

FUTURE-PROOFING BUSINESS RESILIENCE THROUGH FLEXIBLE WORKING

INSIGHTS FROM MEMBERS OF THE
CIPD SENIOR DIVERSITY NETWORK

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BACKGROUND

Growing business case testimonies position flexible working as the way ahead to meet competition and sustain global market delivery.

‘There is no question for me that allowing your people to work flexibly and assessing them on outputs rather than presenteeism will lead to greater engagement, higher productivity and retention and a stronger employer brand – it makes good business sense’ (Fleur Bothwick, Director of Diversity & Inclusive Leadership – EMEA, Ernst & Young).

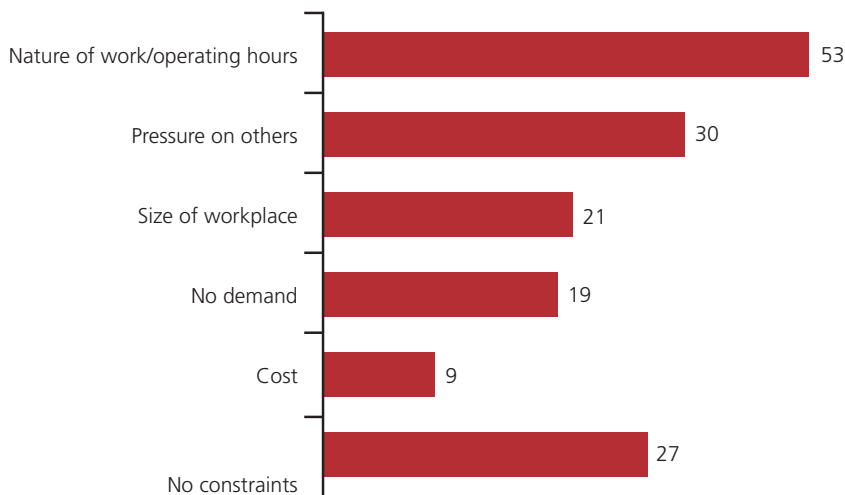
While evidence shows – and many commentators would say – that much progress has been made over the last few decades regarding the adoption of flexible working by UK employers, recent findings from the CIPD’s 2012 *Flexible Working*

Provision and Uptake survey and the *Workplace Employment Relations Study 2011* show slow increases in the take-up of flexibility by employees and very limited use of different kinds of flexible working – particularly among non-managerial staff.

So why hasn’t the uptake of flexible working increased more significantly over the last decade against the background of improved rights to ask for flexible working which have been welcomed by many stakeholders – in particular the CIPD?

While the effect of the economy on people’s budgets may be freezing the interest of some employees, the corollary is that many still have jobs they might otherwise have lost because employers have chosen to retain people on a flexible basis rather than making them redundant and losing talent.

Figure 1: Constraints on flexible working provision (%)



