

MAKING CONSTRUCTION A GREAT PLACE TO WORK: CAN FLEXIBLE WORKING HELP?

Insights from 4 pilot studies


Programme supported by:

LifeSkills
Created with  **BARCLAYS**

 **BUILDUK**
Leading the Construction Industry

citb

In partnership with:

 **bam**

SKANSKA


WILLMOTT DIXON

FOREWORD

Like many projects, this one began with a discussion in the fringes of a meeting and I am delighted that it became so much more than I could ever have imagined. Flexible working has enabled me to continue my career in construction for over 30 years; by driving forward this programme, I hope it supports many others to do the same, creating a stronger, more diverse and healthier workforce.

The lack of women in construction has been discussed for many years and a plethora of initiatives introduced. Yet despite all the hard work, effort and passion, the dial has not shifted much in 20 years. There are amazing women working in all areas of our industry that can more than hold their own, but there are nowhere near enough of them, at any level.

We know that when women do better, economies do better¹, and research has consistently shown that companies with greater female representation on executive committees generate higher net profit margins - a potential £47 billion pre-tax profit across the UK¹. To achieve this, we need a healthy pipeline of female talent running right through an organisation, yet the construction sector has one of the largest gender pay gaps and women are still a rarity. We have to address the underlying reasons why women make up just 14% – 1% in operational roles – of the industry’s workforce.

We need to stop shouting louder at women, and other under-represented groups, to join us; and instead make construction a viable career choice for as many people as possible, recognising that a lack of flexibility and agility in the way we work actively prevents many from either joining our industry or staying with us.

Meeting the inspirational Emma Stewart from Timewise, and hearing her experience and knowledge of other sectors, reinforced the benefits of flexible working for everyone and made me realise that we needed external help to understand how different flexible working arrangements could become a reality for construction projects with the complexity of supply chains, programmes, locations and traditions we have to deal with.

Two years after a kick-off meeting hosted by Richard Threlfall at KPMG and a global pandemic later – which accelerated the mind-shift around flexible working for our industry – with commitment from our four Pioneer companies and their projects, support from CITB and Barclays LifeSkills and the passion of Angela Goldsmith at Timewise, we have demonstrated that not only is flexible working possible for frontline operational roles in construction, but that it is positively beneficial. And there is not only one way of achieving it; it takes planning, time and effort, but the rewards for everyone are well worth it.

By taking time to read this report and saying ‘yes’ to exploring flexible working arrangements across your business, we can fast forward towards the more productive and profitable industry we all want to see.

Suzannah Nichol MBE

CEO
Build UK

01. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This pioneer programme was co-designed by Timewise and Build UK, with support from Barclays LifeSkills programme and CITB. It set out to test whether improved access to flexible working, for site based teams in construction, could address some of the cultural issues and demanding working patterns which are understood to be root causes of the industry's struggle to attract and retain talent. In particular, the long hours' culture is believed to contribute to the sector's troubling record on mental health and wellbeing, and its challenges with gender diversity, with this having for many become the accepted norm.

The programme comprised pilots with 4 leading construction firms – BAM Construct, BAM Nuttall, Skanska UK and Willmott Dixon. The four pioneer firms had all bought-in at leadership level to increasing flexibility – the essential first step to introducing changes around working patterns.

Within the short timeframe of the pilots (their duration varied between 6 weeks and 3 months), the immediate goal was to begin to shift the workplace mindset around flexible working, and to evidence the positive impact that increased autonomy and control over their own working patterns can have on workers' sense of job quality and wellbeing.

Timewise designed a programme that comprised four key stages, and the key points for each stage are outlined below. Here and throughout the report 'we' means Timewise.

PHASE 1: DIAGNOSTIC AT ORGANISATION LEVEL

We undertook an initial diagnostic to assess the baseline cultural and operational constraints to flexible working, in each of the pioneer firms.

In terms of flexible working practice, we found a mixed understanding; it was mostly offered in the form of ad-hoc, occasional flexibility, with colleagues

wanting to help each other out. In some instances we also noticed a gap between policy and practice, partly because of site operating hours and partly because of different manager attitudes.

Through culture surveys and focus groups, we learned that much of the resistance to flexible working came from those frontline workers who were hourly paid. Their resistance stemmed mostly from their need to earn as much as they could, with strong fears of loss of pay. Delving behind this primary concern, however, we found an unmet demand for other forms of flexibility that would help workers to lead more balanced lives.

Through a series of interviews with managers, we heard loud and clear that there was a perceived view that stretching resources through long hours was the key to keeping a project on time and in budget, creating a tension with the industry's focus on wellbeing and mental health. Managers did, however, recognise the negative impact of long hours on workers' lives, and could see that it needed to be addressed.

Flexible working was very much a taboo subject in the industry. A common belief was that anyone not up to working the long demanding hours was less committed, and was more likely to be overlooked for promotion. The impact of the line manager's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour was a core theme across all participating firms. Feedback indicated that the culture that permeated the industry prevented many from asking if they could work more flexibly.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, we identified several genuine operational constraints to flexible working in frontline construction roles. These included the interdependency of roles, constraints on site operating times, workers' long travel times to reach site, the challenge of decoupling time and output in situations where people were hourly paid, client expectations, and the differing pay methods and interests of the multiple layers of directly employed, self-employed and subcontracted workers.

PHASE 2: CO-DESIGN OF THE PILOTS

The findings of the diagnostic phase led us to focus the pilots on a team-based approach to organising working patterns. This meant looking primarily at flexibility in when people worked (for example flexing start and finish times), and also at where they worked (looking at home-working for office based site staff).

The goal was to give site workers a greater sense of control and input into their working lives, to improve their work-life balance and sense of wellbeing. We identified four key elements to be addressed:

- Changing cultural attitudes and behaviours
- Improving workers' input into their working patterns
- Improving manager capability to implement flexible working
- Increasing home-working for site workers whose roles were not fully manual.

The specific working patterns to be trialled varied between the pilot sites, to match their individual operating constraints:

- A team-based approach to flexible working, involving a collaborative method of setting shifts that took workers' personal preferences into account alongside the need to deliver business outputs.
- An output based approach designed to allow workers to start earlier and leave when that day's work was complete, rather than remaining on site for their contracted hours.
- Staggered start and finish times, alternating between teams, so that all workers got the pattern they wanted every other week.
- A flexi-day approach in which workers could accumulate additional hours in exchange for one day off each month.
- Home-working for desk-based roles was trialled across all the pilots, and in the event was accelerated by the Covid pandemic.

PHASE 3: GUIDED IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PILOTS

The approach to running the pilots followed a methodology established by Timewise in previous studies with other frontline sectors such as the NHS and retail.

The first critical success factor was to engage the site managers in the aims of the pilots and motivate them to want it to succeed. This was followed up with training sessions to equip them with an understanding of flexible job design, and to build their knowledge and capability to manage the changes within their team, applying them fairly and inclusively.

Briefing meetings followed with all workers in the teams, to ensure their understanding of the collaborative nature of good flexible working (recognising people's preferred working patterns, but also the need to meet business and client deliverables).

Once the initial briefings were complete, the pilots were rolled out by the pioneer firms, with mentoring support from a Timewise consultant.



PHASE 4: EVALUATION OF THE FINDINGS

Before the pilots began, we had worked with all the pioneer firms to determine how to measure success. We conducted a pre and post pilot survey to measure shifts across some key indicators. To gain more qualitative insights, we also conducted focus groups with a selection of the participating workers, and interviews with a selection of managers and senior stakeholders.

The survey results showed that the pilots had shifted the dial in a positive direction, on all of the four chosen criteria:

- “In the past month I have regularly worked significantly more than my contracted hours”

Respondents who agreed with this statement decreased from 51% to 34%.

- “My working hours give me enough time to look after my own health and well-being”

The number of respondents who agreed with this statement increased from 48% to 84%.

- “I feel guilty if I start later or finish earlier than the other people on my site”

The number of respondents who agreed with this statement decreased from 47% to 33%.

- “If someone works from home, I am not sure they are working as hard as they would be on site”

The number of respondents who agreed with this statement decreased from 48% to 33%.

Qualitative feedback further highlighted a broad positive shift in wellbeing, with many workers speaking of improvements to their family life and sense of wellbeing. Some even stated that they would consider the ability to work flexibly as a key criteria when applying for future work.

Managers began to see the positive impact of empowering teams to adjust their working patterns. They reported a greater sense of trust and ownership, reflected in the team dynamic and level of engagement.

All the pioneer firms reported that introducing improved flexible working had no negative impact on budgets or timeframes. For some, there was also emerging data suggesting that the adjustments to working patterns were driving savings on labour costs due to increased productivity

Facilitating a sense of ownership, good communication and collaboration were the hallmarks of the most effective pilots. The best approach was for employers to provide a framework for flexible working, and then devolve decisions to teams and their managers. Weekly team meetings resulted in increased clarity and engagement, allowing workers to openly discuss their working preferences whilst checking that flexibility was proving compatible with the project schedule.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The pressure for projects to meet client deliverables has been a fundamental factor in the industry's resistance to flexible working, but these pilots have shown that the fears are unfounded.

