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Policy

Can work be both productive and good?

February 2019



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We offer balanced analysis of topical issues at work, covering everything from zero-hours contracts to the impact of new technologies on working lives, and productivity to mental health.

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This paper was written by Gill Dix and Adrian Wakeling. The views expressed in this Acas Workplace Policy paper are those of the authors and not the Acas Council.

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Introduction and key findings

Two big questions currently dominate policy thinking on the world of work. The first asks how we can make our organisations more productive, and the second asks how we can improve the quality of working lives. Of course, a huge complicating factor, is how the answers to these questions will be affected by the UK's future relationship with the European Union.

Most commentators seem to agree with the Chief Economist at the Bank of England, [Andy Haldane](#), that the productivity problem is caused by a long tail (55% of companies) not copying new ideas from the those leading the way; what the RSA's [Matthew Taylor](#) described as a "poor diffusion of innovation".

Meanwhile the quality of work agenda seeks to address, amongst other things, the impact of the one-sided flexibility associated with business models often based upon the gig economy and zero-hours contracts. The broad quality of work agenda promotes values such as worker voice, work-life balance and job security.

But are the interests of businesses and employees compatible? Can more productive workplaces be built upon better quality jobs? And, if so, is this viable amongst those business models which rely most heavily on atypical contractual arrangements for their workforce?

In the light of these challenges, Acas commissioned a YouGov poll to find out what UK workers feel are the key issues for their workplaces and for their working lives over the coming year.

Key findings

- ❖ **The biggest issues facing your workplace** in 2019 will be:
 - Getting the right people with the right skills (53%)
 - Productivity (36%)
 - Technological change (36%)
- ❖ **The most important issues in your working life** in 2019 will be:
 - Balancing work and home life (53%)
 - Staying healthy and feeling well (51%)
 - Job security (44%)
- ❖ **The majority of workers (63%) think flexible working arrangements** will stay about the same in the next year

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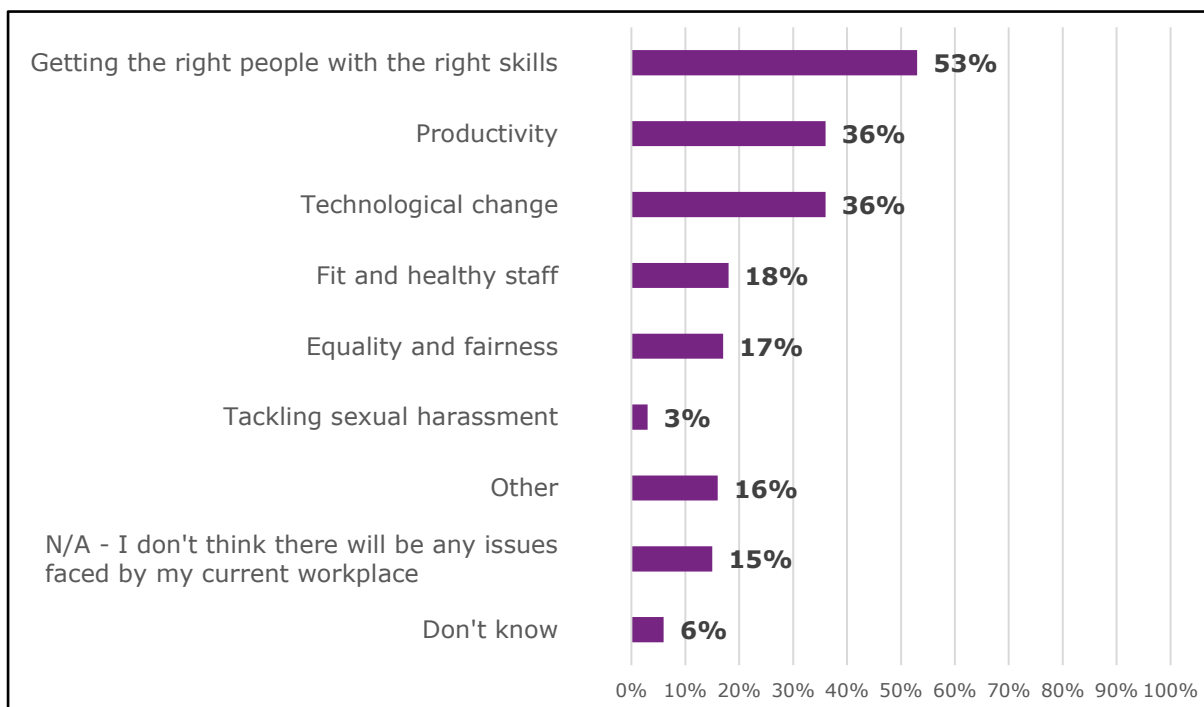
- ❖ **49% of workers think that the use of gig workers** will stay about the same
- ❖ **The vote is split on whether mental health** will be taken as seriously as physical health by employers – with 46% agreeing and 43% disagreeing
- ❖ **65% of workers are confident their workplace will be able to hire people with the right skills after Brexit**
- ❖ **Only 12% of workers are worried that their job could be done by a machine** in the future.

