

Team-based Flexible Working

Pilot Evaluation



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Team-based Flexible Working

**Sector-wide Pilot
Evaluation Report**
February 2020

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A new approach to flexibility was needed after 'if not, why not' was announced

In 2016, Premier Mike Baird announced a policy commitment that all roles across the government sector could be made flexible on an 'if not, why not' basis by 2019. Flexible working itself was not new across the sector; most roles, particularly frontline, had a number of different types of flexibility encoded into their industrial agreements. However, satisfaction with flexible working, as measured in the *People Matter Employee Survey*, had remained more or less static across the sector in recent years, as had use of flexibility.¹ Qualitative research undertaken by the NSW Public Service Commission revealed common barriers in ICT and HR systems, alongside misgivings and misconceptions across workplaces about what was and was not 'allowed'. Managers still approached flexibility as something to be accommodated and negotiated on a case-by-case basis after an individual requested it – it was rarely pro-actively planned at the team level in the context of overall outputs. This meant access was infrequently democratic and rarely normalised.

While technical and IT systems change was out of project scope (as a longer-term challenge for agencies), a new approach to integrating flexible working within the current parameters was required, based on evidence from diversity research that the most effective way to challenge beliefs around flexible working is to change behaviours.

Partnering with teams, divisions and agencies across the sector, we set out to improve the use, satisfaction with access and quality of flexible working in a pilot, in addition to seeing what impact this would have on individual engagement, team connection and collaboration, and critically, customer service/service delivery.

"You can act your way into a new way of thinking faster than you can think your way into a new way of acting"

1 In Q8i, respondents were asked 'How satisfied are you with your ability to access and use flexible working arrangements?', with a five-point response scale of 'very satisfied - very unsatisfied'. 2017 scores for satisfied/very satisfied were 57%, 2018 and 2019 were 59%.

We adopted a methodology that changed behaviours to challenge beliefs

Two types of pilots were arranged. Each engaged with teams and leaders and focused on principles. Each used the same evaluation method.

- 1 Team Design,**
in which the entire team worked together to design their flexible working experiment.
- 2 System-based Design,**
in which the leaders change their role as a 'gatekeeper' of flexible working, with the experiment emphasising principles, not rules-based approaches.

Participants were drawn from diverse roles, work environments and locations

837 people across 14 different work contexts joined the pilot, from office based and front line service delivery environments. Participant teams included road maintenance crews, civil lawyers working in Aboriginal communities, traffic emergency patrol teams, health infrastructure planners, tow truck drivers, human resources professionals, human services policy experts, health managers and environment policy experts.

Each pilot lasted a minimum three months, with some extended to five months to adjust for team changes or operational considerations.

The results revealed teams could build a new culture of flexibility, and individual, team and customer outcomes were either maintained or improved

Our findings show that the experience of flexibility improved in all pilots, and perceptions were that individual, team and customer outcomes were consistently either maintained or improved. **This approach worked.**

All teams involved in the pilot have now adopted what they did in the pilot as business as usual.

Significant increases

Data from the pilots show considerable growth in 'strongly agree' scores across key areas:



Team and leader co-operation



My supervisor is strongly supportive of flexible working



Those who felt they could access flexibility for any reason



Teams felt they worked together more effectively after the pilot



Teams are flexible and prepared to adjust how or when work is done in order to get a job done



Those who felt they had an effective system for organising and planning work to enable flexibility



People working at home by pilot conclusion*



How much flexibility you have where you do your work

* Growth in people reporting regular use of this flexible work option

Changes to workforce structures and processes can further bolster flexible working

This pilot emphatically demonstrated that using a whole team and leader-supported approach to flexible working will produce a significant shift in the use and quality of flexible working, and in workplace, business, and individual outcomes.

However, there are some building-block actions required within agencies to smooth the way and further bolster innovation in the way we plan and arrange our work. This becomes even more critical as work itself transforms – given the skills built in this pilot are not just in working flexibly but thinking flexibly.

The core themes that emerged are around manager and leader capability, and HR/IT frameworks, systems and process:

- **Workplace systems and processes:** Review and adapt workplace systems and people processes to better match the way we work now. Employees reported barriers to flexibility from across the employment lifecycle, and agency processes to support could benefit from modernising, simplification and striking a better balance between a risk-based and human-centred approach.
- **IT system improvements:** Review and adapt IT systems to better support modern workplace productivity. This applies to agency software, hardware and critically, the HR systems used that have not kept pace with modern employment arrangements (for example, the inability of financial or performance management systems to cope with job sharing team leaders).
- **Industrial arrangements:** While industrial arrangements were out of scope for this project, the pilot did reveal the need to strike a better balance between workforce protections for all, and an individual/team's need to adapt to their local context and find the best way to get the work done.
- **Leadership support and role-modelling:** Leaders/Managers need to proactively support and role model flexible working in order for individuals and teams to feel comfortable using it themselves. Employees reported that there is inconsistent leadership support during change initiatives like this, particularly unambiguous support to try new things out.
- **Building manager capability:** Capability at all levels is needed to manage for performance outcomes and outputs, not time present. 'Presenteesim' was keenly felt by employees, whether explicitly expressed or otherwise.
- **Team cohesion:** Managers need to intentionally ensure teams stay connected and cohesive, particularly if the team grows more dispersed and therefore requires a different way of managing, communicating and 'staying connected'.

1. How we designed the pilot

We began by acknowledging that the Premier's policy commitment to flexible working required a new approach to planning and implementing flexible working; one that better supported both managers and employees alike to bridge the gap between the policy commitment and making it work in practice.

The commitment means that:

- anyone can seek a flexible working arrangement, for any reason;
- managers and teams need to consider how their services will be maintained or improved as part of their decision making;
- having that conversation as a team means the whole team 'owns' the arrangements. This prevents it being purely a manager's responsibility to monitor; and
- those conversations can start from a place of 'given the work we have to do, what flex might be possible, can we make this work, and if we can't, why not? Then – what else might be possible?'



1.1 We used two different methods to achieve the same end

Following a competitive tender, two approaches were selected, to allow for adaptation across a huge, diverse sector. Both were grounded in a solid evidence base of organisational psychology, human-centred design, theories of change, and lessons learned from private sector experiments. In both pilots, once designed, people did not have to seek permission to use flexible working, provided guiding principles were adhered to across the team.

- 1. Team-based design** is a co-operative approach, where the entire team participates in designing the pilot. It works well with smaller teams that benefit from designing their pilot together and have an appetite to challenge the status quo of how they currently plan and arrange their work. It was used in both office and frontline service delivery environments, typically over 3-5 months to capture peak periods.
- 2. Systems-based design** empowers leaders to change their role as a 'gatekeeper' of flexible working requests in their team system. Leaders design a pilot that guides what can and can't be done in informal² flexible working within the operating rhythm of the team and the services they offer. This builds agency and autonomy for employees, while managers lead by example. It is particularly effective for large or geographically dispersed teams and areas, where there is a need for strong leadership. In this pilot, it was used in office-based environments over three months.

“Both approaches are framed around the evidence that people, when provided with some flexibility and autonomy in their working arrangements, will continue to deliver, and often deliver even better, for their organisation.

They also assume that given the right support, people can challenge – and change – their beliefs and assumptions about their work, their colleagues and their organisation.”



² That is, not permanent changes to employment such as part-time or job share, which require significantly more planning and discussion, and forms.

While each approach used a different methodology, both started by inviting participants to do things differently. Rather than engage people on just a cognitive level (the widely used 'mythbusters' approach to challenging mindsets), the challenge to mindsets was made implicit in the process.

Both approaches work from the business out – the discussion about flexible working starts only after a team or leadership group has confirmed the business outcomes that need to be maintained or improved, understood its stakeholders, its customers and its workload peaks and troughs, and identified any challenges or concerns about flexible working its people may already carry. Only then does a conversation about what flexibility is possible, for anyone that wants it, gets started. In this way, a series of 'rules of the road' are set up, and everyone in the pilot agrees to abide by them.

	No. of teams	No. of employees
Team-based design	10	400
Systems-based design	4	437



See the PSC's [Design your own flexibility trial](#) toolkit for further detail on the steps contained in each approach, and the specific roles and responsibilities of leaders and employees.



Both approaches took a similar structure:

1. Consult with the pilot group (whether whole teams or leaders) to understand jobs, work, teams, current flexibility, flexibility dilemmas, and agree on scope.
2. Design the pilot (via a team or leader workshop).
3. Pre-implementation evaluation survey (pre-survey).
4. Regular communication throughout the pilot period.
5. Post-implementation survey (post-survey).
6. Review and evaluation workshop.

1.2 Guiding principles gave structure to expectations

- flexible working is open to all team members
- the process is based on trust
- there is flexibility in where, when and how work is done and who does the work
- flexible working arrangements are mutually beneficial – clearly meeting the needs of teams, clients and the individual
- teams look for ways together to increase flexibility that will both maintain and improve service delivery, as well as team and individual wellbeing
- performance is no longer purely assessed on physical presence but towards outputs/outcomes
- possibilities are considered for job and work redesign to enable increased flexibility (in the context of standing industrial arrangements)
- all team members share responsibility for the success of flexible working in their team
- there is respect for each person's flexible working arrangement
- there is a positive team culture that supports flexible working.



1.3 The pilots had clearly articulated goals for flexibility and business outcomes

The pilots were designed with these goals:

1. Increase staff use of flexible working (what was used, and how often);
2. Improve the quality of flexible working experiences (e.g., being able to use it for any reason);
3. Improve team and manager support for flexible working;
4. Develop a culture of flexible working, and
5. Create flexible teams and work design.

Core to each pilot was also that the following outcomes were maintained or enhanced:

- **Business outcomes:** Reputation, performance and capability; availability and responsiveness to stakeholders, customers; key result areas and work priorities met; and innovation.
- **Team:** Supportive team culture; creatively working together; and team engagement.
- **Individual:** Work/life balance; learning and development engagement; and more efficient use of time.



1.4 Pilot participants were drawn from very different workplace contexts

While 27 agencies/teams will have undertaken pilots by the time this project concludes, this report includes the results of the first 14 teams completing it:



Figure 1: Pilot teams, divisions and agencies

Cluster	Team/s	No. of participants	Methodology used
Communities and Justice	Six different pilots drawn from branches in the Family and Community Services (FACS) Commissioning Directorate: Inclusion & Early Intervention; Child and Family; Housing and Homelessness; Partnerships, Frameworks and Systems; State-wide contracts; and Procurement and Funding Administration.	215 staff	Team-based
	FACS Human Resources Division	160	Systems-based
	Legal Aid: Civil Law Service for Aboriginal Communities Branch	21	Team-based
	Legal Aid: Newcastle Office – Criminal, Civil and Family Legal Practices	42	Team-based
	Legal Aid: Grants Division	97	Systems-based
Premier and Cabinet	Public Service Commission: Corporate Division	25	Team-based
Planning, Industry and Environment	Office of Environment & Heritage: Policy Branch	80	Systems-based
Health	Clinical Excellence Commission	97	Team-based
Health	eHealth (Office of the CE & CIO; Investment, Strategy & Architecture (ISA) Team; Data & Analytics; Clinical Engagement and Patient Safety (CEPS); Customer Engagement & Service Transition (CEST))	100	Systems-based

2. Our results confirmed this approach works



2.1 A short note on evaluation design

The evaluation was designed as exploratory in nature, focused on employee experiences of taking a different approach to flexible working.

The short timeframe, voluntary nature of the evaluation and some turnover meant possible minor discrepancies between pre and post survey respondents, and it is therefore not possible to draw any substantive conclusions about outcomes, cause and effect.

However, the richness of the data provides highly relevant insights about this approach and its application in improving flexible working across the sector, particularly as many agencies continue to work towards embedding 'if not, why not'. Its replication across such a diverse range of operational contexts gives the results additional power.

This evaluation comprises:

1. An analysis of pre- and post-survey data. The response rate for pre-survey completion was 40% and for post survey completion it was 45%. Note significant differences were not found for the pre and post demographic characteristics of respondents, although turnover meant respondents may have differed to a degree.
2. A brief qualitative and quantitative assessment of data obtained from the evaluation workshops for 10 team-based pilot contexts.
3. Analyses of verbatims from the post-survey responses for four systems-based pilot contexts.

The emphasis in our analysis is on differences that were statistically significant (at the .05 level or more). Because many participants already had much access to flexible working and a positive experience of it, we have focused only on shifts in degree of positivity, i.e., a shift from being 'satisfied' to 'very satisfied', or from 'agree' to 'strongly agree'.

Where relevant, differences in response patterns by gender, manager or employee, and caregiving responsibilities are highlighted.



Our results confirmed this approach works

Our demographics were consistent with the sector's

Survey participant demographics were broadly consistent with those of the NSW government sector workforce.



