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Quality part-time work: responses to the recession

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Executive summary

This report focuses on quality part-time work during the recession, using qualitative research methods, with a view to the identification of good practice for the future, and to assess the costs and benefits to employers of providing quality part-time work. In contrast to previous recessions, employers have been vigorously pursuing strategies to retain staff for as long as possible, in order to best position themselves for an economic up-turn. Introducing more flexible working and working reduced hours are examples of measures which can help reduce costs while maintaining staffing levels and minimising reductions. In-depth interviews were conducted with human resources (HR) and diversity representatives from a variety of organisations, focusing upon the impact of the recession and the potential longer-term provision of quality part-time work.

- The major benefits of introducing quality part-time work, identified by respondents, were: increased commitment and loyalty, diversity, retention and work satisfaction, reduced sickness and absenteeism. Major costs were: extra training and management and the need for effective communication between part-timers, colleagues and line managers.
- Organisations fared very differently during the recession, with some being seriously affected and others being hardly affected or not yet affected. Those affected by the recession adopted one or more of the following measures: downsizing (natural attrition, voluntary or mandatory redundancies); scaling down or freezing recruitment (including delayed recruitment or recruitment in service-critical areas only, internal recruitment only); pay reductions or pay freezes; redeployment of staff (from less busy to busier areas, secondments); promoting the message that requests for part-time work will be considered; reduced-hours working (short-time working in areas of the business hardest hit, additional annual leave); sabbaticals.
- Of the 18 organisations five introduced different forms of reduced-hours working as a result of the recession, two promoted the take-up of part-time work due to, or in anticipation of, public budget cuts, and two introduced flexible working policies to coincide with the recession.
- Where organisations introduced reduced-hours working in response to the recession, these varied in duration (4 to 9 months with some decisions still pending), leeway in how reduced hours were implemented (days off, shorter daily hours of work or more annual leave) and take-up where the measure was introduced on a voluntary basis.
- In the two education institutions which encouraged the take-up of part-time working as part of other cost-cutting measures, there was thought to be a slight increase in requests; the majority did not notice any change in requests for part-time working. Some thought that the recession may have acted as a deterrent to working part time, either due to financial pressures or because the person may perceive him or herself as being in a potentially vulnerable position (e.g. seen by others as less committed or not having enough to do). In others, requesting part-time working may have become more difficult due to higher work intensity for those still in employment.
- The following main themes were identified from the data, relating to the experiences of organisations in reduced hours working during the recession and what strategies are needed to support or increase quality part-time work:

- Process: Importance of management dialogue and training, in questioning/changing the mindset, and equipping managers with the skills to respond to part-time working requests and to successfully implement changes.
- Process: Examining implications for job design: requests for part-time working may require creative thinking around whether and how a request can best be accommodated.
- Process: Importance of trial periods in testing working arrangements.
- Process: HR representatives have a vital role to play in encouraging managers to think more creatively about current and future roles.
- Communication: Dissemination of best-known practice via case studies, particularly for managers with no prior experience of part-timers.
- Communication: Reduced working hours in client-facing roles. Some organisations have started to question the full-time working model for such roles, allowing trial periods where a business case could be made.
- Communication: Open communication to help increase take-up of part-time/short-time working during the recession: information clearly provided by the organisation sends out clear signals as to what adjustments are required.
- Communication: Demonstrating and selling the business case for increasing quality part-time work is crucial in getting commitment from senior management and line managers.
- Government: Policies and legislation play an important role in supporting quality part-time work.
- Example: Mainstreaming part-time/flexible work, e.g. in a bid to attract a more diverse workforce, one company introduced a new policy extending the right to request part-time work to all employees.
- Leadership: Clear signals from the top, e.g. one company began to mainstream flexible working after top management recognised its importance. Line managers also feel more empowered to act on policies if explicitly endorsed by the business leader.
- Opportunity: Organisations which have implemented reduced-hours measures during the recession might be more willing to consider requests for part-time working at more senior levels, especially if these experiences were positive for the business overall.
- Opportunity: The recession can act as a spur to increasing quality part-time work, if recognised by organisations as having the potential to cut costs. However, other organisational priorities and cost-cutting measures may block any new flexible working strategies.

I. Introduction

This report focuses on quality part-time work during the recession, using qualitative research methods, with a view to the identification of good practice for the future, and to assess the costs and benefits to employers of providing quality part-time work. In contrast to previous recessions, employers have been vigorously pursuing strategies to retain staff for as long as possible, in order to best position themselves for an economic up-turn. Introducing more flexible working and working reduced hours is one measure which can help reduce costs while maintaining staffing levels and minimising reductions. For those employees wishing to pursue quality part-time work in the longer term, the recession could therefore act as a facilitator in moving to reduced hours. On the other hand, those employees working reduced hours as part of an overall organisational strategy to reduce costs should, where a business case can be made, be allowed to move back to full-time hours if they wish to do so, as the economic situation begins to improve.

Drawing on the previous international literature, the working definition of quality part-time work focuses on four key areas (see Box 1).

Box 1: Proposed working definition of quality part-time work

At all levels of responsibility, quality part-time work:

1. provides the same (pro-rata) terms and conditions, development and progression opportunities as comparable full-time work;
2. enables the job-holder to maintain (or enhance) his or her skills;
3. enables the achievement of an acceptable work–life balance, meeting the needs of both employer and employee; and
4. where a business case can be made, jobs providing the opportunity to increase the number of hours to full-time work, if desired, at the same or a higher job level.

Ideally, quality part-time work should fulfil all criteria, but it is acknowledged that the working definition has an aspirational element, certainly with regard to the opportunity to reduce hours and increase them again at a later stage, as it is recognised that this will be dependent both on business needs and the current financial situation. In reality, there may be different types of part-time working edging towards the ideal, e.g.:

- ‘Retention’ jobs (Tilly, 1996) which clearly meet criterion 2, but may not meet criterion 1 fully, as the job may not provide the same progression opportunities as for full-time workers.
- Where people have voluntarily or involuntarily taken up a part-time job below their skill level, i.e. criterion 2 has not been met, but the job itself may well meet criterion 1.

Recent surveys provide an indication of the scope of flexible working in general (rather than part-time working in particular) during the recession. For example, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 2009) reported that, in a cross-sectional survey of employers, 45% of companies have introduced more flexible working during the recession (with a further 24% planning or considering it) and 17% have introduced short-time working (with a further 13% planning or considering it). A smaller survey conducted on behalf of *Personnel Today* (2009) reported that 34% used flexible working in order to reduce compulsory redundancies. Drawing on an employee survey, there are also indications that more private than public sector organisations introduced reduced hours (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2009). While private sector organisations are more likely to have felt the immediate impact of the economic downturn, public sector organisations are more likely to experience its impact later on as spending cuts start to bite. Large organisations may have adopted a more formal approach to flexible and part-time working, whereas small and medium-sized organisations may be more likely to be operating on an informal basis (see e.g. Maxwell et al., 2007, for Scottish organisations).

There are also press reports, e.g. *The Independent*, 17 June 2009, 'Struggling BA asks its 40,000 employees to work without pay', (and *The Independent*, 13 August, 2009, 'Barrister to barista: the rise of part-time Britain') about companies which introduced short-time working (e.g. manufacturing companies, such as Ford and JCB) or other forms of reduced hours working (e.g. British Airways, KPMG and PricewaterhouseCoopers), which effectively means part-time working on a voluntary or mandatory basis for a limited period. KPMG, for example, was reported to offer a range of new flexible working options since the beginning of 2009, initially until September 2010, driven by the need to reduce costs. Flexible working meant either a reduced working week (down from five to four days), or a two to twelve week sabbatical – or a combination of both. Most employees (with men and women in equal proportions) were reported to have signed up for either option, including around 40% for the combination, with 20% of KPMG's UK workforce already working the flexible hours for which they opted (Toonkel Marquez, 2010, drawing on research by Hewlett, 2009).

However, beyond a few details that emerged for some blue chip companies, little is yet known about the scope of these measures, how they have been implemented, how they have worked out in practice (e.g. in terms of take-up or costs and benefits) and whether they have a lasting impact beyond being a stop-gap in response to required cost-cutting.

Findings from the study presented here show that the experience of a limited period of reduced-hours working has led some employees to consider working reduced hours in future, although some resistance was reported towards accepting part-time work on a permanent basis, especially in some roles. Nevertheless, given the experience with reduced-hours working, in some cases there may be more scope for arguing the business case and having a trial period of work accepted. Those organisations which encouraged take-up of part-time work on a permanent basis reported small increases overall, with increased opportunities for all employees to request part-time work.

Quality part-time work was often achieved by a combination of several approaches, such as management dialogue and training; dissemination of best-known practice via case studies; looking at the implications for job design; importance of trial periods; policies and legislation; mainstreaming part-time/flexible work, allowing all employees to have regular conversations about required changes in working patterns; and clear signals from the top that part-time/flexible working is accepted.

For ease of reference, Box 2 contains a definition of the different working patterns adopted in this part of the report.

Box 2: Definition of different working patterns

- **Flexible working** comprises a wide range of forms with regard to the number of hours worked, when they are worked and at which location, such as part-time working, job share, term-time working, flexitime, staggered hours, shift swapping, self-rostering, time off in lieu, compressed working hours (e.g. working longer daily hours over 4 days per week), annual hours (workers' contracted hours are calculated over a year), v-time working (workers agree to reduce hours for a fixed period with a guarantee of full-time work when this period ends), zero-hours contracts (workers work only the hours that they are needed), remote working, leave for child or elder care, career breaks (e.g. unpaid sabbaticals).¹
- **Reduced-hours working:** part-time working, job share, term-time working, short-time working.
- **Part-time working:** workers are contracted to work fewer than the standard, basic, full-time hours; in practice, part-time work is generally defined in the UK as 30 hours per week or fewer.
- **Short-time working:** reduced-hours working for a set period, in response to a decline in demand for services or products, either by reducing hours on a weekly basis or working fewer days.

