Short paper submission to EGOS: Sub-theme 21: Bricolaging Careers – (Re)Imagining Meaningful Careers for 'the Good Life'

In search of the good life? Experiences of executives and senior managers navigating reduced hours in the UK.

Authors: Jennifer Tomlinson, Sue Durbin, Stella Warren and Jack Daly

Introduction

The challenges of greater wellbeing, work-life reconciliation and gender balance in senior management and executive careers are well established. Working hours are critical to career advancement and women, more so than men, seek a reduction in hours at stages in the life-course that are also career defining. Previous research has shown that women face stagnating careers when they reduce their working hours, losing key clients, being restricted in terms of their role development, and because of the perceptions of part-time work lose opportunities for internal and external progression (Durbin and Tomlinson 2010). Ten years later, our research re-visits some of these themes and issues and asks how much has changed for senior managers given the rise in flexible working and greater acceptance of reduced hours and alternative working patterns, such as the four-day working week. While there is a growing body of research on alternative working patterns and flexibility in managerial jobs (Beham et al., 2020; Chung, 2020; Chung & van der Horst, 2020; Kossek et al 2015; Tomlinson et al 2019), few studies focus on senior managers and executives who, as well as having a managerial role, demonstrate leadership around the flexible and reduced hours working agenda. In this paper we focus upon elite careers (executive and senior management) and explore the experiences of both men and women who reduce their hours for a variety of reasons, including child and eldercare, health, wellbeing, personal relationships and leisure.

The data this paper presents is based on 35 interviews (26 women and 9 men) with senior managers and executives working reduced hours in the UK private sector 2020-21. We engage with and respond to several of the questions posed in this EGOS subtheme, namely: What might 'good life' careers look like? What are the alternatives to the dominant narratives of career success? How can these alternatives be enacted and sustained? In particular we compare and contrast two forms of reduced hour working in executive and senior management careers: a reduction in working days with reduction in pay, (i) a 'four-day week' which is increasingly common in corporate contexts and (ii) job share partnerships.

Background and context

The career trajectories and sustainability of long hours among senior managers and professionals is a longstanding subject of research (Bessa and Tomlinson 2017). Overwork is frequently reported as a concern for managers and professionals (Ahuja et al., 2018; Lupu et

al., 2020; Wharton and Blair-Loy, 2002). Current research shows that reduced-hours work among the managerial and professional workforce still runs counter to prevailing expectations about how such workers should act and behave – especially when they are senior management and executive level. For example, key challenges highlighted in past research concerns regarding how managers and professionals remain visible and organise work, supervise personnel, manage client relations and remain active decision makers and seek new opportunities for mobility (Kossek et al 2016; Durbin and Tomlinson 2010, 2014; Lee et al., 2002). There has also been concern that when working hours reduce and pay is cut in alignment with a reduction in hours, organisations often do not adequately reallocate workload. This can lead to work intensification and employees trying to fit five days' work into fewer hours and for less pay. The rise in working from home is likely to facilitate this, with some referring to this tendency to work longer and harder given flexibility, as self-exploitation (Chung, 2022).

An alternative to reduced hours (and pay) which takes place generally through a negotiation between the individual seeking a reduction and employer, is the campaign for a four-day working week at the **organizational level** where all employees working five days reduce to four days but aim to maintain the productivity expected of a five-day week. The notion of a four-day week and research on this subject is currently enjoying a period of sustained high profile, with organizations across a number of countries trialing this new working week, advocating the benefits in terms of both productivity and employee wellbeing and work-life balance. Many academics, policy makers and think tanks promote the potential for a four-day week to help reconcile work and care, to enhance gender equality and the green economy (Chung 2022, Onaran and Jump 2022). While these are indeed positive developments, the four-day week takes the full-time/five days as the standard working pattern, and for many this is not the reality of work. Implemented at the organizational level, questions remain also over how those with alternative working patterns are accommodated and benefit from this particular organizational initiative. There are also wider concerns over how arrangements are implemented and for the quality of work, work intensity and scope for inequalities for example in terms of who can realistically access reductions in working time (Delaney & Casey, 2021; Spencer, 2022).

It is important to recall that the idea of a four-day week is not entirely new, but that individuals have been negotiating reduced hours on a more individualized basis for some time. There is evidence that individuals at more senior grades have been able to negotiate reductions to a four-day week, often as part of a recruitment or retention strategy (Tomlinson, 2006). There are also major agencies supporting flexibility in corporate careers, and this now extends to not just the retention of key staff but a key draw or pull – a recruitment feature attracting new staff to an agile and 'embracing' workplace (Kossek et al 2015). As such there are two bodies of literature, each contributing to reduced hours or four-day week alternative. Both these arrangements achieve a shorter working week and have the potential to be progressive through challenging the standard (male) full-time worker norm. Yet they are not without similar and different challenges. We review some of these in organizations where individuals have negotiated a reduction in working hours,

rather than undergone organizational-level change as these are more common across a range of managerial and professional contexts, notably professional service firms.

