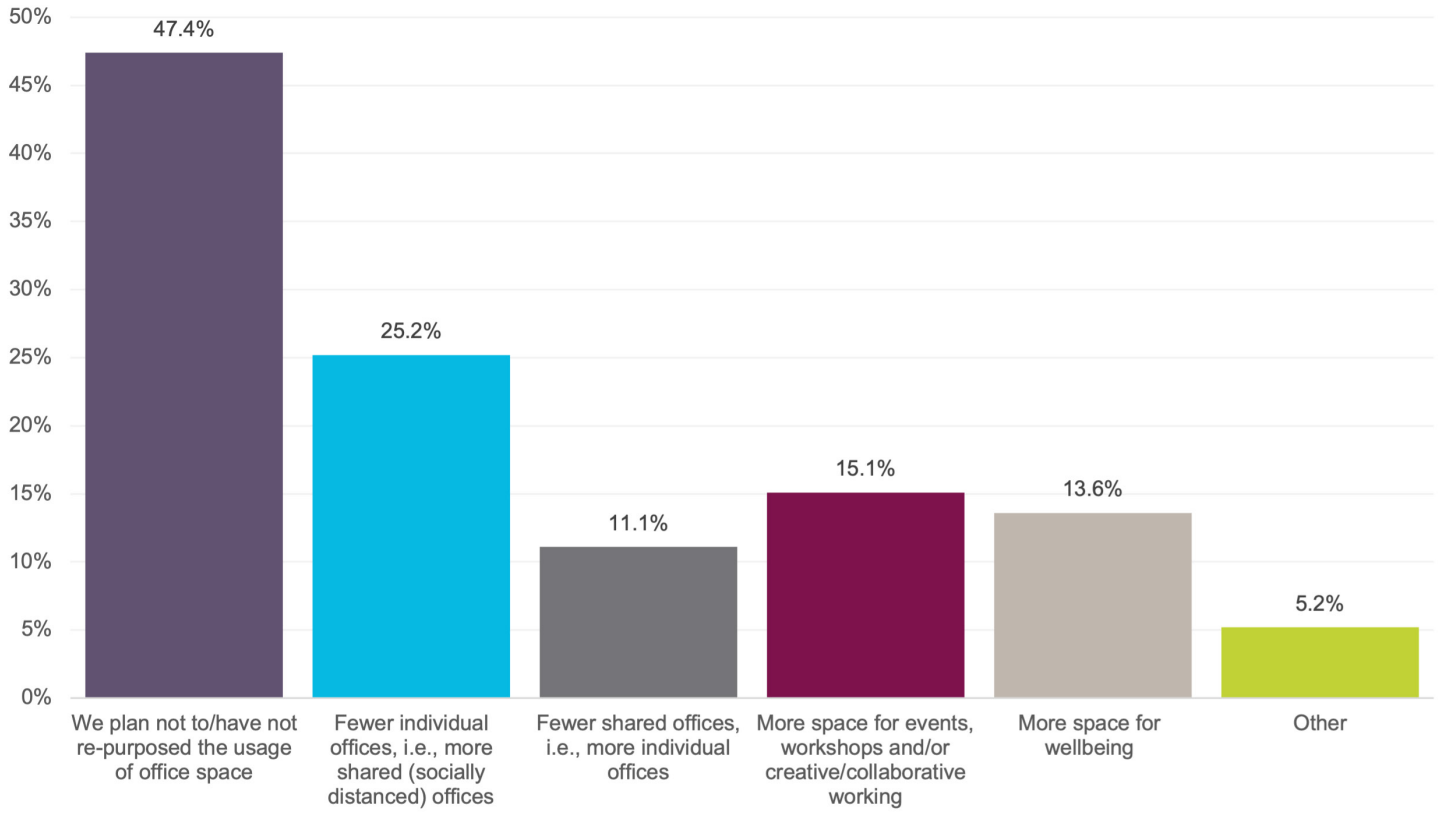


59%
of managers are expecting employees in fewer than 5 days a week

33%
of managers report their organisations are planning to decrease their office space