¹ For further details see, for example, www.businesslink.gov.uk

2. Research aims and methods

2.1 Aims

Against this background, the key aims of the study were threefold:

1. To explore quality part-time working during the recession.
2. To identify and assess practical lessons from the increased availability of part-time working during the recession, which could be adopted by businesses and organisations in the post-recession economy.
3. To assess the costs and benefits to employers of providing quality part-time work.

2.2 Methods

The scope of the study allowed the inclusion of two types of organisations: those which offered quality part-time work, irrespective of whether or not they increased the scope of reduced-hours work during the recession, and those which had implemented reduced-hours working on a voluntary or mandatory basis as a result of or during the recession, over the short or medium term. (For full details of the methods employed, see Annex A.1.)

The study initially aimed for a robust 'snapshot' of 15 organisations, although this was extended to 18 organisations which provided interview data, giving a total of 23 interviews in all.² The sample was designed to include public and private sector organisations, small and medium-sized (SMEs) and large organisations, and organisations with a low/medium and a high percentage of part-time workers (the average figure for the sector to which the organisation belonged was used as a proxy for the latter). These three criteria were chosen for the following reasons: public sector organisations are often thought to be in the vanguard of flexible or part-time working, and, as mentioned earlier, are more likely to feel the impact of the recession later than private sector organisations; larger organisations may also have adopted more formal approaches to flexible and part-time work than smaller organisations; the scope of part-time or flexible working is likely to shape the organisational culture and perhaps its propensity to consider further scope for such working patterns.

Since there is no ready-made database that would allow us to draw a sample of organisations which had introduced reduced hours during the recession and/or offered quality part-time work, we used a number of sources to target organisations:

- press reports, reports in weekly journals and web pages with information about organisations which had introduced reduced hours during the recession;
- organisations which were thought to be more committed to offering quality part-time work than others, e.g., *The Sunday Times* Best 100 organisations to work for; Working Families Awards and the Exemplar Employer Scheme (EES) launched by the government (it was agreed that we draw a maximum of two organisations from the latter source, due to potential bias);

² In some organisations more than 1 employee was interviewed.

- networking, drawing in intermediaries (e.g. a sector skills organisation and a trade union) or professional contacts; and
- a targeted search for additional organisations that fitted with the sampling frame.

The selected organisations were placed into the sampling frame which consisted of the three criteria mentioned above (size, public/private sector and percentage of part-time workers). For further detailed information, see Table A.1 in Annex A.1. The distribution of the organisations across the original sampling frame is as follows:

- five public sector organisations and 13 private companies (including one which is largely publicly funded);
- nine organisations with fewer than 20% of part-time workers (classed as low), 3 with between 20 and 39% of part-time workers (medium) and 6 with 40% or more of part-time workers (high);
- four SMEs (with fewer than 250 employees) and 14 large organisations;
- a range of occupational sectors (health and social work (3), education (2), public administration (2), manufacturing (3), real estate renting and business activities (7) and others (1)).

Fieldwork took place between October 2009 and the beginning of February 2010. Around 90 organisations were contacted between one and three times. Following the initial postal or email contact, a total of 23 telephone interviews with representatives of 17 organisations³ were conducted, and one written response was also received. The interviewees were human resources (HR) directors or managers, equality and diversity managers or staff who had diversity management in their portfolio, senior managers or managing directors in smaller firms. Where it was possible, interviews were conducted with more than one person per organisation to avoid bias and gain a broader picture of the issues. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide⁴ covering the following topics:

- background information: the establishment and its workforce;
- scope and nature of (quality) part-time work during the recession and the overall impact of the recession on the organisation;
- scope and nature of (quality) part-time work prior to the recession;
- how quality part-time work was implemented, what helped and what hindered;
- costs and benefits of quality part-time work;
- sustainability of quality part-time work.

³ Written comments from one organisation were also received, bringing the total to 18.

⁴ See Annex A.1 for example.

The interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes, were recorded where permission was granted (in most cases) and extensive notes were written up. The data were analysed using a statistical software package for qualitative data (NVivo).

Five organisations introduced different forms of reduced-hours working as a result of the recession, two promoted the uptake of part-time work due to, or in anticipation of, public budget cuts and two introduced flexible working policies coinciding with the recession. All 18 organisations self-assessed that they offered quality part-time work against a set of criteria, albeit only partly for some.

2.3 Limitations of the research

The study covers a range of organisations against set selection criteria and achieved a good spread across a range of sectors. It includes a greater number of large, private organisations with a low or medium percentage of part-time workers than originally targeted, yet these provide interesting examples with regard to the focus of the study. The study contains four organisations from the IT sector (computer manufacturer and computer services), whereas attempts to include organisations from other sectors (e.g. financial services) did not meet with success. However, the study was designed to be robust, not representative. The study includes fewer organisations which introduced reduced-hours working in response to the recession than targeted through the sampling method, possibly because these organisations were going through a period of intense change.

'Triangulation' of data through interviews with an HR representative and a diversity manager was not always possible. In many cases, this was due to the fact that these roles were merged into one job. It was also difficult to access trade union representatives, with many organisations, especially in the private sector, having no official representative. Furthermore, the assessment of costs and benefits of quality part-time work is based on experience and anecdotal evidence rather than hard data, as supporting data were not available.

3. Scope and nature of part-time and quality part-time working

3.1 How do organisations recruit part-time workers?

In order to examine the range of measures implemented in response to the recession, and how these varied by organisation, we first set out to identify the recruitment of part-time workers and the scope of part-time (and specifically, quality part-time) work among those organisations covered. Where the percentage of part-time workers was very low (three organisations), part-time roles were created in response to demand from employees, vacancies were advertised as full-time and hours were not said to be negotiable during job interviews. This included one organisation which recruited either graduates straight from university or experts in specific fields. There was a similar pattern in other organisations with a low percentage of part-time workers, but there may be some (limited) scope for recruiting staff working reduced hours externally (e.g. some full-time jobs may be advertised as open to negotiation, or jobs with few hours, e.g. catering or administration, may be advertised externally).

Organisations with a high percentage of part-time workers, which included all five public sector organisations and one care organisation, all advertised part-time posts externally or designated posts as suitable for job-shares or reduced-hours work. Some organisations stressed the need to offer flexible working, including part-time working, to attract a large talent pool, because the company offers a service beyond nine to five (nursery) or because the company is looking for certain skills, regardless of whether the person could work full time or part time (legal firm).

Where data were provided, part-time jobs were said to be found ‘across the board’, covering a range of skill levels (e.g. lawyers, legal support and business support in a law firm; fundraising, administration, nurses, carers, cleaning, maintenance and HR in a charity; administration, HR manager, business analyst, people dealing with customers, marketing people and sales staff in an IT company). In others, part-time work was concentrated in one particular area but was also available elsewhere (e.g. largely in administration, but also examples in project management, IT or sales in an IT company). Some argued that part-time jobs were more difficult to establish in some areas (e.g. in customer-facing roles; roles where there is a need to be visible and present; jobs in a deal or transactional environment where continuity is required; or consultancy roles). A representative from a legal firm explained that “the area that we struggle most with is the level of commitment we expect from our partners and the ability to do that on a part-time basis”. Some interviewees stressed that they had few part-time jobs at management or partner level (e.g. professional services firms) although there was at least one job share in some organisations (e.g. in an education institution, a local authority, a nursery or an NHS hospital).

Part-time work patterns also varied, including staff working full time for two and a half to four days per week or a couple of hours each day, and included staff working up to 30 hours or slightly more per week, and term-time workers.

3.2 What is the scope of quality part-time work?

In a literature review undertaken as part of this project (see Lyonette, Baldauf and Behle, 2010), a working definition of quality part-time work was developed for all levels of responsibility and comprised four main criteria (see Box 1). All were read out to the interviewees to gauge the scope of quality part-time work within their organisations.

Criterion 1 – providing the same (pro-rata) terms and conditions, development and progression opportunities as comparable full-time work

All organisations reported that they provided the same (pro-rata) terms and conditions for part-time workers as for comparable full-time workers, and many organisations said that they provided the same development and progression opportunities and that this generally applied across the organisation. Some gave examples to expand upon their organisational practice. In a large IT company, there were cases where part-time workers received superior or top ratings in the internal performance system or had been promoted similar to full-time workers (although this should happen anyway, in practice, part-time employees are often overlooked or disadvantaged with regard to promotion; for more information, see the evidence review, Lyonette, Baldauf and Behle, 2010); the senior manager was also aware, however, that development and progression opportunities can be influenced by the manager of the group. An HR representative from another IT company asserted that, although they were quite open to accepting requests for part-time work for very senior positions, part-time work currently only occurred up to a certain management level. The senior manager of a local authority thought that part-time work was not “detrimental” to gaining access to training or promotion. However, while the organisation was “right there in giving people opportunities to work part-time”, the manager also felt that sometimes “there is still a stigma attached” to part-time work, discouraging some people from applying.

Some organisations thought that part-time work could affect career progression. The representative of another large IT company thought that the organisation had struggled with part-time workers being valued in the same way as full-time workers and being able to progress, an issue the company is currently trying to address. Another representative of this organisation asserted that the company is promoting the message that “going part-time does not mean that you are not in line for promotion or in line for salary increases”, but added that the company needs to change people’s perceptions that part-time work can affect their career. However, a representative from a large legal firm thought that part-time work can restrict a lawyer’s career development: experience (the number of years in post) counts “for a lot” when moving up the career ladder, and some careers can be “put on hold” if the part-time worker cannot commit to a demanding job in a front-line, transactional environment.

