WORK FOUNDATION

MANAGING INSECURITY: THE ROLE OF GOOD MANAGEMENT

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November 2023

Research partner:

CMI Chartered Management Institute

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CITATION

If you are using this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is: Atay, A., Williams, G.D. & Florisson, R. (2023). Managing Insecurity: The role of good management, Work Foundation at Lancaster University.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We'd like to thank CMI for their support in delivering this research. In particular, we'd like to thank the following individuals for their contribution: Daisy Hooper, Chloe Jepps, Will Smith, Caroline Mallan, and Anthony Painter.

Thank you to all the team at the Work Foundation who worked on this report, Aman Navani, Jon Fitzmaurice and Ben Harrison.

In addition, we would like to express our appreciation to following for their insights and contributions to this research:

- Dr Kay Greasley, Lancaster University Management School
- Prof. Maria Piacentini, Lancaster University Management School
- Mark Judd, Strategic Adviser, Work Foundation
- Trades Union Congress (TUC)
- British Retail Consortium (BRC)
- Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)
- Cosmo Gibson, Federation of Small Businesses (FSB).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK labour market in 2023 faces a range of deep and intertwined challenges.

Nearly 2.6 million workers are economically inactive due to long-term illness and the cost-of-living crisis has made workers poorer, with over half of people in poverty living in a family where at least one adult is in work. At the same time, businesses are struggling with staff shortages and retention issues, and the UK's recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that long term trends such as low productivity and sluggish growth persist.

Against this backdrop, millions of workers are in insecure jobs – characterised by low pay, unpredictable hours, poor protections, and limited career progression. Some worker groups are more likely to be in insecure work, such as women, young people, disabled people, and people from ethnic minorities – and insecure work is more prevalent in sectors like social care, hospitality, retail, and construction.

Job insecurity is not only harmful for individual workers but also for employers, managers, and the health of the UK workforce. While sustained Government action to strengthen worker protections will be required to tackle these issues, legislation alone won't resolve all the challenges faced in the working lives of insecure workers – we also need to see significant changes within organisations themselves. This research highlights the critical role that good management practice plays in people's experience of insecure work and provides a number of practical ways in which specific management choices and behaviours can mitigate some of the negative impacts of insecure employment.

Our findings suggest that the working lives of insecure workers can be significantly improved if more attention is focussed on improving the management support on offer within organisations to prioritise predictable hours, greater autonomy at work, general wellbeing, and development and progression.

Overcoming financial and contractual challenges

As the cost-of-living crisis continues to squeeze household finances, insecure workers are particularly exposed to rising prices. Approximately one in three workers in insecure work (30%) expect to lose their jobs in the next 12 months. And almost half of workers in insecure jobs (49%) cannot personally pay an unexpected bill of £300 if it was due within the next seven days.

Many of the insecure workers we interviewed spoke about the stress they experience from worrying about the financial consequences of losing their job.

Most of the managers we interviewed were aware and sympathetic to the financial and contractual challenges faced by the insecure workers they manage, but many felt they lacked the resources, power, and support to help. In this difficult context, many were developing their own ways of supporting their staff such as having an open and honest approach, adopting a personalised managerial style, or ensuring parity, where possible, in their treatment of temporary and permanent staff.

Supporting more autonomy and predictable working patterns

Almost three in five (57%) of the insecure workers surveyed wanted more predictable hours and one in five (22%) workers who have spoken to their manager about this issue have not obtained more predictable hours. Several workers we spoke to said they felt they had limited control over their working hours. Some felt unable to take sick days or refuse their manager's requests to work additional or unsocial hours for fear that they could lose out on work in the future.

Managers reported that they are often not in a position to resolve issues with working hours, with nearly half (46%) stating that their team's hours are set by others. Employers giving line managers more power to set their teams' hours could improve employee well-being and address some of the day-to-day concerns of those in insecure work.

Supporting flexible working that works for employers and employees

Many insecure workers are expected to be flexible with their working patterns to suit the needs of their employer. Over one in three (34%) workers reported having at least one of their shifts cancelled with less than two days' notice in the past month. Worryingly, half of workers surveyed (51%) say their mental wellbeing is affected by sudden changes to their work, schedule or weekly hours.

Managers can play a significant role in providing their colleagues with the right balance of stability, predictable hours and flexibility and, importantly, they stated that they are keen to do so. Around three quarters of managers surveyed said they would be willing to provide more flexible working arrangements to a direct report who requested them due to caring responsibilities (74%), personal wellbeing (73%), or for disability or health reasons (77%).

Managers in insecure work settings need support too

Our research found that insecure workers who feel they are treated well at work are 7.5 times more likely to be satisfied with their job. Many of the workers we interviewed told us of the transformative effect of supportive management on their personal and professional lives.

But managers in insecure work settings often also face the same challenges as their colleagues, and often feel they lack the power to make the kinds of changes needed to support the workers they manage. Half of the managers we spoke to expressed a desire for more predictable hours and almost one in ten (8%) expected to lose their job in the next 12 months. As well as dealing with their own job insecurity, several managers stated they face mental pressures in attempting to support members of their team who were experiencing significant difficulties due to the precarious nature of their contracts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To tackle job insecurity and its negative impact on workers and managers

1. **The UK Government** should bring forward new employment laws and regulations to strengthen labour rights and contractual security for all workers.
2. **The UK Government** should set-up a 'Good Work Taskforce' to identify international best practice examples of mitigating the impacts of insecure work on individuals, employers, and sectors.

To support the improvement of management practice

3. **The Department for Business and Trade** should mandate a wider array of metrics for large employers to conduct and report on such as the equality impact assessments (EIAs) which allows the public to see the composition of their workforce in terms of types of contracts, and assess which groups are more affected by this.
4. **The Department for Business and Trade** should support the development of management capability in providing secure and predictable working arrangements, including a focus on SMEs who may lack in-house resources and capabilities to undertake this work.
5. **The UK Government** should build on programmes of support for managers such as the apprenticeship scheme and Help to Grow to ensure inclusive practice is emphasised within existing training for supervisors and managers.

