Government Equalities Office

Encouraging employers to advertise jobs as flexible

Interim report on a randomised controlled trial with a job site

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September 2019

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Background

The Government Equalities Office established the Gender and Behavioural Insights (GABI) Programme in partnership with The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT). The GABI programme aims to build evidence on what works to improve gender equality in the workplace. As part of this programme, BIT partnered with a major job site in the UK to test a behaviourally-informed intervention to encourage employers to advertise more jobs with flexible working options.[1] Professor Iris Bohnet (Harvard Kennedy School), Associate Professor Mike Luca (Harvard Business School), and PhD candidate Heidi Liu (Harvard Kennedy School) provided expert advice on the intervention design.

According to research by Timewise, 93% of non-workers who would like to work prefer flexibility, while only 11% of 'quality jobs'[2] are advertised as flexible.[3] Once in the job, 60% of workers end up working flexibly.[4] As women are twice as likely to work flexibly, this lack of transparency is likely to affect them more.[5] Additionally, women may be particularly averse to ambiguity in job adverts[6] and may avoid specifically asking for flexibility due to concerns about negative employer reactions.[7]

Intervention and methodology

We ran a two arm field randomised controlled trial with a large UK job site testing whether changes to the choice architecture of job advert templates can encourage employers to advertise more jobs with flexible working options. This first round of testing was conducted between April and May 2019, and involved more than 55,000 employers posting more than 200,000 job adverts, eliciting over 5.5m applications.

We tested the impact of introducing a prompt in the job listing template which gave employers the option to advertise jobs with a choice of flexible working options, compared to business-as-usual with no such prompt. Our primary outcome measure was whether or not the resultant job posting mentioned flexible working options. We compared postings which had been subject to the prompt with a control group of postings which had not. We used webscraping to establish the proportion of job advert postings that offered flexible working options across both the treatment and control groups. Our secondary outcome measure was the number of applications received within two weeks after the job posting, to determine whether flexible jobs attract more applicants.

Findings

We found that employers exposed to the prompted choice page in the job listing template were 20% more likely to advertise their job with flexible working options (an increase of 7 percentage points, $p<0.001$), compared to the control group where 35% of job adverts offered flexibility. Exploratory analysis suggests that this effect was mostly driven by the increased offer of Flexitime but all types of flexible working showed a significant increase. Looking at jobseeker response, we found that job adverts offering flexible working attracted 30% more applicants ($p<0.05$), though this is likely an overestimate due to potential spillover effects between treatment and control groups.

Implications

Subject to some methodological limitations, this trial shows promising results whereby small changes to the choice architecture of job postings can encourage employers to advertise more jobs with flexible working options. Furthermore, jobs advertised in this way tend to attract more jobseekers.

Interim report

Background

In 2017, the Government Equalities Office (GEO) commissioned the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to deliver a three year programme of work - the Gender and Behavioural Insights (GABI) programme. GABI aims to build evidence on what works to improve gender equality in the workplace, by using behavioural insights and empirical approaches. The programme includes the running of trials to design and test interventions to improve gender equality in the UK.

As a part of the GABI programme, BIT partnered with a major UK job site to run a large field trial. We designed an intervention informed by behavioural insights which appeared within the job site's job listing template used to write and post job offers. The intervention aimed to encourage more employers to clearly advertise the flexible working options they could support in relation to the job on offer. Between April and May 2019, we helped implement and rigorously evaluate this intervention. This report notes findings from this trial.

We would like to thank Professor Iris Bohnet (Harvard Kennedy School), Associate Professor Mike Luca (Harvard Business School), and PhD candidate Heidi Liu (Harvard Kennedy School) for providing expert advice on the intervention design, and to PhD candidates Jeff Fosset (Harvard Business School) and Stephanie Chan-Ahuja (London Business School) for their valuable comments at the analysis stage.

Research context

Flexible working can be key to enabling people with caring responsibilities to reconcile the competing demands of work and care. All employees in the UK have the legal right to request flexible working arrangements, though there is no onus on employers to offer them or to be transparent about what they may be willing to offer.

