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Women returning to work in a post-pandemic world:

Busting the
myths of flexibility
and choice



Introduction

As employers worldwide struggle to attract and retain talent post-Covid-19, the Innovation Foundation and the TASC Platform are joining forces to identify opportunities to empower women returning to work. This collaborative research series explores the challenges faced by women returning to work after the pandemic and asks whether flexibility at work is a universal solution for both employers and workers.

In this introductory research paper, we challenge the discourse and solutions proposed in response to the 'Great Resignation' - where millions of employees are leaving their jobs to seek better conditions and work-life balance. 4.5 Million US workers resigned in March 2022 alone, and similar trends are being seen across regions¹. Employers struggling to gain and retain top talent are urgently seeking new solutions - with flexible work at the top of the agenda.

However, the data reveals a labour market disconnect. Even as companies face talent shortages, a significant proportion of women find themselves in sub-optimal working conditions, underemployed or unable to re-enter the job market at all. Vulnerable groups have borne

the brunt of economic hardships due to the pandemic - including young people, low to medium-skilled workers in hard-hit industries, and parents and caregivers. And women are disproportionately represented across all these vulnerable groups.

How can we reconcile this challenge - connecting employers with this valuable workforce, and supporting these underserved women in reaping the benefits of the 'Great Reset'?

Through a combination of desk research, social media scanning and expert interviews, we outline the limits of workplace flexibility as it is currently conceived and identify what more positive and empowering flexibility could look like for women in these vulnerable demographics. We suggest avenues for further exploration to develop solutions that better serve women returning to work and their employers.

This report is just the first step. In the next stage of our research, we will be diving into perspectives from both employers and women going back to work in key industries in the UK, Sweden, South Africa, and India.

Part 1

The Great Resignation: a new movement, or a new myth?

The Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to a new worldwide phenomenon, known as the 'Great Resignation'. Also termed the Big Quit, the Great Reshuffle or the Great Reset, it refers to the millions of employees who have left their jobs, are looking for a new job, or plan to do so in the near future following the upheaval of the pandemic – and it has hit the risk-radar of employers across the globe.

A tighter labour market shifts the power balance towards employees who are demanding more flexibility, choice and purpose from their working life. Employers struggling to gain and retain talent are now urgently seeking new solutions to meet these rising expectations.

This is a huge societal shift, but we believe it is only part of the picture. In this paper we ask – is the great resignation as universal as it seems? Has the pandemic impacted the entire workforce equally? If not, who is being left out of the narrative? And what does that mean for employers seeking to design solutions that strengthen all segments of the workforce?

A tale of two labour market segments

On closer inspection, research from the US shows that voluntary exits from jobs have, so far, been more pronounced in two cases:

1) Mid-career workers in high-pressure industries

Resignation rates have risen disproportionately, by over 20%, amongst mid-career professionals between the ages of 30 – 45, while the numbers decreased for entry-level staff². The shift to remote work is likely to have reduced the risk appetite for employers when hiring new staff, leading to a preference for more experienced and reliable employees, and giving mid-career professionals greater choice and leverage in securing new positions. In addition, the resignation trend has been driven by professionals in healthcare and high tech, two industries that have faced incredible strain during the pandemic³.

2) Front line and low-wage employees

Surveys reveal that front-line and low-wage employees are leaving at significantly higher rates than before⁴. The biggest resignation rates were seen in the leisure and hospitality sector, where there are lower wages and limited opportunities for remote work. Early in the pandemic, these were driven by the fears and struggles of working in the context of Covid-19, but towards the end of 2021, it seems workers were primarily leaving for better jobs. Pay has been rising fastest at the bottom of the wage distribution since 2015, providing more opportunities for frustrated workers to switch to higher-paid jobs.

Hitting the Headlines

The narrative goes that through two years of the pandemic, employees have faced job insecurity and employment instability, poor work-life balance, illness and burnout. At the same time, they have had the opportunity to experience alternative models of work and, as a result, re-evaluate their values, interests and career options.

As the risks of the pandemic subside, those who experience poor working conditions in terms of long working hours, fewer opportunities to take leave, inadequate compensation or toxic workplace culture are leaving their jobs in droves.