Source: 2011 *Workplace Employment Relations Study: first findings*

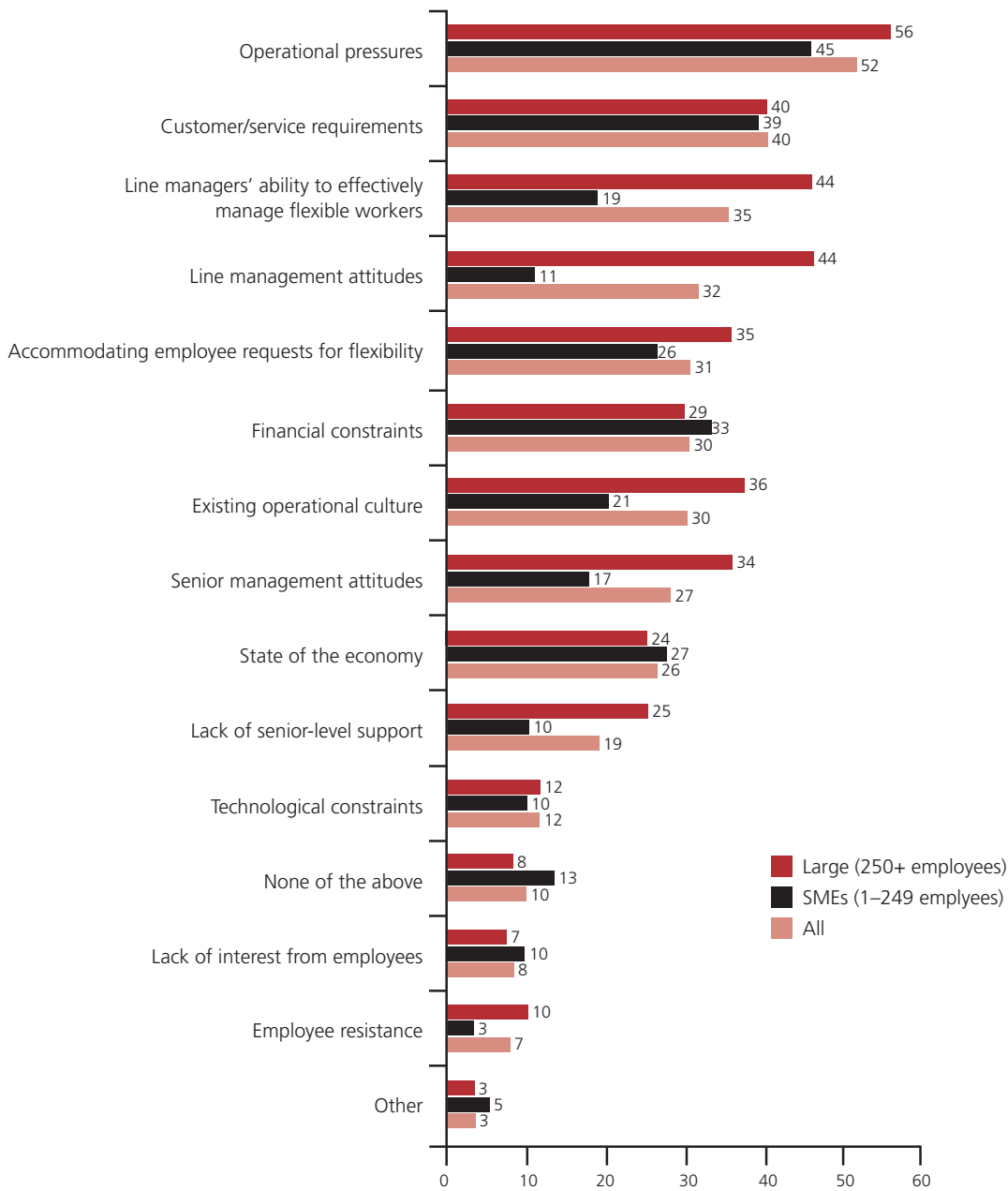
Table 1: Given the opportunity, would you take up flexible working? (%)

	All	Men	Women	Private	Public	Voluntary
Yes	46	44	51	47	44	65
No	33	38	25	35	36	0
Don’t know	20	18	23	19	20	35

Source: CIPD *Flexible Working Provision and Uptake* survey 2012

Base: All employees (excluding the self-employed) whose organisation does not provide flexible working (347)

Figure 2: Barriers to improving flexible working practices (% employers)



Source: CIPD *Flexible Working Provision and Uptake* survey 2012
 Base: All organisations (818)

So what are the underlying issues? A CIPD Senior Diversity Network focus group considered five challenges that businesses need to grapple with to develop responses that will help them to maintain economic success in the face of an ageing working population and the need to attract and retain a diverse workforce.

ONS figures show that part-time working in the UK has grown since the recession. The UK now has the most flexible labour market in the world and this gives significant ability to be agile to changing market conditions.

This short report offers thought leadership and observations to help UK businesses manoeuvre successfully in the emerging twenty-first-century global landscape.

FRAMING THE FUTURE OF FLEXIBLE WORK

Notable quotes from the Senior Diversity Network focus group discussions:

'Ongoing tough times have magnified the issue of sustainability.'

'A more realistic description for people's need to work flexibly is not work-life balance but "work-life fit". The hours and responsibilities of the job can be fitted around people's lives rather than their office hours.'

'Small organisations have to take things a step at a time. Culture is always going to be the biggest barrier to overcome.'

'How do I, as an HR professional, build inclusivity and flexibility into job design? I call it freedom within a framework.'

'There is no need for HR to encourage line managers to over-manage staff. An effectively trained line manager can see how staff are performing and motivate them without the need to spend time continually recording everything on forms.'

