

# Flexible working for parents: personal stories and practical research for HR

Brought to you by

**HRzone**



WOMBA



# Contents

- |   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>1. One man's perception of how flexible working works in his household</b>   | <b>03</b> |
| <b>2. One woman's perception of how flexible working works in her household</b> | <b>07</b> |
| <b>3. How could more flexible work benefit family life?</b>                     | <b>10</b> |
| <b>4. Unintended consequences of flexible working and how to tackle them</b>    | <b>14</b> |



1.

## One man's perception of how flexible working works in his household

*Daniel Godsall, Founder, Womba Group*

Two years ago I made the decision to quit my corporate career, to spend some time with my newborn son. Jesse was six months old at the time and my wife, Kate, was going back to work in the January. Thanks to a fortuitously timed restructure, I was able to leave the business at the end of December - perfect timing for the baby-shaped baton to be passed.

After twenty-eight years working my way up the corporate ladder, I found the adjustment to stay-at-home dad challenging. I knew looking after a baby all day was demanding, but I really had no idea how difficult I was going to find it.

**From day one, I was taken aback by the relentlessness of it.**

Jesse, like many babies, had the attention span of a gnat, and didn't like to be left on his own for a second. If I left the room he would cry. When he got bored of what we were doing, he would complain. Sometimes I'd leave him wailing while I stood in the hallway for a few minutes, trying to find some reserves of patience and energy.

**“We try to co-parent as equals, but at the same time accept that two heads aren’t always better than one.”**

Then there was nap time; a daily battle to maintain the routine my wife had developed. Just as I’d flop down onto the sofa, hoping for half an hour of peace to recharge my batteries, I’d hear him cry out from upstairs, and my heart would sink.

Back up the stairs I’d go, feeling the dual pressure of needing to get Jesse to sleep so that we’d have an easier afternoon, and reporting back to Kate that I’d kept her hard-fought routine on track.

More than anything, I think it was these moments that I found most stressful. Knowing that he needed sleep but was refusing to comply was mentally and emotionally draining. And Kate seemed so much better at coping with it, which compounded my feelings of failure.

### **Eventually, though, the tide began to turn...**

About two months into my time off, I suddenly started to feel more capable and confident. I learned to accept that babies are unpredictable, and that trying to fight it just robbed me of energy. I realised that my need for control was the problem, not Jesse, and I began to change my attitude. It’s one of the many lessons that my son has unknowingly taught me.

### **That was two years ago.**

Today Jesse is a rambunctious two year old, still as demanding of my time and attention as he was back then, but now we get to spend our time playing together. Plus we can communicate properly and, to a certain extent, reason with each other.

And, thanks to Jesse’s intense induction programme for my transition into fatherhood, I’m

now able to be mindful when we’re together, which means I enjoy every minute (almost) in his company.

Over the last two years, Kate and I have also established our roles and routines. We try to co-parent as equals, but at the same time accept that two heads aren’t always better than one.

When it comes to important decisions about raising Jesse, I will almost always defer to my wife, if we have a difference of opinion. Sometimes I don’t even voice my opinion if I sense that Kate is fixed in her view point. I know now that when it comes to raising kids, there aren’t black and white answers, that sometimes the best thing to do is to go with the flow rather than assuming that my way is better.

“I quickly came to the conclusion that flexible working is really about a state-of-mind.”

### **The importance of flexible working**

When I think about flexible working, this is one of the most important aspects of how we make it work for us. It's all too easy to slip into bickering over trivial issues, particularly when you're sleep deprived, but it's just another way of consuming precious energy.

We've also learned to appreciate each other's strengths and, for the most part, to accept each other's weaknesses. We make the effort to compliment each other when we notice that one or the other of us is doing something well. It makes us feel valued and appreciated, and is a really important aspect of how we make our parenting relationship work, and how we strengthen our own relationship as a couple.

Of course we still bicker, particularly when Jesse is poorly and we're all knackered, but we seem to be able to

resolve our petty differences more easily these days. Another skill I've developed as a parent is the ability to more quickly hop down from my high horse, aware that to stay up there is just another waste of time and energy.