The programme has demonstrated that flexible working can be implemented successfully on frontline operation construction sites, with no detrimental effect on the budget or programme. It also met its goals of improving wellbeing and initiating a positive shift in attitudes to flexible working.

However, because of a number of complex operational barriers, a systemic roadmap for change is needed, to ensure that any new approaches meet business drivers as well as benefiting workers' wellbeing. Timewise strongly recommends that all firms carefully trial their plans to increase flexible working, on one or two sites, before rolling out.

WHAT CONSTRUCTION FIRMS CAN DO

Construction firms wanting to embrace flexible working, for all their employees, will need to take a number of steps:

- Determine a clear vision that starts at the top, with senior leaders advocating the benefits of flexibility and taking a proactive approach
- Consider options for flexibility in every role (frontline workers as well as knowledge workers), taking guidance from HR teams to ensure fairness and inclusivity
- Equip managers with skills and capabilities to design flexible jobs that are suitable for different site circumstances, and to manage flexible teams
- Trial new approaches at a team level, before embedding and scaling out successful learnings through guidance and further training
- Measure the return on investment of flexible working in terms of project performance and productivity, at minimum ensuring it doesn't have a detrimental effect on budget and timeline.

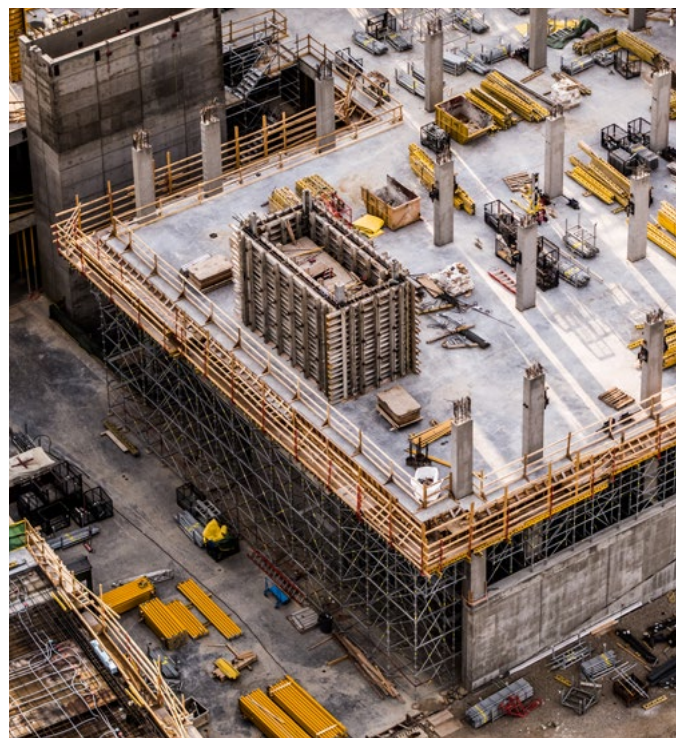
- Share insights with clients, to improve their understanding of the positive benefits of flexible working and unlock barriers to its implementation through the contracting process.

Tailored support, acknowledging the construction industry's unique cultural and operational constraints, is available separately in our [ten step action plan and guidance](#).

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Construction firms have begun to dramatically shift their thinking as a result of the pandemic, and the expectation is that they may be much more willing to adapt to flexible working. But for this to happen, it is critical for leaders to embrace flexible working and set the vision and culture for their firms.

To highlight the need for sector-wide action on flexible working, Timewise is seeking a commitment from the Construction Leadership Council to advise that increasing flexibility is critical for the future workforce, to address concerns around wellbeing, diversity, fairness, inclusion and respect; and in turn to attract and retain talent.





02. INTRODUCTION

The UK economy is utterly dependent on having a vibrant construction sector; without it, the country could not meet the demand for new housing, develop the Northern Powerhouse, transition to a green economy, update our transport infrastructure, or fulfil the government’s Build Back Better strategy .

Over 3 million people work in the UK construction sector, contributing 9% of the economy².

However, the industry struggles to attract and retain talent. Its culture is notorious for long working hours, physically demanding work, a lack of diversity and poor mental health statistics. With an ageing workforce and over-reliance on European labour, it’s a sector that is urgently seeking solutions.

To date, investment to address these challenges has focussed on industry programmes ranging from skills and apprenticeships through to supporting more women into construction. But there has been far less focus on exploring the extent to which structural working patterns are contributing to the talent crisis.

And more specifically, whether improved access to flexible working could enable the construction industry to better attract and retain a more diverse and skilled workforce.

At Timewise, we know the difference flexible working can make for businesses and individuals. Our Innovation Unit takes a sector specific approach to piloting new approaches to flexible job design, with a focus on frontline roles that have complex operational constraints. Our aim is to help employers tackle skills shortages and build more inclusive workplaces; and at the same time give frontline workers more control over their working patterns, to enhance their job quality and work-life balance.

Our Innovation Unit works with industry bodies and ‘pioneer’ organisations to understand the barriers unique to their sector. We then pilot innovative, appropriate ways of improving flexibility. And we share the outcomes and insights across the sector, in order to help unlock further opportunities for wider change.

In 2019 we identified both the need and the opportunity to take our model into the construction industry. Through a partnership with Build UK, Timewise developed the Construction Pioneers' Programme with the dual goals of:

- 1** Improving access to flexible working for frontline construction workers – giving them more input and control over how they work, in order to enhance their work-life balance, health, and wellbeing.
- 2** Enabling construction employers to improve working practices and job quality, in order to tackle talent shortages and attract a more diverse talent pool, including more women.

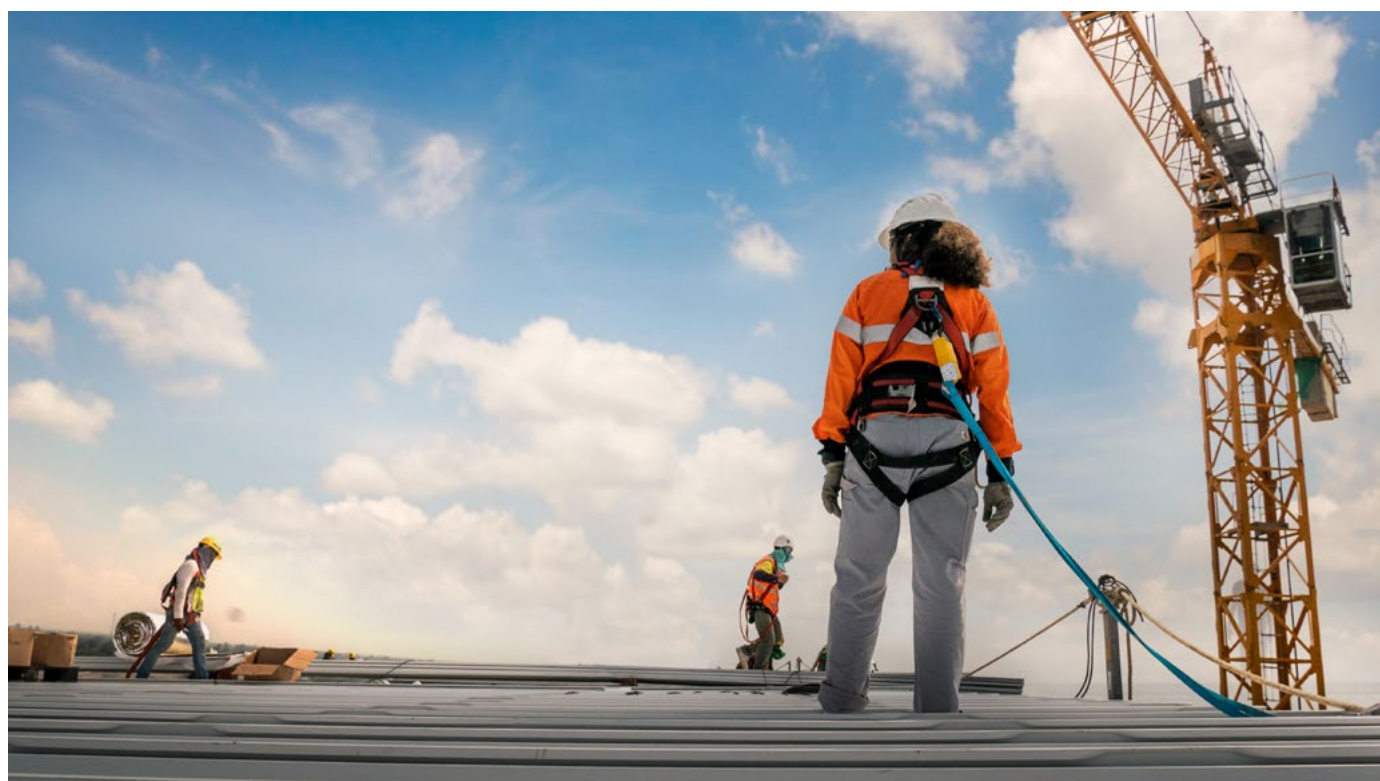
We worked on pilots with four of the UK's major construction organisations - BAM Construct, BAM Nuttall, Skanska UK, and Willmott Dixon, collectively employing around 12,000 people. The pilots ran between June 2020 and February 2021, through the pandemic. They set out to review, design and test how to improve flexible working across a range of sites and projects, from an HS2 site in London through to a substation build near Weston Super Mare, with teams employing between 14 and 120 workers.