Figure 2: Pre and post survey demographics compared to NSW government sector

		Pre	Post	Whole workforce
Gender	Female	67%	67%	65%
Age	15-24	3%	2%	4%
	25-34	27%	24%	23%
	35-44	32%	31%	24%
	45-54	24%	27%	25%
	55-64	14%	16%	19%
	over 65	1%	0	4%
Other Demographics	Born in Australia	58%	60%	85%
	Identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	2%	2%	3.5%
	Have a disability	6%	6%	2.5%
	Have caring responsibilities	54%	53%	49.7%
	Child care	36%	34%	40.2%
	Elder or other adult care	18%	20%	16.1%
	Manager	28%	25%	31.2%



Notes from Figure 2

Source: PSC pilot surveys, NSW Workforce Profile 2019 and People Matter Employee Survey 2019

Born in Australia definition: This figure represents the proportion of people who selected 'Australia' as their country of birth from the total people who selected any country as their country of birth. Those who did not respond to the question have been excluded. Data is a small sample size, based on 43% respondents.

Carer definition: The methodology used in this report defines a carer as an employee who responded "Yes" to either 15n and 15o in the People Matter Employment Survey. The questions are "Q15n - Do you provide care for a child outside of work?" and "Q15o - Do you provide care outside of work for a child or adult who needs support due to disability, chronic illness, mental illness, dementia or frail age?". All other combinations were excluded from the analysis. Data based on 53% respondents.

Manager definition: As per 2019 PMES this includes Managers ("16c. Do you directly supervise the work of one or more employees?"), Manager of Managers ("16d. Do you manage other managers?") and Senior executive ("16f. What is your current employment status?"). Categories are exclusive. Data based on 53% respondents.

2.2 There is strong evidence of a positive shift to flexible working

An important first question to explore is whether or not this intervention had an impact; that is, was there a shift in both team and leader support for flexible working? There is strong evidence for this having occurred.

Teams were more supportive and co-operative about working flexibly

There were four survey questions that tested team support for flexible working, with statistically significant increases in agreement for every question.



Figure 3: Team support for flexible working (strongly agree percentages)

Have a spirit of co-operation and support that enables flexibility for all members in how, when or where work is done

48%

30%

Give consideration to flexibility in how, or where we work, when we are organising our work

39%

16%

Have an effective system for organising and planning work to enable flexibility in how, when or where work is done

38%

17%

Are flexible and prepared to adjust how or when work is done in order to get a job done

48%

27%

● POST ● PRE



About half of employees felt that their teammates strongly supported flexible working after the intervention

(from 30% of survey respondents to 48%).

These four questions were combined to form a reliable Team Support Scale, where we saw a positive trend from 23% pre to 43% post.³

Further analysis revealed that employees reporting the use of informal flexible working - flexible start or finish times, more hours over fewer days, working from different locations and working from home - showed significantly higher scores on the Team Support Scale in both the pre - and post-survey (according to correlations). The relationship was slightly stronger in the post-survey analysis (.27 vs .23).

Team support for flexible working was also significantly related to the quality of flexibility experience reported by employees in both the pre- and post-survey, with the relationship being significantly stronger in the post-survey (correlation of .57 for the post-survey, vs .34 for the pre-survey).

Scores overall post-survey were significantly related to whether or not an employee used at least one flexible working option regularly. Some options stood out: significant correlations occurred with use of flexible start or finish times, working more hours so they could come in fewer days, working from different locations, and working from home. This association did not exist pre-survey, suggesting the intervention somehow helped to make these types of flexible working arrangements easier for workgroups to handle than they had been before.

Leaders (immediate supervisors or managers) were more supportive and co-operative about flexible working over time

Statistically significant increases between pre-and post-pilot survey results were found in agreement for two of the questions asked about leader support: 'my supervisor is strongly supportive of flexible working'; and 'my supervisor is sensitive to the demands of my personal/family life'. The role modelling question, however, did not show this. This suggests that individuals in the pilots did not feel that their managers adequately role-modelled flexible working.

In the post-pilot survey, a relationship emerged in the data between employee use of flexibility and their perceptions of supervisor support. Employees reported that their supervisors were significantly more supportive of flexibility and more likely to model flexibility themselves where the employees used at least one flex option during the pilot.⁴

In the pre-pilot survey, where supervisor support and flex use was less, there was still a significant relationship between employees using at least one flex option regularly and their perceptions of manager support for flexibility. However, there was no significant relationship for the connection between supervisors' modelling flex and employees' flex use during that earlier period.

However, there was no significant relationship for the connection between supervisors modelling flexible working and employees' flexible working use during that earlier period. This finding suggests that the team-based approach's tendency to increase supervisors' modelling of flexibility may enhance employees' own use of flexible working.

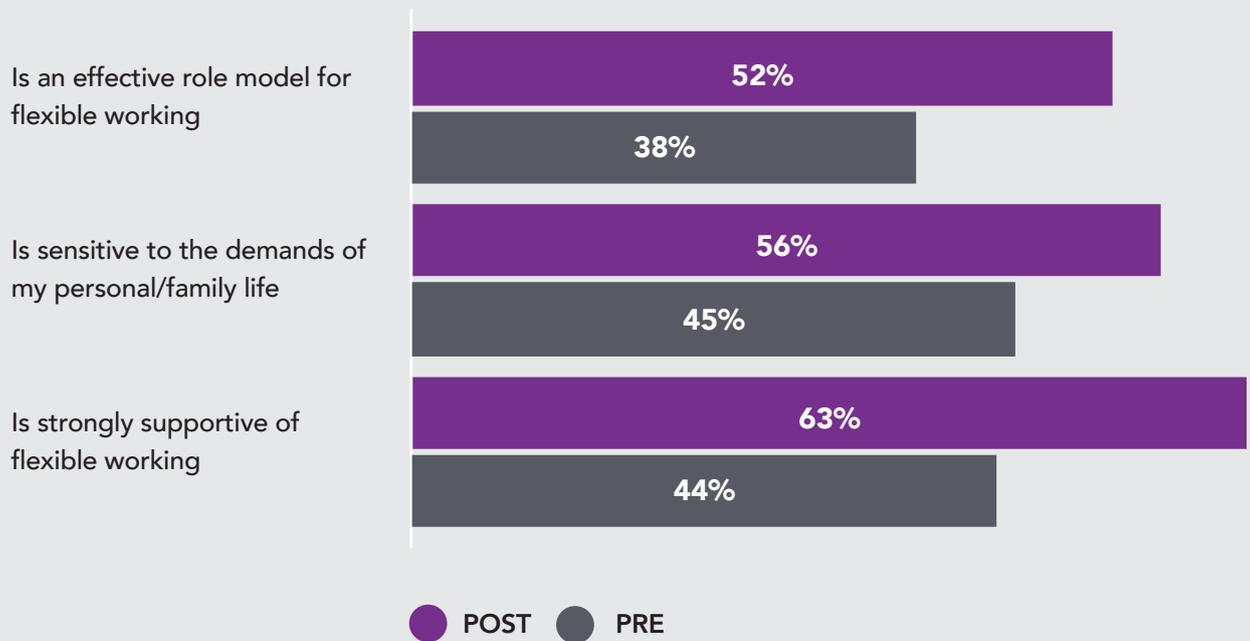


³ Reliability co-efficient alpha of .89

⁴ Reliability co-efficient alpha of 0.81



Figure 4: Employee perceptions of leaders towards flexible working



Flexible working use increased, particularly certain types

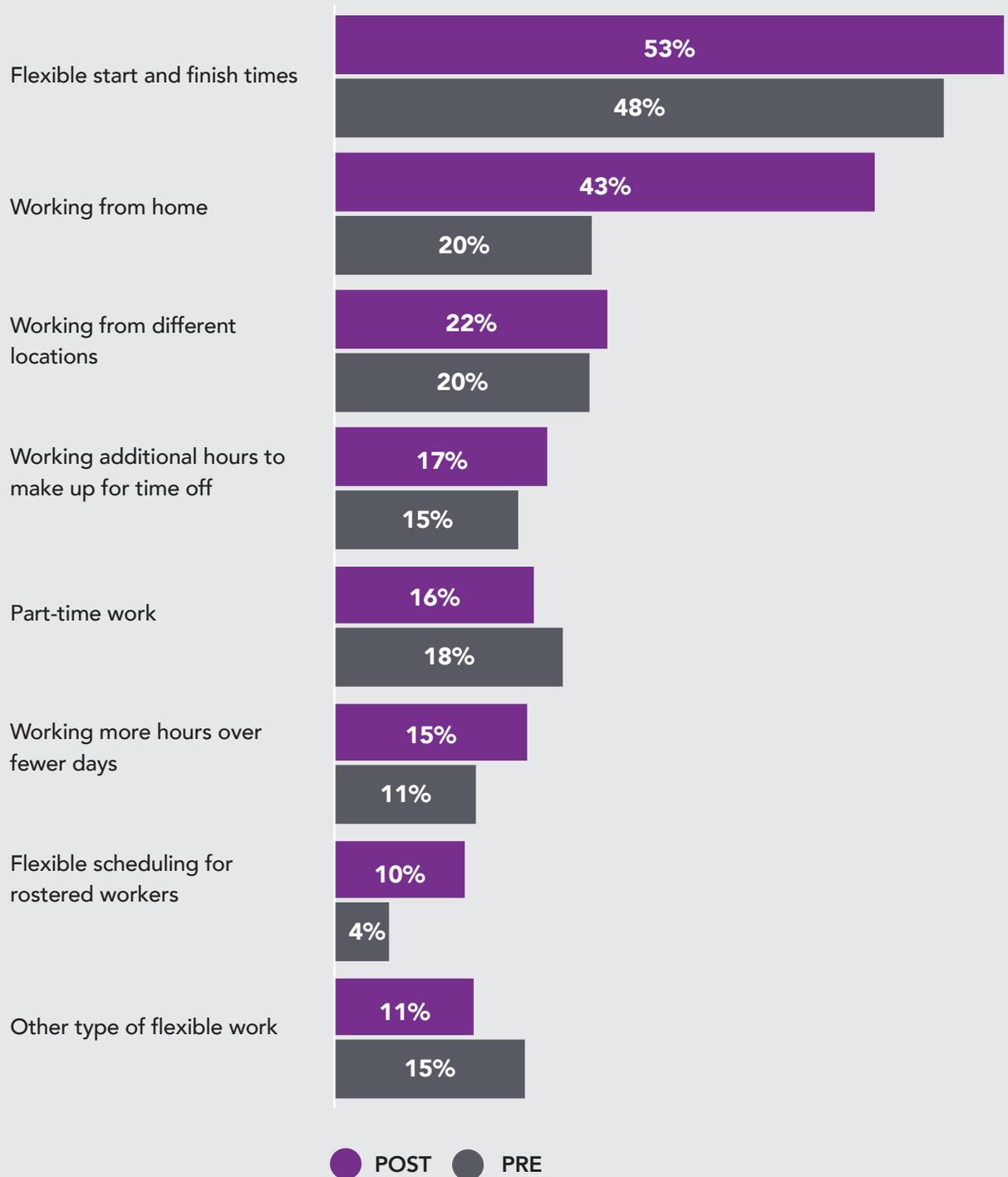
Participants were asked to indicate how often (Never, Occasionally, Regularly) they used 11 different flexible working options (drawn from those listed in the People Matter Employee Survey, familiar to all participants). The results, and the patterns of use split by group that is discussed following, provides insight for agencies on who uses what flexible working type, once access is democratised.

For most of the pilot groups, working from home and flexible start/finish times were also the easiest and most valid options to use for all survey respondents. Comparing average survey responses before and after implementation, there were statistically significant increases in 'working from home'. While a substantial number of employees were already working at home, this proportion doubled (20% pre to 43% post-survey) by pilot conclusion.

Additionally, there were some constraints in access to other types outside the pilot group's control; for example, access to other locations in the same agency and rostering.



Figure 5: Percentage of employees using given flexible working options regularly



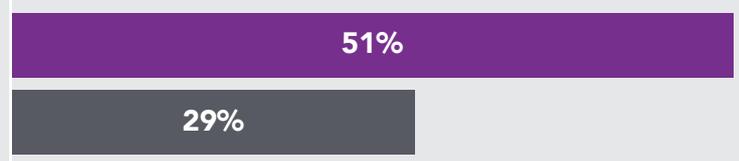
Our results confirmed this approach works

Employees were also asked about how much flexibility they had in terms of *where they do their work*. The proportion of employees who reported that they had “a great deal of flexibility” in this significantly increased from 29% pre-survey to 51% post-survey.



Figure 6: Flexibility in where work is done

How much flexibility do you have where you do your work?



● POST ● PRE

Virtually all employees used flexible working options, with only five employees in the pre-survey and six employees in the post-survey reporting they had never used any of the 11 options (acknowledging this could be their ideal as well). The proportion of employees overall who used at least one option did not alter significantly over the pilot.