Women provide twice as much childcare as men[8] and are twice as likely to work flexibly.[9] Boosting the supply of flexible jobs is therefore key to expanding the pool of jobs available for people with caring responsibilities, which we expect to disproportionately benefit women at the current time. Making flexible working more widely available also has the potential to normalise flexible working for both women and men.

However, whilst 93% of non-workers who would like to work prefer flexibility,[10] they can struggle to find jobs advertised as such. For instance, research from Timewise found that only 11% of 'quality jobs' (which they define as permanent and paying £20,000 or more per year) are advertised as flexible.[11] This demand-supply gap is aggravated by the lack of transparency about potential flexible working options, where potentially flexible jobs are not advertised as such. This means that people either cannot find suitable job vacancies or they have to actively request flexibility. Research suggests that this ambiguity about flexibility can particularly discourage women,[12] who may be more likely to be averse to poor clarity in job adverts.[13] Research also indicates that two in five women will avoid bringing up flexibility because they fear the negative impact on their chances of being hired.[14]

One promising avenue for a behavioural intervention is to improve the offer of flexibility on job postings on third-party job sites. This is because job sites enable access to a large pool of employers and jobseekers at a point in time when they are about to put out a job posting or apply, respectively.

The design and presentation of choices can disproportionately affect the decisions we make.[15] People frequently make choices using intuitive 'fast' thinking that relies on simple cues from the environment, instead of using systematic slow deliberation.[16] This is why we need to think carefully about 'choice architecture': which options are available during a given decision point, how they are framed, and what happens if people fail to make a deliberate choice?

In the context of online job advertising, the job posting template is an example of choice architecture. The job site which we partnered with as part of this trial provides employers with a job listing template. The original template did not include a clear flexible working category for employers to use to advertise jobs' flexible working options. This means that the only way for employers to inform jobseekers that a job is suitable for flexible working is to choose to mention it in the text of the advert itself. However, most employers using the job site do not do so (65%).[17] There is thought to be a gap here between what is being advertised and what is truly on offer. The evidence shows that the majority of jobs ultimately include an element of flexibility, as 63% of UK employees work flexibly.[18]

Behavioural theory may help to explain why employers do not advertise jobs as flexible, when they could be willing to offer flexibility. Reasons could include status quo bias[19] which favours full-time work, and ambiguity aversion[20] which may discourage consideration of a range of flexible working patterns.

Debiasing the choice environment is key to improving equality in the workplace. Prompting choice is a promising behavioural solution to counter the lack of transparency of job flexibility. Such prompts can encourage people to reflect on their preferences, reveal them, and encourage them to select the socially desirable option.[21] By adding a prompt to employers asking them to clearly indicate whether or not a job can be done flexibly, we can remove the ease of inaction and prompt them to make a deliberate decision on the type of job they are offering. This can help to both reduce the lack of transparency in the working options being transparently advertised to job seekers in individual job adverts, and also potentially encourage employers to offer more flexible jobs overall.

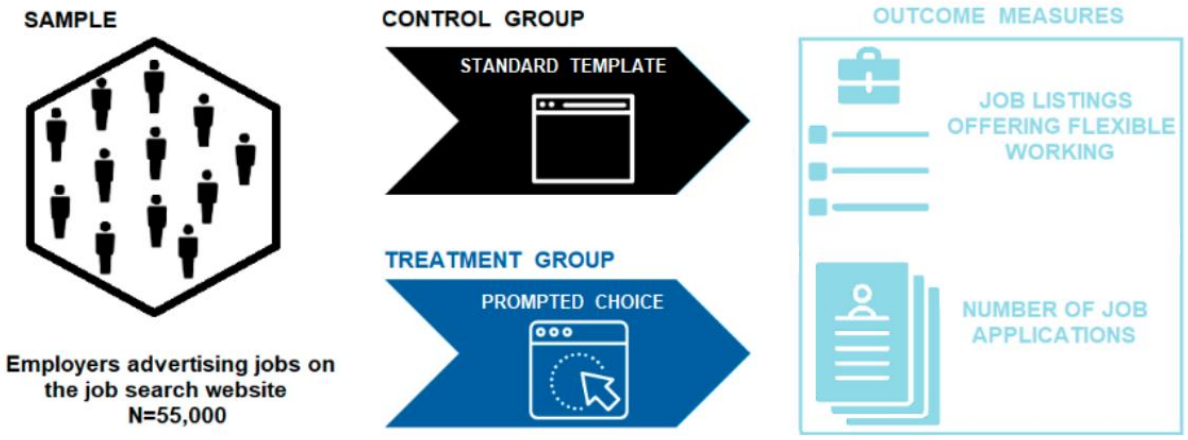
Behaviourally-informed changes to job adverts can influence jobseeker behaviour.[22] For instance, one US study found that simply adding a single sentence about how many people applied for the job can increase women's application rates.[23] Another study has shown that mentioning that a salary is negotiable in the job advert increased women's propensity to negotiate.[24] Most relevant of all, a recent experiment in China has found that the unsolicited offer of roles advertised with flexibility options attracted more applicants who were married women and, to a lesser extent, married men.[25] Given this research and women's greater tendency to work flexibly, we hypothesised that mentioning flexibility in job adverts should encourage more applicants - and in particular more women - to apply.

