



FLEXIBLE WORKING, TELEWORKING AND DIVERSITY

An evidence review

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Evidence summary

Flexible working, teleworking and diversity: an evidence review

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a huge rise in homeworking that many expect will lead to a long-term rise in remote working. At the same time, flexible working arrangements (FWAs) are positioned as an important way to support workplace inclusion and diversity.

This evidence review set out to understand the effect of flexible work or teleworking on enhancing inclusion and diversity in the workplace. The review explored what we mean by flexible working or teleworking, the theory behind its effect on inclusion and diversity, and its actual effect on inclusion and diversity at work.

We searched two scientific databases and, from an initial haul of 113 studies, we included 26 that met our criteria for quality and relevance. A scientific summary of the research is available at cipd.co.uk/evidence-flexible-work

What is flexible working or teleworking?

Flexible work, also referred to as flexible working arrangements (FWAs), describes arrangements that allow employees to vary how much, when and where they work. This involves them working remotely from their chosen location (teleworking).

How are FWAs supposed to support inclusion and diversity?

The idea that flexible working helps individuals manage work and family responsibilities is based on two social theories. First, **resource theory** suggests that work–family conflict occurs when the demands of work drain the resources needed to meet the demands of home life, or vice versa. Work life and family or home life compete for time, energy and attention. FWAs help here by allowing employees discretion over when and where they work, enabling them to better balance their resources for both domains. This is then thought to support workforce diversity because FWAs are particularly beneficial for those with greater family responsibility, such as parents (in particular mothers).

Second, **social exchange theory** suggests that people feel a desire to help and give back to those who have done the same to them. Thus, employees who receive the benefit of FWAs may be more likely to reciprocate in the form of greater commitment and engagement to their organisation.

What effect do FWAs have on factors relevant to inclusion and diversity?

All studies indicated that FWAs help employees cope with work and family roles, leading to less conflict between them. The differences were small, however. The effect was also determined by the type of FWA, with flexibility of time more likely to lead to these positive outcomes than flexibility of location.

Other studies show a small positive effect of flexible working on job satisfaction. However, this tends to decrease over time. Women, in particular, showed higher levels of job satisfaction when their organisation offered flexible working, regardless of whether or not they actually took up this option. This suggests that the perception of an organisation as being family-supportive over the availability of FWAs has an effect on job attitudes.

Autonomy is a critical ingredient

However, simply allowing parents more time with their children is not enough; they must have autonomy or control over how their time is distributed between work and personal life. Several studies showed that the favourable effects of FWAs on outcomes such as satisfaction and reduced work–life conflict are only felt when employees, not the employers, exercise control over variations in work schedule.

The importance of autonomy is highlighted further by the link between FWAs and mental health in women with a baby. In fact, some FWAs can harm in this case. Women who found it easy to bring work home experienced worse mental health than those who found it difficult. That is to say, FWAs may not in fact lead to less time working and more time spent with children, but instead unintentionally lead to a blurring between work and home life.

Younger workers are especially attracted to flexible working

There is mixed evidence on the effect of FWAs on employee commitment, but it appears to support a small link. This appears to be moderated by age, with younger workers showing greater commitment when FWAs are an option. They may therefore be a tool for attracting younger talent.

The link with virtual teams

Finally, evidence shows that teleworking in particular, which relies on computer-mediated technology, may hinder understanding and knowledge transfer, given the lack of non-verbal cues present, such as tone, warmth and attentiveness. This causes difficulty with feedback and communication, which may negatively affect team performance. You can see our evidence review on virtual teams at cipd.co.uk/virtualteams

Conclusion

Overall, research evidence shows that flexible working arrangements and teleworking have small positive effects on diversity and perceived inclusion. Creating an environment in which employees have the autonomy and freedom to work in a more varied manner to suit their needs is a worthwhile inclusion and diversity intervention.



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