

Flexible working affects mums' ability to progress their career

Submitted by: WM People Ltd

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Nearly half of working mums think working flexibly has affected their ability to progress their career, although almost three quarters identify flexible work as crucial to getting more women into senior roles, according to Workingmums.co.uk annual survey (<https://www.workingmums.co.uk/workingmums-annual-survey-2017/>).

The survey of over 2,300 working mums, sponsored by Nielsen**, shows the impact on women's careers if they work flexibly - whether part time, some degree of homeworking, flexi hours or some other form of flexibility. According to the survey:

- 47% of those surveyed think flexible working has affected their career progression with 28% saying it hasn't
- 52% of part timers say they have missed out on career progression opportunities or training
- 41% feel their flexible working is not viewed positively by their colleagues
- 29% feel discriminated against because of working flexibly

Yet it also shows that mums feel flexible working is vital for them to manage work and family life. In fact 60% of those who work flexibly would like more flexibility, such as more homeworking or more use of job shares, and 73% believe flexible working and flexi opportunities in senior roles are key to career progression.

Moreover, 51% are worried their flexible working will be taken away from them.

The lack of availability of senior flexible roles means many women have had to take pay cuts to get flexibility - 44% say they earn less than before they had children with just 27% earning more. The lack of women in senior positions in organisations is also a key contributor to the gender pay gap.

Far from the stereotype that flexible workers are less committed, 67% of mums feel they have to work harder because of unconscious bias in the workplace.

Workingmums.co.uk promotes best practice in flexible working and highlighting the benefits for all of normalising flexible working. That includes dads who research shows are keen to spend more time with their families. Some 24% of dads work flexibly, according to the Workingmums.co.uk survey, although only 4% of these work reduced hours, a figure that has barely changed over the last few years. Part of the barrier to dads working flexibly is the perception that it will damage their careers.

One woman who has benefited from flexible working to progress her career is Vicky Sandry, General Counsel for the UK and Ireland at Sky, named Workingmums.co.uk Top Overall Employer in 2016. She says: "I've worked part time since returning from my first maternity leave in 2004 – first four days a week and then 3.5 days a week. Whilst working part time I've had two significant promotions, the first in 2005, to run the Regulatory & Competition legal team, and the second in July to my current role. It has been challenging, but I feel lucky to have the best of both worlds – an incredibly interesting and engaging job, and the ability to spend time with the boys and I wouldn't change it for anything."

The survey also shows that many employers are losing experienced women because they cannot accommodate their flexible working requests:

- 23% of women had had flexible working requests turned down by their employer
- 19% had left as a result
- 35% had the request turned down for a reason other than that allowed under flexible working legislation
- 57% of those whose flexible working request had been refused while they were on maternity leave felt they might not return to work.

Gillian Nissim, founder of Workingmums.co.uk, says: "There is a clear link between the availability of flexible working, women's career progression and the gender pay gap. Too many women are not achieving their potential because organisations just don't understand the benefits all round of creating good flexible working opportunities. That is a waste of their skills and a loss to employers. It is not enough to retain women after maternity leave or attract them back through returner programmes. The culture has to be sufficient to enable them to stay. It is not just women, either. Growing numbers of dads are feeling frustrated at the strait jacket of 9 to 5 and want more input into family life. A work culture that does not recognise that the majority of employees have or will have families is not a culture that is fit for the future."

Editors' notes:

Case studies:

Lauren Powell works in recruitment in Berkshire. She has a two-year-old daughter. She came back from maternity leave after seven months and worked four days condensed into three. However, her workload remained the same and her salary was reduced by more than a pro rata sum. She says she was made to feel that she should be grateful to get flexible working. She was soon told that the condensed pattern wasn't working and that she had to increase to four days. She was not allowed any homeworking, but was expected to pick up any extra work on her day off. She says it took 18 months for her workload (which was greater than other full-time workers) to be reduced. She adds that she has been passed over for promotion so she is about to change jobs and move out of the recruitment industry. Her new role will be full time, but with lots of flexibility and home working. Asked what needs to change she said: "Attitudes need to change. People are stuck in the past and HR need to address this bias across every company. Flexible workers are often bullied and have no one to turn to. HR should conduct a review of all flexible workers every so often to make sure everything is okay."

Rachel Nurse works in retail management and lives in Derbyshire. She has a seven-year-old daughter. She says before she had children she was next in line for promotion to store manager, but after she fell pregnant that was never mentioned again. Because she has to pick up her daughter from the childminder by 6pm she cannot go for any roles higher up the ranks because the main company hours are 8.30am to 6pm. Rachel fixed her rota after having her daughter so she could manage childcare. This has been more difficult in different stores where the person doing the rota has decided that she needs to be 100% fully flexible and has changed her rota on a weekly basis. She would like to see more fixed shifts. She relies heavily on her parents to help with childcare, but they are often not available so on several

occasions in the last year she has had to take her daughter to work with her.

Justine French* (not her real name) works in the private sector and lives in Bradford. She has a three year old child. She says there have not been any flexible positions advertised at her workplace at all in the six years she has been there and that only full timers who work standard hours get promoted. She knows a part-time worker who has been there for 17 years in the same job role. After returning from maternity leave she put in a flexible working request, but it was rejected. She was told her job couldn't be done part time and her suggestion of a job share was also turned down. She says she asked for homeworking and it was not even discussed. She had to go back to her full-time role or change department and start again as a trainee, which is what she did. Asked what needs to change, she says: "I think employers need to understand that times have moved on. Women no longer stay at home to raise children because they also want a career and it's impossible in this day and age to survive on one wage. Job shares would work absolutely fine and loads of women would jump at the chance. At the moment I feel flexible workers have jobs rather than a career and this is what needs to change."

*For more information or more case studies, contact Mandy Garner on mandy.garner@workingmums.co.uk or ring 07789 106435.

More details: <https://www.workingmums.co.uk/workingmums-annual-survey-2017/>

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