

# Report on the Cambridge AWiSE Questionnaire and Discussion Meeting on Experiences of Part-Time and Flexible Working in Science, Engineering and Technology

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## **Background**

In recent years the government has introduced flexible working legislation and many companies and universities have policies for part time and flexible working. The purpose of this questionnaire was to collect information about people's actual experiences with regard to part time and flexible working in science, engineering and technology (SET) occupations in both industry and academia in the Cambridge area. As a membership organisation, Cambridge AWiSE exists to help women stay in SET careers through networking, mentoring, advice and support. This questionnaire gave people the opportunity to relate their experiences and to help give advice to others. It is important that women can learn from other's positive experiences as well as recognising the difficulties people have encountered. It is also important that their voices are heard by employers and by the government.

## **Method**

The questionnaire (see appendix 1) was distributed by email through the email lists of Cambridge and National AWiSE and through countless personal networks. A web-based version on the National AWiSE web site ([www.awise.org](http://www.awise.org)) was used by many respondents. In the publicity material, we specifically asked for women who

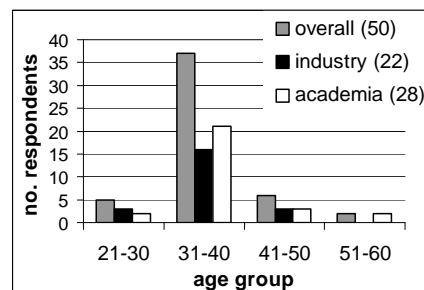
- had worked part-time or flexibly in a science, engineering or technology field,
- had considered it but decided not to ask,
- had advice to give to other women considering part-time or flexible working arrangements.

The questionnaire was not restricted to women's experiences, however we did not expect to receive many responses from men. It turned out that two men did respond and we have included their responses in the summarised data. Numerical data from the questionnaire are summarised below. Free text comments were read by at least 3 individuals who made independent summaries which were then condensed into the information reproduced below. A discussion meeting was held on 15 September 2004 to explore the rights and realities of part time and flexible working. In addition we discussed what we would like to say to employers and the government.

## **Key Findings**

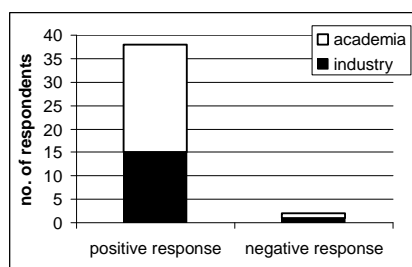
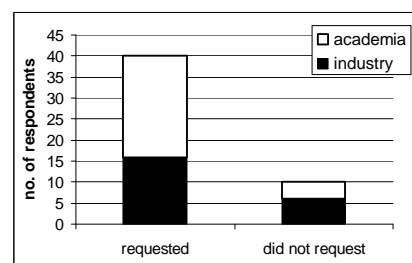
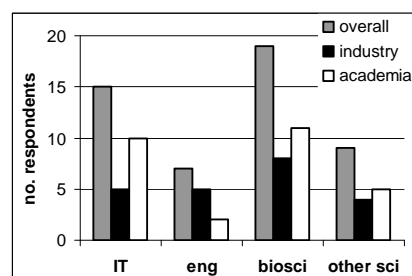
### **Description of the respondents**

There were 50 responses in total, 22 from women in industry and 28 responses from women in academia. The majority of responses were in the 31-40 age range, most probably reflecting the observation that many women who wish to work part time are those with young children. The biosciences constituted the largest group, making up 19 out of 50 respondents with the next largest being IT (15/50).



### Do women ask for part time or flexible working and if not, why not?

Of the women in industry, 16 out of 22 asked for part time or flexible working while 6 chose not to ask. Of those who chose not to ask there was a clear division of reasons. Half commented that their company had made it clear it wouldn't be possible. In contrast two respondents said that it wasn't necessary as flexible working was already standard and so they didn't need to ask. One respondent commented that their commuting distance was so great as to make part time working impracticable. A similar proportion was observed in academia where 24 out of 28 women asked for part time or flexible working while 4 chose not to ask. One of those who chose not to ask said that it was not possible while the other 3 commented that academia was sufficiently flexible anyway.



### When they asked for part time or flexible working what was the response?

Almost all of those who requested flexible/part time working received positive responses (15 out of 16 women in industry and 23 out of 24 women in academia).

### Why request part time or flexible working?

Of those who requested flexible/part time working all except one were from people with children. These people conveyed a strong sense that they enjoyed their work, were good at it, and wanted to contribute to science, engineering or technology but felt that spending time with children was important.

