



timewise

TIMewise SECTOR GUIDE

Secure and Flexible Work in the **Retail Sector**

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The purpose of this short guide is to provide an introduction to promoting flexible and secure work for employers and industry actors. It offers snapshot insights into the sector-specific challenges and barriers to flexible and secure work, shares opportunities for good practice and identifies priority actions that can be taken by employers and sector bodies to better promote and implement flexible and secure work. It will help you to answer:

- What is the state of play in your industry?
- What can good look like?
- How can you take action now?

The guide has been developed following a 12-month engagement programme including roundtable discussions with employers, workers, experts and sector representatives.

This guide has been created as part of the Industry Voices for Better Frontline Work programme, supported by the abrdrn Financial Fairness Trust, which is seeking to increase the supply of good flexible jobs for low and middle-income workers across key frontline sectors.



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WHAT IS THE STATE OF PLAY?

SECTOR INSIGHTS

Employment in the retail sector represents approximately 8.6 per cent of the UK total, with around 3 million employees, reasonably evenly distributed across the countries and regions. The 314,000 retail businesses make up 5.7 per cent of all UK businesses, and in 2023, retail sales in Great Britain were worth £510 billion, an increase of 3 per cent on the previous year.¹

The current pace of change in the retail sector is unprecedented: the number and type of roles

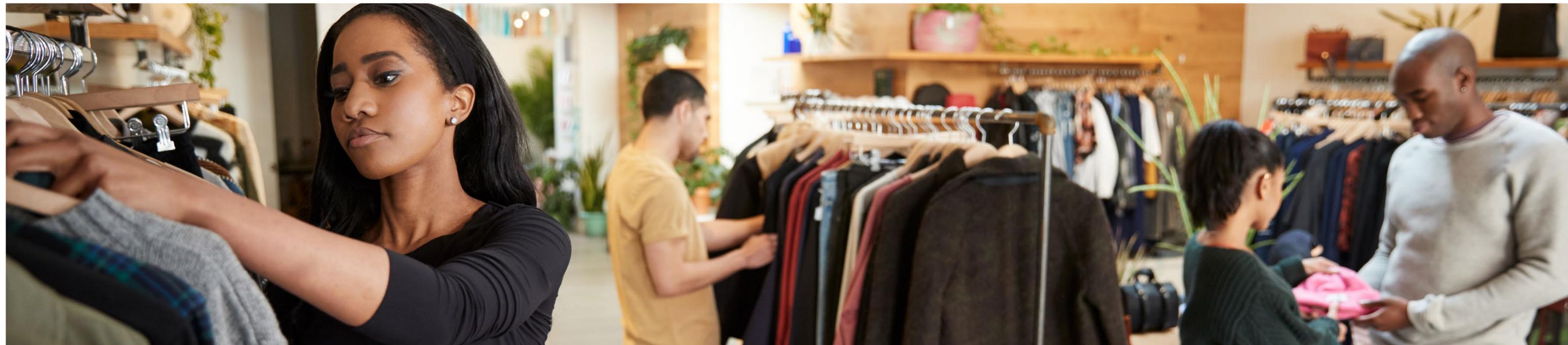
needed are changing, with a growing proportion of sales taking place online and fewer physical stores. This is also a sector where employers face significant pressure on margins and have real challenges attracting and retaining staff.