However alongside exploring how senior managers and executives in corporate careers navigate reduced hours in a context where the norm is long hours over five days, we also explore a further alternative which has received scant attention in recent decades: the older and arguably outmoded concept of 'job share'. We argue this is a significant omission in career studies concerned with enhancing working lives and wellbeing and that the long hours often demanded of senior managers and execs, in addition to the rise in varieties of flexible working and technology could make this overlooked option a viable alternative in the job design and crafting of meaningful careers.

We argue that more could be done to promote job share arrangements given many senior management and executives roles require *extended* rather than *reduced* working hours and time commitment (Lee et al 2002). We found that senior managers who shared a demanding role often really did experience the 'good life' feeling assured by the shared responsibility for a senior executive or management role. Key to making job share partnerships work were **trust, role specification, communication and technology**.

While an established body of research highlights the challenges for employees in terms of sustaining a career while working flexibly, there is less focus on how those in very senior positions navigate flexible working effectively. This is the ultimate focus of our paper.

Revisiting and revising the ideal worker norm

This paper is framed by the concept of the gendered organisations, and specifically the 'ideal worker' elaborated in the work of Joan Acker (1990; 2006). The ideal worker demonstrates a total dedication to work. They are competitive and career driven, unencumbered of time constraints outside of work and willing to sacrifice non-work relationships to progress their careers (Kerfoot & Knights, 2003; Poorhosseinadeh & Stratchan, 2021 Wajcman, 1998). Critically, the ideal worker defaults as male. The neoliberal context of the private sector creates a boundless time culture (Kvande, 2009), where paid labour is assumed as the primary responsibility of the worker, demanding individualism, self-development, and discipline (Ridgeway et al., 2022). The ideal worker not only engages in a masculinity of high performance, but demonstrate hard-work, constant availability to the profession, and flexibility towards work (Turnbull et al., 2023). In contrast, women are assumed as less able to commit the required hours due to childcare responsibilities (Bernard & Correll, 2010; Padavic et al 2019) and as such struggle to fit, or be a perceived fit, with the ideal worker mould.

The ideal worker norm has exposed how organizations prioritise and reward behaviours that are masculine, individualistic, and unencumbered. Those who are demonstrate presenteeism, availability and devoted to work get ahead (Calinaud et al., 2021). Although this is unattainable for many (Poorhosseinzedah et al., 2018), individuals may mask or marginalise non-work priorities to project a professional identity that meets and conforms

to ideal worker norms (Reid, 2015; Ladge et al., 2012), especially in high pressured, corporate environments (Borgkvist et al., 2021). Ultimately, this ideal is both challenging to maintain and competitive (rather than collaborative) in form. Individuals seek to bill the most hours, be seen to stay in the office the latest, maintain greater presenteeism and availability than their co-workers. Such patterns of behaviour are corrosive and harmful, particularly for those who are unable or unwilling to compete and adhere to such pressure. As argued by Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachen (2021), those who aspire to executive roles must assimilate into the masculine ideal worker norm and in doing so potentially undermine legitimate work-life balance policies and flexible working arrangements designed to make workplaces more accommodating and inclusive (Ladge et al., 2015).

The work-family narrative is persistent means through which the career success of some can be explained at the expense of others and it is women who are assumed experience greater work-life conflict and uncertainty in their careers (Padavic et al 2019). A flexibility stigma exists (Chech & Blair-Loy, 2014) and Chung et al. (2020) argue that flexibility stigmas are inherently gendered: men are more likely to hold any bias to flexible workers due to negative perceptions of mothers' commitment to work, whilst women, and especially mothers, are more likely to experience disadvantage and discrimination. Furthermore, the prioritisation of work and expectations of performance to that of full-time colleagues persists in flexible working arrangements (Lott & Klenner, 2018), and reduced hours workers are depicted as bringing additional assists to the workforce rather than the reconstruction of ideal workers (Benschop et al., 2013). As such, flexible work is still constructed in a way to benefit mothers' careers, in which men are observed to avoid uptake and continue to prioritise work over familiar responsibilities (Ewald & Hogg, 2022).

