

MINUTES

Securing the Future of Women's Work: Making Flexible Working a Reality

Women and Work APPG Meeting, Monday 17 May 2021
3-4.30pm via Zoom

Chair: Laura Farris MP, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG

Guest speakers:

Emma Stewart MBE, Development Director, TIMEWISE

Yvonne Braun, Director of Policy, Long Term Savings and Protection, Executive Sponsor for Diversity and Inclusion, ABI

Harvey Francis FCIPD, Executive Vice President, Skanska UK

Andrew Pakes, Director of Communications & Research, Prospect Union

Minutes

Co-chair of the Women and Work APPG, Laura Farris MP convened the meeting, welcoming the guest speakers and attendees. She explained the importance of trying to shift the perception of flexible working from something that is a 'lightweight' option only women request to accommodate childcare needs, to an option for many people for many reasons. Laura stressed the importance of understanding that flexible working doesn't just mean working from home, it can mean adjusted hours, different shift patterns, job shares, part or full-time work.

Laura spoke about the importance of the Employment Bill and said that agency workers, part-time workers, and those on zero hours contracts, have been more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic as opposed to those working full time. She mentioned that one of the advantages of putting flexible working into a new Employment Bill is that these same people with the same need to work flexibly (zero-contract hour, part time etc), would have the same status as a full-time worker.

Laura then introduced the first speaker, **Emma Stewart MBE, Development Director, TIMEWISE**

Emma explained the importance of exploring how flexible working can benefit anybody, whether that is part time work for frontline shift-based roles, or in another form of working. When we come out of the pandemic, we need to make sure we don't increase inequalities for flexible workers.

Emma argued that the recruitment market needs to change to ensure that flexible workers aren't excluded from the job's recovery market. For example, 70% of people worked remotely this year, but only 2 in 10 jobs reference flexible working for hire. Moreover, only 8% of job roles offered part-time jobs last year. This means that the recruitment market need to catch up with the employment market.

Secondly, it is critical that flexible jobs are of good quality.

The way to overcome these types of issues Emma said was through legislative shift, stimulating more supply for flexible jobs and sharing examples of what is possible for front line industries and providing roadmaps of how to carry this out.

Laura thanked Emma for her contribution and introduced **Yvonne Braun, Director of Policy, Long Term Savings and Protection, Executive Sponsor for Diversity and Inclusion, ABI, as the next speaker.**

Yvonne explained that she is responsible for diversity and inclusion and outlined the ABI's campaign '[Making Flexible Work](#)' which launched on 28th April 2021. The campaign aims to increase flexible working - in all its forms - and narrow the gender seniority gap in the Insurance and Long-Term Savings Sector. As part of the campaign, the ABI has encouraged all ABI members, associate members and other insurance and long-term savings firms to pledge their support. 27 firms have already signed up, in addition to the ABI. Yvonne described the pandemic as the "*perfect moment*" to launch the initiative as it forced a business model on financial services which people which people thought was unimaginable. It has helped companies learn how to open up the majority of their roles to flexible working, in which she meant job-sharing, part-time work etc, ensure this is publicised to job-seekers and putting this process and guidance in place to make this initiative work well.

Yvonne went on to explain why the initiative was launched. Research was carried out in 2018 on the gender seniority gap, and it was found that 58% of women were in entry jobs and only 29% were at board level. She explained that women want to progress but get stuck in childcare and therefore get stuck in terms of career progression. Research has shown that to overcome this gender seniority gap, we need to make it easier for people to work part time, but also progress while doing so. If companies follow this initiative, not only will it help women, but it will also open opportunities for people with disabilities who might want to work as part time employees, who may otherwise leave the labour market.

Yvonne explained that the next steps she wants to take is to focus on job-sharing, because 87% of the people who work part time in the insurance sector right now are women. If we can have more job-sharing opportunities for them, it will make it possible for these to both work part time and progress their career.

Laura thanked **Yvonne**, agreeing that it is vital that there are equal chances to reach the top and it is important we put pressure on the areas where women are losing this opportunity. She mentioned how working from home during the pandemic has shown that it is possible to thrive at your work in different settings and circumstances.

Laura then introduced **Harvey Francis, FCIPD, Executive Vice President, Skanska UK.**

Harvey explained that Covid-19 has been a '*game changer*' in terms of showing what is possible with flexible working and employers. Historically he explained that site workers wouldn't believe flexible working is possible for them, however this is not the case. However the possibility of flexible working whilst in the construction sector relies on quality

line managers. He explained that he believes Skanska has actually thrived during the pandemic, as a result of flexible working.

Harvey explained that the company has launched an initiative called Flex-it which runs on the belief that every role has an element of flexibility, it just depends on the nature of the role of work being done, and where the work is being done. Regardless of what and where work takes you, the initiative balances three things. Firstly, productivity and profitability, by asking people to look at the needs of their team and how the work can get distributed across the team. Secondly, the importance of cohesion and consistency, and thirdly, what the individuals' preferences are and how this can reflect the preferences of the team.