Criterion 2 – enabling the job-holder to maintain (or enhance) his or her skills

There was largely agreement with criterion 2, the ability to maintain or enhance his/her skills, with some qualifying comments. Some organisations explicitly stated that women returning from maternity leave come back to the same or a comparable job. For example, a representative from a professional

services organisation stressed that staff return because of the job quality: “The work that you do is of the same quality and at the same level. It’s just that you do them in less hours. A tough environment to be in and people come back because of the quality of the roles.” A representative of a large IT company could recall three female managers who returned to their jobs on a part-time basis after maternity leave, with additional support brought in to make this arrangement work. In another IT company, returning to the same or a comparable job did not happen throughout, and it was left to the initiative of women to find a job-share partner, if required. There was some acknowledgement from other organisations that during the recession, or when budget cuts start to kick in, it may be more difficult to return to the same job (due to restructuring or new leaner forms of management). In these instances, comparable jobs may have to be found in other parts of the organisation.

It was further acknowledged that it can be challenging to fit in training (e.g. part-time workers who work evenings or nights have to attend training sessions that run during the morning or afternoon).

Criterion 3 – enabling the achievement of an acceptable work–life balance, meeting the needs of both employer and employee

Those interviewed generally agreed that part-time work in the organisation enables the achievement of an acceptable work–life balance, meeting the needs of both employer and employee. This could be challenging if managers are not convinced of the benefits of part-time working, but can be achieved through trial phases of working, during which either or both parties may need to adjust working hours to make the arrangement work. Some stressed that an acceptable work–life balance strengthens the business case, as staff are happier and, as a result, more engaged and more likely to look at their continuing professional development, as outlined by a representative from an education institution.

Criterion 4 – where a business case can be made, jobs providing the opportunity to increase the number of hours to full-time work, if desired, at the same or a higher job level

Where a business case can be made, jobs providing the opportunity to increase the number of hours to full-time work, if desired, at the same or a higher job level was largely dependent on whether the departmental budget or the demand for work would allow for it. While the focus of this research is on increasing quality part-time work, employees should also be allowed the opportunity, where a business case can be made, to return to full-time work – or longer part-time hours – if they wish. In particular, those organisations with a low percentage of part-time workers would welcome their part-time workers back to full-time work “with open arms” if they wished to do so. Two organisations operating a ‘headcount funding’ system felt that it might be easier to accommodate the request because the budget was already available, but expenses might need to be approved at a higher level. In one local authority, staff were very clear that once they reduced their hours, there was no automatic right to increase hours again, but a request would be put in or opportunities could be sought elsewhere in the organisation. Some stressed that during the recession or periods of budget constraints, requests for increased hours would be met with more resistance.

Overall, the large majority of organisations agreed to the first three criteria as set out above and the fourth in principle, while a few agreed at least partly to one or more of the first three criteria and also to the fourth in principle. Overall, there was broad agreement among those interviewed with the elements of the working definition of quality part-time work. Asked how interviewees themselves would define quality part-time work, setting the working definition aside, this generally came down to being able to do the same job as a comparable full-time worker, without suffering any disadvantages in terms and conditions, quality of work and inclusion at work, as well as training, development and progression opportunities. For example:

- Quality part-time work is ‘an arrangement that works for the individual, for the team they are working in and the organisation’ and shows flexibility on the part of both the employee and the employer.
- Quality part-time work means working reduced hours but maintaining the pro-rata salary and benefits, without any detriments to status, opportunity to train, being promoted or being moved around the business.
- Quality part-time work is part-time work that isn’t ‘dumbed down’. It is about working part-time on quality work. It is about doing the same job, and also still feeling included and not being ‘out of sight, out of mind’.
- Success is achieved when part-time workers are able to rotate and progress within the organisation and are valued in exactly the same way as full-time workers.

4. The recession and quality part-time work

The interviews demonstrated that organisations fared very differently during the recession, with some being seriously affected and others being hardly affected or not yet affected. For example, one company had to lay off large numbers of staff through the recession, despite a period of short-time working. Others had avoided huge job losses by adopting a range of measures, including working reduced hours or redeployment into areas of the business which were still going strong (or even increasing) as a result of the recession. Some organisations went through a period of downsizing or restructuring prior to the recession to position themselves better in the market or to pre-empt forecasted reductions in demand for their services. As a result, they needed to take less, if any, remedial action during the recession. Other organisations began to implement cost-cutting measures prior to the recession, following budget cuts in the public sector or in an attempt to prepare themselves for anticipated cuts. One public sector organisation, not yet affected by the recession, expects to have to “tighten their belt” over the next couple of years, highlighting similarities with the two local authorities in the pilot programme (see Lyonette and Baldauf, 2010, in preparation).

Box 3: Responses to the recession

Organisations affected by the recession adopted one or more of the following measures:

- downsizing (natural attrition, voluntary redundancies, mandatory redundancies)
- scaling down recruitment or implementing a recruitment freeze (including delayed recruitment or recruitment in service-critical areas only, internal recruitment only)
- pay reductions or pay freezes
- redeployment of staff (from less busy areas to busier ones, secondments)
- promoting the message that requests for part-time working will be considered
- reduced-hours working (short-time working in areas of the business hardest hit by the recession, additional annual leave)
- sabbaticals (from a couple of months to two years)

Source: IER study funded by the GEO.

Some organisations explained that they wanted to prevent job losses as much as possible because of the detrimental effects on the organisation suffered as a consequence of the last recession. For example, a representative from a large IT company said:

“On reflection, we believe that that [making people redundant] wasn’t the right thing to do because as we came out of the recession, (a) we ended up hiring a lot of people again, and (b) we weren’t able to move quickly because we had to spend so long hiring people and we’d got rid of all of our recruitment team.”

The different kinds of reduced-hours measures taken during the recession were of particular interest. These include working reduced hours temporarily until the organisation decides that the business is picking up again (short-term working) and changing from full-time to part-time work over the longer term (either in response to organisational measures or because the person felt (s)he could make a better business case during the recession).

4.1 Reduced-hours working for a set period of time (short-time working)

Some organisations in our snapshot introduced different forms of short-time working for a limited period of time, with reductions ranging from 4 hours per week to 9 days in a fortnight; and 18 days' additional annual leave (resulting in either effectively part-time working if spread out over a period of time, or longer overall leave). In these cases, short-time working was introduced for a limited period (between four and nine months). The period may have been agreed beforehand with the unions or was/will be reviewed at certain intervals and reversed when the demand for services or products increases. The measure was introduced across the board in some cases or only affected those parts of the workforce worst hit by decreasing demand. The decision to work short time was either taken following initial job losses or as part of a range of measures. A more detailed account of these measures is provided below (case studies 4.1 to 4.4).

Furthermore, a large nursery chain, operating throughout the country, reported that it had to introduce a combination of redundancies and reduced-hours measures, which included asking some staff to work on bank contracts (enabling the nursery to draw on a pool of bank staff on request to meet its staffing requirements) rather than permanent contracts. Other staff members were asked to change working patterns, such as working mornings rather than afternoons, when there was less demand for childcare. The extent to which these changes were required varied by region, with the north-east especially hard-hit. During an economic up-turn, bank staff members were always the first to be approached if a permanent job was to be advertised. In this case, reduced-hours working appears to have been combined with reduced employment security and, depending on the nature of the bank contract, possibly a reduced salary due to fewer working hours.

Case study 4.1: Working a 9-day fortnight in a design agency

The medium-sized design agency was faring well during the recession but had to resort to cost-cutting measures, as its new owner had come under financial pressure. After staff consultation, nearly all staff (99%) opted for the reduced-hours scheme in order to retain staff. As of March 2009, the entire company worked 9 days in a fortnight for a limited period of time. One department had put in substantial effort to manage the timetabling of the 9/14 arrangement. Some time after this timetable was implemented, it was decided that staff should instead reduce their daily hours by 45 minutes, which was met with negative feedback from this department. As of December 2009, everyone will revert back to their pre-recession hours.

Case study 4.2: Reduced hours working, internal and external secondments and 6-month sabbaticals in a law firm

Following a decline in activity in certain areas of the business, the law firm introduced a raft of measures in October 2008, including non-replacement of staff who left, secondment of some staff to busier teams (marrying up individual skills and job requirements) or external secondment to clients, six-month sabbaticals and reduced hours. These measures were communicated to all staff, with the managing partner giving monthly updates on how the business was doing and how the company was progressing in terms of the contingency plan. It was left to individuals to come forward, however. The teams which were much quieter took up some or all of the measures but take-up of reduced hours was “a bit patchy”, resulting in a slight increase overall in the percentage of part-time workers (from 20 to around 21%). In one of the teams hardest hit by the decline in activity, all team members decided that they would reduce their working hours by 20%, as headcount reductions were feared otherwise. Very few partners reduced their hours (2 out of 90) as their role is to generate income streams. The 6-month sabbaticals (with one or two months paid for by the company) tended to be more popular with business support staff or legal secretaries, and were taken up mostly by people with no dependants (they are now no longer available). Various requests have been made for shorter working hours or internal transfers since the measures were introduced. Some redundancies (1% of the workforce) still had to be made eight months later.

Case study 4.3: A 10% pay cut for 18 days' additional leave in a law firm

The law firm saw a decline in activities in some parts of the business and an increase in others due to the recession. In the first quarter of 2009 it made a total of 40 people redundant (about 6% of its former workforce) and 6 months later it introduced further cost-cutting measures without any further job losses. Nearly all staff (95%) accepted a 10% pay cut for an initial period of four months and took the 18 days' additional leave offered as part of the deal. Following agreement with line managers, there was some leeway as to how this was done, with some effectively working part-time (e.g. four days at work and one day off, or one day off per fortnight) while others took a period of extended leave. Some forfeited the extra leave, as the end of the year is a busy time for the company. The different working patterns were reported to have been difficult to manage. A few people took up the sabbatical option, for childcare reasons or because they wanted to work abroad. Overall, these measures were said to have "cut payroll costs significantly" without a noticeable reduction in the quality of work or the commitment of the workforce. Taking out the 'cushioning' that existed before meant that the team needed to pull together when other staff went off. However, jobs are now more flexible, people are learning new skills and there is more of a team atmosphere. As business was perceived to be picking up again, these cost-cutting measures may no longer prove to be necessary.

