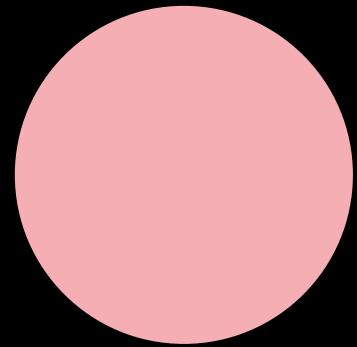
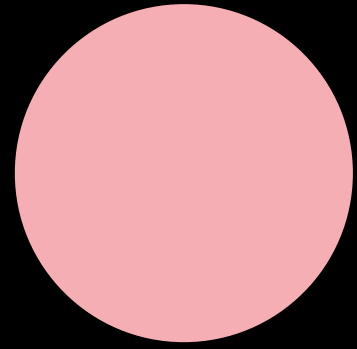


9 May 2024

WWU Employer of Choice Qualitative Follow-up



Classified: Private

Findings report by Savanta

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Introduction

In late 2023, Wales & West Utilities (WWU) commissioned Savanta to conduct secondary research into the present state of employee expectations in several areas, and how and why they have shifted in recent years.

This review of the literature revealed that employee expectations across all sectors of the economy have shifted markedly in the last few years. It is not news that the pandemic has significantly and irreversibly changed how people work, and how they expect to work. Gen Z entering the workforce and the rising cost of living have also brought changes in what employees expect from their jobs and from their employers. In short, what people want from their jobs is not the same as it was several years ago.

Not only do people have different priorities when it comes to work, these priorities depend on the nature of their work and specific role. For instance, the secondary literature suggested that field operative workers – such as engineers – do not prioritise flexibility in terms of *where* they work, and place greater emphasis on an attractive benefits package. Their office-based colleagues, meanwhile, are more likely to prioritise hybrid working, with their time split between home and the office.

It is important for WWU to develop its understanding of these changes by examining how the findings of the secondary literature review apply to the utilities sector and, more immediately, the organisation itself. To provide a rounded view, this mixed-mode qualitative research explores the experiences and perceptions of two audiences:

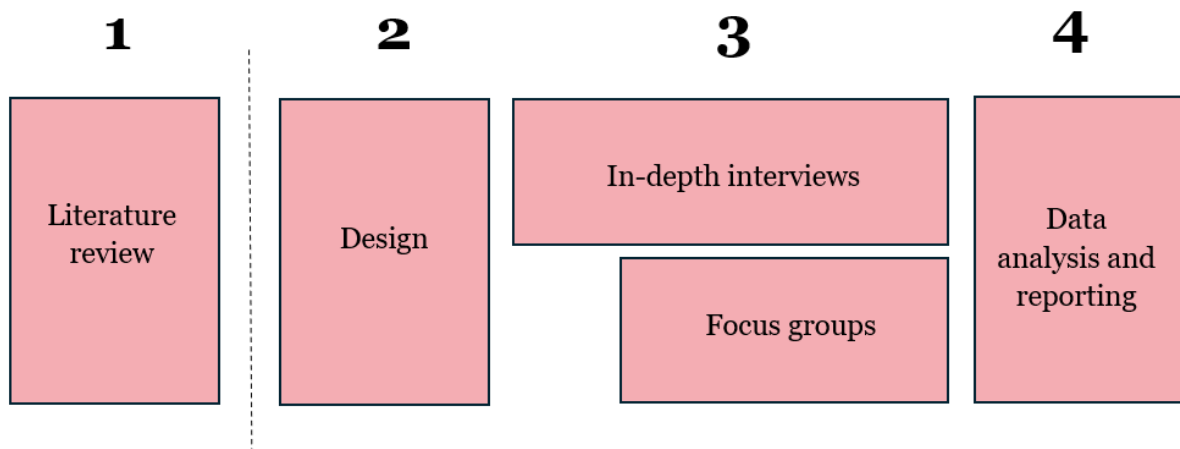
- 1. In-depth interviews with People and Talent decision-makers in UK organisations with a high proportion of field operative employees.** The intention of these interviews is to understand what comparable organisations are doing to meet employee expectations in the post-pandemic context.
- 2. Focus groups with WWU employees, including one focus group with office-based employees, and two with field operative employees (one with employees based in South Wales and another with employees based in Wales).** The purpose of this strand of the research is to understand the extent to which WWU employees' expectations match the findings of the literature review, and what meeting expectations looks like in practice.

