



Working parents, flexibility and job quality: What are the trade-offs?

**Global Institute of Women's Leadership,
King's College London, Working Families
and University of East Anglia**

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LEADERSHIP**





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What are the trade-offs?.....

“We need the flexibility and we need the good pay. But we also need jobs that are good for us, as women. You know, we're not robots. We want things where you can progress, and you can get training... We're not being greedy.”

- **Mother, healthcare**

“When you go to reduced hours in my job... there's no chance of progression. And I think it's very much held against you that you've got these other responsibilities. I have been openly told that if you work part time, then there's only a certain level that you can reach in the business. It's like you have to choose between having a successful career or spending time with your family, which is really unfair. I don't see why we can't have both.”

- **Single mother,
fashion design**

“People don't talk about your children... when I asked for the support from a manager, it's like, Why? Where do you need to go? Why do you need time off? What is your priority? Can your wife not pick up the children from school?”

- **Father, charity sector**



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--> Foreword

Working Families has been supporting parents and carers in work for over 40 years. Over those decades we've seen plenty of progress, but we know that some barriers to change have remained stubbornly in place. This report adds significantly to our understanding of the elements of work parents see as most important now and looking into the future, as well as their attitudes to job quality.

We are particularly pleased to be collaborating with King's College London to fill this gap in knowledge. The juggling act parents carry out on a daily basis is much discussed: this research brings it to life by looking at the quality of the jobs parents can get, and the compromises they make to try and secure them alongside meeting their caring responsibilities.

For both employers and government, understanding the needs and priorities of parents when it comes to work is a top priority. Without knowing parents' experience of job quality, and their sense of what it could be in the future, it is hard to develop meaningful policies and practices to make sure they are well supported and seen as valued and productive participants in the labour market.

The stories about the trade-offs parents make to manage work and childcare are often shocking to hear, but we know that the examples shared in this report illuminate the experience of many. Working parents are often undertaking low paid roles, well below their level of skill, and giving up on

opportunities to progress or take promotion because of their childcare responsibilities. It shows very clearly that work and care are not easily reconciled without flexibility, security and supportive employers.

This report, for me, underlines the importance of our work at Working Families: supporting employers to create flexible, family-friendly workplaces for parents and carers, and helping government and policymakers to understand the reforms that will make the biggest change for families across the UK.

Jane van Zyl | Chief Executive, Working Families



Executive summary

Rapid changes taking place in the world of work due to the impacts of COVID-19, Brexit, technology and automation are disrupting people's livelihoods and transforming their working arrangements.

Against this background, the 'future of work' is an important area of policy focus across the political spectrum and among employers, unions and professional associations. While the government now has a strong focus on getting people into work through the Plan for Jobs, it is important to remember the prior objective of creating 'high quality jobs for all UK citizens' (stated in the 2017 Industrial Strategy)¹ and that few tangible improvements to job quality have been made as a result of the 'Good Work' strategy also published at that time². Now, as we re-evaluate the role of work in our lives and livelihoods in light of the pandemic, job quality has never been more relevant.

Achieving the goal of improving job quality necessitates a deeper understanding of labour market inequalities beyond pay, including variations in people's experiences, and expectations of, job quality. This report forms part of a larger project entitled 'Who can 'have it all'?: job quality and parenthood in the UK', conducted by researchers at the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The report is written in collaboration with Working Families and the University of East Anglia contributes to the agenda of improving jobs by gathering detailed insights on experiences of job quality among working parents from diverse backgrounds employed in different sectors. It illustrates the high currency of work flexibility for parents – conceived broadly in terms of control over when, where and how work takes place – but also the importance of other elements of job quality, including job security and support from managers. Crucially, for employers and policymakers, these new data expose barriers that prevent parents from achieving job quality. These are many and varied: from gendered assumptions about part-time working that devalues it, to weak knowledge among managers of flexible working arrangements.

We derive practical recommendations from these findings to drive positive change and improve the world of work for parents. These include measures to tackle the gender pay gap by widening access to part-time and flexible opportunities for all employees, regardless of gender and seniority, and ensuring that progression routes are not limited to those working full-time and standard hours. Arguably, such measures would improve job quality for many.

Importantly, through this research, we position the voice of parents at the heart of the job quality debate. Their perspectives should reassure those proactive employers already looking to improve working life for parents and motivate those who have yet to develop strong policy and practice in this area. For government, the findings should galvanise action to make flexible working 'part of workplace DNA' – following up recent proposals to change the law to allow employees to make a flexible³ working request from their first day in a job, as well as encouraging wider reforms to improve job quality.

¹HM Government (2017) Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain Fit for the Future. London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. (page 29)

²Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2017) Good Work: the Taylor review of modern working practices. London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-work-the-taylor-review-of-modern-working-practices>

³Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng quoted in announcement of government's proposals to extend flexible working. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/millions-to-be-empowered-by-government-plans-to-strengthen-day-one-employment-rights-and-increase-productivity-of-businesses>



Key findings

Parents value job security and control, which are often overlooked in policymaking relating to 'family friendly' workplaces.

- What parents value in a job shifts significantly after having children, with increased priority given to flexibility in particular. However, parents also value job security, job control, financial security and support from managers.
- Gendered assumptions by employers – such as that mothers do not value training and progression, and that fathers do not have family responsibilities – can limit job quality.
- Parents value job security and control, which are often overlooked in policymaking relating to 'family friendly' workplaces.
- There are still huge barriers to effective flexible working, including employers denying requests due to unsubstantiated 'business needs', unsupportive workplace cultures and a lack of knowledge of how to deal with requests. Also, employers sometimes define flexibility in narrow terms and do not always offer the forms of flexibility parents need. Arrangements around working time (including both flexible working and shift patterns) are often dependent on the discretion of individual line managers rather than employees' needs.
- Line manager support enables flexible working to function well and can also reinforce employees' sense of trust and security at work.
- Working parents, especially mothers, sometimes sacrifice important elements of job quality such as pay and progression to secure other elements, particularly flexibility. This means many get 'stuck' in flexible roles with little opportunity for improved pay or progression.
- For many of our participants, it was seemingly impossible to combine flexibility with other desirable aspects of a job, like pay and opportunities for career progression. This may be due to employers' negative attitudes towards part-time and flexible working arrangements or to a perception that senior roles cannot be performed flexibly.
- Other job quality trade-offs were varied across industries: some working parents had given up job security in favour of flexibility whilst others had sacrificed career progression in favour of job security.
- Factors such as a partner's job and childcare costs feed into these job quality trade-offs. Single parents have fewer options and face acute challenges in achieving job quality due to the dominance of financial concerns.
- Parents want to see lasting changes to improve their working lives following the COVID-19 pandemic, including: more creative thinking around flexible working, ensuring a gender-inclusive approach, trust and understanding from employers and strengthening employee voice.



Recommendations

For employers

A variety of forms of flexible working should be made available at all levels including the most senior.



1. All jobs need to be designed and advertised as flexible unless there is a strong business case that this is not possible. The level of flexibility possible within each role needs to be considered carefully. Whilst some roles may have higher levels of 'flex' than others, all can be designed to have flexible elements. Line managers need training and support in job design. This should include identifying the possibility for flexibility in every role, assessing requests consistently, and managing flexible teams effectively to ensure employees' health and wellbeing.
2. Improve the process of requesting flexible working: provide clear guidance to both employees and managers on the full range of flexible options available⁴. A consistent approach is required, and all requests need to be considered on a case-by-case basis according to the job role and individual employee's needs⁵.
3. Unsubstantiated 'business needs' should not be widely used to justify refusing flexible working requests. Employers must provide evidence to support their justification and consider alternative working arrangements if requests cannot be accommodated.
4. To achieve gender equality in the use of flexible working and make it work for all working parents, reducing the need for job quality trade-offs, a variety of forms of flexible working should be made available at all levels including the most senior. There is often no obvious reason that people need to work standard full-time hours to fulfil the requirements of a more senior role.
5. There needs to be greater parity between part-time and full-time workers in terms of pay and progression. Employers should monitor part-time and flexible working in relation to employee characteristics, pay and progression, to make it clear if, and when, part-time and flexible employees are getting 'stuck'. Action in this area will reduce gender inequality.
6. Monitoring is required to increase parents' sense of control and security around their flexible working arrangements – key elements of job quality. To provide greater security for employees, flexible working should not be contingent on a particular manager.
7. As part of re-configuring working patterns post-lockdowns, be more creative with the types of flexible options you offer employees and give them more control. Consider flexible and split schedules and ways of reconfiguring hours other than part-time or compressed hours. This may prevent working parents switching involuntarily to part-time work because other options are not available.
8. Managers need to recognise the whole person. This involves acknowledging the responsibilities that employees have outside of work and how they impact on working arrangements.

⁴See Working Families, Flexible working: your questions answered. A webinar for parents and carers.

⁵See Working Families, Tips for negotiating flexible working and Choosing a new work pattern: a step by step guide for employees.

When an employee starts working flexibly, their workload needs to be reconfigured in a realistic way to account for the changes.