Managers also reported on how their remaining office space would be repurposed following COVID-19, with 25.2% reporting that there would be fewer individual offices, 11.1% reporting there would be fewer shared offices, 15.1% reporting more space for events/workshops, and 13.6% reporting more space would be made available for wellbeing (see Figure 18). These figures suggest organisations are planning for very different patterns of working following the COVID-19 pandemic. However, only 38.8% of managers reported their organisation as having conducted a consultation with employees about working preferences before making these decisions around the amount of office space available.

Figure 18: Percentage of managers reporting how the office space would be repurposed

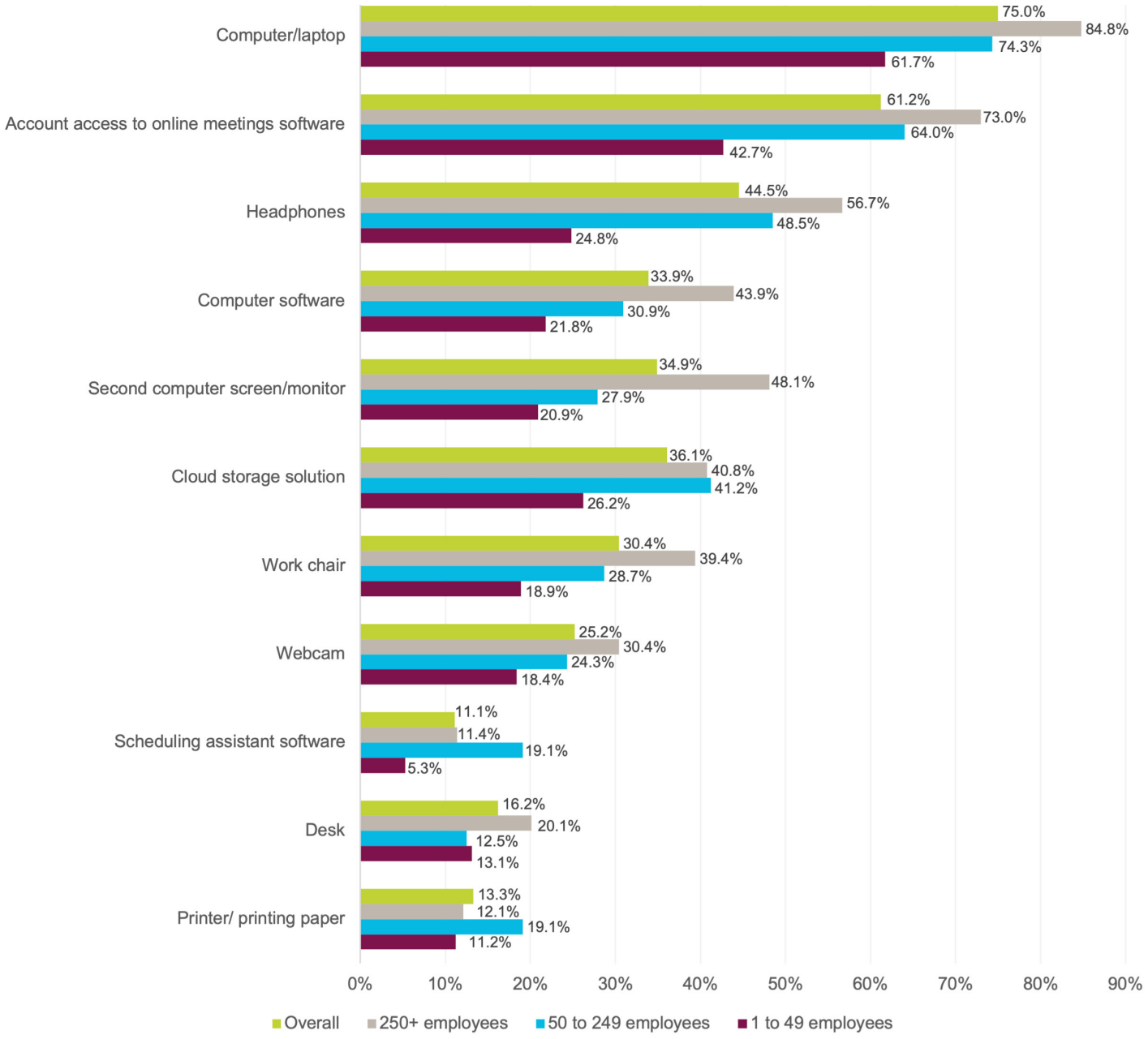


4 SUPPORTING FLEXIBLE WORKING

Many organisations are continuing to provide extra support for those working from home and working flexibly