Intervention design and test methodology

We partnered with a job site,[26] and Harvard Business School, to conduct a large field randomised controlled trial between April and May 2019. The trial[27] involved more than 55,000 employers posting more than 200,000 job ads, eliciting over 5.5m job applications. In this two arm trial, we tested the impact of the introduction of prompted choice into the job listing process compared to business-as-usual where there is no such prompt (Figure 1).

The job engine randomly allocated employers to view either the business-as-usual job listing template or a new template with an additional web page, prompting them to select the types of flexible working potentially available for the role (Figure 2). The flexible working options they selected were then displayed on the job advert for jobseekers to see (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Trial design



The primary outcome measure was whether the resultant job posting offered flexible working options.

- To measure the flexible working options offered on job adverts, we used a web scraping algorithm that identified a list of predefined terms indicating flexibility (see Annex 1). The list was pre-tested to confirm that the terms were only used to signal the availability of flexibility.[28]
- To estimate the treatment effect, we used an OLS regression model, clustered at the employer level and controlling for job function. No other covariates relating to the employers or the job adverts were available to us.

The secondary outcome measure was the number of applications per job advert, that is whether positions that offered flexible working arrangements attracted more applications.

- To capture this, we used data on the number of applications per listing within two weeks of the job posting, a timeframe suggested by the job site to capture the majority of applications.
- We could not look at the gender differences in applications, because the job site does not collect data on applicant gender.
- Because the treatment was randomised at the employer level, applicants may have seen adverts from both the treatment and control groups. That may mean we overestimate the impact of offering flexible working options as the treatment may have 'stolen' applicants from the control group, which would not happen if the intervention was rolled out to the entire platform.

