

Women in UK Manufacturing 2026

Time to flex: building flexible manufacturing workplaces



About this report

The *Women in UK Manufacturing* report provides an overview of the progress made over the past year and the challenges that remain for women in the manufacturing sector. The 2026 report focuses on flexible working, examining how different approaches to flexibility can support the attraction, retention, and development of talent in manufacturing. The report presents evidence-based insights and practical examples to support organisations seeking to develop more flexible ways of working and strengthen workforce participation across the sector. The report findings are independent and represent the views of the authors, but they have been enabled by IfM Engage and Cambridge Industrial Innovation Policy (Institute for Manufacturing, University of Cambridge) and our Women in Manufacturing UK partners and sponsors.

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Foreword

As members of the Women in Manufacturing Industry Advisory Board, we give our time voluntarily because we believe in what this initiative is trying to achieve. We come from different backgrounds, different organisations, different roles and sectors within manufacturing, but we have a shared commitment to making manufacturing a sector in which women can be seen, heard, and represented more equitably that cuts across these differences. Over the past year, that commitment has translated into a great deal of activity.

We have launched a successful webinar series covering a range of topics, held regional events, and brought together people from across industry and academia to share experiences and ideas. Our regional roundtable at the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland brought together people from apprentices and graduates through to managing directors and professors. The Women in Manufacturing UK LinkedIn page, launched a few months ago, has already built a community of over 1,000 followers and continues to grow, and our conference once again sold out in weeks.

The reason I mention this is because these things tell us something very simple: people still care about this work. People want to be part of the conversation. They want to learn from each other, network, develop, and, crucially, they want to see change. This, I believe, is especially important at a time when this work is becoming increasingly difficult to do.

The climate around equity, diversity, and inclusion has changed considerably. Whilst it is true that progress is rarely linear, recent years have been a reminder that the gains we have made cannot simply be assumed to continue. There will be periods where progress continues, periods when it plateaus, and periods when ground already won becomes uncertain. This is also why this report is important. The overall proportion of women working in UK manufacturing has not increased this year, and whilst that is not the direction we want to see, one number does not tell the whole story. There are substantial positives in the report alongside areas from which we can learn.

This report identifies important changes within different parts of the workforce. Its focus on flexible working explores practical ways in which manufacturers can make work accessible to more people, create more appealing workplaces, attract and retain diverse talent, retain valuable skills and experience, and rethink assumptions about how manufacturing should or must be organised. Its value is not simply in documenting where we are, but in challenging employers whilst giving them evidence, examples, and practical ideas that can help determine where they might go next.

We would like to thank the team at the Institute for Manufacturing, the authors and researchers who brought this report together, our fellow Industry Advisory Board members and volunteers, all of the partners, supporters, and sponsors who enable Women in Manufacturing UK to continue its work, and, most importantly, all those people across manufacturing who continue to give their time, share their expertise, challenge what can be done differently, and support one another. Progress may not always be linear, but it is sustained by the people who keep showing up.

Poggy Murray Whitham

IAB Co-Chair, on behalf of the Women in Manufacturing Industry Advisory Board

Executive summary

As UK manufacturing navigates economic uncertainty, technological change, and intensifying competition for talent, it has become both a business imperative and a social priority to create workplaces that meet the needs of a diverse workforce. Flexible working, defined as any contractual status of employment or work arrangement that gives employees greater choice over when, where or how much they work, is increasingly recognised as an important part of addressing this challenge. While flexibility is often associated with office-based employment, growing evidence suggests it can be successfully implemented across a much wider range of manufacturing roles than is commonly assumed.

This report reviews progress towards greater gender diversity in UK manufacturing and explores the role that flexible working can play in attracting, retaining, and supporting a broader range of people throughout their careers. Drawing on an annual review of workforce data and consultations with manufacturing employees and leaders, the report highlights both the opportunities and challenges associated with creating more flexible manufacturing workplaces.



State of diversity and inclusion in UK manufacturing in 2025

1. Progress towards greater gender representation stalled in 2025

Women accounted for 28.2% of the manufacturing workforce in 2025, a slight decrease from 2024, when the figure was 28.4%. Although this represents a pause in the progress seen over the previous year, women's participation remains close to its highest recorded level. Achieving the "35 by 35" target embedded in the *Advanced Manufacturing Sector Plan*¹ and supported by the Women in Manufacturing (WiM) UK initiative, will require women's representation to increase by a further 6.8 percentage points over the next decade.

2. Women continued to gain ground in traditionally male-dominated roles

Women's representation increased in several occupations where they have historically been under-represented. The share of women in manager, director, and senior official positions rose from 24.8% in 2024 to 27.3% in 2025, while representation in professional occupations reached 28.7% from 27.2%. Skilled trades recorded one of the strongest improvements, increasing from 8.2% to 10.4%. Despite this progress, substantial occupational segregation remains across the sector.

3. Diversity gains among under-represented groups were broadly maintained

The proportion of women in manufacturing from non-White ethnic backgrounds remained broadly stable, at 13.7%, following the significant increase recorded in 2024. This remained below their representation among women in employment across the UK, where women from non-White ethnic backgrounds accounted for 17.7% in 2025. Representation among disabled women increased from 19.2% to 21.2%, highlighting the growing importance of creating workplaces that are accessible and inclusive for people with different needs and circumstances.

4. The gender pay gap continued to decrease, but challenges remain

Women working in manufacturing earned 14.8% less than men in 2025, a slight improvement on 2024 (14.9%). But the manufacturing gender pay gap remains higher than the UK average, and disparities continue to widen across the later career stages.

5. The UK maintained its international position in women's representation in manufacturing

The UK remained 11th among major manufacturing nations in women's representation in 2025. While maintaining its position ahead of several European and OECD economies, the UK continues to lag behind the highest-performing countries, where women account for more than one-third of the manufacturing workforce.

¹ UK Government (2025). *Advanced Manufacturing Sector Plan. The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy*.

Understanding flexible working in manufacturing

As part of this report, we conducted a survey of 83 manufacturing employees and gathered insights from manufacturing leaders across a range of industries and occupations. These findings highlight the growing demand for flexibility and the practical challenges associated with implementing it in manufacturing workplaces.

Flexible working in manufacturing remains concentrated around a limited set of practices

Flexible start and finish times and remote or hybrid working were the most commonly reported forms of flexibility. More innovative arrangements, including job sharing, term-time working, and flexible shift arrangements, remain uncommon despite growing interest among employees and evidence of successful implementation in some organisations, particularly given the more limited access to flexibility reported in production-related roles.

Flexible working supports retention, wellbeing, and workforce participation

Flexible working plays an important role in retaining talent in manufacturing. More than half (56%) of survey respondents reported that access to flexible working was very or extremely important to their decision to remain in their current job, while 11% said it had enabled them to remain in the manufacturing sector. The benefits extend beyond retention: 57% of respondents reported an improved work-life balance, and 40% indicated that flexible working had reduced stress or fatigue.

Technology is creating new opportunities for flexibility, but inclusion cannot be automated

Digital technologies are changing how manufacturing work is organised, with more than one-third of survey participants reporting that technology had increased flexibility in their role. While these developments can support more adaptable and inclusive ways of working, they are also reshaping occupational demand and may disproportionately affect roles where women have traditionally been concentrated, such as administrative roles.

The barriers to flexibility are as much cultural as operational

Although operational constraints remain important, respondents frequently identified workplace culture, management attitudes, and inconsistent implementation as significant barriers to flexible working. While many employees perceived managerial support in principle, fewer were confident that working flexibly would not affect their career progression. This concern is consistent with research on “flexibility stigma”, which suggests that employees may perceive a risk of being viewed as less committed when they make use of flexible arrangements, with organisational and team cultures shaping the extent to which such concerns arise.

Inclusive leadership and communication are critical to making flexibility work

Evidence from employers demonstrates that successful flexible working is often supported by inclusive leadership, open dialogue with employees, experimentation, and a willingness to challenge assumptions about who can work flexibly and how work should be organised. Rather than focusing on whether flexibility is possible, these organisations emphasise exploring how flexibility can be delivered while maintaining operational performance.

Call to action: how do you go flexible? Six practical tips for manufacturing employers

This year, we partnered with Flexibility Works, a consultancy specialising in workplace flexibility, to identify practical actions manufacturers can take to create more flexible, inclusive and productive workplaces. Drawing on their expertise across a range of sectors, they identified several practical measures that organisations can implement.

Flexible working in manufacturing should start by understanding what employees need, improving shift predictability, and exploring flexibility in every role rather than making assumptions.

This does not necessarily require major changes. Small adjustments to shift patterns, start and finish times, notice periods, or how shifts are exchanged can make jobs accessible to people who might otherwise leave, reduce their hours, or not apply in the first place.

Employers should prepare for the expected 2027 legislative changes² and make flexibility a visible, supported part of their workforce strategy and culture. The best approach is to start small, test practical changes, and learn what works for both employees and the business.

Now is a good time to start, and the following six actions provide a sound starting point:



1. Ask people what would make a difference

Start with your workforce. Ask employees what would make their working arrangements more manageable and what forms of flexibility they would value.

They may not be looking for major changes. More notice of shifts, greater input into working patterns, easier shift swaps, or different start and finish times may be enough. For others, part-time hours, compressed hours, job sharing, or a phased return after leave could help them remain in work.

Not every request will be possible. The important first step is to understand what people need rather than assuming what flexibility means to them.

Action: Ask your workforce where greater flexibility would make the biggest difference and identify one or two areas you can explore.

² UK Government (2026). *Factsheet: Flexible Working*.



2. Make shifts predictable

For many manufacturing workers, predictability is flexibility.

Giving people shifts as far in advance as possible, keeping patterns consistent, and making it easy to swap shifts are all ways to give people greater control over their lives. They can organise caring responsibilities, appointments, and other commitments around work.

Greater predictability can also help employers to reduce last-minute disruption and retain people when their circumstances change.

Action: *Review how far in advance employees know their shifts and how easy it is for them to request or exchange shifts.*



3. Look for flexibility in every role

Do not start by deciding which jobs are “flexible” and which are not. Instead, ask the question: what flexibility is possible in this role?

Depending on the job, this could include part-time work, compressed hours, job sharing, annualised hours, twilight shifts, different shift patterns, or greater choice over working times.

The aim is not to offer the same arrangements to everyone but to explore what can be changed within the operational requirements of each role.

Action: *Choose a role or team where flexibility has traditionally been considered difficult and review what elements of the job genuinely need to be fixed and what could be changed.*



4. Get ready for the 2027 legislative changes

Flexible working rights will change in 2027. The new rules are expected to introduce a reasonableness test, with employers required to consider whether a request is reasonable and feasible. Where a request is refused, employers must explain the reasons for the decision, and those reasons must align with at least one of the eight statutory business grounds set out in the Employment Rights Act.

The process around consultation will also be strengthened, putting greater emphasis on constructive conversations about what might work. This does not mean every request has to be agreed. Some arrangements will not work for certain roles, shifts, or production requirements, but employers should be prepared to look beyond a simple yes or no and consider whether there is another option.

HR teams can play an important role in preparing for these changes, helping to ensure that policies are up to date and that requests are handled fairly and consistently. Managers will also need the confidence and knowledge to discuss requests, explore alternatives and explain decisions clearly.

Action: *Review your flexible working policy and request process before the new requirements take effect, and make sure that HR teams and managers understand their roles and are equipped to have constructive conversations about what is possible.*



5. Make flexibility part of your workforce strategy and organisational culture

Flexible working is not just an individual accommodation or employee benefit. It can be part of a wider workforce strategy, helping manufacturers attract and retain people who might otherwise be excluded by the way work is organised.

Think about who you could retain if their working pattern could change, who you could attract with more choice, and who might currently be excluded because of the way work is organised.

Where roles allow it, consider making flexible options widely available rather than requiring employees to negotiate them as exceptional arrangements. Having a policy is not enough: people need to know flexibility is available and feel able to use it without being seen as less committed. Managers also need to have the confidence to discuss options and make fair and consistent decisions.

And if you are open to flexibility, make sure people know it is available. Making flexibility visible can support more inclusive recruitment by widening the pool of potential applicants. Alongside this, consider how applicants' skills and experience are assessed and address any biases, including those related to career gaps.

Action: Review whether flexibility is visible, accessible, and supported in practice, not just available on paper.



6. Start with what is possible

Getting flexible working right does not mean changing everything at once. Start where there is a clear benefit for both the workforce and the business. Try something, see how it works, and learn from it.

The best arrangements are not about choosing between the needs of employees and the needs of the business. They are about finding better ways of organising work that benefit both parties.

Action: Pick one practical change to test. Agree what success would look like, review the results with employees and managers, and use what you learn to inform the next step.

There is no single model of flexible working that will work across manufacturing, and flexibility alone will not address the barriers facing women in the sector. But the evidence provided in this report suggests there is often more scope to change how work is organised than initially assumed.

The next step is to find out what that means in your workplace. Ask your people, look again at how jobs and shifts are designed, and test an approach where there is room to do things differently. And when something works, build on it. The question is not just "Can we offer flexible working?" but "What flexibility is possible here, and what can we do to make it work?"

Introduction

Flexible working is no longer a nice-to-have. It is becoming a strategic workforce necessity. As manufacturers respond to skills shortages, demographic change, technological transformation, and evolving employee expectations, the ability to offer flexible working arrangements is increasingly shaping organisations' capacity to attract, retain, and develop talent.

Progress towards greater gender diversity in UK manufacturing has continued in recent years, although advances remain uneven. In 2025 women accounted for 28.2% of the manufacturing workforce, broadly maintaining the gains achieved in 2024 despite a slight decline from the previous year. Women's representation increased in several traditionally male-dominated occupations, including management, professional roles, and skilled trades. At the same time, the sector continues to face persistent challenges, including a gender pay gap that remains above the UK average.

These challenges coincide with wider changes in UK manufacturing. Automation and artificial intelligence (AI) are changing the occupational profile of manufacturing, increasing demand for higher-skilled roles while may be reducing employment in some occupations in which women have historically been more strongly represented. At the same time, demographic change is increasing the importance of retaining skills and experience across different stages of working life.

Flexible working is one element of this transition. In manufacturing, flexibility cannot simply mean working from home. It encompasses a much wider range of approaches to when, where, and how work is organised, from flexible start and finish times and compressed hours to shift design, job sharing, part-time working, and hybrid arrangements where roles allow.