The changing work landscape demands a refresh of employee value propositions, to ensure they are aligned to what current and prospective employees now want and expect. As competition for talent – especially in the utilities sector – gets ever-fiercer, developing and maintaining an up-to-date and compelling offering is key to be an employer of choice.

This research forms a key part of WWU's work to refine its employee offering. It situates broad trends in a more immediate context, examines their applicability to WWU, and makes informed recommendations on how WWU can effectively respond to significant changes to retain and attract talent.

Methodology

Savanta followed a four-stage research process, as shown by the diagram below:



While **Stage 1** formed part of a separate piece of research that Savanta conducted for WWU, it is necessary to include the literature review in this process, given its findings informed the focus of this qualitative follow-up research.

The literature review outlined the present state of employee expectations in a number of different areas, how and why they have shifted in recent years, and made recommendations on how WWU can effectively respond to these changes. This research builds on the literature review, using it as a foundation from which to explore how broader trends in employee expectations apply to WWU specifically, and how WWU can meet the expectations of its own employees.

In **Stage 2**, Savanta and WWU adopted a collaborative, iterative approach to research design. WWU wanted to explore two distinct, but related strands:

1. 10 x 45-minute in-depth interviews with People and Talent professionals at companies with a high proportion of field operative employees.¹
2. 3 x 90-minute focus groups with WWU employees. To ensure we explored the experiences and perceptions of a diverse range of WWU workers, each focus group had a different composition:
 - a. Office-based employees.
 - b. Field-operative employees based in the South West of England.
 - c. Field-operative employees based in Wales.

Using the findings from the literature review, WWU identified different – yet overlapping – areas of focus for the different audiences:

The **in-depth interviews** with People and Talent professionals explored:

1. Work-life balance and flexibility.

¹ Savanta used the following definition of field operative employees: are professionals who are engaged in onsite work, such as engineers, technicians, maintenance personnel, or construction workers. This does not include traditionally 'office-based' roles that are undertaken remotely – a field operative employee has a role that *requires* non-office, onsite work as a core part of the job role. For anonymity reasons, Savanta cannot share organisation names, but a spread across industries, including participants from the energy and water industries, was achieved.

2. Technology and communications.
3. Development, autonomy at work, and progression in role.

The **focus groups** explored:

1. Work-life balance.
2. Development, autonomy, and progression in role.

Savanta then developed separate discussion guides for the in-depth interviews and focus groups. The discussion guides ensure the interviews and focus groups follow a rough structure, with a focus on the aforementioned areas of focus, while also providing space for participants to lead the conversation according to what they deem most relevant or important. This conversational tone often elicits the richest insights by allowing participants to discuss their own subjective, lived experiences.

Savanta conducted the fieldwork in **Stage 3** of the research. It was agreed that Savanta would adopt a staggered approach, starting with in-depth interviews so the initial insights from these could feed into the focus groups.²

All interviews and focus groups took place on Microsoft Teams. To encourage frank and honest discussion, no representatives from WWU were present and transcripts were not shared with WWU. Savanta’s moderators adhered to several best-practice principles during fieldwork. First, they asked concise and open questions. Second, they avoided leading questions that could encourage participants to affirm a particular answer or conclusion. Third, they elicited further details when a participant made an intimation but did not elaborate.

At all times, moderators were mindful that qualitative research can be a strange experience for participants. Especially in the case of focus groups, there are few other situations in which a stranger asks you to reflect on behaviours and perceptions that you may have always taken for granted.

