

## Midlands Engine Observatory Academic Insights

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Abigail Taylor (City-REDI)

### **Theme:**

Across the globe, greater demand for flexible and hybrid working practices is emerging following the shift to homeworking accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Employees are increasingly seeking greater choice over where and how they work. In turn, this is influencing companies to change their business models to respond to these new expectations and prevent potential staff shortages.

### **Area of Focus:**

How prevalent is flexible working in reality? Why is it important for the Midlands Engine?

### **Key Findings:**

- Analysis of over one million job adverts from over 450 UK job boards suggests a large proportion of jobs currently listed across the UK are not advertised as flexible. According to the [2021 Flexible Jobs Index](#), notwithstanding changes in attitudes towards flexible working driven by the pandemic, and a significant jump in jobs offering flexible working between 2020 (pre-Covid) and 2021, only a quarter of jobs advertised over the period between April and August 2021 offered flexible working.
- Canvassing of business leaders across 9 countries and 25 industry sectors by [EY](#) indicates that whilst most businesses intend to make moderate to extensive changes to their workplace models (e.g. allowing greater hybrid working), under 50% have communicated these plans to their workforce. According to the [ONS](#), nearly 1/3 of businesses are unsure what proportion of the workforce will work from their usual place of work in future.
- Uncertainty over how the pandemic will play out could be one reason why businesses are yet to commit to ongoing flexible working.
- Large numbers of employers still [value the office](#) in fostering collaboration and productivity, and are resistant to encouraging flexible working on a wider scale.
- The Flexible Jobs Index relates to jobs advertised as flexible. A larger proportion of roles may be flexible in practice.

### **Why is flexible working important?**

- The availability of flexible working (regarding when, where and how people work) is especially important in [retaining older workers](#) and [parents](#).
- 1 in 6 older workers [want to work fewer hours](#). A pilot where Guys and St Thomas' Trust and Legal & General trialled more flexible working arrangements with over 50s found job holders reported [benefits including better work life balance, greater sense of focus](#) when at work and greater sense of value and recognition. Line managers reported greater productivity and improved recruitment and retention.
- [Nuffield Foundation research](#) illustrates how "gendered assumptions about part-time working that devalues it", and "weak knowledge among managers of flexible working arrangements" prevent parents from achieving job quality.

### **Midlands Engine Impact:**

- The Midlands, particularly Birmingham, has a [relatively young population](#). Therefore, supporting parents to find employment which enables parents to better balance their work and family ambitions would seem important in ensuring the region has the skills required to respond to changes in employment created by challenges such as Brexit, Covid-19 and increasing automation. Work flexibility can also help workers who are not parents but who may have other caring responsibilities and/or other interests to achieve a better work-life balance.
- Given the population aged 50-64 in the Midlands increased by over 12% between 2010 and 2020 ([NOMIS](#), 2021), it would seem important for addressing skills shortages in the Midlands, that employers and wider stakeholders look to support this age group by offering a wider range of flexible roles.
- Managers have a key role to play in ensuring flexible working is available and employees working flexibly are [effectively managed](#). Improving access to [training for line managers](#) on supporting effective and equitable management of staff who work flexibly and progression and monitoring participation in training and retention rates offer ways forward.

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