Figure 2. Illustration of the prompted choice screen

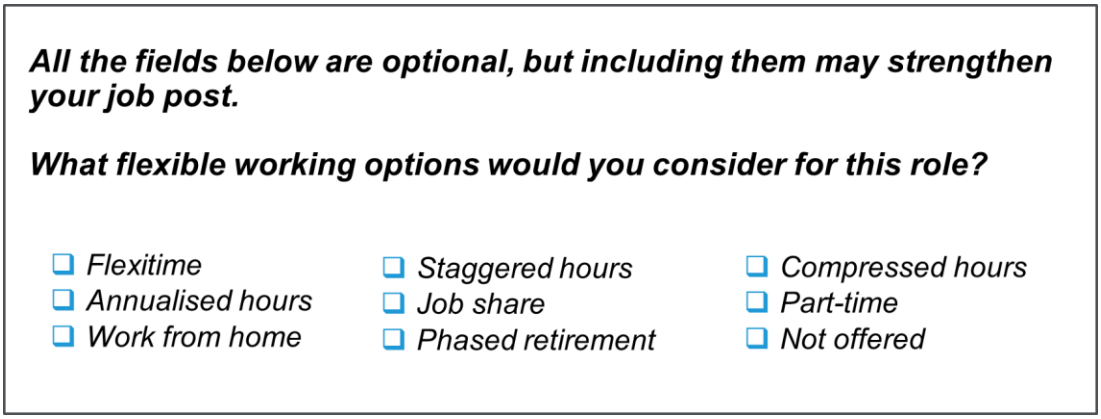
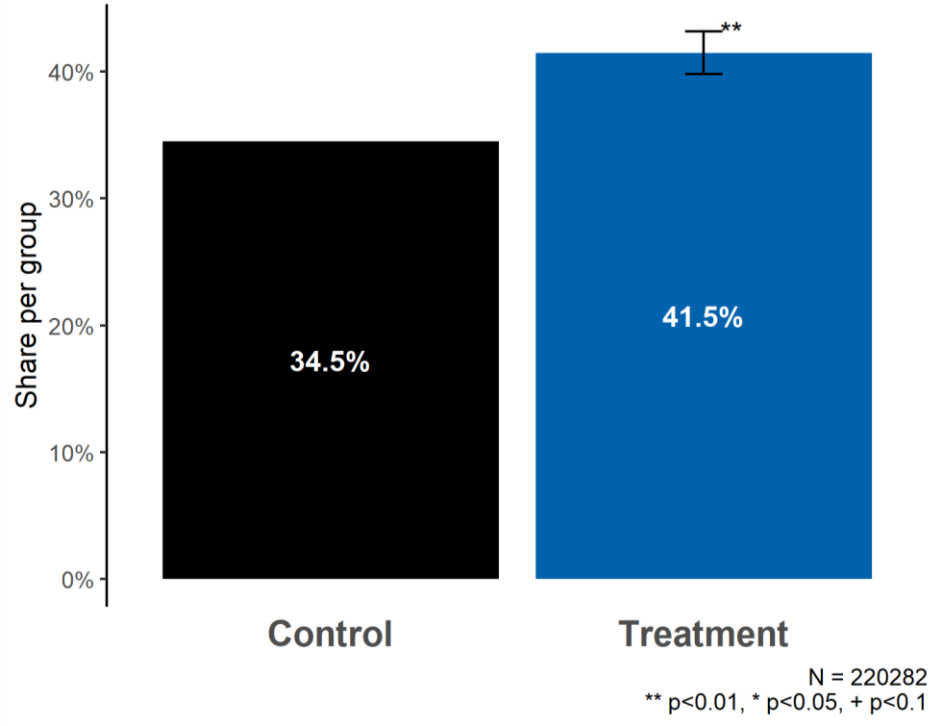


Figure 3. Display of flexibility on job adverts

Results

Job adverts published by employers who were exposed to the prompted choice treatment were 20% (7 percentage points, p<0.001) more likely to offer their positions as flexible, compared to the control group without such a prompt (Figure 4). This was a sizeable increase on a baseline of 34.5%.

Figure 4. Share of job adverts offering flexible working options (Primary outcome measure)



We ran exploratory analysis to measure the impact of the prompted choice on the offer of different kinds of flexible working arrangements. Exploratory analysis showed that the strongest effect was on an increased offer of flexitime (8.6 percentage points, p<0.001)[29], but all types of flexible working were affected, including part time (2 percentage points, p<0.001) (Figure 5).

Looking at jobseeker behaviour, using the increase in flexible working advertising resulting from our intervention,[30] we found that flexible jobs attracted on average 30% (p<0.05) more applicants. Job adverts without flexible working options attracted 23 applicants on average, so we estimate that they would have received 30 had they included flexible working options (Figure 6). The magnitude of this effect is much larger than we expected, and may be biased by one of the methodological limitations of the trial, which we discuss in the next section.

Figure 5. Shares of adverts offering different types of flexible working (Exploratory analysis)

