Encouraging flexible recruitment: an email trial

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| BIT | Behavioural Insights Team |
| CIPD | Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development |
| EHRC  FTE | Equality and Human Rights Commission  Full time equivalent |
| HR | Human resources |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| RCT | Randomised controlled trial |
| UK | United Kingdom |

Executive summary

Background and rationale for trial

Despite the progress made, gender equality in the UK labour market remains far from complete. Women’s likelihood of working or earning as much as men decreases in particular around the time they have children (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). We know that flexible working can enable people to better balance work and caring responsibilities (Kelliher and Anderson, 2008); however, research into pregnancy- and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage has found that over half of women who had a flexible working request approved said it led to negative consequences, and almost two in five women did not request the flexibility they would have wanted due to fear of negative consequences (EHRC, 2016b). Flexible recruitment, which refers to a job being advertised as having flexible working options, is at low levels: 8.7 million full-time UK workers were estimated to want the option of flexible working in 2014 (in addition to those who already work flexibly), but only 360,000 job adverts per year (8.7% of all such adverts) offered these arrangements (Timewise, 2016a).

In the labour market, low levels of flexible recruitment can have disproportionately negative effects on women, who are more likely to have caring responsibilities that require them to work part time. If women with caring responsibilities cannot find a flexible job, they stay at home, work part time or take on jobs below their qualifications and skills, and advance more slowly in their careers, which contributes to the gender pay gap (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016).

Aims and development of the trial

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (‘the Commission’) partnered with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to explore ways to improve the experiences of pregnant women and new mothers in the labour market as a response to the research the Commission and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) published into pregnancy- and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage (EHRC, 20165a; EHRC, 20165b). The Commission tasked BIT to conduct a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to encourage human resources (HR) professionals to openly advertise jobs with flexible working options. In March 2017, BIT ran an RCT in partnership with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the professional body for human resources (HR) and people development with over 140,000 members. We contacted 25,000 HR professionals through the CIPD, testing whether behaviourally informed emails made them more likely to click on a link to access material about advertising jobs with flexible working options.

The trial

Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of four emails designed by BIT in collaboration with the CIPD and the Commission, as well as with support from Timewise and the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC). The email distributed was a short basic email with information about flexible working, or one of three messages informed by behavioural insights (social norms, loss framing, or cognitive dissonance).

* An email highlighting the inconsistency between the stated support for flexible recruitment and the low supply of jobs advertised as flexible.

The results show that the social norm message (which highlights flexible working as the future trend) was the most effective in generating interest in flexible recruitment. Our analysis examines two outcomes: the proportion of people opening the email and the proportion clicking on the link within the email. Compared with the simple message (the control), the social norm email increased the likelihood of opening the email by 16% (a statistically significant result).[[1]](#footnote-1) Those who received the social norm message were also 24% more likely to click on the link in the email compared with those who received the simple message, but this effect was not statistically significant. The simple email performed better than both the loss-frame and cognitive dissonance messages, although these differences are not statistically significant. Overall, while not all the effects are statistically significant, the results suggest that using social norms messaging can be effective in increasing interest in flexible recruitment.

Relevance and scope for future work

Offering jobs with flexible working options at all role levels is key to encouraging women as well as those with caring responsibilities to stay in the labour market, and to enabling them to work at a level that matches their experience and qualifications. Many changes are needed to increase the availability of flexible jobs, including encouraging employers and recruiters to advertise jobs as flexible. This trial shows that using the right messaging can make HR professionals more likely to look for further information about flexible recruitment. The trial represents a positive first step towards identifying what works in reducing gender inequality in the workplace.

Going forward, we encourage other organisations to use this evidence as a basis for testing further changes to messages to those involved in recruitment, as well as changes to the templates used by job boards to increase the number of jobs advertised as having flexible working options.

Introduction

In March 2016, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (‘the Commission’) asked the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to examine whether behavioural insights could reduce workplace discrimination and disadvantage towards women who were pregnant, on maternity leave or returning to work after maternity leave.

According to the Commission, negative experiences related to flexible working are the most frequently cited issue among mothers (EHRC, 2016a; EHRC, 2016b). Drawing on these findings), BIT suggested five possible trials to test and evaluate interventions to reduce pregnancy- and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage. Two of these trials proposed ways to increase the proportion of employers who ‘recruit flexibly’ by making it clear in their job adverts whether a job can be done flexibly. The first trial proposed partnering with a recruitment website to make changes to the job advert template that employers or HR professionals fill in to advertise a job; the second proposed emailing employers to encourage flexible recruitment. While we did not run either of these trials exactly as initially envisaged, the trial presented in this report draws on elements from both of these trials: it uses emails as a channel and it tests whether behaviourally informed messages can change behaviour among HR professionals.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) worked with BIT on this email trial because they believe flexible working is a key driver of workplace diversity and inclusion, enabling talented people to both enter and stay in the workplace and reach their potential at work. The CIPD regularly engage with their members on this topic and were keen to gain a deeper understanding of how to encourage the availability of flexible working. This trial is an opportunity to generate insights that will be useful to HR professionals in inspiring change in their organisations.

