



# FLEXIBLE WORKING: A TALENT IMPERATIVE

A RESEARCH STUDY INTO THE UK WORKFORCE:  
WHO WANTS FLEXIBILITY, FOR WHAT REASONS,  
AND HOW MUCH IT MATTERS TO THEM

# INTRODUCTION

This research by Timewise indicates phenomenal demand for permanent jobs that offer flexible working options. It highlights that to stay ahead in the race for talent, employers need to make it a key part of their benefits package. By doing so they will more easily attract the 63% of full-time employees who already work flexibly, and also the 93% of non-workers who would prefer to get a part-time or flexible job – many of whom are locked out of the workplace by the scarcity of advertised flexible jobs.

## UNIVERSAL DEMAND FOR FLEXIBILITY

Men as well as women, young and old alike, are crying out for flexible working. The evidence is overwhelming that it is no longer a women's childcare issue – in fact, childcare is cited as a reason for working flexibly by only around 3 in 10 respondents.

## RECRUITMENT MARKET IS OUT OF STEP

In sharp contrast to the high demand for flexibility, fewer than 1 in 10 'quality jobs' (permanent roles paid more than £20,000 FTE) are advertised with options for flexible working<sup>1</sup>. The imbalance between the demand for flexible working (87% of full-time UK employees either work flexibly or would like to) and the availability of flexible jobs at the point of hire (9.8%) continues to cause a bottleneck in the talent market, blocking career progression and job mobility for millions of people who need to work flexibly. For example, a previous research study by Timewise<sup>2</sup> has shown that 1.5 million people are trapped in low-paid, part-time jobs below their skill level, because they can't find an appropriate new job with the working pattern they need.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'FLEXIBLE WORKING'?

Flexible working means different things to different people. Our research focuses on the following types of flexibility, which are generally seen as favourable for the employee:

- Flexible working hours (sometimes called 'flexi-time')
- Working from home or remotely (for some or all of the working week)
- Shift work (with the ability to choose favourable shifts)
- Term time or seasonal work
- Part-time hours

Our respondents included full-time workers who might be working flexibly now (or not), and may have told us they would prefer to work part-time or to work full-time but with flexibility in their working pattern.

1. Source: Timewise Flexible Jobs Index, 2017

2. Source: How Flexible Hiring Could Improve Business Performance and Living Standards, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016 (Research conducted by Timewise)

# KEY FINDINGS



# 87%

OF ALL FULL-TIME  
EMPLOYEES EITHER  
WORK FLEXIBLY ALREADY,  
OR SAY THEY WANT TO

## OTHER KEY FINDINGS

# 63%

OF FULL-TIME  
EMPLOYEES ALREADY  
WORK FLEXIBLY IN  
SOME WAY.

THE PREFERENCE FOR  
FLEXIBLE WORKING  
IS STRONG FOR BOTH  
SEXES:

# 84%

OF MALE FULL-TIME  
EMPLOYEES EITHER  
WORK FLEXIBLY  
ALREADY, OR SAY THEY  
WANT TO. FOR WOMEN  
THIS RISES TO 91%.

YOUNGER WORKERS  
WANT IT MOST:

# 92%

EITHER WORK FLEXIBLY  
OR SAY THEY WANT TO.

AMONGST THE DIFFERENT  
TYPES OF FLEXIBLE  
WORKING PATTERNS,

# 1 IN 4

(25%) OF ALL FULL-TIME  
EMPLOYEES WOULD  
SPECIFICALLY PREFER  
TO WORK PART-TIME FOR  
PART-TIME WAGES.

# 93%

OF NON-WORKERS WHO  
WANT A JOB WOULD  
PREFER TO WORK EITHER  
PART-TIME, OR FLEXIBLY  
IN A FULL-TIME ROLE.

AMONGST SELF-  
EMPLOYED PEOPLE

# 89%

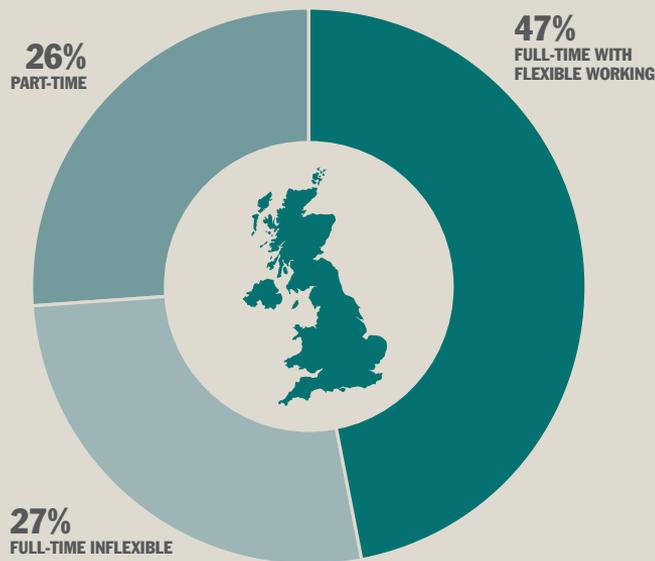
WORK FLEXIBLY.