'Hard facts are what you need to progress the use of flexible working and track the benefits to business better. We're working to turn flexible working into a cost benefit. You can only do that if you have hard data.'

FLEXIBLE WORKING – THE JOURNEY SO FAR

Sarah Jackson, CEO, Working Families, covers the ground:

The employment landscape is changing fast and jobs for life are disappearing. As employers realise that recession is likely to continue into the medium and long term, they are coming to terms with the fact that economies once regarded as temporary are here to stay. There is growing recognition that traditional working practices must change as organisations struggle to do more with less.

There is a strong link between flexible working, employee engagement and productivity. The most tangible benefits result in reduced sickness absence, improved retention rates and savings in the cost of recruitment, all of which help to boost productivity. HR professionals recognise that flexible working is part of a much-needed virtuous circle but that more needs to be done to show through hard evidence how it adds value to the business at a deeper level. Flexible working has become increasingly viable because of the use of technology.

Types of flexible work are numerous and include working from home, working a set number of hours over a given period and output-focused, task-oriented work, where the employee has control over the amount of time they put in to reach a goal or target.

Business and organisations benefit from having a ‘big brand’ associated with a good reputation. When flexible working is embraced by the brand, it helps organisations to attract talent and stop it leaking away, saving recruitment and advertising costs and conserving skills. It helps to support employee well-being and improve work–life fit, which in turn enables employees to focus on their work without the distraction of personal background pressures.

Everyone has personal non-work-related responsibilities which change over life stages – for example, raising a family or caring for an elderly parent or relative. Organisations with flexible working policies don’t miss out on talented people who may not be able to work full-time.

Despite the clear business benefits, however, the prevailing economic challenges have brought the growth of flexible working under attack. A few dinosaur employers and members of the business lobby have been pushing back on the agenda, despite leading-edge contemporaries seeing this as a positive solution to support economic survival rather than a barrier to competitiveness. However, the Coalition Government has maintained its course in making the law on the employee right to request flexible working more inclusive than it was when they came into power.

The long-hours’ culture that is prevalent in certain sectors has become an engrained pattern of working that is hard to shift. It is the attitudes of employees themselves that contribute to this. According to research by Working Families, men are twice as likely as women to believe that working long hours is the key to getting on. This is despite the fact that men in the UK already work the longest hours in Europe and 55% of them are dissatisfied with their work–life balance.

The long-hours’ culture is associated with the issue of ‘presenteeism’. This is where employees seek to be visible but are not necessarily fully engaged with their work.

In addition, employees who are satisfied with their work–life balance are less likely to report being under excessive pressure and are more likely to be engaged. Flexible working, on the other hand, is also associated with employer trust and improved employee autonomy, which are known to be conditions that improve productivity.

To date, flexible working has tended to be seen more as a woman’s issue associated with childcare, but this crude gender stereotyping is slowly beginning to change.

With dual-income families now being common and the earning potential of women improving – despite the stubborn gender pay gap – more women are becoming essential breadwinners and more men are beginning to request flexible working arrangements.

This will help change perceptions of flexible working being for women in professional jobs who can work away from an office location because of the availability of technology, which has led flexible working to be seen as a lifestyle choice and an option for employees who are not fully committed to long hours or the demands of the business. This is not the case.

Flexible working is now just as likely to be an issue for men as for women and there are moves to promote the advantages of flexible working for people doing lower-skilled jobs too. However, the further down the organisation you look, the more likely you are to see flexible working translated as part-time working. Unlike the above perceptions about flexible working, those associated with part-time working – or the casualisation of work and shift patterns – see them as giving greater advantage to employers than to employees. In reality, any kind of flexible work provision can give advantages to both employers and employees and recognise the lifecycle events that may mean that for short periods people may need or prefer to work fewer hours.

For example, the ageing workforce has focused attention on the issue of eldercare as more and more workers hit the age bracket where they will need to respond to the care needs of elderly dependants. Significantly, men are just as likely to be involved in eldercare as women, and employers will find an increasing employee appetite for different kinds of inclusive flexible working options to help employees cope, or risk unstoppable talent leakage.