Local authorities can play a vital role in tackling job insecurity

6. **The UK Government** should build management capability into local and regional skills programmes for sectors where insecure work is prevalent.
7. **The UK Government, mayoral combined authorities and local authorities** should review their investment strategies for opportunities to further incentivise existing and future employers to improve labour standards in sectors where insecure work is prevalent.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Work Foundation research showed that there are nearly 6.2 million workers in severely insecure jobs.[1] These jobs are often characterised by low pay, unpredictable hours, poor protections, and limited career progression. This can mean that those in insecure work may experience poor financial wellbeing, poor mental health, and more limited job opportunities in the future.[2,3] Job insecurity can also be costly for employers and the overall economy, as it can reduce people's motivation at work,[4] lower their productivity,[5] and lead to higher staff turnover rates.[6]

Managers can make a considerable difference to the working lives of the people they oversee, particularly in more insecure work settings. Research indicates that good management can enhance worker wellbeing,[7,8] while bad management has been linked to worker stress[9] and increased employee turnover.[10] There is currently limited research examining the role of managers in supporting insecure workers.

This research, conducted in partnership with the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), explores the role managers can play in supporting workers in insecure jobs and highlights the limitations managers face, and the support they need.

The term 'managers' can have many meanings to different people. Anyone who line manages or supervises someone can be described as a 'manager.' In this research we limited our scope to junior to mid-level managers who supervise more than one individual and who have contact with them on a daily basis, but who do not have the power to shape an organisation's policies or strategies.

The study is based on mixed methods research including a detailed literature review, two surveys with 3,000 workers in insecure jobs and 1,000 managers, interviews with 10 workers in insecure jobs, and three focus groups with managers in sectors where insecure work is common. Please find the details of the samples used in this research in the methodology section.

Improving work in the UK: unfulfilled promises and commitments missed

Over the course of the last five years there has been an increasing focus on the need for intervention from Government and employers to drive up the quality of jobs across the UK. Yet, despite several strategic reviews and major policy commitments, much remains to be done. And importantly, the critical role that managers can play within organisations has yet to be explicitly recognised by the major political parties.

What has been done so far and what is next?

Figure 1: Policy timetable on improving work in the UK

Limited progress has been made since the Taylor Review of Working Practices

The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices[11] commissioned in 2017 acts as the foundational reference document to understand the current UK Government's approach to improving working lives across the UK. While the review has over 50 recommendations, only three of these relate to 'Responsible Business', which focused on the need for good management and employment relations within organisations.

None of these recommendations called on the Government to take action to improve management skills. In response to the Taylor Review, the Government published the Good Work Plan in December 2018.[12] The Government agreed with Taylor's recommendation that it should work more closely with experts to promote better forms of work, but it did not set out any specific initiatives to achieve this goal. This report aims to fill this gap.

A failure to deliver a new Employment Bill

The Conservative Party's manifesto for the 2019 General Election had the stated ambition of making the UK the best place in the world to work.[13] The Government announced an Employment Bill that would contain elements from the Good Work Plan in the Queen's Speech in December 2019.[14] Key elements of the Bill included creating a new, single enforcement body offering greater protections for workers, and making flexible working the default unless employers can provide a good reason for not offering it. The Bill was never published, and the synopsis released by the Government did not contain any reference to improving management skills or capabilities.

The Workers Act aims to address concerns with one-sided flexibility

In absence of an Employment Bill, the Workers (Predictable Terms and Conditions) Act 2023[15] was tabled by Scott Benton MP and Baroness Anderson and was supported by the Government. The Workers Act 2023 contains new regulations to give workers and agency workers the right to request predictable terms and conditions of work. This regulation will have the biggest impact on sectors where shift patterns vary. While it is a welcome development to address the concerns raised in the Taylor Review, it still does not reflect all the proposals made in the Employment Bill.[16]

Flexible working has become more accessible, but it is still not a day one right

Delivering on the Conservative Party's 2019 Manifesto, the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023 received Royal Assent in July 2023.[17] The Act will make it easier to make flexible working requests and requires employers to consider any requests made by their employees. In this context, flexible working does not solely refer to hybrid or flexible working, but also things like working hours and patterns. However, it still does not grant workers an absolute right to work flexibly.

Landmark court rulings

In the absence of legislation, we have seen policies and practices challenged in the courts on an ad hoc basis. The absence of legislation risks leaving a disjointed and patchwork set of employer regulations. In addition to this, often both employees and employers do not know their rights and responsibilities, and this is likely to increase the pressures faced by managers.

Labour plans to reform the labour market

In 2022, the Labour Party published its New Deal for Working People green paper,[18] which included commitments that a future Labour administration would look to improve wages and strengthen employment rights. Labour has also promised to end one-sided flexibility, and released its Start-Up, Scale-Up report on how the party will help make Britain the best place to start and grow a business. In September 2023 Labour's Deputy Leader, Angela Rayner MP, promised to bring in a new bill to ban zero-hours contracts, a "proper living wage", and repeal anti-strike laws within 100 days of forming a new government.[19]

A 2022 report by Labour's Council of Skills Advisors also called for greater emphasis to be placed on the importance of improving managerial skills within the workforce.[20]

New legislation and changes in employer practice can reduce the impacts of insecure work

The best outcomes in policy and practice can only be achieved when the Government works in partnership with employers. Our research illustrates that alongside any changes in the law that we may see in the future, improved employer and management practices will be vital to bettering the working lives of those in insecure work settings.

2. DEFINING INSECURE WORK

The Work Foundation defines insecure work through a single holistic measure which combines:

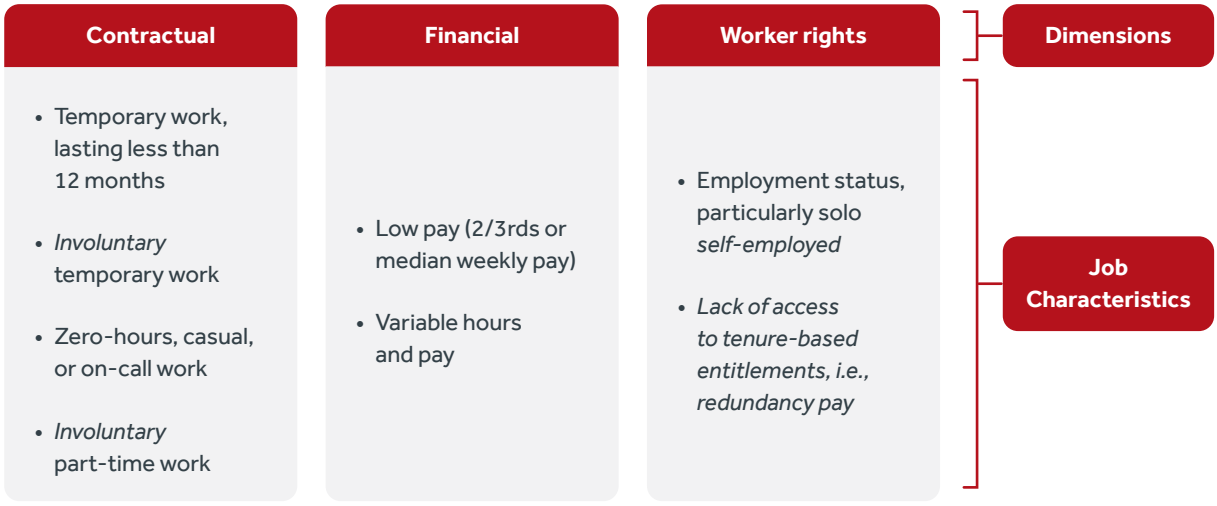
- Contractual insecurity, where people are not guaranteed future hours or future work
- Financial insecurity, where people have unpredictable pay, or their pay is simply too low to get by
- Lack of access to employment rights and protections.