**REASONS FOR  
WANTING TO  
WORK FLEXIBLY**

PEOPLE ARE MOST  
LIKELY TO SAY THEY  
WANT TO WORK FLEXIBLY  
FOR WORK/LIFE  
BALANCE, OR BECAUSE  
IT IS GENERALLY USEFUL  
OR CONVENIENT. OTHER  
KEY REASONS INCLUDE  
COMMUTING ISSUES,  
LEISURE OR STUDY  
INTERESTS, AND CARING  
RESPONSIBILITIES.

# WHO WORKS FLEXIBLY ALREADY?

## UK EMPLOYEE WORKING PATTERNS



ONS data tells us that 26% of UK employees work part-time while 74% work full-time.<sup>3</sup> This Timewise study finds that, amongst full-time workers, 63% work flexibly in some way while 37% have no flexibility in their working pattern. The resulting calculation from these statistics is that only 27% of all UK employees (full-time and part-time combined) work a traditional full-time pattern with no form of flexibility.

## FLEXIBLE WORKING INCREASINGLY 'THE NORM' FOR CURRENT UK EMPLOYEES

Our research suggests that most employers offer flexible working to their people, and that it is extremely popular. More than 6 in 10 full-time employees (63%) already access flexible working.

Moreover, the use of flexible working tends to be official: amongst those full-time employees who work flexibly, 6 in 10 say their flexible pattern is part of their contract (60%), while it's an informal agreement for only 4 in 10 (40%).

The three most common forms of flexibility are: flexible working hours (used by 29% of full-time employees), an element of home-working (26%), and favourable shift patterns (21%).

## SELF-EMPLOYED PEOPLE CHOOSE FLEXIBILITY

Flexible working is, unsurprisingly, even more prevalent amongst the self-employed people surveyed: 89% work flexibly in some way and more than half (57%) cite work/life balance as a reason why they decided to work for themselves.

# WHO WANTS TO WORK FLEXIBLY?

Amongst the minority of full-time workers (37%) who do not currently work flexibly in any way, 64% would prefer to (including those who would prefer to work part-time). Overall, this research found that 87% of all full-time employees either work flexibly already, or say they want to. Specifically, a staggering 1 in 4 (25%) of all full-time workers would prefer to work part-time for part-time wages, if it didn't affect their pay per hour or career progression.

## MEN AS WELL AS WOMEN



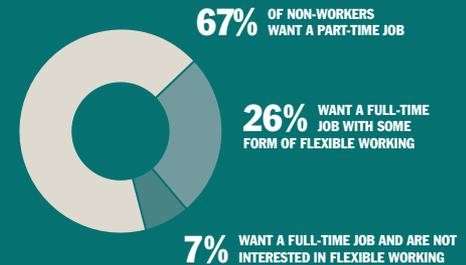
The preference for flexible working is strong amongst both men and women. 84% of male full-time workers and 91% of female full-time workers either currently work flexibly, or want to.

## YOUNGER WORKERS ARE THE MOST KEEN



Younger people are the most likely to want to work flexibly. Amongst full-time workers, flexibility is either used or wanted by 92% of 18-34 year olds; 88% of 35-54 year olds; 72% of those aged 55+.

