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PRODUCTIVITY AND EMPLOYEE PRACTICES

*Embracing mobile working could put an end
to the productivity problem*



WHITE PAPER

MOVING ON - EMBRACING MOBILE WORKING COULD PUT AN END TO THE PRODUCTIVITY PROBLEM

At a time where four in five companies say skills gaps are likely to be their primary concern, failure to offer flexible working is crippling their ability to find and retain the talent they desperately need.

Eighty per cent of success is showing up, according to Woody Allen's famous quote. It's the other 20 that seems to determine a company's fortunes and the satisfaction of its employees, however.

Despite a legal right to request flexible working and ubiquitous technology to provide for a more mobile workforce, most businesses retain traditional working practices. Employees in many sectors are still tied to their desks.

A new survey by TeleWare shows that fewer than a third of UK employees work for companies offering flexible working schemes for all, despite widespread – and growing – demand for these.

A further 22% of employees say they work in firms that have no flexible working options in place at all, despite there being a legal obligation on firms to consider requests.

As a result, both staff and businesses miss out. The former are tied to jobs that fail to offer the balance they desire between work, home life and other responsibilities. Companies, meanwhile, limit their pool of applicants for recruitment, deprive themselves of the best candidates, and get poorer results from their workforce. Indeed, if you want proof that the current arrangements are not serving anyone well, you need look no further than UK businesses' productivity, which has barely grown in the last decade.¹

The technology to address this is readily available, however, and leading businesses are already using it to boost productivity and profits, and developing a happier, healthier and more loyal workforce as a result. It is time others took advantage to do the same.



A DISAPPOINTING REALITY

The right to request flexible working was extended to all workers – not just parents and carers – in 2014. The change meant 20 million people had the right to ask to work flexibly, the Government announced.

“Modern businesses know that flexible working boosts productivity and staff morale, and helps them keep their top talent so that they can grow,” said Nick Clegg, then Deputy Prime Minister. “It’s about time we brought working practices bang up-to-date with the needs, and choices, of our modern families.”²

About time, perhaps, but the evidence is that the majority of workers are still waiting. A new survey of over 2,300 British workers, both men and women, shows only 29% work for companies operating flexible working schemes for all staff – whether that’s flexible start and finish times or remote working, from home or elsewhere. Even adding another 20% who say it’s offered for those above a certain level of seniority, it is still a minority. Of course, there are variations, with as many as 35% of businesses in London offering flexible working for all. On the other hand, in the East of England, it is as low as 23%, and just 25% in the North East and North West.

Of course, there may be more who have a legal right to request flexible working, and whose employers would try to accommodate them. But, first, we know that culture is as big a barrier to adoption of flexible working as almost anything else;³ and, second, the numbers still undoubtedly fall well short of demand.



A HIGHLY VALUED PERK

Research has consistently shown high demand for flexible working. Previous surveys have pointed to a substantial minority who would prefer flexible working to a pay rise or other perks like pension, holidays or bonuses.⁴ On the flipside, traditional nine to five working patterns has fallen significantly out of favour. In one survey, just 14% said they'd opt for those hours given the choice.⁵

Our survey confirms widespread enthusiasm for more flexible working. Almost nine out of ten say that being able to choose the hours they work and where they work from is very (48%) or somewhat (39%) important to them.

Some of this is due to childcare and other commitments, of course, but there's significant evidence that the demand for flexible working is cultural, as well as practical. For a start, women, who are still the predominant carers for children,⁶ are only marginally more likely than men to say flexible working is very important to them (50% against 46%).

