

Every Researcher Counts

Resource E

Supplementary guides

E2 – A guide to flexible working for research staff: The researcher perspective

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As institutions review their policies to support a diverse research workforce, this may open up opportunities for research staff to benefit more from practices such as flexible working, career breaks and increased support with issues such as working with a disability and working in a second language. The provision of these resources can contribute to training Principal Investigators (PIs) in the diversity and equality principle of the Concordat (Principle 6), encouraging them to work with a diverse range of researcher staff within their group, where every researcher counts.

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Flexible working for research staff: The researcher perspective

This resource aims to help researchers manage different working patterns in a research environment. It provides an overview of some of the key aspects of flexible working and the considerations required. This document concentrates on the research team member perspective and it should be read in conjunction with institutional policies and guidance on the subject.

What is flexible working?

Flexible working is a term used to describe a range of different approaches to working. It includes (but is not limited to):

- Flexible hours – this might affect start and finish times to give researchers flexibility at the beginning and end of the day
- Working part-time – this does not necessarily equate to a researcher working 0.5 FTE – a researcher could for example work 0.2 FTE or 0.8 FTE
- Job sharing – this usually involves two people sharing a full-time post
- Working compressed hours - this enables a researcher to fulfill their contractual hours over fewer days. For example, working a 37 hour week over a four day period
- Working different hours at different times of year depending upon the requirements for teaching and research in your department or only working at particular times in the year, for instance in term time only
- Flexibility of work location including the opportunity to work from home or a location closer to home
- Flexibility for personal needs on a regular or occasional basis – this may include periods of carers leave or emergency dependents leave

The benefits of flexible working

Flexible working provides you and your workplace with the opportunity to manage the demands of work and your life outside work so that you can be as effective as possible during the hours you work. It is for this reason that many employers, including higher education institutions allow all staff, not just those who have rights under employment law, to make requests for flexible working.

Your right to request flexible working

Employment legislation gives some researchers a statutory right to request flexible working. Researchers are eligible to request flexible working if they have been employed for a continuous period of 26 weeks and they:

- have or expect to have parental responsibility for a child under the age of 17
- have or expect to have parental responsibility for a disabled child under the age of 18 who receives Disability Living Allowance
- are the parent/guardian/foster carer or are applying to care for a child who is under the age of 17 or disabled and under the age of 18
- are a carer who cares for or expects to care for an adult who is a relative or is not related but lives at the same address

Flexible working may also be appropriate in other circumstances for example, on the return to work after an illness or to help manage an ongoing illness or disability.

What is the process for asking for flexible working?

If you have the statutory right to apply for flexible working, employment legislation requires that you submit your request in writing (even if it is based on a series of conversations). Your employer has up to 28 days to hold a meeting with you or to provide a written response agreeing to the flexible working arrangements. Following the meeting your employer has 14 days to inform you in writing of the outcome of your request, this can be a compromise. If your request to work flexibly is rejected you can appeal and your employer has 14 days in which to consider your appeal. Within 14 days of hearing your appeal your employer is required to notify you in writing of the outcome.

If you do not have a statutory right to apply for flexible working then you can seek advice from your department or Human Resources on the best approach to take.

If your request is agreed then it may result in a permanent change to your contract and if you work fewer hours then it is likely that your pay will reduce.

I can see how I would benefit from working flexibly but I am worried that no one will agree to it in my environment

It is difficult to be the first to do anything. This should not stand in the way of considering whether flexible working could work for you in your environment. You just have a bigger task of researching the possible options, creating a case for it to happen and then making it work. Many researchers work flexibly as a core part of their job: with many researchers having teaching commitments and responsibilities as well as research, there is a need to be flexible to be able to manage all of the commitments successfully.

The way to see whether your environment would support a flexible approach is to put a well-researched and prepared case together and to be flexible about the potential outcome.

Why would my principal investigator agree to me working flexibly?

The first thing to consider is the contribution you make to your group or department. Your principal investigator is more likely to agree to your request if your existing commitment to your work is already significant and your output is in line with the research funding for the department. You need to be able to demonstrate to your principal investigator the advantages of a flexible approach and that there will be no drop in your contribution to the team from the hours that you work (pro rata if you are asking for reduced working hours).

Your principal investigator is more likely to agree to your request for flexibility if they can see a well prepared case where the flexibility they are being asked for will be managed by you, where your commitment and output will remain strong and will not cause a wider set of challenges for the rest of the team members that you work with.

Remember that your principal investigator's responsibility is to deliver research in line with funders' expectations and to manage the researchers in the pursuit of this.

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Consequently your principal investigator will be looking for ways to ensure that both happen and that they retain researchers with a strong track record and a commitment to their work. You need to ensure that your request for flexible working covers these points and that you can demonstrate how the flexible approach you suggest will fulfill these requirements.