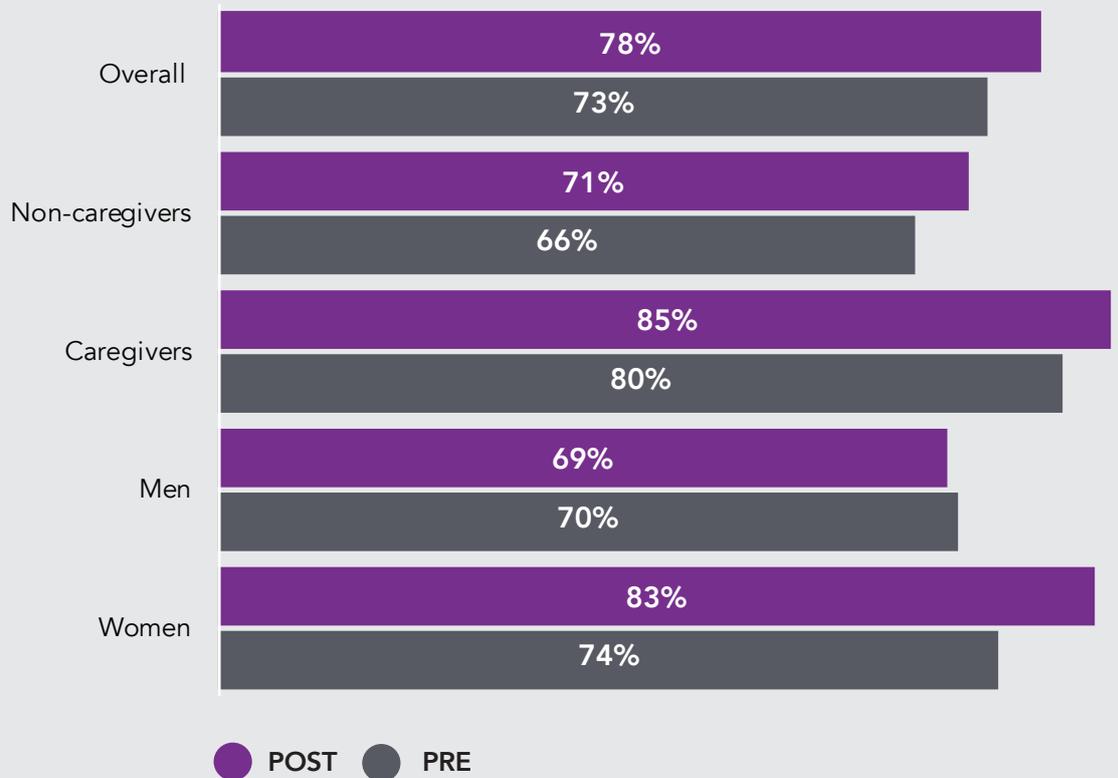
However, looking at it by different demographics, one group did experience a significant increase in regular use of flexible working over time – women. While there may be myriad reasons for this, we propose that the inclusive nature of the pilot, with everyone having access to flexible working and permission not being required, was a contributing factor.

Our results confirmed this approach works



Figure 7: Use of at least one flexible working type by demographic (%)

Demographic	Pre-pilot	Post-pilot
Women	74	83
Men	70	69
Caregivers	80	85
Non-caregivers	66	71
Overall	73	78



Our results confirmed this approach works

Further analysis showed other group differences sorted by different flexible working options.

The regular use of working from home changed significantly for some groups, with dramatic increases for women (compared to all other workers), non-managers (compared to managers), and caregivers. For agencies seeking to target their initiatives to their audience, this data provides insight into areas of potential unmet need.



Figure 8: Changing use of regular working from home

Demographic	Pre-pilot survey	Post-pilot survey
Women	18	48
All workers (excl women)	24	35
Non-managers	18	42
Managers	27	45
Caregivers	22	52
Non-caregivers	19	34

Women were also more likely than others to report perceived access to greater flexibility in where their work could be done (54% pre-survey vs 47% post-survey) as well as experience a greater increase in using flexibility in where their work could be done (18% pre-survey vs 30% post-survey). This was true also for caregivers, where 27% reported having a great deal of flexibility before and 53% after, and for non-caregivers: 31% pre-survey to 50% post-survey.

The post pilot survey indicated that there was a strong correlation between the regular use of flexible working options and positive perceptions of a quality flexible work experience (.57), higher than was found pre-survey (.34, although still significant). Post-survey, the correlation between regular flexible working use and positive perceptions of team support for flexible working was .19 (significant), while for the pre-survey it was not (at .06).

We also considered the combined use of informal flexible working options (flexible start/finish times, working more hours over fewer days, working more hours to make up for time off, flex scheduling for rostered workers, working from different locations, working from home).

Our results confirmed this approach works

The percentage (whether they used it occasionally or regularly) for informal flexible working options was 40% for pre and 53% for post-pilot – a significant increase.

Relationship between different demographics and the number of formal flexible working and informal flexible working options used were also examined. For the pre-survey, caregivers used significantly more formal flexible working options than non-caregivers, and women and managers used more informal flexible working options than others.

However, post-survey, caregivers used significantly more combined formal **and informal** flexible working options than non-caregivers, but women were using informal flexible working at a similar rate to those who did not identify as women. This suggests that caregivers and employees who did not identify as women felt more comfortable using informal options after the intervention - which is the right direction for making workplaces more inclusive, particularly to the men/father cohort who have historically not felt they could engage in flexible working.

Satisfaction with access and use of flexible working increased markedly

We also measured how satisfied employees were with their ability to access and use each of the 11 flexible working options. Satisfaction is important to measure, because while employees might not use all their options, the knowledge that they can if they need to provides an important sense of safety.

We found statistically significant improvement in satisfaction in all 11 flexible working options.

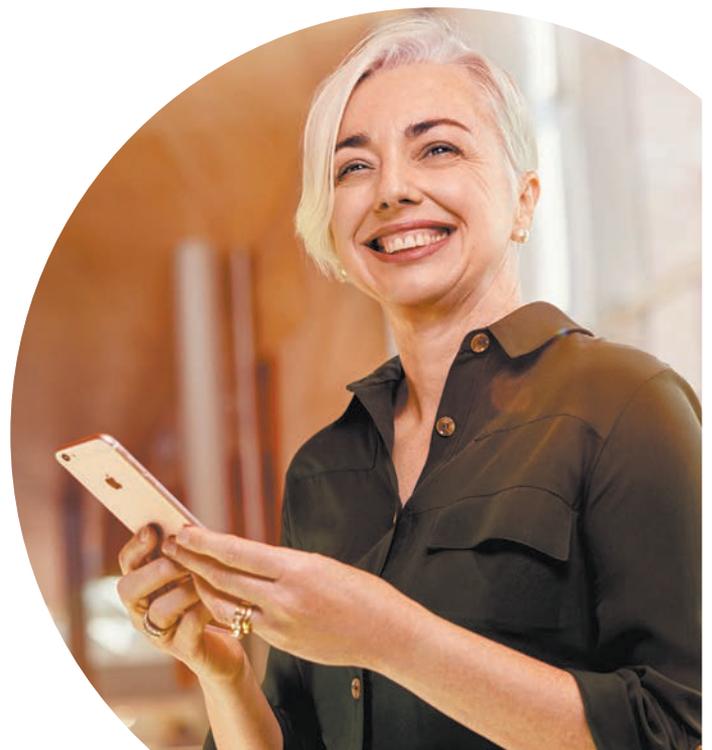
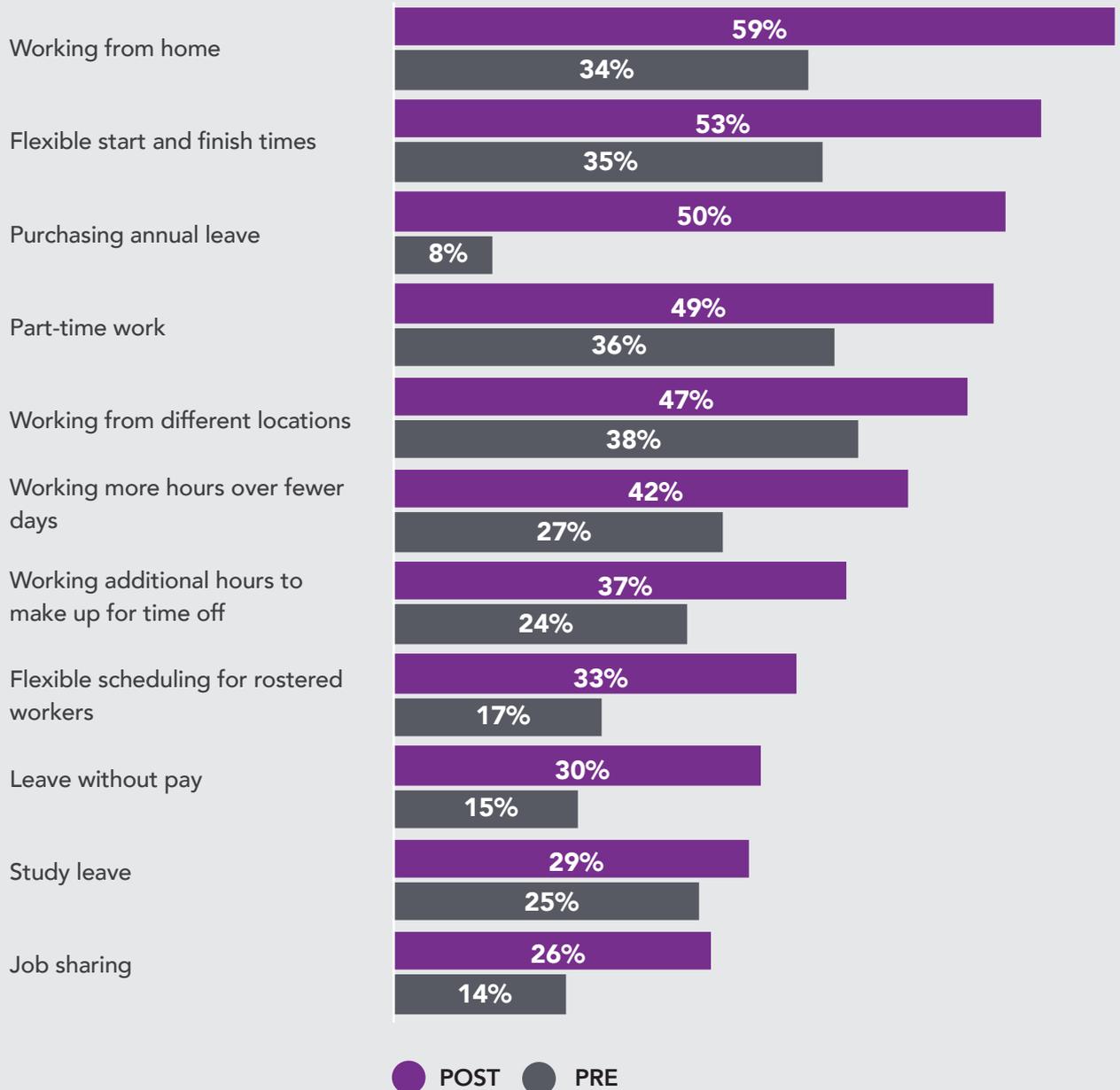




Figure 9: 'Very satisfied' perceptions people using flexible working, pre-to post-pilot (%)