9. Managers should engage in workload planning in collaboration with employees. For example, when an employee starts working flexibly, their workload needs to be reconfigured in a realistic way to account for the changes.
10. Ask working parents what they need and value at work and help them to achieve that rather than relying on assumptions. Empower employees to ask for what they need in terms of schedules, hours, workload changes or other ways to improve job quality. This could be through returners programmes/ interviews for both mothers and fathers returning to work after having a child. Recognise the additional challenges faced by single parents.
11. Managers must trust employees and place emphasis on outputs rather than hours, shifting emphasis onto quality and work completed and away from fixed ideas about the length of a working day or week.



For government

12. Ensure employees' rights to access suitable working arrangements, control and security through the Employment Bill. The new legislation should guarantee that shift workers receive advanced notice of shifts and take into account their caring responsibilities. Additionally, the Bill should stipulate that jobs should be designed and advertised with flexible options in mind, so prospective employees can apply for roles with the confidence that day one requests for flexible working will be accommodated.
13. Improve guidance for employers on dealing with flexible working requests, including on the full range of flexible working possibilities and their legal responsibilities.
14. Recognise the multifaceted role of flexible working in equalising opportunities in the forthcoming Levelling Up White Paper. Remote and flexible working enable employment opportunities to be distributed more fairly across the UK whilst also widening access to the labour market, particularly for single parents.
15. In the focus on boosting employment, such as through the Plan for Jobs, maintain a focus on job quality, particularly among key groups who are at risk of low job quality or job quality trade-offs, such as working parents. Incentivise and encourage employers to create jobs which combine all the crucial components of job quality and make existing high quality jobs accessible and available to working parents.
16. The high cost of childcare is intimately linked to parents' job quality, particularly for single parents. The enormous problems with childcare affordability, quality and availability need to be urgently addressed, not least to reduce the need for parents to make difficult job quality trade-offs when their children are young. Free universal childcare should be available from 39 weeks.
17. As part of much-needed reforms to gender pay gap reporting, encourage businesses to report on indicators such as pay and progression among flexible and part-time workers, and to include action plans addressing disparities in these areas.



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Free universal childcare should be available from 39 weeks.

Approach and definitions

Moving beyond flexibility

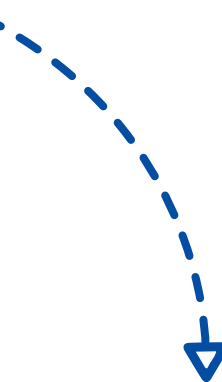
Job quality relates to the extent to which a job can be considered decent, fair, and conducive to workers' wellbeing. In this report, we focus on job quality among working parents. Flexible working is the element of job quality for parents that is given most attention in the literature. This includes location flexibility (typically working from home), as well as schedule flexibility (such as flexi-time, part-time and job shares), and informal flexibility (for example, being able to leave work at short notice if a child is ill or childcare falls through).

In principle, flexible working should help parents to better manage the demands of both work and family life. In the case of schedule flexibility, for example, there is evidence that it can help “[relax] the work scheduling constraints faced by families with young children⁶.” Reducing working hours can lower levels of chronic stress, particularly among mothers⁷. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents have experienced the benefits of flexible working and would like it to continue long-term⁸.

While flexibility is a vital aspect of job quality for many working parents, it is important that we do not lose sight of other components (which are listed and explained in the next chapter and Figure 1). The absence of other elements of job quality – even in the presence of flexibility – can be very damaging for individuals and families. For instance, a lack of control over hours (even if these hours are seemingly ‘flexible’) can lead to relationship conflict⁹. When parents have better job security, this has been shown to be associated with better social, emotional and behavioural development in children¹⁰. Indeed, researchers have argued that ‘family friendly’ work extends far beyond flexibility to incorporate security and control¹¹.

The ‘flexibility paradox’ and trade-offs

Flexible working may not always be positive for parents. Researchers have noted that flexible working can lead to reduced job quality in other areas, such as increased overtime hours, known as the ‘flexibility paradox’¹².³ Further, in prioritising flexibility, working parents may be sacrificing other aspects of job quality, such as a job that aligns with qualifications and experience. We are interested in the trade-offs and compromises parents make: which aspects of job quality they can achieve and which ones they are more likely to lose.



⁶Bryan, M. L., & Sevilla, A. (2017). Flexible working in the UK and its impact on couples' time coordination. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 15(4), 1415-1437 (page 1415).

⁷Chandola, T., Booker, C. L., Kumari, M., & Benzeval, M. (2019). Are flexible work arrangements associated with lower levels of chronic stress-related biomarkers? A study of 6025 employees in the UK household longitudinal study. *Sociology*, 53(4), 779-799.

⁸Working Families (2021) Building back better for working parents: #FlexTheUK campaign briefing. Available at: <https://workingfamilies.org.uk/publications/flextheuk2021/>

⁹Perry-Jenkins, M., Goldberg, A. E., Pierce, C. P., & Sayer, A. G. (2007). Shift work, role overload, and the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(1), 123-138

¹⁰Lam, J., O'Flaherty, M., & Baxter, J. (2016). Dynamics of parental work hours, job insecurity, and child wellbeing during middle childhood in Australian dual-income families. Available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43394119.pdf>

¹¹Strazdins, L., Shipley, M. & Broom, D. H. (2007). What does family-friendly really mean? Wellbeing, time, and the quality of parents' job. *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, 33(2), 202-225.

¹²Chung, H., & Van der Horst, M. (2020). Flexible working and unpaid overtime in the UK: The role of gender, parental and occupational status. *Social Indicators Research*, 151(2), 495-520.



Comparing mothers and fathers' experiences

While flexibility is a vital aspect of job quality for many working parents, it is important that we do not lose sight of other components

It is well established that parenthood leads to gender differences in working hours¹³ and income¹⁴. However, we know little about how becoming a parent affects the non-financial aspects of work for men and women. While the policy focus in recent decades has been facilitating women entering, and staying in, the labour force, this may have come at the expense of job quality, with large numbers of women working in poor quality jobs¹⁵. To what extent is this driven by motherhood? Additionally, fathers are often neglected in studies of the impact of parenthood on working life, meaning that we only have a partial view. Though men are less likely to alter their working hours in response to parenthood¹⁶, they may experience impacts on their job quality. Evidence emerging through the pandemic indicates that fathers are increasingly wanting to play a greater role in caregiving but find that their job inhibits this¹⁷.

Our approach

Our aim with this research was to explore experiences, attitudes and desires around job quality with a cross-section of working parents. For more details on the methodology please see Appendix 1 and 2. We conducted a series of focus groups to hear parents' views about the questions below, speaking to 27 parents living all over the UK and working in a variety of different jobs:

- What aspects of job quality are important for parents?
- What trade-offs and compromises do parents make to secure the components of job quality that are important to them, and how these could be mitigated?
- How does flexibility interact with other aspects of job quality?
- Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed what parents want from work?

Given the small sample and qualitative research methods, we do not claim that our research is representative of the views of all working parents in the UK. Instead, our aim is to widen the parameters by which to debate and assess parents' working lives by examining the varied components of job quality and their interactions in the working lives of parents, as expressed through their own voices. This will build knowledge and understanding among employers and policymakers of the types of challenges faced by working parents in relation to achieving job quality.

Ongoing quantitative research as part of this project will further build the evidence base.

¹³Costa Dias, M., Joyce, R. & Parodi, F. (2018). Wage progression and the gender wage gap: The causal impact of hours of work'. IFS Briefing Note, BN223, pp. 1–21. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

¹⁴Glauber, R. (2012). Women's work and working conditions: Are mothers compensated for lost wages? *Work and Occupations*, 39(2), 115–138.

¹⁵Warren, T., Lyonette, C. (2018). Good, bad and very bad part-time jobs for women? Re-examining the importance of occupational class for job quality since the 'Great Recession' in Britain. *Work, Employment and Society*, 32(4), 747–767.

¹⁶Costa Dias, M., Joyce, R. & Parodi, F. (2018). Wage progression and the gender wage gap: The causal impact of hours of work'. IFS Briefing Note, BN223, pp. 1–21. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

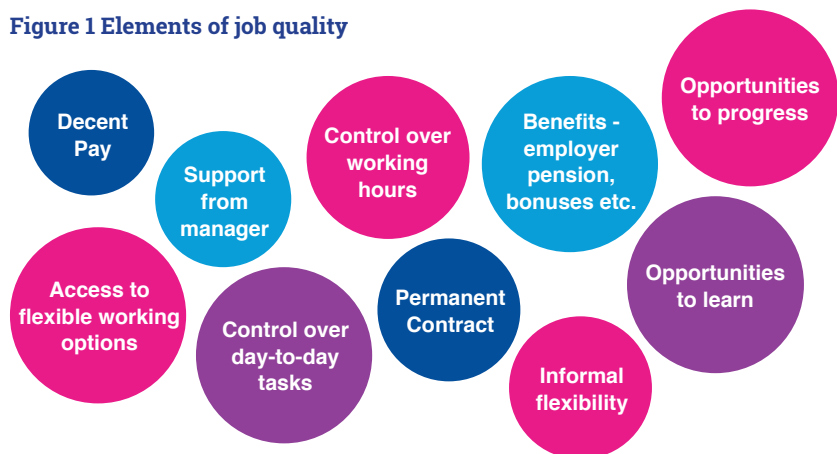
¹⁷The Fatherhood Institute (2021). Lockdown fathers: The untold story. London: The Fatherhood Institute. Available at: <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Lockdown-Fathers-Full-Report.pdf>



Research background: Working parents and job quality

Job quality relates to the extent to which a job can be considered decent, fair, and conducive to workers' wellbeing. In some definitions, it involves the extent to which a job is fulfilling and meaningful¹⁸. There are multiple components, shown in Figure 1, which encompass the working conditions of a job (including contract type and working hours) as well as the resources it provides to workers (such as pay, security, benefits, flexibility, opportunities to progress and autonomy)¹⁹. Some elements of job quality can be improved via 'soft' interventions while others require more regulation and policy change. It is important to take a holistic view of job quality because most jobs include both positive and negative elements. Also, many of the components reinforce one another: for example, managerial support may enable access to flexible working. Some have an outside impact: for example, the positive effects of autonomy and control over work schedules may be insufficient to counteract the negative effects of long or unsocial hours²⁰.