Unlike childcare – where responsibilities are predictable and where employers can respond to needs by providing maternity and paternity leave and facilities such as workplace crèches and planned cover – eldercare is unpredictable and open ended. For the employer it will mean finding substitute cover at short notice.

Another important emerging business driver for flexible work arrangements is the cost of office space. This has risen sharply, particularly in central London, and will call for expedient ways of employing talent to keep rising accommodation costs under tighter control. Provisions such as hot-desking combined with working from home are likely to grow.

Clearly, the take-up of the diverse range of flexible working opportunities is linked to how prepared line managers are to adopt and promote it in their teams. The evidence on this so far is not encouraging. The message about the benefits of flexible working has been slow to filter through. When it does, issues that stop it being taken up appear to include pressure of work, the challenges of managing flexible teams successfully and line manager preoccupations with performance management.

The business case for flexible working is up and running. The research carried out by Working Families shows a minimum estimate from employers of 5% improvement in productivity. But more hard evidence will help to speed up change. As the flexible working agenda progresses, we should see more facts and figures emerging and innovative solutions that meet the needs of both people and business.

The growth of flexible ways of working is a modern phenomenon that is unstoppable.

Time, Health and the Family: What working families want is available to purchase from the Working Families website at www.workingfamilies.org.uk/

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY: WHAT DO WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT?

Five questions were addressed by the focus group:

1 Insights

What insights do employers need to gain about the role of flexibility?

'How operational pressures and culture block progress. Culture is always going to be the biggest barrier to overcome. Small organisations have to take things a step at a time.'

'If you want to be successful in business now you need to do things in a very different way.'

'Work smarter not harder. But if you work smarter you will be given more to do.'

'With agile working and more autonomy, employees may even end up working longer hours. That's the spin-off benefit and it's an easier sell-in to a company.'

2 Evidence

What evidence should employers gather to argue the need to become more flexible?

'When you talk about autonomy employees feel they have control over their hours. We can see when they are allowed greater control over their working lives and greater flexibility, employees are responding with greater job satisfaction.'
(Sarah Jackson, CEO, Working Families)

In order to drive flexible working policies, and better understand both the barriers to and the benefits of flexible working, employers can carry out exit interviews/questionnaires and new joiner interviews/questionnaires. This will tell them what employees are looking for.

A full picture is needed. *'Hard facts are critical. We're struggling to turn flexible working into a cost benefit. You can only do this if you have hard data.'*

Many employers are starting to gather evidence about the links between flexible working practices, employee engagement and increased productivity by asking questions in employee engagement surveys and inspecting patterns in absenteeism figures and long-term sickness data.

3 Open-minded

How open-minded, radical and strategic should employers be prepared to be to drive continuous change and why?

'Unlike recessions of the past, this recession has impacted businesses more widely.'

'We have to be more open-minded about the challenges we face and what we are in danger of losing. We've got to do medium- and long-term planning. It's not just about the short-term bottom line; it's about what the business needs to look like in the future to be sustainable.'

HR professionals need to think creatively and outside the box and use the recession as a prompt to redesign services and staffing levels so they can create a new paradigm for how work is done.

4 Employer interventions

To be smarter at talent management, should employer interventions be exclusive or inclusive? Reactive or future-proofed?

Rapid change and projected increases in skills shortages will require employers to be on their toes about managing talent and the adoption of better ways of managing talent pipelines and meeting employee expectations and preferences about work. Otherwise talent will choose to go elsewhere. It will be important to keep ahead of the herd.

Communications are seen as vital for an organisation to make employees, customers and clients aware of the impact of flexible working practices on the way services will be delivered and what to expect.

'Clients and customers need to be told that they won't get the same level of service in the same way they were used to in the past. They need to know that the same employee can't be available to them around the clock. We will have to find better ways of matching service expectations.'

Promoting flexible working policies to potential and existing employees will help to improve take-up and change cultures based on rigid approaches to full-time working.

'If people know they can go for it (flexible hours), they might decide to follow up options and present solutions to their line managers to consider. Ones that would work for them, the job they do and fit in with team needs as well. Everyone would win.'

If flexible working options are transparent and open to everyone in ways that make sense to the business, there will be less resentment about perceived favouritism for groups such as young parents with childcare responsibilities. This will help change the culture of working practices. But we will also have to learn better ways of managing things in sensible ways.