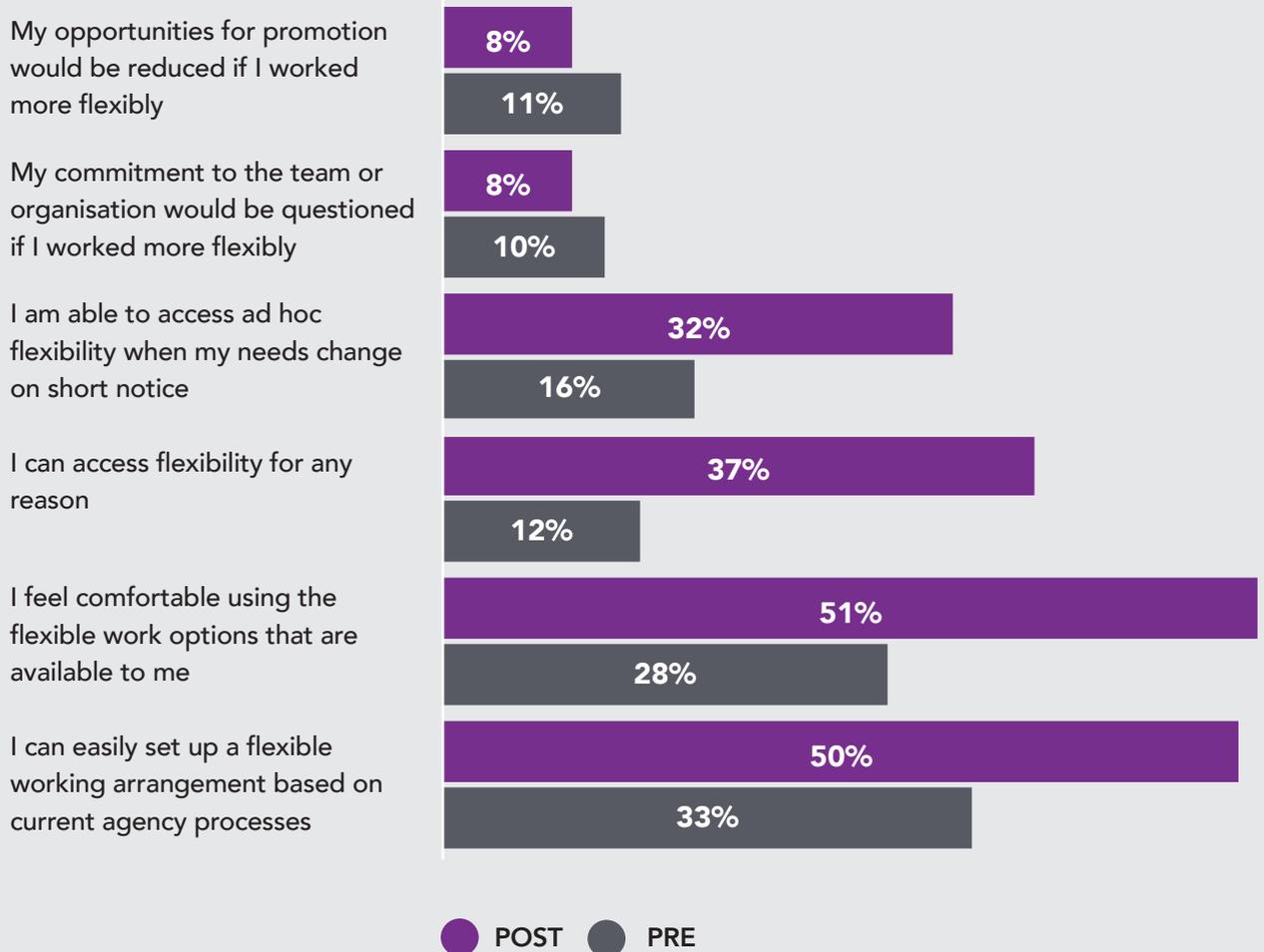
Note: the two most commonly used flexible working types also had the largest increases in very satisfied responses: working from home and flexible start and finish times. Since high satisfaction levels are probably the result of using these options, it suggests option use was quite positive, with few negative experiences. Looked at by demographic group, there were few differences.

The quality of flexible working experiences improved significantly

Participants were asked six questions about their perceptions of the quality of flexible working experiences. Statistically significant increases in the level of strong agreement were found for all of these questions.



Figure 10: Changes in scores for 'strongly agree' in quality of flexible working questions, pre- and post-pilot



Our results confirmed this approach works

Some group differences were evident, and are summarised in Figure 11 below. While most results are positive, caregivers are still more likely to perceive their promotion opportunities will be affected than non-caregivers. This could indicate that agencies may need to better demonstrate their support for this significant proportion of the workforce, in case caregivers self-censor applying for promotional opportunities. It may also explain why men are less likely to seek flexible working, indicating agencies may also need to target promotion towards this group.



Figure 11: Demographic differences in post-pilot flexible working experiences

	Comfortable using flexible options	Promotion opportunities would not be reduced	Flexible working is easy to set up	Can access flex for any reason
Women	86	73	84	81
All others (including men)	86	57	75	76
Managers	95	75	80	87
Non-managers	89	64	81	77
Caregivers	90	63	81	78
Non-caregivers	91	71	81	80

KEY ● >80% ● 60-79% ● <60%

Note: further analysis to see if there is any relationship between the flexible working type used and responses to these questions could prove interesting.

Combining these questions, a reliable scale⁵ was developed with these six items called the **Quality of Flex Experience Scale**. There was a significant improvement in the quality of the flexibility experience in the post-survey (from 22% pre to 43% post).⁶ When looking at variations in the quality of the experience with flexibility among different employee groups in the post-test, using all the items in the **Quality of Flex Experience Scale**, no significant differences were found between women and others, managers and others, and caregivers and others. This indicates the quality of flexibility was enhanced inclusively using these approaches.

⁵ Reliability co-efficient alpha of 0.81

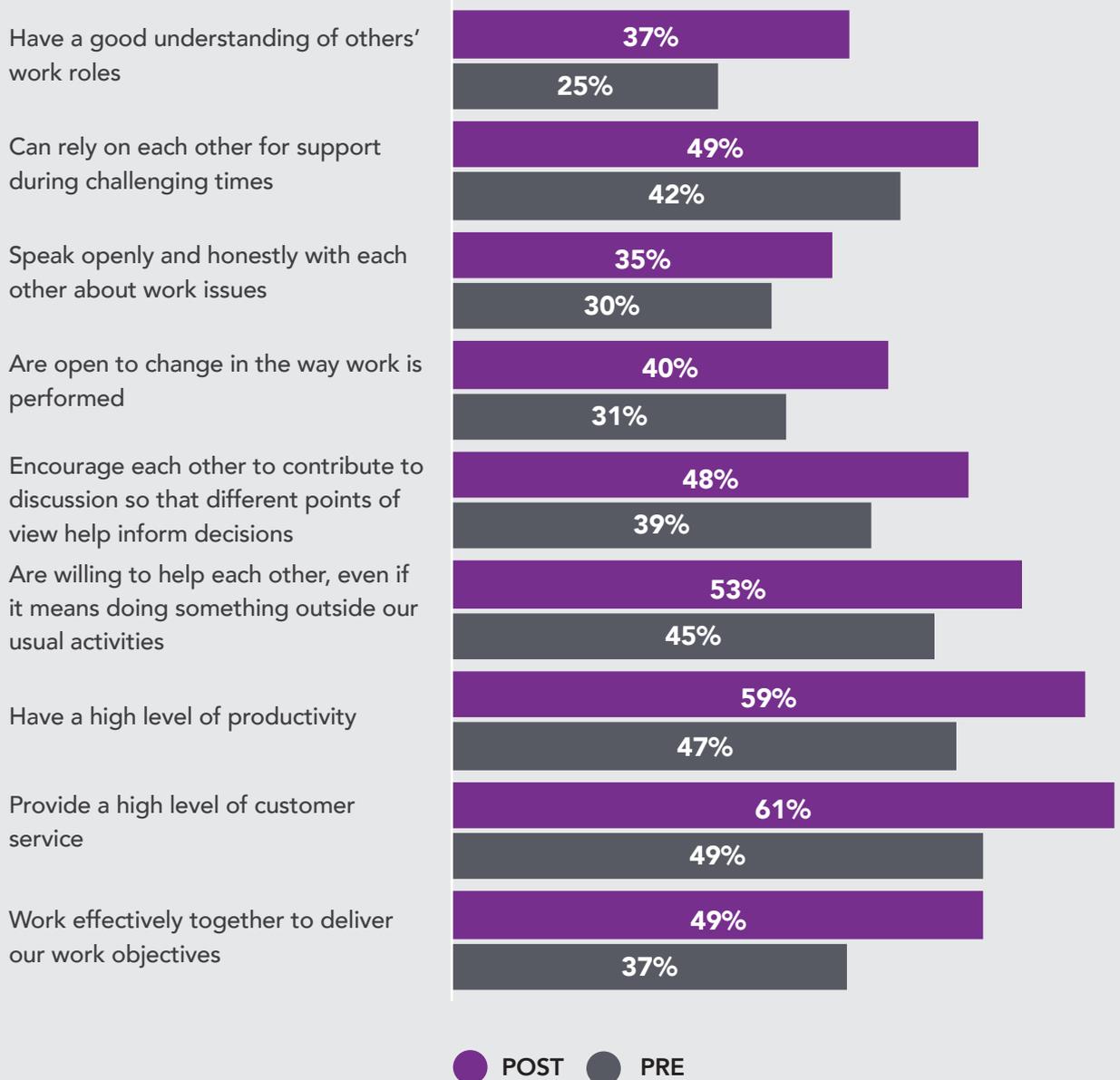
⁶ According to summary independent sample t-tests

Teams felt they worked together more effectively after the pilot

We asked employees nine questions on how well their teams worked together. All nine questions had statistically significant increases between pre- and post-pilot responses, with the following figure showing the increases in 'strongly agree'.



Figure 12: Team perceptions of working together (strongly agree)



Our results confirmed this approach works

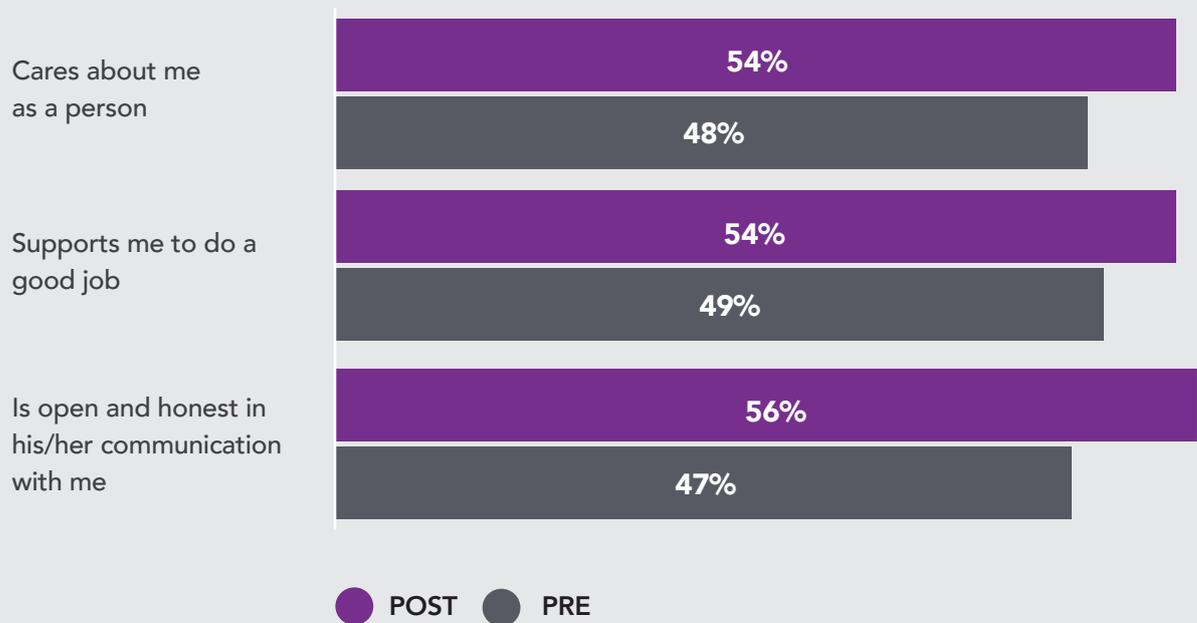
These nine questions combined formed a reliable scale,⁷ with post-test scores for the **Team Works Well Scale** significantly higher than for the pre-survey.⁸

Pre-survey, whether or not an employee regularly used a flexible working option did not significantly affect how well the team was perceived to work together. However, it did in the post-survey. This suggests that regular use of the flexible working option during the pilot had a positive impact on team functioning.

While there were increases in the three leadership support questions asked, they were not statistically significant.



Figure 13: Individual perceptions of leadership support for flexibility (strongly agree)



Individual attitudes towards work performance remained stable, while engagement showed an interesting trend

Employees were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how effective they felt in achieving their work goals.

The mean scores for both the pre-test and post-test groups were similar: 7.70 for the pre-test and 7.84 for the post-test – not a statistically significant difference. When pre-test and post-test groups were compared to see if using a flexible working option regularly had a significant impact on individuals' self-ratings, the result was the same.