Figure 1 Elements of job quality



Focusing on job quality highlights the role of work in shaping mental and physical wellbeing and living standards, as well as social inclusion and social cohesion. In turn, impacting on social inclusion and social cohesion²¹. Crucially, the world of work is changing, with associated risks to job quality including: increased job insecurity, the growing role of technology and automation eroding workers' autonomy and opportunities, and the employment impacts of COVID-19 and Brexit. In the current UK policy focus on getting people into work (for example via the government's Plan for Jobs), the importance of job quality is at risk of being overlooked. It is thus important to understand variations in job quality between population groups so that we can target resources effectively to increase job quality for all.

¹⁸Warhurst, C., Wright, S. & Lyonette, C. (2017). Understanding and measuring job quality – thematic literature review. London: CIPD. Available at : https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/understanding-and-measuring-job-quality-3_tcm18-33193.pdf

¹⁹More detail on the various aspects of job quality can be found in the following reports:

- EUROFOUND. (2012). Trends in job quality in Europe. Dublin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.
- Warhurst, C., Wright, S. & Lyonette, C. (2017). Understanding and measuring job quality – thematic literature review. London: CIPD. Available at : https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/understanding-and-measuring-job-quality-3_tcm18-33193.pdf

²⁰Charlesworth, S., Welsh, J., Strazdins, L., Baird, M., & Campbell, I. (2014). Measuring poor job quality amongst employees: the VicWAL job quality index. *Labour & Industry: A journal of the social and economic relations of work*, 24(2), 103-123.

²¹Warhurst, C., Wright, S. & Lyonette, C. (2017). Understanding and measuring job quality – thematic literature review. London: CIPD. Available at : https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/understanding-and-measuring-job-quality-3_tcm18-33193.pdf

²²Jones, W., Haslam, R. & Haslam, C. (2017). What is a "good" job? Modelling job quality for blue collar workers. *Ergonomics*, 60(1), 138–149.

Whilst the elements of job quality in Figure 1 are thought to be important to most workers, preferences do vary. For example, there may be certain 'core features' which are important to almost all workers, such as safety and security, and others which are only important to some, such as autonomy and flexibility. In this sense, a good job provides a 'match' to individual preferences²² and mismatches may result in negative impacts for workers (such as poor wellbeing) and for organisations (such as high turnover).





3. What do parents value in a job?

Key findings

- What parents value in a job shifts significantly after having children, with increased priority given to flexibility in particular. However, parents also value job security, job control, financial security and support from managers.
- Gendered assumptions by employers – such as that mothers do not value training and progression, and that fathers do not have family responsibilities – can limit job quality.
- Parents value job security and control, which are often overlooked in policymaking relating to ‘family friendly’ workplaces.
- Barriers to effective flexible working include employers denying requests due to unsubstantiated ‘business needs’, unsupportive workplace cultures and a lack of knowledge of how to deal with requests and provide the forms of flexibility parents need.
- Line manager support enables flexible working to function well and can also reinforce employees’ sense of trust and security at work.

We began by asking working parents what they most valued about their current job. The answers touched on a range of aspects of job quality that participants either currently have or would like to have, including intrinsic features of the job: the variety, creativity, and challenge it provides, as well as resources, good promotion prospects, a supportive manager; flexible working and a lack of stress or excessive demands.

“What I love about my work is the fact that I get to work with lots of different clients and I’ve always been the kind of person who enjoys the variety, enjoys the challenge of everyday something new.”

- Mother, higher education

Most agree that there are certain core elements, like decent pay and benefits, from which other aspects of job quality extend. For example, in relation to benefits:

“It makes the employer more responsible...it shows that they care about you and will invest in you, which will naturally help you to learn, be appraised properly and maybe progress.”

- Father, local authority worker

In short, when it comes to their work, parents value many of the same things as the rest of the working population. However, most feel that their priorities had shifted significantly since becoming parents.

When we asked which job quality components had become more important since becoming a parent, flexibility was central, but the following were also highlighted:

- Job security
- Job control
- Financial security
- Support from managers

Battling gender-based assumptions

Assumption 1: Mothers stop caring about training and progression

Some parents feel that they have been subject to incorrect, often gender-based assumptions about what they would want and value from their work after becoming a parent, which they feel has been unfair and damaging. Several participants have been on the receiving end of biases and assumptions about shifting priorities that they feel has affected their job quality by limiting their opportunities at work. For example, they feel they would not be given the same opportunities to learn and progress since becoming a parent.

“When you become a mum, sometimes ... the employer assumes, or my employer assumed, that I wasn't keen on the learning or the trainings. But obviously I still wanted to learn... I think it's about giving mothers the option for those who want to still progress to get those mentorship opportunities ... Just don't assume on behalf of us.”

- **Mother, higher education**

“We need the flexibility and we need the good pay. But we also need jobs that are good for us, as women. You know, we're not robots. We want things where you can progress and you can get training... We're not being greedy.”

- **Mother, healthcare**

“Going from the top of my game, highly driven, viewed very highly... returning to work and there's less of an expectation on me now to even achieve because I'm a mother.”

- **Single mother, youth work**

This practice of gatekeeping of opportunities for progression could stem from assumptions that working mothers are less committed to their work. Several participants felt that this was a common (mis)perception.





Assumption 2: Fathers do not face family responsibilities

Several fathers describe a lack of recognition of men's family responsibilities and a reluctance to discuss these in the workplace.

“I think it gets very gendered in terms of my caring responsibilities and the lack of understanding of that role. I feel under a lot more pressure to be present, and so that's a, kind of an ongoing challenge really trying to negotiate that, make that work.”

- Father, higher education

Sometimes this is linked to an inability to access some of aspects of job quality, such as flexibility.

“People don't talk about your children... when I asked for the support from a manager, it's like, why? Where do you need to go? Why do you need time off? What is your priority? Can your wife not pick up the children from school?”

- Father, charity sector

The importance of job security

Job security is defined as the subjective likelihood of losing one's job and is typically understood by the type of employment contract, with permanent contracts implying higher levels of job security. However, since job insecurity is subjective, it is experienced by people employed in a range of contract types and can be a factor of broader economic circumstances or the state of an employee's industry of work.

Job security has a crucial yet overlooked role in the 'family friendliness' of jobs due to its impact on parental wellbeing. Both adequate time and parental wellbeing are thought to be crucial components in promoting effective family functioning.²³ Job insecurity also poses a threat to families' economic stability and ability to plan ahead.

Alongside an increased emphasis on flexibility, the prominence of job security is reflected in many accounts of the transition to parenthood. For some, this is focused on the need to have a permanent employment contract.

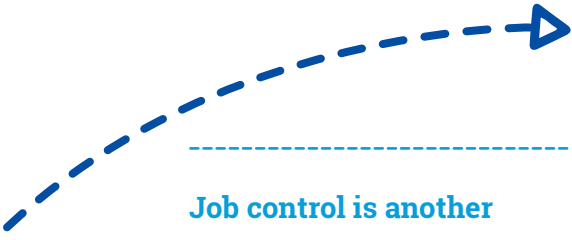
“I think for me when I think about my career and going into parenting, I think I had a lot of freedom in my work where I could move around and work in different countries and all of that kind of stuff, and that had to stop as soon as I had children, and I was working on various kind of different kinds of contracts, and my first thought when we had children was that I needed to have a some kind of permanent post.”

- Father, higher education

Jobs in the public sector are typically perceived as more secure and this was seen as one of their key family-friendly benefits. For those who are self-employed or working in some areas of the private sector, there is a feeling of insecurity arising from the inherent dependence on clients and on generating business.

²³Strazdins, L., Shipley, M. & Broom, D. H. (2007). What does family-friendly really mean? Wellbeing, time, and the quality of parents' job. Australian Bulletin of Labour, 33(2), 202-225.

We discussed hypothetical jobs with different job quality features. Those which included self-employment or non-permanent contracts were generally perceived less favourably, even if they had other benefits. For example, a job which would involve self-employment but with a large element of flexibility provoked negative reactions. It was seen to lack security and not be sufficiently 'family friendly'.



Job control is another aspect of job quality thought to be particularly important for parents. Yet it is often excluded in discussions about the relative 'family-friendliness' of different jobs.

