

Government says in the interest of employers and employees to make offer of flexible working standard

- Liz Truss calls for flexible working to be normalised – giving employees the option to things like part-time/flexi time, working from home and job shares.
- New research from the UK Government and jobs website Indeed reveals offering flexible working arrangements increases job applications by 30%
- A national shift to flexible working would boost productivity and particularly help women and those outside major cities

Ahead of International Women's Day, Minister for Women & Equalities, Liz Truss, has called for employers to make flexible working a standard option for employees, to help level-up the UK, boost opportunities for women and reduce geographic inequality as we recover from COVID-19.

New research – published today by the Government-backed Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and jobs website Indeed – shows offering flexible working explicitly in job ads would increase applications by up to 30%.

The research, which analysed nearly 20 million applications and is the largest of its kind ever conducted in the UK, shows greater transparency in job adverts would create at least 174,000 flexible jobs to the UK economy per year.

With more people working flexibly due to Covid, Truss argues now is the time to normalise it across the country. She believes the move will boost employment in areas away from major cities and help turbocharge opportunities for women – who are twice as likely as men to work flexibly.

Flexible working is shown to increase the productivity and morale of workers, and Truss says making it an option will help address the UK's longstanding productivity gap and help level-up the country.

Minister for Women & Equalities, Liz Truss, said:

“Our commitment to flexible working is based on our desire to open up employment opportunities to people regardless of their sex or location. The shift for many people to work from home during the pandemic has changed mindsets and now is a chance to seize the opportunity of making flexible working the norm, rather than something employees have to specially request.

“The fact is that for many jobs there are invisible restrictions that hold

people back – like the need to live in high-cost accommodation close to the centre of cities or maintain working arrangements that are very hard to combine with family or other responsibilities.

“We now have the chance to break down these barriers and boost opportunities for everyone.”

David Halpern, CEO of BIT said:

“This is an amazing trial, and a great credit to our partners in the Equality Hub and Indeed, the global jobsite. It’s a huge result in several ways. We think it may be the BIGGEST experimental social policy trial ever published – certainly in Britain, and perhaps in the world.

“It also had big effects. It boosted the number of jobs advertised as flexible by around 17%, and in turn boosted the number of applicants by at least 20%. It’s also a particularly important result in the context of Covid, and a changed world of work.”

Deepa Somasundari, senior director of strategic projects at the global job site Indeed, said:

“We constantly test our products and use those learnings to build a more equitable system for those looking for work and in doing so make the hiring process fairer. Our work with the Behavioural Insights Team led us to make changes in the UK and internationally that help fulfil our mission of helping all people get jobs.

“We know people value flexible work opportunities and as a result of the pandemic, there is increasing expectation that jobs are designed with this in mind. For employers, this means reconsidering the notion that flexible work is a benefit and instead acknowledging it as a better way of working that could positively impact the lives of women and therefore society as a whole.”

The research from BIT & Indeed builds on another government backed report that was published in December. Insurance company Zurich worked with the BIT to advertise all roles as flexible as part of a trial with BIT, this led to a 20% jump in the number of women applying for senior roles within the company and double the number of total applications.

Almost 40% of employees worked from home in 2020, and the appetite for flexibility hit new heights during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has shown that 9 out of 10 jobseekers want increased flexibility, be it remote working (60%), flexitime (54%) or reduced hours (26%).

Minister for Women, Baroness Berridge, said:

“We continue to see the benefits of flexible working, now more than ever. These findings add to existing evidence showing how both men and women stand to benefit from working from home and returners programmes.

“Our work with Indeed has proven how much benefit there is for employers in advertising flexible roles and how doing so will help to normalise flexible

working. Everyone can benefit from flexible working, but the research shows that for women it can be especially important. Flexible working can be a vital tool at the disposal of employers, helping to achieve workplace equality.”

Paweł Adrjan, head of EMEA research at the global job site Indeed, said:

“Covid-19 turned the labour market upside down and today job vacancies are -37% below their pre-pandemic trend. While no sector has been immune to the virus some have fared worse than others with job postings drying up much faster and deeper in customer-facing occupations that typically attract more women than men.

“Interest in flexible work was growing before Covid-19 before accelerating over the past year and now that the vaccine program offers hope of a jobs recovery it remains to be seen how employers respond to these changes and address widening inequalities.”

Further information

About the test

In 2017, the Government Equalities Office (GEO) commissioned BIT to deliver a three year programme of work – the Gender and Behavioural Insights (GABI) programme. The programme includes the running of trials to design and test interventions to improve gender equality in the UK.

As part of this programme, BIT partnered with job site Indeed and Harvard Business School, to test a behaviourally-informed intervention to encourage employers to advertise more jobs with flexible working options.

The aim of the trials was to test the impact of introducing a prompt in the job listing template which gave employers the option to advertise jobs with a choice of flexible working options, compared to business-as-usual with no such prompt.

They were presented with nine different options ranging from flexitime to job sharing. Selected options would then add an additional list of flexible working arrangements to their job posting thus offering a more prominent way to identify flexible options.

Round one

The first randomised controlled trial involved over 200,000 job postings and over five million job applications on Indeed.co.uk to assess the impact on a) the % of job postings mentioning flexibility options and b) the number of job applications flexible roles received.

Analysis throughout 2020 found that by implementing a prompt to employers to consider whether jobs could be offered flexibly led to 20% more jobs being advertised with flexible working options. And, when job adverts offered flexible working, the study showed that they attracted up to 30% more applicants.

Round two

The second round of testing looked at the impact of additional prompts and was performed on a sample size of almost 500,000 job ads, involving over 14 million job applications.

Additional prompts viewed by employers highlighted that flexibility is a legal right in the UK, and that flexibility is gender inclusive, given both men and women desire it.

The main results were replicated to a similar degree on flexible job postings: 20% flex adoption (Round 1) vs 16.5% flex adoption (Round 2). When it came to applications, the main result was a little weaker and started from a higher baseline: 30% increase in applications (Test 1) vs 19% (Test 2). The main conclusion we can take from Round 2 is that the results from Round 1 replicate and can be trusted.