The Construction Industry Training Board and Barclays Life Skills supported the programme, to develop the initial partnerships; evaluate the impact it could have on the ability of construction firms to attract future talent; and to disseminate the findings.

This report explains the methodology of the pilots, captures the findings, and makes recommendations to the construction industry. A [toolkit](#) is separately available for construction firms wanting to develop their own flexible working pilot.

“*Many people think flexible working in the construction industry, with its long hours culture, deadline-driven mentality and physical demands, is simply impossible. But Timewise has worked with organisations in other sectors - such as the NHS and the British Retail Consortium - and seen real change take hold, in the face of similar challenges. Get flexible working right, and you can attract a more diverse workforce and see wellbeing improve.*”

EMMA STEWART MBE, CO-FOUNDER OF TIMEWISE



03. THE CASE FOR ACTION

The UK construction industry has for many years struggled with skills shortages and a need to enhance its competitive edge as an employer of choice for future talent.

In particular, it faces a challenge when it comes to gender diversity, with women comprising less than 15% of the workforce (mostly in office-based roles). Women leave the sector at a faster rate than men, citing cultural reasons and the lack of flexible working arrangements forcing a decision between family and career³.

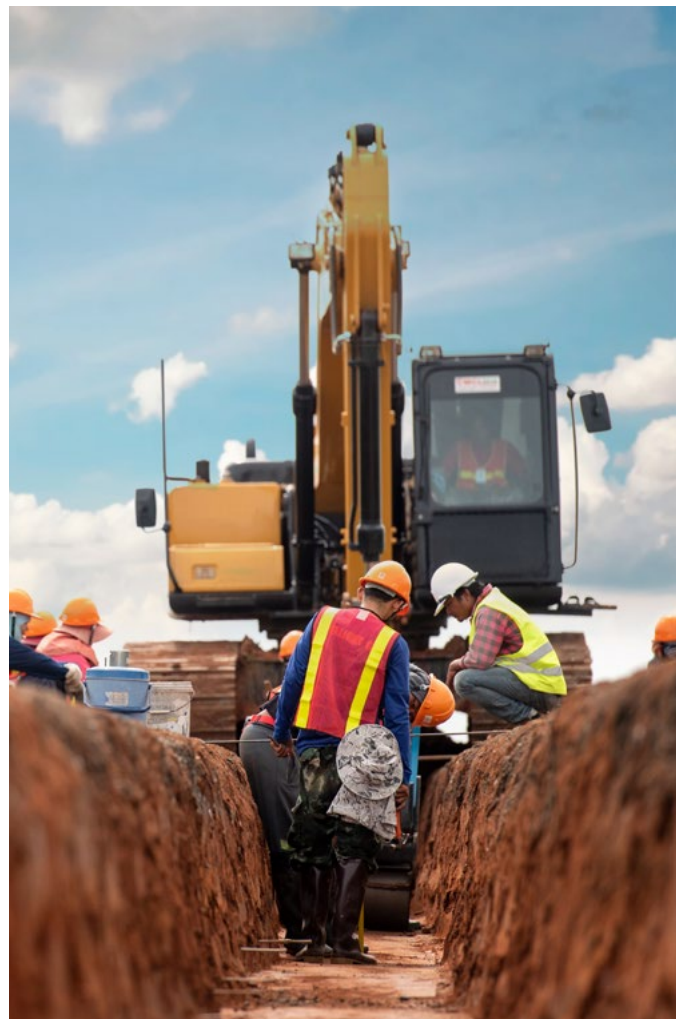
However, the long hours culture that persists in construction is a problem for men too, restricting their ability to play a greater role in caring and family life. It is also linked to poor mental health, with some stark statistics: death from suicide among construction workers is 10 times more frequent than from accidents, and 25% of construction workers have considered taking their own lives⁴.



The industry has in recent years been investing heavily in actions to make construction a more attractive profession to enter and stay in, looking at ways to improve wellbeing and work-life balance, and to ensure fair access to progression opportunities. In many other industry sectors, flexible working is seen as a key solution to these challenges, yet to date construction has struggled to find ways to adapt. At the time this programme started in 2019, Timewise found that just 10% of job vacancies in construction offered flexible working, falling to 2% for frontline roles⁸.

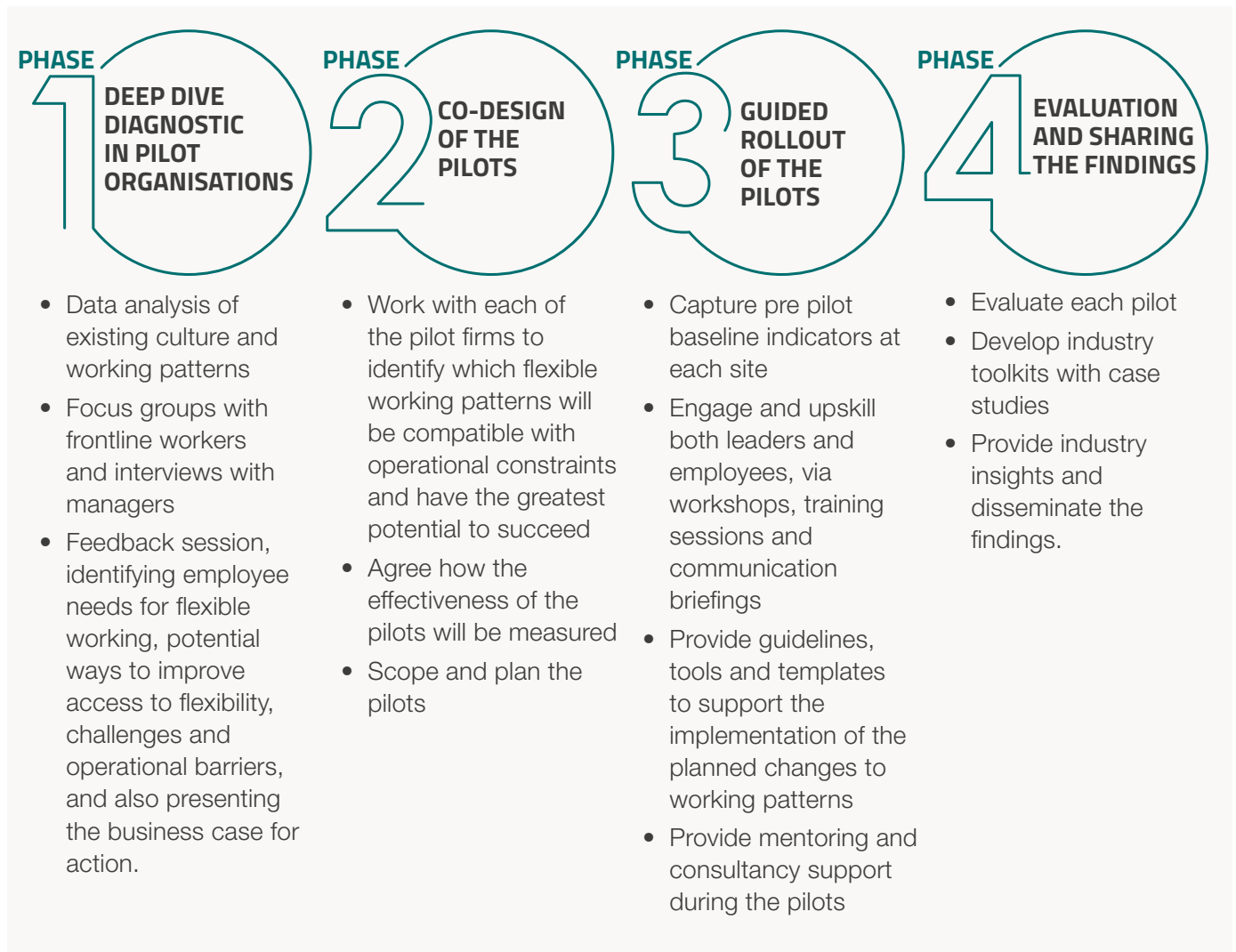
Part of the issue is that employers lack knowledge of how to create flexibility that genuinely works for both the business and its employees. While a few large firms have trialled informal flexible working for onsite jobs, there has been little systemic, industry-wide action.

As with all industries, the pandemic created a major catalyst for construction firms to adapt to new ways of working. However, while managerial and knowledge based workers were able to take up remote working options, firms struggled to address flexibility for site-based teams. Post pandemic, the need still stands for the construction industry to address its demanding working patterns and long hours culture.