The case is particularly relevant to the ambition to increase women's representation in manufacturing to 35% by 2035. Achieving sustained progress will require attention to the conditions that enable women to remain and progress within the sector. While flexibility alone cannot address the structural causes of gender inequality in manufacturing, it can form part of a broader approach to creating workplaces in which a wider range of people can participate and progress.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 reviews changes in women's participation in UK manufacturing during 2025, including developments across occupations, industries, ethnicity, disability, and pay.
- Section 2 examines the evidence on flexible working and its relevance to manufacturing.
- Section 3 presents the findings from a survey, interviews, and a focus group discussion with manufacturing employees and leaders, exploring barriers, impacts, and emerging approaches to flexibility.
- And Section 4 sets out practical actions to support more flexible and inclusive workplaces in manufacturing.

1. Annual review: women’s participation in UK manufacturing

Progress towards greater gender representation in manufacturing stalls in 2025

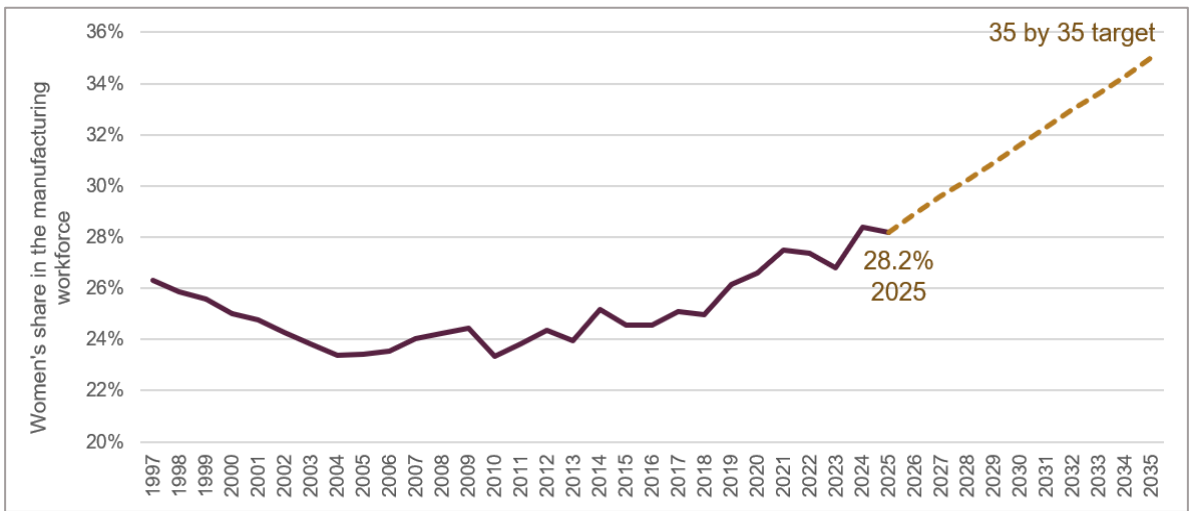
Women’s representation in the manufacturing workforce fell slightly to 28.2% in 2025, a decrease of 0.2 percentage points from 2024, when it was 28.4%. But this setback follows a substantial improvement in the previous year, when women’s representation rose by 1.6 percentage points from 26.8% in 2023. Despite the decline, the share remains close to its highest level.³

The slight decline in women’s representation coincided with a broader fall in manufacturing employment, which decreased from 2.73 million in 2024 to 2.67 million in 2025. While employment fell for both women and men, the number of self-employed men increased, whereas the number of self-employed women remained unchanged, contributing to the small reduction in women’s share of the workforce.

Manufacturing continues to be among the sectors with the lowest participation of women, despite women representing nearly half of those in employment or self-employed. This contrasts with sectors such as health and social work and education, where women account for more than half of the workforce.

To meet the government’s “35 by 35” target, embedded in the *Advanced Manufacturing Sector Plan*⁴ and supported by the Women in Manufacturing (WiM) UK initiative, women’s representation will have to increase by a further 6.8 percentage points over the next decade. This equates to an average increase of approximately 0.7 percentage points per year between 2026 and 2035 (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. SHARE OF WOMEN IN UK MANUFACTURING WORKFORCE, 1997–2035



Note: Data includes employees and self-employed persons. Figures are based on annual averages of quarterly data.

Source: Office for National Statistics (2025). EMP14: Employees and self-employed by industry.

³ ONS (2026). EMP14: Employees and self-employed by industry.

⁴ UK Government (2025). *Advanced Manufacturing Sector Plan. The UK’s Modern Industrial Strategy.*

Women are gaining ground in traditionally male-dominated roles

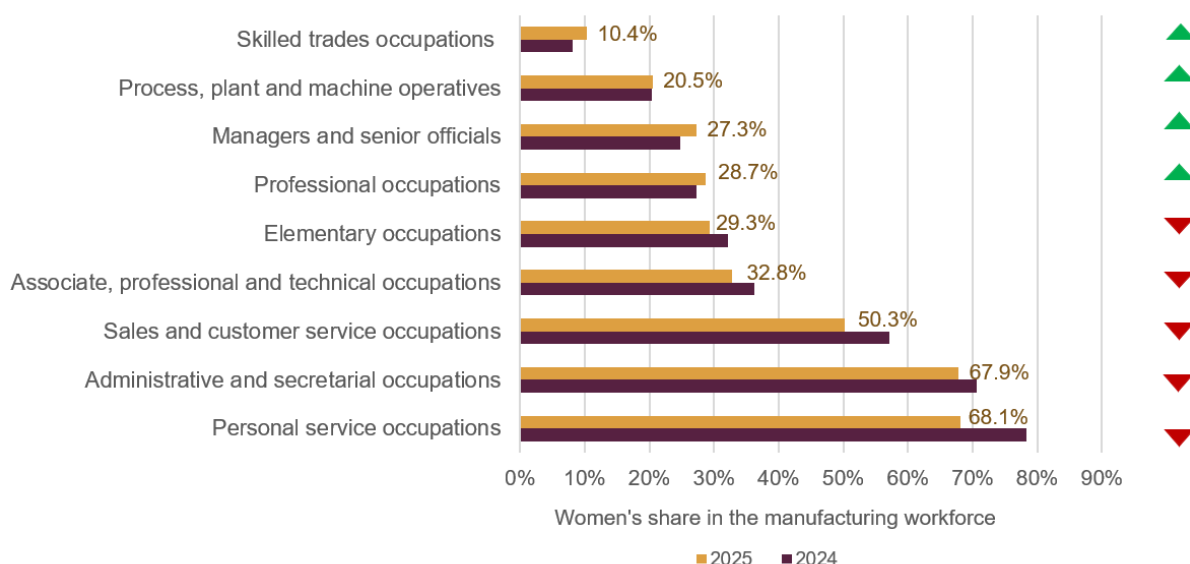
The 2025 data suggests some narrowing of occupational gender segregation in manufacturing. Progress continued in some of the sector's more male-dominated occupational groups, including management, professional occupations, and skilled trades. At the same time, women's representation declined across several occupations where they have traditionally accounted for a larger share of the workforce.

Women's representation in manager, director, and senior official roles increased by 2.5 percentage points, from 24.8% to 27.3%, continuing progress towards greater representation in manufacturing leadership. Representation in professional occupations also rose, from 27.2% to 28.7%, while the share of women in skilled trades increased from 8.2% to 10.4%. This marks a departure from the trend seen in previous years, although women remain markedly under-represented in skilled trades.

There was little change among process, plant, and machine operatives, where women's representation increased from 20.4% to 20.5%. In contrast, associate professional and technical occupations recorded a decline of 3.4 percentage points, from 36.2% to 32.8%, reversing some of the improvement seen in the previous year.

The largest falls occurred in occupations where women remain comparatively well represented. Women's share of personal service occupations fell by 10.3 percentage points, from 78.4% to 68.1%, while representation in sales and customer service occupations declined by 6.9 points, from 57.2% to 50.3%. Administrative and secretarial occupations and elementary occupations also recorded declines of around 3 percentage points (**Figure 2**).

FIGURE 2. SHARE OF WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING BY OCCUPATION, 2024 AND 2025



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025). Annual population survey. Workplace analysis. Occupations based on ONS Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2020.



Digital transformation and other structural changes are reshaping the occupational composition of the manufacturing workforce, with important implications for gender diversity.⁵ Between 2022 and 2025, the share of manufacturing employment accounted for by professional occupations increased from 15.9% to 19.1%.

In contrast, occupations that have traditionally employed larger numbers of both men and women declined as a share of total manufacturing employment. The sharpest decreases were recorded among process, plant, and machine operatives, whose share of employment fell from 19.2% to 16.2%. Administrative and secretarial occupations, where women remain comparatively well represented, also fell significantly, from 8.5% of manufacturing employment in 2022 to 6.8% in 2025.

These shifts reflect the growing importance of higher-skilled roles within manufacturing, and they raise important questions for gender equality. UK-specific and international evidence suggests that administrative and clerical occupations are among those most exposed to generative AI-enabled task change.^{6,7} As women continue to be over-represented in many of these roles, the ongoing digital transformation could disproportionately affect women's employment opportunities.

⁵ Castañeda-Navarrete, J. (2023). *Women in manufacturing: the case for a gender-transformative digitalisation*. Cambridge Industrial Innovation Policy, InterAct.

⁶ Roupakia, Z. (2026). *The Default Setting: Women, AI, and the Future of Work in UK Manufacturing*. Noetic AI.

⁷ ILO (2026). *Gen AI, occupational segregation and gender equality in the world of work*. Research brief.



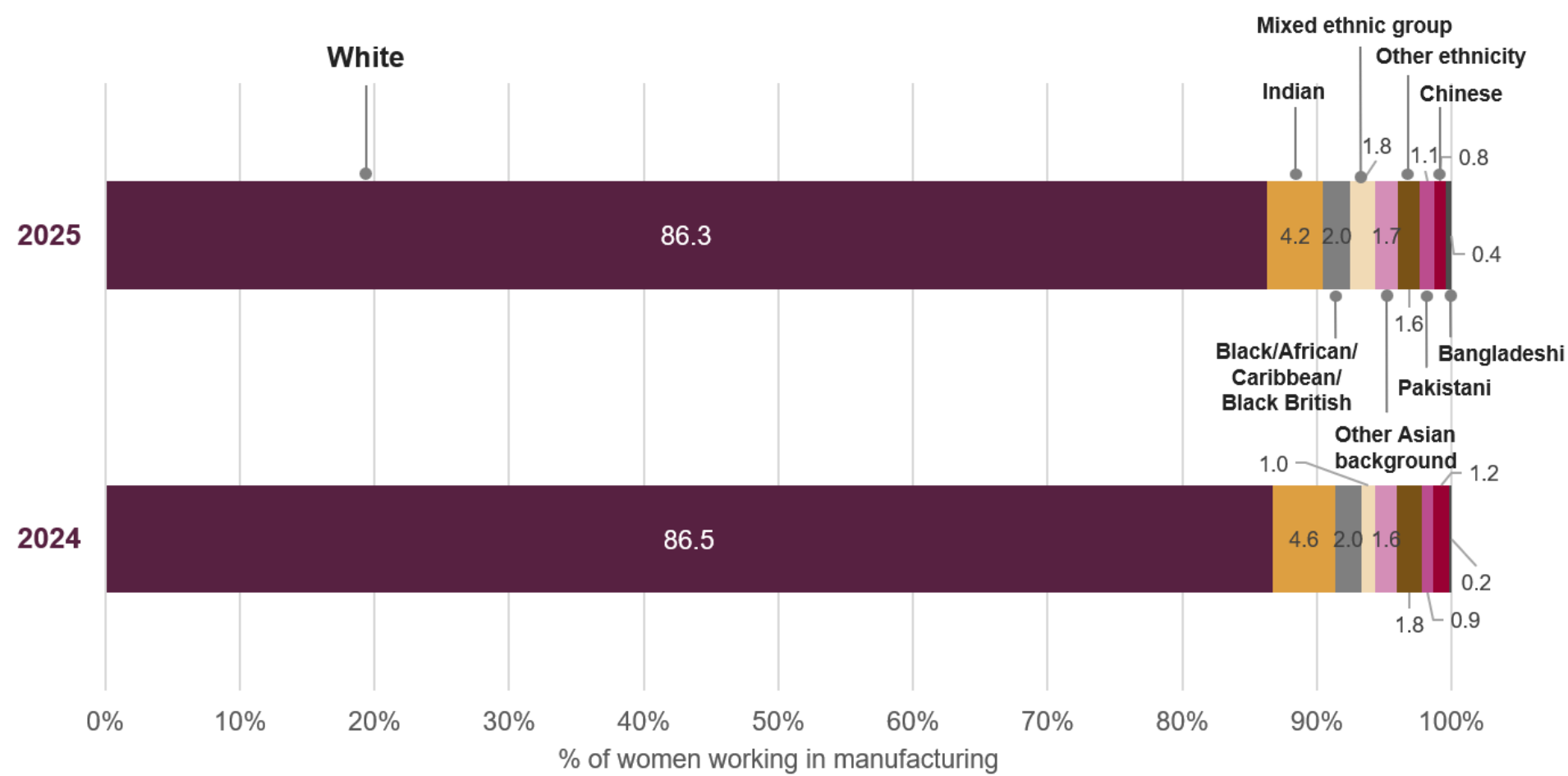
Representation of women from non-White backgrounds holds steady following recent gains

Women from non-White backgrounds represented 17.7% of the women in employment in 2025,⁸ while only accounted for 13.7% of women working in manufacturing, a figure that was broadly unchanged from 13.5% in 2024 (**Figure 3**). Within this overall picture, there were some shifts in representation across ethnic groups. Women from mixed or multiple ethnic groups recorded the largest increase, rising from 1.0% to 1.8%, while the share of Pakistani women increased from 0.9% to 1.1%. Representation among Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British women remained broadly stable at 2.0%, while the share of Indian women declined from 4.6% to 4.2%. Overall, the data suggests that the increase in ethnic diversity recorded in 2024 was broadly maintained in 2025.⁹

⁸ Office for National Statistics (2026). *Labour market status: Employment by ethnicity: Women (not seasonally adjusted)*.