Before the COVID-19 lockdowns, organisations generally supplied employees working from home with some tools to support them. Phase one of the Working From Home During COVID-19 Project showed that this increased during the first lockdown (Forbes, Birkett, Evans, Chung and Whiteman, 2020). Figure 19 shows a breakdown of tools provided to employees to assist them with home working before and since the third COVID-19 lockdown. The provision of a computer/laptop has remained high since phase one, with 75% of organisations providing these to employees compared to 80.6% in phase one. Similarly, 61.2% of organisations provided access to online meetings software in phase two, compared to 70.1.% in phase one. This data shows that technical support for employees to assist them with working from home has remained high throughout the pandemic.

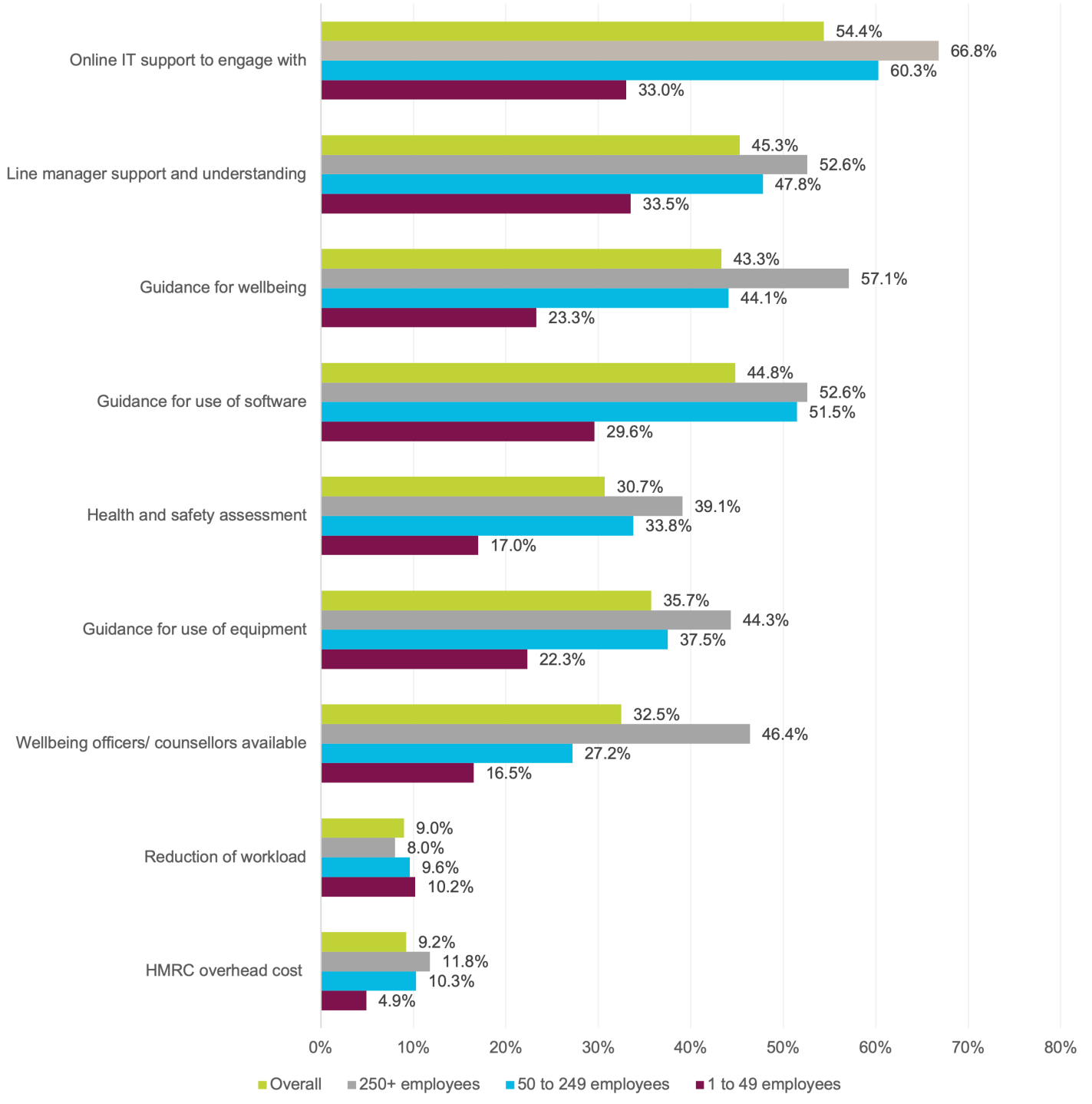
Figure 19: Percentage of managers reporting tools supplied by their organisation to employees to assist with working from home after the third COVID-19 lockdown by size of organisation (number of employees)