The importance of control, boundaries and predictability

Job control is another aspect of job quality thought to be particularly important for parents. Yet it is often excluded in discussions about the relative 'family-friendliness' of different jobs and workplaces. Job control is typically defined as the way work is organised and the degree of control employees have. For parents we spoke to, this sense of control is vital, and goes hand-in-hand with the need to create boundaries around work with clear, predictable schedules, especially in the context of rigid childcare and school hours. Both mothers and fathers describe being less able to respond to unpredictable or last-minute work demands since they had children and that this contrasts with the way they had worked previously.

“Before kids it was a case of: I’ll drop everything for my employer and do whatever it takes to get the project or work done... so whilst before I might think, I’ve got 10-12 hours to get this task done, now... that’s it, I have to leave at this particular point and pick the kids up.”

- Mother, finance

Some parents feel they need to create fixed work schedules and stick to them, and they need their workplace to be able to accommodate this. But this is not always possible due to unpredictable events happening at work, leaving some feeling conflicted.

“There’s always something that goes wrong at 4 o’clock, or there’s always a reason I can’t get away on time and I have to really force myself now, because there’s nobody else to collect my child from nursery. And that makes me feel quite guilty that I’m leaving my job half done, if that makes sense, I feel like I’m not as committed as I used to be because I have to leave, and that’s the bit I dislike the most.”

- Single mother, food manufacturing

Last minute changes and demands are especially problematic for parents who rely completely on childcare.

“As a single parent, I do find childcare difficult if my child minder has not got availability, or if I need to work any extra, and the practice has actually just started working weekends as well, which is something that I’m not able to do because there are no childcare providers on a weekend.”

- Single mother, dentistry

This need for fixed schedules and predictability is closely linked to the idea of preserving clear boundaries between work and family life. This is an issue that had become particularly important since parenthood. For many, however, it feels difficult to establish boundaries and stop work from encroaching on home life, especially when employers were used to them being constantly available before they had children.

Consequently, arrangements that could be deemed 'flexible' on the employers' side, entailing unpredictable and frequently changing work patterns, such as zero-hours contracts, were deemed 'impossible' by most parents, although some had been forced to accept this sort of work arrangement at various points in their career, particularly when working in low-paid jobs and industries.



The importance of financial security

The level of pay is one of the most basic features of a job. Most parents we spoke to regard decent pay as being a given, something that they would always expect and hope for from a job. Pay enables workers to meet their financial needs but can also be understood as reflecting the respect and status afforded to workers within a workplace, and some prioritise this more than others. Pay was described as a particular priority by fathers, single mothers and those working in low income jobs. A single mother working in food manufacturing said:

“[I value] decent pay. I’m on my own, and I’m a homeowner. So if I do reduce my hours I still need to make sure I’m making enough money to pay our bills because the support for homeowners just isn’t really there... I’d have to give up my home if I didn’t make enough money to pay my mortgage.”

- Single mother, food manufacturing

When asked about one thing they would like to change to improve life for working parents in the future, one father working in manufacturing simply said, “more money”. Among single mothers, especially those with pre-school age children, there is an awareness that work must pay enough to cover expensive childcare costs, as well as all the other costs associated with running a household alone.

When asked about what aspects of job quality she would prioritise, one single mother emphasises just how much the cost of childcare drives decisions about how and when to work. In this sense, being in a two-earner household brings a greater degree of choice and ability to prioritise what matters to you in terms of job quality.

“Yeah, probably the salary for me as well. I went from full-time down to part time, in terms of just being able to afford childcare in my area.”

- Single mother, dentistry

Coupled mothers working in professional occupations are less likely to mention pay as one of their top priorities.

Money is perceived by some as a sign of being valued and respected for what you can offer to a business, as opposed to feeling exploited – not just a material necessity. One father, who had worked in various manual jobs throughout his life, was keenly aware of power hierarchies in the workplace that are reflected in salaries. Hence, he wished for more equal rates of pay and a fairer working culture.

But money was not always discussed in terms of actual earnings. It was linked to the desire for the financial stability gained through having a regular decent income, highlighting, again, the importance parents attach to security.



Finding the right kind of flexibility

While not all parents we spoke to currently had flexibility in their job, those who did have flexibility valued it highly and those who did not have it usually wanted it.

Unsurprisingly, flexible working was the most common topic discussed by our participants when asked what aspects of job quality had become more important since becoming a parent. While not all parents we spoke to currently had flexibility in their job, those who did have flexibility valued it highly and those who did not have it usually wanted it. Participants described various sorts of flexible working arrangements, including reduced (i.e. less than full-time) hours, full-time hours with non-standard schedules, and location flexibility. The most common arrangement was working part-time. Unsurprisingly, this was most prevalent amongst mothers. Other arrangements included:

- Flexi-hours (working full-time hours but with flexibility over when these work hours are performed)
- Term-time only working
- Compressed hours, for example working a full-time week over four days
- Working from home (which was obviously more common during the pandemic)
- Hybrid working, with some work done from home and some 'in the field' or in an office
- Informal flexibility

In most cases, notwithstanding the changes that had taken place due to the pandemic, working flexibly was a direct response to individuals' caring responsibilities, and had been negotiated with an employer to accommodate these. Several mothers indicated that without flexibility they would not be able to participate in paid work.

“Flexibility has probably been the only thing that’s kept me in my job... It’s the one thing that makes work doable, really.”

- Single mother, youth work

The availability, costs and timetabling of childcare were mentioned by several participants as a driver for seeking alternatives to full-time hours. As recent research has highlighted²⁴, childcare in the UK is amongst the most expensive in the world, causing parents major financial difficulties. It is a significant determinant in their decision-making regarding how and when to work. With more affordable childcare, it is debateable whether flexible working would be such a priority for parents with young children.



²⁴OECD (2021) Net childcare costs. Available at: <https://data.oecd.org/benwage/net-childcare-costs.html>

Sometimes part-time work is pursued because workplaces do not offer other types of flexibility, such as flexible scheduling.

While many parents we spoke to had flexible working arrangements that were working well for them, some wanted more or a different kind of flexibility. For others who wanted flexibility in the future, we discussed what that would ideally look like.

Some parents have actively chosen to work part-time. But sometimes part-time work is pursued because workplaces do not offer other types of flexibility, such as flexible scheduling. That is, there is not always a desire to work less, but to have greater control over working hours.

“I don’t mind the volume of work, but I need for it to be on my terms so that I can fit things in around it.”

- Mother, self-employed consultant

“I don’t want to have to take a pay cut... So I’m more than happy to work at night once the kids are in bed and that’s been tried and tested. To do that without dropping down to, like, 0.8 or 0.7. Because I don’t see that there is really a need for me to cut my hours in that way.”

- Mother, self-employed consultant

Shift-working

For some parents we spoke to, their main priority was not accessing a flexible working arrangement, but securing the shifts they wanted to fit around school and childcare or partners’ work schedules. Securing desired shifts and keeping these often felt like a random and disempowering process. For example, one father working in food manufacturing works a shift from 6am-2pm and then picks up his daughter from school. Although this arrangement works well for his family, he had only secured it out of luck because a colleague had retired. It was not a result of consideration from his employer for his caring responsibilities. For parents who do shift work, getting a working pattern that suits their circumstances seems to be a matter of luck rather than a right or something that they feel they can ask for.

Informal versus formal flexibility

Participants had differing views about the value of informal flexibility as opposed to more formal arrangements. For some, informal flexibility is not desirable as they feel that consistency was important for themselves and their children. They do not want their flexible working arrangements to be dependent on individual relationships or to have to ‘fight’ to get the flexibility they need. They do not want key elements of their caring lives – such as collecting children from school – to be contingent in any way on a manager’s good will. In contrast, some parents feel that informal arrangements, in addition to more formal ones, were helpful as ‘things change’. Informal flexibility is also seen by some parents as a sign of fairness, suggesting that their employer can ‘put themselves in your shoes’ and respond spontaneously and with empathy (in situations like children’s medical appointments or unexpected emergencies).

Not all participants are able to work as flexibly as they would like to, due to workplace barriers.

“So, with childcare or if you have an arrangement, I don’t think you can have that informal. It would need to be set in stone as to what is permitted and isn’t, so it’s not one minute we used to let you do this but now we can’t.”

- **Mother, finance**

“I’d much rather have a kind of informal [arrangement] where I know that as long as, I’ve got control over my day-to-day tasks, as long as the work’s getting done then I can be flexible about it, that would be my preferred way to work.”

- **Father, teacher education**

It is possible to have too much flexibility, which could easily cross over into feeling insecure if there were no rules and boundaries. For example, faced with a hypothetical job that had almost total flexibility in terms of where and when to work, but where the arrangements were totally informal and not set out in a clear company policy, many parents felt this would be unsuitable.

Informal flexibility is valuable as long as parents are confident that they retained control over its use and are sure it will not be taken away. Similarly, formal flexibility is valuable in that it gives parents confidence that they will retain the desired control in the future.

“Changing to a job where I have more control over my working hours has been quite a big improvement. Less money, so the pay thing is this an issue, but that control is quite--well, I did it, so I guess it must have had a better impact for me in the long run.”