⁷ Alpha for reliability coefficient was 0.94

⁸ (from 38% pre to 48% post)

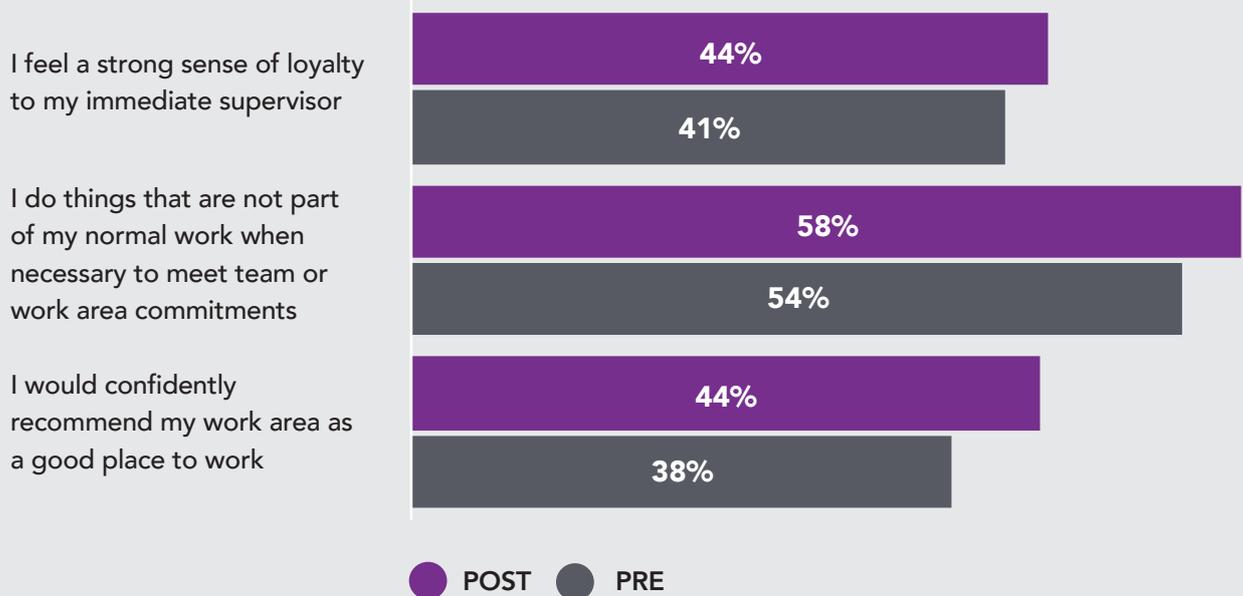
Our results confirmed this approach works

So while it appears that the flexibility initiative did not positively impact perceived work performance, it did not hurt either. This is important, as a deterioration in work performance is one of the central misgivings many have about using flexible working. These results correlate with much of the international evidence around measuring actual work performance and finding it largely stable.⁹

Employees' engagement with work was also not significantly affected by the flexible working initiative, as shown in Figure 14.



Figure 14: Employee engagement with work



These three items formed a reliable scale,¹⁰ and the pre- and post-test scores for this **Engagement Scale** were also not significantly different.

However, while employees' engagement levels did not increase over time, using at least one flexible working option regularly did have a significant impact on engagement. The pre-survey found no association of flexible working use with engagement, but the post-survey found significant associations with two engagement measures ('I would confidently recommend my work area as a good place to work' 38% pre, 45% post and 'I feel a strong sense of loyalty to my immediate supervisor' 39% pre, 47% post) and to the three-item Engagement Scale. We propose that the initiative made flexible working more acceptable, so that employees who used at least one flexible working option after the initiative were more engaged in their work.

⁹ See a survey of the international data by Lyonette, C, Baldauf, B. (2019): Family friendly working policies and practices: motivators, influences and impacts for employers, UK Government Equalities Office

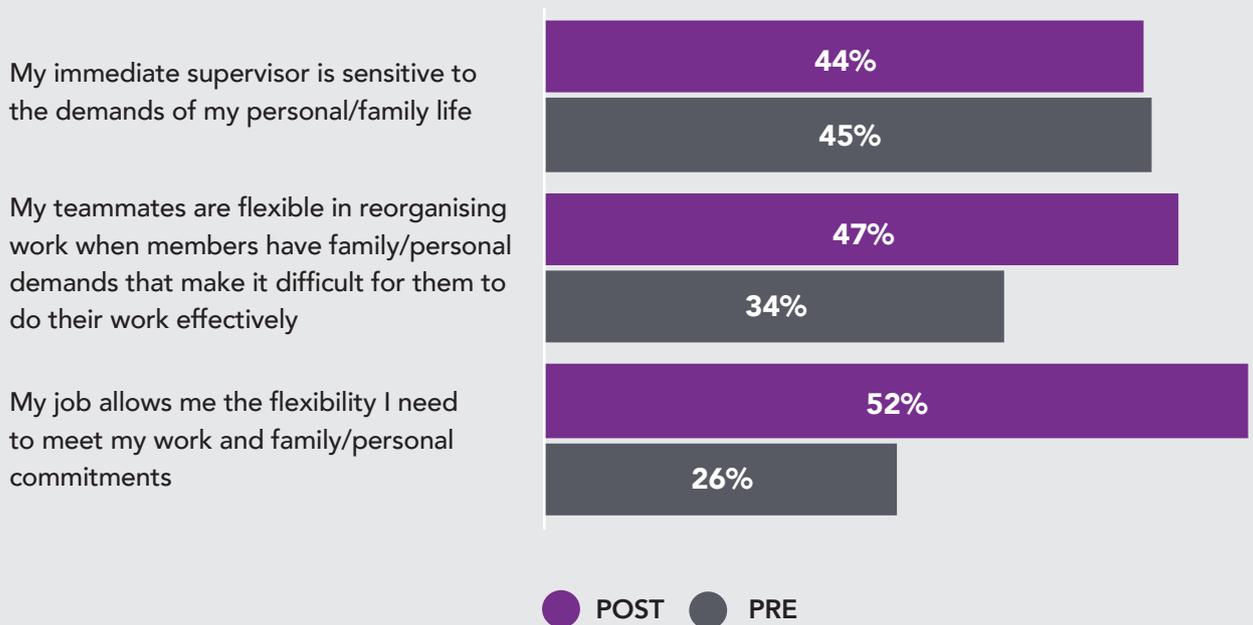
¹⁰ Reliability co-efficient alpha of .75

Individual perceptions of work-life balance significantly improved, particularly for women and managers. This was a common theme in the qualitative analysis too

Support for individual employee work-life balance was measured several ways in the survey, as shown in the changes in 'strongly agree' responses in Figure 15.



Figure 15: Individual perceptions of work-life balance, strongly agreed



The result for the third question doubled, a dramatic difference. While the supervisor question had the highest level of strong agreement, the increase was not significant, consistent with our hypothesis that supervisors are generally good at accommodating flexible working after a request, particularly for family reasons. However, the results overall show that about half of the employees in the post-test highly rate their jobs, teammates and supervisors for proactive support for their personal and family lives.

These three items formed a modestly reliable Personal Support Scale,¹¹ with a significant difference between pre- and post-test scores. This scale was used to determine which employee subgroups might require more personal/family life support.

This analysis showed that for both the pre and post-pilot surveys, women reported significantly more workplace support for personal/family life integration than other employees. Women's post-survey scores for this measure were also significantly greater than they were for the pre-survey, showing that women at the post-survey now experienced more support.

¹¹ Reliability co-efficient alpha was 0.68

Our results confirmed this approach works

Managers reported significantly more workplace support than non-managers at the post survey, which suggests that the intervention made this issue more salient for this group.

Caregivers, however, did not vary significantly in their reports of workplace support over-time, or in comparison to non-caregivers.

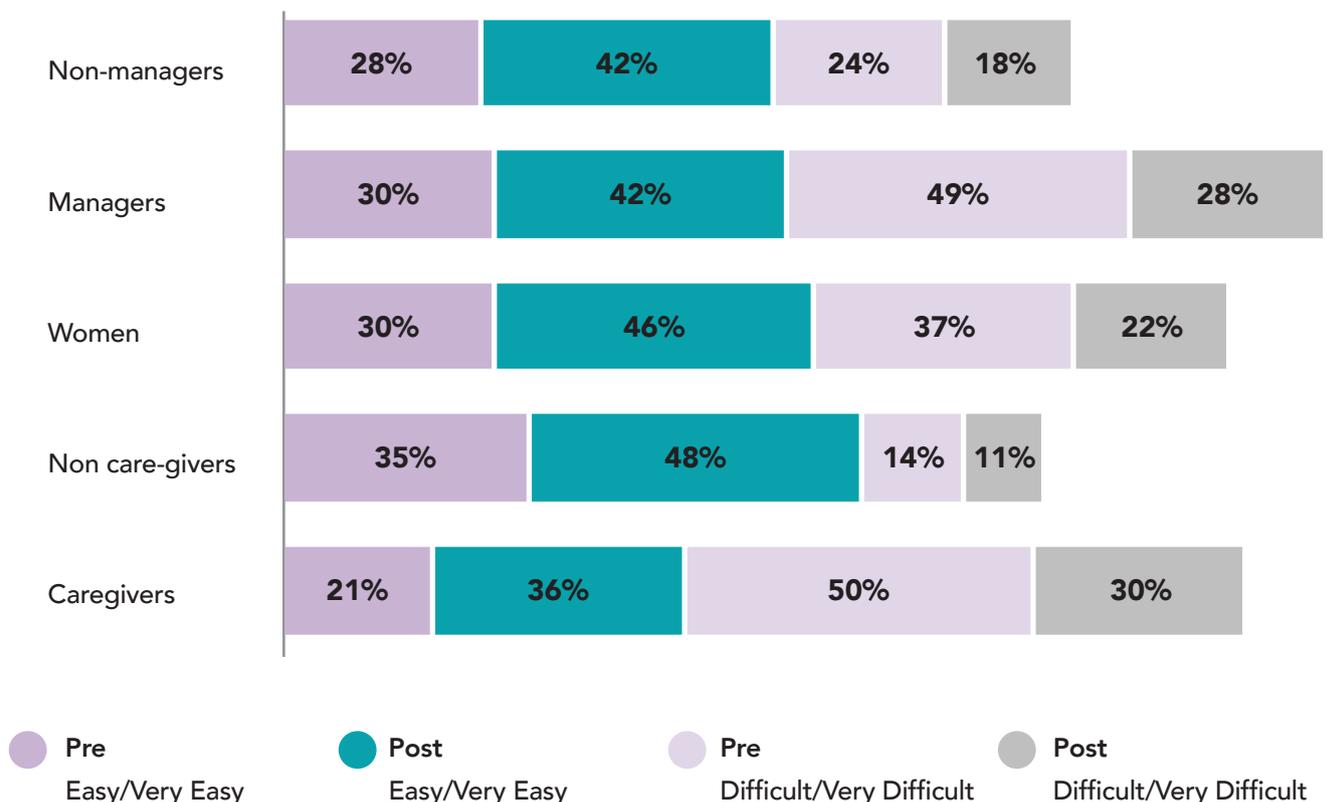
This shows the application that flexible working use can have for attracting and retaining women in key roles. However, this data, combined with the data on flexible working experiences discussed previously, indicate stronger agency messages of support may be required for caregivers.

Personal support scale scores were significantly higher for the employees who reported that they had used at least one flexible working option regularly both in the pre-survey and the post-survey. Among employees who reported regularly using a flexible working option at either time point, those in the post-survey were significantly more likely to have higher scores on the Personal Support Scale, compared to those in the pre-survey. This suggests that the intervention helped employees' feel supported in the area of personal/work family integration.

Employees were also asked how easy or difficult it was for them to manage the demands of their work and their personal/family life, as shown in Figure 16.



Figure 16: Managing demands of your work and personal/family life



Our results confirmed this approach works

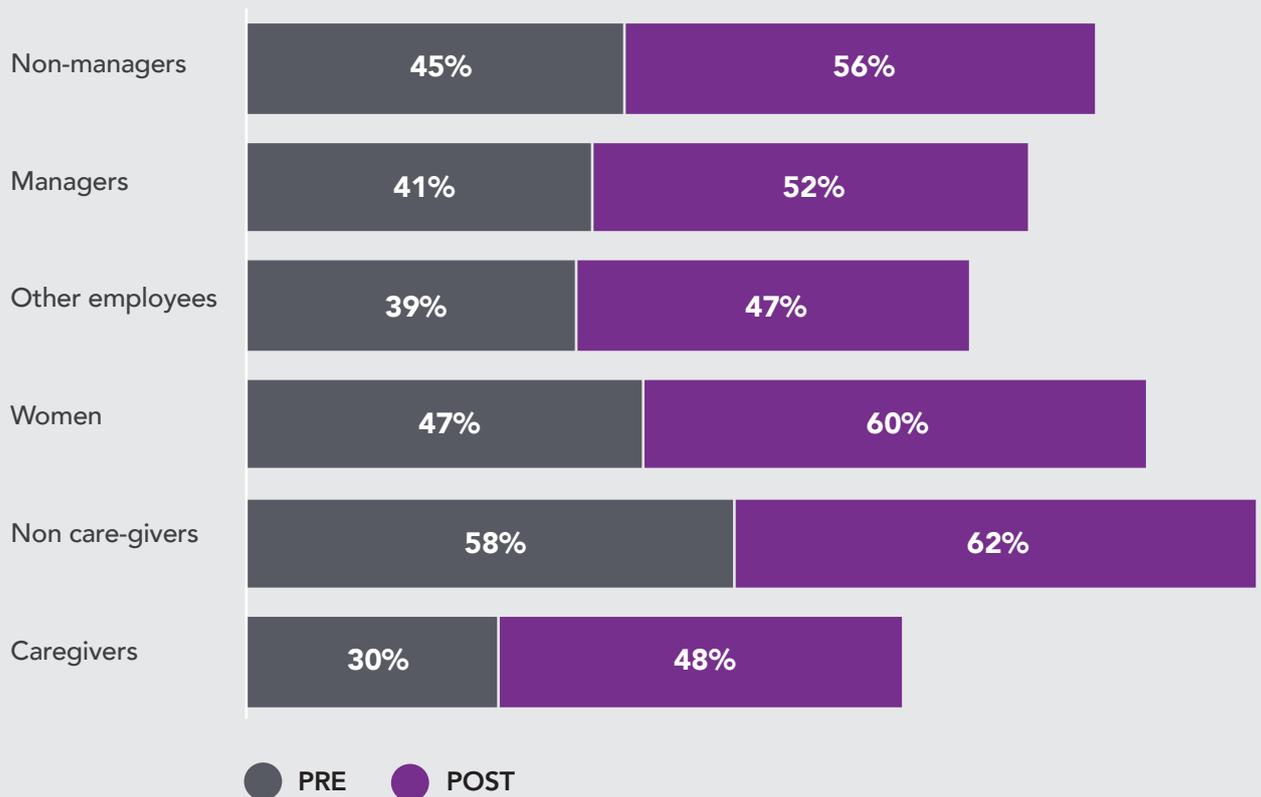
There were statistically significant differences for caregivers, but not women. While employee (non-manager) scores were much lower pre-survey, these improved post-survey.