Different from our previous outputs, which use the ONS Labour Force Survey to measure the experience of insecure work, this new research used data collected by two online surveys, one with 3,000 workers in insecure jobs and a separate survey of 1,000 managers, conducted by Censuswide in May 2023. The criteria to select insecure workers follows our theoretical framework for understanding insecurity in the labour market, as outlined in the UK Insecure Work Index 2022.[21] This research does not distinguish those in moderately insecure and severely insecure work, as the UK Insecure Work Index does. Here, we include in our definition of insecure workers anyone who experiences one or more of the following forms of work:

- Temporary work, particularly involuntary temporary work
- Involuntary part-time work, meaning that people want to work full-time but are unable to do so
- Zero-hours, seasonal, casual or on-call work
- Having low pay (below £343 per week)
- Having unpredictable pay
- Being solo self-employed as a freelancer or contractor, without employees.

For some people, these forms of work may have a negative impact on health and wellbeing, their ability to obtain secure work in the future, and broader employment outcomes.

Figure 2: Dimensions and job characteristics of insecure work.



3. CAN BETTER MANAGEMENT MITIGATE CONTRACTUAL INSECURITY?

Significant levels of job insecurity have remained a persistent feature of the UK labour market in the 21st Century.[22] In particular, insecure contracts such as zero-hour contracts and short-term or temporary contracts, can lead to workers facing uncertainty in relation to their terms and conditions, working hours, and opportunities for progression.

There is strong evidence to suggest that these kinds of working arrangements can have a significant impact on workers' health and wellbeing, as well as wider negative impacts on the economy as a whole. Researchers at University College London found that individuals on zero-hours contracts reported nearly double the levels of mental ill health compared to other workers.[23] Additionally, another study by IZA Institute of Labor Economics, concluded that young workers on zero-hours contracts are less likely to be in good health compared to their peers with stable employment.[24]

While we need to see legislative reform to curtail the use of these kinds of contracts, the findings from this research indicate that, with the right support, managers can play an important role in supporting their colleagues in these circumstances.

Figure 3: Insecure workers' experiences

49%

Insecure work's impact on people's finances

Almost half of the workers in insecure jobs cannot personally pay an unexpected bill of £300 if they had to pay within the next seven days from today.

57%

Unpredictable working hours

Close to three in five of workers surveyed say they want more predictable hours.

30%

Contractual insecurity

Approximately a third of workers surveyed expect that they will lose their job in the next 12 months.

34%

Influence over work

A third of workers said at least one of their shifts had been cancelled with less than two days' notice.

x7.5

Fairness at work

Feeling that you're being treated fairly at work makes it 7.5 times more likely you will be satisfied at work.

Source: Censuswide survey of 3,000 insecure workers (May 2023).

A third of workers in insecure work (30%) expect to lose their job in the next 12 months

While not all insecure jobs are 'bad', if contractual insecurity becomes something workers get trapped in, it may become a problem for individuals, employers, and the wider health of the local labour market. Previous Work

Foundation analysis found that for many people, opting into insecure work was not always a free choice.[25] Four in ten (44%) insecure workers earning less than £18,000 per year said they were in their current job due to constraints such as lack of transport or available childcare. Janet faces similar challenges, the 59-year-old cleaner based in the North East told us about the most important factor for her when choosing a job "would be the location...it revolves around the bus service" which "isn't brilliant".

Case Study One: Diana

Diana is a 31-year-old woman who lives in the South West of England and works on a zero-hours contract.

Diana is a single parent to a disabled child with complex care needs. She works part-time as a receptionist on afternoons and weekends to accommodate her son's childcare arrangements.

Diana is on a zero-hours contract and job shares with a colleague who has a permanent role with fixed hours. She finds this challenging as she is expected to be flexible with her hours to support her colleague, but her colleague does not have to do the same for her. Diana would like to be on a fixed hours contract and dislikes that she is the only person in her organisation who is "affected" by a zero-hours contract.

Although Diana is guaranteed work on set days, her zero-hours contract means her work schedule can range from 14-25 hours per week, which affects her ability to financially plan ahead.

She feels frustrated that her manager does not provide her with a weekly rota. Instead, she is generally informed of her working hours on the day up to an hour in advance of her shift via text.

Because of her zero-hours contract Diana often feels unable to say no to her manager's requests for her to work additional or unsocial hours, carry out long shifts without a break, or undertake tasks outside of her job description "for fear that I might lose my normal hours".

> **"One of our cleaners left at the last minute and because I had a zero-hour contract, [my manager] actually called [me] in to do cleaning duties at six o'clock in the morning... but because I'm on a zero-hour contract, I felt like if I said no, that might affect... my normal duties."**

Many insecure workers want more predictable hours

More than half of the insecure workers (57%) we surveyed want more predictable hours. Crucially one in five respondents (21%) have spoken to their manager about wanting more predictable hours but have not obtained them. David a 27-year-old social worker from the South West, told us that even after working a 15-hour shift:

> **"If somebody calls in sick, you kind of have no choice but to stay on that day"**

Insecure workers experience barriers to accessing organisational support

Workers we interviewed noted challenges they faced in gaining support from their managers due to their insecure contractual arrangements. This included the pressure some felt to not make mistakes or ask their manager for support in case this negatively impacted their chances of retaining their contract or securing a permanent position. Not only could this adversely affect a worker's wellbeing, but it may also limit their opportunities to develop within their role. Deborah, a 32-year-old teacher from the West Midlands, who has been employed on a series of fixed-term contracts, spoke about a previous role:

> **"I don't really want to ask [for help] because... they [might] think I'm no good at my job... you want to kind of impress as much as possible, so that there isn't really that kind of opportunity to ask for help if you feel like you need it."**

Some managers are aware of the challenges their staff face

Many of the managers we spoke to were aware of the challenges that can be associated with insecure contracts and actively supported their workers to navigate contractual issues.