- **Mother, mental health**

“I think for me, the real bug-bear is just, the whole ‘it’s flexible, but we’re not sure for how long’ and so forth - that just doesn’t really work for me.”

- **Father, Civil Service**



Not all participants are able to work as flexibly as they would like to, due to workplace barriers.

Barriers to flexible working

Although flexible working was mentioned by the majority of our participants as more desirable since they became parents – and the demand for flexible working is growing amongst workers more generally since the pandemic – not all participants are able to work as flexibly as they would like to, due to workplace barriers.

According to parents we spoke to there are three main barriers to flexible working currently.

1. Business Needs

In some businesses, flexible working is seen as ‘not possible’ due to the nature of the business. For example, a single mother working in dentistry said:

“I suppose it’s quite difficult being in the job that I’m in for flexibility because we have to be available for people...I suppose the flexibility would be something that would help me. But [it’s] not going to help the business, at the end of the day, which is difficult.”

- Single mother, dentistry

Interestingly, this person works part-time but does not view this as a form of flexible working. Instead, she cited the downsides and the fact that she is only doing so because of the high costs of full-time childcare.

In some workplaces, the concept of ‘business needs’ is often deployed to deny flexible working requests. This blocks creative approaches to finding solutions and enabling parents to better balance their home and working lives.

“There are...statutory codes of practice that employers are supposed to observe, but from my experience they rarely know them and you often have to fight quite hard... they can always find a way, to say “well, business needs are such and such so I’m sorry but you’ve got to meet the business needs.”

- Father, higher education

2. Unsupportive workplace cultures

Some employers do not see it as their job to accommodate the responsibilities that parents have outside work. In the case of one father working in a male-dominated environment, there is a dismissive culture around any mention of parenting in the workplace. He would like informal flexibility to be able to pick up his children sometimes, but the workplace culture does not seem at all conducive to this. This causes him frustration, especially when there were no obvious, practical constraints to allowing this.



“My kids are my first priority. So, my job shouldn’t take over my own wellbeing. My own future. So, I think that’s what I have in the back of my mind like, I would like informal flexibility... but I don’t see that happening.”

- Father, charity sector

Linking back to working parents’ need for control, there was a sense in this father’s account of a struggle for control over his time.

3. Lack of knowledge amongst line managers

Some employers say publicly that they support flexible working, but obstacles to achieving it in practice include a general reluctance as well as a lack of knowledge of how to deal with requests. This was mentioned by parents employed in a range of industries:

“You know, there’s so many flexible things that are out there on paper. But, actually, when you ask for them, they’re rolling their eyes... there’s resistance.”

- Mother, healthcare

“When I requested it, they didn’t know what to do. Despite there being a policy, they didn’t know who needed to sign it off, who was allowed to sign it off... It was a three-month process because no one had seen it before, despite [place of work] being this massive global company.”

- Mother, technology

Implementing flexible working effectively

Among participants who have access to flexibility there is sometimes a sense that it is not functioning optimally. Some participants described feeling increased pressure since starting to work flexibly. This was linked to a failure by their employer to genuinely reconfigure workloads to reflect changing hours or to unchanged underlying high-pressure cultures.

“A thing that I don’t like about my job is the untold pressure. So, I guess the expectations that, oh yes, we can be flexible. And, oh, don’t worry if you need to pick up your kids. But, actually, the deadlines and the pressure are still there regardless, um, which, you know, I know we all manage and kind of get on with that sort of thing, but it still feels a bit like paying lip service.”

- Mother, technology

The ‘flexibility paradox’

While many employers have been forced into being more flexible in terms of working from home since the pandemic, there is a sense from some participants who had been working from home that this has led to more pressure to be ‘always on’. This highlights what has been termed ‘flexibility paradox’ whereby flexibility can impact negatively on other aspects of job quality, particularly pressure at work.

Line manager support is vital to enable informal flexibility, but also to implement formal policies and procedures, including pursuing requests.

“There’s now no real break. It’s just continuous working. It’s actually working 24-7 with life added on, as opposed to the way around where you live and you work for a little bit in between.”

- Mother, technology

This often linked to a sense of not being trusted to do the job. For example, a single mother working in fashion design, who had been working from home, said:

“Even now, I feel like even if I step away to make a cup of tea when [I’m] working from home... it feels like you’ve always got to be at your desk... I can do my job and I don’t need....I’d never leave a job unfinished, and I should be trusted.”

- Single mother, fashion design

The importance of managerial support

Support from managers is a key aspect of job quality that we asked about. Through our research, it became clear not only how important this is, but also how other aspects of job quality are dependent on managerial support.

One participant highlights the inter-connected nature of many aspects of job quality and how these all fundamentally hinge on management support:

“I’ve got the control of my working hours, and then ultimately I can control my day-to-day tasks, that’s up to me. But that wouldn’t be possible, obviously without the support from my manager. Erm, and also obviously leads onto ... flexibility.”

- Father, childcare

Line manager support is vital to enable informal flexibility, but also to implement formal policies and procedures, including pursuing requests. For shift workers, it is essential for getting shifts that work around family and childcare. Several parents mentioned that having a supportive manager is one of the things that keeps them in their current job. They would be worried about losing this if they changed jobs as it provided an element of security. They might therefore put off finding a job that was more suitable in other ways to avoid losing their supportive manager. In this sense, job quality can be highly dependent on individual people and relationships, illustrating the lack of control that some workers have over their flexibility, which they feel is out of their hands.

“If you’ve got a manager that you have that personal informal flexibility with, you’re fine, but if that manager changes then that informal flexibility gets thrown out of a window, because they’d be rigid to a point that ... it can be like...”you can no longer do that”... it could potentially cost you money with childcare issues.”

- Father, retail



Trust-based working is key

Many participants reflected not only on the importance of practical support in terms of approving flexible working requests and facilitating informal flexibility, but also on the value of being trusted by superiors. One father described benefiting from this sort of trust-based working:

“We trust each other and we’re able to work in that way, with kind of regular check-ins, so that is also important where -- especially at the moment if I need to drop something, in order to go, pick up my kid, I don’t mind putting that extra thirty minutes to, half an hour at the end of the day to do that so, again it’s coming down to ... that element of trust.”

- Father, higher education

Not only do participants want to be trusted, but they want to be seen as a ‘whole person’ at work and to have their employer’s support with managing life’s challenges and transitions, including becoming a parent. One participant mentioned the mental health implications and challenges parenthood can bring and their desire to be supported by their manager in dealing with this. This included the idea of being a ‘shield’ against criticism and negativity that might come from other employees in relation to, for example, needing to take time off work to care for a child.

Participants emphasised the effect of senior leadership on workplace culture and, in turn, on their day-to-day experience of being in a job. Hence, making it an important driver of job quality. Several employees emphasised the importance of senior leaders’ trust in employees and recognition of people’s lives beyond the workplace, along with their values and knowledge of their statutory obligations towards employees, particularly working parents.



4. Can parents have everything they want?



Key findings

- Working parents, especially mothers, sometimes sacrifice important elements of job quality, such as pay and progression, to secure other elements, particularly flexibility.
- For many of our participants, it was seemingly impossible to combine flexibility with other desirable aspects of a job, like pay and opportunities for career progression. This may be a feature of employers' negative attitudes towards part-time and flexible working arrangements.
- Other job quality trade-offs were varied across industries: some working parents had given up job security in favour of flexibility whilst others had sacrificed career progression in favour of job security.
- Factors such as a partner's job and childcare costs feed into these job quality trade-offs. Single parents have fewer options and face acute challenges relating to job quality trade-offs.

Security, predictability of work demands, decent pay, managerial support and above all flexibility are increasingly valuable to workers when they become parents. Yet other aspects of job quality remain important too, from a variety of tasks to decent prospects for progression.

Our research shows that working parents sometimes make painful sacrifices to secure these newly prioritised elements of job quality. The shift to more flexible working in response to parenthood has often been understood through the lens of 'compensating differentials' theory. This suggests that parents, especially mothers, accept lower paid jobs in return for working conditions and benefits that they value²⁵. We were interested in exploring whether parents had indeed made these sorts of job quality 'trade-offs' or whether it was possible to achieve multiple components of job quality simultaneously.

We found evidence of both mothers and fathers making a range of trade-offs. For many of our participants, it is seemingly impossible to combine flexibility with other desirable aspects of a job, like pay and opportunities for career progression. They are deeply mindful of the trade-offs they are making to secure flexible work. For others, the security and control they desired had come at a similar cost.

²⁵Goldin, C. (2014). A grand gender convergence: Its last chapter. *American Economic Review*, 104(4), 1091–1119.

Several participants recognised that, with their skills and experience, they could earn more in another [less flexible] job, yet they were unwilling to give up their current flexible working arrangements, so were in a sense trapped.

Sacrificing pay and progression for flexibility

Several participants who benefited from flexible working mentioned that they had sacrificed pay to achieve this. This was mainly mentioned in the context of reduced or flexible hours (rather than location flexibility). Pay had fallen because they had shifted from a higher paid job, where flexibility was either perceived or known to be unavailable or hard to access, into a job where flexibility was openly available, which was also lower paid. Several participants recognised that, with their skills and experience, they could earn more in another [less flexible] job, yet they were unwilling to give up their current flexible working arrangements, so were in a sense trapped. We saw evidence of both mothers and fathers making this type of trade-off. However, fathers tended to speak of trade-offs in a more positive light, whereas for mothers, it was clear they were unwanted.

