

BEYOND COVID

How flexible working can shape the future of industry

A virtual roundtable hosted by Sir Robert McAlpine and chaired by Paul Hamer, Chief Executive, on 16th March 2021.

Overview

On 16th March 2021, Sir Robert McAlpine (SRM) hosted a roundtable event to discuss the future of flexible working. Attendees included Minister for Employment Mims Davies MP, as well as a range of Members of Parliament. In addition to political attendees, industry leaders from across the construction sector participated in the discussion along with leading flexible working campaigners, culminating in an excellent conversation which sought to progress the ways we can embed flexible working into our everyday working patterns.

Background

Over the past number of years, SRM has been determined to change the outdated perception that flexible working is somehow not compatible with the construction industry, while also looking to challenge the more wide-ranging flawed notion that flexible working has an overarching negative impact on businesses.

The virtual roundtable followed the publication of SRM's new report – 'Forever Flex: Making flexible working work beyond a crisis' – created in collaboration with flex Champion Anna Whitehouse, aka Mother Pukka, and behavioural change agency Claremont. The roundtable built on the conclusions of the report, which explored how to make flexible working sustainable in the long-term. Anna Whitehouse also joined the roundtable discussion to share her expertise amongst the group.

Introductions and current government focus

The session began with a short introduction by SRM Chief Executive Paul Hamer, who provided a brief overview of SRM's work in the flexible working field before passing over to Employment Minister Mims Davies, who spoke to the government's current employment policy focus. Referencing the recent Plan for Jobs, the Minister spoke about the government's desire to ensure that the recovery from coronavirus focuses on the retention and creation of highly skilled jobs, noting a number of examples where flexible working patterns have led to greater levels of productivity, opportunity and inclusion. When questioned on how industry could support government advance the flexible working agenda, the Minister noted that businesses which allow their employees to work flexibly around family commitments often see greater levels of employee loyalty, whilst also stressing that businesses should be open to the notion that a large number of employees may wish to work flexibly for a number of acute reasons, and, as such, flex shouldn't be limited to carers or parents.

The Minister also asked industry to ensure that working practices do not lead to individuals having to make a choice between their personal lives and employment, noting that some may struggle to get back into working after taking an extended period out to attend to personal circumstances. The Minister encouraged industry leaders to provide a working environment where individuals did not have to leave their jobs because of a change in personal circumstances, and encouraged industry to embrace flexible working to retain talented individuals and open opportunities to a wider range of individuals. The Minister noted that she and her colleagues often have to work flexibly to juggle family and government commitments, and stressed the need for industry to champion a similar approach.

The meaning of flexible working

Continuing the conversation, a number of attendees discussed the stigma around flexible working, noting that many have an outdated perception that it is often only called for by parents, and in particular by mums. Attendees were united in their assertion that there is a need to ensure flexible working is available to all employees - independent of caring or parental responsibilities - with participants noting that there should be no need for employees to “justify” why they want to work flexibly.

Participants mentioned how the current pandemic has accelerated the move by many companies towards flexible working, with technological advances now ensuring that individuals do not need to be in the same location to effectively carry out their roles. Attendees highlighted that many firms have committed to giving their employees a mix of home working as well as office working, yet more needs to be done to ensure a fundamental shift in mindset towards the adoption of long-term flexible working patterns.

Several speakers highlighted the need to normalise flexible working in the recruitment phase of employment, noting that a number of firms don’t publicise their flexible working practices, or only offer them as a reward for longevity. Many stressed the need for employers to celebrate their flexible working offers and not see them as a “benefit” of employment, more as a fundamental right. Access to a wider, more diverse talent pool was highlighted by many as a key reason for employers to more publicly celebrate their commitment to flexible working.

Having discussed how flexible working was fundamental to ensuring greater levels of employee welfare, productivity as well as diversity, participants discussed the many variations of flexible working, criticising the notion that home working was synonymous with flexible working. For example, speakers highlighted that those working in the construction industry, but also in hospitality and leisure, should also be able to take advantage of flexible practices, despite home working not being available.

Learning from success – FlexNHS

Moving on, a representative from the NHS provided attendees with an example of flexible working practices within the NHS and discussed the importance of ensuring staff have the ability to flex in the workplace. It was noted that the NHS offers flexible working from day 1 of employment – earlier than the statutory period of 26 weeks – and also ensures that flexible practices are the default for staff within the NHS, rather than the exception. As a result of consultation with NHS workers during the FlexNHS campaign, it was identified that many workers wanted greater ability to alter shifts only slightly, such as around parental commitments or appointments. Participants discussed that, in order to keep talented individuals who have been highly trained, it makes little sense for employers to decline flexible working asks and ultimately push people away into other forms of work. Furthermore, the NHS representative highlighted that the health service is continuing to look at ways of retaining talent through flexible working solutions, in particular stressing how it is important for organisations to find new ways of ensuring parents can work alongside their caring responsibilities, and not feel like they have to make a choice between the two.

Making progress – how to embed flexible working in industry

With attendees in agreement with regards to the benefits and values of flexible working, the conversation turned towards how to embed flexible working into the wider industry psyche. Many noted the role that businesses could play themselves, such as championing flexible working practices and ensuring they are the norm, whilst others focused on the role of government. Numerous attendees were critical of the current practice of employees only having the right to request flexible working after 26 weeks, and called on the government to scrap this unnecessarily long period and ensure flexible working can be accessed from the start of employment. Others voiced a preference for the forthcoming Employment Bill to include a commitment to making flexible working the default practice for employees, with employers only denying flexible working in exceptional circumstances.

In addition, several speakers raised concerns around the issue of enforcing flexible working policy changes, with many weary of businesses ignoring or putting informal pressure on employees to waive their right to flex. A number of attendees called for greater oversight and scrutiny of government on employers to ensure they had in place adequate measures to allow employees to flex. A number of MPs in attendance encouraged industry to join them in raising these suggestions with the Business Secretary ahead of the Bill's publication.

Flexible working in the construction sector

Towards the end of the roundtable, a number of representatives from SRM spoke about the need to ensure a greater degree of flex within the construction sector, which has often been viewed as an “inflexible” industry. Many stressed how the high degree of suicides and mental health struggles within the sector underline the continued importance of ensuring employees have access to a wide range of welfare services, with flexible working playing a huge role in ensuring construction workers feel comfortable with their work-life balance.

Whilst noting that some jobs may lend themselves to flexible working more than others, a number of attendees noted that flexible working is possible in construction related roles, and that to advance productivity and welfare on site, firms should not shy away from the label of flexible working. Attendees also called on the construction industry to share best practice on flexible working, and discuss ideas and policies which have worked best to advance flex on site. Roundtable Chair Paul Hamer stressed how, within SRM, onsite flexible working policies have been designed by individuals with first-hand experience of these roles and their requirements – rather than implemented from senior management. In summary, attendees agreed that ensuring employees have a say in the design and implementation of flexible working procedures is fundamental to their overall success.

Conclusions

Paul Hamer drew proceedings to a close and thanked everyone for their participation. He noted that the discussion had touched upon the benefits of flexible working, as well as possible next steps towards implementation, and encouraged everyone from across Parliament and industry to continue their efforts in advancing the cause for flexible working.