

**IWD 2021**

**#ChooseToChallenge**



## **Ten Ideas for Inspiring Change in your Workplace**

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Work with me: Anna Meller

# Introduction

## WHY do we need change?

In the UK there are roughly as many women employees as men. Yet the female presence in senior positions remains persistently low. Over 40% of employed women are currently working part-time - often below their skills level and experiencing the well-documented "part-time pay penalty".

Both anecdotal evidence and research suggest one of the key reasons women step off the corporate career ladder is to "**achieve better balance**". Indeed, when it comes to managing *work-life balance*, the evidence suggests reducing her hours is the most likely strategy for a woman to take: even at senior levels. In addition, mothers are increasingly holding themselves back from promotion because of concerns about maintaining their work-life balance. Many employers, on the other hand, continue to operate with practices and cultures established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Ones which assume that an employee's only commitments are to the workplace while someone else provides family support.

Employers are likely to argue their flexible working policies are designed to aid women in their quest to *balance work and caring responsibilities*. The problem is that often these policies are not only inflexible in their application, but also likely to sit within rigid corporate cultures and entrenched working practices that deny the possibility of combining motherhood with a senior career. In reality, most employers have been slow to accommodate truly flexible working practices. Research has shown that despite the existence of policies offering a range of flexible working options, the biggest take up by far is for part-time (reduced) hours.

## WHAT needs to change?

Women's career patterns have always been different from men's. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century many employers expected a woman to stop working when she got married, or at latest on the birth of her first child. By the 1960s and 70s, the growing demand for workers resulted in employers enticing mothers back to work – often on part-time arrangements to accommodate their caring responsibilities.

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and little had changed in the workplace. The pandemic last year and the resultant enforced home working caused many people to rethink both what they want from work and what is possible in terms of flexibility.

2021 is the perfect time for us to take radical steps. To **#choosetochallenge** corporate cultures and re-design full-time jobs so they both *support better work-life balance* and enhance productivity.

## HOW can we inspire change?

The pioneering women of the last century who set their sights on corporate careers chose to play the game by men's rules. Recognising they were a small minority, and with few alternative models to follow, they strove to understand and adapt to the masculine cultures which prevailed in most organisations. Half a century on, the focus has changed.

Instead of asking *"How can we change ourselves to fit into this organisation?"* women are increasingly asking *"How can we encourage this organisation to change so that we can all fit in?"*

On the following pages I've suggested ten things you can **#choosetochallenge** to generate change in your workplace.

Someone once said to me *"change happens best when nobody notices"* while the poster on my wall reminds me that *"small changes add up"*. We can all inspire change in small steps – challenging a process, starting a conversation, asking questions, taking some small actions in the right direction.

Some of these changes can be made quickly, but the majority will require those things we women are good at – starting conversations and then having them over and over, patience, persistence and above all, a sense of humour.

Pick one or two actions you feel are most likely to succeed in your organisation; and use the worksheets to plan your strategy.

Anna Meller  
Sustainable Working Ltd  
International Women's Day 2021

# 1. Negotiate a *more balanced working arrangement*: redesign your job

In many organisations work still seems to be more about how many hours you put in - and where you are when you're doing that – than about what you achieve. The smart alternative is a focus on outputs or results.

In order to focus on results, you'll first need to be clear on what the objectives of your job are (see also action point 3) and where you should be putting your focus. With smart use of technology and the help of [my free workbook](#) you can re-design your job for more agile Working while improving your *work-life balance*.

If you're a manager or team member, why not share this idea with the team and commit to redesigning everyone's job? Or perhaps you have a hard to fill vacancy in your team/department which might generate more candidates if you offer a more flexible job (see also action point 2).

## Taking Action

What's your target (what do you plan to do? E.g. redesign my job, redesign the team's jobs, share this idea with HR etc)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?



## 2. Redefine recruitment: engage a flexible working agency

Whether you're looking for a new job yourself, or you're a manager looking to hire a new member of staff, why not give the traditional recruitment agencies a miss and talk to one of the newer breed promoting flexible working?

If you're a manager with a vacancy you may be surprised at the quality candidates you can attract when you offer more flexibility. (And it's not just women, younger men are increasingly expressing a desire for a *more balanced life* too.)

If you're a mother returning to work, or seeking a change of job for *better balance*, you'll find support and a large variety of jobs available from some of the pioneers of flexible recruitment such as:

<http://www.sapphirepartners.co.uk/>

<http://www.timewisejobs.co.uk/>

<http://www.workingmums.co.uk/>

I've also put together a [list of sites to follow on Twitter](#)

### Taking Action

What's your target (what do you plan to do? E.g. list one vacancy with one of the above, share this idea with my manager etc)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?

### 3. Get very clear about your 'performance outcomes'

The best antidote to a long working hours culture is a focus on outputs or results. And the best starting point for focusing on results is to review your employer's Performance Management Process (PMP).