Case study 4.4: Reduced weekly hours from 39 to 34 hours on the shop floor of a manufacturing company

Within the last two years, a large manufacturer underwent many phases of voluntary and mandatory redundancies which affected all areas of the business, seeing the company lose around 60% of its former workforce. "We've laid off in chunks throughout, a big chunk of it through voluntary redundancies and early retirements," said the Human Resources (HR) Manager. "In order to keep as many people as possible for as long as possible," shop-floor employees worked short-term for a period of six months, following agreement with the unions. At the end of 2008, short-time work meant reducing weekly hours from 39 to 34 hours and forfeiting hundreds of pounds for overtime and shift patterns. This applied across the shop floor and in most areas of the business, apart from some areas which were still doing well, affecting around 2,000 employees. However, despite the temporary reduction in hours, the company has had to lose more staff (albeit fewer than earlier on) and is continuing to do so, following periodic reviews. Short-time working did not have a lasting impact on working patterns, as staff were keen to resume their normal hours to boost the family income.

Short-time working has given employees an often involuntary experience of what it is like to work reduced hours for a relatively short or even a longer period of time. There is some anecdotal evidence that a few employees were considering the idea of working reduced hours in future. A representative of a large legal firm thought that “some of the current part-time workers may stick with it and others may consider it”. He added: “I was talking to one of our male partners recently and he was seriously contemplating going to four-day working, just to pursue other interests really. I’ll be interested to see if he actually does it.” In another organisation, one member of staff, who was not granted a previous request to work part-time to spend more time with his children, now wants to re-apply on the grounds that he worked part-time successfully during the recession. Experiencing recession-induced part-time work may have also led organisations to think differently about requests for part-time working in the future. Another large legal firm argued that “there is now more appetite to consider it”. The experience during the recession can help HR teams to “open up the dialogue” with managers and argue for a trial period of part-time working.

Most teams were said to have accepted part-time work in the short term, but there was uncertainty about whether this would have a lasting effect. Implementing part-time work in client-facing roles was still perceived to be more difficult in comparison with other roles: some teams reportedly argued that the job could not be done in less than four days per week, and that even this should only be a short-term measure.

4.2 Promoting take-up of more permanent part-time work during the recession

As part of a range of measures to help drive down costs, two organisations tried to encourage staff to come forward if they wanted to work part-time. A university implemented voluntary phased retirement as one of several measures, in response to looming budget cuts, and this was said to have resulted in “some increase” in take-up. An education institution, which also had to reduce costs, encouraged part-time working among its staff members and 14 people took up the option in August 2009 for a 6-month trial period. It is not known what would have happened in the absence of this measure, but the HR manager could not recall such a high number of people changing their working hours in the past. In some cases, cost savings helped to convince the line manager of the business case for granting requests for reduced hours (for more details, see case study 4.5). Other organisations asserted that they had policies in place for part-time working and that requests for part-time work were a matter of choice for the individual concerned and would be considered on their merit.

Case study 4.5: Encouraging part-time work on a voluntary basis during the recession in an education institution

Background: In response to cost-saving measures as a result of an earlier review and reductions in training budgets, the organisation introduced a range of measures, including efficiency savings, a voluntary redundancy programme (affecting around 5% of its workforce at that time) and encouraging staff to consider the suitability of part-time work. The HR manager explained: “In actual fact we made a very close statement that as well as looking for volunteers for redundancy, if there were staff who wish to volunteer to reduce their hours because it fitted with their personal circumstances, we’d welcome them coming forward.”

Take-up: As a result of the internal communication, 14 people (13 women and one man) started to work part-time for a 6-month trial period for a variety of reasons, including childcare, semi-retirement or work–life balance. With the exception of one person who has already reverted back to full-time work, all are expected to continue with their new working patterns (March 2010). Ten had reduced their hours from 37 to between 25 and 30, typically for between 4 to 5 days per week, one reduced to 10 hours per week, and three maintained their reduced hours but moved on to working term-time only. The majority of the female staff who went part-time worked in a range of support roles (e.g. teaching assistant, reception desk, information systems) and four worked as lecturers.

Cost savings: Part-time working was not solely guaranteed on the basis of cost reductions but it had to be tangibly shown that some cost reductions would be achieved. In some cases, the line manager had to be convinced that “this person’s reduction does not result in another person’s increase in effort”. Overall, the organisation managed to save somewhere in the region of £50,000 to £60,000 on an annual basis as a result of this measure, but it did not systematically follow up whether this had implications for the job design or workload of other members of staff.

4.3 Policies on part-time and flexible working introduced during the recession

Other organisations (an IT company and a local authority) launched new flexible working policies which coincided with the recession period. As a result, there may be more requests for part-time working in future, particularly in one IT company, where the right to request part-time or flexible working was extended to all staff (for more information, see case study 5.3). Initially, this firm was unsure if it would be a good idea to promote the new flexible working policy during the recession. However, when it decided to go ahead, the HR team found the recession helpful in promoting flexible working internally to top management, as a way of saving money and maintaining staff. The policy, launched in October 2008, provides options for flexible working, including part-time work, but there is no pressure on take-up as a result of the recession. There are no figures as yet on outcomes, but it was noted that the policy had generated a lot of interest.

Another organisation, a local authority, is currently piloting four approaches to flexible working in response to pre-recession budget cuts: mobile working (which could include working from home), home-working (saving costs by releasing office space), flexible working and traditional, desk-based working. The new approaches allow reduced hours and more flexible working during the day (e.g. to pick up children from school and carry on working later), within a set flexitime window. The aim, according to a senior manager, is to give people the autonomy to work more flexibly around their needs, without necessarily having to seek part-time work. It is not clear whether the approach will increase the number of part-time workers, but the organisation may be more able to accommodate part-time working as a result. Increasing part-time working on its own was not considered as a viable strategy for reducing costs and meeting service needs. The project started in spring 2009 and will be fully evaluated before being rolled out across the local authority. It is interesting to note that in the longest-running pilot, 17 employees who are now working entirely from home have increased their hours from 18.5 hours to between 25 and 30 hours, as commuting is no longer necessary (other than for meetings and training), and there is a strong interest from others within the department to do likewise.

4.4 Requests for reduced working hours

The snapshot approach to the research has demonstrated three types of outcomes, as a result of measures undertaken:

- In those organisations (two) which encouraged the take-up of part-time working as part of other cost-cutting measures, there was thought to be **a slight increase in requests**.
- The majority saw **no change in requests** for part-time working. Some thought that the recession may have acted as a deterrent to working part-time, either due to financial pressures (“if anything, people want longer hours”) or because the person may perceive him- or herself as being in a potentially vulnerable position (e.g. seen by others as less committed or not having enough to do).
- **Requests for part-time working may have become more difficult to grant**, as the experience of one company shows. Having restructured and downsized through voluntary redundancies before the recession, an IT company now had a recruitment and pay freeze in place to help curb costs. The senior manager argued that “as work intensifies and replacement staff are harder to get, part-time work is considered somewhat less by managers”. The system of headcount targets, effectively an upper limit on staff numbers, may also have played a certain role in this, as managers who employ more part-time workers may not be able to negotiate replacements and thus have effectively fewer full-time equivalents to get the same amount of work done.

5. Supporting or increasing quality part-time work during and after the recession

All organisations in this study reported that they offer quality part-time work, with some also having implemented temporary measures in response to the economic downturn. There is therefore a wealth of experience on how these organisations supported or increased quality part-time work and what acted as a facilitator or a barrier. Organisations often adopted a range of measures, yet for analytical purposes these have been looked at separately under the following headings, identified as the main themes in the data analysis:

- Process: Management dialogue and training
- Process: Looking at the implications for job design
- Process: Importance of trial periods
- Communication: Dissemination of best-known practice via case studies
- Communication: Reduced working hours in client-facing roles
- Communication: Open communication to help increase take-up of part-time or short-term working during the recession
- Government: The role of policies and legislation
- Example: Mainstreaming part-time/flexible work⁵
- Leadership: Clear signals from the top that part-time/flexible working is accepted.

5.1 Management dialogue and training

This was seen as a key strategy in supporting quality part-time work. Management dialogue and training works on two levels: (1) questioning or changing the mindset, and (2) equipping the manager with the right skills to respond to requests for part-time work and to successfully implement agreed changes. “Managers shape the culture of the team” which in turn shapes the individual’s approach to his or her manager, a human resources (HR) representative from an education institution commented. HR managers can play a proactive role in supporting quality part-time work upon receipt of requests for changes in hours, or when engaging in dialogue with managers who (initially) resist a request. Where organisations were in the process of implementing new HR policies on flexible working, this was accompanied by management training.

HR managers who initially met with line management resistance highlighted the fact that willingness to consider the business case for part-time working is a key part of the process. Opposition to part-time or flexible working may be due to an “old management style” which fails to empower staff and puts more emphasis on input rather than output. The strategy often adopted by HR managers in such cases was to encourage them to operate in a different way, while highlighting the benefits of part-time

⁵ Often organisations used the term flexible working to denote all forms of working beyond the traditional nine-to-five office-based job, including part-time workers, term-time workers and other forms of flexible working.

work for the organisation. Others argued for a trial period of part-time working, not just in cases where line managers were resistant.

However, an HR representative of a large IT company reported that most of its managers deal with each case on merit or look for support from HR. The senior manager in the same company observed that there is now an increasing critical mass of people believing in the value of part-time work, due to a recognised increase in commitment from part-time workers. Other interviewees, themselves line managers, also tried to support staff seeking to work reduced hours, where possible. For example, a representative of a small company promoting tourism asserted “we reached a consensus view as a responsible employer that we need to be mindful what we are asking of our staff, based on what their lives involve outside of work. If we can assist with achieving a better work–life balance, then we should try and do it.” While retaining valued staff was the priority for a number of organisations, others were also open to negotiation on the number of hours worked when selecting candidates for a vacancy.