04. THE TIMEWISE PIONEER MODEL

Through our Innovation Unit, Timewise has developed a methodology for our sector-based pioneer programmes. Our work with the construction pioneers followed these four phases:



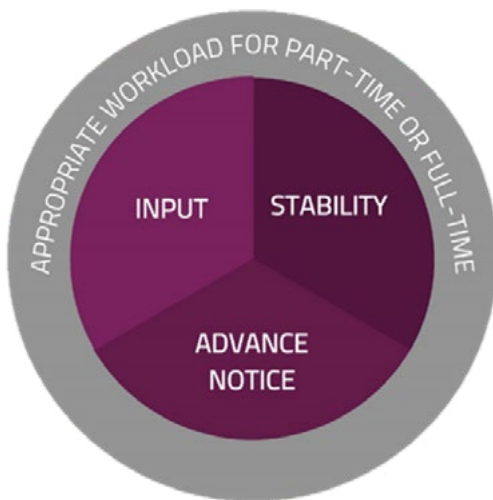
OUR FLEXIBILITY MODEL FOR SHIFT-BASED TEAMS

Within the programme process described above, Timewise used a model we have developed for frontline roles which need to cover a long working day – we call it our ‘shift-life balance’ model.

From previous pilots we have run within the NHS (enabling team based rostering for nurses) and in retail (supporting store based teams to have more input and advance notice in their shifts) we know that achieving a consistent and fair approach to flexible working is far more challenging for frontline teams than for desk-based roles.

In a frontline environment, flexibility needs to be considered primarily in the context of when people work, rather than where or how much. And any flexible working arrangements need to be designed around the work schedule and the interdependency of the team, rather than around the individual worker.

OUR ‘SHIFT-LIFE BALANCE’ MODEL



In a shift-based situation, the three elements that can enhance work-life balance are:

- the **stability** of the work (the degree to which the working pattern changes from week to week)
- the amount of **advance notice** each worker gets into changes to their work schedule
- the degree of **input** they get into their working pattern or shift.

Achieving shift life balance is about getting managers, supervisors and workers to understand how these three elements can empower workers to feel more equal in the employee-employer relationship. They also need to think through how they can design flexibility into working patterns at team level rather than individual level.

ADVANCED NOTICE

Compared with other frontline industries, construction workers do quite well on having advance notice of their schedules, as working patterns are generally fixed by the project and its programme. Sometimes, when an unforeseen problem occurs and a project falls behind schedule, change is needed at short notice. However, such changes cannot be planned for, so improving awareness of the need to give as much notice as possible was the only action we could take here.

STABILITY

Construction teams are often made up of direct employees of the main contractor and sub-contractors, labour only sub-contractors, agency staff and self-employed workers. This complexity in the variety of contracts is a major operational barrier to stabilising the workload from week to week; for the workers on hourly contracts, it simply isn't possible. For this reason, it was agreed that the pilots would not explore the ‘stability’ angle.

INPUT

The diagnostic phase of our programme identified scope to improve the degree of input or autonomy that construction workers have over when, how much and (for some roles) where they worked during our programmes. We felt confident that ‘feeling more in control’, coupled with good advanced notice of shifts, could make a measurable difference to workers’ job quality and work-life balance. We therefore determined to focus primarily on this third element of shift life balance in the pilots.

05. THE STARTING POINT: FINDINGS OF OUR DIAGNOSTIC

When we first embarked on this journey with our pioneers, we had no idea that a global pandemic was just around the corner - all of our initial diagnostic work was undertaken pre-Covid.

However, we believe the findings still stand. Even though the pandemic has catalysed significant change in working practices, the industry's operational challenges and deep-set culture mean that many firms are likely to revert to traditional ways of working, with the possible exception of increased home-working for desk-based roles.

The diagnostic phase of the programme comprised qualitative research with site-based workers (through focus groups) and with leaders and managers (through a series of interviews), in each of the pioneer firms.

With the site-based workers, we explored their current ways of working and the level of control they had over their working arrangements, such as whether they had any input into their shift pattern. We also explored their views of flexible working, aiming to get a sense of their needs.

Our focus with managers and leaders was to understand their views on flexible working, and to find out about any examples of current flexible practices, good or bad.

Across the pioneer firms, we found examples of organisational goodwill, stories of good practice, and an appreciation from employees of company initiatives that were already underway.

However, there was a mixed understanding of flexible work, and in general it tended to be granted on an ad-hoc basis for occasional, reason-specific needs, with colleagues wanting to help each other out. There was also occasional home-working for some roles, but little focus on other forms of flexibility such as part-time work. Through analysing culture surveys

and speaking to staff, it was clear that there was unmet demand for greater flexibility.

There was also often a gap between policy and practice, partly because of site operating hours and partly because of different manager attitudes. The impact of the line manager, their beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, was a core theme across all of the pioneer firms. As you will see later in our recommendations, this is not to be underestimated.

Insights from our diagnostic phase are summarised below, split into findings around operational barriers, views of workers, and views of managers.

“

I see my children 30-45 minutes per day. I'd love to be able to drop off the kids or pick them up from school sometimes. **FRONTLINE WORKER**

”

“

On paper, flexible working is great. In practice, it's not, unless you have the relationships with the right people. **SUPERVISOR**

”

OPERATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

In the main there was a one size fits all approach, with the majority of workers all starting, finishing and taking breaks from work at the same time. Most site based work was very regimented and controlled; breaking this approach was challenging for those who have worked this way for a long time.

However, there were several underlying practical reasons for the traditional operating pattern, which needed to be acknowledged before new flexible patterns could be tested:

THE INTERDEPENDENCY OF ROLES

There was constant interaction, even between manual jobs and those that were more desk based, which made it easier to work if the whole team was present.

It was challenging to unpick what the genuine interdependencies were, versus the comfort/ convenience of having all role holders present at all times, simply because that was the way it was always done. For example, the interdependency ranged from the convenience of being able to ask a designer to 'come and look at this', to the necessity of having one labourer digging a hole while a second one took the earth away.

*A setting out engineer doesn't need to set out all day every day. Depends on what they're doing and how stable that site is. **MANAGER***

CONSTRAINTS ON OPERATING TIMES

Some sites operated in residential areas and were subject to section 61 regulations, imposing restrictions on operating hours. This could limit the potential for flexibility around hours, making early starts and/or late finishes problematic.

THE DAILY BRIEFING

It was a common belief that there could only be one, whole site, morning briefing. Most sites were adamant that it was essential for health and safety that all site-workers be present at the briefing before work started each day. However, we also found examples of some sites trialling a different, more flexible approach to briefings.

*We've experimented with having several briefing meetings in a day, and doing one at the end of the day, so that those who start later don't miss out. **MANAGER***

IMPACT OF THE HOURLY-PAID WORKFORCE

There was a tension caused by the tiers of salaried employees, those on contracts of varying types, and sub-contracted workers. Many of the frontline workers were hourly paid and wanted to maximise their hours; it was therefore inevitable that some might feel incentivised to make the work last longer, or conversely feel penalised for being efficient and finishing a job quicker. This had a knock-on impact on the overtime of salaried workers who (because of the 'all in it together' culture) had to stay on site too.

It was difficult for managers to decouple time and output, and there was a tendency to believe that the two go seamlessly hand in hand. But fatigue and concentration play a part, especially over a long working day. More information and understanding is needed by health and safety experts, to show managers that hours in and output are not necessarily linear.

THE WORKER PERSPECTIVE

Our focus groups revealed that much of the resistance to flexible working came from those frontline workers who were hourly paid. Their resistance stemmed mostly from their need to earn as much as they could, with strong fears of loss of pay. Delving behind this primary concern, however, we found interest in other forms of flexibility.

LONG HOURS AND PAY

The over-riding feedback from many frontline manual workers was that while they would like to have input into when they work, the flexibility to work reduced hours was unwelcome.

Large portions of the labour workforce were paid by the hour, so hours in equated to cash out. They did not want any change that would jeopardise their pay. Moreover, there was usually a standard hourly rate for the 'start' 39 hours, then a premium rate for additional hours. So, these workers were in fact incentivised to work long hours.

Linked to this was a culture of presenteeism, with all workers being expected to stay on site until the work was done. This was often articulated as everyone being 'in it together' and some workers looked to achieve a 'badge of honour' for being the first one in and the last one out.

All of this had a huge impact on those workers who were employed directly on full-time contracts. The 'in it together' culture, as well as the need to be present to supervise the hourly-paid workers, meant that salaried workers often had to work substantial amounts of unpaid overtime. While some managers gave time back in lieu when they could, this did not happen consistently. Unsurprisingly, workers would welcome consistency and fairness around this issue, with flexible working hours being a possible solution.

Finally, another culture we came across in some workers, was that they actually enjoyed being at work for longer, and were more than happy to minimise their time at home. Which begs the question: is there a role for responsible employers to encourage workers to achieve a better balance in their lives?

“

*I would love for things to be different but the reality is the team need to work as much as possible to make ends meet. **MANAGER***

”

THE IMPACT OF TRAVEL TO WORK

Many site-workers faced long commutes, as they had to move with the projects. In the main, workers preferred to travel home on a daily basis rather than stay away from home, in spite of subsistence allowances being available for substantial distances. But long commutes add to an already long day, making it extremely long.

Some workers chose to lodge away, leaving home early on Monday or even late on Sunday, and returning home late on Friday. These workers wanted to maximise their time on site whilst they were away from their families. It's another contributing factor to the long hours culture.



