

World Changers podcast
Episode 3 Part time pioneers



Elle Bradley-Cox 00:08

Welcome to World Changers, a podcast exploring the trends making an enduring mark on our world of work, and how business leaders, HR teams and internal communicators can stay one step ahead. What does your working day look like now? I bet you a break room brew and a biscuit that it's quite different to your pre-pandemic schedule. For many of us, the office space nine-to-five, as we knew it, is well and truly a thing of the past. As hybrid working ushered in the potential to design our days, first by necessity and then by normalisation, there's an expectation this flexibility will help us better balance our work and life commitments. So, does a more fluid way of working help banish burnout? Does less physical presence lead to less trust from leaders and will flexibility for all finally begin to stop the stigma that surrounds parents who go part time? Content consultant Patrick Halkett chose this theme as his World Changer for our 2022 report. Later in this episode, we chat with Matt Manners, chief inspiration officer at Inspiring Workplaces. But before that, Patrick and I got together with our colleague and consultancy director Lu McKay to chat about part time pioneers. Welcome to the World Changers podcast. Thank you for joining me.

Patrick Halkett 01:19

Thanks for having us.

Elle Bradley-Cox 01:22

So Patrick, have to ask. What originally inspired you to write about this topic? And are you both card carrying flexibility advocates? Could the four day week catch on?

Patrick Halkett 01:32

I think what prompted me to talk about this in the first place was just media coverage, really, of what happened in Iceland. How they trialed the four day working week and they hadn't seen any dip in productivity. And it just got me thinking that we're so wedded to the five day working week. And do we actually really need to stick to it? Or is it just something that we've always had and that's why we stick to it? Because if we can get through the same amount of work in four days, and we can pay people the same amount, then surely that's a that's a better way to model it.

Patrick Halkett 01:47

Interesting, isn't it? What do you think, Lu?

Lu McKay 02:16

It's a really interesting one, because for so many years now, we've all been battling over those same 8 hours of nine-to-five. So if you need a dental appointment, if you need to go to the post office, if you need to go see a solicitor, it's all in that sort of same time slot. Now, obviously, the pandemic has eased back a little bit from the sort of the fight over the over the tubes, over the trains and, kind of, that real "rush hour". But it still really feels like there's a huge focus on trying to get those same hours, which is causing a lot on that really,

Elle Bradley-Cox 02:47

Would you say that you are in a card carrying flexibility advocate? I know I am.

Patrick Halkett 02:53

Yeah, definitely. I think that we have a model here, which is based on common sense and trust. And I think that that's definitely the way to go. I think that as long as you're getting through your work, and you're not letting clients down and you're delivering, then we should be trusted, really, to be able to manage our time, manage our days, where and when we work. As long as we're doing a good job, then that's the thing that matters most.

Lu McKay 03:23

I totally agree with that. I think we really need to be focused on outcomes. So, what is it that we as individuals, or the organisation, is trying to achieve? What part teams and individuals play in getting that performance, both from a kind of cultural side, and an outcomes perspective,

Elle Bradley-Cox 03:41

I know you became a mum last year, and you moved to a slightly different working pattern. Has this really changed your perspective on the nine-to-five?

Lu McKay 03:49

It has actually, quite considerably. And I think a lot of that is because as a parent or carer, your responsibilities don't follow a pattern, whether that's nine-to-five or any other sort of hours across the day. Because you reach close of play on Friday, and you don't switch off for the weekend. Actually, you just jump into your other role - that "always on" 24/7 role and you are engaged in something else. So, I think when you've got other demands on your time, for whatever reason, because childcare is seen as a sort of acknowledged reason to have flexibility, but think it should be afforded to any other reason as well, to be able to use your time and, importantly, energy when you have it is critical. Whether that's 10am on Tuesday or actually 8pm on a Thursday evening, providing you're being purposeful with your time and therefore able to find the right balance. If you're able to work things around each other, you're far more likely to get the effective outcomes you're looking for.

Elle Bradley-Cox 04:48

And Patrick, I know you're a father as well. I am interested in the male gaze on this because obviously responsibilities are slightly different, but do you feel the need for that flexibility still?

