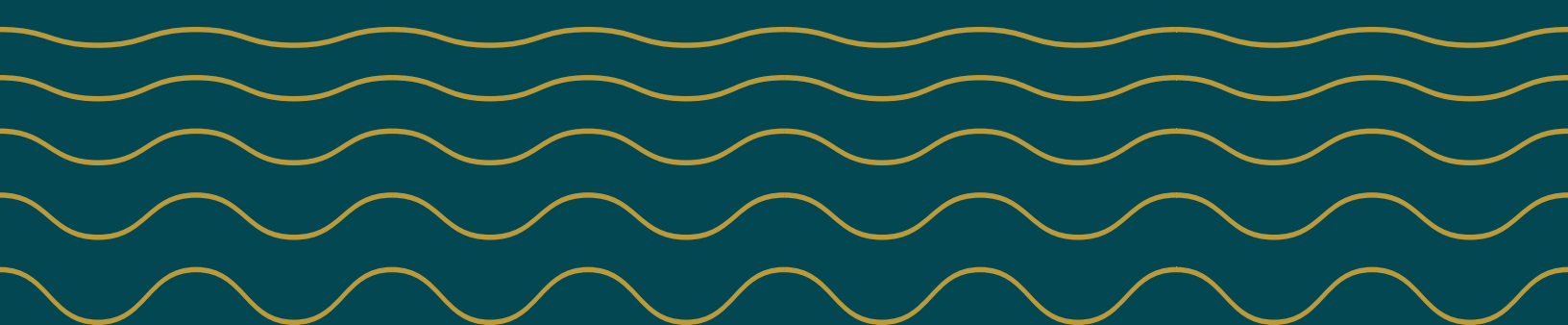
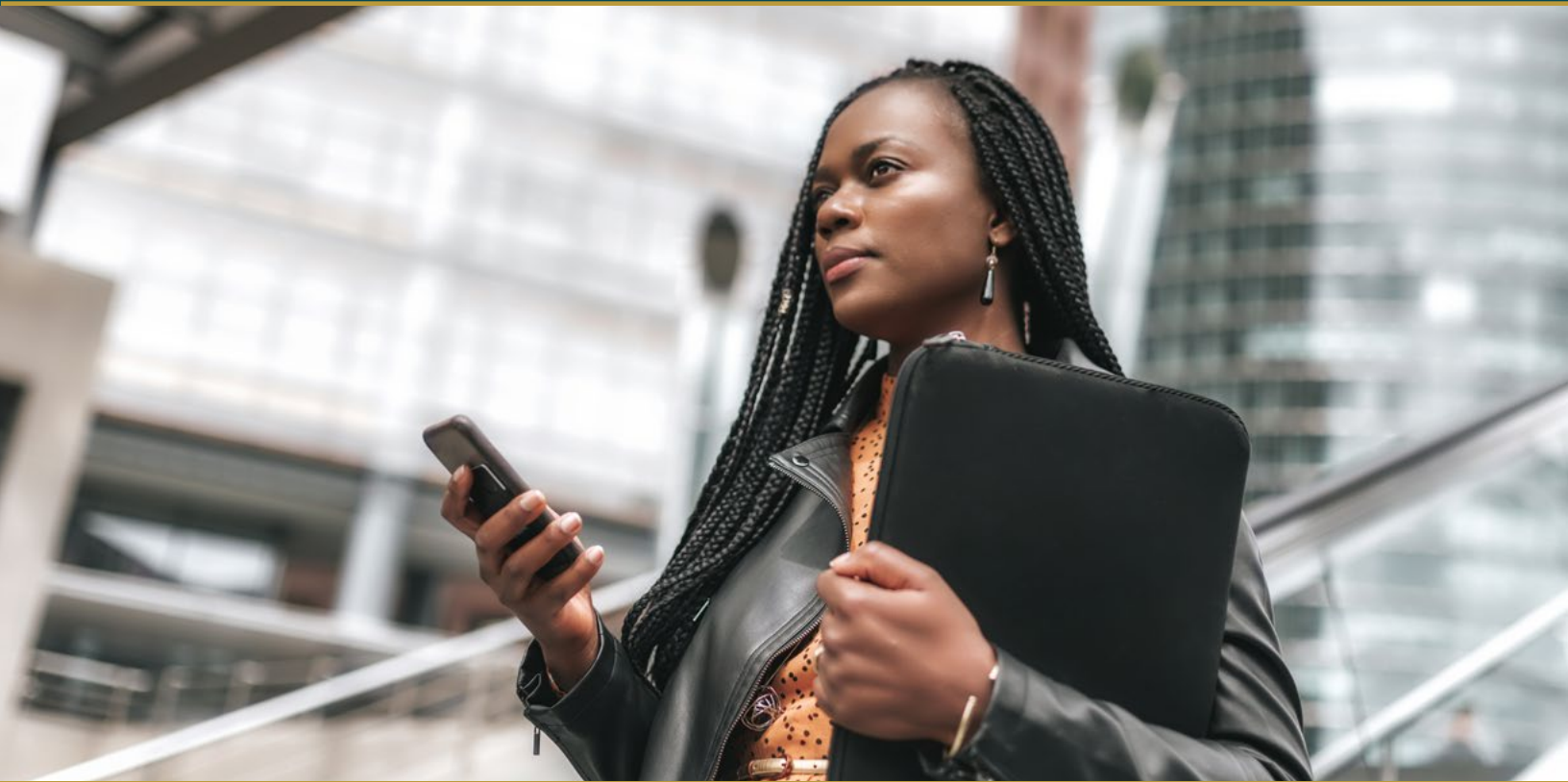