Reference was often made to the importance of the manager having the right skills to assess and discuss the business case and to ensure that, where a business case can be made, part-time working is implemented thoroughly. A senior manager in an IT company also stressed the need for developing consistency and knowledge among managers in his organisation on how to deal with women returning from maternity leave, with some line managers supporting part-time work and others expecting them to come back to work full time.

In addition to supporting and training their managers, some organisations mentioned the formal or informal involvement of employees in articulating either the business case or the individual benefits of part-time working. For example:

- Staff in an education institution are being asked to fill in a flexible working application form requesting them to consider the impact on the organisation as a result of their reduction in hours, and any suggestions they may have as to how this could be absorbed or accommodated.
- As part of a pilot project currently being introduced in one local authority, both the line manager and the employee will decide whether the job is suitable for part-time work, whereas previously this decision rested solely with the line manager.
- Information and support for women returning from maternity leave are being provided by some organisations (e.g. a parents’ network booklet contains tips on how to come back into the workplace and how to discuss issues with the line manager, and, in a large NHS hospital, there is a Child and Family Care Advisory Team, providing help to women wanting to work flexibly).

This research does not closely examine the business case as such, but it is interesting to note that in some organisations, the ability to accommodate part-time working in a particular department was also seen as dependent on the number of existing part-time staff, including one organisation operating a headcount system in which the number of staff is already specified and controlled for, whether they are full time or part time. For example, a line manager in a design agency argued that he could

accommodate a second part-time worker in a department of 20 people, if this person did not take his/her day off on the same day as the other part-time worker.

Concerns among managers about how best to manage the performance of part-time workers and flexible workers emerged in a number of interviews, particularly where it was felt that managers should make the transition from input- to outcomes-based performance management, involving an element of trust. An HR manager in an IT company reported that employment contracts will be increasingly outcomes-based, rather than defined by the number of hours worked, thus how and when the employee works will be based more on choice and ability to fit in with other commitments. HR representatives pointed out that their employees (full-time and part-time workers) are committed to getting their jobs done, and that part-time workers may even work more effectively in order to achieve their work–life balance.

Other line managers talked about the importance of managing change (e.g. managing expectations and making sure that there is no build-up of resentment among full-time staff) and advance planning. For example, a manager in a local authority explains: “When she [the part-time manager who works term-time] is not here, it is quite difficult to cover that role. You have to plan and you have to be really organised ... almost to the extent that you have rotas so that you know what it is that needs to be done.”

Attitude changes are also influenced by managers’ own experiences with part-time work. To ensure that such experiences are positive, an HR representative in a legal firm thought it would be of benefit if “the right people are being accepted to be the pioneers”. Negative experiences, on the other hand, were thought to make a line manager less likely to accept future requests for part-time working. For example, the HR representative of a large manufacturing company reported that two women were allowed to work on a job-share basis. However, the handover between the two partners was perceived to be a problem, to the extent that the job share was not thought to be “commercially viable”.

5.2 Dissemination of best-known practice via case studies

Good practice case studies provide illustrative material on how and why part-time work is successful, and this can be particularly useful for managers who have no prior experience with part-time employees. Two IT companies wanting to drive change have recently begun to put together anonymised case studies on how part-time or flexible working can succeed (HR or diversity managers aim to build up a portfolio by encouraging staff to submit examples and by drawing on examples within their own area). The ultimate goal would be to have a portfolio for every level and every kind of role, one HR manager reported. These case studies are important for a number of reasons:

- Heterogeneity of cases (“No person is exactly the same case”).
- Case studies help to fill the vacuum left by abstract policies (a representative of a global IT company noted that the company’s policies were closely linked to the legal requirements of the countries in which it operates, but include a note that other arrangements can be agreed at management discretion. Such a policy, he argued, provides no guidance on how much or how little flexibility is possible, and increases the potential for management inconsistency).

- Culture change occurs when experiences with part-time work were positive. However, this will remain a localised experience unless the message is spread more widely through case studies, which can also feed into best practice management workshops.
- Where HR representatives were able to give examples of where and how reduced-hours working had worked well in the past, there tended to be less resistance from managers, as one HR representative of a large hospital recalled with regard to a job share in a senior role. In this particular case, the two women had a two-hour overlap for the handover, using a diary to update each other, and this arrangement was said to have worked “extremely well” for a number of years.

5.3 Looking at the implications for job design (re-designing jobs or re-allocating work)

Requests for part-time working will have implications for re-adjusting workload and/or job design where there is no job share. A strong message emerging from some interviews is that requests for part-time working may involve more creative thinking around whether and how the request can best be accommodated, thus offering somebody else a development opportunity (see Case study 5.1). Possible solutions can involve seasonal adjustments in hours of work, in line with demand. For example, some employees in accountancy work full time during the busy first quarter of the year and then work reduced hours for the rest of the year, which was said to have worked well in a large consultancy firm.

Case study 5.1: Examples of job re-design in an IT company

A female member of staff working in the training department of a large IT company wanted to reduce her hours by moving to 4 days per week following the birth of her child. One of the areas she was responsible for took up about a day of her working time. This assignment could be taken on by someone else with the capacity and the skills to do so, while some other tasks which were not essential to that person’s job could be dropped. This arrangement was said to have worked well for both people involved. The HR representative summed up: “Two happy employees. One has got a new stimulating assignment and the other one has got a new work pattern that suits her.” The same principle would be applied to a manager returning from maternity leave and wanting to work reduced hours. Her maternity leave would create an opportunity for someone to get some management experience for a limited period of time, after which s(he) would return to the previous job or look for a permanent management job.

5.4 Importance of trial periods

Trial periods were seen as important for testing working arrangements and the business case in practice, particularly where part-time work is new to a certain area (e.g. a job share in sales, see Case study 5.2). It can also help to tackle pockets of resistance among some managers. An HR representative of an organisation with a high percentage of part-time workers recalled: “We’ve met with some very hard resistance from some managers in certain areas. But we get round it and not so much that they back down but that they will allow a trial period.”

The importance of both managers and employees being open to compromise, either in advance of or throughout the trial period, was highlighted in a number of instances. The availability of childcare provision may play its role in the negotiation process. An HR representative from an NHS hospital recalled how a woman returning from maternity leave wanted to work a certain number of hours but she needed to change one of her working days to fit in with service needs. She was asked to liaise with the nursery and the change in childcare provision could be accommodated.

Trial periods were either for a set period or were flexible. A representative from a manufacturing company said that if the arrangement seems to work, the trial period can be relatively short. However, where it does not quite work, different work patterns can be tried out until a successful one has been agreed upon.

Case study 5.2: Job share in sales in an IT company

There is a traditional perception that sales people work long hours and need to be constantly available for clients and customers. When two female employees with childcare responsibilities got together and requested a job share in sales, the management was initially reluctant but asked HR for advice on how they could make this work. Having identified a strong enough business case, HR pushed for a trial period and asked the two women to articulate the business benefits, how it would work and how they would get over any potential pitfalls. The job share has been in place for over a year and was said to be working well for the employees (feeling healthier, more committed and engaged) and the employer (more productive employees with higher pro-rata sales commission numbers than full-time workers). The two women each work 3 days per week (with a day’s overlap) and are committed to making the job share work between them. There are now two job shares in sales.

5.5 Reduced working hours in client-facing roles

Working reduced hours in client-facing roles is often said to present difficulties as clients demand constant availability, although one professional services organisation commented that some clients are more demanding than others and that employees need to be flexible for it to work: “There’s a balance, a kind of a deal” (HR representative, PSO). There is a danger, however, that this ‘flexibility’

might involve a part-time worker working extended hours, and being available on days off, in order to get the job done. Other HR managers also felt that working 4 days a week was more acceptable than working anything less: “a day out a week, you can still work around it and still deliver your work”; if working 3 days, however, it was felt that there are boundaries to what can and cannot be done. One partner did successfully work 3 days a week, although the HR manager added “I can still get hold of her on a Monday... it’s not a formal day but if it’s urgent, I can get hold of her.”

HR representatives in some organisations have also started to question the full-time working model for client-facing roles, allowing for a trial period where a business case could be made, with some success. For example, a large IT company arranged for a trial period for a job share in sales which turned out to be successful (see Case study 5.2). Furthermore, clients may not always require the full-time availability always assumed. A representative of a smaller design agency recalled that clients accepted the reduced hours availability of particular staff on occasion (e.g. when a designer had worked with the client before). Where the client requires a single person contact there may still be scope for reduced-hours working. For example, a senior, female part-time worker in a large consultancy firm aligned her working pattern temporarily with the needs of the client by working full time. She then reduced her hours again and this was said to have enabled her to have a “very successful career”.

While some of these are very specific examples, they show that there may be more scope for changes in working patterns than first anticipated. There are, however, also client-facing roles where it is easier to implement part-time work, as the nature of the work is such that single person contact can be maintained, as requests from clients do not warrant a same-day response.

5.6 The role of policies and legislation

Policies on flexible working and/or legislation, in combination with other measures, played an important role in supporting quality part-time work. In the case of a large IT company, the flexible working policy was thought to have helped to empower those line managers who required reassurance to consider requests for part-time or flexible working, and to reduce resistance among other managers. Although largely in line with legal requirements, the policy contained a statement that the company supports flexible working, and there were also targets for driving flexibility programmes as part of the company’s diversity management strategy, currently being monitored. A representative from a large hospital argued that if all other options have been shown to managers, then legislation is used at the end of the line to highlight the need to consider flexible working.