CULTURE AND BEHAVIOURS AROUND FLEXIBLE WORKING

Flexible working was still a taboo subject. The belief was that long hours were ‘what you sign up for’ in construction, and that if you want to progress you need to put the hours in to show that you are committed. Anyone looking to work less than full-time would be viewed as being less committed, and therefore overlooked for promotion. Even for roles where remote-working was possible, people ‘wanting to get on’ would not opt to work that way.

Linked to this was an assumption that the further you progress, the more hours you work. This was felt to be why some people opt out of the promotion ladder, or move into office-based roles to achieve a better balance.

However, feedback indicated that there was unmet demand for greater flexibility, and that the culture that permeated the industry prevented many from asking for it. For those on hourly contracts especially, additional overtime at short notice made it very difficult to plan their personal lives, or to fulfil non-work commitments such as childcare, eldercare, regular exercise, classes, hobbies or social events.

Women will be disproportionately affected by the lack of flexibility – in previous research, 50% have said that flexible working was a key factor that would make them more inclined to stay in construction; 11% cited it as their top ranking factor⁹. Timewise has found in other sectors that lack of flexibility and a long hours’ culture are key drivers of the gender pay gap, which in reality is a ‘gender progression gap’.

“

If the project’s coming to an end, I could easily do two days a week from home. But it’s so ingrained that you shouldn’t do it. **SITE-BASED OFFICE WORKER**

”

WORKERS’ OPINIONS OF INCONSISTENT PRACTICE

Workers felt their access to flexibility was very much down to the subjective attitudes of their manager, with some managers working on a give and take basis, while others refused any modification to the standard site operating hours.

In part, some workers believed this was because managers did not know what was within their gift to allow, on a case by case or site by site basis. But others felt there was a more deep-rooted explanation based on control and lack of trust.

“

My manager would never give me overtime back, but I know someone else whose manager notes how much extra they’ve done and rewards them for that. **FRONTLINE WORKER**

”

“

One colleague says he’d rather quit than talk about changing his working hours. Really? The company would rather he quit than talk about how we can make things work? How did we get to that position? **SITE-BASED OFFICE WORKER**

”

MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

Many of the concerns expressed by managers and leaders echoed those outlined by workers, but there were also some additional themes which recurred across the pilot firms.

COMMERCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The primary measure of success for construction projects was the mantra ‘was it on time and in budget’. This could cause a tension with attempts to improve the wellbeing and mental health of workers, as there was a common perception that long hours and squeezing resources was the key to meeting targets. Even amongst managers who were supportive of well-being initiatives, if there was a problem with the project then longer hours were often expected as a way to address it.

“

“Success in this industry is whether it was on time and on budget, not how happy people felt. So you do the hours that are needed.” **SITE-BASED**

OFFICE WORKER

”

CONCERN FOR WORKER WELLBEING

Managers did recognise that the long hours’ culture could sometimes come at a cost to individual well-being, affecting the mental health of workers and their ability to balance work with caring and family life.

We heard of positive examples of some managers trying to acknowledge this, by giving overtime back to salaried workers in the form of time off in lieu. The challenge, however, is that this tended to be done ‘under the radar’ rather than as a consistent practice.

“

“By the end of the project we may have a pristine building and everything is perfect. But if people working on the project are knackered it has not been a successful project.” **MANAGER**

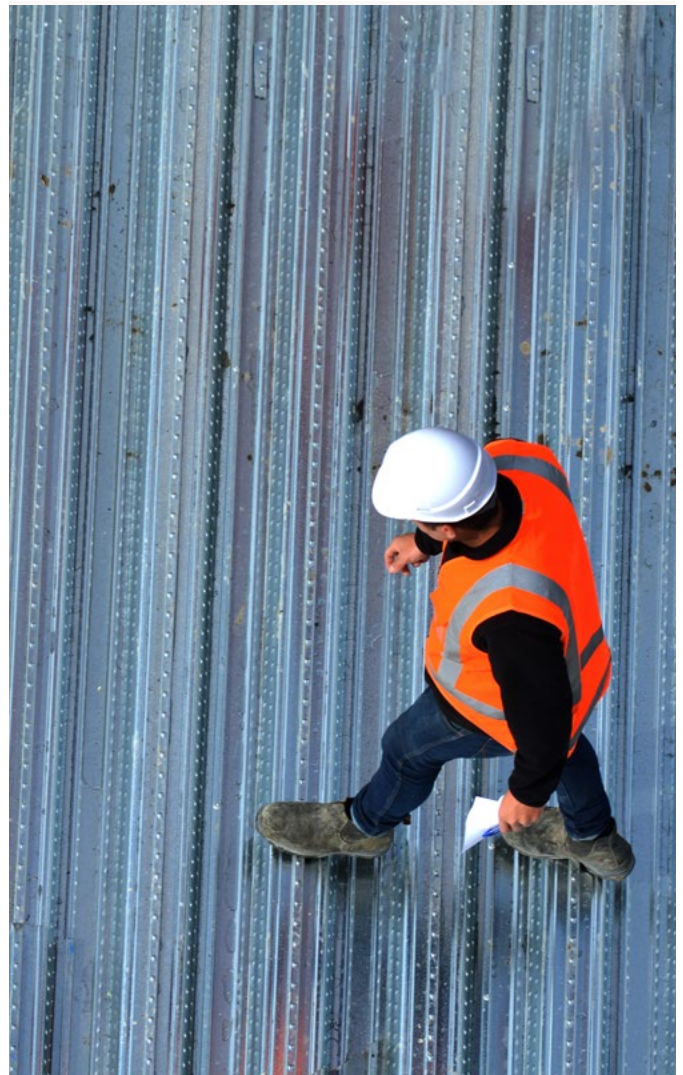
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MANAGER CAPABILITY

There was huge variation in management’s skills and confidence to implement flexible working - from firm to firm, region to region, and manager to manager.

We heard plenty of examples of ad hoc ‘needs based’ flexibility being granted on a give and take arrangement, for example “I’ll let him go and get his car fixed, and I know if I need him to do a bit extra another time there is goodwill.” However, practice was patchy and inconsistent.

Few managers really understood flexible working, or which forms of it were within their gift to support. Most believed that workers needed to have an ‘acceptable reason’ to ask for a flexible arrangement. There was also a fear that enabling more flexibility would mean more work for the manager.



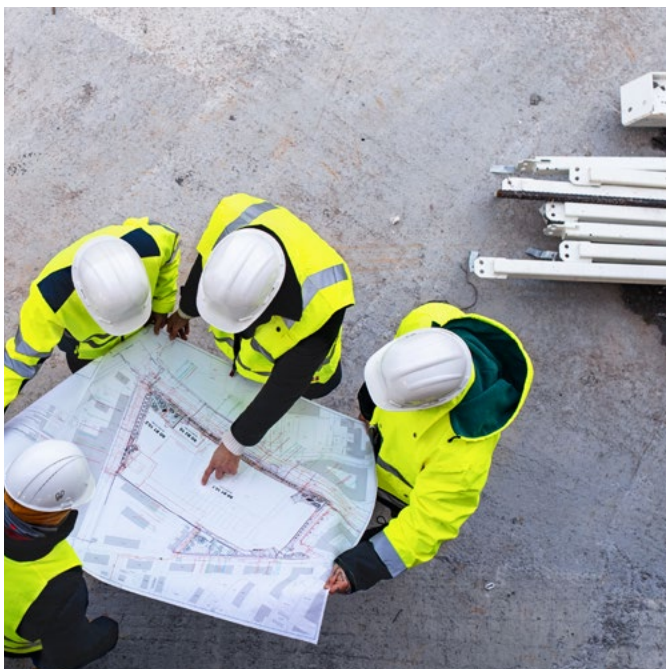
06. SETTING THE SCOPE AND AIMS OF THE PILOTS

Taking into account the quantitative and qualitative data uncovered during our diagnostic phase, there were some operational constraints that were outside our scope of influence in the pilots.

We identified four key elements that the pilots had the potential to address, and that would enable an enhanced approach to flexible working:

- Giving workers input into their working patterns
- Increasing home-working for desk-based site workers
- Changing cultural attitudes and behaviours
- Improving manager capability to implement flexible working

By focusing on factors that could be controlled, and where change could be evidenced, the aim was to demonstrate that (at minimum) offering flexible working needn't impact commercial considerations; and at best it should provide employees with better job quality and improved wellbeing.



IMPROVING FRONTLINE WORKERS' INPUT INTO THEIR SHIFT PATTERNS

We identified a number of adjustments to working practices that we believed would address some of the concerns, and which could be tested on an informal basis without having to change formal terms and conditions. These were:

- Compressed/shortened weeks, especially for those who work away from home
- Late starts/early finishes for those who need them
- Facilitating staff to cover for each other
- The ability of salaried employees to take back unpaid overtime in less busy periods of the project cycle.

We were keen to see positive changes for workers, by allowing them more control and input over their working patterns, and to see evidence that this led to an improvement in their wellbeing and work life balance.

HOME-WORKING FOR DESK- BASED SITE WORKERS

Across all the sites involved in the pilots, there were team-members whose roles were at least partially desk-based. They tended to stay on site all the time, to supervise the frontline workers and be on hand to make decisions; there was hardly any home-working.