Patrick Halkett 04:59

So, I think that flexibility shouldn't be dependent on your gender. And whether you're a mum, a dad, a carer, or a guardian, I think we should all be afforded the same flexibility. Personally speaking, I'm really lucky that I don't necessarily require as much flexibility as my wife does, who's the primary caregiver to our son. But having said that, there are occasions where things crop up. And I do need to dash out at the last minute, or I do need to start early, finish early, that kind of thing. And it's really important that that flexibility is given to mums, dads and whoever really, to echo Lu's point, it doesn't necessarily mean that it should just be about parents. It should just be about people. We've all got different commitments outside of work, some people have more than others. And it should be fair, across the board, really,

Elle Bradley-Cox 05:53

I've actually been speaking to a few clients about this recently, who were saying that people are finding in their offices that parenting, for example, or caring is a really good, socially acceptable excuse to leave and have that flexibility. Whereas other people who say "I'm just feeling a bit burned out today", or "I'm just not at my best, but I know that going to the gym will make me feel better", or whatever. The social acceptability of that excuse is really different. I thought it was really interesting, actually. What do you think employers and leaders and managers roles are here to really define what's a good way of doing it?

Patrick Halkett 06:29

I think that it's really important for leaders and managers as well to model those behaviours. They're the people that set the tone and set the example. And I think that if colleagues see managers and leaders embracing a different way of working, that's more flexible, and that prioritises wellbeing, they're more likely to model those behaviours themselves and see that it's okay for me to take a 15 minute break and to go and run an errand. I'm not going to be told off for not being at my desk. I think that that comes right from the top down. I think that the more we can get C suite leaders talking about how they use flexibility, and flexible working patterns to suit their day and talking about their own experiences as well through storytelling, senior leaders telling the stories about how they collect their kids from school or how they go to the gym because it helps them manage their stress and that kind of thing. I think it's really important that we surface those stories and share them across organisations.

Lu McKay 06:29

I think it has to come back to being really focused on outcomes and productivity, because you're absolutely right Elle. It shouldn't matter what the reason is, actually. We're all quite different in the way that we work, in the way that we operate. So if you've got early birds versus a night owl, actually, you know, I'm much more productive in the morning, by the time we kind of get to sort of late evening, don't bother asking me to do something complicated, because I've been up since 5am, I'm done, thank you very much. And actually, you need to play to people's energies. So of course, if I'm working with a night owl, we need to find a way to be able to collaborate together if that's necessary, but it should be done very much like "how are we going to get the best output here?" You know, "what are those sort of energy flows that we need to match up?" And also thinking about energy sprints as well, because the way that our systems work is very much around a kind of 90 minute sprints, so that you should be kind of focusing on something and then taking a break. And that break can be going to do some yoga or going to the gym. Or it could be actually doing a different kind of activity, but just

being really purposeful about what we're trying to achieve. And what's the best way of doing that. For the individual, the team and the overall outcomes.

Elle Bradley-Cox 08:49

I do think certainly with industries that have a certain amount of autonomy, like deskpace based, client-facing usually where people are trusted to get the get the job done much more. I mean, are you seeing this by a little bit more with kind of frontline industries and colleagues? Are you hearing any of that from your from your clients?

Lu McKay 09:10

Yeah, I think it's a lot harder/a lot more complicated for frontline colleagues there, whether that's manufacturing, hospitality, financial services, essentially, any of those industries that require a number of people to be available at set time to meet customer needs. So, a call center, actually keeping those lines running. I think it's harder for those organisations to find flexibility, but there are different ways they can do it. So it could be around shift swapping, or splitting shifts, or maybe providing flexibility around the location that that person goes and works at. It could be around, you know, potentially buying and selling holiday or on site facilities that might include a creche or something like that. That just makes it brings in that element of flexibility and makes it easier for people ought to be able to kind of mold their life around the work or vice versa.

Elle Bradley-Cox 10:04

Are there any businesses that you could shout out who are doing this really well, that you've, you've seen?

Patrick Halkett 10:09

Yeah, I can. So Deloitte have been really outspoken about how they're giving their workers flexibility to do to do their work from wherever and whenever they choose. And that has come right from the very top. And they're really outspoken about it, they're talking about it in the public forum, as well as internally. And they're not trying to do away with the office by any stretch of the imagination, they're still encouraging people to come together for moments of collaboration and celebration. But they're really trusting their people to manage their own time, I think it does actually go as far as working four days a week as opposed to five. Yeah, they're just putting a lot of trust in their people to use their common sense to do a good job. And they're staying results focused.

Elle Bradley-Cox 11:01

I think the more businesses that can jump on this and embrace it and see it as a working style, because it was all very well with a trial in Iceland, but businesses that have very different industries. So if you think about that as like a very kind of agricultural industry, or tourism based industry, a whole different hours of the day industry, because of the light. situation, Iceland, of course, it was going to be a really different test case. I noticed last year, Scotland said that they would take part in the trial, I'll be really interested to see those results much closer to home and how those industries, although I kind of feel like very often Scotland seems to be much more liberal in its decisions for its people. Certainly, I mean, I'm sure you could wax completely lyrical about Scandinavia, Patrick, but I just kind of think that the more that we just give it a go and try it. I mean, what is the harm that it's going to do? It's a trial for a reason, right? You learn from it.