Surveys suggest that over 60% said they want to continue this degree of flexibility. If companies don't accommodate these needs, people will go work in a different company that offers it.

Laura thanked **Harvey**, agreeing that the usual "log in, log out" mentality is diminishing and it is interesting to talk about such a traditional sector immersing itself in new ways of work. She agrees with the top talent and advantages of bringing in more money if flexible working is added to the sector as an option for employees. She then welcomed the final speaker, **Andrew Pakes, Director of Communications & Research, Prospect Union**.

Andrew explained that although he supports the prospect of flexible working, he mentioned how the 'working online' 'WFH' aspect is worrying. He explains either working from home or in the office is too simplistic to use as an explanation of what flexible working is, and being flexible in the working world, means we have to get it right, matching with the culture, management and involving the employees with this decision.

He stressed the importance of including employees in the decision when figuring out how to include flexible work into the company's culture by explaining that in a recent polling it was found that only one in five workers said that they had conversation with their manager or employer about future working patterns after Covid.

He explained that although during Covid, working digitally was a benefit, we need to learn how to disconnect as well. He stressed the importance of respect given from management and the work place in general to those who choose to work from home, as statistics show that 38% of those who work from home are less likely to receive a bonus, and those who do work from home are likely to work 6 hours out of contracted hours. He explained that Prospect has worked with countries like the Canadian government looking at measures they are concerned about when it comes to flexible working.

Andrew spoke about the importance of creating balance, how to create flexible work with correct mechanisms. This includes the 'right to disconnect. He ended with stressing the importance of recognising the positives of digital connectivity but also the negatives.

Laura thanked Andrew and welcomed **Paul Scully MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets)** to the meeting.

The Minister briefly spoke about how the concept of flexible working fascinates him and explain that when he first became Minister, he believed it would be such a big challenge to implement, but Covid has flipped it, and made it more possible.

He explained that permanent working from home wasn't just flexible working, as it turns into '*living in the workplace*' and he stressed the importance of getting that balance right. Although recognizing that this affects women more, he stressed that this working technique should be for everyone and believes we should pressure point hybrid working.

Q&A

Laura thanked everyone for their contributions, and invited **Claire McCartney, Senior Policy Advisor for Resourcing and Inclusion CIPD**, to comment.

Claire thanked everyone for all the important examples of how flexible working can work well in different sectors. She mentioned the issues that have been raised with regards to hybrid working, flexible working, part – time, WFH etc, and the potential disadvantages. She then asked the question about what more we can do to ensure fairness and equality going forward, when implementing this 'flexible working' pattern to the workplace.

Amanda Blanc, CEO of Aviva said CEOs need to set an example themselves particularly in regard to career progression.

Emma then responded to the question of ensuring equality, saying that you need to invest time by equipping the correct managers and make sure you avoid a "hybrid bias." She explained that even though we see companies trying to make sure their culture is fair and putting formalised plans of flexible working in place, it will be a process that will take 6-12 months, rather than an "overnight" fix. She went onto to explain the importance of providing visibility and leadership and making sure we are not in the office too much, setting examples and getting rid of the normal "5-day a week" in the office. This should be displayed to employees both online and in physical presence. She finished with explaining the importance of leadership, management capability and performance metrics, and that is when we can review output.

Harvey said that culture is important and without this, the leadership becomes less important. He then provided an explanation of the 'Grandparent principle' to avoid inequality. He explained that we must ensure that somebody else is always looking at what else management is doing, to ensure there are no bias, and guarantee there is scrutiny going on from all different levels.

Laura asked another question to the panel, asking what they would say to the young employees who are told that they are not trusted to work at home, don't have enough experience etc.

Harvey explained that even though his company has had this concern, if we don't show ourselves to be flexible, recruitment will suffer.

Andrew spoke about the importance of trust and culture. He said he agreed with Harvey that solutions will not be found in just working in office space or at home, but there is space for collaboration. He went on to explain that solutions can be found for job-sharing across the income scale and job sector if the culture is correct.

Yvonne agreed with the above statements about the importance of trust, she said it's normal to think performance might drop off but that is where good management comes in and if you manage these people better when you see them, you will trust them working from home and have constructive conversations with them, holding workshops and ensuring their happiness and have a level of trust with management to work well in these circumstances.

Laura asked what the government can do to help improve this way of work in the different sectors, and what employers dread when it comes to WFH, flexible working etc

Emma responded saying that there is a cost of flexible working, but it is hard to calculate it. She went on to explain that there is a return on investment over time. Companies need the support of government to give examples, roadmaps etc before they invest money into their company to make those changes.

Harvey explained that his company just launched a construction playbook which has helped companies become more progressive. He went on to explain that he could work with government agenda and receive help to further this progression of flexible working in the workplace.

Yvonne said the government should be coming out with more stories and examples to show how flexible working can work, with advantages and statistics of the downfall but the ways to combat these problems would be useful.

Laura thanked the panellists and attendees and brought the meeting to a close.