Background

Half of UK employees would like to work flexibly, but the supply of flexible jobs remains low, as does flexible recruitment, which is defined as advertising jobs as having flexible working options (Timewise, 2014b). Jobs are flexible if they give employees some control over how and when they work. This can mean flexibility in terms of working hours, such as the option of working part-time, staggered or compressed hours,[[2]](#footnote-2) or it can mean flexibility in location (for example, having the option to work remotely or from home) or work pattern (for example, job share arrangements).

Relatively few employers recruit flexibly despite high levels of demand from workers: 8.7 million full-time UK workers were estimated to want the option of flexible working in 2014 (in addition to those who already work flexibly), but only 360,000 job adverts per year (8.7% of adverts for jobs paying £20,000 FTE or more) offered these arrangements (Timewise, 2016). This is despite the fact that 95% of UK companies report offering at least one form of flexible working (EHRC, 2016a), and 91% of UK employers say they are open to discussing flexible working options during the recruitment process (Timewise, 2014a). These statistics suggest there is considerable scope for highlighting flexible working opportunities more clearly.

The low levels of flexible recruitment are particularly striking given that many employees do end up working flexibly, even in jobs which did not necessarily offer this option during the recruitment stage (CIPD, 2016). Yet, this also means that some candidates may be discouraged from applying for positions for which the job advertisement does not clearly state that flexible working is possible. One survey found that 52% of UK workers reported feeling nervous asking for flexibility when applying for or accepting a new job, and 42% feared it would damage their chances of securing the position (Timewise, 2014b). Almost two in five pregnant women and women returning from maternity leave did not request the flexibility they would have wanted in their workplace due to fear of negative consequences (EHRC, 2016b).

These concerns appear justified: 69% of UK managers believe that flexible workers are less ambitious than their full-time peers (Timewise, 2014a). There are also costs for many mothers who have flexible working arrangements. About half (51%) of mothers who had a flexible working request approved reported experiencing unfavourable treatment as a result, including being offered fewer work opportunities than their peers, receiving negative comments from co-workers, and feeling that their opinion was less valued (EHRC, 2016b).

Low levels of flexible recruitment can have disproportionately negative effects on women, who are more likely to have caring responsibilities that make them less able to work full-time inflexible hours. This is supported by the fact that women are four times more likely than men to work part time (42% women to 13% men) (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). In the long term, inflexibility in work arrangements can cause women to spend more time outside the labour market, take on jobs that are below their qualifications and skills, and advance more slowly in their careers. These in turn contribute to the gender pay gap by lowering women's earnings (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). Encouraging more organisations to be open and transparent about their flexible working options and to promote a culture of flexible working could reduce the negative consequences for women who wish to work flexibly.

Behavioural biases in flexible recruitment

Behavioural biases that characterise how people process information and make decisions can help explain why levels of flexible recruitment remain so low, and provide some ways to solve this issue. This section describes four areas of behavioural science research that inform the design of our intervention: cognitive overload in the digital environment, social norms, loss aversion, and cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive overload in the digital environment

Emails are the most popular form of business communication (Gallup, 2014). They can also be an effective tool to change behaviour in the field of recruitment. BIT has used emails to successfully increase the number of applications to the Army Reserve and improve the diversity of applicants to become police officers (BIT, 2015).

The risk of cognitive overload in the digital environment should be taken into account when using emails as a tool for behaviour change. The human capacity to process and retain information is limited (Miller, 1956; Halford *et al*. 2005), particularly when individuals are tired or preoccupied, which is referred to as ‘mental fatigue’ (Francke *et al*. 2008; Rice, 2013). These cognitive constraints can make decision making in digital environments particularly challenging (Benartzi and Lehrer, 2015); the sheer volume of information and choices (‘information overload’) can lead to a desire for ‘choice closure’ (Scheibehenne *et al*., 2010). For example, providing people with more healthcare options online (in this case 8 options) led 80% of them to pick a suboptimal health care plan. When people were given 4 options, only 60% made a poor choice (Johnson *et al*., 2013). Emails that seek to encourage behaviours can avoid some of the problems of cognitive overload by using simple, clear language, and by making it easy for people to do the desired behaviour.

Social norms

People are often influenced by the behaviour and expectations of those around them (Cialdini and Trost, 1998).BIT has found that telling a person how most people behave in a particular situation (the descriptive social norm) is an effective way to change behaviour. In one such trial, we found that telling people that ‘Nine out of ten people pay their tax on time’ made people more likely to pay their own taxes promptly (Hallsworth *et al*., 2014).This approach has also been used successfully at the local authority level, increasing council tax payment rates by 19% in one case (BIT, 2016).

Social norm messages tend to be more effective when they are more relevant to the recipient. For instance, telling someone ‘Nine out of ten people in your area pay their tax on time’ has been found to be more effective than telling people what others in the UK do (Hallsworth *et al*., 2014). Social norm messages can also be personalised by profession rather than by geographic area. For example, one tax trial found that addressing doctors as a distinct group rather than as generic taxpayers made them five times more likely to respond than those who received a generic letter (BIT, 2014).

