

VOICES FROM THE PANDEMIC: PART-TIME WORKERS AND JOB SEEKERS

FAIR FLEXIBLE FUTURES #2

A qualitative research report

November 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, supported by Trust for London, sets out to understand the impact of the pandemic on part-time workers. It builds on the quantitative data from our first Fair Flexible Futures report, using qualitative research to explore the lived experiences of those who have been directly affected.

AREAS FOR EXPLORATION

- The challenges and issues part-time workers and job seekers were facing before the pandemic.
- The impact of the pandemic on part-time workers' and job seekers' working lives.
- Suggestions on how the recovery can address the issues part-time workers are now facing.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Most participants experienced challenges with working part-time even before the pandemic. These included one or more of the following:

- Having to take a job which did not fully utilise their skills or where the pay was not commensurate with their skill levels.
- Feeling themselves to be less valued by their organisation than their full-time colleagues.
- Having to accept flexible work arrangements which were felt to benefit the organisation more than themselves.
- Not being able to secure flexible work that met their own needs, either because their employer had denied their request, or they had been reluctant to ask.

2. The pandemic has amplified the difficulties faced by those who need to work part-time, in the following ways:

- Job seeking is reportedly tougher than ever, with fewer jobs being advertised as part-time – especially higher-paid and skilled roles – and more competition for available jobs.
- This serves as an even greater deterrent to job seekers asking about part-time options where it hasn't been explicitly mentioned in the vacancy.
- Additionally, a number of participants' experiences imply higher levels of precarity, and greater risk of poor treatment from employers, for part-time workers during the pandemic.
- The consequence of this is that many may be forced out of their current employment or even out of the labour market, and the value of their skills lost.

3. In order to effect positive change, participants believe that:

- Those making hiring decisions need to shift their mindset to acknowledge the benefits that part-time working can bring for both employers and employees.
- This will require greater managerial understanding and capabilities with respect to part-time job design.
- A more receptive environment for part-time working should be created by strengthening employee rights, such as changing the law to allow candidates to ask for flexible working from day one (rather waiting until after 26 weeks).

It is felt that such changes will help normalise part-time working requests within the workplace.

ACTIONS FOR CHANGE

Through our Fair Flexible Futures campaign, our Fair Flexible Work in Scotland programme, and our wider consultancy and social impact work, we are tackling these issues by:

- Lobbying for a legal requirement for employers to consider whether roles can be made flexible before they are advertised, in addition to giving employees the right to ask from day one.
- Training hiring managers to design and deliver flexible roles, particularly within hard-to-flex sectors, or those in which part-time has not traditionally been available, as there are more barriers to overcome.
- Equipping intermediaries to change hiring practices.

We are clear that we cannot afford to let the millions of people who can only work part-time fall through the cracks, and invite interested parties to join us as we work to create Fair Flexible Futures.

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01 INTRODUCTION

Since March 2020, a workplace revolution has taken place. Pandemic-enforced lockdowns have triggered a huge uplift in remote working, which appears to be here for the long term; at the time of writing, large numbers of employees who previously worked in offices remain home-based, and many companies are offering hybrid working arrangements for their teams.

But while much has been written about the move towards **location-based flexible working** – that is, people working from home or in other off-site locations – there has been little, if any, attention given to **time-based flexible working**, particularly part-time. Put simply, the voices of people who cannot work full-time, and their experiences during and after the pandemic, are not being heard.

This report sets out to remedy this omission; to listen to the experiences of part-time workers and job seekers, and understand how the pandemic has impacted them. It builds on the quantitative data from our first Fair Flexible Futures report, providing real-life insights that will help employers, policymakers and labour market intermediaries drive more inclusive policy and practice.