The extent to which the ideal worker norms remains entrenched or is likely to become disrupted due to changes in working practises is an open debate (Zanhour & Sumpter, 2022; Scholtz et al., 2023). The increasing visibility of flexibility and work-life reconciliation prior to (Tomlinson et al., 2019), and certainly through COVID (Chung et al., 2020), have stimulated challenges to masculinised ideal workers to emphasise the centrality of non-work priorities in working lives and across the life course. At the individual level, workers can reconstruct their identities to emphasise skill development within caring responsibilities and working time reductions as effective to improving efficiency (Balan et al., 2022). However, where change is isolated to the individual rather than at a cultural and structural level (Chung et al., 2021), the benefits are yet to translate to the workforce in a way that truly challenges notions of the ideal worker. As described by Ewald & Hogg (2022), flexible working arrangements may entrench cultures of ideal workers in deep-rooted notions that physical presence in the office is critical to being an effective worker, and that flexibility is designed for mothers rather than fathers in professional roles.

As such, an ideal worker would not usually seek a reduction of working hours or foreground equivalent non-work pursuits. In this context, we argue that collaborative working – which is precisely what a job share partnership entails, holds great potential to disrupt the ideal worker norm. We contend not enough has been written on the benefits of job share, and its potential to complement other innovations in working time.

Data and methods

The study adopted a qualitative research approach in the form of semi-structured interviews following a pre-determined thematic framework. This allowed the research team to follow the lead of the participants, and gives the opportunity to explore in more detail, resulting in rich, in-depth data (Kvale, 2007; Mason, 2017; Creswell and Poth, 2021).

To begin with, project partners were identified through existing research networks of the two first named authors who took keen interest in the promotion of gender equality and inclusion in organisations and who agreed to support the research. These included a flexible working specialist, HR consultancy, a social enterprise, a women's equality network, and a senior management recruitment specialist specializing in flexible work. In addition to their own knowledge and expertise within the area of flexible working, the project partners were also instrumental in using their extensive networks to facilitate the identification and recruitment of executives and senior managers who work on a reduced hours basis.

The sample consisted of 35 men and women senior executives working reduced hours working in a range of corporate contexts. We sought respondents that were both men and women of different ages to get a variety of perspectives on reduced hour working at senior level, as well as different motivations for reducing hours. Once scheduled, our participants supplied demographic information about themselves and their circumstances. The age range of participants was 35-62, 30 were married or lived with a dependent partner, and 28 had dependent children and two respondents stated they has significant care responsibilities for another adult (partner and parent). All identified as white in ethnicity, though several were of different (non-UK) nationalities.

All those participating in the research were required to work in senior positions at executive and senior management levels, while working reduced hours. We advertised for participants through our networks and the research partners circulated our request to potential interviewees who met these research requirements, along with a description of the background to the project, the researchers, and funding. We sought respondents that were both men and women of different ages to get a variety of perspectives on reduced hour working at senior level, and a range of motivations for reducing hours. This form of purposive sampling was used as it allowed the research team to select participants who would provide data that met the research objectives and resulted in valuable and information rich cases (Mason, 2017; Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 1990; Suri, 2011).

This project was funded in 2019 and fieldwork commenced in early 2020 just the ahead of the COVID pandemic and lockdown. This meant that while more respondents initially were willing to be interviewed, some participants were understandably harder to reach and those who remained working were often highly time pressured. With agreement from the funder, the decision was made to pause the research in May 2020 and fieldwork resumed from November 2020, interviewing when opportunities arose. The sample size is slightly smaller than we initially anticipated because some participants initially available pre-COVID were

either non-responsive when we returned to the project, or proved too hard to reach and schedule over the time we had remaining to collect our data.

Participants voluntarily opted into the study, emailing their key contact through which they'd heard about the study. The research team then sought informed consent from all participants giving each a Participant Information Sheet, a Consent form and privacy notice ahead of time. These documents fully explained the purpose of the research, how to take part and what would happen to the data. Participants were informed that they could withdraw consent at any time up until a given date, after which the data would be anonymised for analysis. Before each interview, participants were asked to return a signed consent form and provide demographic information and themselves and their circumstances. Verbal consent was given at the beginning of each interview.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a university approved transcription service. No names were used in the audio recording or transcription and the data was securely stored on the university's secure network, with access to the research team only. The project received full ethics approval from the University's Ethics Committee in February 2020.

The interviews were semi-structured and the topic guide was developed by the research team, and informed by discussions with the research partners, to explore why and how reduced hours were negotiated and how careers were navigated while working reduced hours in terms of future career aspirations, management responsibilities, leadership and how their role had been adapted following a reduction in reduced hours.