Regular flexible working users reported a significant difference in their work-life balance, improving post-survey. This suggests that the pilots helped to make using flexible working more useful for reducing work-life conflict than before the initiative.

A third measure of work-life balance asked employees how often they had missed a significant personal/family obligation or event for work reasons, ranging from never/rarely to always, as shown following. The results are excellent for women and caregivers in particular.



Figure 17: Results for how often employees report missing significant life events for work (% never/rarely)



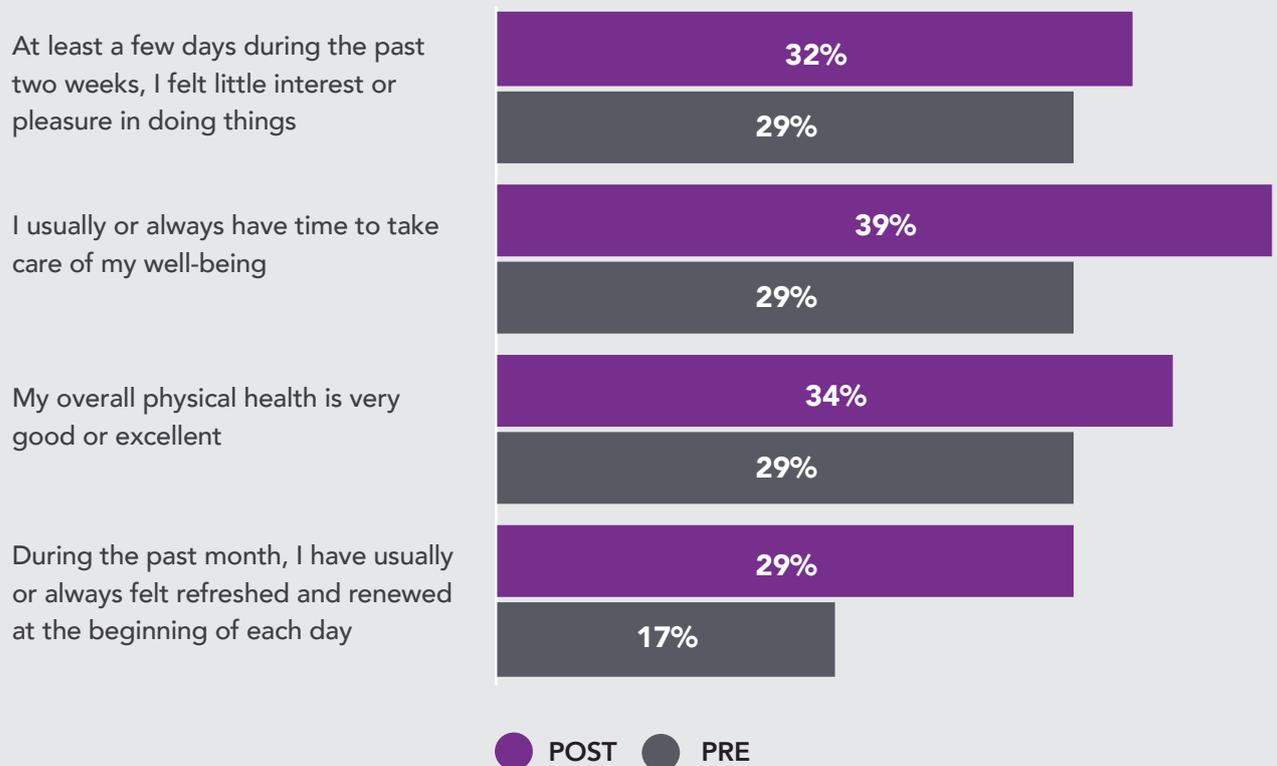
These results demonstrate the importance of flexibility for work-life balance, further supported by data showing that employees who regularly used a flexible working option missed significantly fewer events than employees who did not use a flexible working option in the post-pilot survey – a pattern not observed pre-pilot. This suggests that the pilot played some role in helping work flexibility have a bigger impact on individuals' personal and family lives than using a flexible working option did before the flexible working initiative.

Improved individual mental and physical well-being

Many NSW government agencies are developing a number of wellbeing initiatives, focused on supporting mental and physical health. We included four survey questions on this topic to test any links with flexibility. Three of the four post-test group responses showed significantly more wellbeing than the pre-test group, as shown following:



Figure 18: Individual mental and physical wellbeing (frequency scale)



A three-item reliable Wellbeing Scale was formed from the first three questions,¹² and also showed post-survey scores were significantly higher than pre-survey. Using this scale, analysis showed that caregivers reported significantly higher wellbeing scores at the post-survey than they had at the pre-survey, suggesting that the flexible working initiative had a particularly positive effect on their wellbeing. No differences were found for women or managers. Moreover, there was no significant association between personal wellbeing and using a flexible working option regularly at the pre-survey or the post-survey.

¹² Reliability coefficient alpha was .74

2.3 Business outcomes were either maintained or enhanced, and a culture of flexibility was created

Our findings are drawn from two qualitative sources, and despite the different approaches taken, are remarkably consistent:

- analyses of survey verbatims and workshops conducted with managers from four pilots: Grants, FACS HR, OEH and e-Health
- analyses of data from team-based evaluation workshops conducted in the other 10 pilot areas, including 41 sub-teams. These workshops had a combined participation of 236 people (of 400 in this pilot group total).

Business outcomes were either maintained or enhanced

We asked leaders and work teams at the initial design workshops to nominate the way we could qualitatively assess expected impact on the business, team and personal outcomes of the pilot. Then, during the post-pilot evaluation sessions, leaders and work teams were asked to evaluate whether these expected impacts occurred.

The overwhelming finding (from all 41 of the sub teams involved) was that business outcomes were either maintained or enhanced. None of the pilot groups concluded that business outcomes had been compromised or diminished – even though some teams had been disbanded or had experienced significant change due to NSW government machinery of government shifts during the pilot period. Enhanced business outcomes are shown in Figure 19.



Figure 19: Enhanced individual, team and organisational outcomes

Individual	Team	Organisational
Job effectiveness, productivity and client service (e.g., by having greater focus, fewer interruptions, being more organised and improved quality of thinking)	Improved problem-solving and team confidence	Less need to use sick leave
More engagement, communication and discussion about working and job responsibilities	Team members were opened up to change, resulting in efficiencies and streamlining	Improved prioritising workload and asking the team to help when needed
Work-life balance improved, personal stress was reduced (e.g., reduction in travel time), and a more relaxed approach to the workday	Team understanding/dynamics improved: increased consideration of each other	Increased agility in work
Increased time with children and families	Increased trust and reliability within teams	Enhanced learning and development

There were changes in how teams worked and who did the work

Pilot groups also reported an improvement in the way teams interacted with each other, particularly how they supported each other, stayed connected to each other and maintained an awareness of each other's priorities while working flexibly.

As many more people were accessing working from home and flexible hours, teams started using technology, such as MS Teams, to stay connected professionally and personally. They also reported improved planning, scheduling and prioritising work, a more supportive team culture and creativity in working together, and an overall improvement in team working relationships and morale.

Teams also considered who did the work, as consideration of this often opened up further opportunities in varying the where, when and how of work, showing how interdependent the types of flexible working can be.

Results show that a culture of flexibility was created

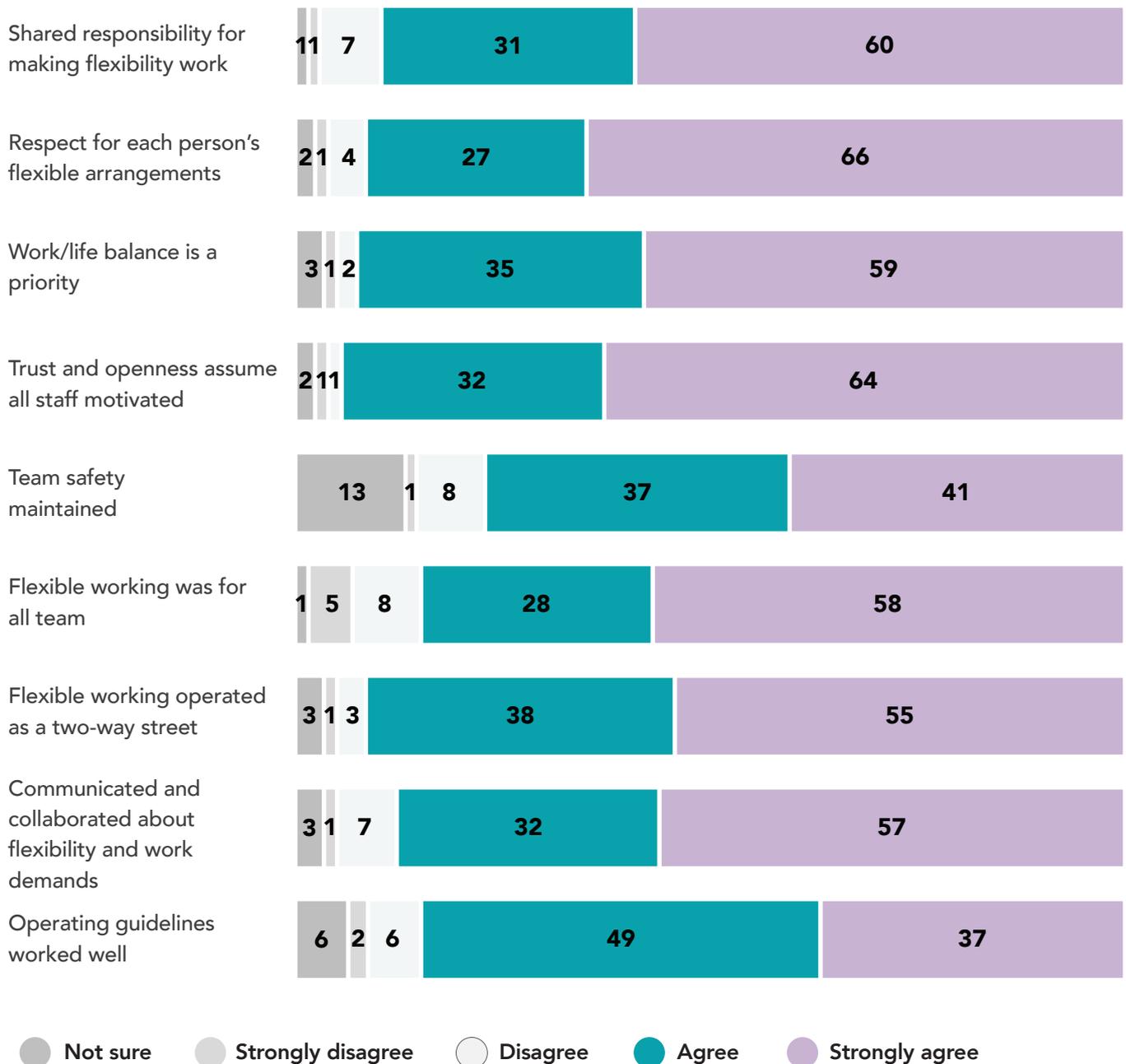
In the pre-pilot design workshops, we asked participants to agree the team-based work and flexibility guiding principles they would stick to during the pilot; like the 'rules of the road'.

In the team-based post-pilot workshops, participants were asked to assess their experiences of the pilot in terms of these principles. We have summarised findings from the 10 workshops in Figure 20.