In **Stage 4**, Savanta transcribed the interviews and focus groups, and coded these transcripts thematically, to identify common themes and patterns in the data. The main body of this report is organised according to that thematic analysis:

- Chapter 1: Work-life balance and flexibility.
- Chapter 2: Development and progression in role.
- Chapter 3: Technology and communications at work.

In terms of the report structure, Savanta and WWU decided to present insights from the in-depth interviews and focus groups alongside each other, to show how they interact. Often, the data from focus groups revealed the challenges that WWU employees face, and we then weaved in data from the interviews with People and Talent decision-makers to explore how comparable organisations approach those challenges. Throughout this report, extended quotations from WWU employees are included in pink boxes, and quotations from People and Talent decision-makers in blue boxes, to avoid the two sources being conflated.

² Savanta was responsible for recruitment of People and Talent decision-makers for the in-depth interviews. WWU was responsible for recruitment of employees for the focus groups.

Executive summary

Chapter 1: Work-life balance and flexibility

While WWU employees have strong views around different types of flexibility and general favourability towards the more fluid work-life boundaries discussed in the literature review, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the terms in which it is most useful to engage employees about work-life balance are *outcomes*. WWU employees emphasised in particular quality time with their families and the ability to switch off from work – these are the terms in which expectations around work-life balance and flexibility are explicitly and repeatedly couched.

Owing to this focus on outcomes, preferences between work-life balance and work-life integration are less binary than the literature suggested, though the literature review's finding that autonomy is the key to meeting the diversity of employee expectations still holds. Affording employees this autonomy requires two main measures:

1. Clear messaging from senior management is essential to set expectations regarding flexibility, both to push line managers to better accommodate individual preferences and to avoid misalignment on what flexibility is 'acceptable'.
2. Addressing the material barriers which make autonomy a trade-off with business outcomes.

The office-based employees taking part in this research were content with the flexibility they have and feel trusted, and the focus of discussion is how best to monitor this over time and identify painpoints as they emerge. This trust from direct management is found to be an important dividing line in the experiences that employees have, with field operative employees reporting more varied experiences of flexibility. Lack of trust from managers was cited as a significant impediment here, but it is not the only one. Experiences differ markedly by team within WWU, and other challenges given relate to standby and van tracking. Over and above barriers, field operative employees also called for more empathy with and acknowledgement of the practical challenges of their working conditions, such as poor weather.

Chapter 2: Development and progression in role

Interviews with People and Talent professionals revealed that organisations – from diverse industries – have responded to changing expectations by handing ownership of development to individual employees. While WWU employees believe they can shape their own development, they are sceptical as to whether WWU will fulfil its commitment to facilitate training.

Line managers have increased responsibility in facilitating development. As one People and Talent professional put it: managers have to be '*everything to everyone*'. WWU employees have had inconsistent experiences with line managers, and would benefit from a more coherent, company-wide approach to management. Other organisations have delivered this through focused managerial training.

Despite satisfaction with progression within their current role, WWU employees expressed frustration that they have limited opportunities to progress to more senior roles. Employees identified three main reasons for this:

1. Promotion is only possible if a more senior colleague leaves or retires.
2. Promotion often requires relocation.
3. It is harder for employees to progress if they excel at their current role.

Chapter 3: Technology and communications at work

People and Talent decision-makers identified a common challenge: maintaining fluid communications with employees without overwhelming them with information in a way that harms productivity. The challenge is more acute when it comes to communicating with field operative employees. They often work in rural areas with poor connectivity and limited access to devices.

The key is to personalise communications to the needs to each employee, and WWU would benefit from conducting further research into how different employees prefer to communicate and receive information.

In the focus groups, field operative employees identified the removal of communication and technology 'stumbling blocks' as a priority. Currently there is a perception that technological inefficiencies have a detrimental effect on productivity, and they would benefit from more streamlined processes.

