**Flexible working in late careers**

Flexible working is becoming an increasingly popular amongst older workers. In the UK, 63% of people who are in work after the age of 65 are working on a non-standard basis which can be for example working less than a full-time basis or working only part of the year. Older workers may choose to work on flexible basis for a variety of reasons. For example, many older workers have caring responsibilities for grandchildren, elderly parents or even both (so-called sandwich carers). Others may want to reduce their working hours in advance of retirement so that they can phase out of full-time work.

**Flexible working** can also benefit employers. For example, many organisations use flexible working to make sure there they are sufficiently staffed during peak times, but not overstaffed when work demand is low. In the UK, all employees now have the right to request flexible working and employers need to give serious consideration to requests which are made. This does not mean that workers who request flexible working have the right to their first choice of working patterns. Normally, there is some discussion between the employee and manager to find a work pattern which suits the needs of both. However, most discussions which occur lead to a negotiated accommodation.

**Part-time working** is the most common form of flexible working amongst older workers. For many older workers, reducing working hours is a way to continue doing work which interests them while maintaining good work-life balance. However, part-time working might not suit everybody. Some older workers might need a change of work routine but not necessarily shorter hours. They might want to work part of the year for example so that they have time to travel. They may also be in work which is difficult to organise on a part-time basis like a management job. In addition to part-time working, many organisations offer other forms of flexible working, including:

* **Core working hours:** Allowing employees to adjust their working hours from week-to-week in order to suit their needs. Employees may be required to work during peak demand times (core working hours) but have flexibility outside of them.
* **Annualised hours:** Under this arrangement, employees have a total number of hours over a year with flexibility to adjust their working hours from week to week.
* **Snowbird leave:** Employees are employed on part-year contracts. For example, if an employee spends their winter in warmer climates, the employer may hold their job open for when they return home. Retailers often maintain these arrangements in order to retain seasonal staff (e.g. retired employees and university students)
* **Job sharing:** Two employees sharing a full-time role. Job sharing is a particularly effective way to enable staff who cannot work on a full-time basis to have access to work which cannot easily be carried out on a part-time basis. Employees who share a role normally develop a plan to divide work responsibilities and processes for handing over work between shifts.
* **Compressed hours:** Working the same number of hours, but fewer days a week
* **Staggered hours:** Changing work hours from week to week.
* **Portfolio working:** The worker works for more than one employer. This can be on a freelance basis, although not always so.
* **Locum work arrangements:** Especially used in the health sector, these arrangements bring retired health care professionals back to work on call to fill in for temporary vacancies.

**How can social dialogue help?**

Although flexible working is increasingly popular amongst older workers, many employers still consider such arrangements as suited only for people with childcare responsibilities. Although most requests for flexible working lead to an accommodation, older workers may be reluctant to ask for flexible working if they expect that they will be turned down. Social dialogue can help both in widening the availability of flexibility and ensuring that it is carried out in a way which is mindful of employees’ health and well-being. Ways in which social dialogue can help include:

* **Publicising the availability of flexible work arrangements**: Older employees might not always be aware of what options are open to them. If they are aware of the choices available and have examples of where they have worked in their organisations, it may be easier to envision how flexible working can work for them.
* **Trying new approaches to flexible working:** Managers are usually more open to considering flexible working when they can see that it has worked previously. Job sharing, for example, is difficult to envision especially in jobs which has a large amount of responsibility. Once a system is in place for managing workload, completing tasks and handing over duties for one job, it can be more easily replicated for others. Social partners can collaborate to pilot flexible work arrangements with different groups of workers, monitor the results and develop protocols for extending them more widely.
* **Promoting flexible working as a way to promote intergenerational solidarity:** Older and younger employees can work together on a job share basis such that the older worker phases out of a job in advance of retirement while mentoring the younger worker into the role.
* **Carrying out health and safety monitoring:** Although flexible working can be beneficial to older workers, working hour arrangements need to be set in a way which protects the health and well-being of staff. For example, compressed working hours can seem attractive to employees who like the idea of a three-day weekend. However, if long working hours lead to physical or mental stress, the arrangements are not sustainable.
* **Monitoring the well-being of older employees on flexible working:** Similarly, many flexible work arrangements, while seeming to give the older worker more choice in work can in fact lead to greater precariousness. Portfolio working, for example, may not be sustainable for a worker who has skills which have become out of date over time. Social partners can collaborate to ensure that older employees who are working on a flexible basis have access to training in order to keep their skills up to date.

**Questions to consider**

* What flexible arrangements are available in your organisation? Are there arrangements which could potentially be used but are not now?
* Are older employees aware that they can ask for flexible working?
* Are managers open to consider requests from older workers?
* Are some jobs considered ‘unsuitable’ for flexible working? Is that designation justified or is it that flexible working hasn’t been tried?