⁹ Office for National Statistics (2026). *Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2025*. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 9535, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9535-1>

FIGURE 3. WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING BY ETHNIC GROUP, 2024 AND 2025

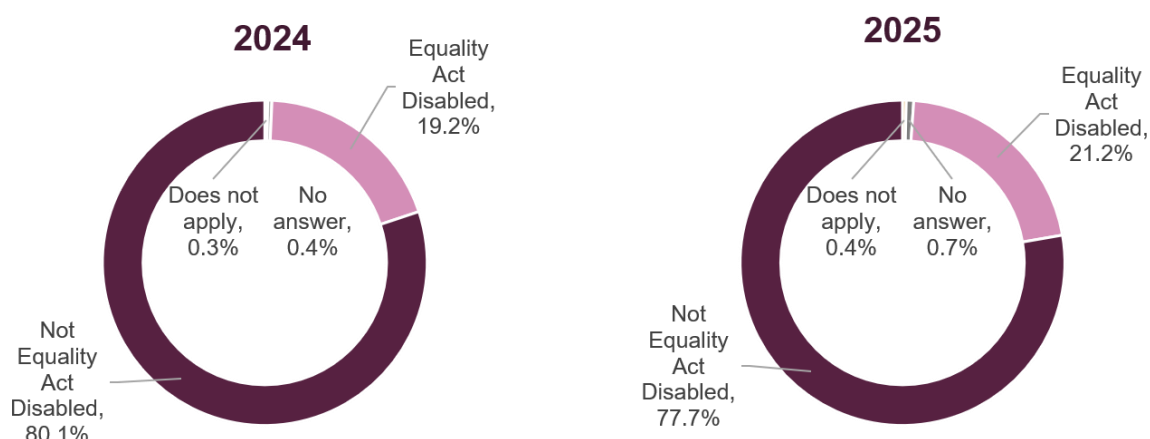


Source: Office for National Statistics (2026). *Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2025*. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 9535, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9535-1>

Representation of disabled women in manufacturing increased in 2025

Disabled women, as defined by the Equality Act 2010, accounted for 21.2% of women working in manufacturing in 2025, up from 19.2% in 2024 (**Figure 4**). In comparison, 15.9% of the overall manufacturing workforce was Equality Act disabled in 2025, meaning disabled people were better represented among women in manufacturing than across the manufacturing workforce as a whole.

FIGURE 4. WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING BY DISABILITY, 2024 AND 2025



Source: Office for National Statistics (2026). *Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2025*. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 9535, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9535-1>

Signs of progress for women in traditionally male-dominated manufacturing industries

Women's representation continued to vary considerably across manufacturing industries in 2025. The highest shares were found in wearing apparel (34.7%), basic pharmaceutical products (34.4%), food products (33.9%), textiles (30.0%), and leather and related products (30.0%). In contrast, women accounted for fewer than one in six workers in wood and wood and cork products (8.5%), repair and installation of machinery and equipment (12.4%), motor vehicles, trailers, and semi-trailers (14.6%), machinery and equipment (15.0%), and other non-metallic mineral products (15.7%) (**Table 1**).

Encouragingly, some of the strongest gains in women's representation occurred in industries where women have traditionally been under-represented. Women's share increased by 5.7 percentage points in coke and refined petroleum products, reaching 18.2%, and by 4.3 points in other transport equipment, reaching 18.1%. Basic metals also recorded notable progress, with women's representation rising by 2.9 percentage points to 16.0%. But the wider picture remains mixed, with declines in several industries where women have had higher representation, particularly leather and related products, wearing apparel, and other manufacturing.¹⁰

¹⁰ ONS (2026). JOBS03 Employee jobs by industry (UK totals) and JOBS04 Self-Employed jobs by industry (UK totals).

TABLE 1. REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN BY MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY, 2024–2025

Manufacturing industry	2024	2025	Change 2024–2025
Wearing apparel	38.6%	34.7%	-3.9
Basic pharmaceutical products	36.3%	34.4%	-1.9
Food products	34.2%	33.9%	-0.3
Textiles	28.3%	30.0%	1.7
Leather and related products	40.0%	30.0%	-10.0
Chemicals and chemical products	29.4%	29.7%	0.3
Beverages and tobacco	27.1%	28.4%	1.2
Printing and reproduction of recorded media	26.6%	26.6%	0.0
Other manufacturing	29.5%	26.0%	-3.5
Electrical equipment	23.8%	23.3%	-0.5
Rubber and plastic products	21.4%	22.8%	1.4
Computer, electronic, and optical products	22.2%	21.6%	-0.6
Paper and paper products	20.4%	20.1%	-0.3
Coke and refined petroleum products	12.5%	18.2%	5.7
Other transport equipment	13.8%	18.1%	4.3
Furniture	21.1%	17.9%	-3.2
Basic metals	13.2%	16.0%	2.9
Fabricated metal products	15.5%	15.8%	0.2
Other non-metallic mineral products	15.4%	15.7%	0.3
Machinery and equipment n.e.c.	15.6%	15.0%	-0.6
Motor vehicles, trailers, and semi-trailers	14.6%	14.6%	0.0
Repair and installation of machinery and equipment	12.0%	12.4%	0.3
Wood and wood and cork products	8.1%	8.5%	0.4

Note: Figures correspond to shares of the annual average of the sum of employee and self-employed jobs.

Source: ONS (2026). JOBS03 Employee jobs by industry (UK totals) and JOBS04 Self-Employed jobs by industry (UK totals).

The gender pay gap in manufacturing continues to narrow

In 2025 women in manufacturing earned 14.8% less than men based on median hourly earnings, a marginal improvement from 14.9% in 2024.¹¹ But the manufacturing gender pay gap remained 2 percentage points above the UK-wide gap of 12.8%. For full-time manufacturing employees, the gender pay gap was 12.5%, while for part-time employees it was 4.8%.

Women are more likely than men to work part-time in manufacturing. Almost one in four women (24.7%) worked part-time in 2025, compared with just 6.8% of men. Compared with 2024, the share of women working part-time increased by around 1 percentage point, whereas the share of men working part-time showed no change. These differences in working patterns remain important when considering gender disparities in pay and progression across the sector.¹²

¹¹ Difference between average hourly earnings (excluding overtime) of men and women as a proportion of men's average hourly earnings (excluding overtime), based on median values, as it is less affected by extreme values.

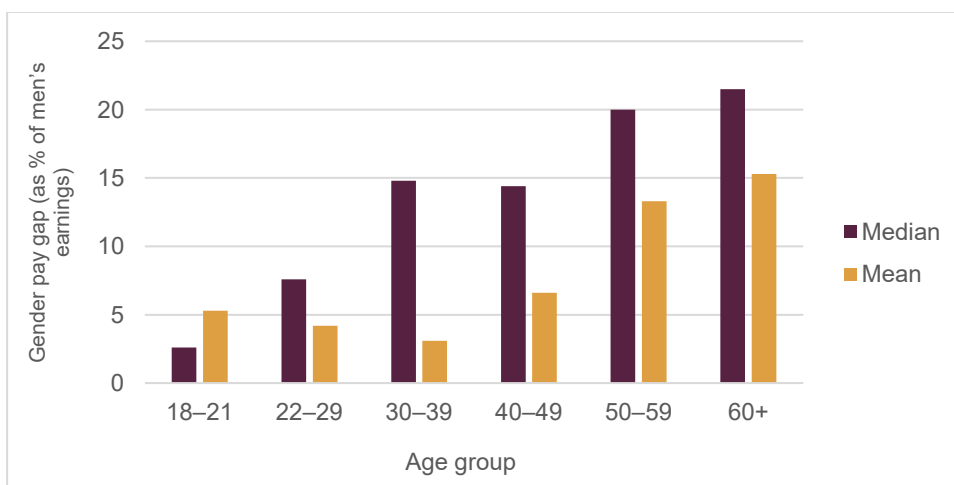
¹² Nomis (2026). *Workforce jobs by industry (SIC 2007) and sex – unadjusted*.



The gender pay gap in manufacturing continues to increase with age. Among all manufacturing employees, the median gap was just 2.6% for those aged 18–21 and 7.6% for those aged 22–29, rising to 14.8% for those aged 30–39 and reaching 20.0% for workers aged 50–59 and 21.5% for those aged 60 and over (**Figure 5**).

There are also differences across manufacturing occupations. Among occupations for which estimates are available, some of the largest median pay gaps were found among business and public service associate professionals (20.2%), science, engineering, and technology associate professionals (18.6%), and skilled trades occupations (17.2%). By manufacturing industry, some of the largest median gaps were recorded in computer, electronic, and optical products (23.6%), repair and installation of machinery and equipment (23.3%), electrical equipment (22.4%), and machinery and equipment (17.3%).

FIGURE 5. GENDER PAY GAP BY AGE GROUP, 2025 (ALL EMPLOYEES)



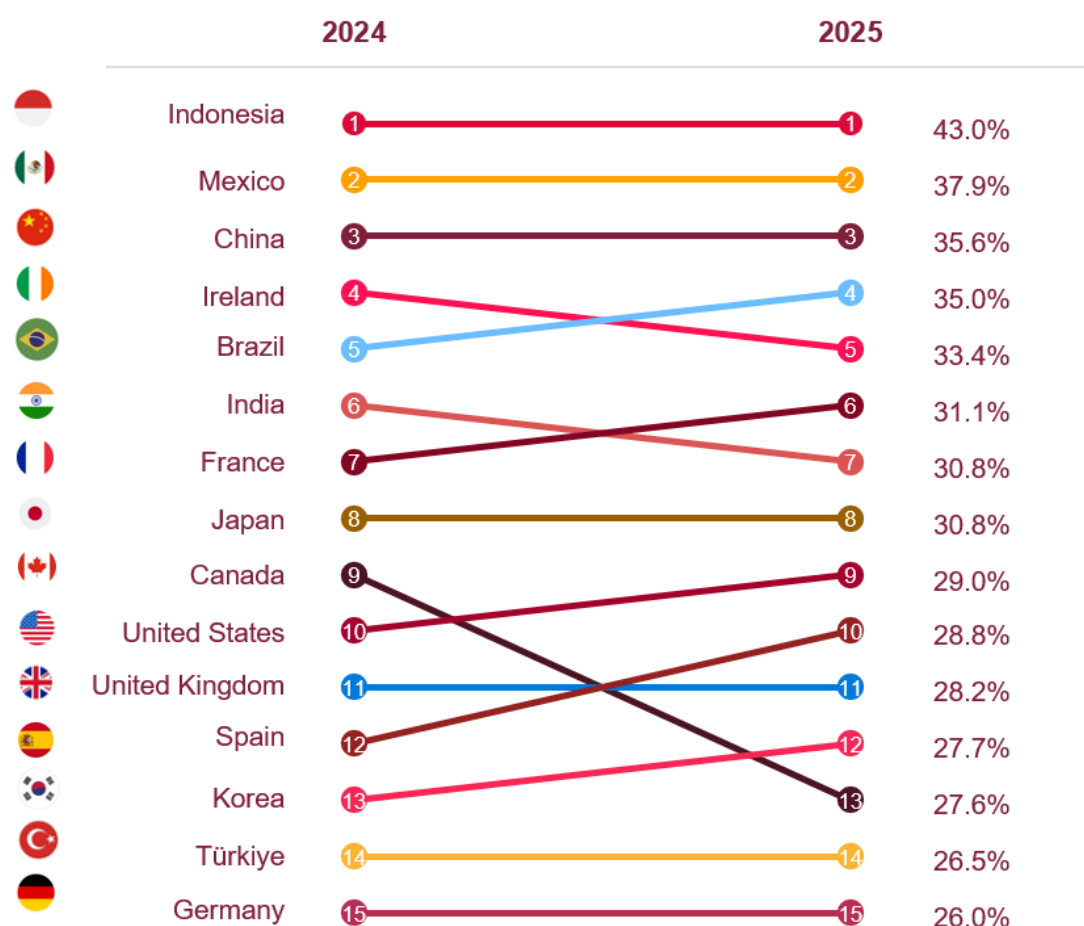
Source: Office for National Statistics (2026). Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings.

The UK remains 11th among leading manufacturing nations for women's representation

Despite gradual progress in many countries, the representation of women in manufacturing remains uneven across the world's largest manufacturing economies. In 2025 Indonesia remained at the top, with women accounting for 43.0% of the manufacturing workforce, followed by Mexico at 37.9% and China at 35.6%. Ireland moved into fourth place, reaching 35.0% and overtaking Brazil, where women's representation fell to 33.4%.

The UK remained in 11th place in 2025, with women accounting for 28.2% of the manufacturing workforce, down slightly from the previous year. While its ranking was unchanged, the UK remained ahead of Spain, Korea, Türkiye, and Germany. Elsewhere, France and the United States moved up the ranking, while India and Canada lost ground. Overall, the figures show that the UK has broadly maintained its recent position, but a sizeable gap remains between women's representation in UK manufacturing and that of the highest-ranking countries.

FIGURE 6. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING IN TOP MANUFACTURING COUNTRIES, 2024 AND 2025



Note: China data is based on 2023 and 2024 figures, while Indonesia data is based on 2022 and 2023 figures, reflecting the latest available information at the time of analysis.

Source: Authors, based on the ILO (2026). ILOSTAT explorer. Employment by sex and economic activity; National Bureau of Statistics of China (2026). *China Population and Employment Statistics Yearbook 2024. Employed Persons at Year-end in Urban Units Excluding Private Units by Sector.*



2. Understanding flexible working

Flexible working expanded rapidly following the COVID-19 pandemic, but researchers have been studying workplace flexibility for decades. This section discusses how academic evidence provides useful lessons for organisations deciding how flexibility should work in practice.

One helpful distinction is between flexibility *of* employees and flexibility *for* employees.¹³ Flexibility *of* employees is primarily about an organisation's ability to deploy its workforce in different ways as business needs change. Flexibility *for* employees, by contrast, gives people greater choice over their working circumstances.

