

## **No more excuses for failing to adopt flexible working**

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## No more excuses for failing to adopt flexible working

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Part-timer. Often the term is derogatory. “You part-timer!” On other occasions it’s expiatory. “I’m *only* part-time!” It’s a testament to how normalised full-time working is. Our response to Covid demands that we challenge that narrative.

When returning to work after the birth of my first child, I asked to work a three-day week. Unless I worked at least four days, came the reply, I would have to relinquish my head of faculty position. I was vulnerable in my new role as a mum. I did not put up a fight and relinquished a position I had worked 18 years to attain.

I didn't stay long in my newly demoted position. I felt my skills were not being used and my voice and expertise were not valued. But my unhappy experience did lead to something positive – a chance to explore whether my personal experiences resonated with those of others.

Through my research, I collected rich narratives detailing women teachers’ lived experiences of part-time working in secondary schools and how this shaped their career trajectories. The results shed light on why so few secondary school senior positions are occupied by those who prefer this pattern of working.

Contrary to stereotype, these women are highly committed to their paid work as well as to their families, and their reasons for working part-time are actually linked to a desire to do things well. They experience stress and guilt as a result of running both aspects of their lives to a high standard, exacerbated by their sense that their voices are not as valued as their full-time colleagues and that their opportunities for career progression are limited as a result of not working full-time. They perceive senior leadership to be lacking in understanding of, and empathy for, the challenges they face in managing competing demands on their limited time.

One of the key lessons learned during this pandemic has been the recognition of the importance of access to childcare in enabling people – particularly women – to be part of the workforce. Models of working and work-based practices have changed enormously in a short period of time.

According to the [Chartered Institute of Personnel Development](#) part-time working is the most common flexible working arrangement. About a quarter of all employees work in this way, three quarters of whom are women. The school workforce is largely made up of women, many with families, yet teachers’ requests to work flexibly [appear more likely to be turned down](#) than others in the wider workforce. In 2019, the [NFER reported](#) that 27 per cent of primary school teachers and only 19 per cent of secondary teachers worked part-time.

In addition, compounding the disparity in the proportion of men and women in senior positions, school workforce data shows that the number of secondary school leadership positions being occupied by anyone working part-time is only around 5 per cent. This suggests that the chances of becoming a senior leader are slim for those who work part-time, especially women.

As we face a post-Covid economic downturn, it's worth noting that flexible working enables parents to remain in the workforce. Providing support for flexible working in schools is not only the right thing to do, it enables other parents to remain in the wider workforce too.

Schools are handling the pandemic magnificently. Through lockdowns, closed bubbles and enforced self-isolation, they have trusted that teachers will do their best and be committed to their work through hastily implemented new working arrangements. And teachers have lived up to that trust, demonstrating that changes in the way we work are possible when the need is deemed to be great enough.

There can be no question then that this can be translated into more empathetic attitudes and practices in relation to flexible working. The global crisis will abate, and it will not do to fall back on an old normal- the time is now for a new narrative around this pattern of working,