In the old days I could hold a grudge for hours, days even - now I ask myself who is losing out when I'm being moody and stubborn, and I quickly come to the conclusion that the biggest loser is me.

There are lots of practical things we do too, to work flexibly together. We have a shared diary so that we can plan around each other; whoever is home first takes responsibility for getting dinner ready; and we make meals that all three of us can eat, so that we spend less time cooking, get to spend dinner time together as a family, and eat at a reasonable hour.

**“First and foremost, flexible working works in our house because we’re equals.”**

Jesse is pretty adventurous about the food he’ll eat - I’m certain him knowing that we’re all having the same thing has helped develop his range.

We don’t sweat the small stuff anymore either. Before Jesse was born an overflowing washing basket, stains on the carpet, or a badly stacked dishwasher would all have driven me mad. Nowadays I just mentally shrug my shoulders and know that we’ll get around to it, and that time spent together as a family is more precious and important than the crack in the plaster from where Jesse’s stair gate used to be.

When I started writing this piece I intended it to be full of practical tips and tricks to help a household run smoothly, but I quickly came to the conclusion that flexible working is really about a state-of-mind. In my case it’s been about letting go of old habits, hang ups, and

behaviours, and learning to change, or ignore my unhelpful internal dialogue.

My spending time as a primary care giver has been a significant enabler in developing equality in our parenting relationship too. Taking time out of your career isn’t something that everyone will get the chance to do, but there are other ways that parents can develop their individual relationships with their kids.

As parents we recognise that typically one of us is going to more rapidly develop our parenting skills and senses, simply because of the time we get to spend with our baby while our partner is out at work. It’s all too easy then for us to always take the lead in child care, as it’s quicker, and we know best, but in the long run this deprives both of us.

First and foremost, flexible working works in our house because we’re equals.

*Daniel Godsall is founder of WOMBA Group, an equality and diversity training consultancy with a particular emphasis on making the world of work a better place for working parents. Dan spent 27 years in financial services, rising to MD at Barclays Bank plc.*



## 2.

# One woman's perception of how flexible working works in her household

*Kate Perrins, Events Manager, Mumsnet*

I hear myself saying “I’m really lucky, my job is flexible” - but why should I feel fortunate and even guilty about this?

I live and work in north west London. My boys are aged 9 and 6 and my partner, James, owns his own antique and decorative art business. He works away, on average, 10-12 days a month and like many people, we don’t have family nearby.

It’s important to me that I a) spend time with the kids and b) don’t give all my salary over to childcare (I’ve already spent too many years doing that).

During term time, I work four days across five, enabling me to pick up my children three days a week. During the school holidays, I can work four full days, or my normal pattern, depending on when I’m needed in the office, childcare and how much time the boys are willing to spend in my partner’s shop.

Working from home allows me to use the time I would take to commute to attend an assembly, or volunteer at the school.

Of course, it's not all plain sailing. I'm an events manager, and in the weeks leading up to an event, I'm glued to my phone long after my working day has ended. FIFA 15 is sometimes a babysitter so I can 'just finish those emails', and ready meals are the dish of the day.

However, it's a world away from my previous role running a team of 15 and barely seeing the children during the week.

**“FIFA 15 is sometimes a babysitter so I can ‘just finish those emails’, and ready meals are the dish of the day.”**

### **The flexible working conundrum**

I'm no different from countless other women of my age. I can tell you too many stories about friends who have been made redundant while pregnant, those who have been demoted while on maternity leave, or passed over for promotion because they're part time etc and the list goes on - it's boring, frustrating, rage-inducing and, above all, mind-numbingly stupid.

Companies are missing a trick. With the current patterns of behaviour demonstrated by these stories, we are effectively closing down a large part of the UK's talented workforce. We look to our European neighbours with envy.

While not perfect, so many of them appear to be steps ahead of us, with free or heavily subsidised childcare and a far healthier approach to flexible working and achieving a work/life balance for all.

Flexible working makes employees (any gender, any age) more efficient, much happier and far more productive. We need to make work something that we do and not somewhere that we go.