Figure 20: Perceptions of culture of flexibility in team, post-pilot



Overall, perceptions of there being a culture of flexibility during the pilot were extremely positive with combined agree and strongly agree scores consistently over 85%. Given that building a culture of flexibility was a fundamental workplace change sought in the pilots, and key to the rationale for using this approach, this was rewarding data to observe.

3. Employees reported a positive pilot experience, while noting challenges

Participant experiences were very positive overall. There were challenges and dilemmas experienced in capability, technology and new ways of working.



Employees reported a positive pilot experience, while noting challenges

“Technology wasn’t strong enough to handle working from home. We can’t offer strong customer service if the phones keep dropping off.”

“It is often technology and availability of meeting rooms that let us down.”

“Senior management should be better role models. Managers/ team leaders need to trust their employees.”

“My immediate manager makes it difficult to request WFH and raises reasons why we need to be in the office.”

3.1 Technology and workplace processes have not kept pace with the way we work now

Notably, the challenges reported were rarely unique to flexible working; many could occur day-to-day, but the attempt to plan and arrange work differently in a focused way surfaced these challenges much faster.

Across the groups the main challenge was technology – mostly the reliability of technology when working in a location out of the office.

In some of the pilots, the interaction with activity-based working was also noted as affecting productivity. Availability of desks, as well as lost time and productivity due to desk set-up at the start of each day were reported as common issues.

Several groups also encountered challenges in being able to consistently embed day-to-day operating guidelines for flexibility, which may ease over time as processes become business as usual (e.g., in relation to employee location and availability, team meetings and team communication).

Survey verbatims also alluded to inconsistent leadership support for flexible working. Some experiences of flexible working were still very much leader-dependant, even where permission to engage in informal flexible working was part of the pilot’s design. Some leaders confused their staff by saying they supported flexibility, yet their actions apparently contradicted this. This made people reluctant to fully engage in the pilot without fear of repercussion. Notably, these were often the teams and individuals who wanted flexible working the most, as they perceived it as unsupported by their leader prior to the pilot.

Employees reported a positive pilot experience, while noting challenges

My team really worked and planned well to allow (flexible working) to happen.”

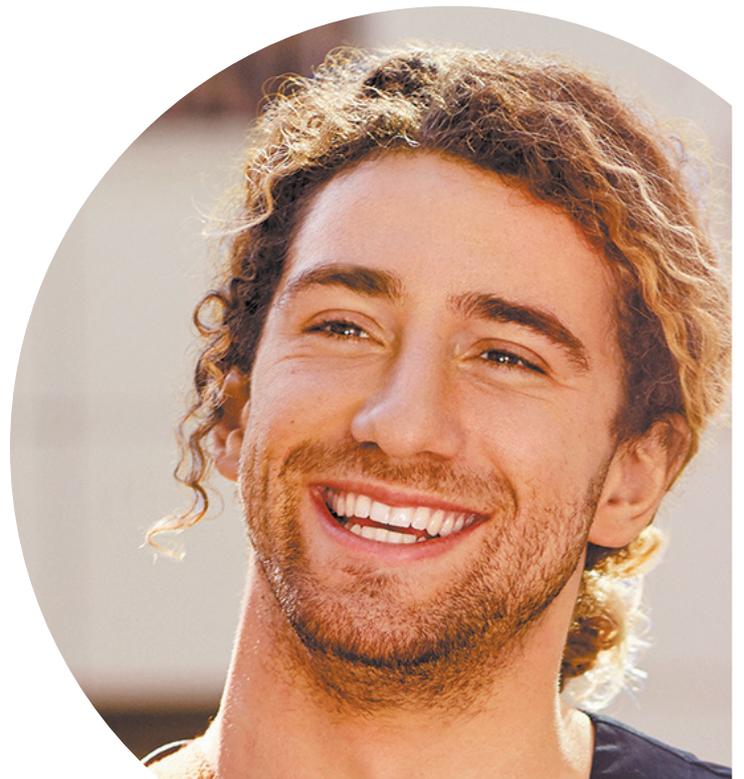
“Flexibility brings the best in a team environment, high productivity and general wellbeing.”

3.2 Overwhelmingly, the experience was positive in a time of great change

Participant experiences were very positive overall, despite some teams experiencing such significant change during this period it could reasonably have been expected to rattle their scores.

For example, one pilot group, which managed high volumes of ministerial work, had the NSW Government elections during the pilot, an incredibly busy time for them. Subsequently, their division was disbanded and the constituent teams sent off to different agencies while still in the pilot. This was a very busy and unsettling time – but it was felt that the group had managed higher than normal levels of work and significant change without incident, and that flexibility had enabled them to do this.

Another team within a larger pilot group was left without a leader for a significant portion of their pilot. However, as a team, they all stepped up to organise themselves and their work, making the most of the pilot and still maintaining high productivity.



Employees reported a positive pilot experience, while noting challenges

Flexible work has increased across our team with more staff working from other locations, particularly home, more often. People feel more comfortable asking to do so and are happier overall. Levels of productivity have increased (team members are more organised to carry out tasks based on their location and resources). Regular contact with practitioners continues to be a highly useful benefit which (via work in frontline offices) has assisted with the development of more appropriate policy/programming.

The opportunity for flex work has shown that staff in our team are more motivated and trusted by management. Staff feel less stressed by having shorter commutes and more time for personal and family matters, including caring roles.

Employees reported a positive pilot experience, while noting challenges

3.3 Employees reported that equity of access and leader support made all the difference

Participants reported that everyone having access to flexible working levelled the playing field. Across the board there was more comfort with using the flexible work options open to them without feeling judged.

Across all pilots, one of the biggest changes was whole teams having equal access to flexible working and removing the need to regularly ask for permission. This provided the autonomy to experiment with flexibility without having to ask or provide reasons. People who used remote working, particularly working from home, reported that the impact to their wellbeing had been incredibly positive, and having this autonomy to work in the best way for them also meant that they were more willing to make more discretionary effort.

"I have felt empowered to make balanced life decisions and feel that this has benefited both my work and home life."

"Work place flexibility has changed my life, it has given me the chance to be a parent and a full-time worker, I feel happy, refreshed, content at home and in my place of work."



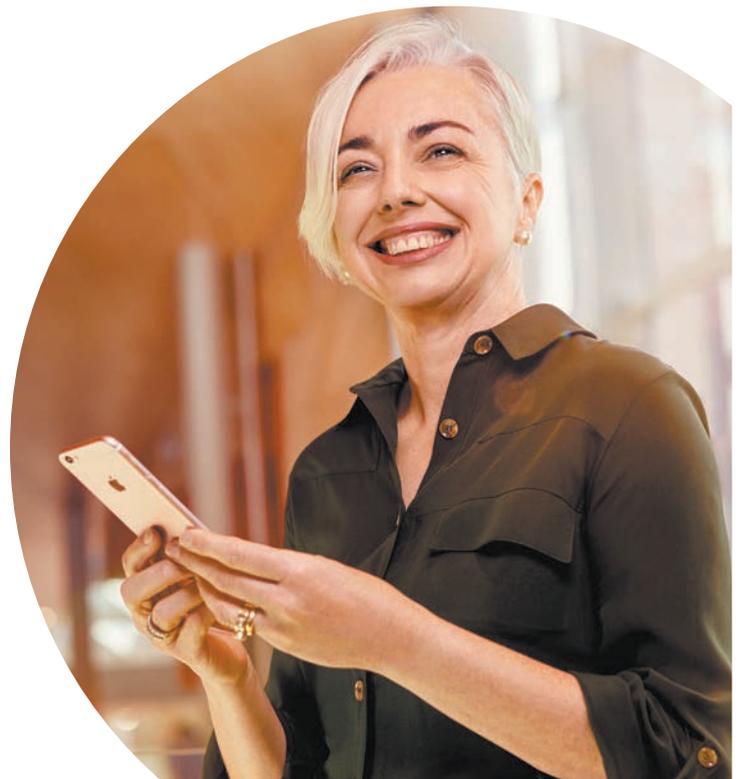
Employees reported a positive pilot experience, while noting challenges

“This is an excellent initiative, I think we need further leadership at all levels to address underlying ideas that a traditional 9-5 at a desk is the best way to work.”

“I feel safe that our managers trust our work output even if we work in a flexible set-up.”

Other factors reported as positive included having unambiguous executive, manager and team support for flexible working, as this mandate gave everyone the confidence to participate.

Managers reported that the pilot enabled them to use a strengths-based, trusting approach with their teams. The team-based approach focused on employee participation in developing each pilot’s guiding principles. By leveraging employee strengths and self-determination in this way, adherence was built to team goals, improving the pilots’ chance of success. By focusing on the opportunities rather than all the things that could go wrong, employees actively engaged in making it work for everyone.



4. The lessons learned apply beyond flexibility

In this section we review the lessons learned, what we observed about managing change in the NSW Government sector, and what we observed are the necessary precursors to a successful change initiative. What is interesting is how closely all three are linked.

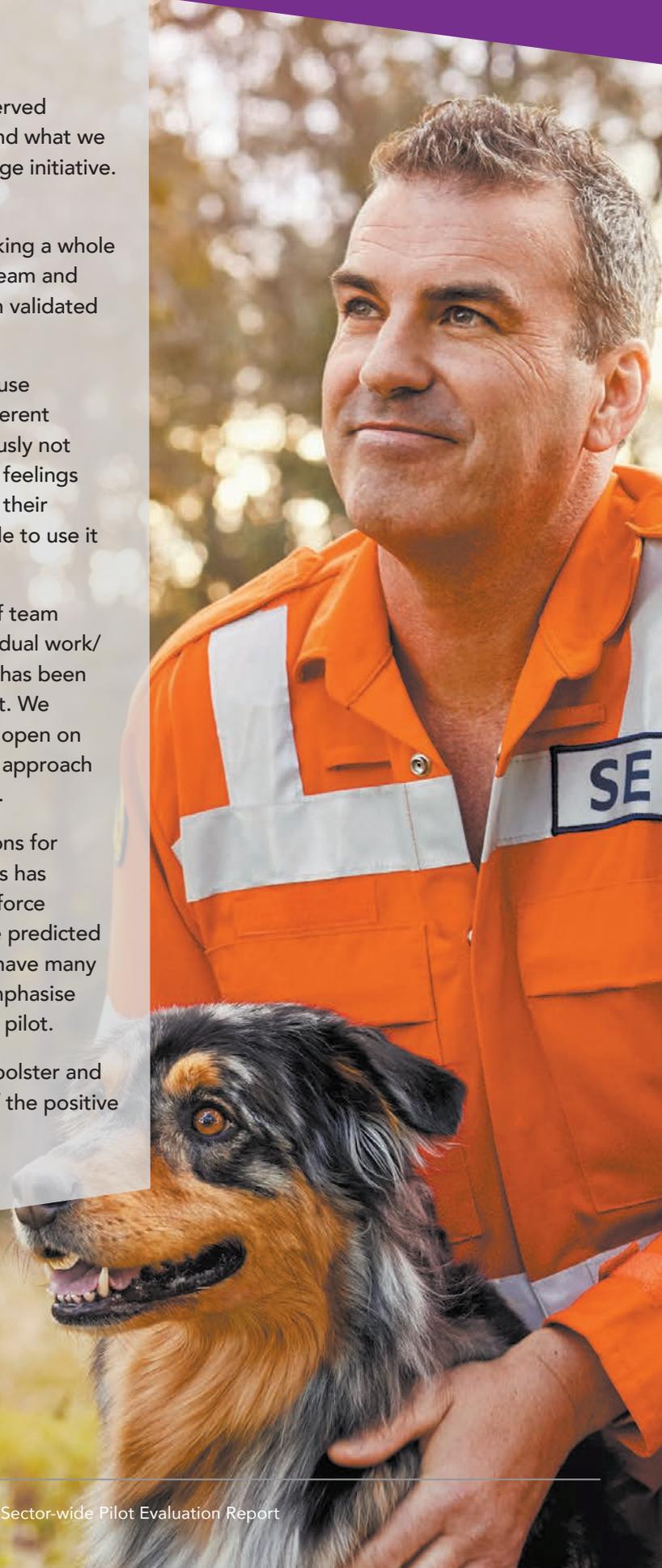
Our quantitative and qualitative data demonstrates that taking a whole team approach to flexibility produced an increase in both team and leader co-operation and support for flexible working, which validated the intent of the pilot.

This newly established culture produced an increase in the use of flexible working options (especially for working from different locations), experimenting with flexible work options previously not considered viable, a highly significant increase in employee feelings of satisfaction with their ability to use flexible working, and their perceptions of the quality of that experience (i.e., being able to use it for any reason, and feeling comfortable doing so).