Field operative employees also want to see better communication between departments, and believe this would improve customer experience and, ultimately, WWU's reputation.

Chapter 1: Work-life balance and flexibility

Recap of the literature review

The literature review that Savanta previously conducted for WWU found that work-life balance is an essential consideration for *both* attracting and retaining talent. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced more flexibility into working patterns and working environments, and the general expectation now is that work-life balance and flexibility continue to be a priority even as the pandemic ceases to have an impact upon people's lives. This much is well-known, and was not a particularly surprising finding in this initial review.

The literature review did not *merely* find that work-life balance has become a more prominent employee priority since the pandemic however. Much of the literature also argues that the pandemic has also seen a divergence in *the way* people think about work-life balance. For some, it continues to mean a clear boundary being maintained between work and life. For others, this is no longer preferable in a post-pandemic context. For these people, part of what appeals about hybrid working is the idea that they can organise their day more flexibly and with a less rigid distinction between 'work time' and 'non-work time'. For instance, an employee might return to the office from an in-person meeting, buy dinner from a supermarket on the way home, and then continue with their workday afterwards. This alternative model is known as work-life *integration*.

For WWU to ensure its employee offer remains compelling therefore, thought will have to be given to how to meet these diverging expectations. As such, a goal in this subsequent piece of qualitative research has been to understand what 'good' work-life balance means to WWU office-based and field operative employees in this new, post-pandemic context, to identify what barriers might have to be overcome to cater to any new expectations, and to understand what employers in comparable industry contexts are doing to overcome these challenges.

This chapter is organised into two main sections to answer these questions:

1. What 'good' work-life balance means to WWU's employees, and the differences between office-based and field operative employees.
2. The extent to which WWU is meeting employee expectations in this area and – drawing on the findings from in-depth interviews with People and Talent leaders – how WWU might overcome some of the barriers it faces in this area.

Before turning to the first of these sections, it is worth briefly noting that this qualitative research supports the findings of the literature review regarding the *stakes* of getting work-life balance and flexibility right. Though it was not an explicit focus of this research, the importance of work-life balance for *both* employee retention and acquisition was clear. By its nature, this qualitative stage cannot quantify the importance of work-life balance, but it is noteworthy that work-life balance was identified more than once when WWU employees were asked about the single most important driver of their happiness at work:

“

You're in a bit of a tunnel vision once you're in work, it's so fast-paced. But then all of a sudden you step back and think about it – you get how important that work-life balance really is, it's essential for wellbeing.

Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales”

Further, People and Talent leaders mentioned that flexible working was asked about in recruitment interviews, and therefore important in acquisition as well as retention:



In recruitment now, one of the very first questions is ‘what’s your hybrid working approach?’ Even for field roles, flexibility comes up a lot.

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

While this finding is not particularly surprising, as was the case in the literature review, it makes clear that the stakes of understanding and responding to changes in employee expectations here is vital. With that in mind, we now turn to providing a more detailed picture of what work-life balance means to WWU employees.

What ‘good’ work-life balance means to WWU’s employees

Employees typically frame work-life balance in terms of outcomes rather than models or types of flexibility, which is important for internal messaging

As one would expect, employees did not talk about work-life balance in terms of the theoretical models found in the literature. Employees are focussed on the *outcomes* or *indicators* of a good work-life balance, rather than the rival approaches of work-life balance and work-life integration that might ensure these outcomes. This is not to say that employees reject the distinction or that different employees have different preferences, it is merely to say that they think about the concrete outcomes of work-life balance rather than more abstract notions of balance and integration.

In addition to not talking about these two models, employees did not distinguish between the different forms of flexibility until prompted later. The literature review made the distinction between flexibility *in terms of location* and flexibility *in terms of hours worked*, and discussed how different types of employee might prioritise these types of flexibility differently. However, when asked openly about what work-life balance and flexibility meant to them, focus group participants initially framed their answers in terms of the outcomes, rather than talking about their expectations in terms of these types of flexibility.