BACKGROUND

There is some evidence that people in part-time jobs have been particularly at risk during the pandemic.¹ In fact, there has been a drop off in almost all forms of flexible working (with the exception of remote working) including job share, flexi-time, compressed hours, part-time hours and term-time jobs.² Overall, only one in four (26%) of advertised jobs in 2021 included flexible working options and a very small minority (10%) were part-time.³

And women have been disproportionately affected by these changes. While falling employment among men during the pandemic was driven by full-time self-employed workers, among women it has been

concentrated among part-time workers.⁴

Specifically, as women have taken on most of the burden of additional childcare during the pandemic, they are more likely than men to have lost work or hours; this is particularly true for Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) mothers.⁵ Women from BAME backgrounds are also more likely to be trapped in low paid and insecure work; they are almost twice as likely as men, and 1.5 times more likely than white women, to be on zero-hour contracts.⁶

RESEARCH AIMS

Our first Fair Flexible Futures report analysed the data on employees who were being furloughed or falling out of work, and showed that part-timers were being disproportionately affected by the pandemic. This report explores the real-life stories behind the data, digging deeper into the impact of the pandemic on part-time workers across the UK. In particular, it seeks to highlight:

- the challenges and issues part-time workers and job seekers were facing before the pandemic
- the impact of the pandemic on part-time workers' and job seekers' working lives
- suggestions on how the recovery can address the issues part-time workers are now facing

In order to answer these questions, we commissioned independent qualitative research, to capture the lived experiences of people who need to work part-time, before and during the pandemic.

We chose to focus on London, for two reasons; firstly, because it is the worst place in the UK to find a flexible job, and secondly, because it has the country's joint highest rates of child poverty⁷, a statistic which has been linked to women being trapped in low-paid part-time jobs and mothers being out of work.

METHOD AND SAMPLE

The qualitative research involved three hour-long focus groups, one each of:

- part-time workers whose jobs have been directly affected by the pandemic (e.g. lost their job, were furloughed, had their hours changed)
- longer-term unemployed people who have been actively searching for part-time or flexible jobs during the pandemic
- current part-time workers who have been actively searching for alternative part-time or flexible jobs during the pandemic

The groups were conducted via Zoom in early June 2021, and a total of 16 people took part. Follow-up interviews then took place with four participants, also via Zoom, to explore their individual stories in more detail.

All of the participants were identified by Timewise through their networks, and screened to ensure they were London-based, on low to moderate incomes, and prioritised part-time or flexible working. Beyond this, the sample represented a mix of characteristics, including:

- a range of ages, between early 20s and early 60s
- some men (3) as well as women (13)
- some people from BAME backgrounds (6)
- people working in different sectors and occupations
- different types of working arrangements (both permanent and fixed-term contracts) amongst those currently in part-time jobs
- different reasons for requiring flexible working (e.g. childcare or other caring/family responsibilities, studying or other interests, winding down before retirement)
- different types of flexible working requirements (e.g. reduced hours, predictability over times of work, flexibility over times of work, remote or hybrid working)

This report summarises the main findings from the qualitative research. It includes anonymised verbatim quotes alongside the narrative commentary, to provide a flavour of the views expressed, along with selected anonymised case studies to illustrate individual experiences.



02 EXPERIENCES OF PART-TIME WORKING AND JOB SEEKING PRE-PANDEMIC

To set the context for this research, we began by exploring participants' pre-pandemic experiences of part-time working and job seeking.

Most had experienced challenges, and there was a general sense that the benefits of flexible work tend to be skewed towards the employer rather than employee in many jobs.

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I think you begin to realise that flexibility only really goes in one direction.

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This view is based on the experience of several participants from their past or present employment, which included:

- working more variable hours than they would wish to (especially those on zero-hour contracts) resulting in unpredictable income
- working more hours than they would wish to, or at inconvenient times
- working in jobs that do not make full use of their skills
- receiving low pay relative to their skills and experience
- working in insecure jobs

Participants also suggested that part-time workers are perceived as less valuable than their full-time counterparts by many employers. This view is based on participants' own experiences of employers, who they have found to be transactionally focused on hours of work, rather than taking a holistic, skills-focused view.