What matters?

Comparing the poll results on the issues that are likely to be most important for *the workplace*, on the one hand, and *for working lives*, on the other, we get a measure of the different challenges workplaces face.

The issues that come up as 'biggest issues for the workplace' seem to reflect fairly traditional business concerns around skills, productivity and technological change. Perhaps it is a positive sign that workers understand what are the chief talking points in company board rooms.

Which THREE, if any, of the following do you think will be the biggest issues faced by your current workplace in the next year (i.e. 2019)? (Please select up to three options)

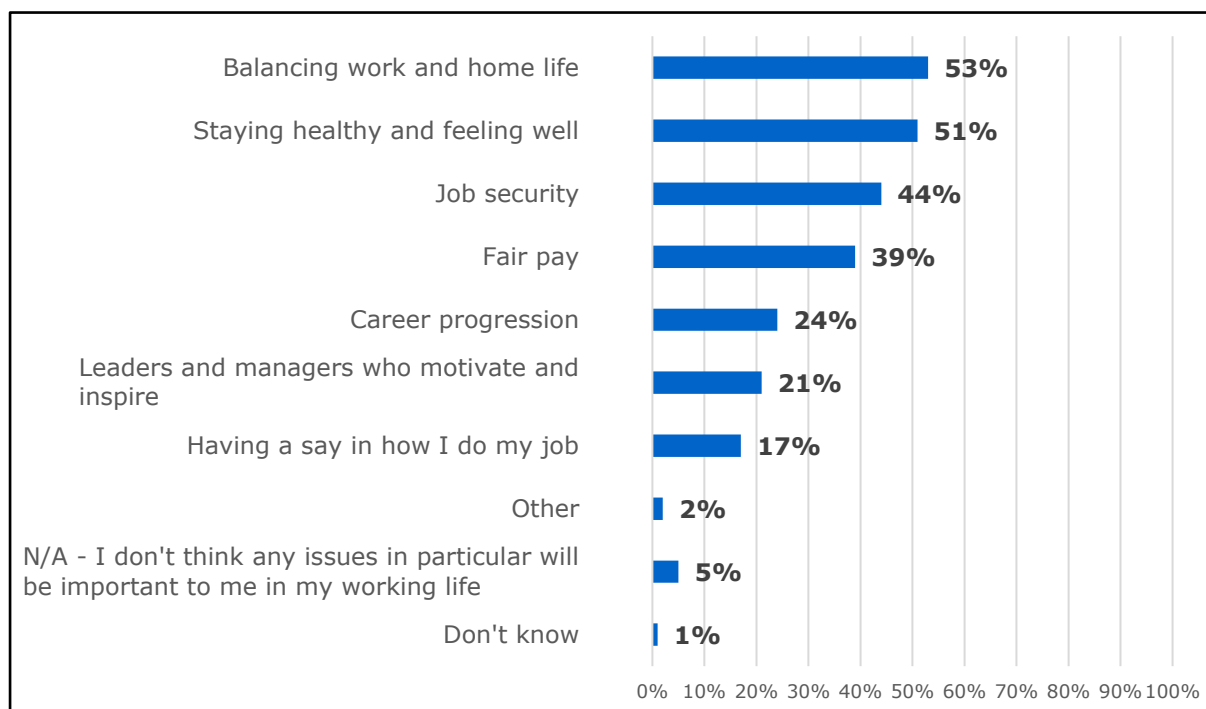


The issues workers identify as particularly important to their working lives fit more easily into 'life needs' rather than the business needs category – although many of

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these (notably wellbeing, work-life balance and job security) have become increasingly associated with business success.