“I’ve absolutely compromised on salary... my salary’s gone down after I had children and that was the trade off in order to gain greater flexibility.”

- Mother, self-employed consultant

“I’ve sacrificed salary just to make sure I’ve got that flexibility and allowance to do what I want to do, for lack of a better term... I’m happy to stick where I am to keep the flexibility I’ve got.”

- Father, retail

It was widely acknowledged that jobs with part-time hours received lower pay (over and above pro rata for hours worked). This was described by many as an unavoidable fact and that as a parent, particularly as a mother, you had to make a stark choice between earning a higher salary or working part-time. For others, there was more anger at the unfairness of this and a feeling that it should change.

“When you go for a part-time role and you look at those salaries... It’s like, you know, for some reason, because you’ve chosen not to work a full-time job, for whatever reason, you’re not worth as much.”

- Mother, technology

For some parents, a job change to achieve flexible working has also entailed moving to a job that they are over-qualified for or with fewer promotion prospects, known as ‘occupational downgrading²⁶.’ Some of the working parents we spoke to had made radical ‘downward’ job changes shortly after becoming parents in order to access flexible working. They apparently did not have the option to maintain their previous career whilst working part-time.

“I actually gave up my career to go part-time and to change job. So, when my son was born... I just couldn’t go back full-time... So, I got a part-time job, and it’s not my career, but it pays the bills.”

- Mother, civil engineering

²⁶Connolly, S., & Gregory, M. (2008). Moving down: women’s part-time work and occupational change in Britain 1991–2001. *The economic journal*, 118(526), F52-F76.



A sense of inevitability that more senior roles bring less flexibility

Some find themselves weighing up whether to 'stay flexible' or to 'go for it' and try to progress, since they believe it is not possible to progress within their current flexible role or to retain flexibility in another more senior role elsewhere.

“Maybe it’s time to give up that flexibility, even though it’s so great, just to think about a career progression, you know, maybe a better life in terms of earning more. So, there’s that constant thought that is currently going through my head as to, Should I apply, should I stay, should I go, what should I do?”

- Father, higher education

This is often linked to a view, expressed by many participants, that more senior roles inevitably come with less flexibility.

Choosing between flexibility and progression

Another common perception is that it is not possible to achieve career progression when working flexible or reduced hours, particularly when working part-time. Some parents have therefore accepted that while working flexibly, they will be 'stuck' at a certain level. They believe career progression necessitates a return to full-time standard hours. Several attribute this view to the lack of respect their employers have for part-time employees and a working culture where 'career success' is inextricably linked to full-time standard working hours.

“When you go to reduced hours in my job... there’s no chance of progression. And I think it’s very much held against you that you’ve got these other responsibilities. I have been openly told that if you work part-time, then there’s only a certain level that you can reach in the business. It’s like you have to choose between having a successful career or spending time with your family, which is really unfair. I don’t see why we can’t have both.”

- Single mother, fashion design

Others echoed the sentiment that it is impossible to progress in a part-time or reduced hours role. One mother we spoke to was reluctantly working full-time in order to secure the job she wanted and to be able to progress in her industry. She shares how conflicted this makes her feel:

“Applying for this role in [place of work], I felt I had to take the full-time role in order to get the job. The offer, really, whilst they said yes, we can be flexible, we have compressed working, and blah blah blah, actually this role is full-time. At least for the first six months, it was very much a, unless you can commit to that, then you can’t have it. And it was a real pull on, oh, so that means I’m having to put my children in childcare five days a week, does that make me a bad mother? I want to progress my career. I can’t believe that in this day and age you have to work five days a week in order to progress your career.”

- Mother, technology



Single parents have to make more complex choices and trade-offs, with the cost of childcare being a key component in decision-making.

For parents in couples, several described the idea of 'taking turns' to either spend a period working flexibly or to spend a period working full-time standard hours to achieve career progression and earn more.

In many cases, this is inevitable since it is not possible to manage the family with both parents working full-time in positions with standard hours (and better pay and prospects). In these cases, the person who 'sacrifices' the material for the flexible is often the mother, yet their ability to work in this way is dependent on their partner's earnings. Parents in this position did not necessarily describe this as a sacrifice, however, and emphasised the positive aspects of their jobs, such as job satisfaction and learning. Although, they did acknowledge that they were dependent on their partner for this. For example, one father emphasised how pleased he was that he was able to work flexibly because of his wife's higher paid, stable job:

"I'm really lucky but that's probably through my wife's work, she's got a really good stable job as well that allows me to reduce my hours and be there more for the kids."

- Father, childcare

Although this type of turn-taking could be perceived as unfair, others are more positive about what they had gained from this, both within the job and by what they perceive as prioritising family life over money and career success, which they see as an inevitable yet rewarding choice.

"I know I've come to sacrifice some stuff but I've not found it as a negative...I want to look back in twenty years and think, I've been here for the kids right through...I don't think there's a lot of families can look back to say there was dad, and here was dad and dad took us there..."

- Father of 3, childcare

Another father, who works fewer hours and receives lower pay to secure a shift pattern that allows him to collect his daughter from school, explained how this pattern allows his wife to study and have more opportunities to get a better job – which he felt would benefit the whole family in the long run. Nothing is more important to this particular father than securing the working hours that allow him to spend time with his daughter, which he feels is 'more valuable than money'.

Extreme challenges for single parents

'Taking turns', however, is only available to parents in couples and where one parent has a secure and high-earning job. This arrangement is exclusive and not an option for single parent families and for those in low-paid or insecure roles.

Single parents have to make more complex choices and trade-offs, with the cost of childcare being a key component in decision-making, especially when children are pre-school age. While most work reduced or flexible hours, this is usually not by choice but is driven by the prohibitive cost of having children in childcare five days a week. Consequently, their earnings are compromised, and they were more likely to mention financial struggles. Working flexibly has often continued when children started school as this makes it easier to work around children's other commitments and needs and is perceived as difficult to give up once a routine is established despite the disadvantages, like limited pay and progression opportunities.

Sacrificing security and job benefits for flexibility

Unlike the trade-off between flexibility and progression and pay, which was mentioned by many participants across industries, the relationship between flexible working and other job quality characteristics is more complex and seemed to vary by industry. For example, some mentioned that finding a part-time or flexible hours job with a permanent contract and good benefits was difficult in their industry.

Self-employment as a forced solution

For some of those working in the private sector, working part-time or flexible hours is seemingly impossible. So, the job security and benefits of their job were abandoned in favour of less secure but more flexible self-employment. For two mothers we spoke to, their self-employment is a direct consequence of trying, and failing, to secure flexible working in their previous private sector jobs.



“Some people can manage working full-time and having a baby at the same time. But for me, I just felt like for my mental health, it really just had a big strain on it... I used to work five days a week and I asked for two and a half. And then they said to me that they can't physically have me on two and a half. So, I said, can I do three days? And then they said no, but you can work compressed hours, so do like, five days in four. And I honestly couldn't do those longer hours, especially with my husband working full-time as well, making it on time to nursery, especially when I had to commute into central London. It just wouldn't work. So, I had to walk out from my job and then hence I started being self-employed.”

- Mother of 2, self-employed consulting

It is clear from this example that some employers will only consider limited forms of flexible working, and these do not necessarily work for parents around their other commitments, like school and childcare schedules and commuting. There can be a reluctance to compromise on the volume of hours worked.

While becoming self-employed may work well and deliver flexibility for some, recent research cautions against self-employment as a solution to work-family conflict. The study finds that the transition to self-employment can lead to long working hours and increased domestic responsibilities for mothers, thereby entrenching inequitable gender roles²⁷. Self-employed mothers spoke about some benefits of self-employment, chiefly the flexibility, but also struggles in terms of the constant need to secure work and keep clients happy, leading to feelings of insecurity and anxiety.

For those working in the public sector, this particular trade-off was not necessary since flexibility is widely available and often goes hand-in-hand with other facets of job quality, such as job security and benefits. However, the 'flexibility for pay/career progression' trade-off is very real and is a key reason why they would be less likely to change jobs in pursuit of higher pay or career progression.

²⁷Dinh, H., Martin, A., Leach, L., Strazdins, L., Nicholson, J., Allen, T., & Cooklin, A. (2021). Is self-employment a good option? Gender, parents and the work-family interface. *Sex Roles*, 84(11), 731-746.)



Sacrificing career progression for job security

Other types of trade-offs, not explicitly involving flexibility, also occur in the transition to parenthood. Several parents stated their strong desire for job security once they became parents. To secure this they had often sacrificed career progression, for example by leaving a job or position that had more prospects but where there was less stability. Job security and financial security are linked since the predictability of having a consistent monthly salary is considered important in the context of family demands.


“I had to make a compromise and have some kind of financial stability in order to be able to just manage having children.”

- Father, higher education

Several parents stated their strong desire for job security.