For instance, in her current role Deborah has a "absolutely lovely" manager who has made her feel comfortable reaching out for support:

> **"We've got each other's mobile numbers and it'll just be a quick WhatsApp... I know I can always kind of go and hunt [them] down in school, if you know, to ask a question and its never kind of judged."**

Deborah's manager has helped to alleviate some of the challenges posed by Deborah's insecure contract. Finally having support from her manager has led to Deborah "grow[ing] in confidence massively" and she will now be able to access coaching when she next applies for a permanent teaching position at her school.

Managers face unpredictability too

Managers, who are in charge of setting working hours for their staff, are sometimes also subject to unpredictability, which may be a feature of work in their sector rather than something within their control. Half of managers (50%) surveyed said they also want more predictable hours. This indicates that many managers are left to cope with the dual pressures of trying to provide their workers with more predictable hours while also contending with their own irregular working patterns.

Financial insecurity is a significant issue faced by many workers in insecure jobs

Almost half of workers in insecure jobs (49%) could not pay an unexpected bill of £300 if it was due within the next seven days. More than two thirds of workers (65%) said their wellbeing is affected by personal or household finances.

Anika, a 30-year-old teaching assistant from London, described the challenges of being employed on a fixed-term contract and the worry she felt that she might lose her job at the end of her contract:

> **"It's hard [being on a fixed-term contract] because if you've got a mortgage to pay for and bills to pay for, you don't know, it's that inconsistency."**

Participants talked about the difficulties in getting mortgages and struggling with their credit scores due to being on insecure contracts. Some workers also raised their misgivings about their rate of pay, including that they were expected to conduct a challenging job with high levels of responsibility for the National Minimum Wage or that they received lower wages than colleagues on permanent contracts.

Half of all insecure workers earn less than the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Minimum Income Standard of £25,500 per year, leaving them especially vulnerable during the current cost-of-living crisis.[26] As managers have a direct relationship with the people they manage, they are often in an ideal position to develop an understanding of their colleagues' wider circumstances that more senior managers may struggle to attain. However, since many organisations lack strategies for supporting workers - including with financial wellbeing, managers can feel constrained in their efforts to support those they manage.

Insecure workers face difficulties accessing training

Low paid insecure workers are less likely to obtain training or development, which may limit their routes out of insecurity.[27] Some insecure workers we spoke to did not think it would be possible for them to advance their career while they remain on a fixed-term contract. Others noted the challenges faced by insecure workers in obtaining training, including a lack of financial support for external training and unfulfilled promises of training. Jennifer, aged 45 who works as an educator told us:

> **"[Her organisation] don't develop staff. They don't support staff... I asked for support and was blankly told no."**

Some workers might prefer to be on temporary contracts or to work on a project basis. Some sectors, such as logistics and construction, are heavily structured around these types of contracts, which come with unpredictability and uncertainty. While voluntary contractual insecurity might help people to accommodate their personal needs, chronic insecurity can harm people's long-term employability, career progression and overall health.[28] Together with legislation, management practices that highlight the importance of guidance, communication and wellbeing can make a big difference for workers in insecure jobs. However, as contractual insecurity is often a sectoral issue, managers in certain sectors may be limited in the actions they can take.

4. HOW CAN MANAGERS SUPPORT GREATER AUTONOMY FOR COLLEAGUES?

A common feature of more insecure job roles is a lack of autonomy and control over key aspects of work, including shift patterns and weekly hours, which can significantly undermine job satisfaction, wellbeing, and productivity.[29]

Despite this, our research does suggest that managers in insecure work settings can either exacerbate this or help to mitigate it in the decisions that they make and the working practices and culture that they implement in their teams.

Lack of certainty around working hours makes it harder for insecure workers to plan their lives

More than a third (36%) of insecure workers surveyed said their manager does not consult them before changing their weekly hours. More than one in three (34%) workers reported having at least one of their shifts cancelled with less than two days' notice in the past month.

Several of the workers we spoke to mentioned the financial challenges they face because they do not know how many hours they would be working each week. Others told us that their managers would inform them of their need to work or the cancellation of their shift at the last minute, causing them greater financial insecurity and adversely affecting their work/life balance.

Arwa, a 27-year-old housekeeper from the North East told us about the frustration of having their shift cancelled at the last minute:

> **"It's always last minute. It's like the day before... so it'll be like 6pm, they'll text, 'you're not coming in tomorrow'. That's not good, that gives me £60 less a week".**

David, a 27-year-old social worker from the South West, noted that he was expected to come into work for short shifts, resulting in him making little or no additional money once expenses such as transport were taken into account:

> **"There are also times where we're expected to sort of come in for two hours with very little pay. By the time you pay petrol to get there, that's how much you earnt really, and then you come home."**

Insecure workers lack control over decisions in the workplace

Just under one in five (17%) insecure workers do not feel that they can influence important decisions in their work. Many of the workers we spoke to told us they felt decisions about their day-to-day work where often made by senior managers who had little direct experience of their role.

Anika, a 30-year-old teaching assistant from London, said the following when asked why she left her previous job:

> **"I wasn't happy for a good few years. My opinions and things like that were never really taken into account, they weren't really valued."**

Different types of jobs have different levels of autonomy

Our research shows a significant difference between insecure workers in professional occupations and those in semi or routine manual occupations. We found that 60% of those in modern professional occupations say they have influence over weekly hours. Whereas workers in semi routine manual and service occupations have the least influence, with only 45% having a say over their weekly hours. Although insecure work cannot be equated with semi or routine manual jobs, we do see insecure work concentrated in these occupations.[30]

Managers from semi routine and routine occupations could play a key role in improving working conditions for their staff. Organisations from sectors where semi routine and routine work is most prevalent should explore the opportunity to provide appropriate training to their managers to develop their managerial skills to support workers in insecure work.[31]

There are also significant sectoral differences

The UK Insecure Work Index showed that insecure work is not distributed equally throughout the labour market and job insecurity concentrates in sectors like social care, retail and hospitality.[32] Our research found that despite being the sectors with the highest level of control, only 57% of workers in healthcare, finance, IT and telecoms have influence over their weekly hours. This rate decreases even further to 50% of workers in other sectors. Similarly, more than three in five (61%) surveyed insecure workers in architecture, engineering and finance say they have influence over their shift start and end times or their working hours. Whereas this goes down to only two in five (42%) for those in retail, leisure, and catering sectors.