Employer interventions do not always work to the advantage of employees. In the retail sector, for example, employers expect workers to be highly flexible and to work when required. This has led to the widespread adoption of 'zero-hours contracts' which give no minimum number of hours' guaranteed work per week to employees. Flexibility in this case works only in the employer's favour and can foster resentment.

'The employee has no guarantee of work, making household budgeting extremely difficult. Even when the hours are sufficient, there is often a considerable variation in when they are available. The employee has little choice but to work when the employer demands and to fit their life around their work.'

This is not the case at McDonald's, where a far more employee-friendly flexible policy is used. Employees can swap hours around and change shifts with colleagues as long as what is done fits the needs of the business and the employee.

5 Barriers

What is holding back the take-up of flexible working, despite increasing employer processes and legal support? Is this a problem for employers?

Flexible working practices almost invariably have knock-on effects on the level of service that organisations can provide. Where work-life fit rises up the employment agenda, employees often have to learn to multi-task or cover for one another when colleagues are away.

The tensions between a client's expectations and the need to cut costs can act as a dampener on the adoption of flexible working.

The traditional model of service delivery results in an employee culture and client expectations that are hard to shift. For example, in law firms it might be the practice for individual partners to be the sole point of contact with the firm. And it will be their responsibility to handle all of that client's business. In connection with policing, members of the community expect to see a named community police officer on the beat.

The prolonged recession has caused organisations to 'cut to the bone' on what they do. They had made all of the easy cuts, and further cost reductions involve reshaping services and reducing quality. In some organisations they are now shedding some of their high-potential talent even though they had been hoping to hang on to it in the event of an upturn in the economy.

'Cost-cutting impacts on the way you train your line managers. You get technical people who are promoted to line managers whereas they should be kept as far away from management as possible. It might make more sense to review practices like this.'

'The pinch point about progressing flexible working is the ever-increasing expectations on line managers. The increased pressure on them and their ever-expanding job description are unrealistic. They are often responsible for budget and performance management, employee appraisals and talent management. The expectations we have for line managers is getting greater all the time. You can't just expect line managers to pick up the essentials of managing flexibility by osmosis. They need help, support and guidance.'

'When you use part-time workers instead of full-time workers a line manager has more people to performance-manage – building their workload. It goes back to HR to sort this out if organisations want to evolve flexible working.'

'Managing flexible workers requires good performance management. It's about agreeing clear targets with employees. We know line managers find performance management the hardest thing they do. Once, you used performance management to manage people out of the organisation. But what we are saying is that to make flexible working successful, it should be used to improve understanding about what employees need to do to deliver their objectives and how they are achieving them. This will give them more autonomy over what they do and build trust and remove control from line managers. This is where good training for line managers will be vital.'

'There is no need for HR or line managers to over-manage staff. An effective line manager can see how staff are performing and motivate them without the need to spend time recording everything on forms. That's just about keeping records.'

FOCUS GROUP OBSERVATIONS

Reflecting the ways in which flexible working has been introduced in their own organisations, a wide-ranging discussion gave a range of practical insights. Below is a flavour of these:

'The benefits of flexible working outweigh the disadvantages.'

Flexible working practices may result in some additional cost but the advantages outweigh the consequences of doing nothing.

'With austerity you can't deliver for less anymore. An organisation that has run out of cash can't just end a service in January and tell people that it will be resumed in April, for example.'

'The cost of taking on extra staff can be offset by flexible working.'

Expensive office space, particularly in central London, is a barrier to recruitment but a driver for flexible working. Firms looking to expand and take on new staff are often having to increase staffing by means of adding more flexible workers who are able to work remotely using IT. Introducing flexible working arrangements such as hot-desking needs to be done with care to make it successful.

'We're taking the time to think strategically.'

Introducing flexible working should be managed carefully to ensure that it meets the needs of employees and the business.

'We are testing agile working in our Birmingham office so that when we're ready to go, we'll roll it out in London.'

'The technology we have now, we didn't have in the recession of the early 1990s. Then the idea of working from home simply had never been thought of' (Tyrone Jones, Head of Values and Corporate Responsibility, DWF).

'However, introducing working from home options needs sensible policies and long-term planning' (Fleur Bothwick, EMEA Director, Diversity and Inclusiveness, Ernst & Young).