Within flexibility *for* employees, it is also useful to distinguish between *flexible work* and *flexible work arrangements* (FWA). Flexible work relates to the contractual status of employment, such as self-employment, part-time jobs, casual jobs, or zero-hours contracts, which allows some flexibility in the employee's time commitment to work compared to full-time employment. In comparison, FWA refers to arrangements that give employees greater choice over when and where they work. Examples include flexible start and finish times, remote or hybrid working, and other arrangements that give employees more control over their working patterns. For simplicity, in this report we use "flexible working" to refer to both flexible work status and arrangements.¹⁴

But the distinction matters: Bal and Izak's review of 262 studies published between 1970 and 2018 found that different forms of flexibility can benefit organisational performance, but flexibility

¹³ Bal, P. M. and Izak, M. (2021). Paradigms of Flexibility: A Systematic Review of Research on Workplace Flexibility. *European Management Review*, 18(1): 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12423>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

designed for employees is more consistently associated with benefits for employees. Their review also suggests that FWA can provide greater mutual benefits than more contractual forms of flexible work.¹⁵

Why flexibility matters to employers

More recent research provides further evidence of the positive benefits of workplace flexibility for both employees and organisations. Studies associate FWA with higher job satisfaction, stronger retention, and improved work–life balance, particularly for employees with caring responsibilities.^{16,17,18,19} FWA is also found to be the most inclusive type of workplace flexibility, as it gives employees agency and a voice over when and where they work.^{20,21}

One explanation for this finding is that flexibility can give employees greater control over their work, which can support engagement and reduce the intention to leave an organisation.²² Research has also linked workplace flexibility with productivity²³ and, in some settings, creativity and innovation.²⁴ But for employers, the value of flexibility goes beyond employee satisfaction and retention. Flexible working can also support a more inclusive workforce. Evidence suggests that flexible practices can help older employees to remain in employment for longer, for example by reducing conflicts between work and family responsibilities.²⁵ Flexible working-time arrangements have also been associated with greater participation by women in paid work.²⁶ Flexible and homeworking practices may similarly improve employment opportunities and

¹⁵ Godwin, E. S., Mahmood, S. and Eke, P. N. (2023). Ontology of flexibility in work and its implication to inclusive future workplace: case of manufacturing industry, Marginalised Gender Identities – How can Intellectual Activism transform Work and Organisation. Gender, Work & Organization Conference, 28–30 June 2023, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

¹⁶ Bainbridge, H. T. J. and Townsend, K. (2020). The effects of offering flexible work practices to employees with unpaid caregiving responsibilities for elderly or disabled family members. *Human Resource Management*, 59(5): 483–495. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22007>

¹⁷ Fahy, M., Dowling-Hetherington, L., Phillips, D., Moloney, B., Duffy, C., Paul, G., Fealy, G., Kroll, T. and Lafferty, A. (2025). “If my boss wasn't so accommodating, I don't know what I would do”: Workplace supports for carers and the role of line managers and co-workers in mediating informal flexibility. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 35(1): 302–318. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12566>

¹⁸ Misra, K. (2024). Work-life flexibility practices in context: A gendered cross-cultural analysis. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 34(3): 810–829. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12533>

¹⁹ Kossek, E. E., Porter, C. M., Rosokha, L. M., Wilson, K. S., Rupp, D. E. and Law-Penrose, J. (2024). Advancing work–life supportive contexts for the “haves” and “have nots”: Integrating supervisor training with work–life flexibility to impact exhaustion or engagement. *Human Resource Management*, 63(3): 397–411. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22207>

²⁰ Wheatley, D., Broome, M. R., Dobbins, T., Hopkins, B. and Powell, O. (2023). Navigating Choppy Water: Flexibility Ripple Effects in the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Remote and Hybrid Working. *Work, Employment and Society*, 38(5): 1379–1402.

²¹ Godwin, E. S., Mahmood, S. and Eke, P. N. (2023). Op. cit.

²² Haines, V. Y., Guerrero, S. and Marchand, A. (2024). Flexible work arrangements and employee turnover intentions: contrasting pathways. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 35(11): 1970–1995, DOI: 10.1080/09585192.2024.2323510

²³ Boltz, M., Cockx, B., Diaz, A. M. and Salas, L. M. (2023). How does working-time flexibility affect workers' productivity in a routine job? Evidence from a field experiment. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 61(1): 159–187. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12695>

²⁴ Azeem, M. M. and Kotey, B. (2023). Innovation in SMEs: the role of flexible work arrangements and market competition. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 34(1): 92–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1961162>

²⁵ Cui, G., Sun, J. (James) and Kooij, D. T. A. M. (2024). A role perspective on flexible human resource practices and older workers' early retirement intentions. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 35(18): 3081–3111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2024.2392830>

²⁶ Maraziotis, F. (2024) Flexibility for equality: Examining the impact of flexible working time arrangements on women's convergence in working hours. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 62(2): 410–445. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12787>

outcomes for disabled and neurodivergent people.^{27,28} These studies suggest the enabling role of workplace flexibility in creating an inclusive workplace environment.

Policy is not enough

Having a flexible working policy does not necessarily mean employees will experience flexibility. Human resources (HR) has an important role to play in turning an organisation's commitment to flexible working into workable policies and processes.^{29,30} But research repeatedly points to another critical factor: line managers. Managers often have considerable influence over whether flexible arrangements are agreed and, just as importantly, how they operate day to day. Fahy et al. (2025), for example, in a paper titled "If my boss wasn't so accommodating, I don't know what I would do", highlight the importance of "informal flexibility" that comes from managers' discretion and co-workers' understanding of such decisions.³¹

But studies have found that supervisor bias shapes workplace flexibility practices.³² This means employees working under the same organisational policy may have very different experiences, depending on their manager or team. And this creates a potential risk, namely flexibility stigma. Employees may worry that using flexible arrangements will lead colleagues or managers to see them as less committed to their jobs or careers, and research suggests that organisational and team cultures can influence whether this happens.^{33,34,35} This issue also has implications for equality and inclusion. These studies highlight that it is often women, particularly mothers, who face difficulties such as flexibility stigma because of organisational culture and a disproportionate unpaid care burden.

²⁷ Branicki, L. J., Brammer, S., Brosnan, M., Lazaro, A. G., Lattanzio, S. and Newnes, L. (2024). Factors shaping the employment outcomes of neurodivergent and neurotypical people: Exploring the role of flexible and homeworking practices. *Human Resource Management*, 63(6): 1001–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22243>

²⁸ Klinksiek, I. D., Jammaers, E. and Taskin, L. (2023). A framework for disability in the new ways of working. *Human Resource Management Review*, 33(2): 100954.

²⁹ Jia, J., Wu, L., Xie, Y., He, X., Ren, Y. and Xu, S. (2024). A meta-analysis of the antecedents of flexible work arrangements utilization: based on Job demands-resources model. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 35(14): 2392–2431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2024.2326843>

³⁰ Reimers, C., Nilsen, E. A. and Olsen, T. H. (2026). Explorers, negotiators, and diplomats: emergent HR roles in flexible hybrid work implementation. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 37(1): 112–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2025.2600371>

³¹ Fahy, M. et al. (2025). Op. cit.

³² Clarke, N., Alshenafli, N. and Garavan, T. (2019). Upward influence tactics and their effects on job performance ratings and flexible working arrangements: The mediating roles of mutual recognition respect and mutual appraisal respect. *Human Resource Management*, 58(4): 397–416. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21967>

³³ Bari, L., Turner, T. and O'Sullivan, M. (2021). Gender Differences in Solo Self-employment: Gendered Flexibility and the Effects of Parenthood. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28(6): 2180–2198. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12724>

³⁴ Borgkvist, A., Moore, V., Crabb, S. and Elliott, J. (2021). Critical considerations of workplace flexibility "for all" and gendered outcomes: Men being flexible about their flexibility. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(6): 2076–2090. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12680>

³⁵ Xiang, N., Whitehouse, G., Tomaszewski, W. and Martin, B. (2021). The Benefits and Penalties of Formal and Informal Flexible Working-Time Arrangements: Evidence from a Cohort Study of Australian Mothers. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 33(14): 2939–2960. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.wlv.ac.uk/10.1080/09585192.2021.1897642>

What can organisations do?

The evidence points to several practical priorities:

- **Make flexibility part of the workforce strategy, not just an individual accommodation.** Where roles allow it, organisations can consider making flexible options widely available rather than treating flexibility as a special arrangement for certain employees. This may help to normalise its use and reduce flexibility stigma,³⁶ and it is aligned with the recent changes in regulation on flexible working.
- **Equip HR to support consistent and fair decisions.** HR teams need to understand both the regulatory requirements and the wider strategic implications of flexible working. They can also play an important role in supporting negotiations between employees and managers and ensuring that organisational policies translate into fair practice.^{37,38}
- **Invest in managers, not just policies.** Managers need to have the confidence and knowledge to discuss flexible working requests, manage flexible teams, and make decisions consistently. Evidence suggests that supervisor support can significantly influence whether flexibility produces positive outcomes for employees.³⁹
- **Pay attention to informal flexibility.** Small, everyday adjustments agreed between employees and managers can be as important as formal policies. Organisations therefore need a culture in which managers and colleagues understand why flexibility is valuable and employees feel able to use it without fearing negative career consequences.
- **Keep policies aligned with regulation.** Organisations should ensure that HR teams and managers understand current flexible working requirements, such as the Employment Rights Act 2025,⁴⁰ which specifies employees' right to be fully informed of the reasons for rejection when an employee's request for FWA is rejected. These reasons also must be aligned with at least one of the eight specific statutory business reasons set out in the Employment Rights Act.

³⁶ Godwin, E. S., Mahmood, S. and Eke, P. N. (2023). Op. cit.

³⁷ Garcia, M. F., Liu, H. F., Triana, M. d. C. and Treviño, L. J. (2025). Support for Sustainable Development Goal 5 and Social Performance: The Role of Diversity Targets, Work-Life Balance Practices, and Female Representation. *Human Resource Management*, 64(5): 1457–1479. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22312>.

³⁸ Pak, J., Heidarian Ghaleh, H., Ma, Z. and Akhtar, M. N. (2025). Antecedents and outcomes of enabling HR practices: The paradox of consistency and flexibility. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 35(2): 371–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12571>

³⁹ Kossek, E. E., Porter, C. M., Rosokha, L. M., Wilson, K. S., Rupp, D. E. and Law-Penrose, J. (2024). Advancing work-life supportive contexts for the “haves” and “have nots”: Integrating supervisor training with work-life flexibility to impact exhaustion or engagement. *Human Resource Management*, 63(3): 397–411. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22207>

⁴⁰ Department for Business and Trade (2026). Factsheet: Flexible Working

3. Flexible working: perspectives from UK manufacturing employees and leaders

This section draws on evidence collected in 2026 to explore employees' and leaders' perspectives on flexible working in the manufacturing sector. The evidence includes an online survey conducted between April and July 2026, which provides a broad overview of experiences, perceptions, and working practices across the sector. This is complemented with insights from a focus group discussion held in June 2026 and three case study interviews conducted between August and September 2026.

A total of 83 individuals completed the online survey. Respondents represented different groups working in manufacturing (**Figure 7**), with around two-thirds of respondents identifying as women (66.3%), 15.7% as men, 15.7% preferring not to disclose their gender, and 2.4% identifying themselves in another gender category.

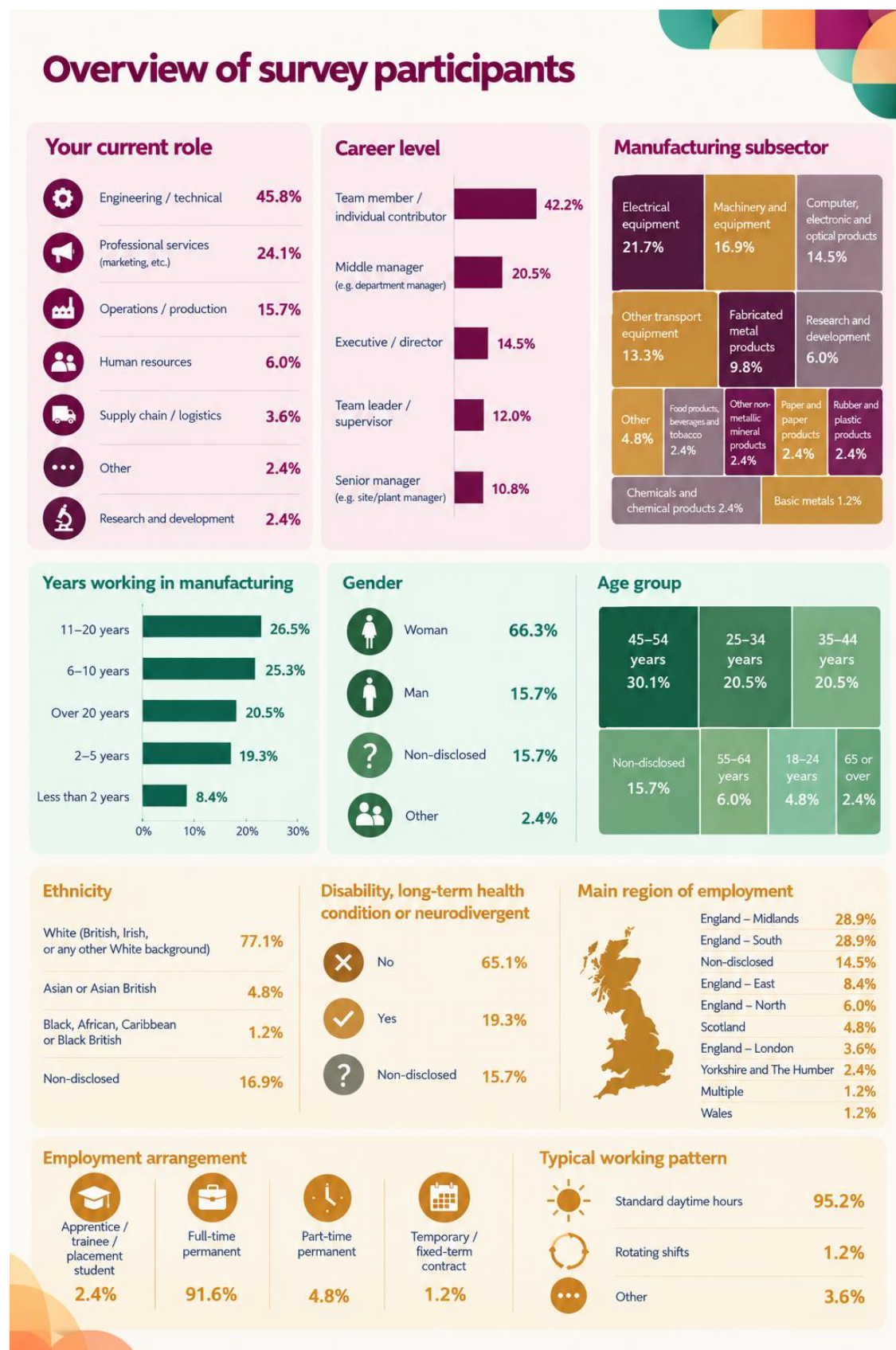
Survey participants were predominantly experienced and established within the manufacturing workforce. More than seven in ten respondents had worked in manufacturing for 6 years or longer (72.3%), including 26.5% with 11–20 years of experience and 20.5% with more than 20 years. Respondents also represented a range of career levels: 42.2% were team members or individual contributors, while the remainder included middle managers (20.5%), executives or directors (14.5%), team leaders or supervisors (12.0%), and senior managers (10.8%). This provides perspectives from both team members and those with management or leadership responsibilities.

Engineering and technical roles accounted for the largest occupational group (45.8%), followed by professional services (24.1%) and operations or production (15.7%). Respondents worked across a range of manufacturing subsectors, with the largest groups coming from electrical equipment (21.7%), machinery and equipment (16.9%), computer, electronic, and optical products (14.5%), and other transport equipment (13.3%).