# The Flexibility Advantage

A new framework for flexible work that..works.



# Welcome

There are few words in our contemporary workplace lexicon that are more divisive than “flexible.” From hot-desking and hybrid schedules to the very nature of our workplace hierarchies, the once-immutable norms of our American office structures are not only up for debate, but determinative of success.

At The Mom Project and Werklabs, we understand that flexibility is as nuanced as it is critical to the workforce and that it relates to every other driver impacting work experiences. In fact, flexibility is one of the most important drivers impacting work experiences, especially for women.

This research focuses specifically on factors that have the greatest impact on creating flexible work experiences. Here we create a framework for organizations to reevaluate how to define and make progress toward building flexible work structures. As many organizations return to the office post-pandemic, we explore how flexibility goes beyond simply scheduling to include critical yet intangible efforts and messaging on the part of organizational leadership and managers, in which nuances will make or break the success of flexible work policies’ impact on bottom line performance.

Leveraging our existing research to develop a comprehensive questionnaire, we surveyed more than 1,700 full-time and part-time workers and asked them to rate their experiences with flexibility in the workplace.

At The Mom Project and Werklabs, we believe that when employees experience ownership not only over their work product but also over their day-to-day work schedule, they are happier and more productive. Now, with this research, we have the data to prove it.

Sincerely,

Pam Cohen, PhD

Chief Research & Analytics Officer

Werklabs & The Mom Project

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*“It is amazing how having some sort of flexibility positively affects my productivity and mood.”*

**Work isn't working for most women. Flexibility can change that.** The last few years of pandemic work ignited meaningful conversations within workplaces and pushed for greater change toward a more purposeful way of working. While many moms feel a greater awareness, acceptance, and prioritization of working motherhood within organizations, there's still a lot to be done in regards to implementing a truly flexible employee experience.

Werklabs' research on flexibility finds that there are drastic differences in the way women and men experience flexibility in the workplace. Women's flexibility needs are not being met; more specifically, they experience their workplace as being significantly less supportive of their flexibility needs than men do. In contrast, men are significantly more satisfied with the flexibility they have in their current work situation and are more likely to say that their current work situation meets their flexibility needs.

Without improvement in their workplace flexibility, women are significantly less likely than men to recommend their current employer to others as a compassionate place to work, anticipate an increase in their productivity, or, ultimately, remain with their current employer at all. Traditional work structures aren't working for women.

**A culture of respect for flexibility is needed.** When looking at the factors that have the greatest impact on creating flexible work experiences, Werklabs identified that Organizational Support and Personal Autonomy are of the greatest importance to women in the workplace. While Organizational Support defines an overarching culture of respect for flexibility needs and care for employee well-being, Personal Autonomy identifies the specific elements of flexibility that matter to each individual. A coordinated focus on both these drivers will highlight significant opportunities for change in the workplace.

“

*While we now work in a hybrid model, I have to request and explain why I need to only work 2 days in office even though I'm willing to work 4 days in the office the following week. There is rigidity in what is supposed to be a hybrid work arrangement.”*

-Interviewed participant



# Demographics

Werklabs' Flexibility Questionnaire was fielded to The Mom Project community and social networks and gathered more than 1,700 responses. The majority ranged between the ages 25-44 (73%) and identified as White (57%), followed by African American/Black (12%), Hispanic/Latino (11%), and Southeast or East Asian (10%).



