

“Let’s talk about flexible working”

How flexible working could help you – and how to start the conversation with your employer





What is ‘flexible working’?

Flexible working can be anything which allows you to vary the amount, timing, or location of your work.

It can help you get into work or stay in your job by allowing you to balance your employment with other things in your life, such as caring responsibilities.

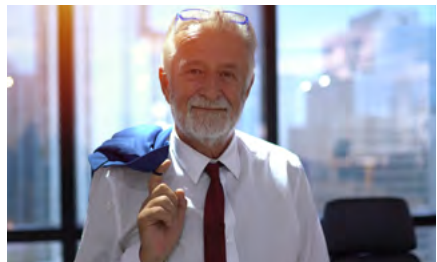
It can sometimes feel a bit daunting to start a conversation about flexible working in the workplace. You might think it won’t be allowed, or that it’s not for people like you. You might assume that it’s only for parents of young children. Or you might just simply not know how to start the discussion.

But, it’s not just parents who want to work in a way that better suits them. Some employees might need to care for a family member or friend and want to balance their work with these responsibilities. Others might want to develop new skills or have a short-term change in circumstances that perhaps means they need to temporarily vary their work-pattern.

The need to adapt to more flexible working practices has become more relevant than ever in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. For more guidance, see carersuk.org/coronavirus-work-and-care

Did you know...?

87% of people want more flexibility in their work, but many of us don’t know how to ask for it.



What does flexible working look like?

Flexible working can allow you to vary the amount, timing, or location of your work. It could be:

- **Part-time or reduced working hours** (where you work fewer days per week or shorter days) - *for example, this might help if you need to take someone to a regular hospital appointment*
- **Working from home or from another location** away from your workplace - *this could cut out additional travel time on days you attend an evening class nearer home*
- **Compressed/condensed hours** (where you work full-time hours over fewer days) - *this might be useful if you have shared childcare responsibilities*
- **Flexi-time** (where workers can choose their start and finish times within agreed limits) - *this could help if travelling during peak hours is problematic*
- **Staggered hours** (where you have different start, finish and break times from other workers) - *avoiding peak travel times on public transport could be safer and help you save money*
- **Term-time** (where you take paid or unpaid leave during the school holidays) - *this could help with covering childcare*
- **Annual/annualised hours** (where you work a certain number of hours over the year with some flexibility about when you work) - *this can help employees in seasonal roles apply for a mortgage*
- **Job sharing** (where two people do one job and split the hours) - *this could enable you to carry on working if your personal circumstances have changed.*

What type of flexible working might suit you?

First, do some thinking. Consider how you're doing your job at the moment and what your working day and week looks like. Then ask yourself:

- **What changes to your working day, or week, would give you a bit more flexibility?** Would you change the days that you work, or the hours, or the timing of your working day?
- **Would any changes to where you work help?** For example, would you like to work from home on an ongoing basis - either once a week or more often?
- **What flexibility would you ideally like, including all possible adjustments that could help?** For example, might you need to be able to alter your hours at short-notice to support someone you are caring for?
- **Is there more than one option that could help?**
- **What are your priorities if you can't have all the changes you want?** Consider talking about what you would ideally like but also be prepared to be realistic. Recognising your priorities will help you know what you're prepared to compromise on, if needed.
- **Would you consider a temporary arrangement or trial period, to test out any changes?** Being prepared to test something on a short-term basis (even if you want it to be longer term) can help show you understand 'give and take'. It may be something that is suggested by your manager, or it could be something you suggest that helps move things forward.

So where should you start?

Next, do some groundwork

- As a first step, check whether your employer has a flexible working policy or other support in place. Check your contract of employment, staff handbook, HR policies or letter of appointment to see what is covered. It might be referred to as ‘statutory flexible working’. See if they have adapted any of their policies because of COVID-19.
- Try asking someone you know at work, or an HR colleague or union representative, if they have any information. Flexible working may also be covered in other places such as your staff intranet, if you have one.
- If your company has a flexible working policy, but it doesn’t seem to cover what you are looking for, don’t be discouraged. You may be able to agree flexible working arrangements informally through discussion with a line manager.



Are you entitled to make a flexible working request?

There are two types of request that you can make: statutory requests or non-statutory requests.

All employees have a right to make a request for flexible working after they have worked for the same employer for 26 weeks (six months).

A 'statutory request' for flexible working

This is a request that is made under the law on flexible working. This means that there is a process set out in law that you and your employer need to follow when you are negotiating your flexible working request. Under the statutory process:

- you need to make your request in writing
- you can only make one request in any 12 month period
- your employer must consider the request seriously, and
- complete the whole process (including dealing with any appeal) within three months.



A 'non-statutory request' for flexible working

If you are not entitled to make a statutory request for flexible working, you can still make a non-statutory one. This is one that is not made under the law on flexible working. There is no set procedure for making a request. However, it is still good to make your request in writing so that it is clear what you have asked for.

Your employer may also have their own scheme with its own rules which may differ from the statutory scheme. For example, it may be open to all employees regardless of how long they have worked for your employer.

(Even if you can make a statutory request, you may wish to make a non-statutory request instead if, for example, the change you're asking for is minor or temporary).

You can find out more about statutory flexible leave applications at www.gov.uk/flexible-working including information on the different rules for Northern Ireland.



Did you know...?

Flexible working can be positive for both employees and their employers. It could mean that there are more staff available at peak times - and improved work/ life balance can increase productivity.

How can you make a request?

Identify who to speak to first. This would usually be your line manager but there may be other options to help you start the conversation.