The survey also captured a range of demographic characteristics. Respondents were mostly aged 45–54 (30.1%), while those aged 25–34 and 35–44 each represented 20.5% of the sample. Most respondents identified as White (77.1%), with smaller proportions identifying as Asian or Asian British (4.8%) and Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British (1.2%); 16.9% preferred not to disclose their ethnicity. Around one in five respondents (19.3%) reported a disability, long-term health condition, or neurodivergence.

Most respondents were in full-time permanent employment (91.6%), with small proportions working part-time (4.8%), as apprentices, trainees, or placement students (2.4%), or on temporary or fixed-term contracts (1.2%). The sample was also overwhelmingly characterised by standard daytime working hours (95.2%), with only 1.2% reporting rotating shifts and 3.6% another working pattern.

FIGURE 7. OVERVIEW OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



Note: Number of observations = 83.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2026). *Flexible working in manufacturing survey*.



What forms of flexible working are available in manufacturing?

Flexible start and finish times were the most widely used form of flexible working, reported by around two-thirds of respondents (66%); this was followed by remote or hybrid working (55%) and informal flexibility based on manager discretion (42%). Other forms of flexibility were much less commonly used, including compressed hours and part-time working (both 8%), predictable or fixed shifts (5%), and easy shift swapping (1%). Only two survey participants (2.4%) reported that job sharing was available in their roles, and the same number reported that term-time working was available. None reported using or planning to use either arrangement.

These findings suggest that many organisations continue to rely on a narrow range of flexible working practices, with more innovative arrangements such as job sharing remaining uncommon. This opportunity area was also highlighted in a roundtable organised at the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland (**Box 7**). But the case of HEINEKEN UK demonstrates that a wider range of options can be successfully implemented when flexibility is approached in a creative and inclusive way (**Box 1**).

HEINEKEN UK is the UK's leading beer, cider, and pub company, employing approximately 2,100 employees across manufacturing, logistics, commercial, and administrative functions. Recognising the importance of retaining skilled employees and adapting to changing workforce expectations, the company has been developing flexible working arrangements for more than a decade.

Following a significant refresh of its approach in 2019, HEINEKEN UK continues to evolve its flexible working offer to support both employee wellbeing and operational performance. We spoke to Laura Stephens and Simon Wright about the company's flexible working journey and the lessons learnt from implementing flexibility in a manufacturing environment.

For the organisation, flexible working is defined as giving colleagues greater control over when, where, or how they work, wherever operationally possible. Central to this approach is the belief that flexibility supports inclusion by recognising that colleagues have different needs at different stages of their lives and careers.

Flexible working requires flexible solutions

HEINEKEN UK recognises that a "one-size-fits-all" model is not feasible in manufacturing. Instead, it offers a broad portfolio of formal and informal arrangements that can be adapted to different roles and operational requirements. These include hybrid working for some office-based positions, part-time working, job sharing, compressed hours, annualised hours, alternative shift patterns, adjusted start and finish times, reduced-hours arrangements, and career breaks.

Rather than focusing on whether a particular request can be accommodated, managers are encouraged to explore how flexibility might work while meeting business needs. This mindset shift, from "Why it won't work" to "How could it work?", is supported through manager guidance, training, and support from HR people partners and employee relations specialists. Senior leaders have championed this approach, helping to build a culture where managers explore solutions rather than focusing on constraints.

Job sharing as a manufacturing innovation

One of the most successful flexible working practices within the organisation has been job sharing, particularly for shift-based manufacturing roles. While job sharing remains uncommon in manufacturing, the organisation has found it to be an effective way of retaining skilled employees while maintaining operational coverage. Two colleagues share responsibility for a single full-time role, often dividing shifts equally between them, with arrangements formalised through contractual agreements.

Job sharing has proven particularly valuable for colleagues approaching retirement who wish to reduce their working hours without leaving the workforce entirely. By retaining experienced employees for longer, the organisation can preserve critical operational knowledge and support the transfer of skills to newer colleagues entering the workforce. In some cases, job-sharing arrangements have facilitated mentoring relationships between experienced colleagues and recently qualified apprentices, helping to accelerate learning and capability development. Building on this success, the company has introduced a job-share register, enabling interested colleagues to be matched with potential partners, widening access to the arrangement across the business.

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Annualised hours for seasonal manufacturing demand

The organisation also uses annualised hours to provide flexibility while responding to fluctuations in demand. In production sites with seasonal peaks, such as their Hereford-based cider makers, which make well-known brands including Inch's and Strongbow, employees work a set number of annual hours but distribute those hours unevenly across the year. This allows staffing levels to increase during busy periods and reduce during quieter seasons without compromising employee security.

The annualised hours system also incorporates a “time bank”, enabling employees to work additional hours during periods of high demand and reclaim those hours when workloads are lower. This not only supports operational resilience but can also create opportunities for employees to spend more time with their families when production requirements allow. The arrangement has also been used to support training and team-building activities during quieter periods.

Supporting fairness through flexibility

A key principle underpinning the organisation's approach is that fairness does not mean treating everyone identically. Instead, fairness means considering requests consistently while recognising that different roles require different forms of flexibility. Employees are encouraged to request flexible arrangements for a variety of reasons, including wellbeing, work–life balance, caring responsibilities, phased retirement, and lifestyle preferences.

To support consistency, flexible working policies are accompanied by detailed manager guidance, workshops, case studies, and support from HR professionals. Requests are typically trialled before being formally agreed to ensure that arrangements work effectively for the employee and the wider team.

The organisation also actively challenges perceptions that flexible working might limit career progression. Interviewees highlighted examples of employees on reduced-hours arrangements successfully securing promotions, demonstrating that flexible working is not seen as a barrier to advancement.

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Lessons for manufacturers

Although the organisation does not formally measure the impact of flexible working through dedicated key performance indicators, managers report positive effects on retention, wellbeing, engagement, and workforce stability. Flexible working has enabled experienced employees to remain in the business longer, supported knowledge transfer between generations, and prompted increasing numbers of employees to explore flexible arrangements through visible role modelling.

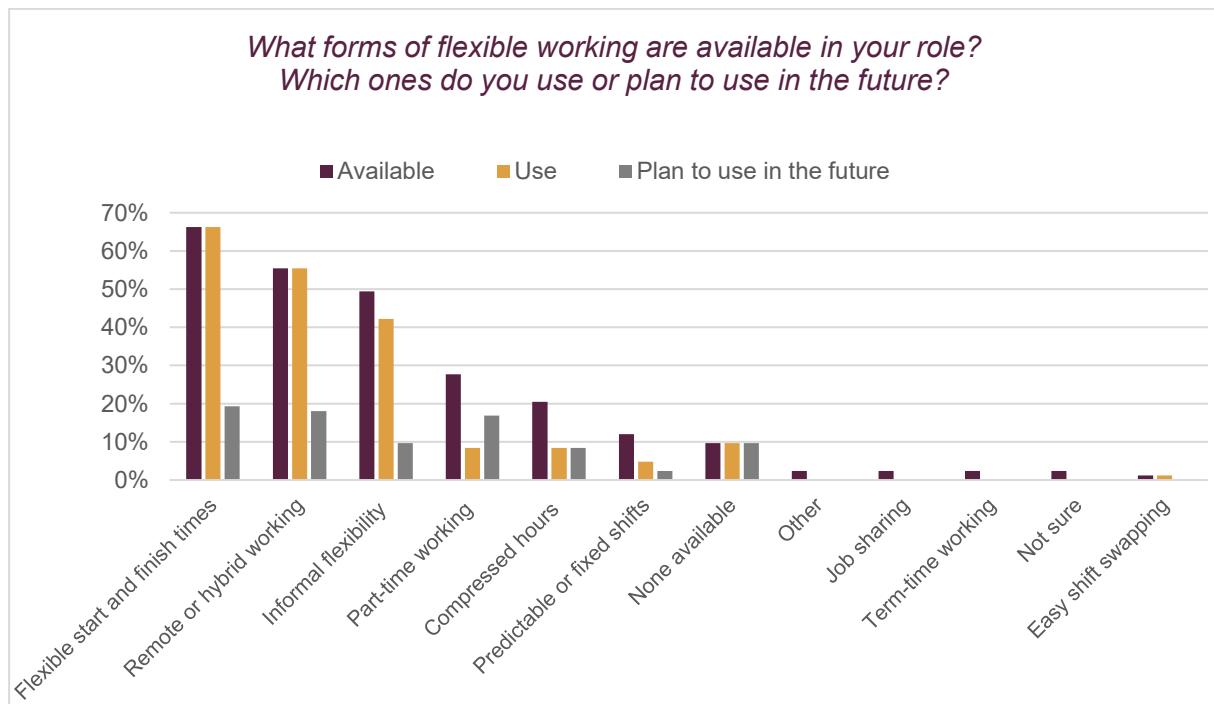
The organisation continues to refine its approach and explore how flexible working could support broader workforce diversity goals, particularly attracting and retaining women in manufacturing roles. Emerging evidence from external research commissioned by the company suggests that perceptions of flexibility can influence whether women consider manufacturing careers, highlighting the importance of communicating available options without creating unrealistic expectations.

For other manufacturers, the organisation's message is simple: flexible working in manufacturing requires creativity, collaboration, and ongoing adaptation, but by focusing on outcomes rather than traditional working patterns, employers can identify solutions that benefit both employees and the business.

Source: Interview with Laura Stephens, People Partner – Supply Chain, HEINEKEN Herefordshire and Simon Wright, Brewery Director, HEINEKEN Manchester.

Despite the continued reliance of many organisations on a limited set of flexible working practices, the survey findings reveal growing demand for greater flexibility in how work is organised. Around one in five respondents planned to use flexible start and finish times (19%) or remote/hybrid working (18%) in the future, while interest in part-time working (17%) was notably higher than its current use (**Figure 8**).

FIGURE 8. ALTERNATIVE WORKING PATTERNS AND SHIFT FLEXIBILITY REMAIN UNDERUSED



Note: Number of observations = 83.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2026). *Flexible working in manufacturing survey*.

In manufacturing, where production schedules, staffing requirements and shift systems often shape when work can be performed, employers may need to explore a wider range of approaches to flexibility. This is particularly important given evidence that traditional shift working arrangements can create barriers to participation for some groups of workers. As discussed in **Box 2**, organisations that review long-established shift patterns, engage employees in redesign processes, and adopt a more demand-led approach to workforce planning may identify opportunities to improve both workforce inclusion and operational performance.

BOX 2. OPTASHIFT: INCREASING DIVERSITY THROUGH FLEXIBLE SHIFT WORK MODELS

Manufacturing is one of the most gender-segregated sectors of the UK economy, and shift work may contribute to this imbalance. Analysis by optashift of the most recent Office for National Statistics data (2017) on shift work found that there was approximately one woman for every 5.6 men working shifts, compared with around one woman for every 1.3 men working shifts across all UK industries.

Many manufacturing shift systems have evolved incrementally over time and may reflect historical operating arrangements rather than current business requirements. As labour market conditions change and employers seek to attract and retain a more diverse workforce, optimising shift work models presents opportunities to increase flexibility without necessarily reducing operational effectiveness.

Some approaches to consider:

Reviewing demand and capacity

- Qualifying whether existing shift arrangements align to current operational requirements or reflect legacy practices
- Analysing production demand and staffing requirements to identify opportunities for alternative shift patterns
- Considering adapting operating models (including line utilisation and production processes) to create opportunities for alternative working hours
- Examining whether operational support functions need to be aligned with current shift arrangements or could adopt different shift patterns
- Testing assumptions about operational constraints using workforce and production data rather than relying solely on established practice

Creating greater flexibility within shift patterns

- Designing a suite of shift patterns that meet the identified capacity model whilst increasing choice for employees
- Including or expanding opportunities for part-time contracts that align to identified demand and cover requirements by hour and day
- Using term-time or seasonal contracts to respond to predictable variations in demand
- Assessing the capabilities of systems that underpin scheduling flexibility such as shift swaps, job sharing, etc.
- Considering predictable scheduling arrangements like fixed shifts and rostered holidays that improve shift workers' ability to plan caring responsibilities and other commitments

Engaging employees in redesign

- Involving employees, Trade Unions and departmental management representatives when reviewing shift work arrangements
- Using sentiment and preference analysis to identify what forms of flexibility are most valued by the workforce

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- Encouraging employees to propose alternative approaches rather than limiting discussions to existing shift models or those proposed by management
- Being transparent about operational objectives, constraints and trade-offs when it comes to discussing options
- Providing opportunities for workers to directly influence the design and implementation of new arrangements

Supporting organisational change

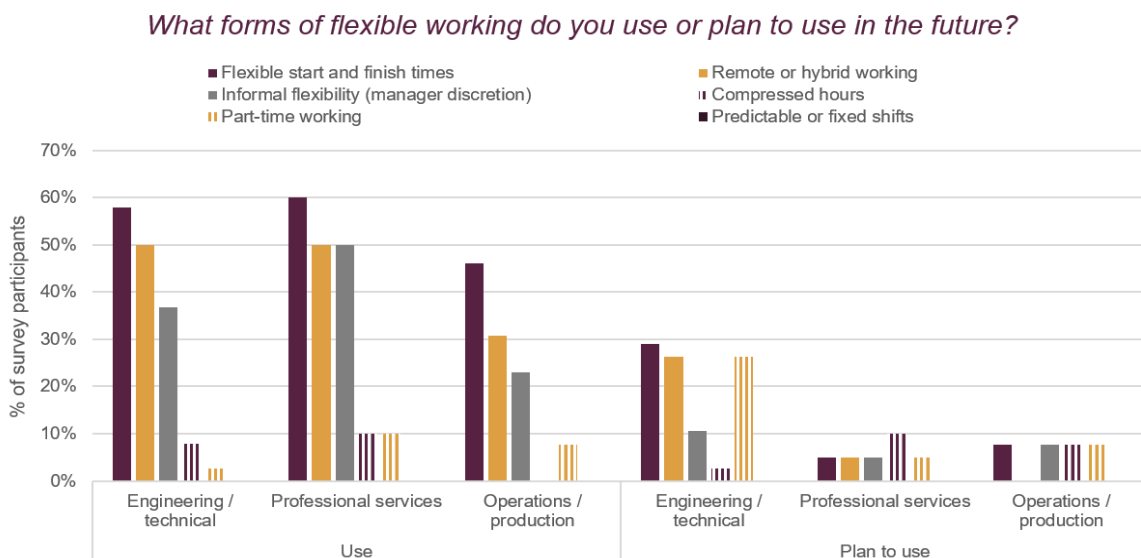
- Recognising that shift working arrangements are fundamental to performance and can be strongly embedded in workplace culture
- Communicating clearly the evidence-led rationale for any proposed changes
- Considering the impacts of change across different employee groups and stakeholders
- Monitoring workforce diversity, wellbeing, recruitment and retention outcomes
- Evaluating both operational performance and people-related impacts when assessing the success of revised shift working arrangements

The aim should not be to adopt a single "best" shift pattern but to identify solutions that balance operational requirements with workforce needs. Organisations that approach shift work optimisation as an ongoing process of workforce planning, employee engagement and continuous improvement may be better placed to widen access to manufacturing careers, support workforce retention and improve organisational performance. For more insights on how to improve shift work in your business, visit <https://optashift.com/resources/>

Source: Robert Crossman, Director, optashift.