Patrick Halkett 11:58

I think the evidence, at least seems to suggest that there isn't a drop in productivity. And I think that if we're using test cases, then let's look at the evidence, let's examine what happens, you know, we don't have to stay stuck to the same old rigid structure. And if the evidence suggests that four day working week can work, then let's give it a go. And if it doesn't work, we can still go back to a five day working week. But we don't need to be wedded to the old traditional ways of working.

Lu McKay 12:31

Yeah. And I think if you think about the change that we've all gone through over the last two years, you go back to kind of late 2019. If we suggested to any one of the businesses we work with, right? "You're all going to work from home, what do you think about that?" I mean, the pilot, the months and months of trials and tech that would have had to be tested! We all got told that you're working from home tomorrow. And we managed, and I think it's really building on that confidence and taking that with us in terms of "we can make things happen, there will be a trial and error". But actually the bulk of it is we found a way to make it work. And you know, we're still we're still adjusting, right. All of my clients I'm speaking to tend to be having a conversation of "what does that back to work look like, or back to the office look like?" And I think we need to be thinking about it slightly different in terms of going forward to work. Because we're not going to go back to where we were, that's gone. It's thinking about what does the future of work look like? And that's where I think we can really turn some dials and be very thoughtful about what is going to get us where we need to be and get the best outcomes for all involved.

Elle Bradley-Cox 13:46

A beautiful and intriguing point to end on. Thank you so much Lu, Patrick for joining me on World Changers and we'll catch you again soon. Cheers.

Patrick Halkett 13:54

Thank you.

Lu McKay 13:55

Thank you

Kate Went 14:01

Hello, friends, Kate here. Our lovely Elle is having a much needed holiday. So I've taken a seat in our host's chair to chat to our guests this month. When it comes to knowing what makes a workplace great, Matt Manners knows a thing or two. As chief inspiration officer at Inspiring Workplaces, he spends a lot of his time getting under the skin of different organisations' cultures and ways of working. And, as his LinkedIn manifesto states, "we believe in recognising and shaping the new forward thinking organisations of the future. By shedding light on those innovative workplaces, we help to encourage positive change in workplaces as well as provide a source of inspiration and education for those who seek it." Earlier this year, the Inspiring Workplaces team decided to put their money where their mouth is and trial a four day working week. How would that pan out? What's the impact on productivity and on happiness? And would the team recommend it? I caught up with Matt to find out. Matt, hello, thank you so much for being here with us.

Matt Manners 15:04

Thanks for having me.

Kate Went 15:05

No problem. So Matt, tell us about the decision to move to a four day working week. What kicked that off?

Matt Manners 15:11

It's actually been something I've been thinking about for a long time, without realising it. In my former life, and when I had a job and wasn't running my own business, I actually asked my employer back then - it must be about 13 years ago - whether I could take all my 25 days leave and have every other Friday off, to which they said no, very, very quickly. I just thought that might be a nice way to have a work life balance. And then obviously, the four day week, and its structure came back around a few years ago now. I had a quick chat with a couple of colleagues and said, "I think this is something we should explore". And again, it wasn't widely received that warmly. So over time, still thinking about it, seeing people I admire take it on, seeing the research coming out and gently talking to the team about it over the past year or two and saying, "look, what do you think would just be something we should explore that you would value that would fit into your life", and it was starting to be warmly received and COVID happened, and everything changed. Our perspective changed in different ways. And at a team meeting in the new year, a few months ago, just before we all caught COVID, we decided that we should just try. We decided to do every other Friday for six months. And throughout that process, we would have a conversation about how it was being received. This is something we change, review productivity and all that all that stuff that we'll probably talk about in a second. And we just went "let's go". We're halfway through it now. And we're all very happy that we've said "let's go."

Kate Went 16:48

Fantastic. I mean, it only took a global pandemic to light a fire underneath it. So how's it been going down? How are people feeling? Is the work still getting done?