Other support was also offered to employees

Organisations provided a variety of other support to employees during the lockdown. Figure 20 shows large organisations provided the most support to employees, particularly software, guidance and support for wellbeing. This is likely indicative of the greater resources available in larger organisations. Overall, 32.5% of organisations provided wellbeing counsellors for staff and 43.3% of organisations provided guidance for wellbeing during lockdown. By comparison, in phase one, 36.3% of organisations provided wellbeing counsellors for staff and 55.7% of organisations provided guidance for wellbeing during lockdown. These results could be a reflection of managers seeing fewer communications by the organisation about wellbeing as a result of a move from mass homeworking to hybrid working.

Figure 20: Percentage of managers reporting their organisation as supplying support to employees since the COVID-19 lockdowns by organisation size (number of employees)



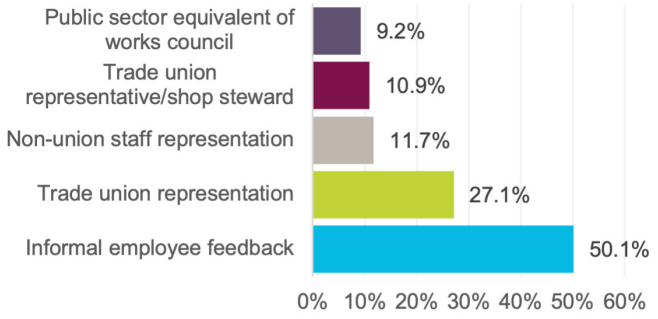
5 CONSULTATION AND SURVEILLANCE

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced ways of working but also processes of consultation, engagement and control.

Consultation

Figure 21 outlines the ways in which organisations have consulted with employees as a way of keeping an open conversation with staff generally over the past six months. The data shows us that organisations rely heavily on informal employee feedback, indicating that organisations engage directly and informally with employees for feedback rather than go through more formal channels such as Trade Union representatives.