Questions also focused on the prevalence of organisational and other forms of support, including mentoring and networking; aspirations for and the realities of further advancement while working reduced hours working; and the support received from their co-workers, those they managed and their own line managers during and since the transition to fewer hours.

An initial pilot interview was conducted to test the question areas, timing, etc., resulting in some minor changes to the topic guide. In addition, because of the lockdown and shift to remote working for all participants, we chose to add an additional set of questions to explore the impact of the pandemic on interviewees' careers, including working from home, their views on this new way of working and its potential future 'normalisation' alongside reduce hours work, organisation readiness for lockdown/working from home and the general impact of covid on the individual and their ability to work flexibly and from home.

Data Collection and Analysis

Originally we offered the choice of interviews taking place in person or online, in line with the participants' preference and busy work schedules. However we were scheduled to start interviews in late January around the time guidance on non-essential travel was being issued and London locked down. As such the pandemic shifted these intentions and subsequently all interviews took place remotely (via Zoom or MS Teams) and audio recorded. The interviews were conducted between March 2020 and November 2021 and

shared between three members of the research team, each lasting between 45 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes. Catch-up meetings were scheduled between the researchers during the fieldwork stage to share initial thoughts from the interviews. In addition, as it became clear that COVID was impacting peoples working lives in new and profound ways, notably requirements to work from home, we also added to the interviews questions on COVID, working from home and how the participants were managing their teams. Given the scale of the event it was virtually impossible not to engage with these issues that were so tangible and at the forefront of people's working lives.

The research team began by analysing data thematically using a systematic process for coding data from the interview transcripts and then categorizing specific statements into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; Creswell, 2014). Because of the familiarity with the data our previous research on this subject a decade earlier (Durbin and Tomlinson 2010) each researcher initially analysed their own set of interviews. The analysis examined the perspectives of each research participant to identify patterns in the data, highlighting similarities and differences and generating some unanticipated insights (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2020; Terry et al., 2017). Next we looked at each others coding to discuss and modify major themes in the research.

Initial coding of the data focused on the themes of transitioning to reduced hours, benefits and pitfalls of a four day week (including here workload, working on days off and pay), job shares and alternative reduced hour arrangements. For the purposes of this paper as themes emerged and developed, the two lead authors revisited the data, concentrating on analysis of data comparing and contrasting the experiences of the four day week with job sharing. In this paper we focus on the participants' views of the four day week (defined as individually negotiated reduction to four working days per week with reduced pay) and alternatives including job share partnerships. Most of the participants we spoke to worked around four days. In total 20 participants working 0.8FTE and a further four were working 0.9FTE over 4 days Nine worked 0.6 or 0.7FTE , and seven of these participants did so as part of a job share, reflecting that senior jobs require more than full-time hours. One participant recently transitioned back to full-time after spending 8 years working four day/0.8FTE.

Together, we identified a number of themes to support analysis in relation to career experiences, and how to enact and maintain meaningful careers while reducing hours. We explored:

1) Experiences and perceptions of working reduced hours (positive and negative);
2) Whether workload changed to adequately reflect the reduction in time and pay change? In particular we paid attention to how many worked on their day off, on a flexible basis and how reciprocal flexibility was;
3) Whether working four days led to a reduction or intensification of work, and how experiences compared to those adopting alternative arrangements, notably job share partnerships.

Findings

Reflecting on, and contrasting with, our previous study, (Durbin and Tomlinson 2010, 2014) we found greater optimism regarding the potential of a four day week and reduced hours working among senior managers and executives a decade later. Most respondents said that when they reduced hours, their job content remained the same or similar in terms of quality, seniority and complexity. The general perception was that reduced hours is more commonplace and accepted within organizations. Taken together this resulted in a greater sense of career maintenance.

Those working reduced hours were very positive about their ability to manage teams, their overall work-life balance and career sustainability. Overall key to making arrangements work: 1) trust and delegation within teams; 2) constructing a solid, compelling business case; 3) being flexible - specifically responsive and available on call on days off. One participant recalled:

> it's not natural to job share at this level and if you're going to do it you need to build a business case and you need to be much more hard headed and much more clear and direct about the benefit that you will bring to the business than just going in and having a vague chat (Sarah, VP pharmaceutical, Job share)

In terms of whether reduced hours produced a 'good life', a number of participants felt that a four day or reduced working week gave them greater head space and freedom and creativity (for hobbies etc) away from the demands of work. All participants said they were less stressed, and felt more in control both at home and work. Crucially, they also felt they were a more flexible manager/leader, able to demonstrate the benefits of a flexible approach to work. Interestingly, very few who had reduced their hours, planned to return to FT work in the future, even when the reasons for initial reductions were linked to a specific life stage (such as care for young children or elderly parents).