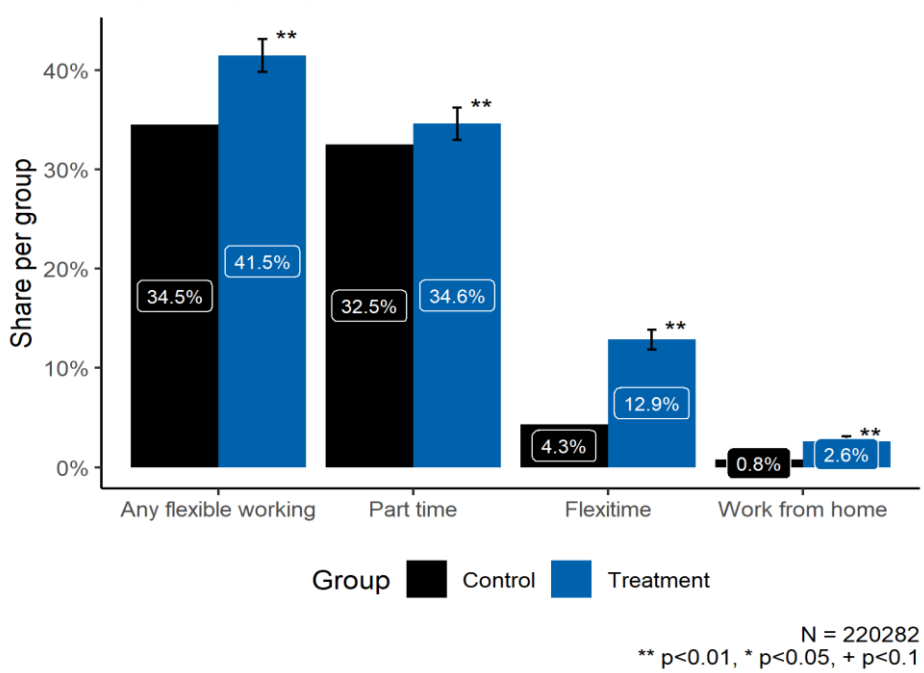
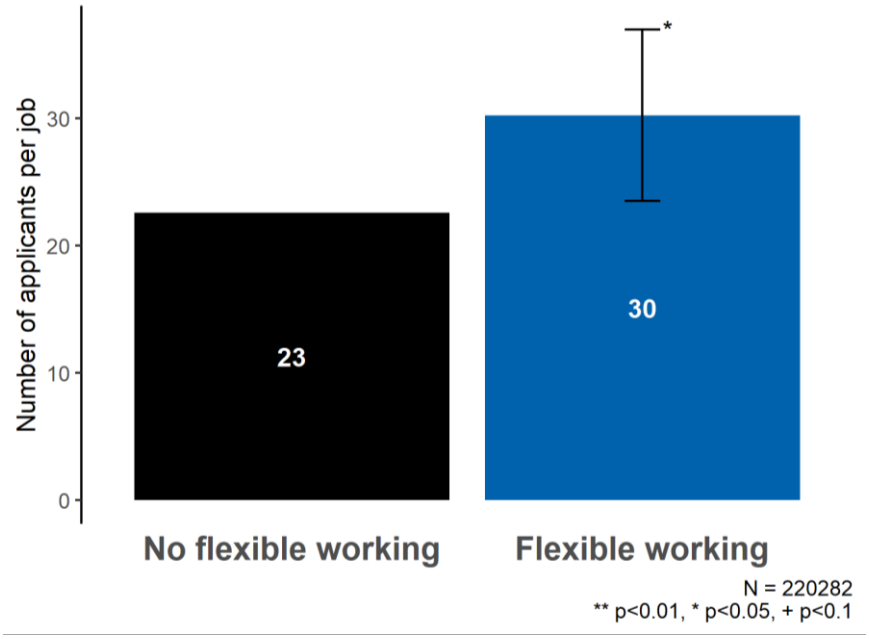


Figure 6. Impact of offering flexible working in job adverts on number of applicants



Limitations

There are four limitations that may bias the results presented in this report or the interpretation of their impact:

- **there was a sample imbalance between the trial arms;**
- **the effect of offering flexible working on the number of applications may be overestimated;**
- **the effect of the additional message inserted into the treatment by the job site cannot be distinguished from the effect of the prompted choice; and**
- **we cannot say whether the intervention resulted in more candidates actually being offered roles on a flexible basis.**

Firstly, despite having correctly randomised treatment assignment to employers, we found strong evidenceof an imbalance between our treatment and control group on *job function* (see Annex 2), an internal classification the job site uses to reflect the tasks an employee is expected to be doing in the position (e.g. drivers, medical nurses or human resources). It is likely that this imbalance was driven by the fact that it was employers who were allocated into the different trial arms, rather than job adverts, coupled with the fact that advertisers tend to post a highly variable numbers of adverts. For this reason, we control for job function in all of our regressions, which accounts for the influence of job functions on our outcome measures, meaning that this imbalance should not directly bias our results.