In March 2022 in the United States, 4.5 million workers quit their jobs and there were 11.5 million job openings.

A global phenomenon?

Even though the term originated in the US, similar trends have been seen in European countries, China, and India⁵. Data in the other countries isn't as compelling but, on close inspection, it has been seen that employees are considering resigning in the other regions too, driven by comparable motivations⁶.

However, the trend has manifested differently in developing countries like India and South Africa, where it is important to examine if workers from the different sectors have equal bargaining power and are privileged enough to quit their jobs.

In India, employees are not just changing jobs but also pursuing careers outside their industry. In a study commissioned by Amazon India, it was seen that nearly 51 percent of job-seeking adults were pursuing opportunities in industries where they had no or little experience and around 68 percent were looking to switch industries as a result of Covid-19⁷. The study also shows that around 90 percent of Indian professionals are learning new and transferable skills to broaden their skill sets and stay relevant in the changing job market.

A similar trend has been observed in South Africa, where overworked employees are quitting their jobs⁸. However, due to the unskilled labour in low-wage positions and high unemployment rates in the country, the trend is more prominent among the high-skilled workforce, such as in the gig economy, and amongst freelancers and contractors.

In Europe, the trend has been dampened by the introduction of a variety of government schemes to retain workers⁹. In Germany, programs such as 'Kuzarbeit', which translates to 'short-time work' and has roots running back over a century, have helped protect jobs by maintaining the relationship between the employers and the employees until business revives. Similar programs include France's "chômage partiel", where the employer receives a partial activity allowance by the state to supplement employees' loss of salary due to a reduction in working hours¹⁰; and the United Kingdom's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (or 'furlough') and Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS)¹¹.

Who is not part of the movement?

On a global scale, it seems the benefits of the Great Resignation are experienced by employees who, in one form or another, are afforded the luxury of choice. Despite the economic hardship that has resulted from Covid-19, the pandemic has afforded new options for some segments of the workforce in the form of improved social security, rising wages, or an opportunity-rich labour market.

At the same time, the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and threatened socio-economic progress in the workplace for less fortunate sectors, income brackets and countries.

Furthermore, within all of these groups, working women have been hit the hardest - with young, and low- to medium-skilled women being the most vulnerable.

For these demographics, resignation is often not an option. If they have left their jobs, it was not by choice and, in many cases, they are struggling to re-enter the workforce. The decline in female employment is both a direct effect of the pandemic and the indirect impact of structural challenges faced by women which were exacerbated by the pandemic.

The global context: Systemic shocks amplify systemic weaknesses

Slowdown in global growth

By 2020, the global economy's growth rate had fallen to **-3.3%**, the lowest growth rate since 1961.

Unemployment rates
shot up by **1.1%**



33 million
more unemployed

Labour force participation
fell by **2.2%**



81 million
more inactive

Working hours
fell by **8.8%**



255 million
less FTE jobs

Groups that were economically vulnerable suffered disproportionate effects



Women

are disproportionately represented or affected within each vulnerable group.



Youth

Unemployment rose by 8.7% compared with 3.7% for adults.



Hard-hit industries

such as hospitality, entertainment, logistics and manufacturing may take more than 5 years to recover.



Low to medium-skilled workers

suffered a 4.7% reduction in working hours as compared to 1.3% for high-skilled workers.



Parents and Carers

reported reduced work hours or a shift to part time work in 15.2% of households.

64 million

jobs lost or
US\$800 billion in earnings.

Job losses **2x** higher than young men;
6x higher than adult men.

510 million

women at risk.

47 million

will be pushed into extreme poverty.

12.5 billion

hours of unpaid work or US\$10 trillion.

Employment losses.

Women **5%**
Men **3.9%**

Employment losses in middle income countries.

Young women **-15.8%**
Young men **-7%**
Adult men **-2.7%**

% employed worker in hard-hit sectors.

Women **40%**
Men **36.6%**

Estimated wage losses without subsidies.

Women **8.1%**
Men **5.4%**

Working parents who report taking on the majority of unpaid care work.