Alongside increased flexibility of hours, we wanted to see whether an element of home-working was possible in these roles, without impacting a project's output and progress. In the event, when the pilots started, the onset of the pandemic accelerated this aspect of the trial. Some of the site management roles rotated to work partially from home, with the use of technology such as Microsoft Teams to keep collaborating.

CHANGING THE CULTURE

A key success factor for culture change would be strong and clear communication to the project teams that their employers were genuinely supportive of flexible working and wanted to make it a success. In the pilots, briefings with workers and their managers would focus on the following themes:

- Promoting the long-term business case for flexible working
- Redefining flexible working – it's not just for one-off needs
- Changing the language
- Addressing trust issues
- Making it safe to discuss flexibility needs at work.

In a full-scale culture change programme, the ultimate goal would be to move from resistance to flexible working, through to systemic acceptance of it, and finally to proactive endorsement of it. Changing the culture in such a lasting and impactful way would not be possible in short pilots lasting from six weeks to three months; but we wanted to begin to shift the dial.

ENHANCING MANAGER CAPABILITY TO IMPLEMENT FLEXIBILITY FOR WORKERS

Another critical success factor would be to equip managers with an understanding of flexible job design (the process of setting the parameters for working patterns that are feasible within the operational constraints of each site). Additionally, they would need support to build their knowledge and capability to manage the changes within their team.

We factored a training module for managers into the design of the pilots, with focus on:

- understanding flexible job design: what's possible, given the site constraints, and how can both individual and organisational needs be met?
- how to have proactive, open conversations about flexibility needs
- ideas for how to deal with objection handling, for example on issues of trust and performance.

The change we wanted to see from people managers was a shift from responding to ad-hoc requests for flexibility, to a reason-neutral and proactive conversation about managing work and personal needs. We also wanted to see managers applying the changes consistently and fairly.



07. DESIGNING THE PILOTS FOR THE DIFFERENT SITES

Having agreed the scope of the pilots at organisational level with the pioneer firms, we next needed to determine the specific working patterns to be trialled. As the operational constraints varied with each project and at each stage of each project, the pilots needed to be designed separately.

We consulted with key leaders, managers and stakeholders at each site, to agree the most suitable flexible working options. We also consulted with workers to capture their preferences.

The managers of all the pilot sites agreed to try to increase home-working for desk-based site workers. However, for their frontline workers, each of the pilot sites chose to trial different patterns of flexible hours:

BAM CONSTRUCT:

BAM Construct tested a team-based approach to flexible working. This involved changing from a top-down approach, to a more consultative method of setting shifts that took workers' personal preferences into account, alongside the need to deliver client and business outputs, work within the site's operating hours, and meet contractor commitments.

An informal weekly discussion was held towards the end of each week, to check that the scheduled work activities were being delivered effectively, whilst meeting the workers' preferences. Workers would then share their personal preferences for the following week, and devise an informal plan to cover for each other as required. The weekly discussions made the process dynamic and relevant to those on the ground, by keeping conversations live.

The team found they could implement the more flexible pattern, simply by using a few basic tactics such as putting whereabouts in calendars, ensuring contact details were provided, and maintaining contact through technology.

BAM NUTTALL

BAM Nuttall selected a site to pilot a flexi-day approach in which workers could accumulate additional hours in exchange for one day off each month. The rationale behind this was that a large portion of workers were living away and preferred to tag a flexi-day onto a weekend, to enjoy extended time with their friends or family.

The team was split into 'pods' by role type, so that they could rotate the 'flexi-day' between them and ensure that work was covered by the rest of their pod. Parameters were agreed around ensuring a full handover ahead of the flexi-day, and being flexible with the flexi-day should urgent business needs arise.



SKANSKA UK

Skanska UK's pilot on the Skanska Costain STRABAG (SCS) project identified two separate teams, to trial two different approaches to improving flexibility.

As one team of operatives made up a whole small site, they were able to operate in a more autonomous nature and the appetite for innovation was stronger. Preference forms indicated that the majority of workers would prefer to start earlier and finish earlier, so it was decided to trial an output based approach. The foreman worked with a planner to develop a more detailed version of the schedule of work, broken down into weekly and daily objectives. Once the workers (working in gangs/teams) had achieved their gang's targets, they could leave rather than remain on site for their contracted hours.

This is a model that has been used previously within the industry, though not for some time. In the past, the principle of managing workers by outputs rather than time has been seen as challenging, due to health and safety fears that if people are incentivised to finish quickly, they will rush their work and/or cut corners. However, this did not prove to be a problem in the pilot (as you will see in section 9 below), and is likely to be a matter of careful supervision.

Workers in the second team also expressed a preference for starting earlier and finishing earlier, but the long site operating hours meant that not everyone could get the pattern they wanted. The foreman decided to alternate the start times between the teams each week, within a new pattern of staggered start and finish times. This meant that all workers got the pattern they wanted every other week. In addition to this, workers were given a choice of break times.

WILLMOTT DIXON

Willmott Dixon had already implemented some trials of agile working (their term for flexible working), from which they developed and rolled out an Agile Working Toolkit and a team-based approach to agile working on all of their construction sites. They chose not to pilot again, but to use the expertise of Timewise to support the commitments they had already made to their people (to limit hours worked to 45 per week inclusive of breaks, and to ensure that an agile working plan is in place for all teams and on all new projects).

Timewise ran training sessions with managers from sites across the business, giving them the skills and knowledge to go back to their sites with the confidence to embrace agile working in their teams. Some of the ways that managers embraced flexibility were:

- Introducing a flexible rota to ensure team members didn't need to be on site at all times, whilst providing cover throughout the operating hours of 8am to 6pm.
- Operating two teams, one on site and one working from home, and swapping every other week.
- Various initiatives around home-working, in response to the pandemic.

SUPPORT DURING THE PILOTS

Throughout the pilots we checked in with the construction managers and some of their teams, to see what was working and to offer further coaching and support. We also used the sessions to understand any developing concerns or barriers, and to capture some of the behaviour shifts and stories as they were happening.

08. THE IMPACT OF COVID

The pilots started just as the pandemic hit. This meant pausing the programme while the firms reengineered processes and policies to enable sites to re-open safely. Additional challenges arose in the shape of furlough, redeployment and redundancies across all of the businesses. However, construction is famous for thinking on its feet and quickly regrouped to ensure a phased return to site.

Some of the agreed actions were fast tracked due to the need for sites to create Covid-safe environments.

Increasing home-working was one of the goals of the pilots, and the directive to 'work at home where you can' gave managers the opportunity to 'go for it' in a bigger way – their mindset was to make it really work, rather than just implement it because they had to.

Taking out the emotional side of the upheaval of lockdown, the projects continued in the main to plan. All the pioneer firms reported that introducing improved flexible working had no negative impact on budgets or timeframes.



09. MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PILOTS

Before the pilots began, Timewise had worked with all the pioneer firms to determine how to measure success. We agreed to conduct a pre and post pilot survey to measure shifts across some key indicators. To gain more qualitative insights, we also conducted focus groups with a selection of the participating workers, and interviews with a selection of managers and senior stakeholders.

In the findings outlined below, we have chosen not to report specifically on which of the pilots worked best, because the pilots were so different from each other, and designed to suit different site circumstances.

Instead, we have aggregated the survey results, presented the qualitative findings across a number of shared themes, and referenced specific pilots only when a finding was unique to that site.

SURVEY RESULTS

We needed to be able to assess improvements in workers' input into their working patterns, in terms of the resulting sense of wellbeing, job quality and work-life balance. It was also important to measure shifts in culture and perceptions associated with flexible working. We needed to ensure that the language we used best reflected the change that would matter to workers. And finally, we knew we needed to be realistic about how much shift would be possible, in what were quite small-scale pilots.

The four indicators we selected were measured at the start and end of the pilots, through a survey with participating workers. The resulting data is provided below.

1. *"In the past month I have regularly worked significantly more than my contracted hours"*

Respondents who agreed with this statement decreased from 51% to 34%.

So, before the pilots began, just over half of workers were regularly working more than their contracted hours. By the end of the pilots, this had decreased to around a third.

2. *"My working hours give me enough time to look after my own health and well-being"*

The number of respondents who agreed with this statement increased from 48% to 84%.

So, at the start of the pilots, just under half of workers felt they had enough time to look after their health and wellbeing. By the end of the pilots, this had risen to 8 in 10 workers.

3. *"I feel guilty if I start later or finish earlier than the other people on my site"*

The number of respondents who agreed with this statement decreased from 47% to 33%.

So, workers became less likely to feel guilty at adjusting their working patterns. Only a third felt guilt at the end of the pilots, compared to almost a half at the start.

4. *"If someone works from home, I am not sure they are working as hard as they would be on site"*

The number of respondents who agreed with this statement decreased from 48% to 33%.

So, workers became less likely to judge someone for 'slacking' if they worked from home. By the end of the pilots, only a third felt this way, compared to almost a half at the start.

FEEDBACK FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

Qualitative feedback highlighted a broad shift in attitudes and behaviours to flexible working, as well as providing some valuable insights into how to implement changes most effectively.