Statutory legislation on flexible working also led a large legal firm to extend its part-time working options firm-wide, with information now posted on the intranet. Some departments, however, are still more open to part-time working than others and, in general, this depends on the clients’ acceptance or otherwise. Open dialogue with a line manager is still crucial in determining working patterns, with policy acting as a back-up. Policies may have less of a role to play in smaller organisations where

requests for part-time working are dealt with informally by approaching the manager.

5.7 Mainstreaming part-time/flexible work

Driven by the aim to attract and retain a more diverse workforce, an IT company introduced a new policy that extended the opportunity to request part-time work or job-share posts to all employees. This means effectively mainstreaming these working patterns as they are no longer the domain of a particular group of employees with a legal right to request flexibility (in particular, women with childcare responsibilities). However, the policy has only been in place for about six months and, during this time, there was not thought to be an increase in take-up among other employees, with any requests for reducing hours coming from mothers. It is envisaged, however, that over time, a wider group may approach the company for part-time work or job share, e.g. men, the younger generation, carers of older relatives and people approaching retirement. However, it was also thought that it takes time to get changes ingrained, whereas in the rapidly changing IT environment, there is a danger that the focus shifts too quickly to other areas. (For more details on the rationale and the implementation process, see Case study 5.3.)

Case study 5.3: Rationale for mainstreaming part-time work/job share and implementation process in an IT company

The driving force behind the new policy was that the company wanted to retain and attract a more diverse workforce with different skills. There was also a realisation that this workforce would like to have a better work–life balance. The industry is perceived as “a high demand, fast-paced industry, and there is an element of working long hours in a global company where people work in different time zones,” explained the HR representative. While operating an informal flexibility approach, the company also wanted to empower staff to make choices and to change the culture to help them to do this.

The policy, one HR representative said, “coincided quite nicely with the change in the economy as it enabled us to give people the opportunity to request different types of working practices which would then perhaps have a benefit for the company, in terms of cost reduction as well as for the individual to fit it in with their work–life balance”.

The policy was developed at corporate level, is applied globally and is being supported by top management. Information is being distributed via videos, website, manager communication and training on flexible working and emails to employees. The company is also in the process of building up a portfolio of case studies that show how reduced-hours working has been implemented successfully to help change perceptions of part-time work.

5.8 Clear signals from the top that part-time/flexible working is accepted

A large IT company recently began to mainstream flexible working, after top management realised the importance of supporting staff in their work–life balance. While it is still too early to report on any results, the HR representative argued that this declaration of support from senior management “has driven people to be brave enough to have a dialogue with their managers, but also for managers to actually say, ‘OK so how could I help, how could I make this happen?’” This dialogue is also embedded within periodic employee reviews, asking if people have any requirements to work differently.⁶

A representative from another IT company also stressed the importance of getting the business leader to clearly articulate how best to run the business. Line managers, it was argued, feel more empowered to act on the policies if they are explicitly endorsed by the business leader, rather than being promoted through HR only.

5.9 Open communication to help increase take up of part-time or short-time work during the recession

Where organisations pursued strategies to increase take-up of part-time or short-time working on a voluntary basis, open communication was vital, as was highlighting the prospect of cost savings to help internal promotion.

Open communication about how the organisation was faring during the recession sent out clear signals as to what adjustments, if any, were required overall, and under what terms and conditions. Where take-up of measures was voluntary (few cases in our sample), individuals or teams/departments would make a decision, based on the information provided. Reflecting on the take-up of voluntary short-time working, the HR representative of a legal firm wondered if it was the right decision to leave it to individuals to come forward, or whether the team leader should have been more proactive in encouraging people to take up the measure, which might have avoided disparities across teams.

A representative from an education institution which saw 14 people reduce their hours, in response to an internal communication, thought that a number of factors may have contributed to the result: letting people know that they would not be in a more vulnerable position once they had reduced their hours, giving staff the opportunity to revise their decisions if they wished, selling it internally as a cost-cutting measure, and the absence of any cultural barriers regarding the up-take of part-time work. “It

⁶ It is interesting to note that Deloitte in the United States of America has recently adopted a new approach which encourages managers and staff to have a periodic conversation about staff’s plans and aspirations in terms of working hours and responsibilities (internally called ‘dialling up’ and ‘dialling down’). This has been set up in response to exit surveys which showed that women were mainly leaving the company because of lack of flexibility, and this is now rolled out to its business arms in some other countries and marketed to its clients. In the first year of the programme it was reported that 39% of employees had an initial discussion with their manager with 18% applying to either dial up or dial down and 10% being approved. It was also reported that contrary to expectation there were more requests for ‘dialling up’ than ‘dialling down’ (Toonkel Marquez, 2010).

is embedded into the [name of the organisation] culture, in terms of people can work on a part-time basis. It does not feel like a big thing, I don't think." Figures on the take-up of reduced-hours working were not available, but were thought to be higher than prior to the measure.

Cost pressures were used as an argument to increase acceptance of part-time working internally, in the case of the education institution described above (resulting in between £50,000 and £60,000 savings per annum) and the IT company which launched a new policy on flexible working during the recession. A representative of another legal company which implemented 4-month short-time working remarked that overall, these measures have "cut payroll costs significantly", without a noticeable reduction in the quality of work or the commitment of the workforce.

As outlined in Section 4, increased voluntary or mandatory part-time working during the recession prompted some people (including men) to consider working reduced hours in the future to fit in with their work–life balance. However, it remains to be seen if this is actually pursued, particularly where there remains an organisational resistance to part-time work more generally, or with regard to specific roles.

5.10 Scope for expanding quality part-time work

Looking to the future, opportunities for flexible working in general were expected to remain on offer. Some saw the potential for expanding it further, e.g. in more general terms if organisations start to think more creatively. Others had recently implemented new flexible working policies. The responses were less specific with regard to scope for offering more quality part-time work, however. One of the organisations which recently introduced flexible working policies aimed to mainstream part-time work and other forms of flexible working, by allowing groups other than women with childcare responsibilities to request part-time work, to widen its talent pool. In another organisation, it remained to be seen whether the particular forms of flexible working it was promoting would also result in the organisation being able to accommodate more requests for part-time working. Furthermore, some organisations which introduced reduced-hours working as a result of the recession thought that it may see some more requests for part-time work in future, but cautioned that there is still resistance towards granting requests.

Other organisations argued that there would be scope for expanding quality part-time work, as and when there is a request and a business case for it. This could act as an encouragement for employees (existing employees and those seeking a job) to test the water if it was felt suitable. However, other organisations were more reserved, including one with a low percentage of part-time work at non-managerial and managerial level, which questioned how far the business could extend the scope of part-time work before it ceased to reap the benefits.

5.11 Supporting or increasing quality part-time work in the post-recession period

The management and implementation of quality part-time work during the recession will continue to be relevant in the post-recession period. In examining practical lessons to be learned from these organisations, it must be borne in mind that the sample contained a small number of organisations, some introducing voluntary or mandatory measures, some on a firm-wide basis or for large parts of their workforce, while others relied on a smaller group of volunteers. Furthermore, some introduced it for longer periods than others, thus allowing more time for adapting to changes in working patterns, and some asked for a larger reduction in hours than others.

In spite of this, the following points can be made:

- Based on the reduced hours experience, there may be more scope for HR, or for employees themselves, to better argue the business case and to get approval for a trial period of reduced-hours working.
- Positive reduced-hours experiences during the recession could be written up in the form of anonymised case studies, setting out what has been successful and why, adding to the pool of case studies.
- Where more opportunities for part-time working were offered to volunteers, primarily to reduce costs, these options could continue to be available in the economic up-turn and would need to be communicated to employees accordingly. It is worth noting that in the two organisations which pursued this strategy, it has not led to a sudden surge in requests for part-time working, which is often feared by employers.

For other organisations, it may be worthwhile to reflect on the reduced-hours working period in terms of how the arrangement worked out in practice and, in particular, whether this has any implications for the business case for part-time work or flexible working more generally, rather than quickly moving on to business as usual. There is always the danger that even positive experiences are forgotten, in part because key staff may move on to other posts and replacement staff are less committed to part-time or flexible working.

6. Costs and benefits of supporting and increasing quality part-time work

There was a clear view that, where there were some extra costs associated with quality part-time work, these were seen as relatively minor, in comparison with the actual benefits. All but one organisation felt that costs and benefits were at least in balance, but most agreed that the benefits far outweighed the costs, as the examples below demonstrate:

“Employer costs can be higher due to payroll and line management impact of more employees, but good staff retention, experience and motivated employees far outweigh these costs” (HR manager, care organisation, high percentage of part-time workers).

“The benefits far, far outweigh the costs because of the impact on the way that we perform and the positive impact on the productivity” (senior manager, company promoting tourism, medium percentage of part-time workers).

Cost-benefit analyses are often used to determine the economic viability of certain measures, and yet hard data are often difficult to find if they have not been collected as part of a systematic evaluation. The interviewees in this study could easily identify costs and benefits of quality part-time working (see Table 6.1), based on their experiences, but could not provide much supporting evidence. The potential or actual benefits are similar to those of flexible working more generally, largely falling into four groups: attracting and retaining people with valuable skills; creating a more diverse workforce; better performance; and flexibility.

Offering quality part-time work helps to retain valuable staff who might otherwise leave the organisation to achieve their desired work–life balance elsewhere, and it also helps to attract a wider pool of talent and a more diverse workforce. For example, a representative of an education institution stressed that, because the organisation can offer part-time work, “this opens up a pool of talent that isn’t able to undertake jobs elsewhere on a full-time basis”; the managing director of a small business was considering advertising for two specialist management roles on a part-time basis, which had proved difficult to fill in the past.