However, this also means that we cannot be fully confident that the trial was balanced on other unobservable characteristics. For instance, it is possible that adverts in the treatment group are for jobs with a workplace culture that is more open to flexible working, which would bias our estimate upwards (so the effect we are reporting will be higher than the true effect). As a point of reassurance on the possible impact of any further imbalance, we checked whether excluding job function from the primary and secondary analysis regression makes a material difference to the results; we found that it does not. In other words, this suggests that treatment and control groups may not be different in a way that should matter substantively for our results. This is likely to be because the general size of any differences in job functions between treatment and control groups is rather small, even though it is statistically significant.

The second limitation relates to the constraints of our trial design in estimating the impact of offering flexible working options on the number of applications, our secondary outcome measure. The most reliable causal estimate of this relationship would ideally involve randomising jobseekers on the job site to observe different job adverts (some with flexible working options, and some without). Because the treatment was randomised at the employer level, and because it was deemed unethical to show different information about the same job to its applicants, the same jobseeker could have seen adverts in both the treatment and control groups. As such, if applicants in our trial chose between job adverts, it is possible that treatment group adverts “stole” applicants from control group adverts. Our estimate may therefore overstate the true impact of our intervention because this ‘stealing’ would not occur if the intervention was rolled out to the entire platform (as applicants then only see ‘treated’ job adverts). We may further investigate the magnitude of this ‘stealing’ in the final report.

Thirdly, the job site's designers inserted an additional sentence into the prompted choice page on the job listing template that may have influenced advertisers. It read 'All the fields below are optional, but including this information may strengthen your job post.' The statement implied that mentioning flexibility could have a positive impact on the effectiveness of the listing. However, at the same time, it highlighted that it was optional, that is entirely up to the employer to decide whether to mention flexibility. First, this means that we cannot distinguish between the impact of the promoted choice, and this messaging. But more specifically, it means that we cannot say in which direction the messaging may have influenced our results. On one hand, it could increase an employer's willingness to mention flexibility in the expectation that it will increase the attractiveness of the advert. On the other hand, highlighting the optional nature of the choice could discourage employers from making such a commitment.

Lastly, it should be noted that the aim of our intervention was only to encourage employers to *advertise* jobs as flexible and not to *offer* flexibility at the point of hiring. So while we can say that the intervention had a clear causal impact on offering flexibility on job adverts, we cannot tell whether this translated into an increase in the actual offer of flexibility at the point of hire because we did not measure this. However, we think it is likely that the intervention made it easier for applicants to start a conversation about the availability of flexibility, and that this translated in some cases into more people being hired on a flexible basis.

Implications

Subject to the limitations described above, this trial shows promising results whereby small changes to the choice architecture of job postings can encourage employers to advertise more jobs with flexible working options. Furthermore, jobs advertised in this way tend to attract more jobseekers.

Below, we hypothesise about the exact causal mechanism behind the success of our intervention. Looking at employer behaviour, a plausible explanation is that four key drivers were at play:

- **Recall:** Employers may have listed existing flexible working options that they already offer because they recalled what they can provide when reminded by the prompt.
- **Improved transparency:** Employers willing to provide flexibility were compelled to offer this transparently.
- **Increased supply:** Some employers may have been prompted to offer flexible working because they thought it would benefit them, when they would not have considered it previously. Also, the related statement inserted by the jobsite's designers about the potential to strengthen the job advert may have contributed to this.
- **Ease:** Being able to simply click on a pre-filled list of flexible working options in order to display them in the job advert may have increased the rate of employers doing so.

As for applicant response, we think more jobseekers applied to flexible jobs because they prefer flexibility, appreciate employer openness on the availability of flexible working options and perhaps because they take these as a proxy for job and employer quality. Given that women are more averse to uncertainty and twice as likely as men to work flexibly due to the gendered division of labour, we can speculate that they may have been more likely to apply for the jobs advertised with flexible working options. However, we could not verify this hypothesis due to the lack of data on gender.