Autonomy is a challenge for managers as well

During our focus groups, managers reported that they feel like they can influence decisions but do not have influence over their working arrangements. Nearly half (46%) of managers told us their team's working hours are set by other people. Organisations could give more power to line managers to set their teams' hours which would increase wellbeing and address some of the day to day worries of those in insecure work. Investing in training for managers could help address some of the challenges this research highlighted.

Case Study Two: Kelvin

Kelvin is a 28-year-old, from the Midlands, who works part-time as a factory technician on an insecure contract.

Kelvin started at his current workplace soon after leaving school, when he took up a job as a line worker because he needed money, and the factory was in a convenient location. Initially he did not give much thought to how he could progress in his role or his future career.

Kelvin quickly developed a "very good relationship" with his manager, who recommended that he take a more proactive approach to his working life. Kelvin's manager helped secure him internal training that allowed him to gain a promotion to factory technician.

He was then encouraged by his manager to attend college to attain a diploma that would allow him to progress even further in the company.

> **"[My manager] help[ed] me to decide a path for my career and that's why I'm doing engineering college."**

To facilitate his studies, Kelvin's manager has made sure he can work shifts that fit around his college work.

Without the support of his manager Kelvin felt he would have been less likely to progress in his job or return to education.

> **"[My manager is] one of the people that kind of encouraged me to... think of going back into college to get my degree and also seeing how I can best support myself with [my] job."**

5. HOW CAN MANAGERS SUPPORT 'TWO WAY' FLEXIBILITY?

Our previous research has found that many people opt into insecure work because they need specific types of flexibility that are hard to come by in many secure roles - for example, some might have caring responsibilities or fluctuating health conditions which need to be managed alongside work.[33,*]

When discussing the quality of work, flexibility is as important as pay to many.[34] But while the Taylor Review of Good Work highlighted flexibility of the labour market as one of the main strengths of the UK economy, flexibility at work is often one sided, with employers able to introduce significant uncertainty into the working lives of those in insecure jobs, while limiting access to the kind of flexibility employees might need or benefit from.[35]

Flexible working is not currently a guaranteed right in the UK - instead all employees have the legal right to request flexible working after working for the same employer for at least 26 weeks but will soon be able to do so on day one of their employment.[36]

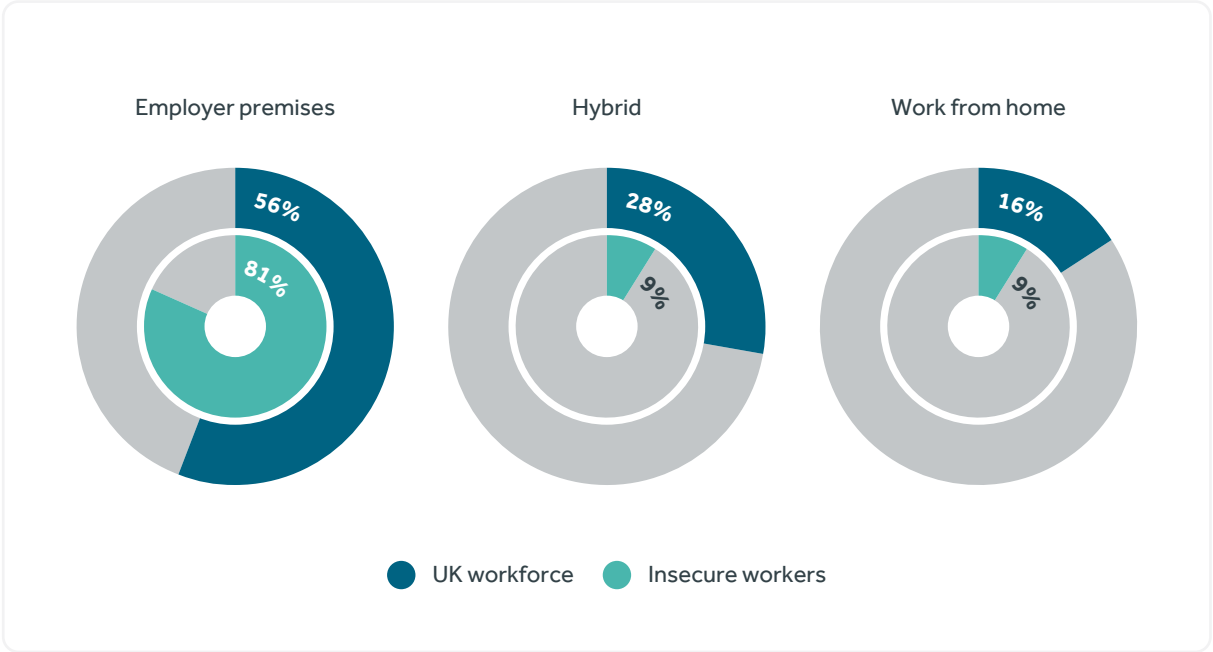
While employers are asked to deal with requests in a reasonable manner, there is no obligation on the employer to agree flexible arrangements that work for all parties. And it remains the case that relatively few jobs are advertised as flexible,[37] and this lack of guaranteed flexibility can function as a real deterrent to people's ability to accept a role.

All of this means that within the parameters of wider organisational policies, very often managers themselves play a pivotal role in the extent to which employees are able to work flexibly and balance life and work.

Insecure workers are less likely than the average worker to access remote/hybrid working

In the UK overall, 56% of workers work at an employer's premises, 28% work on a 'hybrid' basis and 16% work from home.[38] Whereas, almost seven in ten of workers in insecure jobs (68%) work from an employer/business premises. 13% of respondents work from client, supplier or partners' premises/site. Only nine percent work at home, with nine percent working on a hybrid basis. These stark differences are largely due to job insecurity in sectors where workers are needed on-site like retail, hospitality, and construction.