Women **53.4%**
Men **20.9%**

Reconnecting an essential workforce

It seems there is a disconnect – even as companies face talent shortages in this space, a significant proportion of women find themselves in sub-optimal working conditions, or unable to re-enter the job market at all. How can we reconcile this challenge – connecting employers with this valuable workforce, and supporting women in reaping the benefits of this ‘Great Reset’?



Part 2

Is Flexibility the Solution?

As we emerge from the pandemic, the desire for flexibility is at an all-time high. As a result, employers are now viewing flexible working as the top response to an array of issues, in particular the challenges for female workers.

In our current context, flexibility can be defined as ‘the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks’. Its benefits have been well explored¹². Studies have shown that employers who facilitate flexibility stand to benefit from their employees’ increasing ability to allocate time and resources between work and non-work commitments, from higher levels of motivation and engagement, and from higher employee retention¹³. Additionally, flexibility can also work as an insurance policy: just knowing that they have the option to be flexible, should they need to use it, appears to be reassuring to employees¹⁴. Correlations between flexible working and employee engagement, job satisfaction, retention and health demonstrate its benefits for both employers and employees¹⁵.

Women are seen to be the core beneficiaries of workplace flexibility, enabling them to prioritise care responsibilities without sacrificing employment opportunities. But is this always the case?

Types of flexibility

- Choices in managing time of work – including managing shift schedules
- Ability to choose where to work
- Ability to reduce work hours (part-time or full-time)

The limits of workplace flexibility: an issue of choice and risk



Our research shows that the benefits of flexibility seem to hit limits when it comes to women within the vulnerable demographics identified above.

Young mothers were also 61.5% more likely to shoulder care responsibilities across OECD countries during the pandemic. Working mothers displayed more indicators of psychological and emotional distress, stress, anxiety, and depression than all other control groups, and employment declined amongst women globally due to the closure of schools and caregiving services¹⁸.

In general, women are significantly more likely to be working part-time and to be suffering time-related underemployment than men, and these gaps are rising¹⁶. For young women entering the job market during the pandemic, full-time employment was often not available and, as a result, part-time or more flexible contract and shift work was their only option. **Young women** are more than twice as likely as young men to be jobless and not in education or training¹⁷.

Beyond the global decline in employment, reductions in work hours were disproportionately borne by women who do not have the option to stay home and telework¹⁹. Women are the majority of the workforce in vulnerable sectors hardest hit by the pandemic such as retail and hospitality – and many essentially had to choose between their jobs and their care responsibilities²⁰.

For women in these industries who managed to retain their jobs, but who have **low to medium skill levels**, the flexibility they experience is not a matter of choice. The power, and often the benefit, of designing flexible working patterns and shift schedules are in the hands of the employers. Employment models that provide convenience and efficiency for employers, such as zero-hour contracts and flexible shift patterns, increase risk and instability for workers, and can even be

used as punitive measures. Employees rarely turn down shifts offered to them, and thereby risk being overlooked for future opportunities, if they are struggling to make a living wage.

How can flexibility be empowering for working women without increasing risk and sacrificing income, earning potential or long-term financial security?

What does flexibility look like?

We believe flexibility can be a positive solution for both employers and women in these vulnerable demographics, but it will require a deeper understanding of what female workers need and aspire towards.

This will, of course, be context-dependent. In our next publication, we will share findings from

surveys with mid-skilled women in a diverse range of roles and geographies. For now, the results of our desk research, interviews and social media scanning - exploring online conversations about female unemployment and work reintegration - provide some early insights into what women want and need from their jobs, workplaces, labour markets, and social support systems.

1. Secure and flexible job opportunities – part-time work can be viewed as an option to provide flexibility to working mothers, but it is often all that women can find and contributes to the issue of time-related underemployment, raised above. Whether through shifts or fixed-hour contracts, part-time or full-time, women are looking for secure jobs and secure incomes.

“

“I work part-time but am looking for a full-time job” - this is the most common answer to the question of why they work part-time.

From social media scan,
Sweden

“

Shift work is not really flexible because when you don't work shifts, you don't get paid.