Women make up 53 per cent of the retail workforce. Part-time work is common particularly in store and distribution teams, but this decreases with seniority and managerial responsibility, which can hinder progression. Women remain under-represented at

the most senior levels in retail (board and executive team). That said, the split between men and women in middle and senior management roles is far less pronounced today than previously, with the introduction of flexible working cited as an effective way to drive up gender diversity in these roles.²

1. Data source: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06186/SN06186.pdf>

2. Data source: <https://www.brc.org.uk/media/682749/diversity-and-inclusion-in-uk-retail-2023.pdf>





CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Some of the key challenges to the greater provision of secure and flexible work across the retail sector discussed in our roundtable discussions include:

- Pressurised operational environments and high staff turnover rates. These limit capacity to provide flex for individuals or innovate new approaches to rostering and organising work.
- Lack of case studies and data linking secure and flexible work to productivity and efficiency. This will take time and scale to generate, particularly across retailers who are seeking to drive organisational competitive advantage from their workforce practices.
- Lack of consistency in leadership and management support for this agenda, and in the provision of skills and tools to embed the right culture to improve flexibility and security.
- Current pace of change within the sector means there are multiple competing priorities for retail leaders. Work in this area needs to link to other varied industry initiatives, ranging from tackling retail crime to addressing digital skills gaps within the workforce.

WHAT CAN GOOD LOOK LIKE?

VISION FOR WHAT GOOD COULD LOOK LIKE

So what would a more embedded secure and flexible working approach look like?

- Fair – flexibility and security would be accessible to all retail workers whether based in office or operational roles, and across the range of retailer and store size. This isn't just for female employees or those with caring responsibilities; it's for everyone who works within the sector, in all roles and at senior levels as well as shop floor staff (supporting in-work progression).
- Integrated - into a wider approach to make retail a more attractive career choice for a diverse range of people – flexible working, stability and predictability would be offered as part of the overall experience of working within retail, which would no longer be associated with insecure, inflexible work.
- Data-led - embedded within a clear business case which resonates for business leaders, based on real data and case studies.
- Role modelled – through a people-centric, trusting culture at organisation and team level, set by senior leaders and enacted by local management.



CASE STUDY

Morrisons

Morrisons has a huge array of different sites, store formats and operational requirements across their business. They have found consulting with and listening to the experiences of colleagues has provided useful insight to help them develop innovative working patterns in manufacturing sites. For example, certain sites are more challenging for employees to get to, due to mismatched transport links and service delivery times. Listening to the teams who work in these locations inspired Morrisons to design new shift patterns across the week with different start and finish times as well as supporting transportation. This made working at these sites possible for a wider range of candidates and improved the work life balance and stability of the teams. As well as better candidate attraction, Morrisons have also benefited from reduced absence and turnover at these sites, proving that flexible schedules can be a 'win-win'.

OPPORTUNITIES AND GOOD PRACTICE

There are already examples of retailers who have adopted initiatives to try and improve the security and flexibility available to their staff, introducing different working, contractual and rostering arrangements to achieve this.

Some of the examples of good practice we have noted are:

- Adoption of technology to enable shift swapping amongst colleagues, via digital apps. This is designed to give workers more flexibility and autonomy over their shifts.
- Decentralising decision-making so more decisions on staffing and rostering are made closer to the frontline at a regional area-based or store-based level.
- Ensuring minimum contracted hours for all staff and that workers have the security of guaranteed hours, together with the ability to flex up during peak seasons if they wish.
- Publishing rosters at least 12 weeks in advance. This provides workers with the security of knowing their hours of work, and the advance notice that they need to ensure their work-life balance.
- Term-time contracts to enable employees to better manage their childcare responsibilities during school holidays.
- Flexible options for managerial (salaried staff) in head office and operational roles – for example, giving employees the opportunity to compress their hours into fewer days, which reduces their commute and enables more ‘non-working’ days in the week.
- Greater local autonomy and empowerment. Small retailers and the charity retail sector are examples within the retail industry of a high level of local empowerment in terms of resource planning and structuring work arrangements, which allows for more flexibility and innovation in how work is organised.

- The high pace of organisational change within the sector could also provide an opportunity. Retailers should consider flexible and innovative work arrangements and incorporate these at moments of change, such as restructuring teams or stores, or within programmes to improve efficiency or reduce costs.