It was also noted that this can lead to less effort being made to integrate part-time workers into the organisation they work for, a lower standing with colleagues and, in some cases, an increased risk of exploitation.

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You're not included in social groups, it means you're on the fringe, a cheap resource, filling a gap. You're not included in the framework of the company.

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(Colleagues) didn't understand my circumstances. It was quite embarrassing for me. They looked down on me, I was constantly having to try to prove myself.

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“

It can be exploitative; people can be left at the mercy of employers. They hold out flexibility as a carrot, but when the work dries up, they're not good to their employees. It's based on the model of people as a resource. It's ok if you're in a comfortable, well-paid, stable job, but in lower-paid work you can be in a vulnerable position.

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One participant in his 50s felt that flexible work designed to suit employee requirements was more common in the past than it is now. In his view, companies used to trust their staff more to manage their own time and get the job done, whereas modern employers tend to monitor more and trust less.

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I think what is disappearing from workplace language is the term flexi-time, which disappeared in the 80s, maybe early 90s, and which was fantastic. And I think it's the trust factor. A lot of employers just don't trust their employees to be flexible.

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Others concurred with this view, noting that far fewer flexible and part-time jobs are advertised compared to full-time, and that these tend to be predominantly low-skilled and low-paid positions.

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It's depressing looking for flexible jobs, because you enter a space where the skills expected are low.

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It's becoming more and more apparent that a lot of part-time jobs are perceived to be lower-skilled jobs. And I think that's a particularly difficult and unfair situation. People who are well qualified, and have a range of experience, are still compelled to apply for pretty poorly skilled jobs in order to have that flexibility.

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There was also a perception that many employers are reluctant to countenance part-time or flexible working requests, even from existing staff. For example, one participant reported that she left her last job just before the pandemic, as her manager denied her request to reduce her hours; see overleaf for her story.



CASE STUDY 1: LEFT EMPLOYMENT AFTER A REQUEST FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING WAS DENIED

Cleo* is 37 and from a BAME background. She is sole parent to a six-year-old daughter. She has three years' experience in HR administration and an additional six years' experience working for a housing association, which involved liaising with tenants and making court appearances. She is currently not in paid employment and is studying counselling.

Her most recent job was in HR administration at a university. She had been in post for 16 months, working full-time hours, when she asked her manager if she could work a couple of hours less each day, in order to have more time with her daughter (who had just been diagnosed with ADHD). Her manager declined, as they felt her role couldn't be done part-time.

In Cleo's view, this was unfair, particularly because she had been working over and above her job description at the time, having accepted additional duties such as training temps. This came after she had previously asked for a pay rise, which was put off even though she received very positive appraisals, so she felt that she wasn't valued. As a result, Cleo resigned just before the pandemic; her last day at work coincided with the beginning of the first lockdown.

I went back to work a year after my daughter was born. And I'd been working full-time ever since. But for me full-time had always meant her being at breakfast club and after school club, or at nursery till six. So she's always been away from me from 8am to 6pm, and I just wanted a couple of extra hours to spend with her. My manager said that she didn't think that the role could be fulfilled if I was to work part-time, which I thought was a bit unfair, because I practically did two people's jobs anyway... there wasn't a really good reason for it. It would have made more sense for them to keep me, because I was only asking for a few hours off the day.

This wasn't the first time that the lack of access to flexible working had been an issue for Cleo. In her previous, long-term job for a housing authority, the terms and conditions of her employment changed while she was on maternity leave, following a merger with another organisation. The flexible working which had previously been available was removed, which was one of the factors which prompted her to resign.

I worked for one of my previous employers for eight years, and I stayed there because of the flexibility. Then they had a massive restructure due to merging with another organisation. They removed flexi-time and that was one of the reasons why I took voluntary redundancy; it just made me think 'Well, it's not quite right for me'.

Cleo thinks it is difficult for existing full-time staff to ask for flexibility, even if there is a flexible working policy in place, as managers tend to approach the request as something that will cause them a problem and affect the business negatively.