*"I get to spend more time with family and be involved in helping children and school"*  
*"There is nothing that can replace time with children"*

In some cases this was so important that the alternative to part time work was no work:

*"I could spend more time with my baby. This was particularly important to me and in the absence of part-time work, I would have quite my job altogether"*  
*"I probably would not have returned to work if I had to work full-time"*

For some, stress was a major factor:

*"[I] was able to build up some support networks as I have no family nearby. Life is much less stressful."*  
*"having the facility to work from home takes some pressure off me ... I am more productive because [I] am less anxious"*  
*"I'm much less distracted and tired at work as a results. Without this flexibility I think I would have had to hand in my notice by now."*

### How did part time or flexible working work out?

Generally those who worked part time or flexibly thought that it was working out well for them. The perceived advantages were similar for both industry and academia and included:

- spending more "quality time" with family and better work/life balance  
*"I am working from 9 - 4pm, Mon-Thurs ... I can get home to give my daughter her tea and spend some time with her rather than needing to get her straight to bed"*
- greater efficiency, enthusiasm and productivity in working week

*"[I] have become more efficient in my planning and execution of experiments to achieve the maximum output. I think that I have more enthusiasm for my work"*

*"When I am at work, I am much more focussed but since I am not there everyday I get some extra thinking time away from it all and that allows me to see the bigger picture"*

A number of **practical difficulties** were highlighted which were common to industry and academia including missing out on meetings and networking opportunities and that communication with colleagues was more difficult. Many respondents felt that they were expected to do same amount of work in fewer hours.

*"I cannot attend all the meetings I want to and I miss networking opportunities"*

*"I found myself trying to achieve 5 days worth of work in 3 days"*

*"regular tasks such as attending meetings occupy proportionally more of my time"*

The **perceived disadvantages** were different for women in industry compared to academia. **In industry** the perceived disadvantages were that career progression would be slower and that part time workers were given less responsibility (many companies have a policy that it is not appropriate for managers to work part time).

*"Although my company says it offers flexible working, it was made clear to me that this only applied to certain jobs"*

*"My career has stood still since going on maternity leave and I have received very little training"*

*"[I was] excluded from senior management team - too much paperwork, too many meetings for a part timer to be able to go to - would divert focus away from key elements of my job"*

In contrast, some companies embraced part time or flexible working:

*"My boss was very helpful about the arrangement. He seemed happy to go ahead with my proposals and was very supportive of them."*

However **in academia the perceived disadvantages** were much more severe. If there was a period of part time working before a permanent contract was obtained, this tended to mean the end of an academic career. There were negative attitudes from other staff and a feeling that one was no longer taken seriously as a scientist.

*"I wasn't able to publish enough to get my next contract. My Head of Department was not encouraging and advised me to leave academia"*

*"We are now expected to do [proportionally] more of the teaching and less research at the university. However if we want to progress it is research that counts towards promotion"*

*"Promotion is now very difficult as I need to have the same number of publication/funding as a full time worker."*

*"In regard to term-time working, there was a different attitude towards me as a mother with children than from two other male PIs with children"*

*"The difficulty is the department in which I work, and its general long-hours culture. ...[part time working] has flagged me as less committed to my research. I feel I have little or no support in my department"*

However for those who had obtained a permanent academic position, academic life was seen to be sufficiently flexible already.

*"I considered it briefly. However, ... there was enough flexibility in my job to allow me to cope with childcare issues if necessary - e.g. working from home, coming in late or going home early etc"*

## **What advice would you give to others thinking about requesting part time or flexible working?**

In industry:

- Make yourself familiar with the flexible working regulations and the policies in operation in your organisation.
- *"When considering what hours to work, don't just think about what you want, consider what the company needs as well. If they see that you are willing to give as well as take then they might be more likely to do the same."*
- *"Remember that everyone else will probably keep forgetting which days you work and which you don't. It isn't personal, but you do have to keep reminding your colleagues! Try to keep up with information given out in your absence, I miss the monthly staff meeting, but the slides are always on the intranet so I make sure I read them."*

In academia:

- *"[be realistic about] your career ambitions - it is very difficult finding a position that gives you responsibility and interesting work while not taking over your life."*
- *"Be easy on yourself - you cannot do 100% of the work in 50% (or other proportion) of the time"*
- *"Some departments and professors are very supportive and will actively mentor. Others will not"*

## **What would you like to say to your employers and the government?**

1. Part time and flexible working arrangements were overwhelmingly positive experiences. Indeed employees were more enthusiastic and motivated, more efficient and productive and showed more loyalty to their employer.
2. In practice employers in business and academia need to be more proactive to make it work and need more education and guidance about what it really means.
3. Employers should consider the impact of part time working on people's careers and give them appropriate career advice and training.
4. Universities and research councils should have a clear and coherent policy on part time working and create senior positions that are suitable for part time working arrangements.
5. Much of the recent legislation is directed at parents with children under six, however children at school can be more difficult to arrange childcare for than those at nurseries.
6. It is easier if you've worked for a company for a long time. However, there is no legal obligation to allow you to work part-time in a new job. This means that those on fixed term contracts, which include a large proportion of 31-40 year old female academic researchers, are particularly vulnerable. Finding a new part time job in industry is extremely difficult as so few are advertised. More provision for entrepreneurship training for women scientists and engineers may help them to stay in SET careers.
7. Information that exists on company and university websites regarding equal opportunities did not resemble the situation "on the ground".

## **Conclusion**

Addressing some of these issues and increasing the uptake of part time and flexible working arrangements should go some way towards improving gender diversity in SET careers but also will improve the effectiveness, enthusiasm, productivity and work-life balance for all.



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(6b) How did it affect your career?

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(6c) What do you think are the pros and cons in comparison with your normal working arrangements?

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(7) If flexible working was refused, did your employer give acceptable reasons?

- Yes
- No

(8) If flexible working was refused, did you adhere to normal working conditions or did you leave your job?

- Leave
- Stay

(9) With the benefit of hindsight, what advice would you give to others contemplating part-time or flexible working?

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Any other comments?

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