IMPROVED WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND WELLBEING

There was generally a positive shift in wellbeing amongst participants, with many speaking about improvements to their family life.

Workers also voiced a clear improvement in their ability to find the time to look after their mental and physical health and wellbeing. For example, one participant shared that she struggles with hormonal challenges, and needs to go for a run before work. She has agreed with her manager that she can start later two days each week, and this has made a massive difference for her.

Several participants even stated that they would consider the ability to work flexibly as a key criteria in any future work, potentially even more so than an increase in earnings. This was because it had made them realise the difference it brought to their mental health.

“

I would now definitely choose a job like this with flexibility, over the bit extra in money.

FRONTLINE WORKER

”

“

I now get to see more of my son and this is very important to me personally. Knowing I can do this motivates me to get my work done quicker.

SUPERVISOR

”

“

I must admit, before this I didn't even know where my daughter's classroom was. But now I've experienced being part of it I will be sticking with working like this, even though things are easing back.

MANAGER

”

“

I am cooking more at home now, eating much healthier and making extra to take in for my lunch. Previously I was eating out of a tin because it was late and that was a quick way. But I'm enjoying cooking, feel healthy and more energetic already. This extra time is making a really big difference to my health.

FRONTLINE WORKER

”

“

We are also seeing a really positive impact on well-being. 1:1 scores, quarterly score and happy scores. These have not dipped at all. If anything. These are up in the 8s and 9s [out of 10].

MANAGER

”

“

The real positive has been to be able to have more time at home and more involvement with the children and it would be fantastic to be able to keep some of this when things return to normal. I would love to have that conversation with my manager. I'm not talking about all of the time, but to be able to finish early one or two days a week and collect the children from school would be brilliant.”

SITE ENGINEER

”

INCREASED HOME-WORKING

Lockdown restrictions during the pandemic accelerated the pilots' plans to test increased home-working. All roles which could possibly be done remotely, or partially remotely, suddenly had to be done in this way. The site teams adapted swiftly, using technologies such as Microsoft Teams to keep collaborating with those workers who had to be based on site.

This aspect of the pilots was generally felt to be a great success. The improvements in wellbeing and work-life balance seemed to be particularly strong amongst those workers who were able to work from home, and there were no reported problems in terms of impact on the work schedule.

In particular, Willmott Dixon noted the dramatic change to the way the business worked through the first stages of the pandemic, and saw the benefits of enabling people to work from home. They wanted to embed this change of working, and at the end of 2020 moved two thirds of their salaried employees onto contracts ensuring at least one day working from home a week.

CULTURE AND BEHAVIOURS

Managers were beginning to see the positive impact of empowering teams to adjust their working patterns, and feedback from teams reported encouraging shifts in attitudes to flexible working.

There was generally a greater sense of trust and ownership, which was reflected in the team dynamic and level of engagement. At some sites it was already having a perceived impact on productivity.

“

The gangs are getting on great, better than before. The change in the way we work had brought the best out in people. **SUPERVISOR**

”

ENGAGEMENT AND SENSE OF OWNERSHIP

The most effective pilots were led by managers who had completely bought into the reasons for trialling flexible working, and were passionate about improving working practices. To spread that sense of belief and empowerment across the wider team, the best approach was for employers to provide a framework for flexible working, and then devolve decisions to teams and their managers. This facilitated a sense of ownership, and enabled teams to use their local knowledge of the particular site and project, to reach the optimum plan for changing their working patterns.

In the BAM Construct pilot, managers led regular team meetings to improve two-way communication – allowing workers to express their working preferences, check whether flexible working was being applied fairly and inclusively, and confirm that it was proving compatible with the project schedule. This enabled clarity and increased engagement in the process. Teams knew what they were doing and how to do it, and managers became facilitators rather than decision makers.



“

There has definitely been a positive impact on productivity. Morale is much better and the guys are working harder. **SUPERVISOR**

”

COMMERCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Feedback from all the pioneers highlighted that the pilot projects were predominantly still delivering on time and within budget, whilst having had to adjust to Covid restrictions, implement the Site Operating Procedures and introduce more flexible working patterns. Levels of engagement, and in turn performance, increased.

For some, there was also emerging data to show that the adjustments to working patterns were driving savings due to reduced labour turnover.

There was a particularly positive finding with the output based model, piloted at the Skanska UK site. The construction industry has historically been wary of output based models, with fears of standards being compromised if work is rushed to leave early. However, in the pilot, Skanska UK felt that reduced working hours and less fatigue actually supported the health and safety culture, and there were no incidents, near misses or NCRs. Moreover, the output model had a positive impact on the project: managers felt performance was enhanced, and that there is potential to achieve cost savings in labour and plane.

*Interestingly, working in a more agile way has not cost me/ the project anything. The idea of two shifts was forced by Covid, but the work is still getting done and people are getting to meet their own preferences too. **MANAGER***

*It is really interesting how we have been working less hours and still managed to catch up the programme. **SUPERVISOR***

*Productivity is the same as a 10 hour day, being done in 8 hours. People are more energised and working faster. If you are being paid for a 10 hour shift you will make it last 10 hours but if there is an incentive to still get paid a full shift but finish quicker you are focused to get the work done. **SUPERVISOR***

*Productivity is definitely up and so is positivity. You can feel the difference in the energy of the guys. They are motivated to do more, and they know they are being looked after. **SUPERVISOR***

*A colleague calculated that with savings in travel, hours and hotel costs, we have saved over £1m from working with more agility. **MANAGER***

*Labour turnover is down at both Egham and the Leeds site where they have implemented flexible working. **HR MANAGER***

10. CONCLUSIONS

This programme demonstrated that flexible working can work successfully on frontline operation construction sites.

We saw a positive shift in attitudes to flexible working, and improvements in wellbeing, across all the pioneer firms involved in the pilots.

There was no detrimental effect on the budget or programme, for any of the pilot sites. Early indications even suggest that enhanced performance can be achieved.

All of this highlights the commercial potential of embedding and rolling out team-based approaches to flexible working for frontline teams within construction.

We have summarised key conclusions below.

CLEAR LEADERSHIP VISION

Successful flexible working is always underpinned by a clear vision and common understanding as to what flexible working is/can be, with clarity around the working patterns that may be suitable for different roles and operational situations, and also parameters for formal versus informal flexibility.

Any construction firm needs to start at the top, ensuring leadership buy-in and clarity of purpose before making changes to working patterns.

COMPATIBLE FLEXIBLE WORKING PATTERNS

For flexible working to be a success, it has to be compatible with any genuine operational constraints. For site based frontline teams (with interdependent roles, strict operating hours and demanding deadlines), some form of flexibility around start and finish times is likely to be the main option in play. Home-working for site-based office roles also proved successful in these pilots.

The critical ‘benefit’ for workers is to improve their sense of control over their working pattern.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RUNNING PILOTS, BEFORE ROLLING-OUT

The construction sector, with its considerable operational and cultural barriers to flexible working, is a tough nut to crack. Moreover, the specific challenges can vary from site to site within any firm.

It is therefore vital that firms carefully trial their plans to increase flexible working, on one or two sites, before rolling out. To guide employers through the process of designing and running a pilot, Timewise has developed a 10 point plan which is available here: [‘Improving Flexible Working in Construction: a 10 Point Action Plan’](#)



WORKERS' WELLBEING

As a result of being able to work more flexibly, the workers at the pilot sites reported the benefits of spending more time with their families, as well as improvements to their personal wellbeing. They were happier and more engaged in their work.

CHANGING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS

Even in these short pilots, entrenched views were already beginning to shift. Rather than flexible working being a taboo, workers reported that they felt less guilty about starting later or finishing earlier, and were more trusting that people worked hard when working from home. Managers reported that they could now see the positive impact of empowering teams to have more control over their working patterns.

ON TIME, IN BUDGET

None of the pilots were adversely affected by flexible working. After making adjustments to comply with Covid regulations, they all ran to schedule and within budget.

The pressure for projects to meet client deliverables has been a fundamental factor in the industry's resistance to flexible working, but these pilots have shown that the fears are unfounded. There was even early evidence of improved productivity, and also of savings in labour costs and expenses – potential areas to explore more fully in future.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR SCALING UP ACROSS THE INDUSTRY

Construction's multiple layers of employed, contracted and sub-contracted workers make it challenging to implement flexible working in a way that is fair and consistent for all groups. In particular, the difference between salaried and hourly paid workers creates a tension in the trade-offs they make between pay and time.

Linked to this, it is difficult to decouple time and output within the industry's current methods of tracking work and hours paid.

Travel time to site locations is another key underlying factor, as it can limit the types of flexibility that are possible.

Our pilots worked around these constraints, finding compatible patterns of flexibility. However, there is potential for even greater change, faster, if some of the underlying constraints could be addressed through industry-wide effort.

Clients need to be involved too, and there is a communication exercise to be done here. For any particular contract, flexible working needs to be discussed with the client, to get agreement operationally. Moving forwards, clients need to be part of the wider conversation to support increased flexibility, and for this to happen they will need to be reassured (with evidence) that it won't impact time or budget.



11. RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a pressing need to stimulate action on flexible working in the construction industry, to help address concerns around worker wellbeing and work-life balance, and in turn to make the industry a more attractive career choice.

The pressure is also coming from clients; during the tendering process, construction firms are increasingly being asked to articulate their approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. It is therefore a commercial benefit for firms to be able to pledge that teams will be supported to have more control and input into their working patterns.

Historically, the industry has been slow to adapt to flexible working. But over the last year, in the face of the pandemic, it has proved incredibly quick and agile at changing its ways of working. There is a huge opportunity, right now, to capture and retain that learning, so that firms don't revert to old working practices and ingrained behaviours when the pandemic is over.

In particular, the industry needs to ensure that frontline workers are not left behind in the movement towards increased remote working for desk-based staff. Alternative forms of flexibility are possible for site-based teams, as our pilots have shown.

A systemic roadmap for change is needed, to ensure that any new approaches meet business drivers as well as benefiting workers' wellbeing. It should involve careful trialling along the lines of the pilots in this programme; otherwise the risk is a top-down policy that ignores worker preferences, or bottom-up testing without codifying and embedding the results.

WHAT CONSTRUCTION FIRMS CAN DO

Firms wanting to embrace flexible working, for all their employees, will need to take a number of steps:

- Determine a clear vision that starts at the top, with senior leaders advocating the benefits of flexibility and taking a proactive approach
- Consider options for flexibility in every role (frontline workers as well as knowledge workers) to ensure fairness and inclusivity
- Equip managers with skills and capabilities to design flexible jobs that are suitable for different site circumstances, and to manage flexible teams
- Trial new approaches at a team level, before embedding and scaling out successful learnings through guidance and further training
- Advertise roles with flexible working from the point of hire, to attract a more diverse pool of skills and talent
- Measure the return on investment of flexible working in terms of project performance and productivity, at minimum ensuring it doesn't have a detrimental effect on budget and timeline.
- Share insights with clients, to improve their understanding of the positive benefits of flexible working and unlock barriers to its implementation through the contracting process.

Tailored support, acknowledging the construction industry's unique cultural and operational constraints, is available separately in our [ten step action plan](#).

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Beyond the action that individual firms can take, there is both a need and an opportunity for wider industry leadership, to catalyse change at scale. Timewise is therefore seeking a commitment from the Construction Leadership Council (People and Skills workstream) to advise that enabling flexible working for all construction roles is critical for the future workforce, to address concerns around wellbeing, diversity, fairness, inclusion and respect; and in turn to attract and retain talent.

Alongside this overarching commitment, we are proposing three calls to action for the CLC to take:

- 1.** Advocate and promote our 10 point action plan for improving flexible working for all roles in construction
- 2.** Commit to measure the ratio of jobs advertised as flexible at the point of hire, through the new Talent Retention Scheme Jobs Portal, and then trial prompts to encourage recruiters to offer flexible working in their job adverts
- 3.** Embed flexible job design training into existing leadership and management programmes, to build capabilities.



12. FINAL THOUGHT

A reflection on our experience of running the construction pioneers' programme, by Emma Stewart MBE (co-founder of Timewise) and Angela Goldsmith (Principal Consultant at Timewise).

Over the last eighteen months, we've developed a huge affection for the construction industry and the candid culture that flows through it, across all the levels of employees we've had the pleasure of working with.

We've been told that we're working with the wrong industry if we want to improve flexible working. But alongside many a frank and sceptical comment, we've seen an industry that is full of good intention, workers with a phenomenal work ethic, amazing engagement with communities, and speedy innovation in the face of a pandemic.

The pioneer organisations which took part in this programme are true trailblazers, driven by the desire to change the image of construction and make it a great career choice.

At the start of the pilots, many of the workers quietly told us they wanted to work more flexibly but felt unable to ask for it. There were also many reluctant workers, who were fiercely protective of their need to rack up long hours and maximise their pay. By the end of the project, even people in the reluctant group were enjoying enhanced wellbeing they did not realise they needed. The overall result is a happier and more productive workforce.

However, these have just been pilots and while we hope some of the learnings take root, we know that real and sustainable change doesn't happen overnight.

So, we want to leave you with a thought, echoed by many of the construction leaders and employees we have worked with. It starts by noting the progress made in health and safety since the 1980s:

“

At close to 8 fatalities for every 1,000 workers, this industry was four times as deadly as the average UK job in 1981. Accident rates have continued to fall, as new regulations and better safety equipment make construction work less hazardous. Construction is now regarded as one of the most highly-regulated industries around, with lots of laws and safety equipment to keep workers safe.¹⁰

”

... and then considers a greater 'unseen' hazard in construction today:

“

We lose more than one construction worker every day to suicide. It's a horrendous statistic.¹¹

”

... and concludes by recognising that it is both possible and necessary to shift the dial on this too:

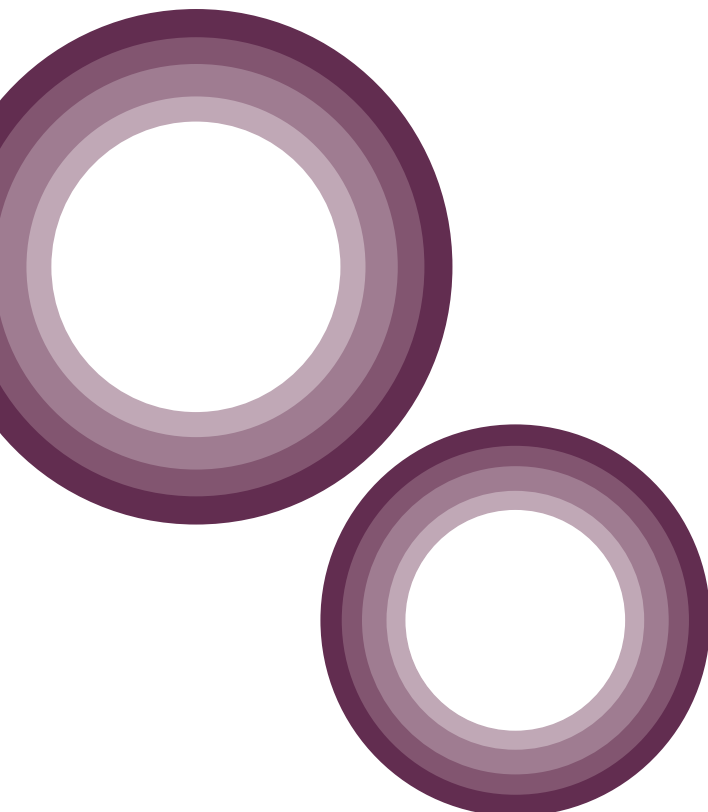
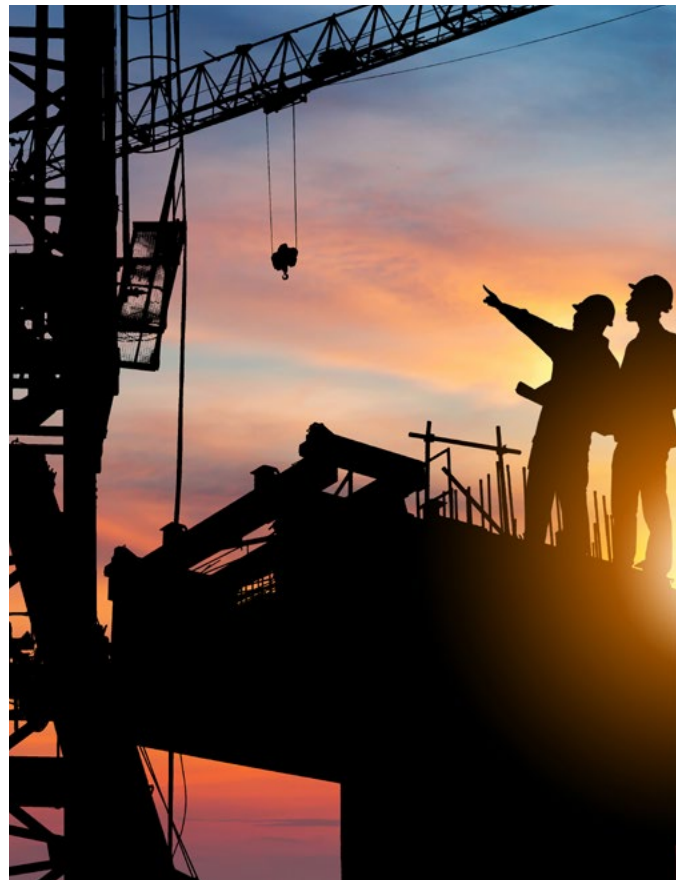
“

It is in our gift as leaders in construction to improve mental health and wellbeing. If changing our ways of working can make a difference, then we should not need to be trailblazing in this space; it needs to be just what we do.

”

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timewise
TALENT THROUGH FLEXIBILITY

Timewise is a multi-award winning social business and leading change agent in the flexible working sphere. We conduct research, share market insights and deliver consultancy services to help employers attract and develop the best talent. We also run Timewise Jobs, a jobs board for roles that are part-time or open to flexibility.

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