In being able to achieve his/her desired work–life balance, the employee is often more engaged, motivated and even more productive (one example being the two job-share partners who were said to have achieved higher pro-rata commissioning sales figures than a full-time worker). This was illustrated by the following two quotes:

“The part-time workers more than repay you in the amount of work they do. If anything, they are more committed because they are so grateful for being given the opportunity to work flexibly or being part-time.” (Senior manager, large IT company, low percentage of part-time workers)

“I can absolutely say that part-time workers put 100% in and work twice as hard as if they were working full-time.” (HR representative of a large nursery chain, high percentage of part-time workers)

However, there were examples where this was not the case. Where full-time workers have given a “significant amount of discretionary effort over and above their normal working pattern”, this sometimes “drops off in a greater sense” when they move to part-time work, as one representative of an IT company explained. Part-time workers are often flexible enough to help cover unforeseen changes in demand (e.g. because of illness), although, as one representative of a local authority highlighted, childcare constraints do not always allow for this to happen.

Part-time workers (and in particular job-shares) were reported to potentially or actually incur some extra costs, such as:

- advertising for and recruiting a job share partner;
- training (as this is per person and not pro-rata; on the other hand, training overall was seen as important to the organisation and some argued that training costs were not that significant);
- having to manage a larger number of people (incurring, for example, more appraisals, particularly where there are larger numbers of part-time workers or job-shares);
- setting up a workplace (although in one organisation, workplaces of part-time workers are also used for hot-desking by temporary staff);
- fixed costs per employee (e.g. part-time workers in one organisation were thought to cost 65% of their salary, as utilities are still consumed in their absence);
- handover among job-share partners or elements of ‘double-handling’ by other staff in the absence of part-time workers;
- non-monetary costs, i.e., managing reduced hours working successfully through effective communication with part-time workers, managing expectations of staff and clients, and working in line with the part-time worker’s working hours. With regard to the latter, one manager remarked: “It is lovely to have the team there exactly when you want to have them there. There is a frustration factor occasionally”.

Table 6.1: The costs and benefits of quality part-time work, as identified by recession respondents

Costs	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advertising costs for job-share partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retaining skills and knowledge which are expensive to replace
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provision of training for more people when job-sharing or increase in part-time working (including induction) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • two sets of skills for job shares (the existing job-holder can train the job-share partner and this can also work successfully for succession planning)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • handover time/element of double handling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attracting and retaining a wider pool of talent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set up costs for workplace (e.g. desk, computer) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staff are happier and less stressed (“people come back to work recharged”)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • line managing more people (e.g. conducting more appraisals) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staff are more engaged, motivated and committed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • non-monetary costs (e.g. managing expectations of staff and clients, convenience factor, communicating effectively) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • better performance, more productive, working harder (“part-time workers are very efficient because they have to be”)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR input into implementing new policies for flexible working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lower sickness levels
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • flexibility for covering peak periods or unplanned events
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • job-share partners can cover holidays and absences between them

Source: IER study funded by GEO

7. Conclusions

This qualitative study explored the nature of quality part-time working during the recession by drawing on a small, purposely selected sample of employers from across the economy. This was an exploratory piece of research and our messages should therefore be seen as indicative, rather than conclusive. Although some statistical and anecdotal evidence has shown that the recession has led to more flexible working being introduced, with part-time working being one form of flexible working, relatively little is yet known as to how organisations managed this transition and what lessons may be learned with regard to sustaining flexible working during an economic up-turn. Of particular interest was an exploration of how organisations managed to offer quality part-time work successfully, irrespective of whether an increase in reduced-hours working took place or not during the recession. This snapshot approach drew on telephone interviews with 18 organisations across a range of industry branches which had either professed to offer quality part-time work and/or increased the number of employees working reduced-hours on a voluntary or involuntary basis, in response to the recession. Some of the organisations in the sample had made massive reductions in workforce numbers in spite of short-time working, whereas other organisations in the public sector were preparing themselves for impending budget cuts.

The report details the approaches and experiences to date of seven organisations which had introduced various forms of reduced-hours working during the recession or encouraged take-up of part-time working where this fitted with personal circumstances, and two organisations which had launched new flexible working policies which coincided with the recession. Reduced-hours working included cases where all employees or volunteers worked reduced hours for a limited period of time, and one case where it resulted in the loss of job security, with some employees having to change from a permanent to a bank contract similar to the system in nursing, in which staff are placed on a register and can be called upon at short notice to work shifts. There were organisations where potential or actual cost savings helped to argue the business case for reduced-hours working and others which were aiming to achieve far greater efficiency savings than part-time work in itself could achieve. A primary focus on cost-cutting measures may succeed in introducing more flexible working (home-working, hot-desking, etc.) but may not translate into more part-time jobs in senior roles in the longer term. It is vital that larger numbers of flexible workers do not suffer the same discriminatory practices that part-time workers have endured in the past (e.g. perceptions of a lack of commitment, being overlooked for training and promotion, not being consulted on work-related matters, etc.). Furthermore, cost-cutting must not be seen as the only reason for introducing more quality part-time and flexible posts, as part-time work alone may not provide the scope of cost-cutting required during the recession. Any cost-cutting measures relating to part-time work should also examine the potential extra costs for other staff members in taking up any additional duties.

Bearing in mind the small number of cases, there is some evidence that the experience of a limited period of reduced-hours working has led some employees to consider working reduced hours in future. Potential increases in demand may not translate into a corresponding supply, however, as there was reported to be resistance towards accepting part-time work on a permanent basis, certainly in some roles. Nevertheless, there was some recognition that, given the experience with reduced-hours

working, there may be more scope for arguing the business case and getting a trial period of work accepted. In organisations which had not previously embraced part-time working, however, there is the danger that senior management will revert back to “business as usual” in the post-recession period, which may therefore require some relatively rapid intervention from HR representatives. As demonstrated in the recession organisations, HR representatives have a key role to play in initiating a dialogue with line managers and with senior management in the promotion and implementation of new forms of working. Although there were calls for more creative thinking in order to increase quality part-time working, certainly if a job share is not considered to be an option, the very nature of this process is that each case should be considered on its merits. A ‘tailored’ approach may need to be developed, involving changes in the job designs of two or more people, and this less standardised process may not sit easily with the day-to-day demands on managers’ time. HR managers can help to manage this process and support managers with any real or perceived difficulties.

The organisations which encouraged take-up of part-time work on a permanent basis reported a small increase in part-time working, with increased opportunities for all employees to request part-time work, other than those protected by statutory legislation (parents and carers). For future research, it will be interesting to explore the medium-term implications on the scope of quality part-time working in large service organisations with a high up-take of reduced-hours working over a longer period: changes are likely to have become more established in working patterns and may thus have allowed for a greater degree of cultural change to take place.

Quality part-time work is often achieved by a combination of several approaches, such as management dialogue and training, dissemination of best-known practice via case studies; looking at the implications for job design; importance of trial periods; policies and legislation; mainstreaming part-time/flexible work, allowing all employees to have regular conversations about any required changes in working patterns; and clear signals from the top that part-time/flexible working is accepted. While these approaches resonate with the literature, this study has added some illustrative material as to how it was done, and what has been achieved, to date. While these approaches will continue to be relevant in the post-recession period, the reduced-hours working experiences may prove to be helpful in highlighting the business case for further quality part-time work.

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Annex A.1

Methodology involved in the study on the impact of the recession

This part of the research project explored changes in the supply and provision of quality part-time work (for example, resulting from the recession), and how such practices and tools are being used by employers with effect. The aim of this piece of research was to provide a robust snapshot of the nature of (quality) part-time work being offered during the recession. In order to provide a robust snapshot of organisations, we initially proposed to select 15 case studies. Initial work suggested that we needed to include a range of companies, representing small and medium-sized (SME) and large companies, as well as private and public organisations, across a range of industries (e.g. manufacturing and various service industries with varying degrees of part-time work, e.g. banking and finance; retail, consultancy/accountancy/law firms).

Key people within all organisations were originally contacted via email or by letter. Once contact had been made, one or two attempts at follow-up were made, if no response was forthcoming. After this time, it was considered that the organisation was not willing to be involved in the research project and no further contact was made. The IER team conducted in-depth telephone interviews with one or two key members of each organisation, where possible, in order to provide a robust view of the impact of quality part-time work:

- A senior HR manager
- An equal opportunities representative (or, if not appropriate, a trade union or other employee representative).

The interviews followed a detailed topic guide (see example below) and usually lasted between 25 to 60 minutes on average. As it was not known beforehand, in the majority of cases, whether or not new measures had been introduced as a consequence of the recession, the topic guide also allowed for information to be gathered about previous provision of part-time work and how that had or had not been affected by the economic climate. With the permission of the interviewee, the interviews were audio-recorded.

Limitations and difficulties encountered

Access to organisations proved to be difficult in many cases. Many organisations were unwilling to be interviewed, especially during a time of economic uncertainty. Others agreed to be interviewed but were then not available when one of the researchers rang at a pre-arranged time. Intermediaries proved to be a more fruitful way of accessing organisations but this had the effect of skewing the sample slightly (e.g. the large number of IT companies was due, in part, to an initial contact who gave us several HR names and email addresses). However, the study was designed to be robust, not representative.

In spite of much effort, triangulation of data through interviews with a human resources representative and a diversity manager was not always possible. In many cases, this was due to the fact that these roles were merged into one job. It was also difficult to access trade union representatives, with many organisations, especially in the private sector, having no official representative.

The assessment of costs and benefits of quality part-time work is based on experience and anecdotal evidence rather than hard data, as figures supporting it were not available.

Example of interview guide employed in the recession study (HR manager version)

(1) The establishment and its workforce

ALL:

- a) To begin with, could you just tell me your own job title and briefly what are your main responsibilities?
- b) *(If not clear beforehand)* And could you just tell me briefly what your organisation does?
- c) *(If not clear beforehand)* And is this a public sector or a private sector organisation?
- d) And approximately how many people work here?
- e) Approximately how many of the staff are female?

