



## Workingmums.co.uk roundtable on flexible working, family support and women's career progression

The roundtable, held on 26th January, brought together diversity and recruitment experts from 19 organisations to debate issues relating to flexible working, family support and women's career progression, recognising the crossover between the three. The aim of the roundtable was to share best practice and influence policy and practice in these areas.

The roundtable was introduced by Gillian Nissim, founder of Workingmums.co.uk, who spoke about the organisation's commitment to promote best practice in flexible working and diversity.

### **Flexible working**

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Professor Caroline Gatrell from Liverpool University Management School chaired the event and laid out the research landscape with regard to each of the three areas before opening the debate. With regard to flexible working, she said recent studies showed that it could disadvantage people's careers, but that it could also enhance employee engagement. However, if flexible working opportunities were on offer but employees could not access them it had the reverse effect and made employees more likely to disengage. Flexible working needed to work fairly across an organisation to be effective. She added that research also showed that more dads wanted to work flexibly. This desire to work flexibly in order to help with childcare was new, she said. If more fathers accessed flexible working it could change the culture, she said.

### **Agile working and recruitment**

Agile working is becoming more popular as more men get on board and this is helping to normalise different ways of working. In the past it tended to be employees who initiated agile working by asking for flexible working. Now employers are initiating it because they can see the big business benefits, including higher retention rates, greater employee engagement, talent attraction and reduced overheads through remote working or hot desking. Agile working does not have as many connotations as flexible working and this is helping to drive wider engagement with different ways of working.

Leadership needs to demonstrate good practice. Role modelling of agile working is vital as is setting examples on issues like reducing the amount of travel to meetings. Consistency is also vital, but this can be difficult as different parts of a business face different challenges.

*We would like to say a big thank you to Lloyds Banking Group for supporting the Workingmums.co.uk Roundtable event.*



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Lloyds spoke about their agile hiring programme which makes it mandatory for managers to define the degree of flexibility any new vacancy can accommodate. Managers have to consider how a job can be worked flexibly and if they don't state that it can be they are challenged by recruiters and have to provide a robust rationale. The policy is about constantly challenging the norm at every point in the recruitment process. Ensuring agility is part of the system from the start is a key part of embedding flexibility and also of attracting a wider candidate base, including returners.

### **Getting managers on board**

One of the biggest challenges to embedding flexible working is managers' ability to manage different ways of working. Managers' mindsets need to change and issues such as the 'always on' culture need to be tackled, trust reinforced and communication enabled. Middle managers need to role model good practice.

Middle managers can be very resistant to change. They are often under pressure to deliver and flexible working can be one task too many. There needs to be a clear framework for middle managers on what a good output is and that must include retaining staff. Flexible working toolkits for managers and videos are a way of providing this. Managers need to be upskilled in this area so they are more output-led and less focused on KPIs. Communication is a key skill and there must be an emphasis on trust, for example, empowering teams to take ownership of devising a break time schedule that works for them and the business. HR needs to have careful conversations with managers about how to manage, for instance, annual leave at peak times to ensure whole groups of potential employees are not excluded.

Employers who have been doing this for a while have noticed a gradual change in mindset among managers. One of the hardest challenges is the different culture in different parts of businesses and confronting resistance to initiatives such as hot desking. Doing a trial in one area and constantly measuring engagement and productivity can help make the business case and win line managers over.

If the trial is successful flexible working can be rolled out across a section and monitored to see where there are problems. These are often due to an individual line manager's mindset. Trialling different ways of working in new offices or where there are younger employees is also a good way of persuading resistant managers.

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Employers agreed all of this had to be a relentless process as it is easy to revert back due to years of social conditioning. Communication has to be kept going and different ways of working have to be role modelled by enough of the right people.

### **Workload and job design**

Employers discussed issues such as ensuring part-time roles are part time and sustainable and the risk of losing visibility if you work flexibly. Job design is important in terms of ensuring workloads are manageable. Some employers offer gradual returns to work on full pay to returners or those coming back from maternity leave [Vodafone] to give them the flexibility they need and in recognition that they are often delivering the same output as full timers in terms of covering the needs of their post. Senior sponsorship is key in keeping a person front of mind if they are no longer, for example, in the office and sponsorship can be vital for people returning from an extended career break. Employers can enable the sponsorship process and provide a framework of support, but individuals also have a responsibility to do what they can to maintain relationships. Using tools such as Webex ensures remote workers can still benefit from face to face meetings and this can be important in terms of building trust.

### **Job shares**

Job shares are a good way of tackling the work overload situation. The Civil Service operates a job share network which helps match make job shares at all levels of the organisation and shares good practice. Lloyds has tried initiatives such as an event where job shares were matched like in speed dating. The initiative was conducted through its Family Matters network and got a very positive response.