Managers and executives in this study had overall positive assessments of their working lives following a reduction in working hours. Reducing hours had created space each week away from a high pressure job, to focus on other important aspects of life. Typically reasons include time to care for and spend more time with children, partners and parents. Reductions in work hours were also explained in relation to health, wellbeing and leisure. In some cases where the agreement was flexibility, some worked longer weeks during school term times and busy work periods in order to 'bank' additional days of annual leave to coincide with the school holidays.

A number of participants felt that this space to have a week-day free from the demands of work was good for their mental health and overall wellbeing at work and home. Many offered the perspective that they also felt a more rounded and flexible leader being able to demonstrate and role model the benefits of a more flexible approach to work. Interestingly, very few who had reduced their hours, planned to return to full-time hours in the future. Nearly all saw their reduction in hour a permanent move, once they had established it successfully.

The common pitfalls in relation to the four day week were significant ones, however. Concerns tended to focus workload and expected output, which remained similar or equivalent to colleagues who work full-time, despite reduced hours and reduced pay. When this occurred there was evidence of work intensification, with managers and expective working very long days when at work, or work spilling over into their day off, and a need for them to be available when they were not working. The managers and executives who felt that they worked nearly or as long and hard as their full-time colleagues, or were as productive, often shared a feeling of frustration or inequity with regards to pay. This was notably so for female respondents who were already acutely aware of significant organizational gender pay gaps.

The table below provides data indicating how many participants i) regularly worked beyond contract hours each week, ii) regularly worked flexibly on their allocated day off and iii) raised concerns about pay equity following a reduction in hours and pay.

Navigating reduced hours: potential pitfalls

	Regularly worked beyond contracted hours	Regularly work flexibly on day off	Concerns about pay equity due to reduction pay
Yes	21	20	12
No (not applicable)	10 (4)	11 (4)	20 (3)

Being available and working beyond contract

Participants often spoke of being 'always available' even on days off and this was particularly so among those with the most senior leadership roles. Around two thirds of our participants worked beyond contracted hours and/or were flexible on their assigned day off while others reflected that they have not seen a reduction in their workload:

> How does it work? I think in theory there's lots of support for it but I think in practice what falls down a little bit is, so when I had that conversation with my director about you know I'd like to apply for the role I would want to do it for four and a half days [0.9FTE] in four [days] and she said ok, so we would need to look at the job description and identify what we would take out. In reality that conversation hasn't happened so and I'm sure you hear this a lot, so in practice it does feel like I'm just doing a full-time job in four days. [Bryoni, HoD, Social enterprise]

> There was a very much opportunity to be told, yes, of course you can come back and do four days rather than five. But there was never a discussion of this is what will go from your role to be able for you to do four days. You kind of just did five days in four days. … So I still came back to line manage the same number of people and just tried to squeeze a lot more in to four days. (Emma, HoD, Social enterprise)

Others emphasized that they felt responsible for making sure everything was covered when not at work and in particular felt it was their responsibility to ensure their colleagues were not affected by their (reduced) availability and made efforts to ensure no-one was inconvenienced.

> Not going home with anything left undone that's going to jump, I had this massive fear over the years of not being there and someone ringing in and saying, how's this, where's she's gone, she hasn't done this, or she said she'll be here, or she said she'll do this, I've always had this massive fear of that happening. So, I wouldn't you know I'd anticipate that and leave with you know leave it with someone or give them an update or just make sure that they've got all the plates spinning really so that it doesn't come unstuck *[Beth, partner, law firm]*

In response to what was perceived as a lack of sufficient reallocation of workload, one senior executive working in finance moved from 0.8FTE to 0.9FTE but contained this within a 4 day working week, to reflect that she works beyond 0.8FTE (operating more similar to compressed hours). Her primary motivation for this is to spend more time with her child who has additional needs, taking her to and from specialist school some distance from work and home. She discusses her dilemma:

> My boss tells me… He says to me, 'I wish you worked 100%, because I would feel more comfortable about what you do.' But he says to me, 'I don't want you to work 100%. I want you to do what you're doing but be paid 100%.' I'd prefer not to be in that position. (Emily, Managing partner, Finance)

Being flexible on the day off/when on leave

A significant number of participants claimed that key to making arrangements work, was the promise of flexibility and by this we refer to employee flexibility designed to meet the needs of the business. 20 of 35 participants said they were flexible on the days in the office occasionally switching a day allocated off and/or being available on day away from work.