Figure 21: Percentage of managers reporting whether their organisation has engaged with any of these methods of employee communication in the past six months



27%
of managers reported the use of surveillance and monitoring software

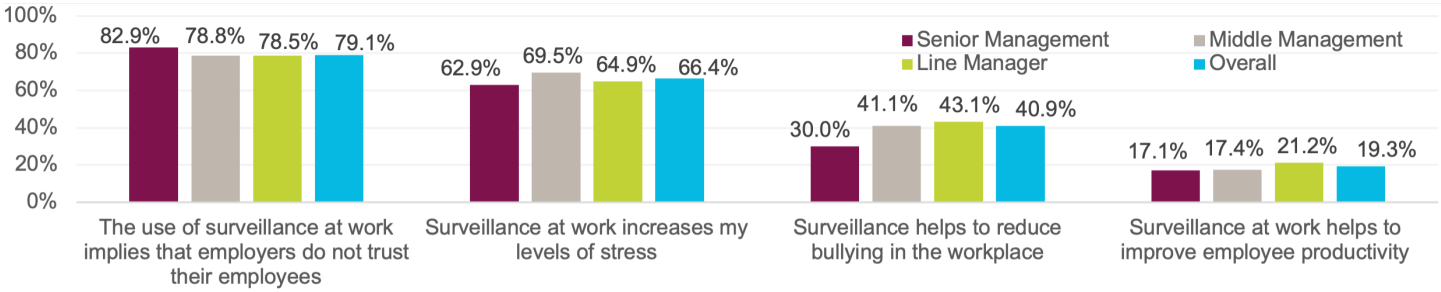
Use of surveillance and monitoring methods

Many organisations may have had surveillance methods in place pre-pandemic but with more employees working from home than ever before, organisations had to adapt quickly to this shift in working practices, and surveillance methods were either implemented or continued. Amongst the managers surveyed, 26.5% reported the use of software to monitor performance amongst employees.

When organisations do use surveillance, monitoring of staff emails and monitoring of staff using CCTV are the most common. Within the professional, scientific and technical activities industry, 35.6% of managers surveyed reported that their organisation uses the surveillance of emails to monitor employees and 60.0% of managers in that industry also believe that monitoring employee work emails, files and browser history is acceptable. Comparatively, in the wholesale and retail industries, where staff do not often have access or use employee email, the most common form of surveillance is monitoring through CCTV footage.

Managers believe that the use of surveillance at work implies that employers do not trust their employees, with 79.1% of managers surveyed agreeing with this statement (Figure 22). Managers also appear to find that the use of surveillance increases their stress levels, and this feeling is similar across all levels of management. Many managers, however, believe that surveillance can also help to reduce workplace bullying, with 40.9% of managers agreeing with this statement. Finally, managers do not appear to believe that surveillance at work helps to improve employee productivity with only 19.3% of managers agreeing with this statement.

Figure 22: Percentage of managers reporting agree or strongly agree to statements about surveillance by role



6 CONCLUSION

The Working From Home During COVID-19 Project, undertaken by the University of Birmingham and the University of Kent, is a longitudinal study of working from home throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is underpinned by research with employees working from home and managers managing staff working from home throughout COVID-19. Using this data the team have been able to map the changing experiences of both groups and resulting changes in attitudes and future intentions regarding flexible working. The data clearly shows that experiences of working from home during COVID-19 have been broadly positive and managers are expecting their organisations to encourage more flexible working in the future, even in senior roles, with hybrid working becoming increasingly popular. Managers have clearly been swayed by evidence and the experiences of supervising employees using flexible working policies themselves (Sweet, Pitt-Catsouphes, and James, 2017).

Many organisations are already implementing new hybrid working practices and have begun to repurpose or reduce office space in preparation. The initial picture here is positive considering how quickly employees in many industries have adapted to working from home, often resulting in increases in productivity, work-life balance, motivation and autonomy. This is combined with an increased interest in future flexible working from employees. COVID-19 has changed attitudes around flexible working and reduced flexible working stigma, creating the potential for more inclusive, more efficient workplaces. However, the current situation is precarious, with flexible working tied to the pandemic mainly in the form of informal work practices agreed with individual managers. As such, we cannot assume that these new attitudes and practices will continue when COVID-19 subsides.