(2) Scope and nature of (quality) part-time work during the recession

- a) Would you say that your organisation has been affected by the recession?
 - b) Has your organisation introduced any reduced-hour measures in response to the recession, for example, asking people if they will work part-time, sabbaticals, etc.?
- (If no, please go to 2 h)*
- c) *(If yes)* Could you briefly describe what kinds of measures you've used?
 - d) And did your organisation offer any incentives for taking up the measure? *(e.g. financial incentives)*
 - e) Do you know approximately how many people have taken up the option to work reduced hours?
 - f) And what types of people were more likely to take up the options?
 - g) What kinds of jobs were these people doing part-time? *(Now go on to 3)*
 - h) You said your company did not introduce any reduced-hour measures in response to the recession, but did you notice any changes in staff requesting part-time work as a result of the recession?

(If no, go to 3)

- i) *(If yes)* And what sort of job roles were these people mainly doing on a full-time basis?
- j) And did the organisation allow these people to go part-time, as far as you're aware?
- k) *(If yes)* So are you seeing any advantages/disadvantages in allowing these people to work part-time?
- l) *(If no)* Was there any particular reason for this?

(3) Quality part-time work before the recession

ALL:

- a) And did you offer part-time work before the recession?

(If no part-time work offered before or during the recession, end of interview; go to 7)

- b) *(If yes)* And what sort of job roles were these people mainly doing?
- c) We've recently been doing a literature review, and we have defined quality part-time work as having four major criteria *(read each out separately)*:
 - jobs that provide the same (pro-rata) terms and conditions, development and progression opportunities as comparable full-time work;
- d) Would you say that your organisation provides this for part-time workers? *(If not, why?)*
 - jobs that enable the job holder to maintain (or enhance) his or her skills, including employees who reduce working hours after a short period of leave;
- e) Again, would you say that your organisation provides this for part-time workers? *(If not, why?)*
 - jobs that enable the achievement of an acceptable work–life 'balance', in line with business needs;
- f) What about this in your organisation – do you think this is the case? *(If not, why?)*
 - jobs that provide the opportunity to increase the number of hours to full-time work, if desired, at the same or a higher job level.
- g) Do you think that your organisation is able to provide this for part-time workers? *(If not, why?)*
- h) With this in mind, what do **you** consider to be the main things which would define quality part-time jobs in your organisation? *(Probe for any similarities, differences)*
- i) If you now look back at the part-time jobs offered in your organisation *(created as a result of the recession, or before the recession)*, approximately what percentage of these jobs among all part-time jobs would you consider to be *quality* part-time?

- j) *(If none)* Is there any particular reason for this? *(Then move on to 5)*
- k) *(If yes, and if not covered already)* And could you say in which job roles/areas do **more** people work in quality part-time jobs and in which ones do **fewer** people work in quality part-time jobs?
- l) We've found from other research that quality part-time work can be offered internally (e.g. for returning mothers and other groups), advertised externally or negotiated with successful candidates without the job being advertised externally as part-time. What strategies does your establishment adopt and could you say why?

(4) Management of the transition to quality part-time work (before or during recession)

- a) How did your establishment manage the transition to offering or increasing quality part-time work?
- b) *(If not already covered above)* Which factor or factors have been key to the successful implementation of quality part-time work?
- c) And do you feel that there were any key lessons learned as a result of offering quality part-time work?
- d) *(If not covered already)* Have you seen any evidence of a culture change or an attitude change within the organisation as a result of offering quality part-time work?
- e) Did anything emerge in the process that may help other organisations in establishing quality part-time working (good or bad)?

(5) Costs and benefits of quality part-time work

- a) Do you feel that there are any particular costs to the employer of introducing quality part-time work?
- b) And do you think that there are any particular benefits to the employer of introducing quality part-time work?
- c) And do you think that one outweighs the other *(if so, which one?)* or are the costs and benefits roughly in balance?

(If no quality part-time jobs offered before or during recession, now move on to 7; otherwise, continue)

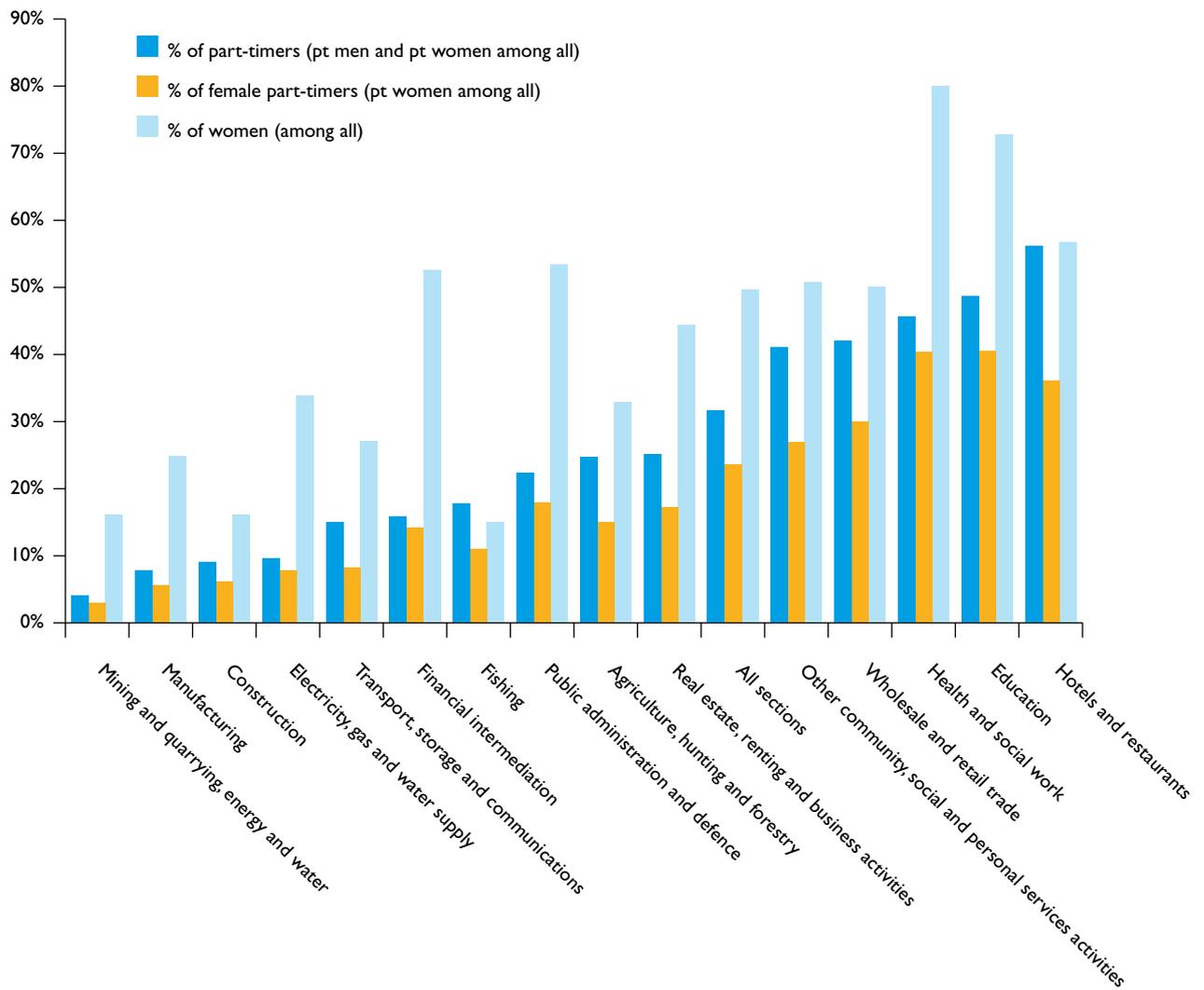
(6) Sustainability of quality part-time work

- a) In principle, is there scope at your organisation/establishment to expand quality part-time work to other job roles?
- b) Looking at the nature and the current level of quality part-time work in your organisation/establishment, how is this likely to develop once the recession comes to an end?

- c) What issues, if any, do you foresee in sustaining quality part-time work after the recession and how could these be addressed?

(7) Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview. It has been very interesting and useful for the project.

Table A.1: Percentage of part-time workers, percentage of female part-time workers and percentage of women by sector (March 2008)



Source: Office for National Statistics (2009)

Table A.2: Interviews with organisations on the impact of the recession and scope of quality part-time work (targeted and achieved sample)

% of part-time workers ²	Sector	Public sector			Private sector			Total
		SME ¹	Large ²	Sub-total	SME ¹	Large ²	Sub-total	
Above average ³ (high)	G							
		Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles, motorcycles and personal and household goods						
	H							
		Hotels and restaurants						
	M		2	2				2
		Education						
	N		1	1	1	1	2	3
Below average ³ (low and medium)	O				1		1	1
		Other community, social and personal services activities						
		2	3	5	2	2	4	9
		Sub-total: targeted						
		0	3	3	2	1	3	6
		Sub-total: achieved						
	A							
		Agriculture, hunting and forestry						
	B							
		Fishing						
	C							
		Mining and quarrying						
	D					3	3	3
		Manufacturing						
	E							
		Electricity, gas and water supply						
	F							
		Construction						
	I							
		Transport, storage and communications						
J								
	Financial intermediation							
K					2 ⁶	7	7	
	Real estate, renting and business activities							
L			2 ⁵	2			2	
	Public administration and defence; compulsory social security							
		0 ⁴	2	2	2	4	6	
	Sub-total: targeted							
	0	2	2	2	8	10	12	
	Sub-total: achieved							
		2	5	7	4	4	15	
	Total: targeted							
	0	5	5	5	9	13	18	
	Total: achieved							

¹ Organisations with up to 249 employees ² Organisations with 250 and more employees

³ The average percentage of part-time workers (men and women) in all sectors is 32%, those above are defined as high (at least 42%) and those below as medium and low.

⁴ Difficult to match given that most public sector organisations are large ones. ⁵ Both have high % of pts ⁶ One org. is largely publicly funded

⁷ Two law firms, 2 computer services and 1 professional services



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