> So there are times when you know if there's a conversation with our chair of the board or the CEO or a very senior external stakeholder that can only take place on a Wednesday that I will move my hours around, I'll find some childcare and I'll be on that call because I think it's important to me in the same way that [company] is very flexible in supporting me but I can also be flexible in return. [Bryoni, HoD, Social Enterprise]

Others took a more adaptive approach to availability, and said they don't have standard days, but are always available to some extent. These tended to be top level leaders, with large teams.

> So the thing is, I guess, with this job is it never properly goes away. So for FTSE100, if something happens, they can't hear that their audit Partner is on holiday, and she'll

speak to them in two weeks' time, or another time. I guess there's a similarity with the leadership position as well. If you need to speak to me I can absolutely speak to you. But please make sure that you really need to speak to me. (Emily, Managing Partner, Finance)

You know the world is still going on, and you're conscious that it's still there; you know everybody else is working. Clients still need you so there is, it's not like a Saturday or Sunday where generally the world shuts down from a working perspective so you know it's never like having a day off … you dont think that day is, is a sacred day that the world stops (Dominic, Equity partner, Law firm)

The job is um is very large in scope and involves a lot of change um you need to be quite flexible so you know we kind of learnt early on that actually it's not a good idea to make very firm ongoing commitments based on the fact that you know on paper you're not working on Friday, it just doesn't work like that because in reality you know we travel a lot (Sarah, VP pharmaceutical, Job share)

Pay equity in reduced hours contexts

Fairness of pay was raised by 12 of the senior managers and executives we interviewed, and all who raised the issue were women. This is a significant matter given the scrutiny of organizational gender pay gaps in recent years. Issues concerning the gender pay gap emerged in two ways. First in terms of women doing more work than their FTE and second in terms of sense of entitlement – that they don't feel able to push for higher salaries, instead flexibility being percevied as a benefit or trade-off for higher pay:

It was really important to me to have a day where I was with her [daughter], and I was very nervous about reducing my hours and getting paid less for doing the same job. Because I felt like, especially when you go to four days, I don't feel like they…I don't really feel that there's a very often a concerted effort to like take 20% of your work… I sort of like when you go to three days, and what I've seen, when people go to three days I think they're like, 'Okay this person is on three days. Two days' work [needs reallocating]. Where are we going to resource this work in the organisation?' When you drop a day, very common for women coming back from maternity leave, it's almost like the job is the same but you're just trying to get it into four days and you're getting paid 20% less. (Olivia, Multinational)

I would say I managed to do that role in less hours as well or better than some other people who did it as a full time role… I suppose the frustrations over the years have been, just being recognised that you've been putting in effort that's above and beyond what I'm actually signed up to … yeah and I think, but I think that was verbally recognised it wasn't necessarily financially recognized (Natasha, Director, Architect firm)

Quite often a lot of people are willing to, I think, accept less money because they think that they don't want to rock the boat in terms of flexible stuff. And I've

certainly heard that at Imperial but also, you know, with colleagues or my friends who have gone back after maternity leave who… people are like, 'Oh well I haven't pushed the money issue because I really want the flexibility and I'm scared to leave this role because I might not get it elsewhere.' (Olivia, Muiltnational)

Alternatives to the four day week: compressed hours and job share partnerships

Interestingly, some of our respondents indicated that unlike the four day week, where corporations generally identified benefits from senior managers and execs working 'reduced hours' with reduced pay often without a reduction in workload, one alternative - compressed hours was not seen favourably by organizations given the reduced the scope for discretionary effort. Compressed hours presents a scenario where workers are less likely to work beyond contracted hours precisely because in order to compress their hours, they already have to lengthen their working days to take the fifth day off:

> So, I effectively worked full-time, but over four days was the theory. So, the theory being that I worked eight till six four days. So, we're on a 35-hour contract which is less hours I think than standard, I certainly know because my husband like is on 40. So… and that does make a difference. So, it… I did four long days, eight till six… I think that a lot of companies don't like compressed hours because I think that they feel that they get less out of you because they feel that everyone gives discretionary effort every day and everyone goes above and beyond their hours. And if people are getting a day off but getting paid full-time, they're not getting that discretionary effort. Obviously, the reality is I… I just was always working, really. [Olivia, multinational]

> Well, I guess there are other flexible working arrangements you could pursue, like compressed hours, for example, as one option. I would say [multinational] as an organisation is not supportive generally speaking of compressed hours so that really narrowed the options down (C8, George, multinational)

Among our sample, there were almost entirely positive responses from job share participants about their quality of working life notably around stability of working patterns, workload and sense of responsibility and achievement. Ability to switch off knowing someone else is on the job was something that made a difference to wellbeing and sense of a 'good life' :