I think most of the places that I've worked, there has been a flexible working policy, they're quite clear. So it's at the manager's discretion whether they think that an employee can be trusted, or has the capacity to work flexibly. And 100% I would have been able to work part-time; a couple of hours off was not a big deal.

It's much harder when you're in the job to ask for flexibility, because they're just used to having you doing whatever hours you're doing. And then they probably panic about who's going to do the other seven hours and, you know, if it will affect the service and business.

* Name has been changed to protect the participant's identity

03 HOW THE PANDEMIC HAS AFFECTED PART-TIME WORKERS AND JOB SEEKERS

As has been widely noted, the pandemic had a big impact on employment, across a range of sectors. This was reflected in the experiences of our participants.

A number had lost their jobs during the pandemic, including some who were initially furloughed, and others who were not offered this option. While they appreciated the pressures on businesses during this time, most felt that their own employer could have handled their individual situation better.

Among the issues mentioned were: insufficient communication from management pre-warning them that their jobs were at risk; a lack of consultation or recourse regarding decisions; and insufficient financial compensation. Some felt that they got less support and poorer treatment compared to full-time employees, due to being seen as more dispensable.



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I wasn't massively impressed. There was no consultation.

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It was very shoddy, I felt messed around with.

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“

It was brutal. I got messages from colleagues, but not from the senior manager.

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I just think that (the pandemic) was a great opportunity to get rid of people, and I was one of those got rid of.

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This included one participant who reported a particularly negative experience involving the termination of her long-term employment, with no recognition of her employment rights; see overleaf for her story.

CASE STUDY 2: TERMINATION OF PART-TIME JOB WITH NO RECOGNITION OF EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS

Christine* is in her early 50s and lives with her husband and her daughter, who is doing her GCSEs. Her background is as a project manager specialising in organising large-scale international events and incentive travel for executives.

She found these roles difficult to balance with parenting, so moved to part-time administration roles, to give her more time with her family. Prior to the pandemic, she was working three such part-time jobs, all for organisations based in the same building.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Christine was abruptly told not to come in for the longest-held of the three jobs, as they were closing the office. While she had been with this organisation for seven years, and was expected to work set days, she had no formal contract of employment and she feels that, as a result, she was treated as a freelance contractor with no employment rights.

There was no engagement from her manager; she was not offered the opportunity to work remotely or be furloughed, and there was no offer of redundancy. She learned that full-time staff were being treated differently, including being allowed to continue working remotely. This made her feel that she was a disposable resource rather than a valued member of staff.

Christine was going through a very difficult time when this was happening, due to two deaths within her close family. This significantly affected her resilience and ability to challenge her employer.

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I felt that I couldn't deal with a fight, that I would have been crushed. Your confidence goes, the value you provide to the company is suddenly diminished.

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She also felt that the pandemic provided an excuse for poor behaviour by her employer. A number of her friends in part-time positions spoke of being treated in a similar way, which led her to believe that many employers didn't feel any responsibility to keep part-time administrative staff on during the pandemic, as their roles were not generating profit.

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I did realise, speaking to friends in other organisations, that a number had similar experiences where their jobs were pretty much deleted through the pandemic. (Employers) were obliged to support full-time workers, but part-timers were considered surplus to needs.

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I think it was a case of saying that we view you as disposable and dispensable. I didn't feel for a minute that there was any attempt at all to say, look, let's review things, let's look at things. Furlough wasn't even up for discussion. And it was a time when it was almost impossible to have any conversations. You know, it was a time of great crisis. And the person that should have provided me with guidance and leadership was not prepared to engage.

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* Name has been changed to protect the participant's identity

It has been widely noted that job seeking was challenging during the pandemic, and this was reinforced by our participants' experiences. They felt that employers had been generally tentative about recruitment, due to the uncertain economic environment, and anticipated that this would get worse when furlough ended, as it would prompt a wave of new redundancies and job seeking.