None of this is to say that the qualitative findings are *inconsistent* with these parts of the initial literature review. As will be discussed later, the focus groups *corroborated* some of the literature review’s findings around how different employee types focus more on different types of flexibility. The point here is that the *top-of-mind* focus for employees when considering their expectations around work-life balance is the *outcomes* of good work-life balance, rather than the measures or models that might help achieve these outcomes.

So rather than undermining the literature review’s findings, this point provides an important qualification: even if changes in employees’ attitudes and expectations can be usefully discussed in terms of models and types of flexibility, one should not make the mistake of thinking that communicating with employees in these terms is likely to resonate with them, as employees only appear to think in these terms when prompted.

This is something that WWU will want to think about in its messaging about any changes to policies in order to promote work-life balance. Whatever strategies WWU looks to implement in order to promote work-life balance – for instance, by looking to implement measures that promote flexibility in terms of hours worked – it is important to ensure communications about any such changes are framed in terms of the outcomes that they enable, as these are the terms in which employees typically couch their expectations.

Two such outcomes were mentioned consistently by focus group participants, with each being discussed below in turn:

1. Having time to spend with family, and
2. Being able to 'switch off' from work.

QUICK WIN FOR WWU:

WWU should prioritise internal messaging that acknowledges the importance of these outcomes whenever discussing decisions around work setup or work-life balance. Talking too much in terms family may not be fully inclusive of all employees, even if was a widespread theme amongst focus group participants – so broadening this to time with 'loved ones' might be a better way to go.

Having time to spend with family

The employees that participated in the focus groups were particularly likely to frame work-life balance in terms of being able to organise work around family time. Good work-life balance, then, means being able to spend quality time with family members and for family-related activities such as the school run. Where participants mentioned flexibility being a benefit, it was typically flexibility *as a means to* this outcome. This was widely mentioned across both office-based and field operative employees.

As mentioned above, participants did not immediately distinguish between flexibility about *where* they work from, and *when* they work – discussion instead focussed on overarching outcomes of flexibility and its role in enabling family time, rather than *type* of flexibility:

“ For me, with the kids, [good work-life balance] is just having that flexibility,... knowing that if I've suddenly got to do the school drop-off and things like that, knowing that's an option for me. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

“ My partner, he lives and works primarily abroad, so we don't actually get very many opportunities to see each other. So [good work-life balance] means having the flexibility to spend time with him when he is here. ”

Office-Based WWU Employee

For some, flexibility enables this outcome. For others, having clear separation between work and non-work is important in achieving this outcome. One focus group participant, for instance, lamented being contacted out of hours because it made putting their children to bed harder than it otherwise would be:

“ I had a text message at eight o'clock last night, regarding a project that we're on today. If you're trying to put the little ones to bed and someone's ringing your phone at eight o'clock, that disrupts your whole balance. If it wakes the little one up, then that takes an extra hour, two hours – everyone knows what the kids are like! ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

Naturally, this focus on family will not be shared by all WWU employees, but it is noteworthy that this framing was so widespread. This again has implications for effective messaging about changes to policy to promote work-life balance, if not the content of those policies. Framing measures to improve work-life balance are more likely to be well-received if explicitly couched in terms of allowing people to spend more time with loved ones.

Being able to 'switch off'

Field operative employees also identified being able to stop thinking about work, when not working, as an important part of work-life balance. As will be discussed later, standby can make this difficult to achieve, but it is nonetheless a part of 'good' work-life balance in the eyes of some field operative employees.



It's important you can completely switch off. I think with this job, it's always on your mind with, 'Oh, I'm on call on Friday. I've got this job planned in on Monday. This needs sorting next week.' You need to learn to switch off. With a lot of jobs, sometimes you can't fully switch off, because you're planning ahead, which you need to, in this job.



Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

Preferences between work-life balance and work-life integration are less binary than the literature suggests

One might think that this desire to switch off from work in particular lends itself to the work-life *integration* model discussed in the literature review.

