

Working remotely can work for carers but multi-dimensional flexibility will even better meet their needs

How COVID-19 has created the opportunity for employers to mainstream flexible work options

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Carers should have the same employment opportunities as other Australians, however many carers face significant challenges when combining work and care. The first briefing in this series explains why working remotely can work for carers.¹ However, it is just one of many flexible working arrangements and now is the time for employers to consider and offer more options that will support carers' participation, retention and development in paid employment.

Carers are individuals that care for a family member or friend living with a disability, mental illness or health condition, or a frail older person. Research shows that when the strain of balancing caring responsibilities with employment becomes too great, carers often work fewer hours or give up work altogether. More than one in four respondents to the 2020 National Carer Survey had at some point left their job or left the labour force in order to care, and a similar proportion had reduced their working hours.² This has obvious implications for a carer's household income and career trajectory, and can mean a loss of knowledge and talent for employers which can be expensive to replace.

Flexible working arrangements are key in enabling carers to maintain employment and more effectively balance both sets of responsibilities. However, as carers' feedback about working remotely during COVID-19 has shown us,³ what works for one carer may not work for another. Caring can be unpredictable and caring roles can vary in their duration and intensity, so flexible arrangements, whether they be formal or informal working arrangements, or be in the form of flexible leave, are needed to adjust to circumstances. It is therefore imperative that employers bring multi-dimensional flexible working into the mainstream. Now is the time for employers to use the insights, data and thought leadership developed during COVID-19 to challenge their existing approaches and implement needed change.

Over 50% of companies that didn't have a flexible or remote workplace policy cited "longstanding company policy" as the reason. In other words, that is just the way things have always worked.⁵

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Offering a wide range of options to manage work benefits all employees, not just carers; for example, in supporting employees to maintain their work life balance, raise a family or transition to retirement. The consistent application of flexible work across teams and organisations can build trust and reduce the stigma associated with having to ask for workplace accommodations.⁴

Culture change within organisations will be critical to achieve this shift, and COVID-19 has acted as a helpful catalyst; however, challenges remain. Common barriers to implementing flexible working arrangements include technical and safety considerations, and in many cases the main barrier is simply resistance to change.

Another common barrier is lack of trust among managers that employees will remain productive and engaged. Encouragingly, it has been reported that during COVID-19, higher levels of trust have developed among many employees and employers. This may facilitate increased flexibility in the workplace.

While productivity is a concern for some employers, productivity gains are often identified as an outcome of mainstreaming flexible working conditions.⁷ The impacts of increased workplace flexibility during COVID-19 on productivity have been variable, however organisations that proactively embedded support to help employees adapt to remote working were three times more likely to see improved productivity.⁸

With everyone working from home now, I think at a managerial level, they'll probably relax a little bit and say, It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Like, I mean, we could get work done, we could do this kind of thing.⁶

“If there was a way that we could remove the anxiety that somebody has around being a carer, at least remove the workplace-related anxiety, that would be pretty amazing. Because being a carer is just full of anxiety on so many levels. You don't really need to have that compounded by what's happening from the workplace end of things.”¹²

It should also be noted that the advantages to employers of mainstreaming flexible working arrangements extend beyond potential for productivity gains. Supporting employees to balance their professional and personal lives has also been shown to promote talent retention and can play a role attracting new talent. For example, it was Suncorp's commitment to mainstreaming flexible work and supporting carers that attracted Zung Dang to find employment with Suncorp, and which has allowed him to manage attending hospital appointments and other caring commitments while working.⁹

In addition to changing employer attitudes, COVID-19 has also resulted in changing employee expectations, with a growing appetite for a mix of flexible working arrangements to suit individual needs.¹⁰ Expanding on the notion of what is possible, many employees have also come to expect more from their employer. One study found some 8 in 10 employees say their employer has the obligation to deliver a better working world, post-COVID-19.¹¹

For carers, this 'better working world' is one where carers are supported and recognised in workplaces and where flexible working in all its forms is offered as widely and as generously as possible. Reducing the work-life conflict carers experience has the potential to increase carers' satisfaction both in the workplace and in relation to their caring role.

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However, in the context of widespread unemployment and job insecurity due to the COVID-19 recession, carers who perceive their existing job or potential employment is at risk are unlikely to feel confident to request flexible working arrangements. These opportunities must therefore be transparent and accessible for carers.¹³ Employees should also be made aware that the *Fair Work Act 2009* gives many carers who meet eligibility criteria the legal right to request flexible working arrangements.¹⁴

Flexible working arrangements can be as diverse as carers themselves and need not be limited to working remotely. The flexible working arrangement that was most commonly accessed by respondents to the 2020 National Carer Survey was flexible start and finish times, which was used by approximately half of all working respondents.¹⁵ Other possibilities include job-sharing arrangements, working more hours over fewer days, and working additional hours to make up for time taken off work.

These kinds of arrangements can enable carers to take time out to attend appointments with the person they care for, visit them in an aged care facility or check in on them at home, and provide medication and therapy support at critical times during the day. Depending on the age, condition and living circumstances of the person they care for, as well as a carer's employment type and industry, the amount, frequency and timing of these variations will differ. Increasingly, employers can tap into existing resources like Future-Flex to make flexible working more mainstream through job and work (re)design.¹⁶

Employers must also look at the potential to expand existing paid and unpaid leave provisions as another mechanism for delivering workplace support and flexibility to retain carers. More than 40% of working respondents to the 2020 National Carer Survey indicated that they used paid personal and annual leave to accommodate their caring responsibilities.¹⁷ Examples of leave arrangements include paid and unpaid leave provisions additional to the requirements of the National Employment Standards, offering purchased or matched leave, and covering the costs of formal replacement care services.

Opportunities for carers to take extended leave should also be considered, for example, if a carer needs to step out of the workforce for a period of intense caring. Allowing a carer to return to their previous job once their caring responsibilities have become more manageable provides more stability for both employees and employers in the longer term.

It is important employers promote flexible work and leave options, so that carers know they are available, and this is done most effectively when communicated and promoted with support from senior leaders in the organisation. Having well documented and promoted policies is only as good as their implementation. It is also important that managers understand the challenges faced by carers and are aware of the policies and other workplace supports available. Managers may need training to be able to embrace requests for flexible work with confidence.

For many, many years actually I hid it and tried to just manage and do it. But then obviously when you have to then go to appointments, or you just can't do it at home at night anymore because you can't take the phone calls, and you can't be there and all that's needed, then you have to actually disclose. But I must admit that was quite a good thing to have done in the end. And so I'm supported, any time I need to take off it's not frowned upon.¹⁸

A literature review conducted as part of the UTS study, *What works for staff carers?*¹⁹ identified a range of recommendations for employers wanting to better acknowledge, support and celebrate carers. These included: centralised and accessible information for carers (separate to parents); continued efforts to

develop and embed multi-dimensional flexible working arrangements; carer consultation and collaboration; ensuring carers are key stakeholders in the development of policy and strategic planning; and an ongoing commitment to monitoring COVID-19 impacts related to working from home.

Many useful resources exist to help employers embrace more forms of working flexibly in the wake of COVID-19. Now is the time for employers to realise the importance of accommodating carers' needs in the workplace and build on the learnings of remote work to expand their flexible work offerings.

References

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For information on managing requests for flexible working arrangements or carers/personal leave see the [Fair Work website](#).

For workplaces wanting to develop a flexible working arrangements policy, The [Workplace Gender Equality Agency](#) (WGEA) has guidance, recommendations and a policy template.

For more information about supporting carers in the workplace visit www.carersandemployers.org.au.