In fact, the real divide is not between men and women, but between the old and young. Among the over 55s, only 38% say choosing their hours and place of work is

very important (still a substantial minority), rising to 44% among 45 to 54-year-olds. Among the under 24s, it's 49% – despite the fact the average age of a first-time parent in England and Wales is above that age, at almost 29.⁷

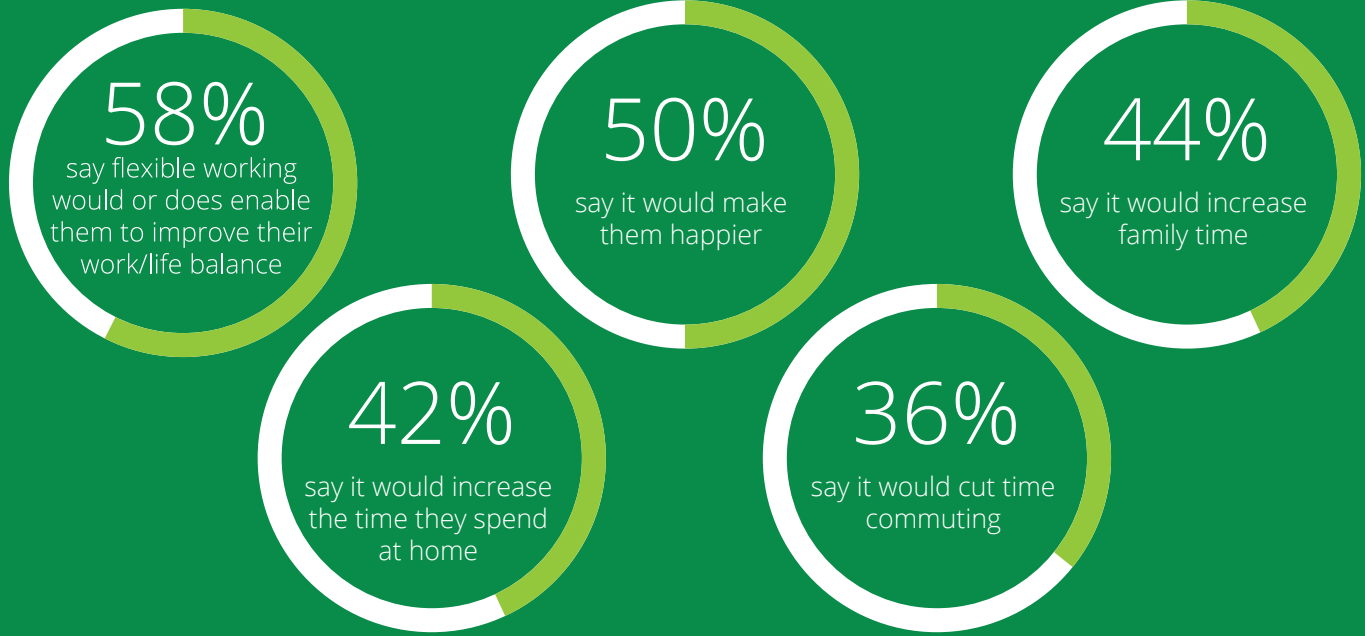
This again reinforces previous work showing that millennials, born in the 1980s and 1990 are significantly more likely to want flexible working than previous generations.⁸ As another study has put it: "Generation X hoped for work life balance, Generation Y simply demand it."⁹

With these younger employees expected to account for half the global workforce by 2020,¹⁰ and up to three quarters by 2025,¹¹ demand for flexible working is only going to grow.



WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?

There are a whole range of benefits for employees from flexible working:



But there are substantial benefits on offer to businesses, too.



This shouldn't be dismissed as wishful thinking. First, it is quite plain that the UK's culture of long working office hours has done little to boost productivity, and probably works against it – hence the old observation that a French worker finishes by Thursday lunchtime what takes a British worker all week.¹² A backlash against counter-productive long hours explains some of the support for the Trades Union Congress campaign for a four-day working week.¹³ There's also substantial evidence that presenteeism among workers feeling the need to be in the office at all hours is a much greater risk to productivity than the hours employees spend working remotely or at home.¹⁴

Furthermore, employees' optimism about flexible working largely accords with employers' experiences: In another survey, for instance, the proportion of employees and employers saying staff were happier and more productive working remotely was roughly the same.¹⁵

But even if businesses are reluctant to take others' words for the benefits of flexible working, they would be wise to consider the impact of the failing to offer it. In our survey, a quarter said they had already turned down job opportunities due to the employer's failure to offer flexible working. A further 31% said they would do so.