As a reminder, the literature review discussed several studies that suggested employees broadly fit into one of two groups:

Segmentors (Work-life *balance*)

This group prefer **clear boundaries** between work and the rest of life, to ensure that one does not dominate the other. These people tend to thrive within a work-life balance model.

Integrators (Work-life *integration*)

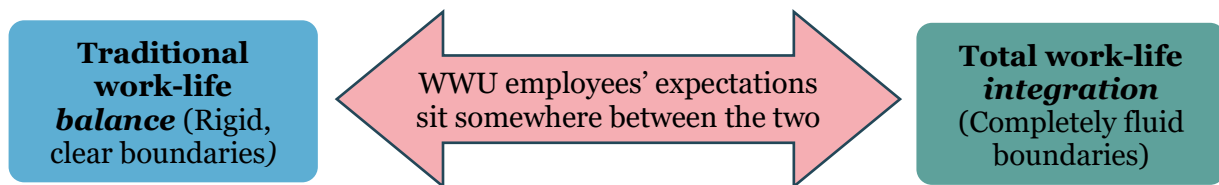
This group prefer **fluid boundaries** between work and the rest of life. They are comfortable in switching back and forth between the two, as their needs dictate. These people tend to thrive within a work-life integration model.

Source: deBara, D. (quoting Haselberger). 2022. *Work-Life Balance Vs. Work-Life Integration – Which Holds More Benefits?* Retrieved from <https://blog.trello.com/work-life-balance-vs.-work-life-integration>

It is easy to see how a focus on family time is consistent with this hypothesis – from the examples already discussed, one can see how clearly segmenting time promotes this outcome in some instances, and fluid boundaries between work and non-work support it in others. But it is harder to see how this second outcome of 'switching off from work' could be compatible with work-life *integration* – as clear, non-fluid boundaries between work and non-work might seem like a prerequisite for being able to switch off. One therefore might wonder if the model proposed by deBara, included in the literature review, really neatly maps onto WWU employees' actual expectations.

However, there is not necessarily an inconsistency here. Fluid boundaries do not mean no boundaries whatsoever. One might, for instance, build their working hours around the timings of the school day, and have fluid boundaries to that extent – they might work an hour later to accommodate the school run, or the weekly grocery shop – but this does not mean that they are (or that they need to be) mentally *‘always-on’*. The field operative employee who mentioned the eight o’clock text message in the previous section for instance, regards some degree of flexibility as important for work-life balance, but has the expectation that this *doesn’t* come at the expense of *no* clear work-life boundaries.

What this suggests for the model in the literature review is that expectations usually sit somewhere on a continuum *between* work-life balance and work-life integration, rather than it being the case that employees neatly prefer one model over the other. This is one point where the qualitative findings differ from the literature review:



This has two main implications for WWU. First, it means that employees (especially managers) should be encouraged to avoid messaging at unusual hours unless it’s a stated preference of the employee receiving the message to be working to those hours – otherwise flexibility comes at the expense of being able to switch off, which is a key facet of good work-life balance for employees.

QUICK WIN FOR WWU:

WWU should introduce guidance for contacting employees – particularly field operative employees – out of hours. While this cannot be avoided in all cases (e.g., when employees are on call), this should be minimised as much as is possible, as several employees mentioned it is an impediment to their ability to switch off from work.

Second, it further reinforces the point in the literature review that WWU cannot meet employee expectations with a one-size-fits-all model. In fact, it shows – further – that WWU cannot even meet expectations by offering a straight choice between the two different models.

In this context, it is not realistic for WWU to meet or gauge individuals’ expectations in a top-down, senior management-led manner. What is instead needed is for senior management to set an expectation that line managers should be allowing their reports, as much as possible, to select a working pattern that suits them – giving permission for autonomy, in line with the recommendations of the literature review.