Our clear positive result is a new step in understanding how to increase the supply of flexible jobs in the UK, and possibly beyond. Making flexible working more widely available and offered from day one of a new job has the potential to help normalise flexible working for both women and men. By reducing the barriers for job applicants in asking for and justifying their need for flexible working arrangements, we may see a decoupling of flexible working arrangements as a working pattern which is mostly granted to or demanded by mothers.[31] In turn, such working patterns may enable both women and men to thrive in roles that can better accommodate their wellbeing and their caring duties.

Annex 1: List of web scraping terms

Included terms:

Flexitime
Flexible start and finish time
Flexible start time
Flexible finish time
Flexible approach to working hours
Flexible hours
Staggered hours
Compressed hours
Annualised hours
Job share
Job sharing
Part-time
Part time
Phased retirement
Working from home
Work from home
Remote work
Remote working
Work remotely
Home work
Home working
Flexible work [except if “Flexible work style”]
Flexible working [except if “Flexible working style”]
Flexible working arrangement
Flexible working options
Flexible working hours
Flexible schedule
Flexible scheduling
Work hours flexibly
Flexible ad hoc hours
Flexible on days and hours
Flexible days and hours
Flexible working approach
Ability to split hours

Terms included if ‘full-time’/‘full time’/‘part-time’/‘part time’ were not found:
One day per week
Two days per week
Three days per week
Four days per week

- All possible permutations of the above phrases using a) any numeric value <=4 instead of 'one'/'two' etc.; b) 'a' instead of 'per'; c) 'every' instead of 'per'; d) ‘each’ instead of ‘per’; e) 'weekly' instead of 'per week'.

One hour per day
Two hours per day
Three hours per day
Four hours per day

- All possible permutations of the above phrases using a) any numeric value <=4 instead of 'one'/'two' etc.; b) 'a' instead of 'per'; c) 'every' instead of 'per'; d) ‘each’ instead of ‘per’; e) daily instead of 'per day'; f) 'hr'/'hrs' instead of 'hour'/'hours'; g) 'h' instead of 'hours'.

Finally, the same permutations as for days per week, but for anything less than or equal to 30 hours per week.

Terms excluded (even when matches were found for the above):[32]
Zero hours
Zero hour
0 hours [excluding cases where another digit appears immediately before 0, i.e. 10/20 etc.]
0 hour [excluding cases where another digit appears immediately before 0, i.e. 10/20 etc.]
Flexible Working Options Available - Not offered

Annex 2: Balance checks

F test for imbalance on job function

F statistic	9.278** (df = 57; 220224)
N	220,282

** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1

The F test checks for balance in the distribution of the 57 job functions used to classify job adverts on the job-listing website, between the treatment and control group.

The number of job adverts, by job function and trial arm

Job function	Control N	Treatment N
1	2200	2276
2	8865	8691
3	66	45**
4	5	6
5	372	289***
6	271	312
7	20	38**
8	3	8
9	5484	5674
10	472	473
11	7103	6675***
12	2769	2976
13	4490	4277**
14	4976	4845
15	241	183***
16	133	128
17	246	261
18	234	252
19	347	380
20	170	248***
21	10775	11286
22	1374	1166***
23	1658	1503***
24	4614	4282***
25	146	228***
26	665	557***
27	5379	5192*
28	2811	2866
29	1429	1531
30	45	42
31	706	699
32	482	309***
33	444	422
34	108	101
35	3826	4197

36	444	343***
37	10	12
38	36	38
39	1699	1452***
40	260	317*
41	560	576
42	1458	1768***
43	294	234***
44	2882	2639***
45	7103	6646***
46	6218	6446
47	241	189
48	1277	1101***
49	62	57
50	162	174
51	596	593
52	664	666
53	1574	1568
54	635	380***
55	161	189
56	8315	8780
57	483	218***
58	2625	2790

At the point of publication, we did not receive permission to reveal the names of the job functions used by the job-listing website. For this reason, they are numbered.

Endnotes

[1] By flexible working we mean all types of flexibility – including the amount of hours worked (e.g. part-time) the working hours (e.g. flextime; compressed hours), the location of the work (e.g. working remotely) and other arrangements (e.g. job sharing).

