

Career progression and flexible working: making it work for women

The **2022 Working Families Index** – produced by Working Families and Talking Talent – found that flexible working can support career progression for parents and carers in the UK. Parents in job shares and with remote or hybrid working arrangements were especially likely to report learning new skills on the job. Further, mothers who work flexibly reported greater career progression than those who do not work flexibly.

Yet, we do find a concerning trend: women in part-time roles were less likely to feel that they had progressed than other flex workers.

Using the Working Families 2022 Index data, the Global Institute for Women's Leadership conducted an analysis to better understand gender differences in career progression amongst the flexible workforce. Based on the analysis, we offer recommendations for employers to help ensure that both women and men can flourish when working flexibly.

First, we consider the prevalence of distinct types of flexible working by gender, including **location flexibility** (i.e., hybrid working or working from home), **schedule flexibility** (i.e., job share, term time work, variable hours or control over when work is undertaken), and **reduced hours** (i.e., part time, or term-time working). We find that location flexibility is more common among fathers and part-time work for mothers, likely due to differences in the sectors women and men work in.

Working Families 2022 Index

The Working Families Index is the **most comprehensive** study of the experience of **work and family life in the UK**. The Index, sponsored by our partners **Talking Talent**, builds on eight years of previous research.

Based on a **survey of 2,806 parents and carers** in late 2021, it examines finances, working arrangements, managing, and sharing childcare, and personal wellbeing – and tracks developments over time.

Who took part in the survey?

- **Gender:** 65% women, 33% men, 2% non-binary/transgender/other
- **Family type:** 64% couple parents, 36% single parents
- **Age of respondents:** 49% between 16-34, 48% between 35-54, 4% 55+

After this, we look into differences in **career progression scores** by gender and **type of flexible working** arrangement. While we see a positive association between flexible working and career progression, it must be stressed that we cannot infer any causal relationship. Higher career progression scores for flexible workers is likely in part explained by the fact that there is greater access to flexible working in high status and high paying occupations with steep wage trajectories (Chung 2017; TUC 2021). Further, the analysis also shows gender differences in career progression scores amongst flex workers: across all types, men exhibit higher career progression scores while women part-time workers are falling behind.

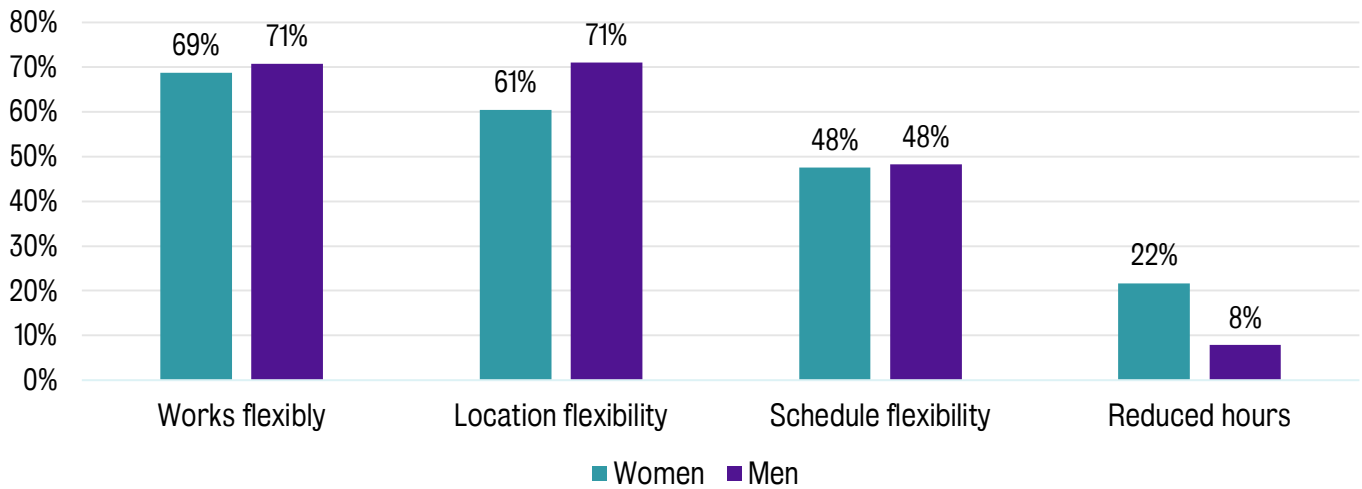
To understand why this might be the case, we study the prevalence of **regularly working additional hours amongst flex workers**. Working additional hours is shown to be widespread amongst flex workers except for women part-time workers. This is cause for concern since the analysis shows a positive association between working additional hours and career progression.