As individuals' relationships with managers may vary, you may feel more comfortable speaking to someone you know better first. Find a supportive colleague, or member of the HR team if you have one, and ask their advice. Or identify another supportive manager who knows you and your work. They may be able to tell you about support in your workplace that you were not aware of. A chat with a supportive colleague will also help you prepare for a conversation with your manager. Although this is not your formal request, it may help shape your thoughts ahead of that conversation.

Your line manager will normally be the person who knows your work best and understands what needs to be done and how. So they will usually be the person to talk to about flexible working. If you're comfortable speaking to your line manager this could be the best place to start.



How should you talk to your manager?

Think about what your employer and manager are likely to care about.

Try putting yourself ‘in their shoes’ – considering what your manager needs to get done and how you can support this. This will help you answer any possible questions or concerns they may have later on, if these arise.

For example, if you normally have a team meeting on a Monday morning, saying that you will make sure you are available for this is likely to be helpful and show that you understand ‘give and take’.

What possible concerns might your employer raise about the changes you are suggesting? Think about these and prepare some answers to them. This will help you plan for a conversation with your manager and, should these concerns arise, show that you have thought things through.



Decide how and when to start the conversation.

Think about how your manager likes to work. This will help you decide how, and when, to start the conversation with them. Some people prefer email so that they can think things over, while others prefer to have a face-to-face conversation.

For example, if you think your manager prefers email you could start by saying something like:

“I’ve been thinking about whether I could work more flexibly; if I email you some ideas, could you please take a look?”

However, if you think they may be a bit reluctant to support your suggestions, you might prefer to talk face to face, as it can be easier to judge their reactions and keep the discussion open.

Prepare some opening lines for your first approach to your manager (whether this is by email or face-to-face).

For example, here are a couple of possible conversation starters:

“I’ve been reading about flexible working (you could mention your workplace policy if you have one) and how it can work, and would like to give this a try. I think it could help me to be more productive. When could we talk about this in more detail?”

“I’ve been thinking that some flexible working could help me to work better and more productively. What are your thoughts on flexible working, or when could we talk about this in more detail?”

What could you say?

Once you've thought about possible flexible working options, be prepared to:

Outline what you think would help and the benefits

Think about the benefits for your manager (and organisation) as well as for you.

For example, if your idea is straightforward – something that's easy to describe like starting and finishing your working day later – just explain this and ask if you can do it. But if it's a bit more complicated, like wanting a change in your working days or location, be prepared to explain the benefits for your manager (and organisation) as well as for you.

A more productive, engaged and happier worker is a huge benefit for an employer (and a team) as well as for the employee. It may help to highlight this by saying something like:

“If I were to start and finish work earlier, I think I could be more productive.”

“If I were to change to a three day week, I think I would work more effectively.”



Keep a flexible mindset when discussing this with your manager

Try to be open to comments or suggestions they may have that may be different to your ideas. Also, try to think how you can help offer a solution that meets your employer's needs too, and minimises any impact on your workplace and colleagues.

For example, this might include offering to cover when the help is needed most in your organisation (or team). And give advance notice of leave requests where you can.

Think about the day-to-day core requirements of your job role and how this might be covered by others, if you work flexibly.

Be open to trying things on a temporary or trial basis. This will allow adjustments to be made on both sides and help reduce any risks for you and your manager. It can also help build trust and confidence as, once it's clear the changes are working well, the chances are your manager will be more likely to support them longer-term.

For example, test a new arrangement for a month or six weeks and book a meeting with your manager to discuss the results. This will allow you to adjust the arrangements if required and show that you're happy to review them as needed.

Did you know...?

If you are caring for someone, you might want to talk about changing your working pattern to support them with their medical appointments - this is an example of flexible working.

Top tips on talking about flexible working

1

Do some groundwork. Check whether your employer has a flexible working policy or support in place.

2

Do some thinking. Consider how you're doing your job at the moment and what changes would help. Think about all possible options - what you would like ideally and also your priorities if you can't have all the changes you want.

3

Think about any possible concerns that your employer might raise about these changes and prepare some answers to address them. This will help you plan for a conversation with your manager and show that you have thought this through.

4

Identify who to speak to in your workplace first. Your line manager should be best placed to support you, but you may wish to speak to someone you know better first. (A colleague may be able to tell you about support that you were not aware of).

5

Consider what your employer (and manager) are likely to care about. Thinking about what your manager needs to get done, and how you can support this, will help you answer any possible questions or concerns they may have later, if these arise.

6

Decide how and when to start the conversation with your manager. This could either be by email so that they can think things over, or face to face which keeps the conversation open.

7

Prepare some opening lines either for a first approach to your manager (whether this is by email or face to face).

8

When you have the conversation with your manager outline what you think would help and the benefits for your manager/workplace, as well as for you.

9

Keep a flexible mindset when discussing this with your manager. Try to be open to their suggestions and think how you can help offer a solution which meets their needs too, and minimises any impact on your team.

10

Be open to (and possibly suggest) trying things on a temporary or trial basis. This will allow adjustments to be made on both sides and help reduce any risks for both you and your manager.

Key tip

Sometimes, the thought of having these types of conversations seems much more daunting than they are in reality. If you're worried about talking about flexible working, consider practising with a colleague or friend and run through the different outcomes.

Flexible working conversations are more common than you may think – and they often go better than expected!



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If you are caring for someone, unpaid, and would like further information on flexible working, please contact our helpline:

0808 808 7777 Monday-Friday 9am-6pm (hours may vary)

For details please check carersuk.org/help-and-advice/talk-to-us

Email work@carersuk.org

Visit carersuk.org/flexibleworking