Skills shortages cost the economy £1.7bn a year, according to Open University research.¹⁶ Yet, at a time where four in five companies say skills gaps are likely to be their primary concern in 2018,¹⁷ failure to offer flexible working is crippling their ability to find and retain the talent they desperately need.

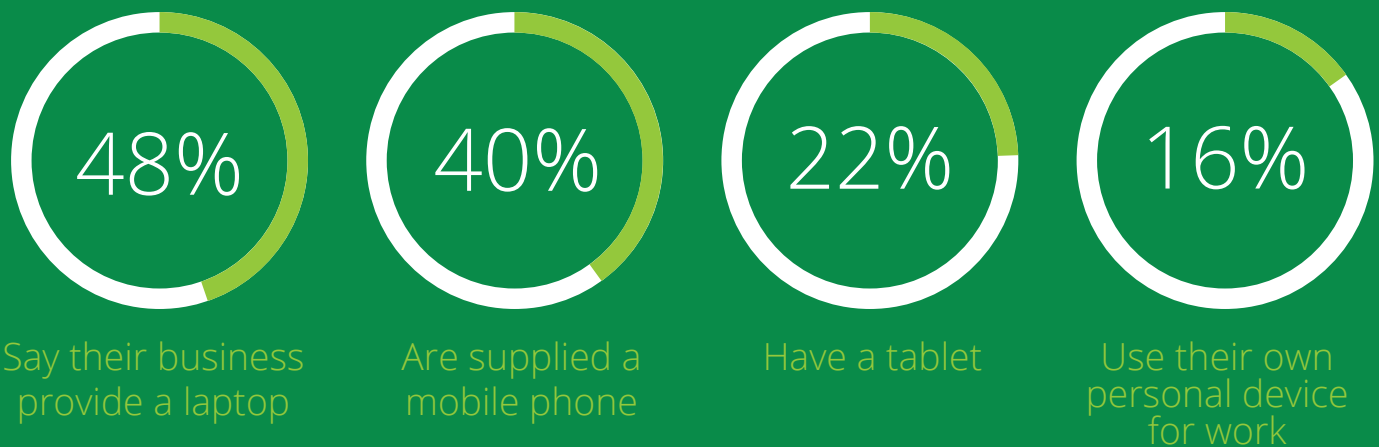


MAKING WORK WORK FOR MODERN EMPLOYEES

For all this, perhaps the most surprising thing about the failure of employers to make flexible working more widely available is that the infrastructure and even the culture of mobile working is largely already in place. The technology key to implementing mobile and flexible working is ubiquitous, and working practices are fluid as a result.