Are you clear on precisely what you've been hired to do? On the activities where you should be focussing the bulk of your time and efforts? Does your PMP aid clarity or is it simply a loathed "tick box" exercise?

Whether you're an employee or a manager, if you feel the current process is getting in the way of efficient working (or that it's not "fit for purpose" in some other way) why not feed this back to your HR department? And what's to stop you developing your own system – one that supports a focus on results rather than time or place? If it works for your team or department there's no need to broadcast it to the rest of the organisation – until they come asking you why your people seem to be working efficiently and still having a life!

#### Taking Action

What's your target (what do you plan to do? e.g. talk to my manager/team about getting greater clarity around what we're expected to achieve, share this idea with HR etc)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?

## 4. Challenge existing policies and practices

The problem with many policies and practices intended to support women's careers, is they're often inflexible and likely to uphold entrenched attitudes instead. So, for example, you want to work flexibly? Employers often hear that as meaning you want to work less hours: welcome to the world of part-time working and the accompanying assumption that you're no longer committed to your career or interested in development and promotion.

While many women are willing to pay the price for this kind of flexibility (it's called the "part-time pay penalty") it represents a loss of valuable skills to the organisation. Skills that - with a little bit of creative thinking - could have been more fully utilized by the employer.

So, if you're a woman struggling with your *work-life balance* don't automatically assume the only option is to ask for a reduction in working hours. See also point 1 above, and consider if there's a way of re-designing your full-time job to support you in achieving *a better balance*. (See also points 3 above and 5 below).

And if you're a manager faced with a request for more flexibility, don't immediately assume it's not possible. Instead of asking "*what's the policy here?*" ask "*who else is already doing this here?*" Or "*where can I get help to redesign this job?*"

### Taking Action

What's your target (what do you plan to do? e.g. talk to my manager/team about working differently for more flexibility etc)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?





## 5. Get better at managing your *Work-Life Balance*

Start a conversation about *work-life balance*, and the chances are the other person will be happy to talk at length. While for most of us *work-life balance* matters, it will mean different things to different people. And the way we prefer to manage our balance also varies.

According to Professor Ellen Ernst Kossek, a leading academic authority on *work-life balance* we tend to fall broadly into three categories. Some of us are what she calls “integrators” happy to integrate work and non-work activities, while others are “separators” who like to keep the boundary clear between work and non-work. The third group (Vollyers) alternate between integration and separation. Use Ellen’s online [Work-Life Indicator assessment](#) to identify your preferred style and consider how you might adapt your working arrangements to fit with your preferences.

If you manage other people, why not support them to learn more about their preferences? Then schedule a team discussion where everyone talks about their preferences and how they can support each other. According to Ellen’s research the support of managers is key to reducing *work-life imbalance*. Read more about Ellen’s work in her book [“CEO of Me”](#).

### **Taking Action**

What’s your target (what do you plan to do? e.g. learn more about my WLB preferences and discuss these with the people around me etc)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?

## 6. Upgrade your flexible working skills

Managers are often reluctant to agree to flexible working arrangements since they perceive the downsides to outweigh any potential benefits. Learning to work flexibly and successfully requires the honing of skills you already have and perhaps the development of some you've yet to acquire. Think of the ability to work flexibly as a competency you can improve.

Visit <https://ework.coventry.ac.uk/> to learn more about the e-work-life assessment tool and identify skills gaps for yourself or your team.

Consider what you'll need to work successfully in a virtual environment. Many people say that working flexibly requires a basis of trust. While this may be so, the bigger factor is whether your working arrangement makes your manager and colleagues feel comfortable and in control. What can you do to support them? You'll almost certainly need to improve your communication skills and take the initiative to communicate more regularly.

### Taking Action

What's your target (what do you plan to do? e.g. learn more about where I need to improve my e-skills etc)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?



## 7. Be a Role Model

In many organisations women (and men) at senior levels are working flexibly to achieve a *better work-life balance*. Sadly, in most cases it's happening "*under the radar*" so very few people know about it. There may be many reasons why – the most common tend to be "*we don't want to set a precedent*" and "*we don't want clients to know we've got people working flexibly*". Women, in particular, are often grateful for what they see as the "*concession*" of being allowed flexibility so they go along with their employer's request not to publicise it.

The risk is that if it's not visible junior women are likely to conclude it's not possible. So they struggle on or leave exhausted. In my work with clients I never cease to be surprised at the level of conversation generated when a senior woman admits to working flexibly. Women are hungry for role models to confirm it's possible and give them pointers on how it can be done.

If you're a middle or senior manager working flexibly, take every opportunity to be visible – both inside the organisation and outside. It's not self-promotion, it's a valuable marker on the path for those women following you.

### Taking Action

What's your target (what do you plan to do? e.g. talk to an internal or external women's network about my experiences of flexible working etc)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?

