

Flexibility challenge

New research shows poor work-life balance is driving mid-career talent out of the industry. Philip Smith asks how this can be addressed

Every employer can do more to maintain a healthy work-life balance for staff, but Women in Property's new report, 'Building Balance', is an alarm call for those who want to hire and retain the best talent in the sector. According to its authors, the property and construction industry will never achieve its full potential or close the gender pay gap unless employers change their approach.

Of the people surveyed by Women in Property for its report, 86% of whom are female, half (50%) say they have considered leaving the industry due to work-life balance issues. Other signs of pressure are that 42% of respondents say they often work more than their contracted hours; and 68% of respondents have had to adjust their working hours to suit the childcare available.

Women in Property's report identifies many reasons for people leaving the industry and why women, in particular, are leaving in their thirties and forties. "As people progress through their career, they decide to start a family or have other commitments that take priority," the report states. "People take a career break or maternity or paternity leave. When they return, they juggle being the best they can at work with being the best parent they can – a position that is very difficult to achieve without burning out."

As an anonymous respondent to the survey highlights, childcare is a major factor, too. "Throughout my career as a surveyor, I would say that I have worked hard at ensuring childcare has not been an issue for my working day, working all hours to ensure the job is complete.

"I believe this has been above and beyond, in comparison to male counterparts. While the offers are getting better, there is still pressure on women to work harder at the same role to compensate for childcare, unless they have support from their partner and/or can financially afford full-time childcare."

All these factors can stop an employer building and retaining a diverse workforce, which will ultimately hit the bottom line. Consulting firm McKinsey says, in its December 2023 report 'Diversity Matters Even More', that firms with executive diversity in both gender and ethnicity are likely to outperform their peers by 9% in pre-tax earnings.

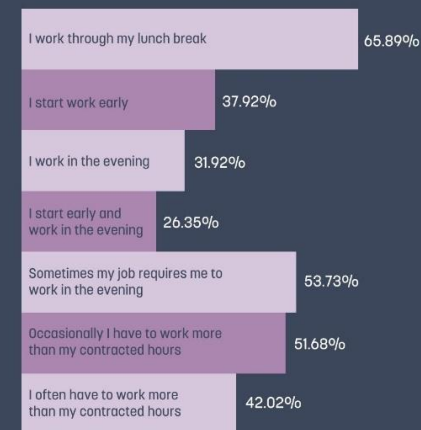
Flexible working

Recruitment and workplace experts are not surprised by Women in Property's key findings. Nicola Pease, lead consultant at Timewise, a social enterprise that champions flexible working through its research and consultancy work, says sectors such as education have a similar challenge and recommends employers in property look at flexible working in its broadest sense to improve the situation.

"Look at where, when and how much of work needs to take place," she says. "It's about autonomy and choice. People should feel they have control over their own lives and the ability to schedule work around their own appointments."

Clare Coe, co-founder of property recruitment specialist Madison Berkeley, fears that if the issue is not addressed properly, there will be even fewer senior females on her firm's candidate lists in the future. However, she adds that there is an understanding the built environment is a sector that requires long working hours in some cases

Work-life balance: working patterns



and a city office base, and that is unlikely to change.

She recommends: "The employer needs to show flexibility with empathy. It's not one size fits all. A set working-from-home policy doesn't suit everybody. Have more empathy; be more aware of individual needs. Parenting and family life is not always straightforward; sometimes life presents certain individuals with more challenges.

"Covid has shown you can have remote working and has proven that, for employers, you can have flexibility. It helps women – and men – to be flexible."

Vanessa Murray, co-founder of The Circle Partnership, a mentoring, development and networking organisation for the UK built environment sector, also stresses that flexibility is not just important to women. "The interesting thing is whether men at the same age and stage would have answered the same [as the women in the survey]," she says. "The world is changing; gender roles are changing. And flexible working benefits men as much as women, especially in construction."

Job-share roles

Creating job-share roles can be one way of addressing this. Lisa Tye and Kathryn Jump are both partners and joint heads of planning at legal firm Shoosmiths, dividing the role between them. The job-share has evolved, they say, and now they can be involved in different projects but share the business development and management aspects of the role. That was not always the case and they think there are many ways to make the arrangement work.

In their case, they think the ability to advocate for each other is helpful. "We are much bolder than if we were

Building Balance – further findings

Childcare

- 65% of respondents have had to consider whether they or their partner could return to work due to the cost and/or availability of childcare, with 40% listing the cost alone as a major factor
- 61% of respondents have children under the age of 18 and 98% of those require paid childcare services
- The average cost of childcare per month for one child potentially ranges from £908.77 to £1,144.30, which equates to between 36.6% and 45.8% of the average take-home salary of survey respondents

Wellbeing

Respondents were asked to rate how beneficial 11 suggested improvements would be for their general wellbeing. The top three were:

- Greater support from your employer to create working teams to allow for flexible or part-time working
- Wellbeing or self-care days in addition to annual leave to use when a child or family member is ill or childcare lets you down
- Flexible working to suit the childcare that is available

one person," says Jump, adding that the onus is on their employer to conduct appraisals and line management reports with them together.

Coe says big organisations such as British Land and Legal & General are getting it right, but it is the smaller firms that face a big challenge in creating the right environment for a diverse workforce to thrive. It can be done, she adds, citing the example of one "old-fashioned, male-led" smaller property firm that has changed, and boosted diversity and staff retention, by addressing its benefits package to include maternity and paternity leave, working-from-home policies and helping with childcare costs through government support.

Jennifer Winyard, Women in Property national chair and senior strategic land manager at Barratt Developments, says the report effectively issues a challenge to managers, who can control many of the factors affecting flexibility. "Take a look around you; think hard about your own team. How does it work for them? Could things be done differently? Even a few small changes can make a huge difference," she says.

Winyard asks managers to lead by example: "Log in the team diary that you're doing school drop-off or pick-up – don't hide it. Simple actions like this help normalise work-life balance and people will really appreciate it."

Women in Property South West branch committee member Helen James, an associate at JLL in Bristol, agrees the report is a challenge for the sector. "We want businesses to start the conversation internally; explore how they could make the changes that will positively impact their teams," she says. "It has to be over to them to develop ways of working that will benefit everyone – and we mean everyone." ■



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