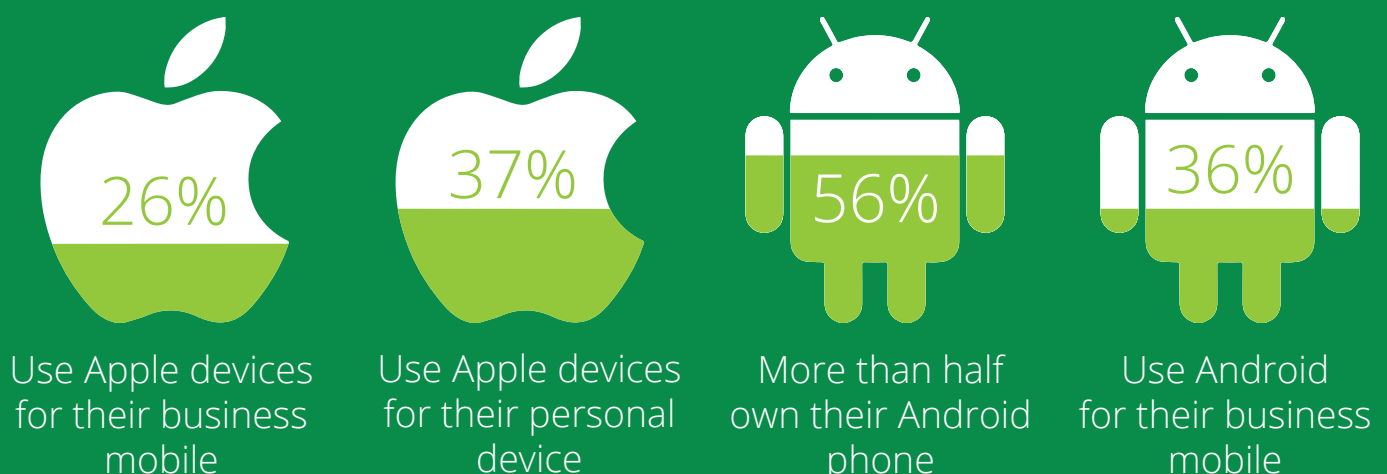
Employees already spend close to a third (30%) of their working time on average using mobile technology for their job. Perhaps not surprisingly, it's the young making greatest use of the technology – 60% of the under 24s spend at least a quarter of their work time on mobile devices, compared to just 41% of the over 55s. Moreover, 26% of the under 24s spend over half their time using mobile devices. Only 16% say they don't use a mobile device for work.

Employers provide a range of devices to facilitate mobile working:



Not surprisingly, given this, even where employers are not flexible when it comes to working arrangements, employees often have to be. Most workers say they are interrupted in the evenings (66%), weekends (61%) or both by calls, emails or messages from work. More than half (53%) have also had their holidays interrupted.

Employees are not just juggling their time; they're also juggling multiple devices. Many will have not only a personal and work mobile, but likewise two laptops and tablets – as well as their office-based phones and computers. This also leaves them navigating various operating systems, as our survey shows. Users are split between iOS and Android operating systems for both their personal and business mobiles, for example.



At the very least, this will inevitably reduce the productivity of workers as they must switch between different devices. It also means many are not working on their preferred device.

This reflects a wider problem for businesses, however: Our survey shows what is lacking is not the ability, technology or even willingness of employees to work away from the office and when needed. Rather, it is a structure and programme to enable this to work for both employees and employers in a way that promotes productivity and satisfaction among employees.

Inside or outside the EU, UK firms operate on a global stage. Employees of all ages, geographies, and gender are demanding new ways of working to enable them to have more fulfilling work and personal lives. It is the role of firms to understand this and to get behind creating a culture and providing the technologies that can deliver them.



REFERENCES

- ¹ See the first white paper in this series for an in-depth look at this issue: <https://www.teleware.com/millennialwhitepaper/>
- ² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-28078690>
- ³ <http://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/cost-management-and-culture-the-biggest-barriers-to-flexible-working-says-bt>
- ⁴ <https://www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/020518-health-wellbeing-survey>
- ⁵ <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/new-polls-confirm-desire-for-flexible-working-as-9-to-5-declines/>
- ⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37941191>
- ⁷ <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/reports/a12784974/average-age-women-have-first-baby-become-mum/>
- ⁸ <https://www.recruitment-international.co.uk/blog/2018/02/70-percent-of-millennials-want-flexible-working-options-research-finds>
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- ¹⁵ <https://www.employeebenefits.co.uk/issues/may-2018/59-flexible-working-job-hunting/>
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- ¹⁷ <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/four-five-employers-fear-skills-gaps-will-hamper-growth-2018/>

If you would like to talk to TeleWare about how TeleWare can help your business work more flexibly, contact our specialist mobility team today

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