Reflecting on the changes seen between phase one and phase two of this research project, it is encouraging to see that managers' attitudes towards flexible working and organisations' approaches to flexible working policies and practices remain positive. This suggests that organisations and managers intend to continue to support employees working flexibly and working from home in the future. However, this does not mean that all the barriers that created flexible working stigma have been resolved or that flexible working will be open to all in the future. Flexible working during this time has not been available to those on furlough or in front line roles and for the rest has been largely forced on companies by government guidelines, with much of the flexitime and other flexible working practices utilised during COVID-19 being done informally. Without formalisation, long-term acceptance and active support from organisations for a broad range of flexible working arrangements, the progress made on flexible working during the pandemic could be lost, particularly for men.

Some significant questions arise from this data regarding the future of work, inclusion and gender equality in the workplace. For example, how do we ensure all indusrties embrace the journey to more accessible flexible working and for jobs at all levels? How do we ensure the focus on productivity and flexible working doesn't lead to work intensification as people work through commuting times and find it difficult to switch off when working from home? Related to this, will employers expect the same level of productivity on days employees are in the office in the future, essentially extending commuters' workdays? In addition, how do we ensure new opportunities for flexible working are not only taken up by female carers, further gendering the concept of flexible working and creating a a two-tier workforce (Chung, Birkett, Forbes and Seo, 2021)? Importantly, what impact will these potential mass changes in working practices mean for town planning, city centre employment, public transport, road traffic, and the environment in the longer term? For example, while mass homeworking is arguably leading to fewer car journeys, working from home means increased use of gas and electric throughout the day in people's home which also has an impact on the environment. These are all potential questions that policymakers and employers need to consider, and we offer some recommendations to this effect below.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

It will be important to act quickly in order to entrench some of the pandemic related wins around flexible working highlighted throughout this report. To do this, industry, academics, policymakers and the third sector need to collaborate effectively to promote best practice and support the different stakeholders involved in creating long term sustainable change. Below are a series of recommendations to aide this process.

Recommendations for organisations/managers

1. Encourage the assumption that all jobs will be available for some form of flexible working by default and task managers with thinking about how flexible working may apply (for example, if working from home might not be appropriate in a role might flexitime of job shares be possible?)

2. Add information on flexible working in all job advertisements.

3. Organisations should put in place return to work discussions with employees and keep the lines of communications open to understand the needs and desires of employees and review these alongside operational demands in order to effectively plan office space and support.

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

5. Review flexible working policies ensuring they are not gendered and ensure appropriate provision of tools and support for flexible working.

6. Update performance management systems and promotion processes to be less focused on presenteeism and not disadvantage those working flexibly.

7. Think through the issue of formality vs informality of flexible working arrangements. Informality introduces real flexibility but can also lead to inconsistent practices across the company and people losing their flexible working arrangements if their manager or role changes.

8. Actively encourage more men, including senior men, to work flexibly and be vocal about this.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS CONT.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. Encourage companies with over 249 employees to report on use of flexible working as part of gender pay gap reporting.

2. Consider changing the onus around flexible working to employers providing a case as to why certain jobs should not be available for flexible working rather than employees providing a case for flexible working. Also, review flexible working being accessible from day one of employment.

3. Review employment law around flexible working to ensure it is fit for purpose with post COVID-19 hybrid working, including protections for those working flexibly.

4. Offer fathers more non-transferable caring leave after the birth or adoption of their children to encourage a more equal distribution of care and provide them with information about flexible working during this period.

5. Government should consider implications for environment, town centres and employment of changes of ways of working and reductions in office space.

6. More actively promote the HMRC scheme for reimbursing companies who pay their employees working from home overheads.

7. Conduct research into the practicalities and economic consequences of potential approaches such as a 4-day week. Also, explore the possibility of parental pay being available from day one of employment.

8. Develop a simple return to work module employers can use to support employees on their transition back to the workplace (not at home) post COVID-19 pandemic (recognising that some may not be returning for a while). Within this module emphasise the key business benefits of flexible working.