The more we keep focusing on flexible working being the domain of women who happen to be parents, the longer it's going to take to change mindsets and working practices. Everyone has a life outside of work, whether that's having children, pursuing a hobby or looking after other family members, particularly elderly parents.

### **So what can HR departments do?**

Take time to do a full appraisal of your business, include all teams in all departments. Some roles may be considered 'inflexible', but there's always room for improvement in working practices, especially if it means retaining good staff.

**“Don’t see flexible working as a problem: in the long run it’s a solution.”**

Target working practices to adopt and roll out. Some will be long term and others can be started now. Long-term goals will include changing the company’s outlook for the better. How to retain staff? Do staff, and in particular women, disappear from certain roles and why? Who is already working flexibly and why? Does it depend on who is their manager?

Take a staff survey and explain to employees why you’re doing it. Be inclusive: if you’re clear from the beginning that this isn’t ‘just for parents’ you’ll get everyone’s buy-in from the word go.

Look at your recruitment policy: people are often reluctant to ask about flexible working at the interview stage for fear of ruling themselves out. Include a clear policy in your advertising; if there’s no doubt, more talent will step forward.

Examine your managers’ working practices. Are the basic skills there - are they approachable, adaptable? Do they demonstrate trust and gratitude to their staff? Are they open to discussions about working practices when a member of staff requests it?

Don’t see flexible working as a problem: in the long run it’s a solution. Look at how it can benefit the company’s productivity, increase your retention of staff and decrease stress in the workplace.

Companies are now legally obliged to consider flexible working, but changing the corporate culture is something else. But one thing’s for sure: if your organisation isn’t doing it, your competitors might be stealing a march on you. It’s time to make work work for everyone, learn from others and make some real changes to employment practices in the UK.

*Kate Perrins is Events Manager at Mumsnet, the UK’s biggest network for parents. She was previously Head of Events at the Guardian.*



### 3.

## How could more flexible work benefit family life?

*Professor Almudena Sevilla, Professor of Labour Economics, Queen Mary University of London*

*Dr Mark Bryan, Reader in Economics, University of Sheffield*

In recent years there has been increasing interest in flexible work as a means to help people reconcile work and family commitments, have quality time together as a family, and generally improve their work-life balance.

Yet despite the fact that, since 2014, all employees have had the right to request flexible working, in a recent survey by the CIPD almost one in five reported that it was not offered in their organisation.

#### **How could an extension of flexible working benefit families?**

Flexible work offers many potential advantages, but a key benefit of flexible working is the ability to coordinate time spent with other people.

Research has shown that couples select work schedules that tend to overlap more than the average, potentially giving them an hour of extra time together per day outside work.

“We find that couples who have flexitime at work enjoy half an hour more daily synchronous time than those in non-flexitime jobs.”

### How much more time coordination might there be if more people worked flexibly?

To answer this question, we used detailed information on some 1,500 couples collected by the nationally representative British Household Panel Survey.

The data included the times of the day that each member of the couple works, allowing us to look directly at the amount of overlap in their work schedules and hence the amount of ‘synchronous time’ they have left to spend together per day.

More importantly, the data also has information on whether workers have the possibility to work flexitime, i.e. whether workers have the ability to vary start and finish times subject to certain core hours. Information on work schedules and flexitime allow us to look at the effect of flexibility on synchronous work.

Flexitime makes it much easier for couples to coordinate their schedules than those with fixed working times, and we find that couples who have flexitime at work enjoy half an hour more daily synchronous time than those in non-flexitime jobs.

It also turns out not to matter which partner has flexitime: only one flexitime worker per couple is needed to achieve greater time coordination.

The flexitime effect adds to any coordination which couples may achieve in other ways, for instance through one partner working part-time (the fewer hours a partner works, the easier it is to coordinate).



### How do children enter the picture?

When comparing different family types, we find that the positive effect of flexitime on couple's synchronization is driven entirely by couples with children – there is no impact of flexitime on couples' coordination for couples without children, whereas the impact is one hour per day more synchronous time for couples with children.