83% identify as female, followed by 16% male and 1% other.



77% are currently employed (74% women and 93% men). Of those,



75% are parents, stepparents, guardians or caregivers. Of those,



68% women and 82% men are full-time professionals.

83%

are moms, followed by 11% dads, 5% caregivers or other.

## Methodology

To begin, Werklabs conducted a thorough analysis of existing qualitative research on the topic of flexibility. From this analysis, Werklabs constructed and fielded its Flexibility Questionnaire, asking professionals to rate their work experiences in a wide range of areas related to flexibility on a scale of 1 to 10.

A rigorous quantitative analysis was then performed to evaluate the measurement model and assess which questionnaire items best “fit together” to define predictors of work flexibility that ultimately impact outcomes such as productivity and retention. Six strong drivers of work flexibility were identified.

In using predictive analytics, Werklabs not only establishes a direct relationship between how these drivers directly impact feelings of satisfaction with workplace flexibility, but also how these drivers impact employees' productivity, as well as the likelihood to remain loyal to the organization through retention and to recommend an organization as a place to work.

Additionally, in the report that follows, we highlight key differences between how women and men experience flexibility in work, allowing organizations to take targeted action to maximize segmented employee experiences.



# A Formula for Flexibility

6 factors in order of impact on women's retention, productivity, and recommendation

## 1.

### Organizational Support

Organizational Support is the bedrock of flexibility. A leadership team's commitment to flexibility matters. Without it, all other efforts to cultivate flexibility in work, whether it be by a manager or team member, are hindered. With it, however, true, productivity-powering flexibility can be realized.

Organizational Support is experienced by employees as active respect and support for flexibility in work. For women, this respect is rooted in genuine care for employee well-being and acknowledgment of their priorities away from work. For men, this respect is more a function of whether or not a flexible work policy exists. Regardless, survey results highlight the impact of having this organizational support is nearly two times greater for women than men. Women first desire and, consequently, assess the extent to which organizational leaders support and encourage flexibility. Men, on the other hand, first assess support for flexibility at the managerial level. Either way, support first needs to be communicated by people leaders at work before employees can begin to feel comfortable exercising flexibility themselves.

“

*Top level doesn't get it and they are only offering flexibility because they don't have a choice if they want employees to stay.”*

-Interviewed participant



## 2. Personal Autonomy

“

*We have a headquarters and it's expected of us to be in 3 days a week...I follow the “rules” but I see other departments with staff not in for several weeks in a row. I don't understand why some can have flexibility and a true remote and some cannot.”*

-Interviewed participant



Today, having autonomy in work includes possessing the freedom to use flexibility to get the job done. In the present research, Personal Autonomy is a key factor impacting flexible work that represents the degree to which employees are empowered to make choices about where and when they work, defining flexibility in their own terms. Employees—women to a greater extent than men—prefer having some measure of choice and control over where and how they work. Flexibility in daily schedules—to make appointments, take breaks when needed, or pick kids up from school—means a lot to employees, especially when it is part of the company culture.

Despite this reality, a lack of consistent organizational support can result in discrepancies in how flexible work policies are applied throughout workplaces. For example, several women surveyed explained how work-from-home opportunities may be available but simultaneously discouraged by leadership. Similarly, mandates to work in-office may not be followed consistently by all departments. These inconsistencies result in confusion and frustration.

After working from home amidst the pandemic while also navigating virtual schooling and child care, many women are adamant that they are significantly more productive working from home than in an office. This claim is validated by the present research.



When women are given autonomy over the following aspects of work, there is a notable increase in productivity, retention, and likelihood to recommend an organization.

— **Where they work.** The majority of surveyed women say they want the option to work remotely, or hybrid at the very least.

— **The times of day they work.** Having the ability to work early morning and late evening hours is critical for women, who frequently note having to work around kid school schedules.

— **The number of hours they work each day.** For women, it's not about the hours worked each day, but rather working the number of hours needed to get the job done.

— **Their day-to-day meeting schedules.** Women express the importance of being able to step away from work occasionally throughout the day.