This is a matter of clear messaging that employees can expect flexibility *on their terms* as long as it does not impact their performance, than it is about anything else – as one of the People and Talent leaders interviewed mentioned, “being really transparent and keeping communications open, and taking everything on a case-by-case basis” is key here, as “you can only systematise [this arrangement] so much” even it is the one which is most likely to meet divergent employee expectations.

This messaging has to be addressed to both employees *and line managers* however – as will be discussed shortly, differing levels of trust from line managers is one of the major impediments to flexibility at present. WWU’s senior management taking a clear line on what employees can expect of their direct managers here is key to overcoming this barrier.

This includes clarity on what genuinely fluid boundaries between work and non-work look like (and how they don’t necessarily mean a willingness to be contacted at any hour), and taking a clear line on what is and isn’t an acceptable example of flexibility. This second point is included on account of the fact that it was very noticeable in both the focus groups and the interviews with People and Talent leaders that, even though many *say* that they agree that work-life integration is a good idea and think that totally fluid boundaries between work and non-work should be an option where employees want these, there is clearly an implicit sense that there are ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ types of non-work activity to work flexibly in order to pursue.

For instance, while working flexibly to accommodate family commitments is widely seen as perfectly ‘legitimate’ – breaking up the workday to accommodate other non-work activities, like doing the weekly shop, going to the gym, or a haircut, and then working later is frowned upon as ‘taking advantage’ or ‘ruining it for everyone else’. This reinforces the earlier point that WWU’s employees care about flexibility insofar as it supports the outcome of family time. But it also highlights that, if WWU is committed to entirely fluid boundaries between work and life for those employees that want them, it will have to very clearly communicate what is and isn’t acceptable to ensure that there is no misunderstanding on this point, and to ensure that this is not held against these employees as ‘taking advantage’.

“ It really spoils it for the rest where if someone takes advantage [of flexibility]. We had, a couple of times, some people went for haircuts in the workday, and it's kind of, 'Come on guys.' There are some people who haven't quite understood [what's acceptable]. ”

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

QUICK WIN FOR WWU:

WWU should set out its ‘vision’ of what flexible working and fluid work-life boundaries might look like, to make it clear to employees what is and isn’t acceptable – both in terms of what employees can do, but also what it is and isn’t reasonable for managers to expect and do.

This clear messaging is only half of what is needed however. As well as providing clear messaging that employees have *permission* to work flexibility as far as is possible, WWU needs to address the barriers to them actually doing so – so that they can work as flexibly as they’d like without there being an impact on team capacity or performance. The next section discusses what these barriers are in WWU’s case in more detail.

Before this, we turn to how the expectations of field operative employees differ from office workers.

*While WWU field operative employees accept there are limits to the flexibility in location they can have, this is **not** to say they don't care about it*

Inevitably, there are some limits to this autonomy that will remain even if WWU removes as many barriers as it can. Many field operative roles, by their nature, cannot be undertaken remotely. The literature review found that non-office workers want more flexibility than they currently have in terms of hours worked, prioritise other benefits over flexibility in terms of location, and accept that flexibility in terms of location is not realistic for all job roles. The findings of the qualitative accord with these findings, but again qualify them slightly.

The point of qualification here is that the qualitative research reveals that flexibility in terms of location is not *unimportant in principle* to field operative employees. That is, to the extent that it is possible, it is appealing – there is just an acceptance that the extent to which it is possible is very limited.



The office-type guys have that option of, 'if you want to work from home every so often you can, and your job can be done from home'. For the entirely operational guys who are out and about on-site doing stuff, none of that has really changed. They don't have that option of working from home. I'm pretty happy [as I can do both as a manager]. Like today, I have stayed at home. It's the end of the month, I've got paperwork to get done, I knew I had this meeting on. So, it's easier for me to go, 'Right, I'll do this paperwork this morning, and then I'll log onto this from home rather than travelling.



Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

In other words, many of these employees *do* care about flexibility in location, like office-based workers, and only deprioritise it against other benefits *because* they accept it is only possible to a very limited extent, if at all. This may seem like a trivial distinction, but it is essential to note because, as will be discussed later, a lack of empathy with field operative workers about the fact that they cannot have the flexibility that they would ideally like can be a source of animosity between these employees and management, or towards office-based employees.