'Gen Y'

Generation Y, the generation of young people who have grown up with the Internet, might seem to be more flexible and adaptable than earlier generations who have grown up with the expectation of a job for life. But this can fuel misleading assumptions. Any differences are more age-related than generational. And people's attitudes about working flexibly tend to shift as they acquire responsibilities, such as a family or a mortgage, and need to maximise their incomes.

'In the good economic times you could have a portfolio career, but when jobs are thin on the ground people want to stay put rather than move on unless they have to.'

'Flexible reward packages'

A company-wide introduction of flexible working practices might make extra demands on some staff in the short term. For example, staff who willingly work extra hours to cover for colleagues who are temporarily unavailable need to be given extra financial reward and compensation.

'A lot of firms have a remuneration system that works on the basis of keeping their top performers.'

'Flexibility is having a career structure and a reward package that is right for you and works with the firm's customer base.'

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS IN RESPECT OF THE QUESTIONS DISCUSSED

1 Should employer interventions be exclusive or inclusive? Reactive or future-proofed?

'We need to be very clear about what the needs of the business should be. Those needs are very often client-driven. But there has to be a balance between the needs of the client/customer and the needs of the employee. In terms of flexible working, it means building in a variety of different career paths. But there is a real risk of short-termism getting in the way of long-term planning. There are stats about customer delivery called "The Customer Calling the Tune".'

'In terms of that level of client dialogue our culture tends to be risk-averse. That is, realistically, anything that might jeopardise the client relationship.'

'Flexibility needs to be balanced with business needs. Our new manifesto includes a pledge to provide wards with a named police officer which impacts on the ability of those post-holders to work more flexibly. As long as this is understood in advance, the needs of both the organisation and the individuals can be met.'

'I heard it reported on the Today programme, a story about an elderly man who relies on personal care who over the course of a weekend was visited by eight different carers. He didn't know their names or anything about them. You need to have standards about how flexible you can afford to be to deliver care without compromising clients' care needs.'

2 How open-minded, radical and strategic should employers be prepared to be to drive continuous change and why?

The general view is that employers should keep an open mind. They need to listen and to think about opportunities for making flexible working work for the organisation in a positive way. But how radical do they need to be?

'You can achieve a lot without needing to be that radical but occasionally you do need to be radical because you'll get to a crunch point where you have to make significant changes, where tried and tested responses to being flexible won't give you the fix you are looking for.'

'For us it would be saying to our clients, "Look, you are not going to have the same partner available to you 24 hours a day, seven days a week because they have a life. That's a radical move for us to manage our clients' expectations in this way.'

Flexible working is not just about time. It's about the design of jobs so they make sense regarding the talent you have got and the needs of the business. Jobs do change and people change jobs. Job descriptions are often out of date.

'You might have people who are always prepared to do the urgent piece of work late at night. And they actually like that style of working. They might perform better with short, sharp deadlines than the other person who likes to be away at 17:00 for the school run. But actually there are two different jobs that are rewarded differently. They are designed differently and they attract different people into them. And it's about the job design attracting the right person for the work that you've actually got.'

'Job design is a bit of a challenge for HR and for line managers. They need to think "what do I really need for this operation?" Then there is the issue about matching the job description to the different life stages of your employees because the same job done by the same person can change over a number of years. The eager beaver young graduate straight out of uni will do anything, I'm from a campaigning background, wrap yourself in a flag – the whole shebang. And then you have kids. And at that point you're no less committed to the job and you're still looking at the prize of partnership, whatever it might be. But the organisation needs to help by redesigning what the job looks like.'

'The pernicious thing is there's not a job for life anymore. That has given some organisations permission to treat people pretty badly rather than thinking there's an investment to be made here. I could help by rethinking the design of the job. That's the way organisations should behave anyway to make sure they are effective and efficient and good at the people side of the business.'

'A lot of people do jobs which bring a lot of value. The nature of those jobs can change over time. So why should it be a problem to redesign jobs on a flexible basis to achieve the desired outputs?'

'Radical change is often in response to a seismic event. Change is sometimes forced on organisations and the only way they can accommodate essential change is through restructuring the organisation and redesigning jobs.'