There were also associated improvements in perceptions of team working relationships, productivity, customer service, individual work/life balance, and mental and physical wellbeing. While this has been a successful series of interventions, it is only a starting point. We recommend that groups continue to keep communications open on flexible working in order to support, evolve and refine this approach further, particularly should their work or workspace change.

Importantly, the pilot also confirmed the necessary conditions for introducing a successful cultural change initiative — and this has relevance beyond just flexible working to people and workforce change more broadly, given the anticipated cultural change predicted from automation and augmentation. Agencies will already have many initiatives underway to address some of these areas; we emphasise them here because their importance crystallised during the pilot.

Below are further considerations for NSW Government to bolster and support a team-based culture of flexible working, and all of the positive benefits it brings.



4.1 Review and adapt workplace systems and people processes to better match the way work is evolving

Across the pilot, employees reported barriers to flexible working arising from the processes currently used across the employment lifecycle; for example, job and work design, recruitment, onboarding, performance assessment, etc. Similarly, onboarding processes currently put the emphasis on an employee proactively requesting flexible working after recruitment, rather than being able to highlight flexible working needs at application stage and then embedding it through the entire employment lifecycle.

Employees reported lack of consistency and clarity in processes that affect their ability to use flexible working, for example, many agencies provide ambiguous advice regarding home ergonomic assessments, the apparent cost of which dissuades line managers from approving working from home requests. Other agencies have revised it to a simple form, consulting with their insurers. The different approaches to this and flexibility generally in the sector were reported by employees as discouraging their mobility, as they fear they may not be able to receive the same arrangements elsewhere. This links in turn to manager and leader capability in implementing and advocating for broader flexible working in their agencies.

4.2 Industrial arrangements can evolve to better support local adaptations and employee autonomy

Reviewing industrial arrangements was not in scope in this current project, and all pilots used current rules as part of their parameters – the emphasis instead was on building a culture of democratic, normalised use of flexible working.

However, all pilot groups reported the opportunity for improvement in industrial arrangements so they provide strong workforce protections that are aligned with workforce needs. An example of this was compressed hours, which some agencies cannot currently offer under their industrial arrangements. However, employees in similar roles in agencies where it is considered feasible experimented with this arrangement during several pilots, with successful results.

The lack of flexibility in some industrial arrangements also amplified the frustrations felt with the timesheet and payroll systems built to mirror them, with employees reporting limitations in time-based systems at the same time that they're moving towards outcomes or outputs-based work planning and execution.

4.3 Review and adapt IT systems to better support the modern workplace

Significant technology investments are hard to justify in times of tight budgets, but the productivity gains witnessed from having accessible systems, mobile workforces, remote access and lower office space costs can justify this cost. Further growth in the types of flexibility available to employees will be constrained until more reliable technology and work practices are available, particularly in frontline (and occasionally rostered) environments. For example, employees reported a need for:

- more reliable remote access to files and systems when working elsewhere (even from other agency offices)
- the provision of reliable hardware that facilitates working in different locations (laptops, soft phones, headsets, additional screens)
- workplace technology that better supports collaboration (e.g. reliable online videoconferencing).



4.4 Leadership support and role modelling during change initiatives

Participants regularly reported on the benefit of leaders providing unambiguous direction and active support when new things are being trialled. When leaders frame new initiatives as a positive change, and allow for trial and error, we observed it emboldens staff to try new things, and the productivity payoff was – anecdotally – higher.

This support is often best achieved when leaders are skilled at reflecting on their own personal biases and are prepared to challenge them. For example, one executive noted how personally challenging they expected to find it to rescind their ‘gatekeeping’ role at the start of a systems-based pilot, but also reflected at its conclusion how it had been easier than they’d first anticipated, and had the added bonus of revealing how much they could trust their team to do the right thing. This challenges leaders to move outside ‘tried and true’ leadership styles they may have developed over the years, and to also consider the way they design roles, recruit, provide performance feedback, conduct talent reviews and provide development career opportunities. This capability is particularly necessary in light of the sector’s diversity goals, and leader accountability for achieving them.

Some leaders in the pilot reported their own practices as progressive and supportive of flexible working, querying how much utility the pilot would offer. These same leaders expressed surprise at the pilot conclusion at how much their team’s culture had transformed by making access democratic and team-based, as team members had previously self-censored their flexibility, assuming it was only for those in ‘need’. Pilot parameters that made it clear it was for anyone, for any reason, combined with clear leader advocacy, made them feel they could ask, and use increased significantly. This shows how much the methodology has to offer in transforming a culture a leader may assume is fine, but in fact can improve even further.

Further, sharing these stories and case studies with each other was also valuable in encouraging other (non-pilot) leaders to consider change (leveraging peer dynamics).

It also proved useful for leaders to engage directly with the pilot participants (particularly their direct people manager reports) to share experiences and both improve and build resilience for future initiatives. This became particularly crucial once a pilot finished, as it was common to establish that HR policy or technology development had lagged the way the team wanted to (and theoretically could) effectively work. Employees reported that active advocacy from their leaders for the broader organisational change needed (via investment in technology capability and contemporary policy frameworks) meant they in turn felt it was worthwhile continuing to experiment as a team with new ways of working, rather than giving up because ‘change was too hard’.

Further work across the sector to build leader capability in managing for outcomes, supporting strengths-based approaches and advocating for necessary change will be rewarded by having teams with more change resilience.

4.5 Building manager capability to manage for performance outcomes and outputs, not time at desk

'Presenteeism' was keenly felt by pilot employees, whether intended or explicitly expressed by the line manager or not. It could be as simple as a manager assigning a new piece of work to someone because they happened to see them in the office, rather than the person working remotely who may be better suited.

This also becomes key when completing performance assessment activities – unintended bias can creep in if visibility is a criteria for assessment. Agile (or activity-based) working assists in challenging a culture of presenteeism, but participants reported that further instruction on how to manage for outcomes is needed for middle managers across the sector.

4.6 Managers need to intentionally ensure teams stay connected

During the pilots, we found that when connection was left to occur organically, it produced mixed results. Further, inconsistent approaches across teams in the same division produced confusion (for example, "we use tech, they use a whiteboard, how are we supposed to know how to find and contact them?").

The more dispersed a team becomes, we observed the more important it became to intentionally plan for cohesion.

From the team's perspective, this can be as simple as keeping connection as a standing item on team agendas, and then inviting the team to discuss and agree their preferred ways to keep feeling that they're a 'team', as well as keeping each other up-to-date on work developments.

From the manager's perspective, however, their entire people and team management style may need to evolve considerably. The PSC has produced a [Managing a Dispersed Team](#) guide that outlines the steps necessary in this transition.¹³

¹³ The PSC defines a dispersed team as one with inter-dependent work, and most members working in different locations 2.5 days per week or more. Evidence shows it is at this point managerial styles and team communication needs to shift to accommodate a new structure.

4.7 Using this approach drives significant cultural change and satisfaction even within the current constraints

When the pilot commenced, the prevailing culture of flexible working across the NSW Government sector was reactive. Permission-led, it would seek to accommodate individual requests (which were not discussed at a whole team level). The processes for requesting and considering flexible working were often onerous and rigid. We observed fixed, often inaccurate, biases about what flexibility meant in a given context and who it was open to with an emphasis (and thus anchor for individual biases) on flex time and flexible hours of work. In frontline environments, the bias was that flexible working meant working from home, and consequently most respondents believed that flexible working was not available to them, despite their industrial frameworks containing a number of provisions. The common theme in all teams was inflexibility in flexibility.

All of this culminated in a significant disconnect between current flexible working offerings versus actual needs, made more problematic by a rigid, rules-based approach to workforce management, and a changing workforce and ways of work.

However, teams participating in this pilot warmly embraced and adopted a different way of engaging with all aspects of flexible working: when, where, how and who. This demonstrates that there is clearly an appetite for changing the current approach.

Beginning the conversation with identifying the business, team and individual outcomes that need to be maintained or might be enhanced resulted in a powerful shift in manager and staff engagement in the experiment, and in mindsets and behaviours in relation to flexibility and work. Including individual staff in these conversations encouraged agency, responsibility and buy-in to the success of the approach.

Over time, significant changes occurred in the approaches of managers, particularly as they could see/experienced the level of team engagement and willingness of the team to focus on work outcomes and flexible working. Even managers who supported flexible working and felt their team was highly engaged, expressed surprise at how this methodology opened it up to employees they did not even know would like to use it.

This growing support in turn encouraged employees, which in turn led to increased reports of discretionary effort, improved team connection and perceptions of a culture of genuine two-way flexibility.

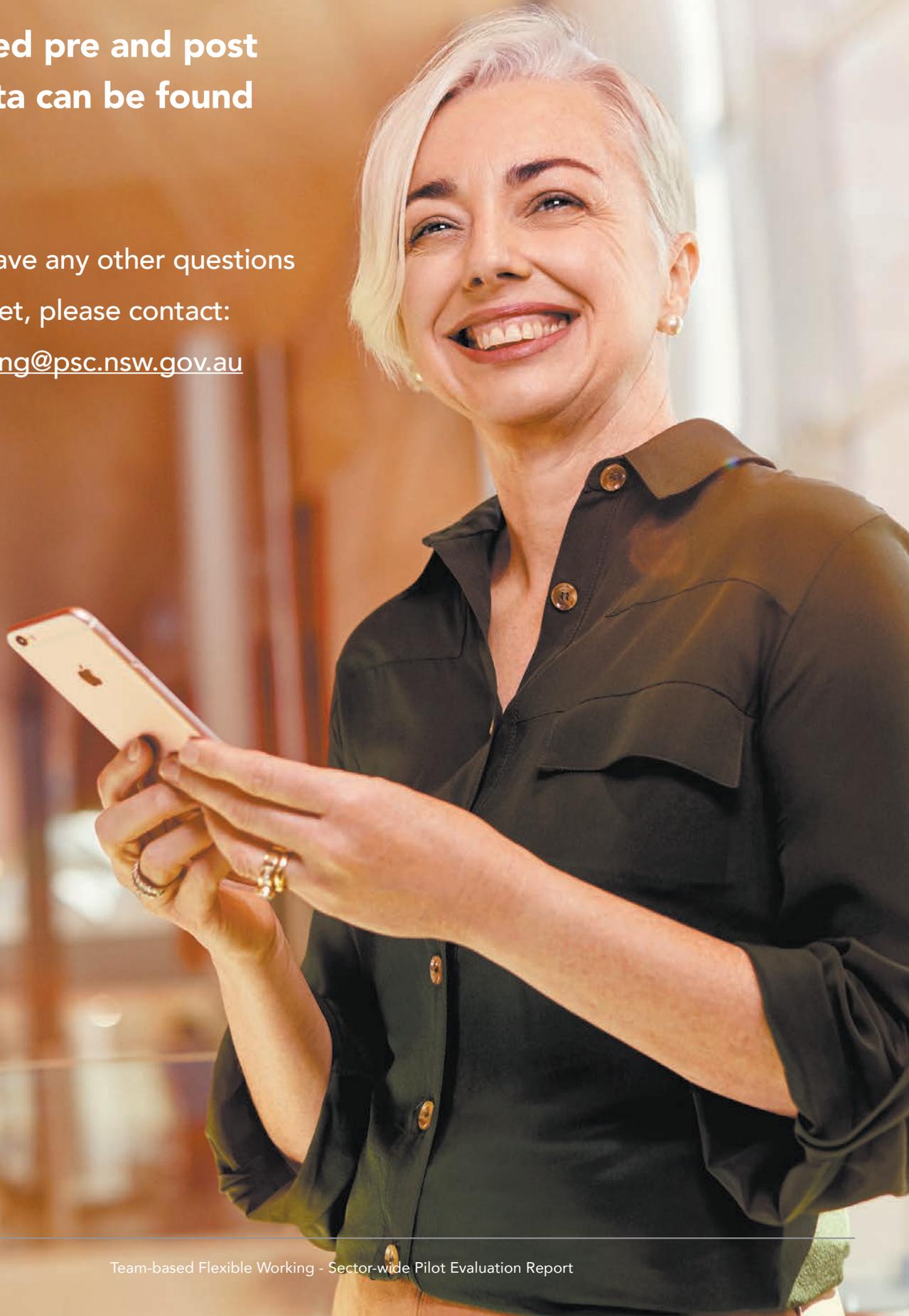
This pilot demonstrated that, even within the current constraints of technology and complex industrial instruments, a significant increase in use and satisfaction with flexible working can be established in environments considered 'hard' for flexible working; that is, frontline service delivery roles. It also demonstrated that new a new culture around ways of working can be established in a very short timeframe, unlike most cultural change experiences.

We encourage NSW government agencies to continue deploying these approaches, given the outcomes of this pilot prove them to be operationally safe, simple to use and highly effective in driving change.



Aggregated pre and post survey data can be found [here](#).

Should you have any other questions on this data set, please contact: flexible.working@psc.nsw.gov.au



For more information
visit the [PSC website](#).



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