One challenge with using social norms in the context of encouraging flexible recruitment is that very few employers currently use flexible recruitment strategies. Telling employers that ‘almost 10% of job postings offer flexible recruitment’ in an effort to encourage more of the behaviour could easily backfire because it in fact confirms that very few employers recruit flexibly. To avoid this problem, we proposed reframing the social norm by telling recruiters that flexible working is the trend of the future (that is, on its way to becoming the majority norm) and that the majority of UK employers are opento flexible working.

Loss aversion

How a piece of information is presented, or ‘framed’, can have great impact on behaviour (BIT, 2014). Many choices can be framed as generating either losses or gains, which influences what people choose (Wheatley and Oshikawa, 1970).

These choices are further influenced by whether or not risk is involved. Prospect theory suggests that people tend to be more willing to accept risks when faced with potential losses or negative consequences, but prefer to avoid risks when faced with potential gains or benefits of a decision (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979, 1982). In other words, in a situation perceived as risky, people may be more sensitive to a message stressing the potential losses than to a message stressing the potential gains. For example, the message ‘failing to detect breast cancer early can cost you your life’ increased uptake of cancer screening because detecting an illness is related to high risk (Banks *et al*. 1995). In a situation perceived as low risk, a gain-framed message that focuses on the benefits of a behaviour such as ‘protecting yourself from the sun is the surest way to prevent skin cancer’ proved to be more effective (Detweiler *et al*., 1999).

Whether a person sees a situation as having the potential for gains or losses is partly a matter of perception (Higgins, 1998), since a person might be more focused on avoiding a loss or securing a win in a particular environment. Effective messages should match people’s perception of the environment (for example, whether they focus on losing or gaining something) with an appropriate frame (loss versus gain) (Higgins, 2000). This hypothesis is supported by examples from health behaviour (Rothman and Salovey, 1997), tax compliance (Holler *et al*., 2008) and marketing (Cesario *et al*., 2004) literature.

If hiring was a riskless situation, using a gain frame would be appropriate. Many existing communications to employers use messaging similar to a gain frame. These messages highlight the business case for flexible working arrangements and suggest that businesses that offer them benefit from a more diverse and bigger talent pool. For example, according to the Family Friendly Working Scotland network, ‘Flexible hiring widens the talent pool for organisations and offers a competitive advantage. Using the Happy to Talk Flexible Working strapline also helps organisations with skills shortages’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hiring for scarce skilled labour is a fundamentally risky activity due to the possibility of poor job fit and high hiring costs. We therefore tested a message that uses a loss frame rather than a gain frame to encourage HR professionals to recruit flexibly.

Cognitive dissonance

Cognitive dissonance refers to a feeling of distress or tension that occurs when people hold mutually contradictory beliefs, or act in contradiction with their existing beliefs (Festinger, 1962). This distress is assumed to be caused by the desire people have for internal consistency. For example, a person who supports a particular politician might be willing to tolerate or explain away that politician’s flaws so that they can maintain a positive image of them, even though they might not be willing to forgive those same flaws in a politician they did not already support.

Evidence from field and lab experiments suggests that cognitive dissonance can encourage behaviour change in a range of contexts, including environmental conservation (Kantola *et al*., 1984; Dickerson *et al*., 1992), safe driving (Fointiat, 2004) eating disorders (Stice *et al*., 2008) and sexually risky behaviour (Thompson *et al*., 2002). A common way of applying this insight is by drawing a contrast between a desirable course of action and a recent personalfailure to behave in line with that goal (Stone and Fernandez, 2008). For example, prompting swimmers who said they were in favour of water conservation to think about times when they look long showers (for example, by asking them, ‘When you take showers, do you *always* make them as short as possible, or do you sometimes linger longer than necessary?’) led them to take shorter showers (Dickerson *et al*., 1992). Another way to use cognitive dissonance to create behaviour change is by using failures to adhere to a personal goal (for example, a person on a diet eats an unhealthy meal) as opportunities to reaffirm the initial commitment (for example, deciding that the unhealthy meal was a temporary mishap and not a reflection of their true identity or preferences) (Harmon-Jones *et al*., 2009).

The stark inconsistency between the proportion of employers who state support for flexible working (91%; Timewise, 2014a) and the low supply of flexible job postings (8.7%; Timewise, 2016) creates the opportunity to apply the principle of cognitive dissonance to encourage flexible recruiting among HR professionals. Emphasising this contrast to HR professionals could effectively induce cognitive dissonance and make them more likely to act in line with their support for flexible working.

Currently, many communications aimed at employers and HR professionals quote the low proportion of job adverts offering flexible working options as a reason for change. According to Timewise (2016), ‘At 8.7% of jobs paid £20k FTE or more, flexible hiring still lags a long way behind workforce need.’ Family Friendly Working Scotland (2016) uses a similar approach: ‘Did you know that 47% of the workforce would like to work flexibly but only 6% of adverts are designed or advertised flexibly?’