'That sounds simple on one level, but you've then got to look at the whole design every single time and that's hard. Organisational design is a bit like playing with a Rubik's cube. There seems to be a bit of a preoccupation at the moment with organisational design. You play with boxes and charts but does it take into account real people? Of course, it should.'

'As an HR professional how do I build inclusivity and flexibility into job design? I call it "freedom within a framework".'

3 What is holding back the take-up of flexible working despite increasing employer processes and legal support? Is this a problem for employers?

'It strikes me that we in the West are very individualistic. Everything is designed around one person. It's all about "me, me, me". Whereas the approach to cultural practices in the East is much more collective. The organisation as a whole is examined rather than the individual within the organisation. I think this approach is shifting due to the presence of Western business in emerging markets. The collective approach is starting to permeate over here and to shift the way we behave as organisations within the West.'

'These influences coming together with a greater community conscience may open up our thinking about how we can work differently – whether we use the word agility or flexibility.'

4 How do you focus on the needs of the business while enabling flexible working?

'I think part of it is communication and the other part is understanding the technology and how it can transform your business. We are giving people increasingly sophisticated technology but we are not giving it to them to transform their jobs. There is a sense that technology has moved quicker than the way businesses have adapted to it.'

'So the full capability of technology hasn't been embraced. It's like when you get a new Blackberry and you learn how to use it. But you want to use it in the way you used your old one (despite the new features).'

'So they give you a new laptop or a new Blackberry. But they never show you how these might transform the way you operate as a leader. It's a very narrow construction of how technology would benefit you if all it did was to enable you to do the things you're already doing a little bit quicker or a bit easier. We need to look deeper. I don't just want the tasks I do made easier, I want it [my working life] to be different.'

'Once working away from the office merely involved having a laptop. Now most company laptops are linked to the host system. That's more prevalent than it's ever been. OK, it's not great working at 23:30 at night but if you choose to do it that's fine, provided that you don't do it too much for your own well-being. It may suit people who are running their own business. It's the kind of flexibility that offers people more choice about when they work. It gives people more autonomy over what they do and that's a good motivator.'

'Working at different times of day or night can make you feel more in control as long as you aren't under so much pressure that you aren't able to respond to the challenges of the job. There is an issue about making people feel comfortable in this space. Are they able to do things well without pushing them too far? Because that is another issue. It's important to give people the space to be flexible but not to expect them to work all the time because you do.'

'Although some people do like working all the time, I hate to say it, but I have come across a manager who told me, "I have the most fantastic work-life balance, I'm able to take one weekend in four off!" If they are happy with their work-life balance, fine, so long as they don't set the template for everyone else.'

'Look at the outputs. What's it [flexible working] worth to you? If you're highly motivated you work all hours because you want to. It probably reflects your sense of purpose. The challenge for organisations is how to reward this effort. Are you doing it in the right way, extrinsically or intrinsically? You need to be aware that you can undermine that intrinsic motivation unless you are very careful.'

We have got to a point in HR where we can't strip more costs out of the business. HR needs to demonstrate how it can add value and more broadly how it can future-proof talent needs. This won't be possible without the adoption of flexible ways of working. It is becoming a strategic issue. But the emphasis should not rest on introducing a menu of flexible working processes but designing flexible ways of working to improve performance.

HR's role should be to enable, to help, to lead, to provoke and to listen and suggest possibilities. So HR does have to behave more radically and take a leadership role on this issue.

'If you say to a manager "who's your top performer, who's your bottom performer?" they'd know straight away. You don't need a triggered appraisal process to find this out!'

'Performance management is a line manager's worst task. The only reason you need a system is to make sure bosses and teams talk to each other and you have a record of what they say. But if it's a once-a-year task, how meaningful is it? Managing employee performance should be a regular enabling dialogue and listening process. This is doing performance management more instinctively and for real. Instead of policing the form-filling by line managers, HR professionals need to say "my role is to help and support line managers in managing performance." The tone would be different. The relationship would be different. The sense of purpose would be different.'

'If we focused more on behavioural issues in relation to flexible ways of working rather than policing HR processes, it would help us to build more effective autonomous teams and foster employee engagement.'