“When furlough money stops, that's going to have a major impact on the employment market. Because a lot of companies won't be able to pay for the staff. And these companies will just make people redundant left, right and centre, so there will be a lot of flooding of the job market then.”

It has also been noted that part-time vacancies were particularly scarce during the pandemic, with the main forms of flexibility being offered reported to be remote or hybrid working, and again, this reflected our participants' experiences. Among the challenges they mentioned were:

(i) Very few part-time opportunities being advertised, especially for higher-skilled and higher-paid jobs or restricted hours positions:

“It seems like there are lots of jobs out there for full-time but not necessarily for part-time. And the part-time opportunities are still a lot of hours, like 21 hours or 30 hours.”

“I find it quite hard when you're trying to find a job to fit around the children. I think sometimes if the employer knows you have children, they know how unpredictable children can be when they're ill, and things like that. And it's impossible to find a job where you can work between 10 and 2.”

“Unless you want to do supermarket work, or McDonald's, or things like that, but in your own sort of field, there's hardly anything. So all your years of skill and knowledge just go down the pan.”

(ii) Greater difficulty in getting responses to applications and securing interviews, due to the heavy competition for available posts:

“It's quite soul destroying sending off your application. I think there are jobs out there, but there are just so many more people applying for them, so your chances are very minimal.”

“You can go through the whole process, and you know, you're not going to be considered because the job's been filled or whatever.”



(iii) Increased pressure on some job seekers' own availability for work, due to lockdowns and changes to schools and childcare availability:

“ I worried that it would be difficult for me to find a job with everything that was going on, and because the schools were closed, I was looking after my daughter. So that's massively changed; being able to look for work properly, being able to find the right thing that can work around having a child at home. Now the schools are back open I feel a bit better, but I do feel anxious that it could close anytime and disrupt what's going on for me. ”

Most feel that, as a candidate, they would be reluctant to ask about the option of working part-time if this was not explicitly indicated on the vacancy, especially given the challenging state of the job market. They described this as “A waste of time” which could potentially count against them in the assessment process, as the employer may question their commitment to the job.

“ I've always applied for jobs and not mentioned kids anyway; I try not to until I've passed my probation. I mean, I shouldn't have to do that. I think it should be respected that people have commitments outside of work. ”

“ My experience is that if you are applying for a job that is highly paid and highly skilled, as soon as you ask 'Could that be flexible, maybe one or two days working from home and then going into the office?', the nature of the job changes. It's almost better to go in saying I'm going to work full-time and then ask later. And I think this is a difficulty in the space: people's perception of a part-time job is that it doesn't require the same level of commitment and the same level of experience. ”

On the other hand, a few had had more positive experiences during the pandemic. For example, some of those currently employed in office jobs spoke of welcoming the opportunity to work more flexibly than they did in the past, especially in terms of remote working and having more control over their working hours.

In addition, one participant reported a positive experience of starting a new short-term contract with the Census. This enabled him to choose between three working-week lengths (15, 25 or 37 hours) and to work flexibly around core hours. He regards this as good practice which should be emulated by other employers.

One participant also managed to negotiate a new job-share role with her current employer during the pandemic, which enabled her to remain in employment when her old job was made redundant. However, as she does not regard this arrangement as particularly secure, she is continuing to look for other opportunities, which she has found to be challenging; see overleaf for her story.

CASE STUDY 3: NEGOTIATED A JOB SHARE TO REMAIN WITH EMPLOYER, BUT POST IS INSECURE

Nelly* is 38 and is from a BAME background. She is sole parent of two children aged five years and 16 months. She is a business studies graduate and worked as an assistant manager prior to her current position as a part-time receptionist at a secondary school.

Nelly has been with her employer for three years. Initially, she was contracted to work 25 hours over five days, which she found challenging as she doesn't have much childcare support. She accepted the role on these terms, because she wasn't confident about asking for further reduced hours at the interview stage, in case she missed out on the job.