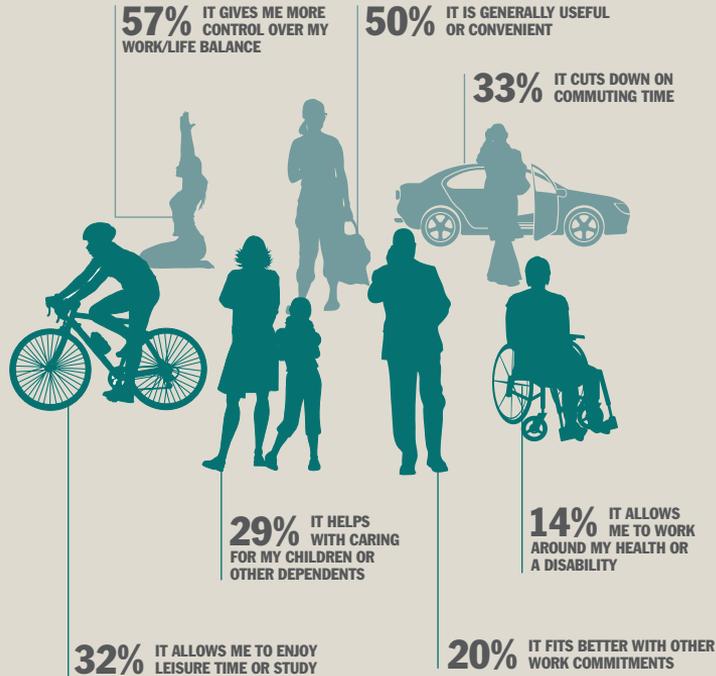
## NON-WORKERS SEEK FLEXIBILITY



Amongst people who are not working but want to work, 67% would prefer to work part-time. Amongst the 33% who want a full-time job, 79% would like to be able to work flexibly. The resulting calculation from these statistics is that only 7% of non-workers would prefer a traditional full-time job with no form of flexibility.

# WHY DO PEOPLE WANT FLEXIBLE WORKING?

## REASONS CITED BY FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES WHO CURRENTLY WORK FLEXIBLY



## BROAD RANGE OF REASONS DRIVE THE PREFERENCE FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING

Amongst full-time employees who work flexibly, the most popular two reasons are generic – work/life balance (cited by 57% of the sample) and general convenience (50%). Many people additionally or alternatively cite a more personal reason, three of which have similar importance – commuting issues (33%), leisure or study commitments (32%), and caring responsibilities (29%). Fitting with other work commitments is also an issue for some (20%), while 14% cited health or disability.

## DIFFERENCES BY AGE GROUP

Some reasons to work flexibly differ significantly by age group:

- 18-34 year olds are more likely than other age groups to cite leisure/study (37% vs. 27% amongst 35-54 year olds) or childcare (33% vs. 17% 55+).
- 35-54 year olds are more likely than other age groups to cite commuting time (37% vs. 28% 55+).
- Those aged 55+ are much more likely than younger people to select the generic reasons of work/life balance (66% vs. 54% 18-34) and general convenience (66% vs. 45% 18-34).

## GENDER DIFFERENCES

Interestingly, there is no significant difference in the reasons cited by men and women who work flexibly in a full-time job. This is true even of childcare, cited by 28% of men and 29% of women. (However, gender differences do emerge amongst part-time workers – see below).

## FLEXIBILITY IS NOT JUST A CHILDCARE ISSUE, EVEN AMONGST PART-TIME WORKERS

As seen above, childcare is not the most common reason for working flexibly, and this is true even when it comes to choosing to work part-time. Only 35% of part-time workers who would prefer to continue working part-time cite caring responsibilities as a reason for this, compared to 36% citing general convenience, 40% wanting to enjoy leisure time or study and 48% citing work/life balance.

However, there is a marked gender divergence in the motivations of part-time workers: 42% of female part-time employees cite caring responsibilities as a reason, compared to only 17% of men.

# WHAT'S THE STRENGTH OF FEELING?

PEOPLE GIVING A HIGH OR VERY HIGH VALUE TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

70%

PART-TIME EMPLOYEES WHO WANT TO CONTINUE WORKING PART-TIME

71%

FLEXIBLE FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES

77%

PART-TIME EMPLOYEES WHO WANT TO WORK FLEXIBLY

Flexibility is not just a 'nice to have' – people attach great value to it. In all groups of respondents who work or want to work flexibly, more than two thirds rated it as being of high or very high importance to them, or as being highly/very highly beneficial. Other studies have also indicated the strength of feeling around flexible working – for example, according to the Scottish Widows think tank, the Centre for Modern Families, 23% of UK workers would be willing to take a pay cut in order to have more flexible working hours<sup>4</sup>.

4. Source: Centre for Modern Families report (Feb 2016): Supporting Families in the Workplace

# IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

## BUSINESS IMPERATIVE TO HAVE A PROACTIVE STRATEGY FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING

This research finds that the UK appetite for flexible working has been grossly underestimated. The proportion of full-time workers who are already working flexibly (63%) far surpasses previous estimates, let alone the proportion of people who would prefer to (87%).

The research also confounds the idea that flexible working is only of business interest as a solution to diversity and inclusion problems. It may well help to solve those problems, but the demand for flexible working goes much further - cutting across all ages and genders.

To attract the best talent, it is clearly no longer sufficient to have a flexible working policy in place, offering flexibility only to existing employees on request. Employers must build a proactive flexible working strategy that makes it part of 'the norm', and opens it up to all employees equally, rather than targeting it at specific groups.

5. Source: Timewise Flexible Jobs Index, 2017

6. Source: The Flexibility Trap, Timewise, 2013 found that 52% of job applicants are nervous to ask about flexible working and that 42% fear that asking would damage their chance of getting the job.

