

Delivering flexible working in practice: an agile approach

Summary

In the UK, up to 4 million working adults have some form of flexi-time arrangement, and around 40% of working adults work from home at least once a week (ONS, 2023; Statista, 2022). The new Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act aims to further improve workers' access to flexible working, with cross-party commitments to also make the right to request flexibility a day-one employment right.

However, to fully realise the economic and social benefits of both formal and informal flexible working, implementation will be key and employers need updated guidance. Our research identifies **three key challenges for successful policy implementation**. First, true flexibility is often restricted by a limited set of so-called 'flexible' options. Second, marginalised groups have historically had less access to flexible working, despite its potential benefits for all workers. Third, while flexible working arrangements often rely on the use of digital tools, without better connectivity rules and boundaries this can have negative implications for both well-being and productivity.

Our research at agiLab, including with the NHS — which has had a policy to extend agile working opportunities to all employees since 2020 — provides important evidence for effective adoption of flexible working practices. We recommend that updated statutory and non-statutory Flexible Working Guidance incorporates our evidence-based research by applying insights from an agile working approach •

About the author

Emma Russell is a Reader in Occupational and Organizational Psychology at the University of Sussex Business School, Co-Investigator at the ESRC £8-million Digital Futures at Work Research Centre (Digit), and Director of agiLab.

Emma's research focuses on resources, well-being and goal achievement in digital work. She particularly focuses on problematic work-email use and the actions needed to overcome poor digital habits, relating to boundary infringements, email interruptions, and the commissioning of digital incivility. NHS research on agile working has examined: how to lead an agile workforce, how to implement agile working with low socioeconomic groups, how to reduce conflict amongst disparate agile workers, how to make remote working work for those with neurodivergence and disability.

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Shortcomings of policy implementation in flexible working

Taking an agile working approach addresses the following key shortcomings of policy implementation in flexible working:

- Current **Government guidance is narrowly focused on a static set of flexible options** often applied as a ‘one-off’ option for workers. A more **agile approach** can enable businesses, organisations and individuals to adapt where, when and how work is arranged, in response to ongoing and changing market and service needs.
- **Flexible working arrangements have predominantly been enjoyed by more privileged knowledge workers.** Our research shows that **agile working** practices can be inclusive of more workers, including those from marginalised groups. This can open up labour markets to more people and enable more people to benefit from ‘good work’.
- Flexible working now relies on digital tools and technologies to keep workers connected and able to access their work, wherever and whenever they are working. However, **flexible working policies often lack guidance about how to use digital tools and technologies effectively while maintaining work life boundaries.** Our extensive research shows that addressing boundary infringements, poor communication etiquette and tech misuse is essential to make agile working work.

What is agile working?

Agile working is a form of flexible working that involves adapting work patterns and use of digital tools as needs change; offering genuinely **innovative, customised** and **responsive** options to liberate workers and organisations from rigid, traditional constraints. It encompasses both formal and informal arrangements and can support both organisational and worker needs regarding **when, where** and **how** people work.

Extending the benefits of agile working

Extending the right to flexible working has cross-party support, but employers need improved, evidence-based guidance about its implementation if the benefits are to be realised. Our research shows how agile working has the potential to benefit all workers (including those in low paid

or low status work, or those with specific disabilities or neurodivergent conditions). This is because ongoing and customised working arrangements can take into account workers’ specific talents and circumstances, changing requirements, and real-time needs.

“I just felt valued, even though I was brand new, they were like well no, we’ll give you the nearest station, we’ll give you a part-time line and you can manage it around your children, and I was like ‘oh my God, this is amazing’. ... I just felt like a totally valued person”.

(Emergency Care Assistant)

Further, adopting digital tools and technologies, and using these well, along with providing effective and inclusive management, is essential to optimise and make possible agile work. However, clear guidance on digital boundaries and etiquette are needed to ensure that a dispersed and diverse agile workforce remains connected and respected.

Key principles for effective implementation

Using agile working principles to go beyond pre-determined ‘flexible’ working solutions

In practice, true flexibility is seldom provided by organisations, who offer a restricted range of ‘off-the-shelf’ solutions (e.g. part-time working, flexi-time, 4-day weeks, work-from home options). These are rarely tailored to fit specific needs and nor do they offer the freedom to make real-time adaptations to emerging market, service and worker demands. In short, current flexible working policies are often not flexible enough. Our research shows how a more agile approach enables organisations to develop truly customised solutions that better meet changing needs—and encourages adaptations when those needs change.