This is about double the amount of overlap which previous research has found among couples overall.

The fact that there is no effect of flexitime for couples without children suggests that couples with no children can find work schedules that meet their preferences without the need of more flexibility.

In contrast, couples with children face a variety of additional constraints.

An obvious example of a constraint is childcare needs: couples may need to make sure that one parent is always present with the child, or need to collect them from school in the afternoon.

### Then we looked at couples with teenagers.

But we find an equally large effect of flexitime for couples with teenagers, suggesting there are broader constraints than just childcare needs. Perhaps once families become established, parents are less mobile and so have more difficulty locating jobs that match their working time preferences.

Flexitime can then be a valuable fine-tuning mechanism enabling spouses to coordinate their hours more effectively.

**30%**  
**of couples contain  
at least one partner  
working flexitime.**

In the context of expansion of the right to request flexible working, the implications of our findings for further research and practice are of great interest.

We show that an extension of flexitime may facilitate time coordination broadly across households irrespective of which partner takes it up.

Our data shows that while only modest proportions of individual men and women report working flexitime (15% of men and 19% of women), many more couples (nearly 30%) contain at least one partner working flexitime.

More importantly, it seems that those who benefit most are couples with children, who appear more constrained than childless couples in their choice of work schedules

### **Trying to impact the ‘family time’ workers get**

So our findings suggest that an extension of flexitime would be a promising route toward more ‘family time’, especially among parents.

The right to request flexible working does not specify a particular form of flexible work but rather a range of options.

We find that the benefits from greater coordination of daily schedules among couples derive particularly from flexitime policies as measured in the survey, and defined as the worker’s ability to vary start and finish times subject to certain core hours.

This is an encouraging result that sets the stage to explore other policies such as time accounts or annualised

hours that could help couples coordinate across the week or year.

These practices also give firms the option of rearranging working hours to match demand – the key requirement for them to help couples coordinate as well is that workers have control too.

*Almudena Sevilla is Professor of Labour Economics at Queen Mary University of London. Her main research interests are family sociology, time use, social inequality, work quality, health and wellbeing and quantitative methods.*

*Dr Mark Bryan is Reader in Economics at the University of Sheffield. His research interests include household economics, wellbeing, the gender pay gap, pension saving and the impact of work identity and hours of work.*



## 4. Unintended consequences of flexible working and how to tackle them

*Almudena Cañibano, Ph.D, Lecturer in HRM, ESCP Europe*

The increasingly positive perception of flexible work is not without a cause. Research has found that flexible work arrangements can have encouraging consequences for both firms and employees, increasing employee commitment and productivity, reducing work-family conflict or boosting employee wellbeing.

However, a number of studies have cast doubt over its advantages for employees.

First, a negative consequence of flexible working is the distortion of work boundaries. In traditional systems work is confined to a certain time and space. Outside of that time and that space, people do not generally work.

### **Work has become ‘ubiquitous’**

Flexible work arrangements in conjunction with technological advancements have enabled work to become ubiquitous. Checking e-mail at a birthday party, reading a report in the doctor’s waiting lounge, using the weekend to work on unfinished business... these increasingly common situations illustrate that the limit between on and off work is blurry.

As a result of disappearing boundaries, flexible workers tend to work more hours. Some do because they don’t count their hours and focus exclusively on results. Some do because they decide to invest in work the extra resources that flexibility provides (for example, teleworkers often devote the hours they save in commuting to work).

Others work longer or more intensely because they see flexible work as an incentive they are offered and feel the need to reciprocate. Whatever the reason, work intensification can easily lead to psychological strain and poor employee health and should therefore be monitored.

Moreover, lack of boundaries and work intensification pose an essential problem for detachment because some flexible workers never really feel 'off work.'

However, detachment (i.e. mentally and physically disengaging from work) is essential for daily recovery. Having time to rest and replenish the resources that have been depleted while at work is necessary to preserve psychological wellbeing.

These negative consequences of flexible work are by no means insurmountable but by acknowledging them, they can be directly tackled.