As these accounts illustrate, for parents, making trade-offs is a common feature of working life. The most prevalent trade-off is to sacrifice salary and progression in favour of flexibility due to the current reality that highly paid and rewarding jobs, with opportunities for progression, are often not amenable to flexible working. This is both a perception and a lived reality for the parents we spoke to. Similarly, parents' desire for flexibility and their inability to achieve it in some job sectors could lead to them sacrificing security in favour of self-employment. On the other hand, a desire for security could lead to them sacrificing pay and opportunities. All of these decisions are highly dependent on family status: the range of options available to dual earner couples is wider than for single parents and this needs to be considered by employers and policymakers.





5. What do parents want from a post-pandemic workplace?

Key findings

- Parents want to see lasting change to improve their working lives.
- Parents want to see more creative thinking around flexible working, going beyond allowing employees to work from home. For instance, increased openness to alternative schedules and to ensuring a gender-inclusive approach.
- Changes that enhance the working lives of parents and carers will impact positively on all workers.
- Parents want to see employers attach greater value to what they do rather than how many hours they work. They also want more voice and recognition.

A desire for lasting change

The experiences of working parents over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic varied significantly by socio-economic status, education, and gender, as well as the age of their children. A range of experiences were represented in our sample. For some, working life was almost unrecognisable from pre-COVID times, whereas for others it was largely the same as before.

Examples of working experiences included:

- Working from home consistently
- Essential workers working outside their home consistently
- Furloughed at the start of the crisis and subsequently returned to work
- Being made redundant and finding a new job

Regardless of their experience, however, most want lasting changes in the workplace and for employers to learn lessons.



Flexibility for fathers, not just mothers

Parents who had access to flexible working pre-COVID described valuing it even more highly than they did before.

Parents who had access to flexible working pre-COVID described valuing it even more highly than they did before. But several mentioned that they want flexible working to be spread more evenly between men and women so that it was not just seen as something for mothers. They also wanted it to extend beyond allowing people to work from home more. As a result of experiences during the pandemic, including fathers' increased exposure to domestic routines and childcare, some are already seeing changing attitudes towards fathers and flexible working in their workplaces: from both fathers themselves and from their employers. For example, one mother said of her partner, in relation to what he would value in a job:

“If you would have asked me before the pandemic, I would probably say no, my husband will just look at the pay, the benefits and the opportunities to progress... I think since the pandemic he’s realised a little bit more about the flexibility... he’s done more pickups and drop offs, so now I think he would maybe think about, [different] hours are an opportunity for me to pick the kids up from school.”

- Mother, technology

One father stated that things were already changing in his workplace in terms of the expectations and demands of male and female employees in relation to flexible working:

“Where I work, just talking broadly, it’s mainly ... the mothers [who] are requesting time to leave early or to look after child care, but over the last 12 months there’s been a major culture shift, where the dad is now taking that responsibility.”

- Father, higher education



Flexibility in time, not just location

There is also a sense that although employers were willing to become more flexible in terms of location (for example, working from home), there is less openness to changes to hours which might make life easier for parents, like split working patterns or shorter working days:

“I need a shorter day. My days were already at least 10 hours, during the pandemic they’re probably 12, 13... Now the requirement is to do at least a nine and a half hour day, which is fine, but there’s a proposal to move to modernised working, or working with purpose, which would mean a four day working week. You’ve got to do 10 hours a day on the four days that you’re in, which is fantastic. But I can’t physically do it because the nurseries are closed. So, it would mean that I would still have to work five days. So yeah, the ability to work a shorter day and doing a little bit more work when you’ve cooked the tea and the children are in bed, if that was an option that would be great.”

- Single mother, food manufacturing



Employers to attach value to the 'whole person'

Several people mentioned that they wanted more recognition of the 'whole person' from employers and explicitly linked this to their being a parent.

Several people mentioned that they wanted more recognition of the 'whole person' from employers and explicitly linked this to their being a parent.

"I want to be valued. I want to know that it's not, oh, yeah, you know, she's a mum now, she's not going to give it all of that because she's part-time or she's requested flexible working... I wanted to go to a company where I could say, well actually, you know, you are valued, we want to give family-friendly policies, we want to make sure that people that have caring responsibilities are looked after."

- Mother, technology

While others emphasised that the pandemic context should encourage a rethink of employers' attitudes toward all employees, regardless of their lives outside work.

"There has to be a recognition for the amount of additional stuff people have at home, whether that's children, whether that's the washing, whether that's walking the dog, just actual life."

- Mother, human resources

There was some evidence of this changing, but also evidence of employers reverting to past ways.

For others, feeling valued is more about respect and being listened to and involved in a two-way discussion, and even sharing in the profits of the business. This hints at the desire for a more substantial rethink about the role of employees and their status within a business.



Outputs rather than hours

In our discussions with participants about what they felt needed to change in the future, several spoke about their desire for employers to value and measure the quality and completeness of the work, rather than the hours they put in. One father said his employer had already started to work in this way whereas others had a long way to go.

"I'd like a focus not necessarily on my working hours, but it almost feels like an arbitrary number. And instead, focus on, is the job getting done, rather than, is she working that 7.5 hours? It's the kind of balance between trusting you to do your job rather than timekeeping."

- Single mother, fashion design



5. Conclusion

Parents value the same things as the rest of the working population when it comes to their work, including variety, creativity, challenge, good relationships with colleagues, being paid decently and good promotion prospects. The desire for these things does not disappear when people become parents. But our research shows that certain elements of job quality become more important after becoming a parent: security and permanence, job control, financial security, support from managers and, above all, flexibility. It is therefore vital that employers understand these priorities to attract and retain parents among their employees and ensure their wellbeing and success.

Flexible working, including reduced hours, non-standard schedules and location flexibility, is clearly valued and desired by many working parents and enables family and work life to be combined effectively. In this sense, our findings echo Working Families' recent survey research on this issue, which found that 77% of working parents want the government to intervene to create more flexible jobs and 69% would consider jobs advertised as flexible more attractive when looking for work in the future²⁸. This increased appreciation of, and desire for, flexibility since the start of the pandemic²⁹ was very much reflected among the parents we spoke to.

Yet parents who did not have flexible working described challenges in accessing it and those who did have it felt that it was not functioning optimally. For example, parents indicated that flexible working was 'not possible' in some businesses. This conflicts with evidence from Working Families' employer members showing that most jobs can be performed effectively with some form of flexibility. Sectors that have been traditionally associated with standard hours and on-site working, such as construction, are increasingly demonstrating creative approaches to introducing flexibility. Flexibility encompasses a variety of options and must not be conceived in limited terms³⁰ as working from home or part-time.

Beyond flexibility, other aspects of job quality are important for parents and warrant greater attention. Indeed, our findings underscore the contention that to be truly 'family friendly', jobs must offer not only time-related support such as flexibility, but also elements which support wellbeing, such as security and control. Parents value security, permanence and predictability. They typically feel unable to take on unpredictable and last-minute work demands. Moreover, these components are mutually reinforcing: flexibility works optimally when underscored by employee control and security rather than being dependent on individual discretion and subject to unpredictable change.

Many parents' desire for flexibility, or for more effective flexibility, is not currently being met by employers. Consequently, they are making various trade-offs to achieve flexibility, most commonly regarding pay and progression. For some, particularly single parents, financial concerns are paramount and the resulting trade-offs can be particularly challenging and harmful to future career options.

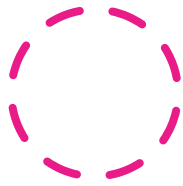
²⁸Working Families (2021) Building back better for working parents: #FlexTheUK campaign briefing. Available at: <https://workingfamilies.org.uk/publications/flextheuk2021/>

²⁹Microsoft (2021). The next great disruption is flexible work: Are we ready? Available at: https://ms-worklab.azureedge.net/files/reports/hybridWork/pdf/2021_Microsoft_WTI_Report_March.pdf

³⁰Timewise (2021) Making construction a great place to work: Can flexible working help? Insights from 4 pilot studies. Available at: <https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TW-Making-construction-a-great-place-to-work-report.pdf>

Whilst the parents we spoke to had varied experiences of working through the pandemic, they felt strongly that working life should not revert to how it was before. Going forward, to improve job quality, they wanted to see increased and more creative and inclusive forms of flexibility, greater fairness and recognition of people's diverse situations and experiences, and to have more voice at work and a stronger sense of trust.





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The researchers would also like to thank the participants involved in the research for sharing their experiences with us.





Appendix 1: Qualitative research methodology

Recruitment

We set up an online 'screener questionnaire' as a method for participants to register their interest in taking part in the research while also allowing us to collect data on key characteristics (see Table 1). These data were needed to construct diverse groups of participants according to our desired characteristics. The online questionnaire was initially open for one month, after which we reviewed results against our target characteristics and selected participants to contact to invite to take part. The questionnaire was advertised by Working Families via the following channels:

- Working Families' parent and carer newsletter mailing list (1500 subscribers)
- Working Families' social media channels (8200 Twitter followers, 5000 Facebook followers, 1181 on LinkedIn and 1901 on Instagram)
- Call outs from their 100 employer members.

Clearly stated in the recruitment text was the financial recognition participants would be offered, as is standard practice in this type of research - a £40 voucher which could be spent either in store or online at a variety of high street outlets.