How do researchers who work flexibly manage their work? Practical examples.

- Rachel has a young family and has agreed with her head of department to work non-standard hours to accommodate a research project that requires daily monitoring over a three month period. During the week she works a six hour day and at weekends she works between two and three hours a day.
- Robert was diagnosed with ME in 2005 and was off work for eight months. On his return to work Robert made a request to reduce his hours and he moved to a 0.8 FTE contract. He negotiated to work three days a week in his department and two days a week from home. Robert works Tuesday and Thursday in his department and from home on a Wednesday and Friday. On the days when he is working from home Robert starts work at 10am and works until 2pm and then from 4pm until 7pm and his colleagues know that he is available between those times as together his principal investigator and he have been clear with the communication of the changes to his working hours. Robert's principal investigator ensures that team meetings are always on a Thursday as far as is practical to ensure that Robert can be part of them.

If I ask for flexible working, do they have to agree?

You have a right to request flexible working if you have parenting and caring responsibilities but there is no obligation for your employer to agree. However, if you have parenting or caring responsibilities and your employer declines a request they must state in writing the business reason for declining your request and include information on your institution's appeals process.

The key to coming to an arrangement over working hours that suit you and your principal investigator is that you are both well prepared to discuss the subject and that you both are open to deciding what constitutes flexibility in your area.

There are several points to consider in preparing for this discussion:

- **What flexibility do you really need?** Are there some core areas where you need some latitude but could do without others? For example, you would prefer the flexibility of working four days a week and a 9.30am start time to enable you to drop your children at school. The core element here is that you need to start at 9.30am if it can be agreed. You have a preference for a four day week and can be flexible about this if you can agree the 9.30am start time.
- **What are you prepared to give in return for the flexibility?** This approach has to work for both sides and you will need to consider what else you can offer in return for the flexibility. For example, Stuart works flexibly from home two days a week so that he can pick his children up from school. On these days he finishes work at 3.30pm but responds to emails between 7.30pm and 9pm; he is always prepared to go into work for an important meeting as long as he can be at the school gate by 3.30pm on these days.
- **Why would your principal investigator say yes to your request?** You should try to put yourself in the shoes of your principal investigator and see it from their point of view. How would they ensure that you are as valuable a member of the

team working flexibly as you are at the moment? Do you have a good track record for contributing to the department and can they anticipate a proportion of your work responsibilities being completed successfully if they say yes to flexible working? Do you have a track record of giving support to your colleagues and department as well as requesting things from them?

■ What flexibility is there in your work at the moment?

Many academic environments currently offer substantial flexibility in how work is managed without the need for a formal flexible working structure. Consider your current working arrangements and look for the flexibility you already have. Also look at the ways in which others in your department work; look for role models of the way in which you would like to work before you put your application together. You should then be well prepared for a discussion with your principal investigator not only about your own request for flexibility but also how flexible working applies in the team.

■ Is there a role model in your area who you can learn from?

Being the first person in your area to establish a flexible work arrangement may mean that you and your principal investigator take several attempts before reaching the best solution for you both and your wider team. If there is someone you can talk to about how to make flexible working work, even if they are from a different discipline or HEI, it can help to inform both your application and making the process viable.

- **How are you going to make it work?** If you have agreed a flexible working arrangement, it will be up to you to make it work in your environment, with the support of your principal investigator, and up to you to ensure that your output at work is in line with what you have agreed. This means that you need to think through the practicalities of what you are asking for. For example, if you have asked for the flexibility to work from another location one day per week, how are you going to demonstrate that this is good use of your time and how are you going to ensure that you have the facilities to get the job done? Do you have the same resources in that environment to be able to work effectively? Are you sure that the distractions of that environment can be managed? What will your output be at the end of the allotted days in that location?

- **How long do you need it for?** As you prepare, give some thought to how long you need the flexibility for – is it 3 months, a year or the foreseeable future? Scoping out your requirements will help your principal investigator to understand the level and term of flexibility you require and to be clearer about what might work and for how long.

The key points are:

- Be prepared and do your research before you make your request
- Be flexible over the exact nature of the changes you are looking for
- Look for a range of solutions rather than one fixed outcome

Summary

Our working environments require us to be flexible employees, to be able to get our work done to a high standard and to meet the needs of the institution. The challenges of managing responsibilities in and out of work mean that we may require some flexibility too. Flexible working can be beneficial to both sides if it is agreed in a way that provides mutual benefit, so that the quality and quantity of work the team is committed to doing does not suffer.

In thinking about applying for flexible working you should think about the needs of your employer as well as your own needs; the practicalities of how you (and your colleagues) will be affected by a change to your working pattern and how you intend to manage this.