Figure 4: Proportion of workers working flexibly in terms of where they work, UK workers vs insecure workers surveyed in this study



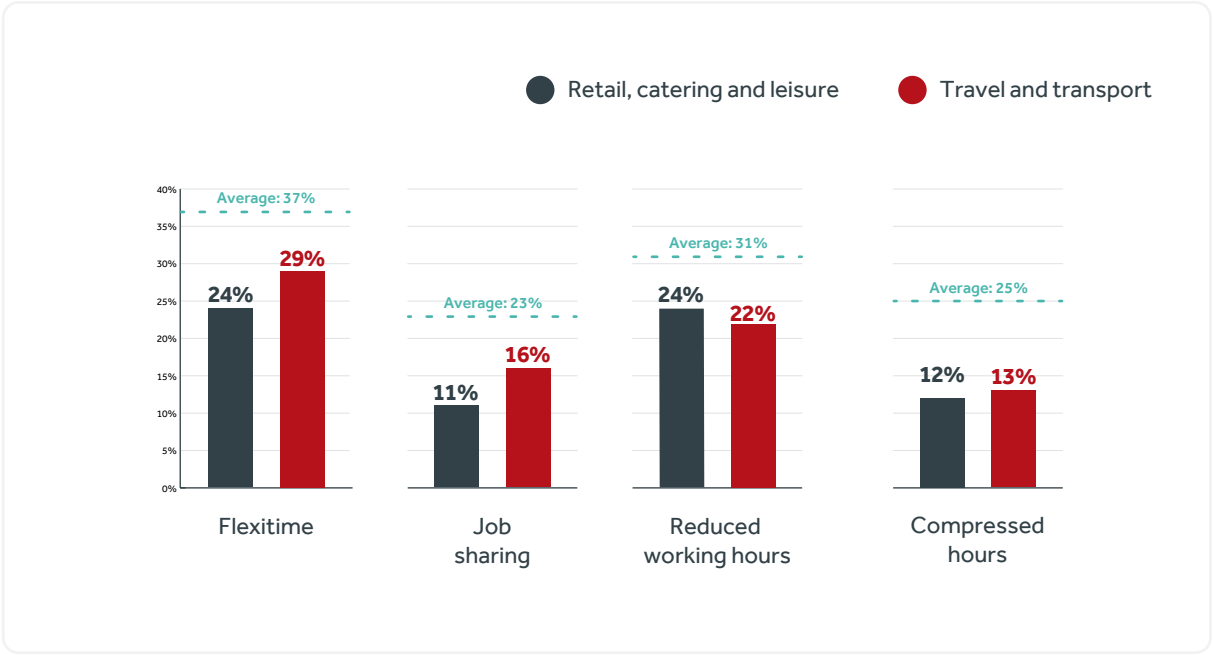
Source: ONS data on characteristics of homeworkers, Great Britain: September 2022 to January 2023. Censuswide survey of 3,000 insecure workers (May 2023).

* Flexible work is often used as an umbrella term to cover a range of working arrangements from flexitime to working from home.

Similar patterns can be observed when considering other kinds of flexibility. For example, flexitime is least likely to be available to workers in retail, catering, and leisure, with 54% of respondents saying this was not available, compared to 37% across all sectors.

The figure below shows the distribution of workers who said they have used flexible working in manufacturing and utilities, retail, catering and leisure, and travel and transport. As shown in Figure 5, 23% of insecure workers surveyed said they have used job sharing in the past 12 months. However, this rate decreased to 11% in retail, catering, and leisure sectors. Similarly, while a quarter of all insecure workers surveyed said they used compressed hours last year, only 12% of those in retail, catering and leisure were able to do that. In addition, access to compressed hours and remote working in retail, catering and leisure, was about half of that in other sectors.

Figure 5: Insecure workers using flexible working arrangements in the past 12 months - highlighting the average and lowest scoring sectors



Source: Censuswide survey of 3,000 insecure workers (May 2023).

Part-time workers can face additional challenges to career progression

Within our research, part-time work was most prevalent in retail, catering, and leisure (62%) compared with 44% part-time work in our sample across all sectors. While female, young, and older workers were more likely to work part-time than their counterparts:

- Women were 2.3 times more likely to work part-time than men (52% compared with 23%).
- Young workers aged 18-24 and older workers aged 55+ were most likely to work part-time (53% and 54% respectively).

One in six (16%) part-time workers stated they do not have the same opportunities to progress in their organisation as full-time members of staff. Moreover, 18% of part-time workers agreed that their colleagues do not organise social activities that fit with their working pattern. Consequently, managers may have to take a more proactive role in helping to reduce the constraints that part-time workers can face accessing support for career progression and engaging with their colleagues.

Managers can play a significant role in supporting workers who want to work flexibly

Around three quarters of managers (74%) said they would be willing to provide more flexible working arrangements to a direct report who requested them due to caring responsibilities, personal wellbeing (73%), or for disability or health reasons (77%).

However, while many managers aim to accommodate workers' formal requests, many workers face challenges on a daily basis. During our research, some insecure workers talked about the difficulty of taking a sick day or changing their shifts so they could attend important appointments. Arwa, a 27-year-old housekeeper from the North East told us:

> **"When I say I can't work, it's very bad. Yeah, you can't really do that, like I tried once because I was kind of sick. And then I was like, Oh, they sound really unhappy about that. I would just go in anyway and just like, just get through the day."**

Anika a 30-year-old teaching assistant from London employed on a fixed term contract, described the challenges she faced following the birth of her child. Six months before she was due to finish maternity leave, she submitted a request for flexible hours. However, she was only offered a meeting to discuss her request a month before she was due to return to work. The slow response to her request was a major contributing factor towards her decision to leave the role.

Disabled people's organisations have long been advocating for more widespread access to flexible working. While significant progress has been made, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, our study showed that disabled workers still find it difficult to get the adjustment or support they need. Among disabled respondents who want to work flexibly, 37% said the adjustment or support they requested was not provided, and an alternative arrangement was made instead.

Graham, a 56-year-old musician based in Wales, has a physical disability which can make it extremely difficult for him to carry out his work. He told us that the high level of flexibility offered by his manager had been of "massive" benefit to his wellbeing. And without it he would be unable to continue in a profession in which he has over 30 years of experience.

For many, the promise of flexibility offered by insecure contracts is often one-sided, with workers expected to accommodate the needs of their employer, whilst lacking access to the kind of flexibility enjoyed by other parts of the workforce. This not only negatively impacts worker's personal finances and wellbeing, but it also deprives employers of talented and experienced staff who, for a wide range of reasons, require a level of flexibility in their working arrangements.

6. THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING IN INSECURE WORK SETTINGS

The link between managerial practices and worker wellbeing is well-evidenced. McKinsey have found that good management improves employee satisfaction,[39] and research has indicated it reduces worker sick leave.[40] Poor management, on the other hand, can adversely impact worker wellbeing and performance. Our research supports these findings and shows that workers who feel they are treated well at work are 7.5 times more likely to be satisfied with their job.

As managers are the link between their staff and the organisation, they also play a key role in helping organisations to achieve their goals. A 2019 report by the UK Government concluded that, "Good management is often the key enabler to driving up firm-level productivity".[41]

But as this research shows, insecure work settings present significant challenges to managers themselves, while placing them in a situation where they are often not equipped to support their colleagues either.

Insecure jobs pose unique challenges to managers

Challenges faced by the managers of insecure workers include uncertainty over staff turnover, understanding the financial constraints faced by workers, and the lack of clarity regarding worker's contracts and working hours. Managers expressed that they sometimes felt out of their depth managing insecure workers and lacked sufficient support from senior management to do so.

> **Sometimes we don't know how long we have [an insecure worker] for, you can't plan ahead very much."**
>
> ZADIE, 35-YEAR-OLD CARE SERVICE MANAGER, BASED IN WALES

Managers also mentioned that organisational communication with workers on temporary contracts was often sub-standard, a point which was also raised by workers. One manager stressed the importance of having more thorough systems in place to make sure that those on temporary contracts are onboarded properly and are included in workplace communications.

Sectoral challenges are often more challenging than individual problems

The challenges managers face can vary significantly depending on the sector within which they are working. In industries such as logistics or construction, the need for temporary workers can vary project to project or depending on the time of year. This places managers under additional pressure to reassure workers about their job security and manage the work of their teams as a whole.

In sectors such as social care or manufacturing where irregular hours – including weekend and evening work – are common, managers often must contend with requests from workers for more regular and social hours. Given our ageing society, there is a need to improve working conditions of our health and social care workers.

> **"[Worker's request] social hours... it can be quite difficult, you know, if you've got a shift which changes from one week to the next [it can affect] sleeping patterns... the most common request we have is just like a bit of regularity with the hours."**
>
> PETER, 37-YEAR-OLD LOGISTICS MANAGER, BASED IN LONDON

The support managers receive can vary significantly

The size of an organisation can also have an impact on challenges faced by managers. Michael, a 51-year-old manager from the Midlands, who works for a small family-run construction firm, told us that because of the size of the business he is more able to get to know temporary workers, which means he is able to provide better support to the workers he oversees.

Managers develop their own methods for supporting insecure workers

The managers we interviewed often stated that to meet the challenges of managing insecure workers they needed to dial up certain management practices and behaviors to support their staff. In particular, managers raised the importance of adopting a managerial style that adapted to the challenges of insecure contracts. This included having an "open and honest approach" [Catherine, 32-year-old retail manager] especially when it came to the realities of a worker's contract. Many managers also spoke of the importance of adopting a personalised managerial style, which acknowledged the specific needs of the worker.

> **"One of the things you can do as a manager is personalising, and listening to what their needs are."**
>
> RAVI, 31-YEAR-OLD CARE SERVICES MANAGER, BASED IN THE SOUTH EAST

Managers also discussed the importance of treating temporary and permanent staff the same, especially when it came to requests for time off or adjustments to working hours.

Too much rests on the experience and ability of individual managers

Several workers we spoke to raised how their manager had gone above and beyond to support them and mitigate the challenges of an insecure employment contract.

Arwa, a 27-year-old housekeeper from the North East, told us how her manager arranges free transportation to the houses she cleans, as she cannot drive and local public transport is unreliable.

Unfortunately, not all managers are as able, or committed, to supporting the insecure workers they manage. In our conversations with workers a recurring theme was the challenge of absentee managers, with whom they had impersonal relationships and who provided them with little to no support.

> **"Having an absent manager, everything just stalls... since I've been working with the [organisation]... there's no development, there's no progression. Staff leave. They work there 18 months, two years, realise there's no support. There's no progression there's no opportunities, and they leave."**
>
> JENNIFER, 45-YEAR-OLD EDUCATOR, FROM THE NORTH WEST

For some workers the only time they would interact with their managers is when they were making demands of them to work additional shifts or during times of conflict. Anika, a 30-year-old teaching assistant from London, told us that she had little contact with her managers until a period of sickness when she required time off, which resulted in tension between the two parties:

> **"I was even admitted to hospital at one point and I had to stay for a few nights because it was just quite bad. But despite me showing all the paperwork and everything, they weren't very accommodating. They were quite cold... I didn't feel like I was valued or I was cared about."**

Ultimately, we cannot tackle the challenges associated with insecure work by relying on managers to respond to these issues in an ad-hoc manner.

Not only does this place extra pressure on managers, but it will also leave many insecure workers without the support they need. Instead, organisations must develop effective strategies to support managers and provide opportunities for them to develop the managerial skills necessary to meet the needs of a diverse workforce. This in turn should help improve worker wellbeing and performance.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY OPTIONS

To tackle job insecurity and its negative impact on the labour market:

1. **Strengthen labour rights and contractual security for all workers**
   Advancing good work should be at the heart of the Government's policy agenda. Although some of the recommendations from the Taylor Review have been implemented, comprehensive legislation addressing the failings of our labour market are well overdue. UK workers urgently need access to good quality jobs, flexibility, and predictable working arrangements.

The Department of Business and Trade must bring forward a new employment bill which:

- Obliges employers to embed flexibility in all roles and make it available to all workers from their first day at work
- Enacts the right for workers to request predictable working patterns to start from day one on the job
- Rolls back anti-union legislation which makes it harder for trade unions to contact and support insecure workers.

2. **Identify international best practice examples of mitigating the impacts of insecure work on individuals, employers and sectors**
   As this research has shown, there is a particular need for the Government to support those insecure workers who are at a heightened risk of losing their jobs. There is a range of international practice that could be drawn on here. For example, in Sweden, the impact of contractual insecurity is mitigated by 'job security councils'. These councils operate as bi-partite social partner bodies, funded by employers, which act as an insurance scheme for workers during times of change and redundancy. They help workers secure new positions through transition agreements, career guidance and training services.