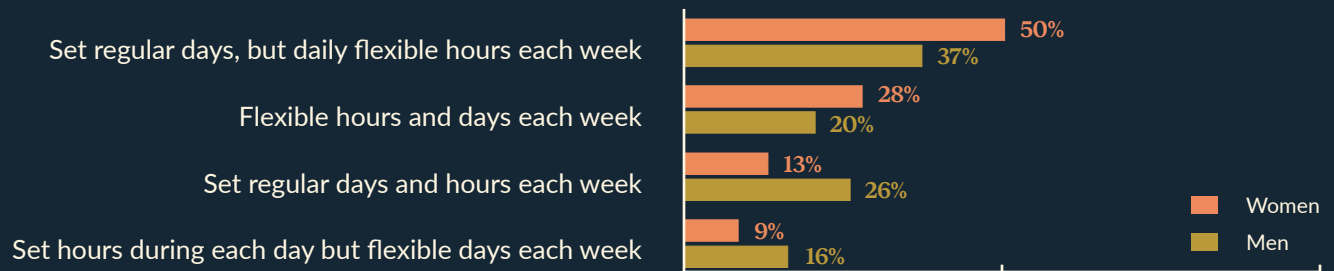
— **Extended travel.** Overwhelmingly, women express a desire to travel very little for work. However, they are open to travel if it is occasional and they have ample advance notice to plan accordingly.

— **Non-work, work events.** Women also desire autonomy over when and if they attend extracurricular work events.



## Ideal Work Schedule

For both women and men the most ideal work schedule is one with set work days, but flexible hours within the scheduled day. Women, however, are more passionate about this schedule being the most ideal: they are almost 1½ times more likely to prefer this option than men are (50% compared with 37%).



# 3.

## Managerial Support

Managers play a significant role in establishing flexibility in the workplace. Managerial Support reflects the ways a manager or team leader demonstrates support for flexibility. The strongest indicators women use to assess managerial support for flexibility are the degree to which their direct leader:

- ◆ Values flexible work practices
- ◆ Understands individuals' unique flexibility needs
- ◆ Creates an environment where it is easy to talk about those needs

Though managers may support flexibility in theory, many women surveyed say that support does not always materialize in practice, often due to workload pressure or a manager's inability to use flexibility options for themselves. Organizational culture can also make it difficult for managers to effectively support flexibility.

For men, their relationship with their managers is critical to their assessment of work flexibility. For women, on the other hand, manager support for flexibility is helpful but not enough. Reluctant to be perceived as receiving special treatment or less committed to their careers, women require true buy-in and respect for flexibility throughout an organization to maximize their personal flexibility at work. Ultimately, this organization-wide respect for flexibility creates an environment where women feel more comfortable discussing their flexibility needs with their managers, and managers feel better able to listen and support them.

“

*My boss is completely flexible and truly cares about my well-being, encouraging me to step away from work whenever needed. As a result, I'm more productive than I have ever been in any other position in 17 years of workforce experience.”*

-Interviewed participant





*“PTO is available, but the stress that results from taking a day off is often not worth it.”*

## 4.

### Paid Time Off

“

*[We get] unlimited sick time which is huge for me as a new mom with a kid in daycare that gets sick very often. But the deadlines don't change, and the work doesn't magically disappear if I have to take time off to take care of a sick kid, so the flexibility is nice, but it doesn't change the expectations.”*

-Interviewed participant

Paid Time Off (PTO) is also a factor impacting work flexibility. For women and primary caregivers, when PTO policies accommodate not only their needs but also the needs of their families, a great amount of stress is alleviated. Although having the ability to work flexible hours throughout the day allows them to attend doctor's appointments or child care pickups without using PTO, there are simply unexpected life events that cannot be scheduled into an already busy work day. The last two years of pandemic work have made this abundantly clear.

Generous PTO, unlimited sick time, and other benefits are valued, but when workload demands make it difficult to utilize benefits without pressure, the overall feeling of flexibility is minimized. Some women note benefits are not applied evenly throughout a company, which can dilute an organization's stated commitment to flexibility or supporting employees and their wellbeing.





# 5.

## Workload

Workload impacts flexibility. The realities of a heavy workload can often overpower the otherwise flexible structures established by organizations. Flexibility is more than just working remotely, so even if employees are working from home, if they are tied to their computer from 8 am to 6 pm in back-to-back meetings, they experience little flexibility in their day-to-day work. While several women report that variations in workload are better supported with flexible work arrangements (rather than fixed hours in-office), some mention that assumptions about remote work itself can lead to increased work expectations.