Overall respondent figures mask differences across the workforce, particularly by job role. Among the three largest occupational groups, operations/production respondents reported lower use of the most common forms of flexibility. Engineering/technical workers showed notable future demand, particularly for flexible hours, remote/hybrid working, and part-time working (26%).

FIGURE 9. PRODUCTION ROLES HAVE FEWER FLEXIBLE WORKING OPTIONS



Note: Number of observations = 71.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2026). *Flexible working in manufacturing survey*.

Differences by gender were most apparent for some less formal or less widely used arrangements. Women were much more likely than men to report using informal flexibility (49% versus 15%), while part-time working (13%) and compressed hours (11%) were reported by women but not men. Women were also more likely than men to consider using part-time work in the future (20% versus 7.7%). In contrast, men reported higher use of remote or hybrid working (62% versus 55%) than women, while the use of flexible start and finish times was similar (69% versus 67%). Differences by disability status were generally smaller for current use, although disabled respondents showed greater future interest in flexible start and finish times (31% versus 19%) and remote/hybrid working (25% versus 15%) (**Figure 10**).

These findings highlight the importance of considering flexibility at the intersection between job requirements and individual needs. This is particularly relevant for disabled employees working in R&D, laboratory, and production settings, where some tasks require physical presence, access to specialist equipment, or fixed working patterns. Rather than treating these roles as inherently inflexible, employers can look at individual tasks to identify where greater flexibility or adjustments are possible. This may include reconsidering when and where particular activities are carried out, how tasks are allocated within teams, and how working environments and equipment can accommodate different needs (**Box 3**).



BOX 3. RETHINKING FLEXIBILITY IN R&D AND LABORATORY-BASED ROLES

R&D and laboratory-based roles can present challenges for flexible working because many activities depend on access to specialist equipment, controlled environments, or on-site collaboration.

A more practical approach is to consider roles at task level: which activities need to be carried out on site, at a particular time or by a particular person, and where is there scope for greater flexibility? Activities such as data analysis, modelling, coding, documentation, planning, and writing may, for example, offer more flexibility than experimental or safety-critical work.

Alongside this, accessible workplace design can help to ensure that laboratory environments, equipment, and working practices accommodate a wider range of physical, sensory, and cognitive needs. While accessibility and flexible working are distinct, considering them together can help employers to identify practical ways that will enable more people to participate fully in R&D and laboratory work.

Some approaches to consider:

Flexible division of work

- Separating activities that require direct machine operation from associated tasks such as data processing, programming, design, documentation or analysis, where operationally feasible
- Enabling suitable components of a role to be undertaken remotely
- Using “tandem work”, combining job sharing, paired working, or team-based allocation of tasks
- Distributing responsibility for different stages of a process across a team rather than assuming that all associated activities must be undertaken by the person physically operating the equipment
- Reallocating lifting, carrying, fine manipulation, or other physically demanding tasks where these are not intrinsic to the core purpose of the role.

Flexible access to equipment

- Using bookable or scheduled equipment access where compatible with operational requirements
- Enabling shorter working sessions, additional breaks, or alternative patterns of equipment use
- Allowing greater flexibility in scheduling to accommodate fatigue, treatment, transport requirements, or fluctuating health conditions
- Reviewing working patterns where prolonged standing, repetitive activity, or fixed-duration sessions create avoidable barriers.

Making laboratory environments accessible

- Providing seated and standing alternatives, including supportive seating or stools where appropriate
- Using adjustable benches, workstations, and counter heights
- Positioning equipment, controls, and materials within accessible reach
- Reducing unnecessary repetitive movement, manual handling, or fine-motor demands through task or process redesign
- Using accessible controls that consider reach, grip strength, dexterity, ease of operation, and visual contrast
- Providing readable displays and data outputs, including alternatives where colour-based interpretation may create barriers

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- Using visual and audible alarms or process alerts where appropriate
- Providing adapted hand tools, grippers, reach aids, or other assistive equipment
- Using software and digital interfaces that are compatible with assistive technologies
- Ensuring data can be captured, interpreted, and shared in accessible formats.

Participatory approaches to adjustment

- Discussing accessibility needs with workers rather than relying on assumptions about a condition or impairment
- Drawing on adaptive techniques and strategies that individuals may already use successfully
- Considering temporary, acquired, and fluctuating conditions as well as permanent disabilities
- Reviewing adjustments over time as roles, technologies, or individual circumstances change.

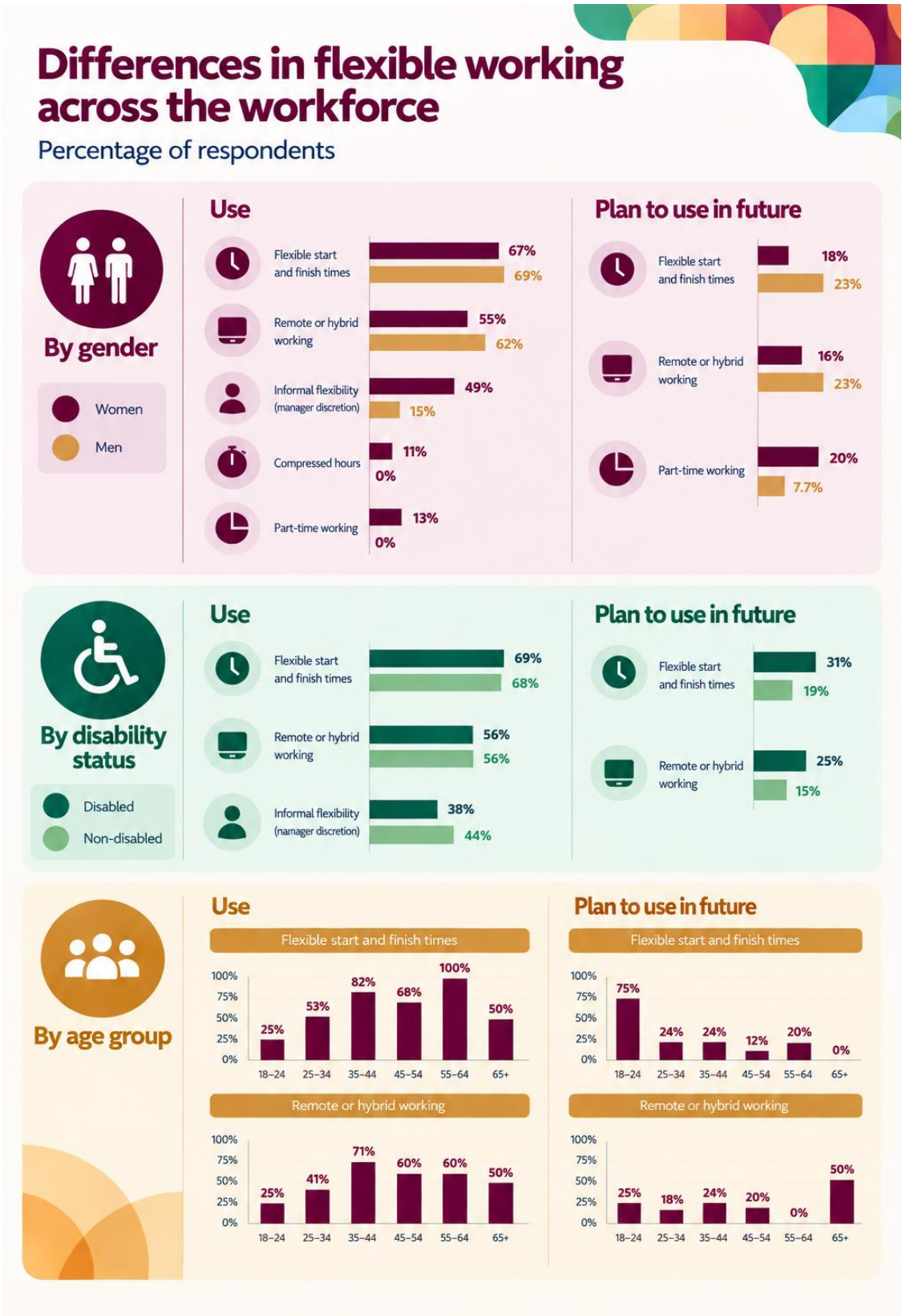
The aim is not to provide identical flexibility in every role but to work towards equitable flexibility, which means looking closely at the requirements of a role and the needs of the individual to identify what can reasonably be adapted. Creating an environment in which employees can discuss their needs openly with managers is central to this approach.

For example, some neurodivergent employees may work more effectively with greater flexibility over working hours, including later start times or compressed hours. More broadly, adapting working practices and environments can help organisations to retain disabled and neurodivergent employees and access a wider range of skills, experiences, and perspectives.

Source: Access All Areas in Labs Project. <https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/projects/access-all-areas-in-labs/>; Royal Society of Chemistry (2025). *Disability-Inclusive Laboratories in the Chemical Sciences: Making chemistry accessible for everyone*. <https://www.rsc.org/policy-and-campaigning/science-culture/disability-inclusive-laboratories-in-the-chemical-sciences>; Boval, J. and Kennedy, S. (2018). *Laboratory Safety for All: Accommodating Students with Disabilities in Chemistry Teaching Laboratories*. *Accessibility in the Laboratory*. ACS Publications.

Differences across age groups were more pronounced. Flexible hours and remote/hybrid working were particularly common among those aged 35–44 and 55–64, while younger respondents showed greater planned use of several forms of flexibility (**Figure 10**). The interviews revealed that flexible working supports workforce planning and knowledge retention. By enabling experienced employees to reduce their working hours or adjust their working patterns, organisations such as Arla Foods (**Box 4**) can retain critical expertise while creating opportunities for knowledge transfer across generations.

FIGURE 10. USE AND DEMAND FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING DIFFER ACROSS DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS



Note: Number of observations = 83.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2026). Flexible working in manufacturing survey.

BOX 4. ARLA FOODS: EMBEDDING FLEXIBLE WORKING THROUGH EDUCATION, CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS, AND EXPERIMENTATION



Arla Foods is the UK's largest dairy cooperative and one of the country's leading food companies, home to well-known brands such as Lurpak, Arla Cravendale, and Arla Protein.

We spoke to Sarah Gant, Logistics Manager at Arla's Stourton dairy site, about the organisation's approach to flexible working within a manufacturing environment. With responsibility for a large operational team that works around the clock, Sarah shared how the organisation has expanded flexible working opportunities while maintaining operational performance.

Arla Foods' experience demonstrates how leadership education and trial periods can help to overcome perceived barriers to flexibility, particularly when accompanied by a shift in mindset from "Why can't it work?" to "How could we make it work?"



*Sarah Gant, Logistics Manager,
Arla Foods UK*

Moving beyond a "one-size-fits-all approach"

For Arla Foods, flexible working is seen not as a single policy or arrangement but as the ability to find solutions that meet individual employee needs while supporting business requirements. Rather than assuming that one model will suit all colleagues, the organisation encourages managers to consider a range of options depending on the role, operational requirements, and individual circumstances.

Arla Foods offers a variety of flexible working arrangements across different parts of the business:

- Part-time and reduced-hours contracts
- Annualised hours
- Fixed and staggered start and finish times
- Flexible shift patterns
- Job sharing
- Informal flexibility agreed between managers and team members

While some arrangements, such as 9-day fortnights, are more common in office-based roles, operational teams often benefit from different forms of flexibility, including fixed shift patterns, adjusted start times, and annualised hours.

Educating leaders and shifting mindsets

Although Arla Foods has established policies and guidance on flexible working, leaders identified that policy was not enough. They have also developed a leadership education programme focused on flexible working, unconscious bias, and inclusive decision-making. Rather than concentrating only on policy requirements, the training encourages leaders to challenge assumptions and consider the benefits that flexibility can bring for both colleagues and the business. A central principle of the programme is helping leaders to adopt a solution-focused approach to flexible working requests.

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Instead of starting from the position that a flexible working request is unlikely to be feasible, managers are encouraged to begin by exploring how it might work. They then work collaboratively with team members to identify practical solutions that meet both individual and operational needs.

Challenging assumptions about who uses flexible working

Sarah noted that in some operational teams she has seen flexible working arrangements used more frequently by men than women. This shift has helped to normalise flexible working and challenge longstanding assumptions about who it is for. "Flexible working is for everyone" has become an important message within the organisation, helping to reduce stigma and encourage colleagues to consider arrangements that better suit their needs.

Supporting colleagues across their careers

One important driver for flexible working has been supporting colleagues at different stages of their careers. Many manufacturing roles involve physically demanding work, and some experienced colleagues wish to gradually reduce their hours as they approach retirement rather than leave the workforce altogether. Flexible working arrangements allow these colleagues to remain in employment for longer, preserving valuable skills and experience.

Arla Foods views flexibility as an important tool for workforce planning and knowledge retention. By enabling experienced colleagues to reduce their hours or adjust their working patterns, the business can retain critical expertise while creating opportunities for knowledge transfer to newer colleagues.

Learning through pilots and trial periods

Trial periods have become a key part of Arla Foods' approach. When there is uncertainty about whether a proposed arrangement will work, managers are encouraged to test it through a short pilot rather than rejecting it immediately. Trials typically run for between 3 and 6 weeks and involve regular communication between managers and team members. Both parties can evaluate the arrangement, identify any challenges, and make adjustments where necessary.

Trial periods often reveal solutions that would not have been identified through discussion alone. In some cases, colleagues discover they need a different arrangement from the one originally requested. In others, managers find that operational concerns are less significant than expected. This approach reduces risk while creating opportunities for experimentation and learning. It also helps colleagues feel involved in the decision-making process, even when a particular request cannot be accommodated.

Key lessons for other manufacturers

Sarah Gant identified five lessons for manufacturers seeking to expand flexible working:

1. Treat flexible working as a business challenge to solve rather than a policy to administer.
2. Educate leaders on mindset and unconscious bias, not just procedures.
3. Start with a "yes, if possible" approach rather than a default "no".
4. Use trial periods to test ideas before making final decisions.
5. Consider advertising roles as flexible from the outset to broaden talent pools.