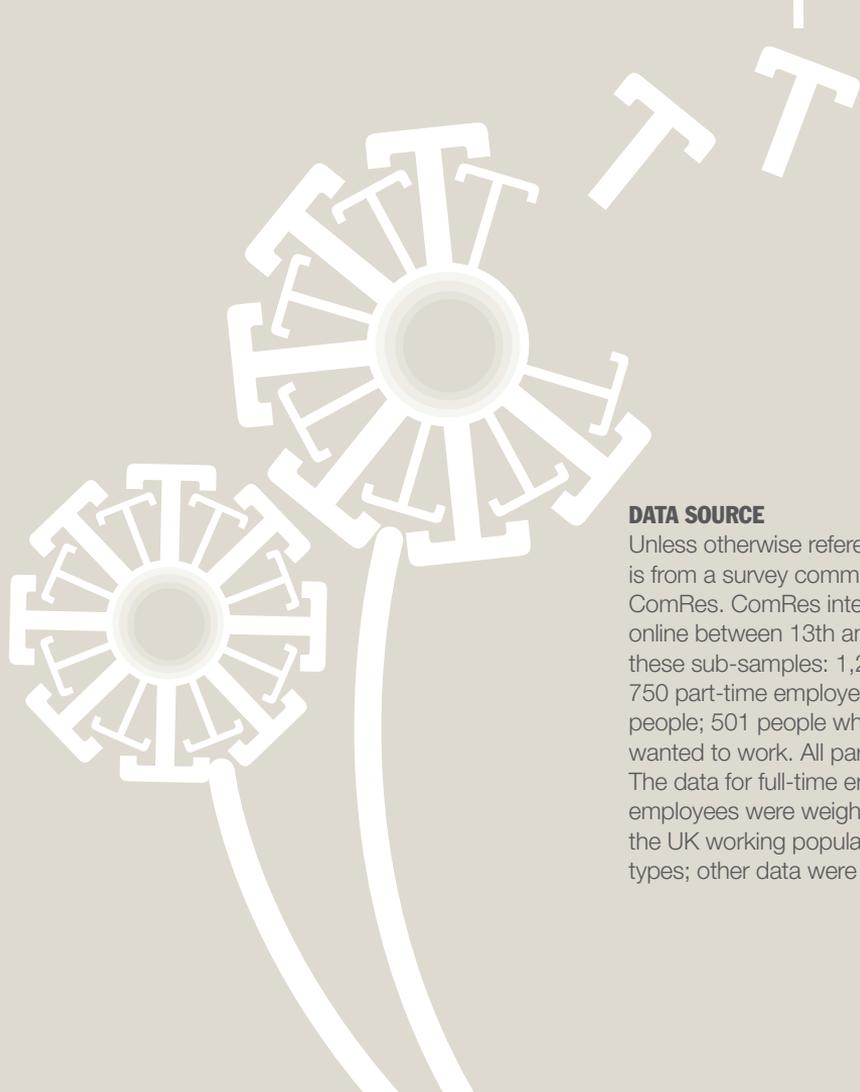
7. Source: How Flexible Hiring Could Improve Business Performance and Living Standards, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016 (Research conducted by Timewise)

## OFFER FLEXIBLE WORKING IN THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

When 87% of UK employees either work flexibly already, or would prefer to, it makes no sense at all that fewer than 1 in 10 job adverts offer flexible working as an employee benefit<sup>5</sup>. Candidates who need flexibility are worried about applying for roles that don't specifically mention it<sup>6</sup>.

The result is that many excellent candidates get stuck in their flexible jobs, preferring to stay in place even if it means they miss out on career progression. The impact of down-skilling is huge – for example, 1.5 million people are trapped in low-paid, part-time jobs below their skill level, because they can't find an appropriate new job with the working pattern they need<sup>7</sup>.

'Flexible hiring' is lagging far behind the take-up of flexible working in the UK. Greater transparency is urgently needed in job adverts, followed through with much more open conversations around flexible working during the recruitment process.



#### **DATA SOURCE**

Unless otherwise referenced, all data in this report is from a survey commissioned by Timewise from ComRes. ComRes interviewed 3,001 UK adults online between 13th and 26th June 2017. Within these sub-samples: 1,250 full-time employees; 750 part-time employees; 500 self-employed people; 501 people who were not working but wanted to work. All participants were aged 18+. The data for full-time employees and for part-time employees were weighted to be representative of the UK working population for those employment types; other data were unweighted.



Timewise works to unlock the flexible jobs market in the UK. We share market insights on flexible working and flexible hiring, deliver training and consultancy to help businesses attract and develop the best talent, and conduct research such as this report and our annual Flexible Jobs Index. We also run Timewise Jobs, a jobs board for roles that are part-time or open to flexibility.

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