As expected, the response was skewed towards women, and so recruiting men became a major focus. This included not only re-broadcasting the call to the same channels with a tailored message (e.g. "we are looking for working fathers"), but also identifying new channels where the identified groups are more likely to be found. This included seeking assistance from our project stakeholder the TUC in sending the call out to member unions to distribute as well as recruiting more informally via parents WhatsApp groups, etc. In the end the survey was open for two months in order to give us more time to recruit these harder-to-reach participants.



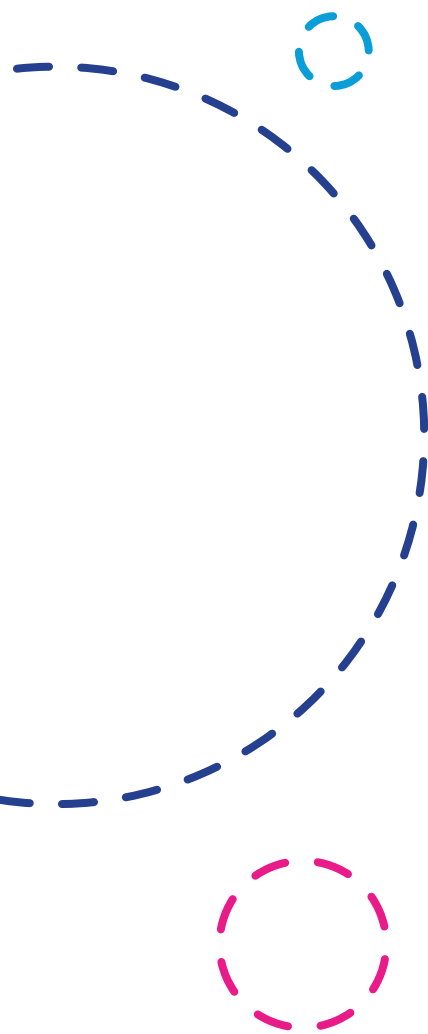
Sample

In total, we achieved 402 responses to our screener questionnaire, which provided a pool from which to select our focus group participants. Our original proposal to run three focus groups was based on an in-person design, with an estimated maximum of 12 attendees per group (36 total). Given that we needed to run groups online due to the pandemic, and having had experience facilitating online groups and after consulting with expert colleagues, we concluded that a 6-person maximum should be applied to online groups. Our aim was 6 groups of 6 people (still aiming for 36 participants in total).

Within this 6-group structure we selected and grouped participants primarily along the lines of sex and industry of work/occupation. We felt this grouping was important to capture class differences in job quality as well as experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, as there was a strong class and occupation-based divide in which workers were able to work from home as opposed to continuing to leave home for work. This resulted in the following groups:

- Mothers, professional/office-based
- Fathers, professional/office-based
- Mothers, frontline/key worker
- Fathers, frontline/key worker
- Single parents
- A mixed group

Participants within each of these groups were selected to be diverse with respect to a variety of other key characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, region, age of children, etc). Throughout the process, over-recruitment was necessary due to the high likelihood of drop-outs.



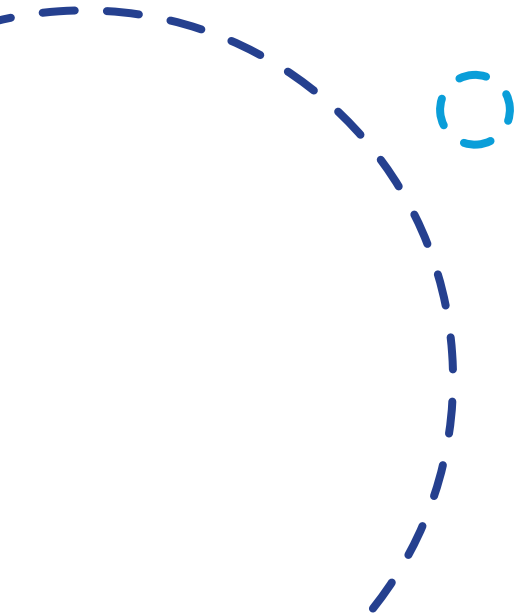
Within an overall strategy of purposive sampling we selected participants who responded to the screener questionnaire in order to ensure sufficient diversity on the basis of key characteristics which we hypothesise to be relevant to the research question. Once identified on this basis, a pool of potential participants for each group (usually around 20-30 per group, depending on the group and how many survey respondents fit the criteria) were contacted and offered three different time slots to sign up to (time slots were allocated to cover different patterns of availability, including morning, afternoon and evening slots). As soon as a time slot achieved around 10-12 sign ups, the recruitment was closed. At this point, eight participants were selected based on the diversity criteria – 6 participants and 2 reserve participants (all of whom were offered a voucher). All eight were contacted and asked to confirm their availability, read our information sheet, and give their informed consent to participate. Invariably, we had some drop-outs. If they let us know in advance we were able to notify the reserve participants who could step in, but often people simply did not show up on the day, or let us know too late. Thus, we ended up with 27 participants in the focus groups in total.

Table 1 summarises our achieved sample.

Table 1: Achieved focus group sample characteristics

Characteristic		
Gender	Man	44.44%
	Woman	55.56%
Age group	25-34	14.81%
	35-44	59.26%
	45-54	14.81%
	55-64	11.11%
Single parent	No	81.48%
	Prefer not to say	3.70%
	Yes	14.81%
Full/part time	Full time	74.07%
	Part time	25.93%
Experience of Covid-19	I am a key worker and have been working outside my home	25.93%
	I have been working from home	51.85%
	I have been working from home, I am a key worker and have been working outside my home	3.70%
	I have been working from home, I am a key worker and have been working outside my home, I have lost work or hours due to COVID-19 (including being furloughed, made redundant or reduced hours)	3.70%
	I have been working from home, I am not a key worker and have been working outside my home	3.70%
	I have been working from home, I have lost work or hours due to COVID-19 (including being furloughed, made redundant or reduced hours)	3.70%
	I have lost work or hours due to COVID-19 (including being furloughed, made redundant or reduced hours)	7.41%
Ethnicity	Asian/Asian British - Bangladeshi	3.70%
	Asian/Asian British - Indian	14.81%
	Black African	7.41%
	Black Caribbean	7.41%
	Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups	3.70%
	White - Any other White background	3.70%
	White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	59.26%

Characteristic	Sample Goal / Minimum quota	
Region	England - East Midlands	11.11%
	England - London	29.63%
	England - North East	3.70%
	England - South East	22.22%
	England - South West	3.70%
	England - West Midlands	7.41%
	England - Yorkshire and the Humber	11.11%
	Scotland	7.41%
	Wales	3.70%
Age of children	Pre-school age	25.93%
	Pre-school age, Primary school age	18.52%
	Pre-school age, Primary school age, Secondary school age	3.70%
	Primary school age	29.63%
	Primary school age, Secondary school age	3.70%
	Secondary school age	18.52%





Appendix 2: Focus group schedule

Who can 'have it all'?: job quality and parenthood in the UK

Focus group schedule (summary) (priority questions in bold)

Session 1: What makes a good job

Moderator: In this first part of the session we are going to be exploring what makes a good job.

Thinking about your current job or the job you've had most recently, could you tell us about something you really like about your current job? Something you dislike?

Thinking back to a job you've had in the past- Can you think of something that you liked/disliked?

- Prompt: Something that has contributed to how happy your job makes you, or how unhappy?
- Prompt: Can others identify with this? Or have a different experience?

Has X [aspect of job quality previously mentioned] become more or less important to you since becoming a parent? If so, how?

Do you think there are some fundamental features everyone should expect in their job? If so, what are they?

- Prompt: What things should people be entitled to at work?

Here are some components that are often considered part of a 'good job'.

Do these components make sense to you? Why/why not? Is anything missing?

Which of these components do you have in your current job? What would you change?

Of all of these components, which is the most important to you?

Ask about partner's preferences

Session 2: Trade-offs, preferences and constraints

Moderator : We are now going to present some example jobs ['vignettes'] which combine different aspects and ask for your opinion on these jobs.

For each vignette, ask:

In your opinion what are the good and bad aspects of this job?

Is this a job you would want to do or be able to do?

Prompts:

- Is this job suitable for a parent?
- Are there any trade-offs involved in this job?
- What type of person would/could take this job, in your opinion?

Which is the best of the four jobs, in your opinion?

We are interested in the idea that sometimes people accept some bad things about a job in order to get the good aspects or the aspects that they prefer. Is this something that you have done? How easy has it been to find a job that fits your preferences/circumstances?

Session 3: COVID-related changes to job quality (20 mins)

Moderator: Lots of us have seen significant changes to our jobs since Covid-19. We are interested in the extent to which these experiences might have shaped what you think of as a good job.

How was/is working life different for you since the pandemic?

Thinking about the aspects of job quality we have talked about earlier, has the past year changed what you look for in a job?

- Link back to job quality features wherever possible

Do you anticipate/want any lasting changes?

If you could change one thing about your current work situation for the future, what would it be?

Wrap up (15-20 mins)

Does anybody have anything they would like to add, relating to anything we have discussed today?

Do you have any further questions about the research project?



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