Matt Manners 16:59

Yes. So from a team perspective, so far, nothing but positive reaction. I'm finding it a little trickier. Being a business owner, I've always had a strange working clock, I suppose, both in hours and days. So I'm finding it a little bit trickier for myself. But as a team, positive reaction. We've all decided to take the one Friday off every other week in the trial, which is something we're going to reflect on because it's actually really flexible. The decision behind "the same day" is that everybody can truly relax and switch off rather than thinking "there's work going on without me. What emails am I going to come back to?" That kind of 'returning from holiday' anxiety that you get when you've been away for two weeks. Four days out, you start thinking about work in the inbox. And so that's why we all have had the same day off and work is being done. We've probably gone through our busiest, most time-critical, time-pressured few months of the year that we have now. Well, it's being done better and more efficiently. And people can have three days off. So nothing but positives with from the team. And it's starting to make us think about other parts of the working environment. So I would imagine the trial will definitely be confirmed into the four day week in six months, but will be slight tweaks. But we're now moving to unlimited holiday, but putting in a minimum amount that must be taken because when those trials have taken

place, it's actually people not taking enough time off. So you have to safeguard against people working too much, amazingly. So we're going to move to unlimited holiday. And, because we have people in different stages of life and different circumstances, whether it's family or moving to doing the hours in the day that suit you best within it within a window. So I love working six to three, because I get a lot done before the email start coming in. And I feel like my brain is starting to get off the other side of the cliff, about two o'clock. So we're starting to move to what hours suit you best, as well. So it's been nothing but a positive experience. Higher productivity, better work life balance, but some tweaks I think will be coming.

Kate Went 19:19

That's so interesting. And I'm so with you with the hours that you work best, I'm exactly the same. It gets to about three in the afternoon, and my brain just checks out for the day. And it doesn't matter what I do to shift my day around. But there's a switch that just flips at that time. I'm actually going to go off script a little bit. I'm just interested in your thoughts on that in terms of how different people obviously thrive at different times in the day. If you can cater to that and let people work within those bands of time, where they work best and they're going to do their best work, do you think that has any kind of negative impact on sort of team cohesion or collaboration and how do you kind of mitigate that?

Matt Manners 19:58

I think in all these things, balance is the best word in the world. With regards to remote work and hybrid working or anything in life, you need to find a balance. Extremes is the wrong way of working. So as long as there's an overlap, like a Venn diagram, in the day that the team or in, then you can find the way for it to work. And then all these things like people rule by the rule of 5%, or 5%, that won't do it properly or to abuse it, but other than 95%, that will do it properly. So like all these things, if there are small issues, then just chat about them, or work through them, and make it make it work. But usually everything works out because people are bought into our organisation. They work hard. And if they don't, then they probably want to find somewhere else to work if it doesn't suit them.

Kate Went 20:50

Absolutely. And I think there's probably a lot to be said, for giving people that autonomy to co-create a workplace that works for everybody, rather than it being something that's mandated to them.

Matt Manners 21:01

Absolutely. We were working together as a team one day a week, we've always been a remote organisation. But we're coming together one day a week to have those collaboration sessions in person. And what I've started to see on LinkedIn and places now, as people, instead of having "out of offices" they're having "in office" alerts. So I'm now in the office. So I won't be responding to email, because I'm working with my team in person, which, again, new world of work and all that. So we're doing one day a week where we're all together, and we move forward so much when we're in person. Zoom and Microsoft Teams are fantastic. But we really value that one day, we're all in together.

Kate Went 21:37

Fantastic. So based on the things that you've learned, particularly as a team, what's been the biggest learning you could offer other businesses that are on the cusp of thinking about how this might work in their workforce,

Matt Manners 21:50

I've heard of people extending their business days to account for the lost day. Within the four day weeks, adding half an hour or one hour to each day. We've not done that so for everybody to be clear, it's the same pay just four days a week, the same hours. If it's not going to work, then it won't work. And we want to make sure that people are productive and focused on output. Rather than the all the things that drove me to create Inspiring Workplaces, like presenteeism, and when in my 20s, I'd sit at the office, and there'd be other people around and we'd just be there clicking, responding to emails at nine o'clock at night to look like we were busy, because that's how it used to happen. And sometimes negative experiences drive positive change. So with regards to things to look out for, I would say, do some research, listen to these great podcasts. And most importantly, speak to your team, listen to their input their feedback. And if there's a positive reaction and overwhelming decision to do it, and just give it a trial, there's not much to lose from trying something that could have a lot of upsides.

Kate Went 22:54

Love that. So we're seeing a lot more variation in what flexibility means. Now, I'm seeing lots of posts on LinkedIn about things like paid sabbaticals, or even paid holiday before you start a job to give you a mental reset between the jobs, because I suppose it is a privilege to be able to take that for yourself if you can afford to take that time off. So having that offered as a perk from a job is quite something really. Do you think it's a fad? Or do you think these kinds of shifts are here to stay?