CASE STUDY

Choice of contracted hours for store sales assistants

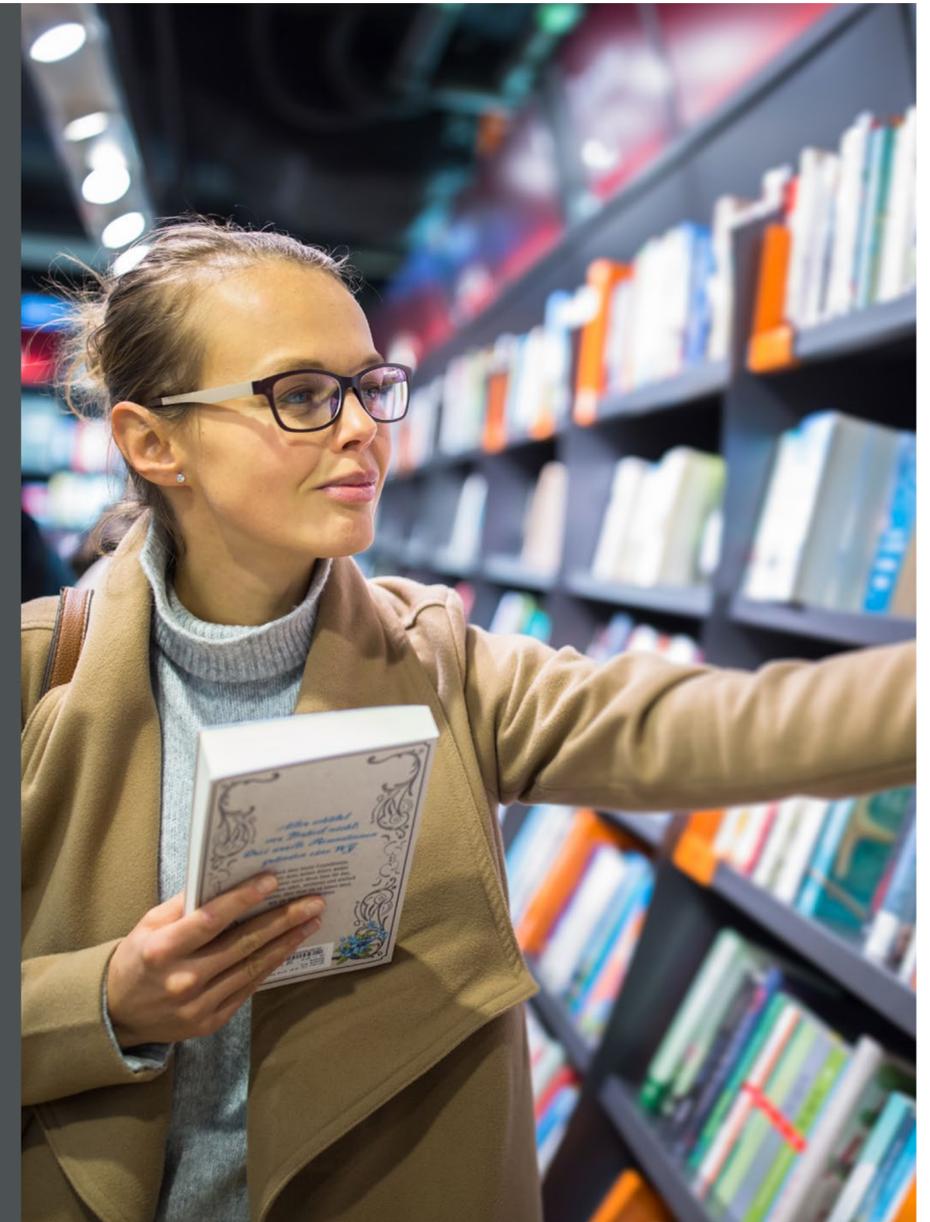
WH Smith Travel operate a network of busy travel stores in airports, rail stations, hospitals and service stations across the UK. They realised that the wide opening hours required in these stores provided an opportunity to think differently and provide workers with greater flexibility and choice, without foregoing the security their job security.

