

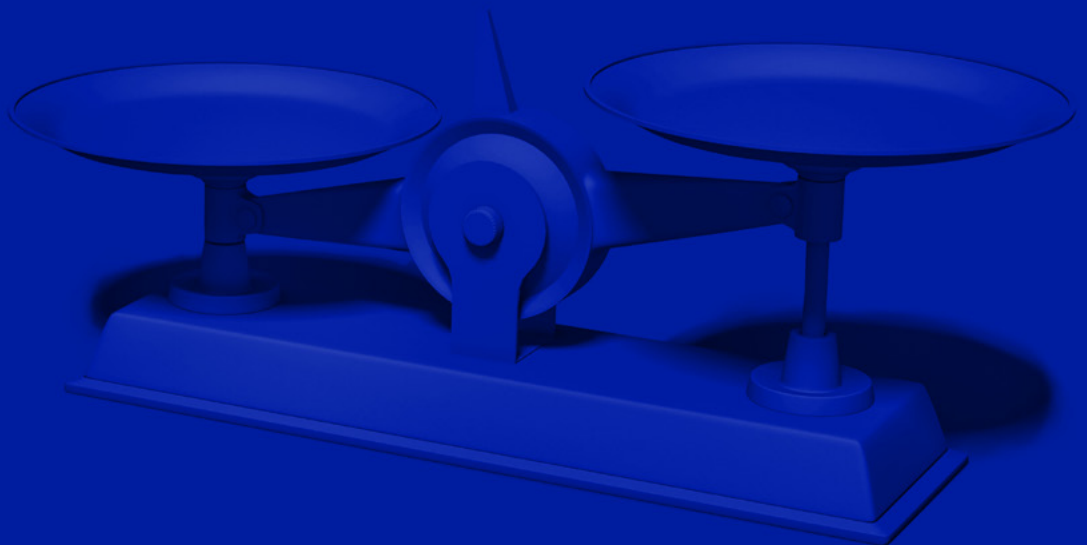


Expert perspectives

Breaking with tradition: changes in work and society

Dr Heejung Chung is an expert in Social Policy and Sociology, University of Kent

She studies different labour market patterns and outcomes across European welfare states, focusing mostly on flexibility at work, work-life balance, and job insecurity. She's particularly interested in how flexible working and scheduling is being experienced in our professional and personal lives, and how this impacts gender inequality.



Flexibility and the future of work

In the industrial age, the rhythm of work was the rhythm of the machine. People worked against the clock and were confined to being in certain spaces, for certain amounts of time. Since then, traditional, mechanical working patterns have been normalised, but that's starting to change.

Now technology is breaking the mould – creating more flexibility allows for more autonomy, and helps people become more productive. So how can we expect technology to reshape our attitudes towards work and home-life to create more equal opportunities for women?

“We’re forging social norms about how to deal with these interactions [such as office meetings] – and that will be very useful in the short and medium term.”

Managing new working patterns

Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, many businesses in the UK have needed to adjust to working from home. Dr Heejung thinks this will force employers to reconsider traditional views of work flexibility. Employers are seeing that working from home is possible, removing a major doubt – that flexible working doesn't work. She thinks this will be especially significant for women workers, who until now have not had the same level of flexibility as men.

“Employers [were] hesitant to trust to trust women to do work at home. But now the evidence is different.”

This new way of working needs a modern style of management. A manager still has to improve the productivity of their team, but they need to trust their teams to do this without regular check-ins. In time, this will mean the management role changes. Managers will be responsible for ensuring people don't feel too isolated and providing them with the tools they need to work effectively.

Closing the gender-gap

Under the traditional working model, women would often have to decide between being a mother or having a professional job. Now that we have more flexibility, women will have more freedom to choose.

“If working from home was more common, then women could avoid trading off their careers.”

But, for this model to work effectively, we will also need to see a change in cultural expectations. Traditional gender roles in the UK mean that some women are still expected to raise the family and manage the home. Women who work from home will often balance both roles. Normalising flexible work could lead to a shift in cultural norms, as responsibilities within the household may have to be more equally distributed.

Reshaping the work landscape

Dr Heejung is struck by the significant geographic 'distortion' in wealth and population in the UK, which is shown most clearly in property prices. If people had the opportunity to relocate or not be tied to particular geographies, she expects them to take those opportunities. Dispersion of the workplace also means employers have more choice when it comes to hiring.

“Especially companies where the client base is all over the world... it's increasingly meaningless to have, say a London office.”

This could open up small, local economies across the country, while making it easier for younger professionals to save money in the housing market and reduce living costs. This would depend on having the digital infrastructure in place to support remote working.

Bringing business closer to home

Cutting down on business trips will also have positive implications for parents who don't want to be away from their children. Flexible working will make it easier for people to connect digitally, across the country and the world, which means they won't need to spend so much time away from home.

“[Flexible working] is allowing for currently excluded parts of the workforce to take more of an active role.”

Dr Heejung points out that the culture of business trips causes an unfair disadvantage to women, who may be expected to stay closer to their children. Introducing more flexibility in this area could mean that talented and highly specialised women could participate in wider-reaching projects. Without causing family life to suffer.

Productivity based on outcomes

Traditionally, measures of productivity have relied on timescales, but the new model of work will make judgments based on outcomes. Working longer hours will not necessarily lead to better results. Unlike machines, people can easily become fatigued, distracted and inspired. Accepting this reality could lead to an increase in creative solutions and job satisfaction.

“The really good managers are adapting. They're redefining productivity and output, it's a big ask and you have to make an agreement and increase levels of trust and clarity.”

Flexibility at work means that businesses can now accommodate the unique working styles of their employees and can support them to get the best results. As this becomes more common, it will be vital for talent retention.

Flexibility will bring more equality

Businesses have been thrown in at the deep end of adapting to flexible work.

Currently nearly 50% of the workforce is working flexibly, due to COVID-19.

That means organisations have had to get to grips with tools to support working from home, quickly. Crucially, Heejung is expecting our experiences of flexible working will force employers to revise their attitudes – especially towards women workers.

Find out how expectations of the modern workplace are changing, and how to make your organisation more productive

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