Nazrene Mannie
GAN Global

2. A level playing field – working women face a wage gap, a skill gap, and a culture gap.

- **Reducing the wage gap** could provide women with more choice to stay in their jobs, or to be viewed as breadwinners in the family. As of 2021, estimates based on 156 countries indicate that globally women earn 37% less than men in similar roles. Based on the current trajectory, women are 267.6 years away from gender parity in economic participation and opportunity²¹.

“

Pay gap often influences the choice of who will leave their job within a household. And then, the man is usually the (understood) breadwinner, which is a primary deciding factor – especially in lower-income groups.

Suchi Gaur
World YWCA

- **Reducing the skill gap** could help reduce the growing divide between high-skilled and mid-skilled workers. Data indicates that every 3 years, workers will have to relearn 35% of their jobs and every 5 years, a worker's skill set will be half as valuable as it was previously²².
- **Reducing cultural assumptions on the roles of women**, whether it's the view that women's jobs are less important, or that women should seek work in specific industries - challenging cultural assumptions can increase women's opportunities and sense of value.

“

For me, welding offers so much! I get to do a lot of travelling, interacting with many different sectors, businesses and people and making valuable connections. I find the welding industry so rewarding.

Female welder, South Africa,
from social media scan



3. Improved support systems – options that improve a woman’s ability to manage her family, home and financial security, could significantly reduce the stress and risk of returning to work. Women’s choices on engaging in the workforce are underpinned by a variety of factors, with caregiving responsibilities at the top of the list²³.

Globally, only 41 million men (1.5%) reportedly provided unpaid childcare on a full-time basis as compared to 606 million women (21.7%)²⁴. Data indicates that women spent 4 hours and 22 minutes a day on unpaid caregiving services and these figures amplified during the pandemic with women performing 15 hours more unpaid labour than men each week²⁵.

“

Many people with low pensions are women who have spent their entire working lives in low-wage occupations. They have worked part-time and taken responsibility for their children and elderly parents without any compensation. These women should receive a better pension. It is not extreme. It is only fair!

Twitter user, Sweden,
from social media scan

“

Especially for women in low and mid-skill professions, post-pandemic, care arrangements fell apart. Precariousness is piled onto precariousness.

Gudela Grote
ETH Zurich



Part 3

Avenues for Empowerment: Positive Flexibility and Other Solutions

Our first phase of research has identified a number of high-potential areas to be further explored. The majority of these solutions have been successfully applied to white-collar professionals, but require adaptation and testing for mid-skilled and low-skilled workers.

1. Pathways to work such as providing upskilling to facilitate movement between sectors, tailoring recruitment messaging and channels to a female audience, and providing 'Returnships' or return-to-work programs to assist women transition back to work after a career break²⁶.

- **Upskilling**

Today, upskilling has become one of the main tools to help employers and employees deal with the tectonic shift in the workplace caused by technology²⁷. As traditional jobs morph and transition, upskilling serves the purpose of mitigating skill gaps, encouraging competency and welcoming innovative ways of working²⁸.

- **Recruitment**

Employers have found some success in adapting their recruitment approaches to meet the needs and capture the attention of mid-skilled women. Redesigning job advertisements to include information such as the options for part-time work, job sharing or compressed hours has increased the number of job applications.



For white-collar workers, more jobs have become accessible. Flexible working has opened the market up quite dramatically, people are looking at different opportunities, and location is no longer the deciding factor. The problem is that blue-collar work doesn't come through in the digital transformation. Considering LinkedIn, blue-collar workers are not as digitally active. If recruitment is largely digitally driven, you're not encompassing all levels of the workforce. Blue-collar work still depends on word-of-mouth and networks.

Nazrene Mannie
GAN Global

- **Returnships**

A returnship program assists women in the transition back to work after a career break. They are tailored to better accommodate childcare responsibilities and to provide upskilling and reintegration support. The popularity of these programs increased in sectors such as financial services, legal practice and STEM sectors, especially since 2019 when, while most economies experienced downturns, these sectors experienced rapid growth generating the need to nurture additional talent.