Nelly had her second child just before the pandemic, but was only able to take eight months maternity leave, because taking longer would have put her childcare at risk. She wasn't ready to go back to work, and felt forced back into employment because she couldn't afford to lose the childcare.

In March 2021, the school Nelly works at carried out a restructure, and her position was removed. They offered her a full-time administrative role, which she wouldn't have been able to do. She initially asked whether she could carry out the job in a hybrid way (some days at home, some days in the office) but they said no, which she felt was unfair as it would have been feasible.

She then asked about job sharing as a way to work reduced hours, but was worried about whether this would be possible; all the other part-time staff had already taken redundancy, so there was no one obvious to share the job with. However luckily, the school agreed to advertise for a job share match and

recruited someone. This has enabled Nelly to work 10 hours over two days per week. She feels that her employer agreed to this because they saw her potential and because, as Catholic school, they have a duty of care to staff.

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I was very worried about job security... And so I had to have a conversation and say, you know, my family circumstances with the children, I don't have support, so I really don't feel comfortable taking on a full-time role until my youngest daughter is in nursery. So, they kind of agreed to that, and advertised for the job share.

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However, as her current contract is not permanent, and will be reviewed after a year, she doesn't feel that she is in a particularly secure position.

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The whole process made me feel deflated. I don't feel secure, I don't know whether I can trust them. I'm not on a permanent part-time contract, so the rules can change anytime. It's always at the back of my mind.

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Nelly is looking for other part-time jobs due to this lack of certainty, but says that job searching has been very difficult during the pandemic. She hasn't heard back about many of her applications, which she puts down to high competition, as so many people have lost their jobs. She also says that a lot of positions are full-time rather than part-time or flexible.

*Name has been changed to protect the participant's identity

04 SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES BEING FACED

The final part of the research focused on exploring participants' views about what could be done to improve outcomes for part-time workers and job seekers. As part of this, we sought their opinions on some specific ideas which are being discussed with regard to part-time and flexible working:

- Greater availability of careers or employment advice for people out of work who need part-time work.
- A change in the law so everyone has the right to ask for flexible working from day one of a job, rather than waiting for 26 weeks.
- An increase in the number of specialist jobs boards advertising part-time and flexible jobs.
- Recruitment firms offering better support and matching people wanting flexible work with employers open to flexibility.
- Managers and employers being more open to considering, and trialling, different kinds of flexible working.

Most were of the view that it is the responsibility of employers and managers to change their attitude to part-time and flexible working. It was felt that the pandemic has provided an opportunity to reframe the outlook of those making hiring decisions, by demonstrating that flexible working can be both feasible and beneficial for organisations.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the pandemic will lead to a widespread appreciation that part-time workers are as committed and valuable as their full-time colleagues, and an understanding that widening access to flexible working can deliver a more motivated, productive, and loyal workforce.

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Part-time people are very valuable assets to organisations. The fact that they work fewer hours doesn't mean they are less committed. I find that we're almost more committed, because we need the money, we need the job to work for us.

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The pandemic has highlighted how old-fashioned the idea is that people work best in the office. People benefit from reducing their commute and having the autonomy to work in the way that works for them. They feel empowered by being able to organise their own working time. I hope to see a lot more of it, as it can be good for people and good for business.

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Ultimately, organisations want to take employees on to get a job done. And then they obviously want the fit that works for them. But looking at the flip side, if you don't take an employee's needs into consideration, they're not really going to stick around for too long.

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A number felt that creating a more receptive environment for flexible and part-time working also requires strengthening of their employee rights. They would therefore welcome a change in the law so everyone has the right to ask for flexible working from day one, rather waiting until after 26 weeks, believing that this would help normalise such requests.

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Rather than having to go to your manager and tell them your personal business, it would be nice if there was a policy where you were eligible to ask for less hours. It's quite difficult to have that conversation with somebody about your personal life, and then hear them say, 'Sorry, I don't care'.

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It would put the onus on the employer, instead of putting the employee in this kind of begging situation where they need to apologise for requesting flexible or part-time working... it would give employees more power and rights, and show that they're not less valuable because they work flexibly or part-time.