The UK Government should:

- Set-up a 'Good Work Taskforce' to explore which international solutions might be most suitable in a UK context
- Review a range of international best practices and provide recommendations for Ministers during the first half of the next Parliament.

To support the improvement of management practice

3. Increase transparency and accountability of employers

Monitoring a problem is vital to developing solutions. Mandatory gender pay gap transparency has helped many companies to see the drivers of inequality and increased accountability within their organisations. Like gender pay gap reporting, equality impact assessments (EIA) are tools to help employers ensure their decisions, practices and policies within the workplace are fair and do not discriminate against any protected group.

However, they do not provide information on the composition of the workforce in terms of types of contracts or job insecurity. As women, young people, people from ethnic minority backgrounds and disabled workers are more likely to be in insecure work than their counterparts, a review of the workforce in terms of job insecurity would allow organisations to mitigate its negative impacts. To tackle the adverse impacts of job insecurity, the Government should oblige large sized organisations to conduct EIAs with their workforce and publish its outcomes. By doing EIAs, organisations can identify the barriers insecure workers face and re-evaluate whether there are any opportunities to come up with better solutions. Publishing the outcomes of these surveys would allow companies to be more transparent and accountable to achieve more inclusive workplaces.

The Department for Business and Trade should:

- Mandate a wider array of metrics for large employers to conduct and report on such as the equality impact assessments (EIAs) and assess which groups are more affected by this.

4. Develop management capability to provide secure and predictable working arrangements

This research has shown that there is a disconnect between what workers need and what managers are providing in terms of hours, autonomy and working arrangements. Although some matters will fall outside of the remit of managers, it is key they are aware of the needs of their staff and able to respond appropriately to them. Many managers want to support their staff, but do not have the skills or knowledge to do so. Even when they are aware of issues created through insecure working arrangements for staff, they may not have the capability to advocate for change to organisational leaders.

The Department for Business and Trade should:

- Support the development of management capability in providing secure and predictable working arrangements.

5. Build programmes of support for managers

Management training plays a crucial role in the success and effectiveness of organisational policies. While large sized organisations are better equipped to deliver managerial training to meet their organisational goals, many small sized organisations may struggle. Therefore, Government schemes such as Help to Grow are key in supporting small sized businesses. Currently, the Help to Grow scheme provides support on topics such as leadership, marketing, employee engagement and financial management.

There is a need to extend the scope of this scheme to include tailored support on issues such as retention, flexible working, and recruitment. This would allow small sized companies to develop their own strategies to tackle the changes in working lives. Moreover, the scheme also needs to be designed in a way to understand and mitigate challenges faced by different groups of workers such as people with long-term illness, childcare issues or those in needs of skills training.

The UK Government should:

- Build on programmes of support for managers such as Help to Grow to ensure inclusive practice is emphasised within existing training for supervisors and managers.

Local authorities can play a vital role to tackle job insecurity

6. Build management capability into local and regional skills systems

The Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) were introduced by the Department for Education following the skills for jobs white paper.[42] LSIPs aim to provide a set of actionable priorities that employers, providers, and other stakeholders in a local area can take to improve the skills system. As insecure work is likely to concentrate in certain sectors and regions, the need for managerial skills to tackle the negative impact of insecure work will also be locally concentrated. While some companies would be able to identify management skills as a gap, not all companies would see it this way. Making managerial training a mandatory aspect of LSIP would allow organisations who need these skills to access them more efficiently.

The UK Government should:

- Build management capability into local and regional skills programmes for sectors where insecure work is prevalent.

7. Use investment strategies to incentivise good labour standards

Job insecurity is more prevalent in certain sectors such as hospitality, retail, and agriculture than others. It is important for the Government to drive employers to adopt good working practices. National government can do this through legislation, but there is also a wide variety of incentives that could be offered through procurement and funding at national, combined authority and a local level. Each level of authority procures and commissions a significant amount of goods and services and has the opportunity to build into these processes clear requirements from those tendering in relation to their employment standards.

The UK Government, mayoral combined authorities and local authorities should:

- Review their investment strategies for opportunities to further incentivise existing and future employers to improve labour standards in sectors where insecure work is prevalent.

METHODOLOGY

This new research aimed to explore the ways managers can place a role in supporting workers in insecure jobs. To do so, the Work Foundation conducted a two-part mixed methods analysis.

Firstly, this new research used data collected by two online surveys, a survey with 3,000 workers in insecure jobs and 1,000 managers, conducted by Censuswide in May 2023.

Workers Survey: Workers in insecure jobs were selected using indicators that are mapped to the theoretical framework for understanding insecurity in the labour market. In our workers survey:

- 72% of respondents were female
- 63% were younger than 35 years old
- 23% of respondents were from retail, 18% are from healthcare, and 11% are from education sectors
- 25% of respondents are from semi-routine occupations, 14% are from routine manual occupations, and 14% are from modern professional occupations.

Managers' Survey: Managers were selected based on the criteria that they must supervise more than one individual and have contact with them daily but lack the power to shape an organisation's policies or strategies. In our managers' survey:

- 15% of respondents were from retail, catering and leisure and 7% of respondents were from manufacturing and utilities sector
- 7% of respondents were from routine, 7% are from semi-routine, and 8% are from technical occupations
- 54% of respondents had more than 2 years managerial experience.

The second phase of the research involved interviews with people in insecure work and focus groups with managers of insecure workers. Ten online interviews with insecure workers were conducted between 8 August – 4 September 2023. These interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. The discussion covered a range of topics including their experiences of work, the main challenges they faced in employment and their relationship with their manager.

Three online focus groups were held with 15 managers in September. These groups were about their experiences of management, challenges they faced in their work and barriers they faced supporting insecure workers.

Participants for the insecure worker interviews were recruited through the Work Foundation's newsletter, social media and Entitledto's benefit calculator. Effort was made to select participants that covered a wide range of contract types, sectors, geographic locations, genders, ages, ethnic backgrounds, caring and parental needs, and disabilities.

The focus group participants were recruited by the research agency Acumen Field work. To be selected for the focus groups managers had to work in sectors where insecure work is common, such as retail, manufacturing, and social care. An emphasis was placed on assembling groups that represented a variety of different sectors, number of direct reports, years of managerial experience, size of organisation as well as age, gender and geographic location. Facilitation for the interviews and focus groups was conducted by the project team, the transcription software Otter.ai transcribed the sessions, and thematic analysis was conducted in work.

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