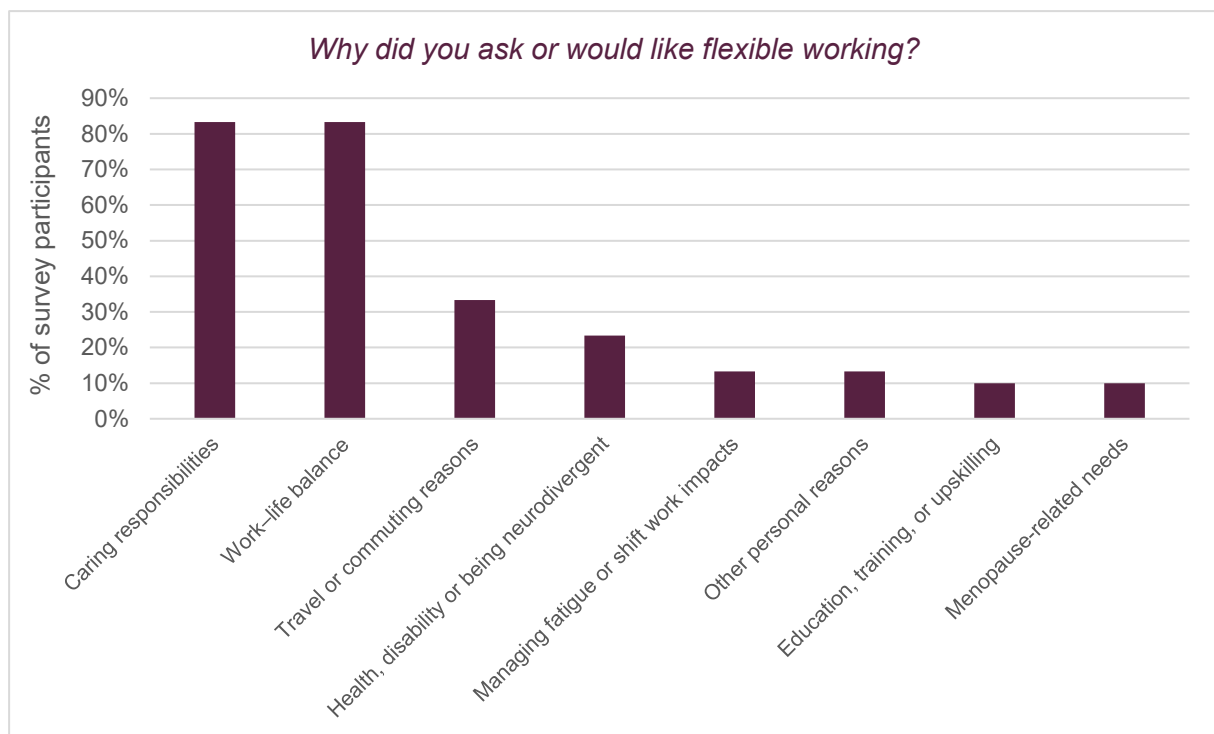
For Arla Foods, flexible working is an evolving area, but the organisation believes that education, experimentation, and inclusive leadership are creating the foundations for a more diverse and engaged manufacturing workforce. Based on their experience so far, leaders see flexibility as not just an employee benefit but an important tool for attracting talent, retaining skills, and supporting the future workforce.

Source: Interview with Sarah Gant, Logistics Manager at Arla Foods UK.

Why employees ask for flexible work?

Among respondents who had asked for, or would like, flexible working, caring responsibilities and work–life balance were by far the most common reasons, with each cited by 83% of the survey participants. A third (33%) identified travel or commuting, while 23% cited health, disability, or neurodivergence. Other reasons, including managing fatigue or shift-work impacts, education or training, and menopause-related needs, were also reported.

FIGURE 11. CARING AND WORK–LIFE BALANCE ARE THE LEADING REASONS FOR SEEKING FLEXIBILITY



Note: Number of observations = 30.

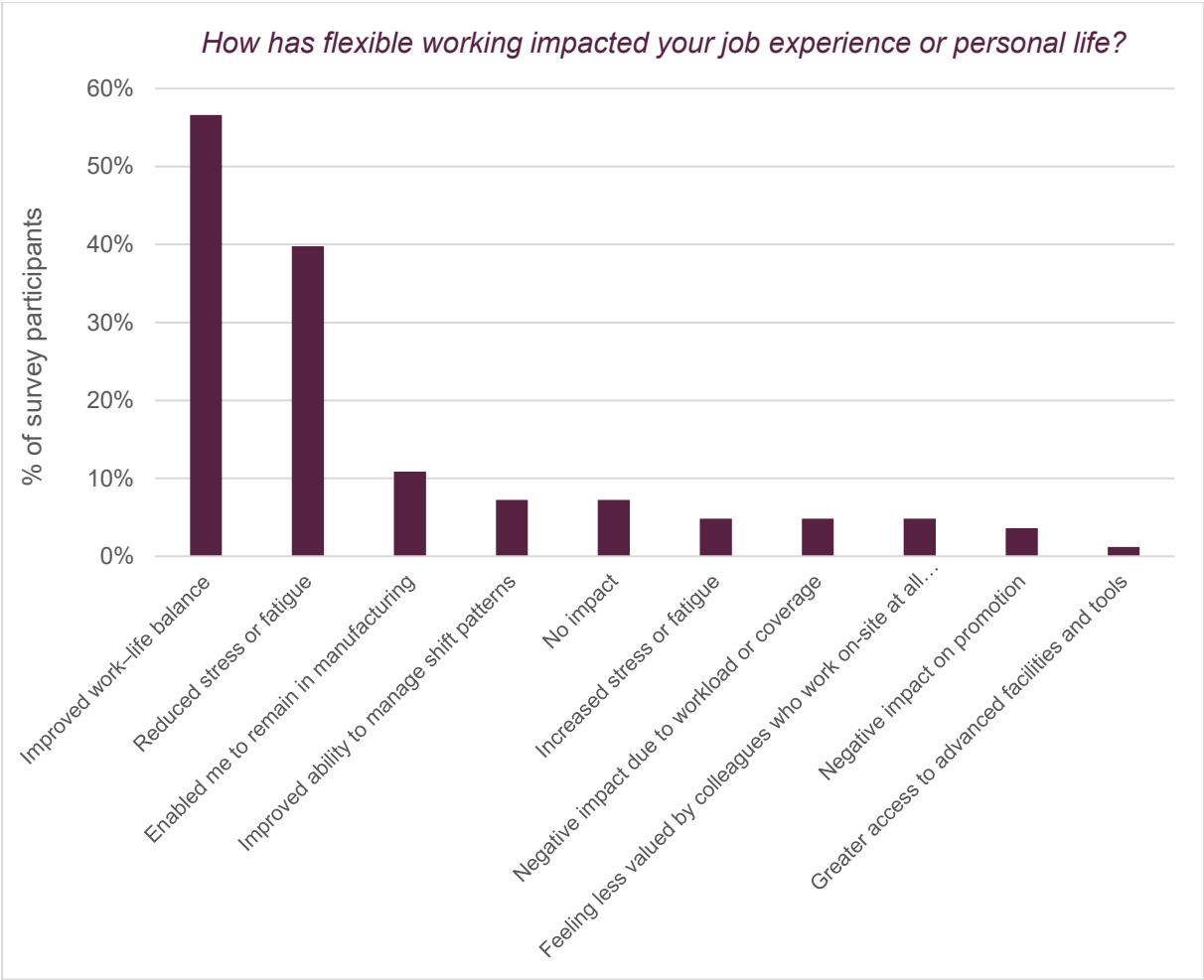
Source: Women in Manufacturing (2026). *Flexible working in manufacturing survey*.

How does flexible working impact job experience or personal life?

Flexible working was predominantly associated with positive outcomes, particularly improved work–life balance (57%) and reduced stress or fatigue (40%). A total of 11% of the survey participants reported that flexibility had enabled them to remain in manufacturing. Flexible working also appears to be important for retention: 56% considered access to flexibility very or extremely important to their decision to remain in their current job. Employers interviewed also highlighted the important role of flexible working in both attracting and retaining employees.

Negative impacts were much less common, although a small proportion reported increased stress or fatigue, workload or coverage issues (both 5%), or a negative impact on promotion (4%). Technology may also be enabling greater flexibility, with 37% reporting that automation or digital technology had increased flexibility in their role.

FIGURE 12. FLEXIBLE WORKING SUPPORTS WELLBEING AND RETENTION IN MANUFACTURING



Note: Number of observations = 83.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2026). *Flexible working in manufacturing survey*.

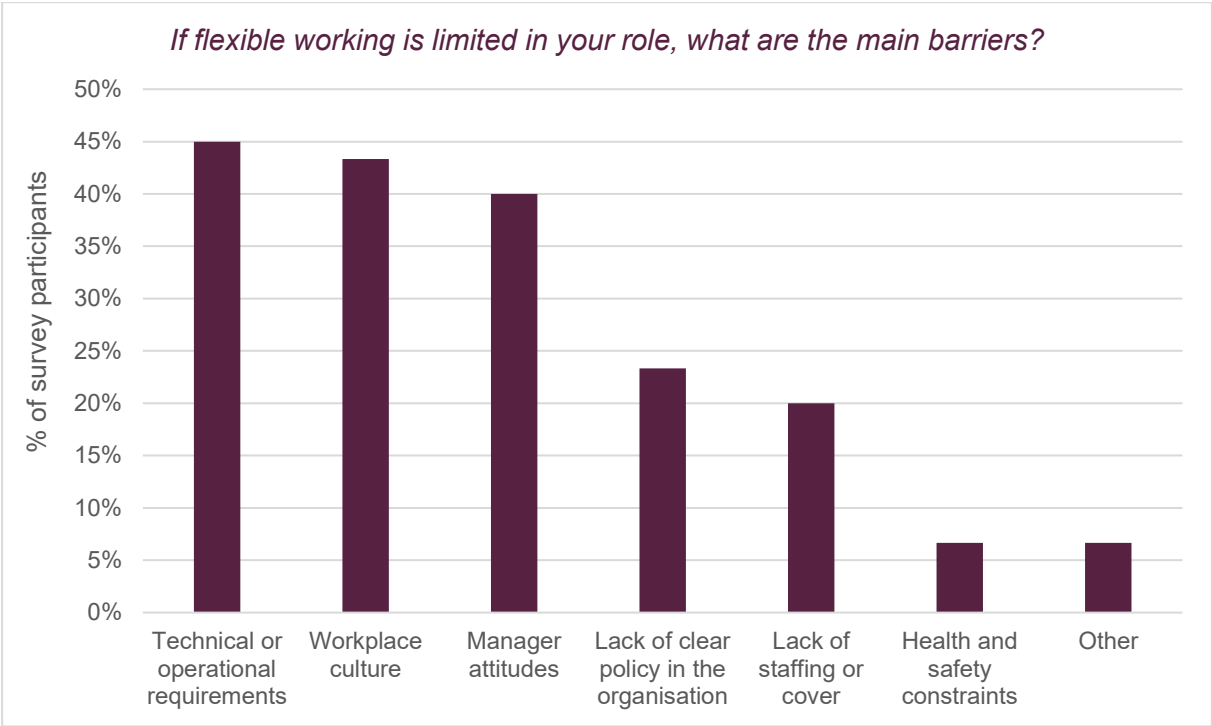
What are the key barriers to working flexibly?

Among survey participants for whom flexible working was limited, the most commonly reported barriers were technical or operational requirements (45%), workplace culture (43%), and manager attitudes (40%), suggesting that constraints extend beyond the practical requirements of manufacturing roles. A lack of clear organisational policies (23%) and staffing or cover (20%) were also identified as barriers. Other barriers included security reasons, unflexible schedules, and inconsistent application of policies.

While around two-thirds of respondents agreed that managers support flexible working in practice, the strength of this support was mixed: 28% strongly agreed and 39% somewhat agreed, while 13% somewhat disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed; a further 12% were neutral. Men (38.5%) and disabled people (37.5%) were more likely than other groups to strongly agree with this statement.

Similarly, although 54% agreed that flexible working was compatible with career progression, only 21% strongly agreed, while 29% were neutral and 17% disagreed. Men were more likely to strongly agree (30.8%) and somewhat agree (38.5%) than other groups.

FIGURE 13. BARRIERS TO FLEXIBILITY ARE BOTH OPERATIONAL AND CULTURAL



Note: Number of observations = 60.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2026). *Flexible working in manufacturing survey*.

Overall, the findings suggest that formal or general support for flexibility does not necessarily translate into consistently supportive workplace cultures, management practices, or confidence that working flexibly will not affect career progression. This highlights the importance of working closely with organisational leaders to ensure that flexible working policies are applied fairly, consistently, and inclusively, as illustrated by the experience of Arla Foods (**Box 4**).

The cases of Beko (**Box 5**) and Lush (**Box 6**) reinforce this point, demonstrating that effective communication is central to the successful implementation of flexible working arrangements. Given that flexibility often varies according to job roles, operational requirements, and individual circumstances, clear communication is essential to explaining the rationale behind different arrangements, managing expectations, and preventing perceptions of unfairness. Beko’s and Lush’s experience also highlights the value of involving employees and their representatives in the design and review of flexible working policies, helping to build trust, transparency, and organisation-wide support.

Beko is a key household appliance manufacturer, employing approximately 2,500 people in the UK and Ireland in the design, testing, servicing, and distribution of a range of products. Ensuring that they can retain a skilled workforce and adapt to climate change has been fundamental to the introduction of different types of flexible working across the business.

In April 2024 Beko merged with Hotpoint, offering the opportunity to review flexible working policies from both companies and adapt their approach. We spoke to Hayley Whitwood, HR Director for UK & Ireland at Beko Europe, about how they have implemented lessons learnt from the process, and which practices they have adopted for the future.



Hayley Whitwood, HR Director for UK & Ireland at Beko Europe, Beko UK

Different flexibility for different roles

Beko believes there is great value in their teams connecting regularly in person, but it also recognises the importance of flexible working for different groups of employees to ensure they can balance work and life. While not all roles can be remote, Beko is making it as easy as possible to ensure that workers can maintain hours that work for them.

In a manufacturing environment, this takes the form of an early/late shift – something they have adopted for worker flexibility but also to mitigate the impacts of working in hot weather this summer. Beko has also created individual flexibility for its service engineers (employees who complete “at home” appliance fixes), putting the employee and the engineering planning team directly in contact to work out suitable hours. This means they can alter shifts to manage the school run or caring responsibilities, for example, and change them (when appropriate) for holidays.

Finally, a large part of Beko’s operations in the UK includes office-based support. The company promotes a tailored approach to flexible working where this is required but also offers both “core hours” and a day of homeworking as standard. They believe this provides an effective balance between securing the benefits of in-person teamwork with the flexibility desired from the workforce to attract and retain talent.