9. Support a campaign to promote flexible working in all industries and jobs, particularly amongst men, focusing on how jobs you would not expect can be done flexibly (e.g., construction, private social care, factory work etc).

10. Encourage employers to add information about flexible working to job adverts.

11. Encourage organisations (250+ employees) to make details of flexible working use in their organisation publicly available.

8 METHODOLOGY / ABOUT THE WORKING FROM HOME DURING COVID-19 PROJECT

The Working From Home During COVID-19 Project is a joint project by Dr Holly Birkett and Dr Sarah Forbes based at the University of Birmingham, and Dr Heejung Chung from the University of Kent. The project has received full ethics approval and was set up to understand what impact the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdowns and resulting mass working from home has had on working practices and to explore the likely implications for the future of work. So far, a total of three surveys have been undertaken, one employee survey and two manager surveys.

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.

The first manager survey (phase one) was undertaken amongst 742 managers from across the UK between the 24th July and 11th August in 2020. A full copy of the report on the findings from that survey can be found here. The survey 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 managers across the UK.

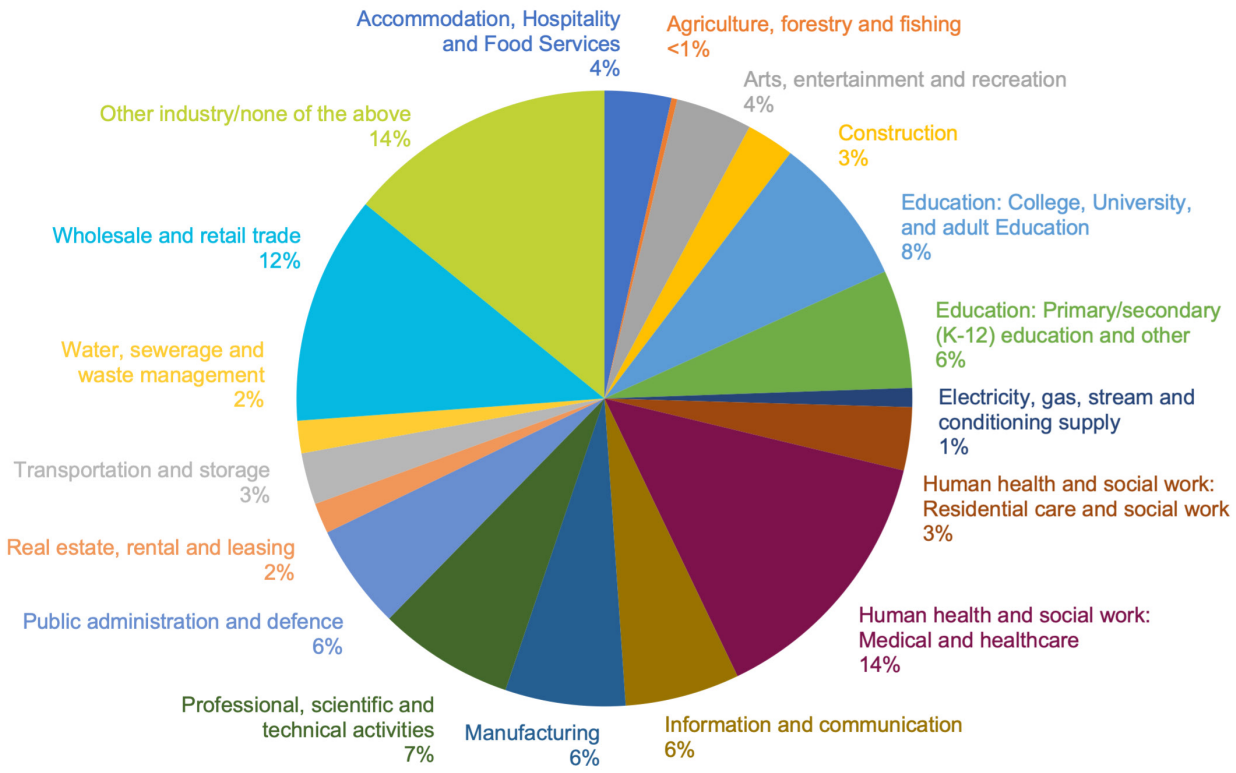
The managers' survey underpinning this report (phase two) asked managers about their experiences of managing employees working from home throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. It explored the impact of working from home on performance and managers' attitudes towards and preferences for flexible working in the future. The data was collected between 28th May and 12th June 2021. The goal was to investigate how managers have managed staff during the COVID-19 lockdown, working patterns, role of Trade Unions, experience and views toward surveillance and changing attitudes to homeworking and flexible working across organisations since the COVID-19 lockdown.