Several factors make up how women experience their workload, beyond just the simple manageability of their work responsibilities and priorities. More specifically, women assess:

- ◆ Is my workload supported by my manager?
- ◆ Is my workload equitable compared to colleagues?
- ◆ Is my workload relatively consistent, week-to-week?
- ◆ Is my workload fairly compensated?

“

*We are short-staffed and overworked and I rarely even get lunch, so I don't have much flexibility to take time off and really rest. Even on vacation days I feel a pulse-check my email or keep in touch with work.”*

-Interviewed participant



*“Caring breeds caring. Mutual respect for schedules can go a long way but folks need to model it [before] others follow.”*

## 6.

### Team Support

Immediate colleagues contribute to a culture of flexibility by accommodating each other’s time needs, as well as by assisting with actual work when time off from work is taken. Several surveyed women discuss the importance of cross-training employees so that team members are better prepared to fill in while others take time off or have to step away from work. Others express that although a shared desire to promote work flexibility often exists across team members, work structures set in place by the organization can hamper any attempt to put desire into practice.

Compared to the five previous factors, the impact of supportive team members on work flexibility is minimal, not because it is not important, but because team members are already relatively supportive of each other’s needs for flexibility, meaning that there is less they can do as individuals to improve an overall sense of work flexibility.

“

*My colleagues and peers all tend to be aligned on the flexibility mission. It’s the executive level that insists on in-person and reduced flexibility.”*

-Interviewed participant



# Outcomes

Through predictive modeling, Werklabs developed a **Work Flexibility Index**, where survey participants were asked to rate (1) their satisfaction with the current level of flexibility in work, (2) the extent to which the flexibility they have meets their needs, and (3) how their current level of flexibility compares to their ideal flexible work scenario.

**On a 100-point scale, men score 70.5; women score 59.3.**

Women have less of the flexibility that they critically need.

**Why does flexibility matter?** An organization's performance is a function of the flexibility its employees have in work. It's in the data. Across the board, if organizations offer greater flexibility in work, employees are more likely to recommend the organization, not only as a flexible place to work but also as a compassionate organization. When organizations invest in creating and sustaining flexible work structures, they will reap the benefits of employees who will (1) stay longer (2) be more productive, and (3) encourage other professionals to apply.

## Conclusion

The shifting pandemic workplace is changing and so, too, are employee expectations. Employees want flexibility in how and where they work, among other things. However, many employers still don't understand the subtleties of flexibility at work and how to implement practical changes so that they may see progress toward building more flexible work structures.

Through our research, we can establish a direct link between drivers of flexibility and outcomes such as productivity, retention, and the likelihood to recommend an organization. More specifically, we see that the extent to which an organization commits to flexible work and the degree to which employees are empowered to make choices about where and when they work are key to organizational success.

A coordinated focus on Organizational Support and Personal Autonomy highlights significant opportunities for consequential change in the workplace.

### Want to learn more?

Visit us at [Werklabs.com](https://www.werklabs.com).

Have questions? Email [insights@werklabs.com](mailto:insights@werklabs.com)



# Model

Werklabs' Flexibility Questionnaire results formed the basis for an ongoing predictive model that identifies, first, what most impacts professionals' feelings and experiences of flexibility in the workplace, and then, through measurement and predictive analytics, understands the current and expected effect of a change in any of these characteristics on critical performance outcomes such as retention and productivity.

In so doing, we can measure across time how these characteristics change both in definition and importance as well as how they impact bottom line performance. This will allow employers to understand where to invest resources to create flexible work structures with the biggest returns on employee engagement and critical performance outcomes. In future applications, this model can be adapted and customized by companies to create models segmented by industry, function, and role.