However, unless we test this message robustly, we cannot say whether it is effective in increasing interest in flexible recruitment. One risk of using this kind of cognitive dissonance message is that it can influence behaviour in two opposing ways. HR professionals who receive such a message can resolve cognitive dissonance by placing a greater emphasis on flexible recruitment. Alternatively, the message may encourage HR professionals to achieve cognitive consistency by continuing their current behaviour of not offering flexible working arrangements. The aim of using a cognitive dissonance message in the trial is to test which of these responses to the message is more likely. This will generate evidence that can be directly useful to those who consider highlighting the small number of job adverts that currently mention flexible working.

Based on the insights from behavioural literature, and after consultation with our partners, we decided to design and test a social norm, a loss-framed and a cognitive dissonance message. We also made sure that we used simple language and a clear call to action for the desired behaviour in all the messages to minimise the risk of information overload.

Interventions

After our literature review and consultation with our partners, we designed a trial to test the impact of four different emails on HR professionals’ willingness to find out more about advertising more jobs as flexible. The CIPD regularly emails its membership about a range of issues, often including links to further information. The main difference between the CIPD’s usual emails and the emails tested in this trial is that our emails were shorter, in line with the evidence supporting short and simple messages, and drew on specific behavioural insights. All four emails tested in this trial were designed by BIT in partnership with the Commission and the CIPD, rather than drawing on existing CIPD emails.

Our two key outcome measures were the number of participants who opened the email (the open rate) and the number of participants who clicked on a link in the email (the click-through rate). The link took participants to the Working Forward campaign website, which provided information and resources about flexible recruitment.

The intervention used a randomised controlled trial (RCT) design, meaning the participants were randomly assigned to receive either a simple email (the ‘control’ email), or to receive one of three different behaviourally informed emails. Each of the four messages also had a different subject line, matching the content of the message. We varied the subject lines because they are an important part of the message that influences how likely people are to open the message.

The four types of email are described in Table 1 below (see Appendix for the full versions). The three emails that drew on behavioural science (social norms, loss aversion, and cognitive dissonance) consisted of exactly the same message as the simple email, with one paragraph added. The additional paragraphs were different in each of the treatments. They were in bold and at the beginning of the email (before the standard text from the simple email).

Table 1. List of interventions

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Condition** | **Details of intervention** |
| Simple email (control) | **Subject line:** Recruit flexibly - Extend your talent pool  This was a simple short email containing a standard definition of flexible working and a call to action with a link to the EHRC–CIPD website.  Dear Bernadette, If you advertise jobs as being suitable for flexible working, you can expand your talent pool. You can also attract better candidates who go on to become productive and engaged, take fewer sick days and stay with the organisation longer. Flexible working includes part-time, working from home, flexitime, compressed hours, and job sharing. Act now: click here to find out how to recruit flexibly. Kind regards, Peter Cheese Chief Executive, CIPD |
| Social norm email | **Subject line:** Flexible working is the future  This email had the same content and link as the simple email but also included a social norm message:  By 2020, flexible working will become the most common working option in the UK (Work Foundation, 2016). 91% of UK employers say they are open to flexible working (Timewise, 2014a). You can join them by advertising jobs with flexible working options. |
|
| Loss-frame email | **Subject line:** Don’t lose out on the best people - recruit flexibly  This email had the same content and link as the simple email but also included a loss-frame message:  65% of employers say using flexible working practices had a positive impact on their recruitment (CIPD, 2012). Don’t lose the best people to your competitors. |
| Cognitive dissonance email | **Subject line:** If you support flexible working, recruit flexibly  This email had the same content and link as the simple email but also included a cognitive dissonance message:  91% of UK employers say they are open to discussing flexible working options within the recruitment process (Timewise, 2014a). But only 9% of jobs are advertised as suitable for flexible working (Timewise, 2016; figure applying to jobs with a salary of £20,000 FTE).  You can help close this gap. |

Trial design and implementation

Ethics

Every BIT trial is reviewed using methodological and ethical criteria before it goes live. BIT staff involved with a trial produce a trial protocol document for internal purposes, which describes in detail the trial to be run, outlines any ethical concerns associated with the trial, and details how risk or harm to participants will be minimised. A trial can only be launched after it has been reviewed and signed off by BIT’s Chief Scientist.

This trial was reviewed and approved after BIT’s internal ethical assessment. BIT concluded that the risk to participants in this trial was low, meaning that the trial was of a routine nature and was non-contentious. Specifically, it was judged that the content of the messages and webpages would not cause distress of any kind to recipients, and the privacy and confidentiality of participants would be maintained throughout the trial.

Data protection

BIT and the CIPD used anonymous ID numbers when exchanging data in order to protect participants' privacy. No personally identifiable information (for example, name, email address) was shared by the CIPD at any point in the project.