From speaking to their store teams about how they would prefer to work, the retailer decided to widen the range of contracted hours that they offered – employment contracts now range from a minimum of 8 hours per week, up to 39 hours per week. Across their Travel business there is a real split in terms of how much people have chosen to work - with 49 per cent of contracts below 20 hours, and

51 per cent above (including 35 per cent over 30 hours per week).

When people start work their manager talks to them about what they would like in terms of work pattern, and this is reviewed periodically to ensure it is still working for the retailer and the employee.

In turn this provides greater flex for the business as well, with team members working across a range of patterns, and able to offer additional hours at peak times on an ‘opt in’ basis. The number of formal flexible working requests has significantly reduced, which indicates that team members are usually able to get the flexibility they need through this approach.



HOW CAN YOU TAKE ACTION NOW?

For the retail sector to continue to progress, we have identified key actions to take at national level, across the sector bodies, and for individual organisations. This is based on the ideas and discussion of our sector panel group.

EMPLOYER PRIORITIES

As a retail employer, regardless of your size or focus, there is tremendous impact you can have enabling flexibility and security for your own workforce, as well as contributing to change within the wider sector.

Below are a set of practical recommendations with links for you to find out more:

1. START BY LISTENING TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

- Gather insight from your employees about their experience of working patterns and arrangements:

- Do your staff know about your flexible working policy and how to make a request?
- Do they feel able to talk about their needs with their manager without it having a negative impact on their employment?
- How satisfied are they with their work life balance? With the predictability of their hours and shift patterns? With the amount of input and notice they get of when they are needed to work?
- Incorporate these questions into staff surveys, employee focus groups or listening sessions, or wellbeing roadshows. Whenever you are talking to your employees and gathering their views, make sure that you are considering this element of their experience.
- Track the data over time and by location / role type. This will help you assess the impact of your interventions and decide where to focus your attention.

2. ENGAGE SENIOR LEADERS WITH THE BUSINESS CASE, HELP THEM SEE THE RELEVANCE

Our panel felt strongly that change in retail needs to be driven from the top. If you've not already done so, talk to your senior leaders about the vision for flexibility and security within your business and how it links to your strategic goals and objectives.

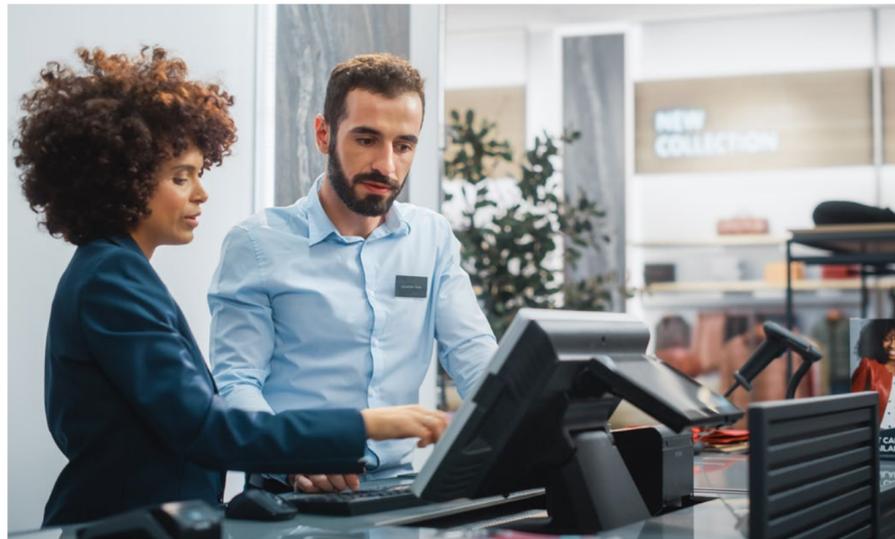
Explore the business case for your workforce – if you are struggling with challenges linked to attraction, retention, absence and wellbeing, build a case as to how providing more secure and flexible work could help address these.