First, if traditional boundaries disappear new limits need to be created. Flexibility should not mean chaos and therefore requires the development of different work

processes and routines that allow people to clearly differentiate on and off work-time.

For teleworkers this generally means finding a specific space for work, let it be a specific room at home, a regular café, etc. in which they avoid having leisure time so that when they leave that space, they can also leave work behind.

Companies like Accenture have helped those employees applying for telework analyse the working environment in their homes and create suitable working conditions there. Although some people can manage very well to work from their couch in their pyjamas, for most, having a dedicated space is essential in the long run for both productivity and personal wellbeing.



**“For people with flexible work schedules, it is important to keep track of hours worked so they can keep them under control.”**

For people with flexible work schedules, it is important to keep track of hours worked so they can keep them under control. It is also important to maintain certain coherence in work habits. Too much volatility can contribute to the above mentioned detachment problem. For example, for most people working 9 to 5 on Monday, 3 to 9 on Tuesday and 6 to 1am on Wednesday may be very flexible but quite distressing.

Having a number of core work hours can help individuals develop healthy routines. Successful companies tend to ensure fluid communication with their employees on what their “best work times are.” Some are more productive in the mornings, others like to take a break in the middle of the day for family issues, etc. The schedules are flexible to cater to their personalities and needs, but not completely random.

For instance, the small Spanish company Cyberclick, at the top of the Great Place to Work ranking in 2015, exemplifies this approach. The highly successful employer Netflix does too. In a way, it could be said that flexibility helps as long as it does not mean complete uncertainty.

Training can strongly contribute to ensuring the development of new routines. Employees can be trained in how to manage their time autonomously (particularly those accustomed to rules and concrete procedures) or on how to set strict boundaries with simple measures (for instance by avoiding answering e-mails beyond a certain hour).

Most importantly, organisations can train their line managers. Traditional management techniques may not be helpful in managing flexible workers. Managers must develop a performance

mindset and evaluate their employees on results and commitment rather than on presence.

At the same time, they must develop a clear understanding that performance should not mean permanent availability. Line managers must help their employees feel ‘off work’ by helping them build boundaries between work and personal time and by respecting those boundaries. This is still a significant area for improvement for many organisations who report having difficulties implementing flexible work arrangements due to managers’ inability to deal with aspects like workflow or communication.

In addition, in order to facilitate a gradual change of mindset, the implementation of flexible work arrangements could be approached as an ongoing process. For many, going from a traditional 9 to 5 job in an office

surrounded by colleagues to a full-time telework job may be overwhelming and very difficult to manage. Middle-ground progressive options can help managers learn the perks of managing people who are not onsite and employees adapt to a new work style. For instance telework could start with one or two days a week and then gradually evolve depending on a successful adaptation.

Finally, it would be a good idea to start thinking about designing jobs

that are flexible in nature rather than creating traditional jobs that are then transformed or moulded into flexible ones.

Better knowledge of flexible work practices and their individual and organisational consequences is essential to develop design abilities, on something that, just like technology, seems not just unavoidable but necessary for future workplace developments.

*Almudena Cañibano Ph.D is Lecturer in HRM at ESCP Europe. Her research focuses on the study of innovative work organization systems, flexible working practices, human resource management and their effect on occupational health, employee wellbeing and organisational performance.*

**“Start thinking about designing jobs that are flexible in nature rather than creating traditional jobs that are then transformed or moulded into flexible ones.”**



## About HRZone

HRZone is a leading online human resources publication, offering advice, trends, analysis and expert commentary to help HR professionals solve challenges in the modern workplace.

[www.hrzone.com](http://www.hrzone.com)



## About Mumsnet

Mumsnet is the UK's biggest network for parents and aims to provide knowledge, insight and a supportive community. Founded in 2000, the site also features a blogging network with over 5000 registered bloggers.

[www.mumsnet.com](http://www.mumsnet.com)



## About Womba

WOMBA Group is a maternity coaching consultancy offering tailored programmes to ensure the right support and expertise is available to both colleagues and managers at every stage of transition in and out of work.

[www.wombagroup.com](http://www.wombagroup.com)