[2] Defined as permanent positions that pay £20,000 or more per year.

[3] Timewise (2017). Flexible working: A talent imperative. Available at https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Flexible_working_Talent_Imperative.pdf
Timewise (2019). Flexible jobs index 2018. Available at https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Timewise_Flexible_Jobs_-Index_2018.pdf

[4] Timewise (2017). Flexible working: A talent imperative. Available at https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Flexible_working_Talent_Imperative.pdf

[5] CIPD (2019). Megatrends: Flexible working, p.15. Available at https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/megatrends-report-flexible-working-1_tcm18-52769.pdf

6 Borghans, L., Heckman, J. J., Golsteyn, B. H., & Meijers, H. (2009). Gender differences in risk aversion and ambiguity aversion. *Journal of the European Economic Association, 7*(2-3), 649-658.

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[9] CIPD (2019). Megatrends: Flexible working, p.15. Available at https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/megatrends-report-flexible-working-1_tcm18-52769.pdf

[10] Timewise (2017). Flexible working: A talent imperative. Available at https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Flexible_working_Talent_Imperative.pdf

[11] Timewise (2019). Flexible jobs index 2018. Available at https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Timewise_Flexible_Jobs_-Index_2018.pdf

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[14] EHRC (2016), Pregnancy and maternity related discrimination and disadvantage: experiences of mothers. Available at: https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/mothers_report_-_bis-16-146-pregnancy-and-maternity-related-discrimination-and-disadvantage-experiences-of-mothers_1.pdf

[15] Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

[16] Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow.* Macmillan.

[17] BIT's own analysis of the job website data.

[18] Timewise (2017). Flexible working: A talent imperative. Available at https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Flexible_working_Talent_Imperative.pdf

[19] Samuelson, W., & Zeckhauser, R. (1988). Status quo bias in decision making. *Journal of risk and uncertainty, 1*(1), 7-59.

[20] Croson, R., & Gneezy, U. (2009). Gender differences in preferences. *Journal of Economic literature, 47*(2), 448-74.

[21] Carroll, G. D., Choi, J. J., Laibson, D., Madrian, B. C., & Metrick, A. (2009). Optimal defaults and active decisions. *The quarterly journal of economics*, *124*(4), 1639-1674.

[22] Likki, T., & Varazzani, C. (2017). Applying behavioural insights to reduce pregnancy-and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage. *Equality and Human Rights Commission.* https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/prejudice-unlawful-behaviour-bit-trials-applying-behavioural-insights.pdf

[23] Gee, L. K. (2018). The more you know: information effects on job application rates in a large field experiment. *Management Science.*

[24] Leibbrandt, A., & List, J. A. (2014). Do women avoid salary negotiations? Evidence from a large-scale natural field experiment. *Management Science*, *61*(9), 2016-2024.

[25] He, H., Neumark, D., & Weng, Q. (2019). *Do workers value flexible jobs? A field experiment on compensating differentials* (No. w25423). National Bureau of Economic Research.

[26] The identity of the job site cannot be revealed yet, but will be disclosed in the final report.

[27] To note is that this interim report outlines the findings of Round 1 of the trial. By the end of 2019, we will have reported on a Round 2 of this project that aims to test several different behavioural messages added to our original intervention.

[28] For instance, we excluded terms such as 'Flexible working style', 'Flexible work style' or 'Flexible approach' used to ask for staff to be flexible as in ready to adapt to circumstances; or to *require* for them to be available flexibly, on short notice or working through weekends. Our pre-tests also showed that advertisers only mention flexibility when they do offer it (i.e. not to list what they do not offer). We also excluded cases where employers directly indicated in the treatment group that flexible working was not offered using the following string: 'Flexible Working Options Available: Not offered'.

[29] This is greater than the overall increase in flexible working advertising (7pp) because most of the increase in flexitime occurred among part-time jobs.

[30] We used an instrumental variable approach.

[31] GEO and BIT (2019) Flexible working qualitative analysis: Organisation's experiences of flexible working arrangements. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/790354/Flexible-working-qualitative-analysis2.pdf

[32] Zero hour jobs are excluded because the flexibility of this job pattern is typically and primarily retained by the employer, rather than offering true flexibility to the employee