## 8. Commit to making your organisation an Employer of Choice for Women

Whether you're in management, HR or the junior ranks commit to making your organisation an Employer of Choice for women and act on that intent.

If you have a women's network, share your experiences and identify how you can make the culture more female friendly (see also action point 10 below). If there's no women's network set one up.

Identify role models within the organisation (see action point 7 above) and publicise them widely both internally and externally: for example to recruiters.

Use a flexible working agency (see point 3 above) to fill vacancies; or brief your traditional recruiters on [your willingness to allow flexible working](#) (this goes for in-house recruiters too).

If you're in a position of influence ask about the take-up of flexible working arrangements. Identify "pinch points" – such as the birth of a child or the sudden need to care for an elderly parent. Consider whether your HR policies – particularly those around development, promotion and compensation, support *balanced working*.

### Taking Action

What's your target (what do you plan to do? e.g. discuss with the women's network how our culture can be more female friendly etc)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?



## 9. Identify and promote the business case for more flexible working arrangements

The case for flexible working comes in many guises. The current favourite is the notion of agile working. We also have “green” arguments around reduced travel and its effects on reducing pollution. Less travel also means less stress for employees.

Flexible working can also:

- Reduce office costs.
- Enable people to work at more appropriate times if they need to interact with colleagues in other parts of the world.
- Enable parents to combine work and parenthood more effectively by allowing them to balance work around caring commitments.
- Provide a better service to clients by extending opening hours.

Whatever your circumstances, the business case is still the most powerful lever for change. And since flexibility when implemented wisely is also *better for balance* there are additional health and social benefits. The more readily people within the organisation embrace flexible working, the more likely it is to seep into the organisation’s culture and working practices (see also action point 10 below).

### Taking Action

What’s your target (what do you plan to do? e.g identify the key business drivers for flexible working in this organisation etc)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?



## 10. Start a conversation: shift your organisational culture

Organisational cultures are created by the people that work within them; by the conversations they have about what's possible and not possible in this organisation; by the people who are admired as role models; by the actions that get rewarded or punished; and by the expectations people have of each other.

Consider what shapes your organisational culture. Are long hours rewarded or do people focus on outputs and *balanced workloads*? (See also action point 3 above.) Are people who work flexibly for the sake of their *work-life balance* admired? Or are they admonished for not showing enough commitment to the organisation?

Changing the culture begins with changing the conversations. By asking why not? By considering new possibilities. By valuing pioneers who show how new ways of working can succeed.

For insights about the questions to ask, take a look at the following:

["Women's Work, Men's Cultures" by Sarah Rutherford](#)

["The Invention of Difference" by Binna & Jo Kandola](#)

And my book:

["#Upcycle Your Job: The smart way to balance family life and career"](#)

### Taking Action

What's your target (what do you plan to do?)

Who do you need to influence in order to achieve this?

By when do you plan to have achieved this?

How will you evaluate your success?

## Work with me

***I'm Anna Meller.*** *With twenty five years' experience supporting individuals and organisations to better work-life balance I'm the UK's premier expert. I work with ambitious professional women who want to balance their corporate career with their family life. Through my Balanced Leader training, coaching and mentoring I empower them to make choices that work for them and their employers – so that they keep their careers and their employers keep key talent.*

I'm one of the earliest champions for flexible and balanced working. I started researching, writing and speaking on the subject back in the mid-1990s. Consequently I've a lot of expertise to draw on; and since it's evidence based I know what works and what doesn't. You can learn more about what I know by [reading my book](#).

I've conducted ground-breaking research into work-life balance challenges for professional women. I'm a working mother and my early career was in corporate HR roles. So I've '*been there, done that*' and I've paid the part-time penalty. All of which makes me passionate about supporting other women's career progression into senior roles.



## Find your #Flex & Regain your #Balance

*Research is showing that mothers are holding back their careers because of concerns about their work-life balance. It's a costly decision - the potential loss of earnings has been estimated at £250,000 over a working lifetime. But there is an alternative.*

Let my one to one coaching transform you from someone struggling to juggle to finding the confidence and clarity to manage your work-life balance and your career. [Email me](#) to arrange an exploratory call (without obligation on your part).

Take a look at this [brief video on YouTube](#) where I talk about the benefits previous clients gained from working with me. And learn more about other ways [I can support you](#) on my website.

## Hire me to speak at your event

As the UK's foremost Work-Life Balance expert I've spoken to a wide range of audiences from postgraduate students to professional groups. Learn more about [my speaker expertise here](#).

I'm particularly keen to share my knowledge with professional women's networks. If you're looking for a speaker please [email me](#) to discuss topics.

## Connect with me

**Not ready to take the next step yet? Let's keep in touch.**

[Sign up to my regular newsletter.](#)

Join the [Balanced Leader Facebook community](#).

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