Which THREE, if any, of the following do you think will be most important to you in your working life in the next year (i.e. 2019)? (Please select up to three options)



If we look at our poll in terms of 'what doesn't matter', there are some interesting findings:

- The **overwhelming majority (85%) are not worried that a machine could do the their job** in the future, despite the constant scare stories about 20% of jobs being under threat by 2030. The [current thinking](#) that automation will create as many jobs as it takes away might partly be the cause for this new optimism.
- Brexit does not seem to feature as a major concern, with **two-thirds (65%) 'confident' that their workplace could get people with the right skills after the UK leaves the European Union.**

Contradictions and interdependencies

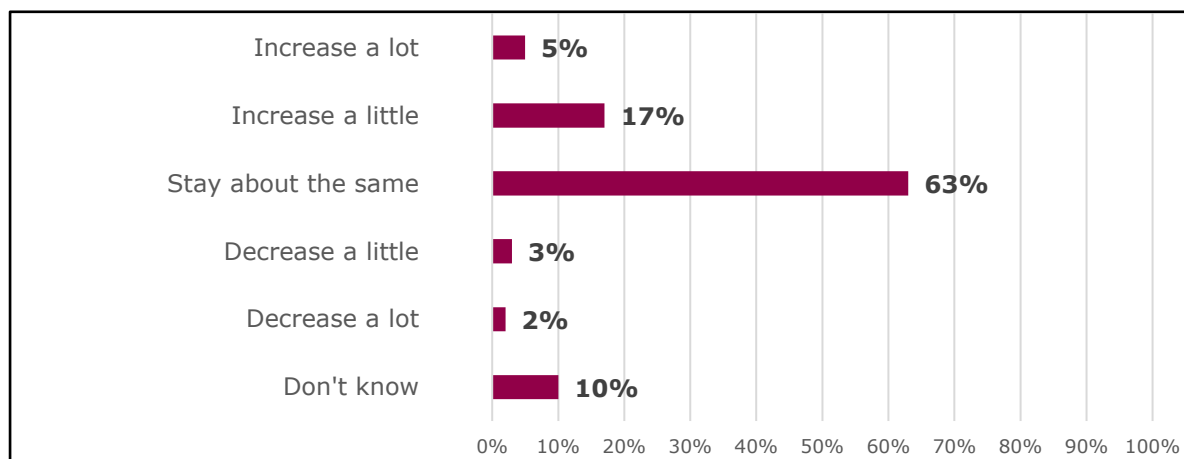
There are evident tensions in our poll results in what feels important for employees and how they see their workplaces changing over the next year.

For example, 'balancing work and home life' is seen as the number one priority for UK workers in 2019, but two thirds (**63%**) **feel that 'opportunities for flexible working' will 'stay about the same' this year.** This seems a little surprising in light of the high-profile campaigns promoting flexible working arrangements, and the growing evidence that flexible working could be a key driver of increased

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productivity. In its recent announcement on workplace rights, the [government](#) has committed to consider requiring all jobs to be advertised as flexible from day one, unless there are solid business reasons not to. It appears that a 'flexible workforce' happens organically and is lauded as a cornerstone of business success, but flexible working arrangements may need more of a helping hand.

To what extent, if at all, do you expect opportunities for flexible working at your current workplace to increase or decrease between now and the end of 2019, or do you expect them to stay about the same?



Other areas that call for a reconciliation between the policy agenda and workplace practice include:

- UK workers feel that although '**staying healthy and feeling well**' is important to them (51%), they do not think it is as important for their workplace to have 'fit and healthy staff' (18%); and despite the government's pledge to create a parity between mental and physical health, only 46% of workers felt UK employers would be taking mental health as seriously as physical health by the end of 2019.
- Two in five (44%) identified '**job security**' as important for them, but three in five (59%) said they believed the level of gig working in their organisation would remain the same or increase.
- 17% said 'equality and fairness' were a priority for their organisation whilst 39% identified 'fair pay' as a priority for themselves. On the question of fairness, interestingly, just **3% of workers felt that 'tackling sexual harassment'** was the biggest issue facing their workplace. This chimes with the findings in our [last poll](#), where 58% of people felt their workplaces were 'doing about the right amount' to reduce sexual harassment.

The recommendations set out by the [Carnegie Trust](#) and the RSA provide a good starting point for identifying metrics for the quality of work. But perhaps the real challenge is to reconcile the differences between the needs of employees and the

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business. In order to do this, it might be worth exploring some of the interdependencies between any agreed metrics. For example:

- Is mental health affected by **levels of job security**? There have been numerous [studies](#), for example, on the impact zero-hours contracts have on young people's mental health.
- Is there enough understanding of the **skill levels needed in different sectors and workplaces**? It can be very easy for the quality of work and productivity debates to focus exclusively on high skills. In lower skilled sectors, what are the drivers of job satisfaction and engagement? As [Sarah O'Connor](#) recently reported, there may also be a race to the bottom when it comes to the impact of technology on skills development.
- Our poll found that '**equality and fairness**' is significantly down the list of most important issues facing the workplace in 2019 (at 17%). 'Fairness' is an implicit part of many of the Carnegie/RSA metrics for quality of work, but should it be articulated more explicitly in these metrics and linked to issues around, for example, gender politics?