Finally, we consider factors influencing career decisions to show that those working part-time are more likely to **sacrifice greater pay or progression** to maintain their current flexibility. Moreover, **childcare arrangements** seem to play a key role in the career decisions of parents, in particular women working reduced hours, indicating that there is a trade-off between career progression for flexibility to manage childcare responsibilities. In light of these findings, we provide recommendations for employers for designing family-friendly working practices to ensure that women and men have equal chances to advance their careers while also having sufficient time to engage in family life.

Location flexibility more common among fathers, part-time work for mothers

We find that around 70% of mothers and fathers in our sample work flexibly. As shown in Graph 1, the most common type of flexible working for both women and men is location flexibility. Still, men are shown to have greater access to this likely due to occupational segregation: men are shown to be concentrated in professional service industries where 83% work from home or with a hybrid arrangement.

Percentage of women and men working flexibly



Graph 1: Percentage of women and men working flexibly by type of arrangement.

In contrast, women are overrepresented in sectors that are less suitable for hybrid or working from home arrangements, such as healthcare, retail and education. We know from previous research that lack of access to location or schedule flexibility can result in women reducing their working hours after childbirth and switching to part-time employment (Chung 2017). In our data, we find that women are 2.5 times more likely than men to work reduced hours. Moreover, 45% of women (versus 25% of men) report wanting to work flexibly to manage childcare, falling in line with previous studies (see Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014; Chung and Van der Horst, 2018a; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Lott and Chung, 2016; Van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2018).

Higher career progression for men working flexibly, while women part-time workers are falling behind

The career progression scores in the Working Families 2022 Index captures the extent to which respondents perceive their careers to have advanced over the past five years, measured on a 10-point scale (0 = not at all; 5 = moderately; 10 = significantly). The majority of men and women sit around the middle of the distribution, although the distribution shows a slight negative skew, meaning that the mean score (5.3) is slightly below the median (6) with a standard deviation of 2.7. For this analysis, we focus on the median rather than the mean values.

As shown in the Table 2, parents with flexible working arrangements reported higher rates of career progression than those working non-flex. This positive reporting on progression rises to 62% when part-time workers are removed from the sample – the form of flexible working arrangement associated with the least career progression.

Yet, a causal relationship between flexible working and career progression cannot be assumed as the positive association is likely related to the fact that workers with greater access to flexible working arrangements also tend to be in higher status occupations with steeper wage trajectories (Chung, 2019; TUC, 2021).

Career progression scores	Women	Men	Total
Overall Score	5.00	6.00	6.00
Flex workers	6.00	7.00	6.00
Location flexibility	6.00	7.00	6.00
Schedule flexibility	6.00	7.00	6.00
Reduced Hours	5.00	7.00	5.00

Table 2: Median career progression scores by gender and type of flexible work.

Moreover, we find significant gender gaps in career progression scores irrespective of whether they work flexibly or not. In both groups, men’s reported median career progression scores are one point higher than women’s scores. The type of flexible work men do is irrelevant to their level of reported career progression. For women, the picture is more complicated. While progression scores are higher when women have access to location and schedule flexibility, women working part-time report the lowest level of career progression. These findings support previous research (see Barnett & Hall, 2001; Costas Dias, Joyce & Parodi 2018; Higgins et al., 2000; Hill, Martinson, & Ferris, 2004; van Osch, Y., & Schaveling, J. 2020) and indicates that more needs to be done to support the career advancement of part-time workers.

Working additional hours is widespread amongst flex-workers apart from women part-time workers

The ability to work additional hours for some flexible workers may be a factor affecting perceived career progression. Using the Chi-Square Test of Association, we examine whether working additional hours is positively associated with moderate to significant career progression scores (values 5-10). We find a statistically significant albeit weak to moderate positive association between working additional hours and career progression for both flex ($X^2(1) = 91.8, p < .001, \phi = .183$) and non-flex workers ($X^2(1) = 77.3, p < .001, \phi = .201$). This positive association is slightly stronger for flex working women ($X^2(1) = 57.4, p < .001, \phi = .214$) than men ($X^2(1) = 14.4, p < .001, \phi = .148$).

We find that working additional hours is widespread amongst all respondents and especially amongst men. The proportion is higher for flexible workers (81%) than non-flex workers (71%) – a phenomenon known as the ‘flexibility paradox’ (Chung 2022). The increase in work intensity for flexible workers is attributed to the blurring of boundaries that results in a spill-over of work into family life (Chung 2017; Clark 2000). Amongst the high-status workers, who have greater access to flexible working, this tendency is found to be more widespread (Schieman et al., 2009).

Additional hours	Women	Men	Total
Non-Flex workers	68.5%	75.5%	70.8%
Flex workers	78.8%	84.6%	80.8%
Schedule flexibility	81.5%	86.4%	82.8%
Location flexibility	78%	84.1%	80.3%
Reduced Hours	68.4%	82.7%	70.7%

Table 3: Percentage of women and men working additional hours by type of flexible work.