Professor Gatrell said research showed job shares were still very much resisted by organisations and the onus tended to be put on the job share people to find partners and make it work. The Civil Service says that productivity among job shares is up 30% so there is a good financial case and that convinces managers.

It required a lot of data to do a proper analysis and prove value for money. Other employers said interest in job shares may be waning in some organisations due to the increase in agile working options which meant people were more able to work full time but flexibly.

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### Family support

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Carillion won the Workingmums.co.uk Top Employer Award for Family Support and spoke about the importance of recognising supportive managers. It has a star managers award which highlights role models and promotes what they are doing across the business. The awards work in a competitive environment.

### Dads

Carillion also promote managers' family responsibilities, for example, it publishes pictures of managers with their families in family support network publications as well as guest articles that give a more rounded view of their managers. Role modelling is vital to creating change.

Sky had clearly branded its emergency and elder care support, provided by My Family Care, as being open to everyone and has had a lot of men registering. This was supported by a mix of male and female case studies which reduced the stigma for men. Other employers felt it was important for families to have conversations about what happened in childcare emergencies so they could devise a fair system. One of the big problems was supporting more dads to work flexibly, but many men nearing retirement were realising a phased retirement could work in their favour financially. Showcasing these could help change the culture for men as could providing more promotional material on men working flexibly, for instance, Deloitte's #agileme videos which showed the breadth of agile working available in the company.

LSE provided workshops for new dads and partners from outside the LSE could attend workshops for both new mums and new dads. It also enhances Shared Parental Leave and allows academics who take 18 weeks leave of absence a term of sabbatical leave to catch up on their research.

With regard to uptake of Shared Parental Leave, employers felt the SPL system was too complex and that more case studies were needed to show how it worked. Perhaps as there were so few cases employers could consider pooling case studies across sectors as it was a case of encouraging a wider cultural shift.

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Employers said there was a genuine desire to share information and best practice in the area of flexible working/equality which they had not seen in other areas. Businesses realised they would suffer if they didn't retain women and that everyone would benefit as a result of sharing information.

### **Elder care**

There was an increasing focus on this among employers with information sessions on elder care proving popular. Organisations like My Family Care offer elder care support and some employers provide emergency days off on top of regular leave. Again it was important to listen to employees about what they want and educate line managers about the importance of being open to conversations about elder care responsibilities and helping them signpost employees to more information.

### **Career progression**

Professor Gatrell said research suggested the key barrier to women's career progression was when they had children and possibly changed their work pattern. That extended to women who did not have children because of the perception they would have them. Nowadays as women were having children later that period where they might have children had stretched. Then there was fear of the menopause. Women coming back from maternity leave often felt resented because they were not supported. Many downshifted while their children were young and wanted to ramp back up again later, but found themselves on the 'mum track'. More support needed to be given to women and managers needed to be better informed of the issues, she said.

### **Leadership programmes**

Sky, who won the Workingmums.co.uk Top Employer Award for Career Progression, spoke of their Women in Leadership programme which started two years ago.

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They did a survey which revealed the main things that held women back were work life balance, lack of sponsors and lack of self confidence. They developed a programme to address the sponsor and self confidence issues. They found that women were overmentored and undersponsored and that they didn't understand the value of sponsors. Men developed sponsors naturally. Sky sought to artificially build that relationship for women. They got each executive area to nominate a high potential woman, get to know the woman and her career aspirations and match them with a sponsor. The programme was mandatory for the executives who acted as sponsors, but they could opt out if they wanted to. It was a 12-month programme including events such as speed networking which allowed directors and sponsors to meet their female talent and talk about non work-related issues. Sponsors followed up with one on one meetings. The difference between sponsors and mentors was important: sponsors are very senior and take action on behalf of sponsees whereas mentors tend to be just a few rungs up the ladder and give advice. Sponsors might take their sponsees to team meetings and advocate for them in meetings, for instance. Sky held roundtables with sponsors and sponsees and found that sponsors became quite competitive over how proactive they had been.

Employers said sponsees and mentees also had a responsibility to raise their own profile. Sky said that the real shift came when executives realised their responsibility and that this was potentially a long-term relationship. Understanding the value of sponsors also helped women to build their own natural sponsors.

The programme also included a self confidence course which covered topics such as how to network effectively and body language.

Self confidence was a complicated issue. Women may be more reluctant to apply for promotions or to negotiate a higher salary, but was this due to a lack of confidence or because those who did were perceived as aggressive and hard? Was it a fear of failure which made them more reluctant and was this due to the fact that if they failed they were strongly criticised in a way men weren't? Was being risk averse therefore sensible? Women often only got promotions in 'glass cliff' type situations where they were more likely to fail. Employers needed to analyse the processes around promotion and what women needed to get promoted.

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LSE, for instance, provided leadership programmes, mentors to work on confidence and a resilience course run by its women's network. Such courses worked better if led by employee networks rather than by HR.