Sample

The CIPD has more than 140,000 members. In our trial, we targeted a sample of 25,000 HR professionals who work in recruitment or had expressed an interested in recruitment. All participants in the trial had previously consented to be contacted by CIPD via email and had either expressed an interest in recruitment and selection or worked in a specialist role related to recruitment and selection.

The sample consisted of the groups described in Table 2. The order that the groups are listed in is the order in which the Commission prioritised them. The prioritisation was based on the view that managers and above were more likely to have influence over policies and practice, and that larger organisations would be more likely to undertake recruitment in the near future and therefore more likely to be interested in this issue. We included all eligible individuals in the first three rows and randomly selected individuals from the fourth row (junior employees from organisations with more than 50 employees) until we arrived at a total sample of 25,000.

**Table 2.** Sample composition

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Recipient type** | **Number of email addresses** |
| Managers and above from mid-sized or large organisations (more than 100 employees) | 12,257 |
| Managers and above from organisations with more than 50 employees | 3,942 |
| Junior employees from mid-sized or large organisations (more than 100 employees) | 8,068 |
| Junior employees from organisations with more than 50 employees | 733 |
| **Total** | **25,000** |

Recipients were randomised into one of the four message conditions. We used a process called stratification through which we randomised junior employees, managers and senior employees separately, allocating a quarter of those groups to each message condition. This ensured that our groups had equal split between senior employees, managers and junior employees.

Emails were scheduled to be sent at noon on 9 March 2017 through the CIPD’s email platform, Adestra. We are able to track whether recipients opened and clicked on the campaign link through Adestra’s reporting.

About 1,000 people were not sent or did not receive their email message. Some of them had unsubscribed in the time between when the sample was drawn and when the messages were sent; some emails were stopped by Adestra’s suppression list; and some people were sent the message but did not receive it due to the message bouncing. The overall degree of drop-off (approximately 4%) is fairly common for CIPD email campaigns, and we find that drop-off is not significantly different across any of the groups.

Findings

In this section, we look at the number of HR professionals who opened the email (‘opens’) and clicked on the email link to find out more about flexible recruitment (‘click-throughs’) for each of the four different emails. All analysis we present is in terms of ‘treatment-on-the-treated’. In other words, it excludes the roughly 1,000 people that were not sent or did not receive their message. More information on the methodology used in the analysis can be found in the Technical Appendix.

Effect of messages on open rates

Our first outcome of interest is whether the recipients opened their emails. If recipients did not open the email, they could not click on the link to the campaign page to learn about flexible recruitment. Subject lines varied by message, and each subject reflected the message’s content. Given the differences in subject lines, we expected to see some differences in open rates.

The open rates varied between 21.4% and 24.8%. As a reference point, open rates for CIPD email campaigns are typically between 18 to 22%.

We found that the social norm message (with the subject line ‘Flexible working is the future’) led to higher open rates than any of the other messages (these differences were statistically significant at p<0.001 for each comparison). Recipients of the social norm message were 17.5% more likely to open the message than recipients of the control message.

**Figure 1.** Open rates by treatment arm

\*\*\*

N=24,010

**\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \*p< 0.05**

Effect of messages on click-throughs

The key outcome measure we were interested in was the proportion of recipients that clicked on the campaign link to learn more about flexible recruitment.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The click-through rates varied between 2.1% and 3.1%. While these are low in absolute terms, the rates are similar to those observed in other mass-marketing email campaigns.[[5]](#footnote-5) The cost of sending emails is also low, which means that emails are worth using even if the click-through rates are low. The large dropout rate between opens (about 20%) and click-throughs is also similar to what we see in other email campaigns.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We find that the social norm message was the most effective message in terms of generating interest in flexible recruitment. The message resulted in a greater proportion of recipients visiting the flexible recruitment campaign page than the loss-frame and cognitive dissonance messages (this difference was statistically significant at p<0.001). However, while the social norm message generated more click-throughs than the simple message, the effect was not statistically significant at the 5% level (p=0.069). To reiterate, the analysis of statistical significance was conducted using the commonly accepted p-value threshold of 5%. A p-value of 0.05 means that, if the treatment had no effect, there is a 5% chance we would still observe a significant result. If we relaxed this threshold (for example to 10%), more results could become statistically significant, but we would be less certain that any differences between messages were due to the wording rather than chance.

The differences in click-throughs between the simple message and the less effective treatments (loss-frame and cognitive dissonance) are not statistically significant. Even if we pool the loss-frame and cognitive dissonance messages together and compare them to the control, the difference in click-throughs is not statistically significant at the 5% level (p=0.095).

In sum, the social norm message led to an increased open rate compared with the three other messages. The social norm message also generated more click-throughs than the other messages, although the difference in click-through rates between the social norm message and the simple message was only significant at a 10% level, not at the generally accepted 5% level.

**Figure 2.** Click-through rates by treatment arm

N=24,010 N=24,010

**\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p< 0.05**

We also analysed the data for any interaction effects. This analysis tests whether specific messages are particularly effective or ineffective for certain types of recipients. An example of an interaction effect would be if the social norm message was particularly effective for female HR professionals. We found that none of the messages had differential impacts based on gender, organisation size or industry.