When looking at different types of flexible working arrangements, we see that the proportion working additional hours rises for women and men with location and schedule flexibility (see Table 3). We also see that a higher proportion of men working reduced hours report regularly put in extra hours compared to non-flex working men. In contrast, the proportion of women working additional hours is the same for both non-flex workers and those working reduced hours. This suggests that women working part-time are falling behind as working culture seems to expect and reward regular overtime.

What is holding back part-time progression?

Previous research has highlighted that parents and mothers in particular are more likely to sacrifice greater pay or progression to maintain flexibility (Global Institute for Women’s Leadership et al. 2021). In our sample, we find that 55% of parents cite this as a reason for staying in their current role. When we break this down for those on reduced hours, we find that this rises to 57% (compared to 53% of workers with location flexibility and 54% with schedule flexibility).

The ability to balance childcare is a further critical factor influencing career decisions, especially for women. In our sample, we corroborate findings from previous research showing that women are more likely than men to work flexibly to manage childcare (49% vs 27% of men). Moreover, we find that seven

in ten parents would need to consider childcare options before going for a new job or promotion. This is particularly true for mothers: over a third strongly agreed with this compared to a quarter of fathers. When considering workers on reduced hours, this percentage increases to 38% for women (compared to a quarter of men although sample size is too small for meaningful comparison). These findings suggest that part-time workers – especially women – are having to trade career progression for flexibility to manage childcare responsibilities.

Summary and recommendations for employers

Across the Working Families 2022 Index, we found that flexible working is widespread amongst UK parents with location flexibility dominant amongst men while women are more likely to work part-time. Parents and carers with flexible working arrangements tended to report higher rates of career progression than those without. While this might indicate a growing appreciation of flexible working, we cannot assume a causal relationship. The positive association is likely linked to the fact that workers with access to flexible working arrangements tend to be in higher status occupations with steeper wage trajectories (Chung, 2019; TUC, 2021).

Moreover, we find a positive association between career progression scores and flexibility for men, irrespective of the type of working arrangement. In contrast, women's scores only improve for those with location or schedule flexibility. Working reduced hours does not seem to be associated with greater career progression scores for women, which is a cause for concern given that they are 2.5 times more likely to be in this group than men. The higher rate of women working part-time has previously been linked to women's overrepresentation in sectors that are less suitable for hybrid or working from home arrangements, such as healthcare, retail and education, often resulting in a move to part-time work after childbirth (Chung 2017).

Regularly working additional hours is found to be widespread amongst all respondents and especially flexible workers – evidence of the 'flexibility paradox' (Chung 2022). However, women working part-time are the exception: the proportion of women working additional hours is the same for both non-flex worker and those working reduced hours. This is a cause for concern, as we find that regularly working additional hours is positively associated with higher career progression. Thus, women working part-time seem to be falling behind in workplace cultures that expect and reward regular overtime.

Structural factors, such as the gendered division of unpaid labour and deficits in care services, likely play a key role in explaining women's greater part-time engagement and lower career progression. We are currently witnessing a fragmentation of the labour force into different career tracks, where women with care responsibilities and no access to location or schedule flexibility are disadvantaged. Yet, career

progression should also not depend on regular overtime, neither for women nor for men. To end the penalisation of part-time workers, who are predominantly women, cultural and organisational change is needed to ensure that career progression ceases to be linked to excessively long working hours.

Below, we draw on our previous research (See Global Institute for Women's Leadership et al. 2021; Jones and Jones 2019; Working Families 2022) to include a list of recommendations for employers to ensure that both women and men benefit from flexible working arrangements while having sufficient time to engage in family life.

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Recommendations for employers

- **Offer flex:** All jobs need to be designed and advertised with a degree of flexibility unless there is a strong business case that this is not possible.
- **Promote flex:** Actively support, promote, and develop staff who work flexibly to build a pipeline of leaders who feel able to do the same.
- **Create a level playing field:** Employers should monitor part-time and flexible working in relation to employee characteristics, pay and progression to ensure greater parity between part-time and full-time workers.
- **Engage men in flex:** Encourage men to take up flexible working for care purposes to ensure that flexible working facilitates a move beyond traditional gender roles.
- **Celebrate flex success:** Signal that flex works by publicising the flexible working patterns of newly promoted staff. Does your senior leadership team use flex? Let people know!
- **Fit for the job:** Be realistic with expectations. Managers should engage in workload planning in collaboration with employees to ensure that tasks allocated in a role can be completed within the given hours.
- **Set the limits:** Agree 'ways of working' protocols that include employees taking breaks and not responding to emails outside of working hours.
- **Keep track:** Broaden your pay and career progression process to monitor working patterns by gender and type of flexible working.
- **Make it about output:** Shift emphasis onto quality and measure performance by results, not where and when the work gets done.

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