“I think that’s one of the real benefits of this agile working is there is a much better work-life balance... so as long as you do your hours and get the work done, you know, if you need to go to the bank at lunchtime, go to the bank at lunchtime, or you need to go for a doctor’s appointment, just go for a doctor’s appointment.”

(NHS Worker)

Agile working must go hand in hand with worker protections

Agile working does not mean removing regulations and long-term contracts that offer protections and security for workers. Rather, it means encouraging a revisitation of arbitrary rigidity so that – following consultation and with the prior agreement of both parties – workers and organisations can shift where, when and how they work. This needs to be carefully managed to avoid a move towards more precarious work, and to ensure that agile arrangements are rolled out equitably and fairly.

Flexible working guidance should include ‘Connectivity Policies’

Using digital tools and technologies to organise work and communicate across teams makes possible new ways of agile working. However, many organisations overlook the importance of providing guidance on how best to use these tools. Our research shows that in removing boundaries about where, when and how people work, it is imperative that new digital boundaries are instated, to guide people on appropriate digital etiquette, to protect people from being constantly connected and at risk of burnout, and to inform managers about the best ways to allocate and monitor work when operating digitally.

Policy implications and recommendations

While we welcome the introduction of new legislation to support the adoption of agile working, we recommend that:

1. Policy makers recognise the benefits of removing arbitrary restrictions about where, when and how jobs should be done, including improved wellbeing and access to the labour market for marginalised groups. We recommend employers focus on deliverables; supporting workers to decide how to best arrange their work where appropriate.
2. New guidance on the implementation of flexible working policy should include the need for organisations to develop ‘Connectivity Policies’. Policies should provide clarity on appropriate digital etiquette, boundaries and effective use of digital tools and technologies so that all workers remain connected, included and protected.
3. Government guidance should make more explicit that agile working adaptations can go beyond the narrow set of off the shelf options currently listed, which may inadvertently have the effect of limiting access to flexible working for some groups.
4. The Government should commission further research into the extent of flexible and agile working among different, marginalised groups (e.g. lower socioeconomic groups, early career workers, those with disabilities and/or neurodivergence), to ensure that all workers can benefit from changes in the law.

About agiLab

agiLab’s purpose is to share academic knowledge and best practice to effectively deliver and implement agile working initiatives that ‘work’. agiLab aims to be at the forefront of leading the agenda to support and optimise agile working, via the utilisation of, and contribution towards, state-of-the-art academic research.

agiLab NHS is the co-creation of academics at the University of Sussex, the NHS South East Regional Social Partnership Forum (SPF) and the NHS HR Directors Network (SE). It is funded by NHS Employers and part of the NHS National Engagement strategy. It is run by a steering committee of NHS practitioners and the academic team at Sussex. A key strategic aim of the NHS is to develop more flexible and pioneering ways of meeting the diverse needs of workers, patients and society. www.agiLab.org.uk

About the Digital Futures at Work Research Centre

The Digital Futures at Work Research Centre (Digit) is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to explore how digital technologies are changing work and the implications for employers, workers, job seekers and governments. The Centre is co-led by the University of Sussex Business School and the University of Leeds Business School with partners at the Universities of Aberdeen, Cambridge, Manchester in the UK and Monash in Australia. www.digit-research.org.uk

Selected key reading

Russell, E., Cohen-Chen, S. and McCloskey, J. (2023), *Understanding and reducing tensions between clinical and non-clinical staff in the NHS, in relation to agile working*, agiLab Research Report, University of Sussex, Sussex

Russell, E., Jackson, T.W., Fullman, M. & Chamakiotis, P. (2023). Getting on top of work-email: A systematic review of 25 years of research to understand effective work-email activity. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*. DOI: 10.1111/joop.12462

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Russell, E., Daniels, K.A., Jackson, T. & Fullman, M. (2021). The work-habits intervention model: a 12-month study to change work-email habits. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 94 (4), 808-835. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12363>

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This Policy Brief reflects the views of the authors and not those of the Digital Futures at Work Research Centre.