Although the impact of the different messages did not vary according to gender, organisation size or industry, when looking at all the four messages together in a pooled analysis, there were some differences in open and click-through rates based on these factors. These are presented in the next section.

Comparing the behaviour of male and female HR professionals

In addition to analysing the differential impacts of the four messages, we were also able to analyse which HR professionals opened the emails and clicked on the links in general (that is, combining all four message conditions). All of this analysis controls for the type of message that an individual received as well as other relevant characteristics (gender, seniority, organisation size and industry). In this section, we look at whether men and women and behaved differently.

Men were significantly more likely to open the emails than women (p<0.001). In relative terms, men were nearly 18% more likely to open the email message than women.

**Figure 3.** Open rates by gender (overall)

\*\*\*

N=24,010

**\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p< 0.05**

However, this trend reverses itself in the results for click-throughs. Despite being less likely to open the message, women were significantly more likely to click through and learn about flexible recruitment than men (p<0.05). Note that this comparison is an overall comparison: it includes all recipients, regardless of whether or not they opened the message.

**Figure 4.** Click-through rates by gender (overall)

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N=24,010  
**\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p< 0.05**

Comparing behaviour in organisations of different sizes

In this section, we look at the two behaviours (opening the email and clicking on the link) based on organisation size, again pooling together all four message conditions.

Figure 5 below shows that recipients in the smallest organisations in our sample (50 to 99 employees) are the most likely to open the emails.[[7]](#footnote-7) While there is a clear downward trend in open rates as organisation size increases, the trend exists only up to a certain point. Recipients in very large organisations (over 20,000 employees) are as likely to open the messages as recipients in organisations that are hundreds of times smaller.

Note that all statistical significance in Figure 5 below is in relation to the 50 to 100 employee group.

**Figure 5.** Open rates by size (overall)

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N=24,010  
**\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p< 0.05**

In terms of click-through rates, we find some evidence that organisation size affects recipients’ willingness to learn more about flexible working. Specifically, recipients associated with smaller organisations were more likely to open the message and click through to learn more than recipients from larger organisations.

Because our sample is split into many different sub-groups for this analysis, the click-through estimates are somewhat imprecise and come with a relatively large margin of error. However, there is a fairly pronounced trend. Recipients from smaller organisations (50 to 99 employees) were nearly twice as likely to click on the campaign link as recipients from very large organisations (those with more than 20,000 employees).

**Figure 6.** Click-throughs by size (overall)

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N=24,010

**\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p< 0.05**

Discussion

In this section, we discuss possible interpretations of our result and highlight opportunities for further enquiry.

Open rates by message

Our analysis found that participants receiving the social norm message were significantly more likely to open it relative to all other messages. This finding may be driven, at least in part, by the different subject lines (the subject line of the social norm message was ‘Flexible working is the future’). In addition, some email platforms provide extensive message previews, and part of the difference in open rates could be explained by exposure to parts of the messages themselves.

Click-through rates by message

The social norm message resulted in significantly more click-throughs than the loss-frame and cognitive dissonance messages, but it did not significantly outperform the simple (control) message.

Based on these results, we can draw some interesting conclusions about the effect of different messages. First, in line with several earlier studies using social norms to change behaviour in different policy areas, we show that social norms are an effective way to encourage HR professionals to find out more about flexible recruitment. In addition, the results suggest that social norms can be effective even if the desired behaviour (in our case flexible recruitment) is not yet the majority norm. We found that expressing the behaviour as being in the process of becoming the majority norm was also effective (using the statement: ‘by 2020, flexible working will become the most common working option in the UK’).

Second, our findings showed that a message which sought to generate cognitive dissonance did not perform better than the simple control message. The cognitive dissonance message highlighted an inconsistency in employers’ behaviour in the assertion: ‘91% of UK employers say they are open to discussing flexible working options within the recruitment process. But only 9% of jobs are advertised as suitable for flexible working. You can help close this gap.’ A possible reason this message was not effective is because it highlights the current low supply of flexible jobs, suggesting that most employers find this acceptable. This is in line with research suggesting that social norms can backfire if only a minority engages in the behaviour that we are trying to encourage (Cialdini *et al*., 2006). In future, organisations that seek to encourage flexible recruitment should consider carefully whether to rely on messaging that underlines the currently low uptake of a given practice or policy.

Third, the loss-frame email did not perform better than the simple email either. There are a few possible reasons for this. The literature suggests that a loss frame is effective in situations that are perceived as risky and competitive, and it is possible that HR professionals do not consider hiring a risky activity. The hypothetical loss of potential candidates may have felt too abstract to trigger loss aversion. Alternatively, it is possible that HR professionals do not consider hiring a competitive activity. In particular, HR professionals may associate flexible working with less attractive jobs and less motivated candidates, despite the evidence to the contrary, and therefore perceive the situation as less competitive. A third alternative is that the loss aversion message would have been effective had we chosen a more powerful statistic, instead of stating ‘65% of employers say using flexible working practices had a positive impact on their recruitment.’