Leading by example

Beko has emphasised the importance of ensuring that senior leadership are involved in and using, where necessary, flexible working hours to encourage more junior employees to feel comfortable in their adoption. By making a clear effort to schedule in significant events (such as company town halls) during core hours and on days where fewer employees will be working from home, Beko highlights the value of flexible working and the ability to balance this with maintaining business productivity levels.

Ensuring clarity and transparency

One of the key lessons learnt from implementing new forms of flexible working during 2024 was the importance of transparency across teams. Critical to this was that Beko ensured effective communication between managers, helping to explain to the wider workforce why, for example, different teams finished shifts earlier than others and prevent perceptions of unfairness. This has been particularly helpful given that different teams are required to keep different hours, based on their roles – for example, delivery teams often begin earlier in the morning, while customer service staff frequently finish later.

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This emphasis on communication influenced the design of a new flexible working policy. As most of the staff at Beko are represented by unions, when changes were made during the merging of Beko and Hotpoint, it was important to consult and gather inputs from unions to ensure employee engagement. But to make sure that those who were not union members had a voice, Beko also supported the appointment of employee representatives from within the firm, which has been critical to generating company-wide support for the policy and creating effective compromises.

Lessons for manufacturers

Beko clearly illustrates the importance of taking different approaches for different roles in a company and communicating clearly to explain why and how decisions are made about flexible working. Through leading by example and ensuring that employees have a voice in designing company policies, it is possible to reach a compromise that allows businesses and workers to thrive. This supports the retention of talented workers, particularly providing important structures for those from under-represented backgrounds in manufacturing, and attracts new people to the business.

Source: Interview with Hayley Whitwood, HR Director for UK & Ireland at Beko Europe.



BOX 6. LUSH MANUFACTURING: DEVELOPING MULTI-SKILLED TEAMS TO SUPPORT FLEXIBILITY AND BUSINESS AGILITY



Lush Manufacturing Ltd is the global manufacturing arm of Lush, producing fresh, handmade cosmetics for Lush Retail stores and online customers worldwide. From its manufacturing headquarters in Poole, Dorset, Lush coordinates a global production network that includes large-scale manufacturing sites in Canada, Croatia, Japan and Australia, as well as twelve Fresh Kitchen facilities producing some of its shortest shelf-life products.

Lush has been manufacturing in Poole for over 30 years, building on expertise that dates back to the founders' work as cosmetics manufacturers in the 1980s. Today, the organisation employs around 700 permanent manufacturing staff in the UK, rising to approximately 1,200 employees during its seasonal peak period in the autumn. Across its workforce, Lush brings together employees from a wide range of ages, nationalities and backgrounds.

As a handmade manufacturer producing hundreds of product lines under a self-imposed freshness policy, agility is central to the organisation's success. This applies not only to manufacturing operations but also to the way the business approaches its workforce. Lush's experience demonstrates how a values-driven, people-centred culture that prioritises skills development can support both operational performance and employee wellbeing.

A people-centre approach

At the heart of Lush Manufacturing's approach is a commitment to treating colleagues equitably according to their individual circumstances and job roles. Recognising that flexibility means different things for different people, the company considers requests on a case-by-case basis. The People Team works closely with colleagues and managers to identify practical solutions that balance individual needs with operational requirements.

These include:

- Full-time day shifts
- Night and twilight shifts
- Part-time roles
- Weekend working patterns
- Shift arrangements that support childcare responsibilities and school runs.

Building flexibility through skills and workforce agility

A key enabler of flexible working at Lush Manufacturing is its emphasis on cross-disciplinary training. Colleagues are trained across multiple stages of the handmade production process, developing a broader range of skills and increasing workforce adaptability. This means teams are trained in different steps of the handmade production processes, which could mean following a formula to produce a product mix, pressing a bath bomb, pouring a shower gel, labelling, potting up, packing or decorating. Hands-on product making skills are also supplemented with the administration tasks needed to progress to training, team leading and eventually room management.

This approach supports employee development while also providing operational resilience. By building teams with a diverse skill set, Lush can more easily accommodate temporary adjustments to working arrangements, support employees moving into roles better suited to their needs, and reduce disruption when staff are absent.

Flexibility across support and office-based roles

The organisation applies similar principles within support functions away from the factory floor. Given the global nature of the business, employees often collaborate with colleagues across different time zones and locations.

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While common working patterns include 7am to 3pm, 8am to 4pm and 9am to 5pm schedules, teams are encouraged to adapt their hours where this supports either business needs or individual circumstances.

Although the organisation values face-to-face collaboration and encourages staff to work on site wherever possible, support staff can request hybrid arrangements where there is a consistent need to balance office-based and home working.

Supporting flexibility through policies and employee voice

Flexible working at Lush Manufacturing is supported by a wider ecosystem of policies, resources and employee networks designed to help colleagues navigate different stages of life and work.

The organisation provides access to a parenting portal and enhanced maternity pay arrangements. It has also developed a menopause toolkit and is exploring additional policies covering menopause and gender-affirming care.

Alongside these initiatives, employee-led community networks provide support and advocacy for employees who identify as neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+, disabled or living with chronic illness, as well as for parents, colleagues experiencing menopause and members of the global majority.

All employees also have access to the company's Employee Assistance Programme through Wisdom Wellbeing.

Employee voice plays a central role in shaping workplace practices. Through the Employee Benefit Trust, employees can raise issues directly with the organisation and contribute to discussions on workplace improvements. Recent feedback through this mechanism contributed to the introduction of free period products across workplace facilities.

An approach shaped by organisational values

Lush Manufacturing describes its approach to flexibility as an extension of its wider organisational culture rather than a standalone initiative.

As a business founded by a group of friends, inventors and creatives, the organisation has historically sought to provide employees with the support they need to perform their roles effectively. As the business has grown from around twenty employees to over eight hundred permanent staff, this commitment has evolved alongside changing legislation and workforce expectations.

The company also highlights the influence of long-standing female leadership within the organisation. Manufacturing Director Mo Constantine has led Lush Manufacturing throughout its development, supported by women in senior leadership positions across the business. According to the organisation, this has contributed to an emphasis on equitable opportunities and supportive approaches to maternity, parental leave and flexible working.

Lessons for other manufacturers

For the organisation, retaining skilled and experienced employees is particularly important in a handmade manufacturing environment where knowledge and expertise take time to develop. The business sees flexibility as one tool for helping employees remain and progress within the organisation, even when life circumstances change.

The results can be seen in workforce retention and progression. Many members of the leadership and factory management teams began their careers as seasonal employees and have gone on to build long-term careers within the company, with some employees remaining for ten, fifteen or more than twenty years.

Lush Manufacturing illustrates how embedding skills development within a people-centred organisational culture can strengthen workforce adaptability, support career progression and contribute to sustainable business success.

Source: Information provided by Lush Manufacturing Ltd.

The survey and interview findings were echoed in discussions with manufacturing employers and professionals at a Women in Manufacturing regional roundtable, where participants explored how workplace culture, leadership, and career development can enable – or constrain – greater flexibility and inclusion in manufacturing (**Box 7**).

BOX 7. WHAT WE HEARD: MAKING FLEXIBILITY WORK IN MANUFACTURING

On 10 June 2026, the Women in Manufacturing UK initiative (WiM UK) convened a Regional Roundtable at the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland (NMIS). Led by the High Value Manufacturing Catapult team, the roundtable brought 25 participants together to discuss flexible and inclusive workplaces, retention and progression, and inclusive leadership. The event achieved a strong mix of industry representatives, research and innovation organisations, and academic participants, with attendees ranging from apprentices and graduates to managing directors and professors.



Flexibility and workplace culture

Participants recognised that flexible working can be more challenging in manufacturing and production environments, particularly for SMEs. But they felt that organisations may underestimate the range of arrangements that can be considered, including job sharing, agile working, and more adaptable shift patterns. Flexibility was seen as important for attracting and retaining talent, particularly women and younger workers, but participants stressed that it needs to be embedded in workplace culture rather

than treated as a policy exercise only. Stigma, unconscious bias, and concerns about the career prospects of flexible workers were identified as continuing barriers.

Retention and progression

Discussions also highlighted the importance of visible career pathways, development opportunities, and effective knowledge transfer. Participants observed that women and younger employees may place particular value on purpose, flexibility, development, and having their voices heard. At the same time, a lack of confidence, imposter syndrome, and unclear progression routes were seen as factors that can discourage talented employees from pursuing opportunities. Mentoring, sponsorship, and visible role models were identified as important enablers of progression, alongside better transfer of knowledge between experienced employees and new entrants as manufacturing technologies and roles evolve.

Inclusive leadership

Participants described inclusive leadership as critical to creating workplaces in which flexibility can work effectively. This included creating psychological safety, encouraging different perspectives, adapting leadership approaches to individual needs, and being transparent about decision-making and progression. Leaders were also seen as having an important role to play in bridging differences across teams, generations, and professional backgrounds, as well as ensuring that opportunities for progression are clear, fair, and accessible.

4. Call to action: six practical tips for manufacturing employers

This year, we partnered with Flexibility Works, a consultancy specialising in workplace flexibility, to identify practical actions manufacturers can take to create more flexible, inclusive and productive workplaces. Drawing on their expertise across a range of sectors, they identified several practical measures that organisations can implement.

Flexible working in manufacturing should start by understanding what employees need, improving shift predictability, and exploring flexibility in every role rather than making assumptions.

This does not necessarily require major changes. Small adjustments to shift patterns, start and finish times, notice periods, or how shifts are exchanged can make jobs accessible to people who might otherwise leave, reduce their hours, or not apply in the first place.

Employers should prepare for the expected 2027 legislative changes⁴¹ and make flexibility a visible, supported part of their workforce strategy and culture. The best approach is to start small, test practical changes, and learn what works for both employees and the business.

Now is a good time to start, and the following six actions provide a sound starting point:



⁴¹ UK Government (2026). *Factsheet: Flexible Working*.



1. Ask people what would make a difference

Start with your workforce. Ask employees what would make their working arrangements more manageable and what forms of flexibility they would value.

They may not be looking for major changes. More notice of shifts, greater input into working patterns, easier shift swaps, or different start and finish times may be enough. For others, part-time hours, compressed hours, job sharing, or a phased return after leave could help them remain in work.

Not every request will be possible. The important first step is to understand what people need rather than assuming what flexibility means to them.

Action: Ask your workforce where greater flexibility would make the biggest difference and identify one or two areas you can explore.



2. Make shifts predictable

For many manufacturing workers, predictability is flexibility.

Giving people shifts as far in advance as possible, keeping patterns consistent, and making it easy to swap shifts are all ways to give people greater control over their lives. They can organise caring responsibilities, appointments, and other commitments around work.

Greater predictability can also help employers to reduce last-minute disruption and retain people when their circumstances change.

Action: Review how far in advance employees know their shifts and how easy it is for them to request or exchange shifts.



3. Look for flexibility in every role

Do not start by deciding which jobs are “flexible” and which are not. Instead, ask the question: what flexibility is possible in this role?

Depending on the job, this could include part-time work, compressed hours, job sharing, annualised hours, twilight shifts, different shift patterns, or greater choice over working times.

The aim is not to offer the same arrangements to everyone but to explore what can be changed within the operational requirements of each role.

Action: Choose a role or team where flexibility has traditionally been considered difficult and review what elements of the job genuinely need to be fixed and what could be changed.



4. Get ready for the 2027 legislative changes

Flexible working rights will change in 2027. The new rules are expected to introduce a reasonableness test, with employers required to consider whether a request is reasonable and feasible. Where a request is refused, employers must explain the reasons for the decision, and those reasons must align with at least one of the eight statutory business grounds set out in the Employment Rights Act.

The process around consultation will also be strengthened, putting greater emphasis on constructive conversations about what might work. This does not mean every request has to be agreed. Some arrangements will not work for certain roles, shifts, or production requirements, but employers should be prepared to look beyond a simple yes or no and consider whether there is another option.

HR teams can play an important role in preparing for these changes, helping to ensure that policies are up to date and that requests are handled fairly and consistently. Managers will also need the confidence and knowledge to discuss requests, explore alternatives and explain decisions clearly.

Action: *Review your flexible working policy and request process before the new requirements take effect, and make sure that HR teams and managers understand their roles and are equipped to have constructive conversations about what is possible.*



5. Make flexibility part of your workforce strategy and organisational culture

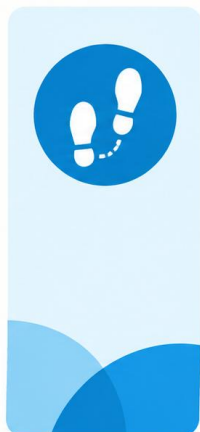
Flexible working is not just an individual accommodation or employee benefit. It can be part of a wider workforce strategy, helping manufacturers attract and retain people who might otherwise be excluded by the way work is organised.

Think about who you could retain if their working pattern could change, who you could attract with more choice, and who might currently be excluded because of the way work is organised.

Where roles allow it, consider making flexible options widely available rather than requiring employees to negotiate them as exceptional arrangements. Having a policy is not enough: people need to know flexibility is available and feel able to use it without being seen as less committed. Managers also need to have the confidence to discuss options and make fair and consistent decisions.

And if you are open to flexibility, make sure people know it is available. Making flexibility visible can support more inclusive recruitment by widening the pool of potential applicants. Alongside this, consider how applicants' skills and experience are assessed and address any biases, including those related to career gaps.

Action: *Review whether flexibility is visible, accessible, and supported in practice, not just available on paper.*



6. Start with what is possible

Getting flexible working right does not mean changing everything at once. Start where there is a clear benefit for both the workforce and the business. Try something, see how it works, and learn from it.

The best arrangements are not about choosing between the needs of employees and the needs of the business. They are about finding better ways of organising work that benefit both parties.

Action: *Pick one practical change to test. Agree what success would look like, review the results with employees and managers, and use what you learn to inform the next step.*

No single model of flexible working will work across manufacturing, and flexibility alone will not address the barriers facing women in the sector. But the evidence presented in this report suggests there is often more scope to change how work is organised than is initially assumed.

The next step is to find out what that means in your workplace. Ask your people, look again at how jobs and shifts are designed, and test an approach where there is room to do things differently. And when something works, build on it. The question is not simply “Can we offer flexible working?” but “What flexibility is possible here, and what can we do to make it work?”

We would like to acknowledge the kind support of the 2026 Women in Manufacturing conference sponsors:



We would also like to thank our partner organisations:



The Women in UK Manufacturing report provides an overview of the progress made over the past year and the challenges that remain for women in the manufacturing sector. The 2026 report focuses on flexible working, examining how different approaches to flexibility can support the attraction, retention, and development of talent in manufacturing.

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