> the more I got into it, and the more we talked about it, the more like… it was almost like a no-brainer. You know, it just seemed to be perfect, because it gave us the chance to do a stretching, challenging role, keeping us motivated and making the most of what we could bring to the company, but also how to deal with that constant dilemma of the home life juggle (Joanne, VP pharmaceutical, Job share)

> The advantages are that you can do a great, fulfilling job, but also do all the things you want to do at home, or need to do maybe. Yeah, that's my main advantage really, that it allows me to do everything I want to do. (B8, Janet, Financial Services)

Key elements in making job share partnerships work were trust, role specification, communication and technology. We found that job share partnerships took two forms: pure and functional. **A pure form (n6)** existed and was most common in our sample (6/9). It typified a job share where the partners worked together with the aim of high consistency is style and approach, in one case sharing technology (one teams and email account):

> People describe our handovers as seamless, don't really know who they're talking to half the time which is noticeable because people often call me [job share name] or vice versa. So, I think we're very lucky, we've managed to make that work. I think if that didn't work, it would be really difficult. (Janet, senior manager, financial services)

> Getting a joint office 365 account took a lot of time and we had to be quite ingenious in the way that we solved some of the problems. Our joint email which is what you're calling from and emailing us on, which is J's last name and my last name. That's the only one we use, everyone knows it, everyone knows that when they send an email it doesn't mean that, so whether it goes to J or me… One of the principles that we've put in place when we started the role was that everyone else whether it's our stakeholders, whether it's our team whoever it is it will feel like you are talking to one person. So you will never have to repeat a discussion, it will always seem that you are talking to one person. (Sarah VP Pharmaceutical Job Share)

> We did an evaluation of the whole of our team and we had some pretty good questions and the results were phenomenal. They really felt that you know you couldn't put a piece of paper between us, they would definitely ask one or the other, they didn't mind and they felt our presence was visible. They felt supported you know they felt we were both leading so, it was great (C4, female director, social enterprise)

A second **functional form (n3)** was also evident, where the focus was more on role specialization – dividing aspects of the job aligned with skills and expertise while sharing overall accountability:

> We divided up some of the responsibilities where it was… where it was obvious, so I took primary responsibility for two of the divisions and she took primary responsibility for the other two, you know, I'm the accountant so I took care of the budgeting things. She's 20 years younger than me, enthusiastic. It works because… in… in a way because I was, sort of you know, I guess more experienced, more senior within the organisation and better networked, and she was younger and enthusiastic and energetic and brought those qualities to the realm. It all helps if you see they've got skills and experience that, kind of, complement each other. (Malcolm, Senior Managing Consultant, Central Bank, previous role Job Share)

> I think it works really well you know [in the] projects environment so we have very clear accountabilities and each have portfolios. We both have individual line reports so we have five people um band four in the team each with their own teams and I have direct accountability with two of them and S has direct accountability with the other three. So people are very clear where the accountabilities lie…. [he] is much more team focussed, very people focussed um he loves these sort of stakeholder management side. I'm much more about delivery and getting things done and finishing for deadlines (Liz, Director, transport industry)

Overlap time and communication, when both partners worked, did handovers or worked together on strategic issues was critical to both the pure and functional job share partnerships. The majority of job share partnerships were equivalent to 1.2FTE, reflecting that most senior exec and management roles require time and effort commitment beyond standard full-time hours. Every one of our job share partners stated that the combined FTE of the partnership was above 1FTE which was critical to facilitate collaborative working on both strategic and operational issues. Line management responsibilities and the ability to respond to issues as they arose were key:

> We have leadership or a full team meeting, then we do a full two hour handover and that is you know to do with strategic work and then the last job we do is the diary and so, and the emails … I've never worked so effectively (Libby, director, social enterprise)

> That overlap's incredibly important. Because we've got so many more strands, we're juggling… we're sort of having to manage. We've got obviously the [people] side of things. But the number of different issues we're dealing with, they change very quickly. And the questions can come from a wide range of stakeholders. (Vivienne, senior manager, financial services)

Added value of the additional time was often set out in a business case for the job share being over 1FTE:

> We had to set out a business case that showed how we would organise the work within the team both in terms of management, line management and also just in terms of the functionality of delivery. But also how we would um be able to bring in and extra pieces of work above and beyond the single post that we had so we had to, to name the projects that we were going to do, the directorate needed it done but no one was doing them because nobody had time and how we would incorporate those onto our day job. (Mark, director, transport industry)