Finally, both the loss-frame and cognitive dissonance messages contained the language used in the body of the simple message in its entirety. The simple message performed better than the loss-frame and cognitive dissonance messages, but the difference in click-through rates was not statistically significant between these groups. It is worth exploring further whether emails that are more concise (in this case, the simple message) are more effective.

Differences by gender

While men were nearly 18% more likely to open the email, women were still 30% more likely to click on the campaign link to learn more about flexible recruitment. It would be useful to explore this reversal further to understand the marked differences in behaviour by gender.

One possible explanation is that men do indeed want to learn more about flexible working, but that the message content itself, which featured a professional-looking woman and the phrase ‘Supporting Pregnancy and Maternity Rights,’ sent a signal that the content was not particularly relevant to them, and they consequently did not follow the link in the email.

Differences by organisation size

Broadly speaking, our analysis shows that people working in smaller organisations were more likely to open the emails and click on the campaign link than those working in larger organisations. These results raise interesting questions related to how different organisations engage with flexible recruitment. Our trial is limited in that it does not include recipients from organisations that would be considered ‘small’ by typical classifications of small and medium-sized enterprises (1 to 49 employees); the smallest organisations in our sample are ‘medium’ enterprises (50 to 99 employees). Future studies may seek to engage this population to see how receptive they are to messages related to flexible recruitment.

There are a few possible reasons to explain why open and click-through rates are higher in smaller organisations compared with larger ones. One reason may be that smaller organisations often do not have formal policies in place and are more likely to seek external advice to develop these policies.

Smaller organisations may also have policies that are more feasible to change. This might mean HR professionals from smaller organisations feel more empowered, and therefore more interested in, flexible recruitment relative to HR professionals in larger organisations.

Avenues for further research

This research has provided several ideas for further testing to identify the most effective messages to encourage flexible recruitment. It also raises interesting areas for follow up around the different behaviours of male and female HR professionals in opening and clicking through the email content, as well as the different behaviours of HR professionals dependent on organisation size.

Beyond these ideas, recruitment websites remain an untapped opportunity to both promote and test ways to encourage flexible recruitment (see also EHRC and BIT (2017) ‘Applying behavioural insights to reduce pregnancy- and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage’). Most jobs are advertised through recruitment websites, which means that HR professionals and employers regularly fill in job advert templates online. Changes such as the addition of different flexible working fields, more visible flexible working fields, or pre-selecting flexible working options could increase the number of job adverts that offer flexible working options. Testing such changes on recruitment websites would also allow direct measurement of how many job adverts offer different flexible working features.

Conclusion

Workplace gender inequality remains a major issue. Among other concerns, the fact that few jobs are advertised as flexible can have disproportionately negative effects on women’s ability to return to and stay in work, as women are more likely to need to balance caring responsibilities with work than men. If women with caring responsibilities cannot find a flexible job, and fear asking for flexibility, they are more likely to stay at home, work part time or take on jobs below their qualifications and skills, and advance more slowly in their careers (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016).

An obvious first step to try to improve the situation is to encourage HR professionals to think about advertising more jobs with flexible working options. BIT worked with the CIPD to test different ways to do this. We tested the effect of four different emails on 25,000 HR professionals’ willingness to click through to learn more about flexible recruitment. These emails contained either a short basic message or one of three behaviourally informed messages (using the principles of social norms, loss aversion, or cognitive dissonance).

The approach revealed useful insights. The social norm email resulted in the highest proportion of people opening the email, as well as the highest proportion of people clicking on the link. Specifically, the social norm email resulted in 16% more people opening the email (an effect that is statistically significant at p<0.001), and 24% more clicking on the link compared to the simple message (an effect that is not statistically significant at the conventional level of p<0.05 (p=0.069)).

Overall, this trial represents a positive step towards identifying what works in encouraging HR professionals to find out more about flexible recruitment. We hope the trial can contribute towards reducing gender inequality in the workplace by increasing the availability of flexible working options. By using a randomised controlled trial design, we robustly demonstrated the effectiveness of a social norm message in encouraging HR professionals to find out more about flexible recruitment. This is encouraging given that flexible recruitment is an important tool to help women who want to balance work with caring duties, and the clear effectiveness of using social norm messages is a valuable step towards promoting and increasing flexible working options.

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Appendix: Emails

The emails below were sent out as a part of the trial. We have used blue boxes to highlight which section of the email varied across conditions. These boxes are for illustration purposes and were not included in the sent emails.