In 2021, Amazon expanded its returnship programme to include 1,000 returning professionals to enhance the candidate's potential. Furthermore, there are over 90 returnship programmes globally with a majority being concentrated in India, the U.K and the U.S.³⁰

Harvard Business Review, 2021

2. Models of work that place power, flexibility and choice back in the hands of the employee. These include early experiments in condensed hours, a 4-day week, job sharing, and packaging tasks to allow off-site work.



In all jobs, there are bits that can be done off-site. For instance, for nurses, they don't always work with patients so employers can package that work together differently.

Gudela Grote
ETH Zurich

3. Career pathways and mobility by providing cross-training to enable role diversification, leveraging SMEs and creating entrepreneurship opportunities through upskilling and providing basic infrastructure and providing sabbatical programs to allow women to take career breaks on their own terms.

In 2021, blue-collar workers were 14% more likely, relative to the general population, to prioritise their value and achievement within a company³¹. When asked what would prevent blue-collar workers from frequently switching jobs, 39% of the responses indicated increasing flexibility at work to allow them to enjoy their roles and work.³²



4. Employee voice enabled by companies, technology solutions, social partnerships and labour unions. Strong collective action is required to raise concerns, build consensus on solutions, and better represent women in employer negotiations. This has been shown to be particularly difficult for part-time or temporary workers³⁴.



We need to ask ourselves: to what extent is flexibility individually or collectively negotiated? Fragmented patterns of flexibility, negotiated on an individual basis, could push uncertainty onto the employer or co-workers. These decisions need to be collectively made to offset the risks. Can there be a setting where you can discuss these conflicts of interest but you have some sort of consensus-building? If employers are willing to experiment, they realize there are more options available. However, it all boils down to how much negotiation power employees have.

Gudela Grote
ETH Zurich

5. Support systems for reduced risk and sacrifice related to family commitments. These can include support from business and policy-makers for financial security, mental health, wellbeing, stress and anxiety, childcare, access to digital technologies and transferable skill sets.



People are getting more used to conversations on support, for example on childcare, and what safety looks like. Even men are demanding these now, so there is more focus and openness towards creating flexibility.

Suchi Gaur
World YWCA

These five areas do not yet provide an answer to the challenge of supporting and encouraging underserved women in re-entering the workforce, but they do provide avenues for further exploration to crystalize challenges, define specific needs and design tailored solutions.

To help inform this work, the next phase of our research will move beyond the global level to bring in voices from the ground. We will localize the issues and gather insights from a selection of geographies, industries and roles, and from employers, workers and experts. The results will inform the Innovation Foundation's design thinking process to create prototype social solutions that address employability barriers for this underserved population head-on.

Project Team

This project was jointly conceived and delivered by the **Innovation Foundation** and the **Thinking Ahead on Societal Change (TASC) Platform at the Geneva Graduate Institute**.

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About The Innovation Foundation, empowered by the Adecco Group



The Innovation Foundation helps underserved populations increase their employability and access to labour markets to secure sustainable livelihoods. That is our mission. We see a future where everyone can access the world of work. That is our vision. Our mission and vision both come to life through the process of the Social Innovation Lab, with which we operate.

The first step is to identify the people who are falling out of the workforce and their unmet needs. We then develop solutions to meet those needs, working with experts and end-users. Finally, our prototypes are taken out into the world with the right partners on the ground - helping to make a world where everyone can access sustainable and fulfilling work.

As the world's leading talent advisory and solutions company, creating social value is in the DNA of the Adecco Group. We connect people and companies with opportunity and help them find their paths. But we also have a wider responsibility to society - to advocate and act for a better, fairer world of work. We do this through the Innovation Foundation, with the full support of the Group's leadership.

www.innovationfoundation.net

About the TASC Platform



The TASC Platform is an open forum where policymakers, businesses, researchers and civil society can come together to tackle some of the biggest universal challenges of the future. By providing a place for people to share perspectives, connect visions and develop new solutions, we can bring the unknowns of the future into focus and act on them today.

An independent body supported by the Government of Switzerland and embedded in the Centre for Trade and Economic Integration at the Geneva Graduate Institute, we leverage the latest thinking in the academic world to inform innovation, policy making, practical action and behaviour change, and embrace a culture of openness, critical thinking, and global cooperation.

www.tascplatform.org

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