With employment rates at a record high, but concerns over the type of jobs being created, the big challenge for 2019 and beyond is to ensure that the quantity of jobs does not diminish, but to begin the process of reconciling what constitutes good quality work for all with what makes productive workplaces.

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The data in this report are derived from a large panel survey, conducted by YouGov between 13th - 21st December 2018. The sample was composed of 2035 employees, all of whom were non-managers or junior/middle managers in British private-sector businesses, and was balanced to be representative of British business size.

Acas Worklife

EMP_B2B_EX Sample: 13th - 21st December 2018



Total

YAW_q1. Which THREE, if any, of the following do you think will be the biggest issues faced by your current workplace in the next year (i.e. 2019)? (Please select up to three options. If any of your answers don't appear in the list below, please type them in the "other" box)

Unweighted base	2035
Base: All Employees	2035
Getting the right people with the right skills	53%
Productivity	36%
Technological change	36%
Fit and healthy staff	18%
Equality and fairness	17%
Tackling sexual harassment	3%
Other	16%
Don't know	6%
Not applicable - I don't think there will be any issues faced by my current workplace in the next year	15%
Net: Any listed issues faced (excluding other)	74%

YAW_q2. Which THREE, if any, of the following do you think will be most important to you in your working life in the next year (i.e. 2019)? (Please select up to three options. If any of your answers don't appear in the list below, please type them in the "other" box)

Unweighted base	2035
Base: All Employees	2035
Balancing work and home life	53%
Staying healthy and feeling well	51%
Job security	44%
Fair pay	39%
Career progression	24%
Leaders and managers who motivate and inspire	21%
Having a say in how I do my job	17%
Other	2%
Don't know	1%
Not applicable - I don't think any issues in particular will be important to me in my working life in the next year	5%
Net: Anything important listed (excluding other)	93%

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YAW_q3. For the following question, by "flexible working", we mean we mean part-time, term-time, home working etc. To what extent, if at all, do you expect opportunities for flexible working at your current workplace to increase or decrease between now and the end of 2019, or do you expect them to stay about the same?

Unweighted base	2035
Base: All employees	2035
Increase a lot	5%
Increase a little	17%
Stay about the same	63%
Decrease a little	3%
Decrease a lot	2%
Don't know	10%
Net: Increase	22%
Net: Decrease	6%

YAW_q4. For the following question, by "gig workers", we mean workers that get paid for 'gigs' they do such as food delivery or car journeys, usually through a website or an app. To what extent, if at all, do you expect the number of gig workers employed by your current workplace to increase or decrease between now and the end of 2019, or do you expect them to stay about the same?

Unweighted base	2035
Base: All employees	2035
Increase a lot	3%
Increase a little	7%
Stay about the same	49%
Decrease a little	2%
Decrease a lot	1%
Don't know	38%
Net: Increase	10%
Net: Decrease	2%

YAW_q5. For the following question, by "taken seriously", please think about generally about employers attitudes towards employee health, as well as policies and procedures that they may have in place. Thinking about UK employers in general in a years' time (i.e. in December 2019)... To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Mental health in the workplace will be taken at least as seriously by employers as physical health by the end of 2019"

Unweighted base	2035
Base: All employees	2035
Strongly agree	10%
Tend to agree	37%
Tend to disagree	33%
Strongly disagree	10%
Don't know	11%
Net: Agree	46%
Net: Disagree	43%

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YAW_q6. For the following question, please think about after the UK has left the European Union...How confident, if at all, are you that your current workplace will be able to hire people with the necessary skills after this time?

Unweighted base	2035
Base: All employees	2035
Very confident	23%
Fairly confident	42%
Not very confident	16%
Not at all confident	8%
Don't know	11%
Net: Confident	65%
Net: Not confident	24%

YAW_q7. How worried, if at all, are you that your current role could be done by a machine, rather than a human, in the future?

Unweighted base	2035
Base: All employees	2035
Very worried	2%
Fairly worried	10%
Not very worried	39%
Not at all worried	46%
Don't know	3%
Net: Worried	12%
Net: Not worried	85%

Cell Contents (Column Percentages)