Simple email (control)

Dear Bernadette,
If you advertise jobs as being suitable for flexible working, you can expand your talent pool. You can also attract better candidates who go on to become productive and engaged, take fewer sick days and stay with the organisation longer.
Flexible working includes part-time, working from home, flexitime, compressed hours, and job sharing.
Act now: click here to find out how to recruit flexibly.
Kind regards,
Peter Cheese
Chief Executive, CIPD

Social norm email

Dear Bernadette
By 2020, flexible working will become the most common working option in the UK. 91% of UK employers say they are open to discussing flexible working options within the recruitment process. You can join them by advertising your job vacancies with flexible working options.
Act now: click here to find out how to recruit flexibly. 
If you advertise jobs as being suitable for flexible working, you can expand your talent pool. You can also attract better candidates who go on to become productive and engaged, take fewer sick days and stay with the organisation longer.
Flexible working includes part-time, working from home, flexitime, compressed hours, and job sharing.
Kind regards,
Peter Cheese
Chief Executive, CIPD

Loss-frame emailDear Bernadette,
65% of employers say using flexible working practices had a positive impact on their recruitment.
Don't lose the best people to your competitors. Act now: click here to find out how to recruit flexibly.
If you advertise jobs as being suitable for flexible working, you can expand your talent pool. You can also attract better candidates who go on to become productive and engaged, take fewer sick days and stay with the organisation longer.
Flexible working includes part-time, working from home, flexitime, compressed hours, and job sharing.
Kind regards,
Peter Cheese
Chief Executive, CIPD

Cognitive dissonance email Dear Bernadette
91% of UK employers say they are open to discussing flexible working options within the recruitment process. But only 9% of jobs are advertised as suitable for flexible working. You can help close th gap. Act now: click here to find out how to recruit flexibly.
If you advertise jobs as being suitable for flexible working, you can expand your talent pool. Yu can also attract better candidates who go on to become more productive and engaged, take fewer sick days and stay with the organisation longer.
Flexible working includes part-time, working from home, flexitime, compressed hours, and job sharing.
Kind regards,
Peter Cheese
Chief Executive, CIPD


Technical Appendix

Balance of treatment groups

Balance checks confirmed that our sample was balanced in terms of organisation size, recruitment interests, CIPD membership, and gender.

Implementation of trial

The sending of the messages was largely a success. Emails were delivered between 12.03pm and 12.06pm and each individual who received an email received the message they were assigned.

Attrition

As stated in the report, about 1,000 recipients assigned to receive an email did not receive one.

We checked for differential attrition in our analysis sample using the same characteristics we checked balance on after randomising. Specifically, we regress the treatment dummies on the characteristic of interest and use a Wald test to test whether the treatment coefficients are jointly 0 (this involves 17 separate Wald tests).

The only statistically significant difference (p<0.05) that we found was the proportion of recipients who expressed an interest in recruitment and selection. The cognitive dissonance email group contains fewer recipients that expressed this interest, and although there is a statistically significant difference, we hypothesise that this difference is not particularly economically significant. Of the control group, 48.7% expressed this interest, to 46.5% of the cognitive dissonance email group.

Analysis strategy

All analysis was conducted using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions.

Our analysis controls for:

* Gender (binary variables: male, female, unspecified)
* Organisation size (binaries: 50–99, 100–249, etc.)
* Industry (binaries)

Seniority (binaries: junior, manager, senior)

BIT endeavours to pre-specify primary analysis to avoid reporting results that are potentially spurious. All analysis that was not pre-specified is therefore described as ‘exploratory’.

Outcome data

One flaw with our outcome data is that some opens do not register in our data. We know this because there are some recipients who are marked as having clicked on the link without opening it. Our theory for why this happens is that opens by many email platforms are often tracked by at least 1 pixel of the image in the email being downloaded, and some organisations (for example, the Civil Service) turn off auto-downloads of images by default. Therefore, a recipient might click on the link without having any of the images download, which would result in a click being registered but an open not being registered. We therefore assumed that any recipient that has clicked on the link has opened the email, and recoded our data accordingly.

Contacts

This publication and related equality and human rights resources are available from the Commission’s [website](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com).

For advice, information or guidance on equality, discrimination or human rights issues, please contact the [Equality Advisory and Support Service](http://www.equalityadvisoryservice.com/), a free and independent service.

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1. The analysis of statistical significance was conducted using the commonly accepted p-value threshold of 5%. A p-value of 0.05 means that if the treatment had no effect, there is a 5% chance we would still observe a significant result. If we relaxed this threshold (for example to 10%), more results could become statistically significant, but we would be less certain that any differences between messages were due to the wording rather than chance.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A staggered hours work scheme allows workers to start and finish work at different times. Compressed hours involves fitting the same number of working hours into a shorter space of time; for example, working 40 hours spread across four days rather than five. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See [here](http://familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk/current-news/voluntary-sector-leads-the-way-in-flexible-recruitment-benefits-for-scotland/) [accessed: 8 November 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The campaign page can be found [here](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/flexible-working-how-create-and-champion-flexible-culture) [accessed: 8 November 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to Mailchimp data on email marketing benchmarks (published Feburary 2017), the average click-through rate for email campaigns from Non-profits is 2.76%. Read more [here](https://mailchimp.com/resources/research/email-marketing-benchmarks/) [accessed: 7 November 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to conventional SME definitions, organisations with 50-250 employees are classified as ‘medium’ size. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)