This report is based on the second manager survey. The survey was restricted to participants at least 18 years old, residing in the United Kingdom, in paid employment (not self-employed or on furlough) and those that were line managing staff. Non-probability sampling was used and a booster sample of under-represented groups was undertaken to gather a total of 631 completed survey responses. To gather this sample, we used the online survey panel company Prolific. Amongst the sample, 57.4% identified as female, 20.4% reported London and 15.2% reported the Midlands (England) as their normal work location outside of lockdowns. Respondents were from an array of industries, with 'Professional, scientific and technical activities' and 'Human Health and Social Work: Medical and Healthcare' making up 7.1% and 14.1% of the sample respectively (see Table 1 for profile of respondents). This sample presents valuable insights on the experiences of managers during the pandemic and their perceived intentions to support flexible working in the future.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

		Senior manager (n=70)	Middle manager (n=236)	Line manager (n=325)	Overall (n=631)
Gender	% Female	47.1%	55.9%	60.6%	57.4%
Age	% aged under 40	52.9%	59.7%	69.8%	64.2%
Ethnicity	% Non-White	27.1%	22.5%	16.9%	20.1%
Size of organisation (employees)	1 to 49 employees	42.9%	29.2%	32.9%	32.6%
	50 to 249 employees	18.6%	24.6%	20.0%	21.6%
	250+ employees	38.6%	46.2%	47.1%	45.8%
Industry	Human health and social work: Medical and healthcare	4.3%	14.8%	15.7%	14.1%
	Wholesale and retail trade	10.0%	8.5%	15.1%	12.0%
	Professional	8.6%	7.6%	6.5%	7.1%
	Other	77.1%	69.1%	62.8%	66.7%
Gender makeup of the organisation	Mostly women	28.6%	26.7%	32.9%	30.1%
	Mostly men	27.1%	21.6%	23.7%	23.3%
	About half women and half men	44.3%	50.0%	41.5%	45.0%
Gender makeup of senior management	Less than half are women (0-39%)	45.7%	57.6%	55.4%	55.2%
	More than half are women (60-100%)	30.0%	23.3%	24.0%	24.4%
	About half are women (40-59%)	24.3%	19.1%	20.6%	20.4%
Normal location of work outside of lockdown	London	20.0%	25.0%	17.2%	20.4%
	South East England	14.3%	13.1%	14.8%	14.1%
	South West England	8.6%	5.5%	9.2%	7.8%
	East Midlands	8.6%	5.1%	8.9%	7.4%
	West Midlands	4.3%	11.4%	5.8%	7.8%
	Yorkshire and The Humber	11.4%	6.4%	9.8%	8.7%
	North East England	7.1%	3.0%	4.3%	4.1%
	North West England	8.6%	10.2%	10.5%	10.1%
	Wales	5.7%	5.9%	5.8%	5.9%
	Scotland	7.1%	11.9%	11.1%	10.9%
	Northern Ireland	4.3%	2.5%	2.5%	2.7%

Figure 23. Percentage of respondents by industry



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The Working From Home During COVID-19 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 Working From Home During COVID-19 Project is made up of two distinct but complementary packages of work, one covering employees' experiences of homeworking during 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:

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