Draw on the examples in this report, this [business case analysis](#) and the following examples of innovation, to help you to influence your senior leaders:

- Grocery [examples](#) of flexibility
- Retail [head office roles](#)
- [Timewise Retail Pioneers programme](#)

Consider the costs and benefits of investing in flexible and secure work. Timewise's [report](#) on reaching a positive financial return on investment in flexible working provides evidence of the financial business case, demonstrating that the benefits of flexible working interventions outweigh the costs within a short time period.

Once you have a vision for flexibility and security which is shared by your leadership group, hold them to account for ensuring that this commitment reaches every part of the organisation. This could be through their personal objectives and/or a regular dashboard report reviewed at Board level. Use your employee experience data to track how you're doing.



3. INVEST IN MANAGEMENT CAPABILITY

Equip your middle management and supervisors with the skills and capability they need to drive a local culture that supports flexible working and prioritises secure, predictable working arrangements. You can include this in an existing management development programme, or have stand-alone workshops and learning sessions to educate and upskill your managers on:

- The importance of their role in enabling flexible, secure work for their teams.
- The legislative requirements and your organisation's policy and procedures.
- How to have confident conversations with team members about working patterns and flexibility.
- How to make decisions about working arrangements which are fair and consistent.

Managers also need to be empowered to make decisions and try new approaches, even when they challenge established norms in terms of working patterns and arrangements. Employers can help provide a clear framework and policy, but allow decisions to be made locally by the managers who know their customers, their service and their team.

4. WORK OUT WHERE FLEXIBLE OPTIONS CAN BE THE DEFAULT

Our panel felt strongly that retailers could shift the dial on flexible options in salaried roles by committing to making all managerial roles flex 'by default'. This requires looking at the design of the roles and identifying what flexibility is possible – this could be job sharing, compressed hours, part time, hybrid working etc. For a guide on how to approach this, and the questions to ask, take a look [here](#).

5. PILOT NEW APPROACHES TO ROSTERING AND SCHEDULING

Trial different ways of working using pilots and experiments. This could be by looking at alternatives to your current scheduling and rostering processes, by designing new shift lengths or times, or by implementing regular conversations between roster managers and their teams to gather insight into when colleagues would prefer to work.

Look at the [three elements](#) which we know improve work life balance for shift workers and consider what you can do to increase the input, stability or advance notice for your workers, and what will have the biggest impact for them.

6. EXPLORE HOW YOU CAN USE MORE FLEXIBLE AND SECURE WORK TO HELP DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESSION

Think creatively about how flexible working can be a vehicle for progression and career development. As well as working out where more senior roles can be designed to incorporate flexibility, some flexible working options such as job shares and sabbaticals will provide opportunities for other team members to step up and take on additional responsibilities. When planned effectively and well supported, this can be a valuable ripple effect from flex which spreads across the team.

7. SHARE AND AMPLIFY CASE STUDIES AND EXAMPLES WITH OTHERS ACROSS THE SECTOR

Individual employers can help instigate and drive change across the sector by sharing examples, learnings and case studies with colleagues in other retailers. By spreading ideas of good practice and demonstrating the impact that initiatives can have, you will influence other organisations to act and will help drive up the profile of retail as an attractive sector in which to develop a career. Sector bodies have an important role to play in this (see below) but will always rely on individual retailers being willing to share good practice and lessons learned with their networks.