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A lot of the time I feel put off from applying for a job because it's full-time. And I'm going to have to wait until I'm properly established and then say, 'Can I reduce my hours?' This actually happened in my current job, with the 25 hours. I knew it would be a challenge for me, but I took it on anyway. And then I felt I had to prove myself, prove that I was an asset, and then go in there and ask, 'Can you please reduce my hours because it's very challenging for me and my family situation?' I really feel like we shouldn't have to feel embarrassed to ask, it should be standard that we can ask for flexible and part-time work.

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Additionally, a number of participants called for the Government to ban zero hours contracts, as a way to reduce the risks of income and employment precarity, and increase people's protection against exploitation.

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I think the Government needs to be involved in a lot more than giving more worker rights. Zero hours contracts should be scrapped. It's ridiculous. I mean, it's all in favour of the employer.

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Participants did not identify a personal need for additional careers or employment advice (which may be related to the levels of skills and experience reflected in our sample). However, the idea of more specialist job boards advertising part-time and flexible jobs was of interest. Those who were aware of Timewise's flexible jobs board were appreciative of this resource, which they felt to be unique:

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(I would like to see) more platforms like Timewise because I don't really see any equivalence... I just think the number of part-time jobs, and the way they break down their website, is pretty good.

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A couple who had not heard of Timewise, and some of those who were familiar with its job board service, would like to see a greater focus on identifying higher skilled and paid positions.

Participants also felt that it would be helpful if recruitment firms in general were better able to match and support people looking for flexible work with employers open to flexibility.

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Recruitment firms should match the people who want flexible work with the right employers rather than being so rigid. Maybe looking outside of the box, looking at the person and finding a matching role for them.

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I mean, in my experience, there are so many good, talented people who don't get a chance to actually have an interview. I always felt that the barrier is recruitment agencies; they get a brief and they have to fill the brief. It's a bit like buying a house, you know; you say you need three bedrooms and three ensuites, and the agent tries to get exactly that because that was your brief. And I think that recruiters should instead look at what the job is, and try to match people to it. So it's less about a very limited CV and much more to do with personality, and chemistry, which really needs to work.

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However, it was felt that it would be challenging to achieve this change of approach due to the way recruitment is currently remunerated (recruiters are understood to be paid more for full-time placements, and part-time and flexible job matching are expected to take more time).

One participant felt that technology could help facilitate matching by applying algorithms, in the way that dating sites do.



CONCLUSION

As we seek to build back better following the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a risk that the gap between opportunities for location-based flex and time-based flex is getting bigger.

The increased focus on, and acceptability of, remote working, is beneficial for people whose roles and lifestyles can support a full-time flexible or hybrid pattern. But as the participants in our research made clear, options are narrowing for those who can't work a full week.

This is in part due to the severe impact of the pandemic on sectors such as travel and tourism, and retail and hospitality, which have traditionally offered larger numbers of part-time roles. Additionally, a pattern has emerged of women whose partners have been made redundant needing to move to a full-time role to maintain their household income.

WHY A LACK OF PART-TIME JOBS MATTERS

Clearly, this is bad news for people who need to work part-time – and there are a lot of them. There were already 3 million people who were economically inactive before the pandemic; in many cases, this was due to them having caring responsibilities, or mental and physical health issues. These meant they were unable to work full-time, which in turn was a barrier to working at all. And their ranks have been swelled by the newly unemployed.

But the challenge isn't just the lack of part-time jobs but the lack of better-quality part-time jobs. Without them, many groups – particularly women – will remain trapped in whatever low-calibre part-time role they can get, with little opportunity to progress, or be unable to work at all. This is already happening; in 2019, 32.9% of part-time employee jobs were low-paid, compared with 9.6% of full-time ones. So both these poorly paid part-timers, and their unemployed counterparts, need access to more, better, part-time jobs.