'The key for future-proofing business resilience is to encourage employees themselves to think about flexible ways of working in relation to the business agenda and both their own and their colleagues' working preferences. They should be involved in the design of timely practical solutions

that would be mutually beneficial. This would be a useful HR process based on employee involvement, ownership and commitment. It should include regular reviews to keep pace with change. Such an approach would give line managers and HR professionals better insight about how to build responsive, agile organisations fit for the future and improve productivity. Job done!'

Dianah Worman OBE
Public Policy Adviser, Diversity, CIPD

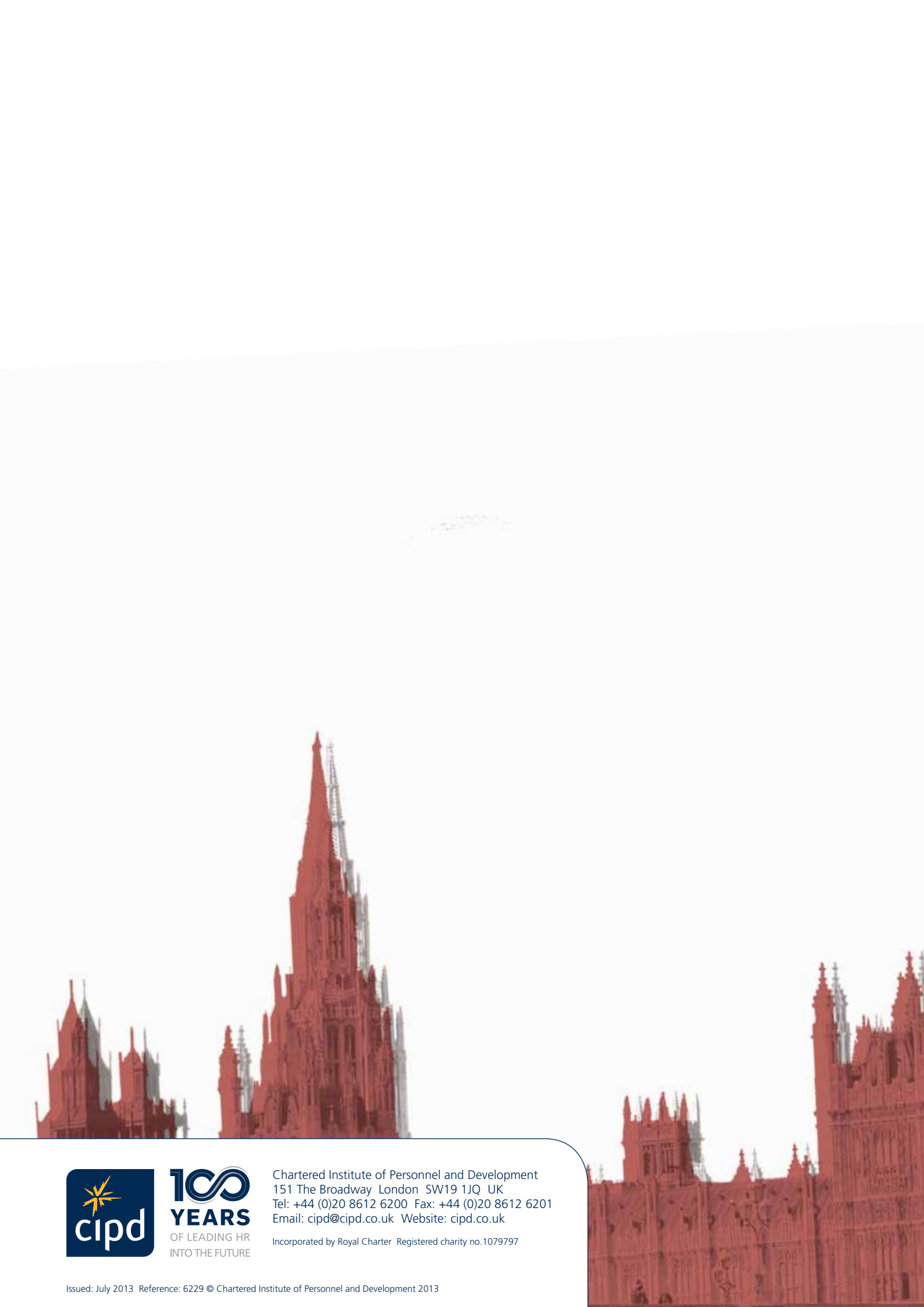
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