### **Unconscious bias**

Wickes held a fishbowl exercise with a group of female employees from all parts of the organisation sitting in the centre of a room, with board members sitting around the outside. The board members were not allowed to speak. The women were asked to discuss several questions, including what they thought might hamper their career and what it was like to be a woman working in the organisation. The observers could throw questions into the fishbowl. The exercise made a deep impression on the mostly male board members. Some were shaken by what they heard and there had been a marked difference in their behaviour since. The employer was following up with a trial personal awareness course which focused on unconscious bias.

Employers said a lightbulb moment often came when male managers thought about their own daughters or wives, if these worked. That made the issues more personal for them. The hardest people to reach were men whose wives didn't work or who did not have daughters.

Unconscious bias programmes, such as Catalyst's Men Advocating Real Change, were very effective, but did these change the culture in the long term? One company, Extended Mind, used theatre to do role plays which attendees had to direct. It ended with attendees having to write a promise to themselves which was posted to them three months later.

### **Getting women on shortlists**

Sky had 50/50 shortlists for both internal and external placements. This was difficult to achieve in some areas and it took longer so that had to be factored into the process to avoid places being filled with women who were not the best fit for the job. It was also important to look at job descriptions - did senior managers in IT need technical skills, for instance. Progress had to be tracked on a continual basis. Lloyds said its managers had to get a waiver from a director to make an offer to someone if there was not a 50/50 shortlist. That had made a difference.

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SThree had looked at the data on the journey from candidate to recruitment. They found that women were not being pushed by recruiters and that they were 30% more likely to be hired if they were pushed. Assumptions were being made about women candidates, for instance, that they were more likely to drop out because they were more loyal to their current employer and that they were slower because they took more time researching roles. It was not the clients who were the problem because they weren't even getting a chance to see the candidates. A whole education process was needed so recruiters understood their candidates better. At the same time, clients often wanted a quick turnaround. They needed to give recruiters more time to provide them with a broader pool of candidates. Employers needed to get some redundancy into their systems so they could cover people leaving suddenly and build time into the recruitment process.

### **Building an inclusive culture**

Recruiters needed to have conversations and be open about what works since different people had different ways of working and needed different things in order to work better. There should not be a one size fits all approach to career progression. People might progress at different times, for instance, returners might be more interested in progressing their careers in their 50s. It was important to build an inclusive culture and not one just divided between different support networks.

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## Conclusion

### Some key takeaways from the session:

- > Flexible working needs to be inclusive and role modelled by senior managers
- > It needs to extend from recruitment to senior management and be carefully monitored
- > Line managers are a key target for information and support
- > Trialling flexible working in one area successfully can bring reluctant managers on board
- > Job design is important in terms of ensuring workloads are manageable
- > Sponsorship is important for keeping remote workers front of mind
- > Data was needed to show the financial advantages of job shares
- > Recognising supportive managers could spread good practice
- > Pooling case studies of successful SPL across companies could change the culture
- > Men had to be included in all family support initiatives and senior managers should talk about their own family responsibilities
- > Women needed sponsors to advocate for them, but should also be proactive in this relationship
- > Employers need to analyse the processes around promotion and what women needed to get promoted
- > Unconscious bias programmes can be effective, but need to be sustained
- > Getting more women on shortlists required time and tackling recruiter bias
- > Progress needs to be tracked continuously
- > An inclusive culture needs to taken into account the fact that there is not one set career path or that people may seek to advance at different times in their working lives.
- > Making real progress means continually challenging established norms.

*An inclusive culture needs to taken into account the fact that there is not one set career path or that people may seek to advance at different times in their working lives.*



## Appendix: Attendees

*Leading HR and Diversity heads from:*

- > **Balfour Beatty**
- > **Carillion**
- > **Civil Service Resourcing**
- > **Deloitte**
- > **Fidelity Investments**
- > **Lendlease**
- > **Lloyds Banking Group**
- > **London School of Economics and Political Science**
- > **Mace Group**
- > **Macquarie Group**
- > **Royal Mail**
- > **Sky**
- > **SThree PLC**
- > **Unilever**
- > **Virgin Trains**
- > **Vodafone**
- > **WHSmith**
- > **Wickes**
- > **Workingmums.co.uk**





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## Contact us

### Sales:

E: [sales@workingmums.co.uk](mailto:sales@workingmums.co.uk)

T: +44(0)20 8432 6094

### Other contacts:

#### Contact us on social media:

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/workingmums.co.uk](http://www.facebook.com/workingmums.co.uk)

Twitter: [twitter.com/workingmums](https://twitter.com/workingmums)

#### Customer service:

E: [info@workingmums.co.uk](mailto:info@workingmums.co.uk)

#### Technical Queries:

E: [support@workingmums.co.uk](mailto:support@workingmums.co.uk)

#### Contact us by post:

[Workingmums.co.uk](http://Workingmums.co.uk)

PO Box 53228 · London, N3 1YR