Matt Manners 23:26

I suppose what are the drivers for them? If you look at the one you just referenced, which I think is great idea. It's because people are starting to think about people as humans. And the whole stigma around mental health was obliterated during the pandemic, you know. People were able to talk about it. Leaders were saying they were struggling, which gave permission to people within their team to say they were struggling. So what could be have taken another 10 years has been blown away. So I suppose the driver behind that is "okay, we recognise that leaving a job might have not been a positive experience. We want to give you a break, mentally to get yourself in a good place before you start, and we will pay you to do so". I'm all for that because it's seemingly coming from a place where they're looking after the well being of their new hire before they even arrived. My wife's a contractor. She just left an awful employer which I won't name - awful, bullied and everything and we built in to that ourselves. So she wasn't being paid, but we built in a week for her to totally switch off and refocus before starting a new job yesterday. And it worked brilliantly for her you could see just in her face and her demeanor that she that time off really works. So I'm all for exploring new ways of helping people perform better and looking after them. Absolutely.

Kate Went 24:46

Fantastic. I'm so glad that she managed to get that break because yes, you think about finishing one job on a Friday and starting the new one on the Monday - you're still trying to log in with the passwords from your from your old job!

Matt Manners 25:02

Absolutely. And you're worried about rent or the energy bills that are coming in and you can't afford to take time off, I have to go straight to work. So actually thinking about it, I can't believe this hasn't happened sooner and that I hope it gets adopted by every employer. I'd love to explore this more actually. Yeah, it's really, really good idea.

Kate Went 25:21

Me too. And I'm excited to see what other kinds of innovations and changes come through flexibility. I think it is important, obviously, to acknowledge that not all workplaces are equal nor jobs. You know, there's a vast differences, despite us all going through the same global experience. We are not all living in the same workplaces. How do you think that we can create greater fairness, about flexibility in the world of work?

Matt Manners 25:45

I think acknowledging is the first step, I heard another phrase that encapsulates what you're talking about. "We're all in the same storm, but we weren't in the same boat". How can we go about making a fairer workplace? Good question. I like to say I think that probably the first step is acknowledging that we are different, and we have different circumstances and seeing people as people, rather than just as an employee. I'll have to get back to you on that one. Our mission as a business is to try and change the world through the world of work, because I think the work life balance is just gone. If you're in a bad job or a good job, it has a negative or positive impact on the rest of your life. So people within organisations, whether it be HR or CEOs, or comms directors, they are tasked with society's problems within the workplace. And, and they've had so many challenges over the past few years, just constantly reacting to what's going on outside, incredibly proud, and sorry for them for the challenges they've had to go through. I'm not really answering that question that well, but um, yeah, I think acknowledging the fact that we're all different and have different circumstances, the best first step.

Kate Went 26:54

Oh, hear hear. I think, change can't happen without a conversation to kick it off. And if there's one thing that's happening more now, as a result of everything that we've been through in the last two years, is that we are having some big conversations about what we want the world of work to be. And I loved what you said there about changing the world for the better through the world of work. Absolutely. Music to my ears. So I think I'll ask you the last question, the one that Elle always asks every one of our guests which I always love to listen to the answers. Thinking about the people making the biggest impact in the world of work right now, who would you nominate as your 2022 World Changer,

Matt Manners 27:35

One person that inspires me, and they might be mentioned already, but Perry Timms is my person. And he's been doing it for years now always looking to try and drive positive change and impact for people who reached out when he saw that we'd decided to take the leap with a four day week. he said "look, I'm here. We're doing it. If you want to ask me any questions, see what we did? What worked? What hasn't? I'm here to help you at

any point free of charge", just because he's a good person. So Perry Timms, thank you very much. Keep doing what you're doing.

Kate Went 28:08

Excellent. Thank you, Perry Timms! Matt, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us today. Really appreciate it. You've got lots going on with your report that's just released through Inspiring Workplaces. So I'm really pleased that we could grab you for a quick chat and absolutely love your viewpoints on this. So thank you very much.

Matt Manners 28:28

Thank you.

Kate Went 28:34

Our huge thanks to Matt Manner from Inspiring Workplaces. If you want to join the conversation on part time pioneers do join us later this month for our webinar: Let's talk about flex, where you can put your questions to our expert panel. We'll share the details in the session notes and on our social channels. And do join us next month for our next episode where you will have our regular host Elle Bradley Cox back from holidays.

Elle Bradley-Cox 29:02

World Changers is a podcast by employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott, hosted by Elle Bradley-Cox. Find out more at scarlettabbott.co.uk