And critically, it is also a problem at a societal level. A jobs market which locks out opportunities for those who cannot work full-time will drive workplace inequality and in-work poverty, as well as having a negative impact on issues such as social mobility and the gender pay gap.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUSINESSES

In addition to the societal imperative, there is a strong business case for taking action. The UK is experiencing a chronic candidate shortage, which means businesses need to work harder to attract talented candidates. Offering more part-time roles would support this in a number of ways.

Our research has showed that 9 in 10 employees want to work flexibly⁸, and that 8 in 10 flexible job seekers would prefer to work four days or fewer per week⁹. Yet still, even post-pandemic, only 1 in 4 jobs are advertised as flexible in any way, and only 1 in 10 are advertised as part-time¹⁰. With such a large gap between the supply and demand of flexible jobs, creating more part-time opportunities seems an obvious solution.

Furthermore, as companies seek to build back better within an uncertain financial environment, offering part-time opportunities can be a lower-risk way to increase headcount. This is particularly pertinent for SMEs, who may not have the budget for an experienced full-timer, but would be able to access a high level of experience and skills by offering a senior part-time role, instead of a lower-level full-time one.

Offering more part-time roles would also help employers deliver on their commitments to diversity and inclusion. As we noted earlier, BAME women have been hit hard in terms of losing work or hours, and are more likely to be trapped in insecure and low-paid work. So creating more, good-quality part-time roles would increase this group's opportunities to find, and progress in, permanent work.

And as a final point, the impact of the pandemic has amplified the conversation about ESG goals, wellbeing, and work-life balance. These are all becoming high priorities for businesses; and they can all be positively affected by increasing the availability of part-time roles.

Forward-looking businesses, who understand the link between fulfilled, balanced employees and company performance, must therefore put part-time work front and centre of their flexible working strategy.

HOW WE'RE DRIVING CHANGE

Ensuring that part-time remains on the flexible working agenda is a central pillar of our work, which we are tackling in a number of ways:

1. Lobbying for flexible working from day one to be offered up front

From our involvement with the Government's Flexible Working Taskforce to our annual Flexible Jobs Index, we have long championed the need for employers to offer flexible working up front.

Participants agreed that the law should be changed to make flexible working available from day one, rather than after 26 weeks, as is being explored by the Government's consultation. We would take this further, and require employers to consider whether jobs can be advertised flexibly, rather than requiring candidates to ask.

During the pandemic, we provided free, practical support and guidance on flexible hiring to thousands of businesses and employees. We will continue to do so as part of our Fair Flexible Futures campaign.

2. Training hiring managers to design and deliver flexible roles

We are clear that making flexible working available from day one is not the end of the story. We need more employers to invest in equipping their managers to design and manage flexible work. At Timewise, we offer a range of workshops, webinars, and other training through our consultancy services, and are sharing our insights through our Fair Flexible Futures campaign, to support wider, systemic change at scale.

We also carry out deep-dive projects within hard-to-flex sectors such as construction, nursing, and social care, designing and piloting flexible roles and encouraging sector-wide roll out. The sectors we work in tend to be overrepresented by low-paid part-time roles, and so we are calling on the Government to create a challenge fund to support more, similar projects, to avoid the development of two-tier workplaces, and support the drive for an inclusive economic recovery.

3. Equipping intermediaries to change hiring practices

We also believe that one of the best ways to deliver change at scale is to equip others to pass on what works. So we are piloting a change agent programme in Scotland, as part of our Fair Flexible Work project, which we will soon be bringing to England.

Through this work, we are providing tools, skills, and insights for intermediary organisations who advise employers and job seekers (such as employment and skills providers, unions, and enterprise agencies) so they in turn can work with their employers to change hiring practices.

Our research participants were clear that the pandemic has had a marked effect on opportunities for part-time workers and job seekers. And we are equally clear that we cannot afford to let the millions of people who can only work part-time fall through the cracks. Our work to create Fair Flexible Futures continues; if you would like to get involved, please do contact us.

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