SECTOR PRIORITIES

FOR TRADE ASSOCIATIONS, SECTOR BODIES AND UNIONS

There are opportunities to take a sector-wide approach to driving change across retail, and sector bodies, trade associations and unions are key actors in this. The recommendations from our panel are set out below:

1. ESTABLISH CORE PRINCIPLES FOR THE SECTOR IN THIS AREA

As a collective group, to develop and agree on behalf of the sector, a framework of principles or commitments for retailers to work to. These would set out, at a high level, the responsibilities of employers and membership bodies within the sector, in relation to ensuring secure and flexible work. This could build on or link into, activities of existing equality, diversity and inclusion working groups in the sector. This would provide an opportunity for voices from within the sector to reassure employers and workers that things can be better, and that change is possible, and to counter some of the more general negative rhetoric about forthcoming government policy.

A framework established and supported by a combination of trade associations, sector bodies and unions would help establish this as the minimum standard for the sector. It should build on the ideas for a vision discussed within this panel, be succinct and include practical indicators of change.

The panel discussed that there may be symbolic opportunities to promote these core principles or commitments by e.g. a flexible working in retail day.

2. DEVELOP A CENTRAL RESOURCE OF INFORMATION, BEST PRACTICE TOOLS, CASE STUDIES AND BENCHMARKING DATA FOR RETAILERS TO ACCESS

Working together at sector level to develop this resource, champion it and encourage member retailers to participate and provide content is an important priority for sector bodies, unions and trade associations.

A working group will need to be formed of representatives from across the sector who can deliver this project, and funding is likely to be required to enable this. Decisions need to be made on:

- design and content
- where it is housed
- how it will be accessed
- who has responsibility for maintaining it
- how retailers will be encouraged to contribute
- measures of impact

Initial ideas for content included tools to support workforce planning, case study examples, information about technology to support good practice, sample policies and procedures.

3. CREATE SECTOR CHAMPIONS TO SUPPORT FLEXIBLE WORKING AND SECURITY WITHIN RETAIL ROLES

Sector champions could be appointed in voluntary roles and receive support from sector bodies to act as spokespeople on this agenda. Their role would be to challenge norms around working practices, role model an alternative management style and culture and bust myths about the impact of secure and flexible work on sales and customers.

They would need to receive training and guidance on the business case and be able to talk credibly on the topic. They could be deployed to support retailers who are aiming to take action in this area and could provide guidance and signpost to the central repository.

Detailed role parameters and descriptions would need to be worked up, but the champions would need to be employed in retail, be passionate about this agenda, and have the support of their employer (including time within their working week to undertake the champion role).

4. COLLECT SECTOR WIDE DATA TO MONITOR AND EVIDENCE PROGRESS

There already exists comprehensive reporting on diversity and inclusion and health and wellbeing indicators by retail trade associations and membership groups (see Retail Trust's annual [‘Health of Retail’](#) report, BRC's [‘Diversity & Inclusion in UK Retail’](#) report, and others). An important priority is to explore what data is already being collected in relation to flexible work and work security and identify opportunities to expand this across the sector using existing surveys where possible.

5. EDUCATE AND EMPOWER ALL RETAIL WORKERS

A specific role was identified for Unions to educate and empower retail workers to understand their rights and have the knowledge and confidence to raise this agenda with their employer, particularly those who are working for retailers who are not supportive of this agenda nor engaging with sector bodies and membership groups on it. Driving up awareness amongst all retail employees is another important way of bringing about change within the industry.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the following organisations for their participation in our industry roundtable discussions:

- Morrisons
- WH Smith
- Amazon
- Retail Trust
- Diversity in Retail
- Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union
- The Association of Convenience Stores
- The Charity Retail Association
- British Footwear Association
- British Retail Consortium



Timewise's mission is to create healthy, equitable and inclusive workplaces for all by widening access to good quality, flexible work. We are the UK's leading experts on job design and we tackle barriers to change with both policymakers and employers. Through our research, we evidence the need for good flexible and predictable work to boost the living standards of low and middle earners. We believe good flexible jobs enable employees to gain increased autonomy and control over how much, when or where they work. Through our programmes, we trial practical solutions and scale these through consultancy and campaigns.

If you would like more information on this guide or to work with us, please email: info@timewise.co.uk.