Key to the success of the job share was being matched with the right partner. In most cases, the job share had come about because the individuals themselves had instigated it as they

wanted to work less hours but remain effective and impactful as senior managers. Good communication and trust were felt to be essential both in relation to how they worked with one another and also their teams:

> She's [job share] my conscience because I have all these ideas and plans and then I've got someone to back me up and go, we need to do it… it's sort of learning to make sure that your handover's really good and actually what our… sort of, the teams got from it was two different perspectives but still some really good learning. So, I think that's really good. (Janet, senior manager, financial services)

> She [JS partner] and I sat next to each other, you know, we are friends anyway, and she was kind of… a talent that I had nurtured, who at one stage, wasn't keen on promotion. And I persuaded her to take the next role up with me [in a job share partnership] (Malcolm, Senior Managing Consultant, Central Bank)

Being prepared to work collaboratively rather than competitively was also important:

> I think the only thing you've just made me think off and this is related to the last question is, you can't take your ego in, you can't survive I think in a job share if you've got a big ego because and would you be able to share the limelight and it's not about heroic leadership. It is about leadership for impact and if you really are passionate about leadership for impact and you haven't got a big ego or you're happy to put it to one side and share the glory and then it will work an awful lot better (Libby, director, social enterprise)

Overall, interviewees were very positive about their job share. two job share partnership had successfully achieved a promotion and as indicated above, on person was promoted into a job share partnership with a more senior male colleague wishing to reduce hours. Another interviewee felt she had become more efficient and effective through the job share, while another felt she benefited from having access to a partner who could share her experience:

> I do like to think, well, actually, we've demonstrated you can get a promotion as a job share, and we're really proud of that…. The advantages for me are because I'm doing it… before, my disadvantages were that I couldn't progress things as fast as I wanted. And that… [I found that] frustrating. But those have gone now, with the job share (Vivienne, senior manager, financial services)

> Totally positive, my experience at work is you know I can't wait to get to work. The team are fantastic I'm thrilled when I'm there, how I think um you know in terms of my motivation which I've always had a lot of you know I think I'm better, I think I'm more efficient and effective. I am clearing my inbox um I don't let J down. I want the staff to be, feel supportive so I suppose I'm even more alert to staff needs then I ever was and I always found I was strong in that department…. (Libby HoD, social enterprise)

When I speak to [job share] I've got direct access to all of her experience as well. So when we're confronting particularly challenging scenarios it's like we've doubled in many ways just the wealth of experience and knowledge. You don't hear that talked about very much, but to me that's a massive advantage (Mike HoD, social enterprise)

Conclusions

Good lives are achieved in different ways, and therefore it is vital that there are a range of viable, meaningful alternatives to full-time careers, if careers are to be sustainable and inclusive. In this paper we have outlined potential opportunities and pitfalls with the four day week and alternatives. We argue that while the four day week is experiencing a heightened period of sustained focus in academic and practitioner research, other viable alternatives are often overlooked. In our sample of senior managers and executives, those who reduced hours , typically to four days working, maintained their seniority and level of responsibility, maintained team working and felt they had more of a work-life balance. However, in most cases their workloads were not reduced and most worked or made themselves available on their 'days off'.

Given what we know about the strain and demands of senior management and executive jobs, reducing hours white maintaining sole responsibility for a senior management or executive role might not always be the most effective solution for either the individual or the organisation. It may in fact create different manifestations of strain through work intensification and pay inequity when responsibilities and workload are not reallocated.

Job shares are one potential solution to this problem, yet they are under-utilized in organizational contexts and remain largely absent from dominant career discourse and research. Theoretical and conceptual contributions on the ideal worker (Acker 1990) can help us make sense of this given the emphasis on presenteeism, availability and competitive tendencies to advance a career in corporate contexts. These characteristics run counter to the qualities and characteristics of job share partnerships. In our analysis we identified two forms of job share: pure and functional. While the analysis is based on small numbers of job share partners, instances of job share partnership in senior management and executive jobs are exceptionally rare. From the data we were able to access and analyse, both forms seemed to work well, and both types of job share partnerships seemed to rely on trust and collaborative working, overlap time, communication and IT innovations to ensure their partnerships worked effectively. This may be a form of working-time arrangement that has greatest potential to challenge the dominant career narratives and offer a genuine alternative approach to sustainable careers. These partnerships enabled participants to combining a rich and meaningful life beyond work with a senior or executive career across the life course.

In promoting the benefits of partnership and more collaborative approaches to management, we create space to challenge the individualistic and dominant career narrative of the ideal worker. Work remains to promote job shares at senior levels and

educate employers of the advantages these partnerships hold to unlock the both personal and organizational benefits of these arrangements, alongside other innovations in working-time.

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