## Scores

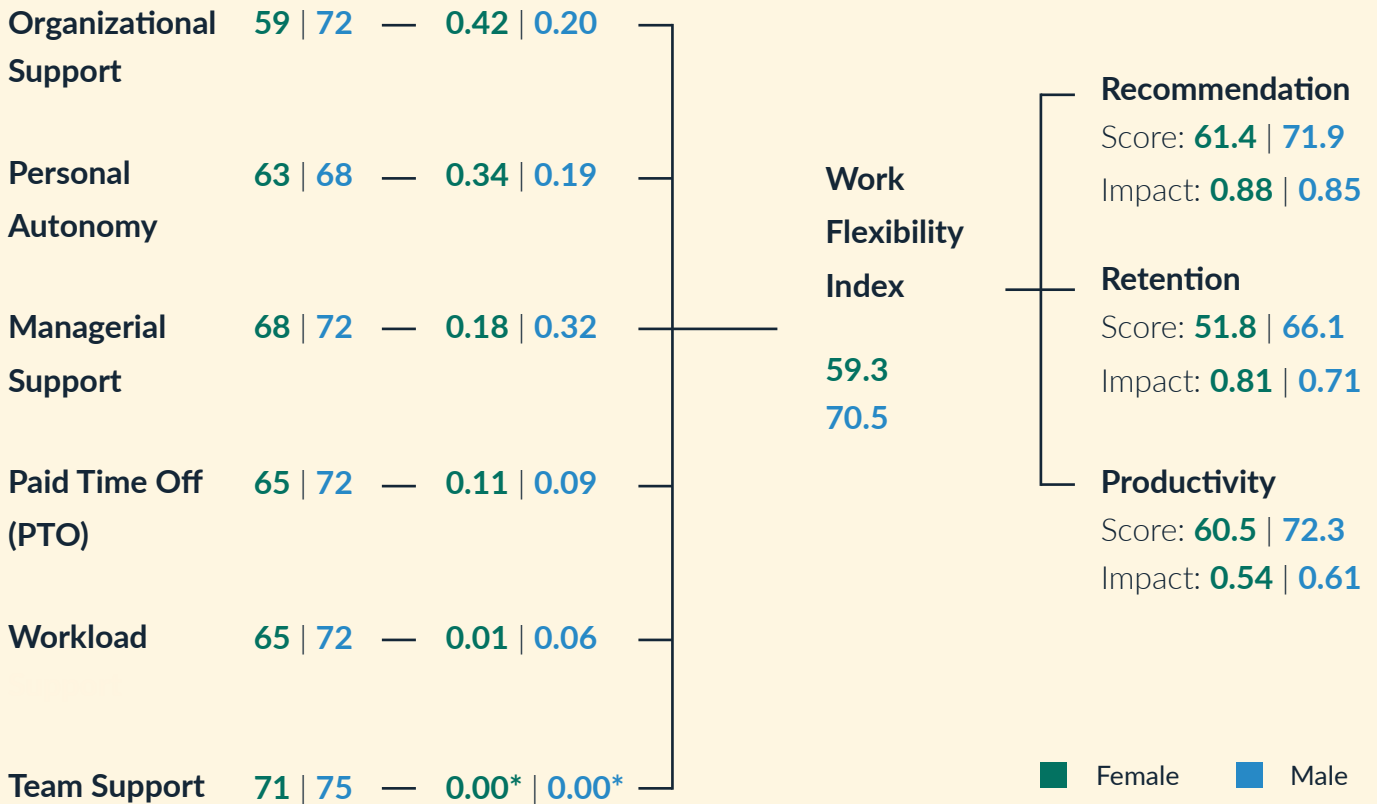
Current experiences on a 100-point scale

## Impact

The expected effect of a 1-point change in score on the outcome

## Outcome

Flexibility Index and Performance Outcomes



\* An impact of 0 does not indicate a lack of importance, but rather that incremental changes to that driver are unlikely to have a further impact on the outcome. This is usually due to that driver being relatively stable/expected in comparison to other drivers, and helps orient where changes should be focused.



# Glossary:

## The Flexibility Formula Defined

### Flexibility Factors

**Organizational Support:** the degree to which employees believe their organization values their work contributions and cares for their wellbeing through flexibility

**Personal Autonomy:** the degree to which employees are empowered to make choices about where and when they work, defining flexibility on their own terms

**Managerial Support:** the role in which managers play in establishing flexibility through practice

**PTO:** the sense employees feel they have a reasonable number of PTO to accommodate both their own and their family's needs

**Workload:** how manageable, supported, equitable and consistent employees' workload is

**Team Support:** the ways immediate colleagues contribute to a culture of flexibility

### Work Flexibility Index

(1) The overall satisfaction with the current level of flexibility in work, (2) the extent to which the flexibility meets needs, and (3) how the current level of flexibility compares to the deal flexible work scenario.

### Organizational Performance Outcomes

**Recommendation:** the likelihood of employees recommending their employer as a flexible and compassionate place to work

**Retention:** the likelihood of remaining at their current employer in one year and three years

**Productivity:** the likelihood that employees will be more productive in the next quarter and year of work