Whilst there is some acceptance that flexibility in terms of location is only possible to a limited extent, it is appreciated when it is possible. For instance, if any employee has multiple sites to cover, having the flexibility to choose the order in which they visit them is appealing – and something line managers should look to allow where possible, to empower field operative employees to have flexibility to the (limited) extent that it is possible.



Is getting to choose the order you go to a specific site helpful for your work-life balance?
Yes, definitely.



Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

Setting location aside, the qualitative research also supports the literature review's finding that the point that flexibility in terms of hours is a particular priority for WWU's field operative employees. In particular, field operative employees responded well when presented with the idea of work-life integration – having more fluid boundaries between work and non-work widely appealed.

Here, WWU employees were also keen to stress that they would like to see empathy about the difficult conditions that they face compared to office-based employees, and this to be reflected in discretion from management around day-to-day hours.



I think that [empathy] would go a long way, especially during the winter. We are out first thing in the morning where it's bitterly cold, the wind and the rain, by the time it hits 10, 11, 12 o'clock, you're soaked. So, to just have that little bit of thought [about being able to finish early when conditions are bad], because I always think of if you're doing something good, then you're going to get something good in return. The next day, if it's a dry day, you're then more willing to stay on for an hour or two, so then you're making up for what you missed out the day before.



Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

QUICK WIN FOR WWU:

Explicitly encourage managers to be flexible with hours when conditions are poor, to the extent that it does not interfere with long-term performance.

With the expectations of WWU employees around work-life balance examined and compared to the findings of the literature review, we can now discuss the extent to which WWU is meeting these expectations of flexibility, and how it can overcome some of the present barriers to meeting expectations in this area.

WWU employee perceptions around the amount of flexibility they have, and the barriers to further flexibility

While the expectations of office-based and field operative employees are broadly in line with the findings of the literature review, the literature review told us nothing about the actual experiences of those employees in WWU's very specific context, and the practical barriers that need to be overcome in order to meet those expectations. This section covers these. Since there are marked differences in experience between office-based and field operative employees here, and the barriers to be overcome differ significantly too, this section deals with each set of employees in turn.

Rather than presenting the learnings from People and Talent leaders as a discrete section, they are included here as possible solutions to some of the barriers faced – to make it as clear as possible where some of these practical solutions might help WWU better meet employees' expectations.

Office-based employees' perceptions of flexibility, and learnings from People and Talent professionals

WWU's office-based employees are content with the flexibility they have and feel trusted

This group was happy with the amount of flexibility and autonomy that WWU currently affords it, and don't think that WWU could be doing much more than it is currently doing. Employees feel trusted to manage their own workloads, which has a positive impact on their work life balance:



I honestly don't think they could do any more than what they're doing.



Office-Based WWU Employee

In line with the earlier section about expectations, happiness here was often couched in terms of being able to spend time with family. For example:



My work-life balance in the department I am in now is spectacular. If I need to go and collect [my child], I can. I think with the way we can use laptops at home and work from home as we want is great, it's just flexible nowadays. That is a massive, massive good thing for us because the work-life balance is a lot better from when I started.



Office-Based WWU Employee

In addition to speaking positively about the outcomes discussed in the previous section on *expectations* around work-life balance, several of the office-based employees participating in the research mentioned the fact that they felt trusted by their immediate managers to manage their own workload and weren't micromanaged as a significant factor in these positive outcomes being achieved.



We'll have brief interactions with the manager - weekly catch up meetings. We'll say, 'yeah, we're doing this, this week' and unless something comes up that we're needed for, we are more or less left alone and got their trust to manage our own work schedule, which is important.



Office-Based WWU Employee

The importance of managers in creating this trust – which is in turn important in expectations around flexibility being met – is a point that should be noted. As will be seen later, WWU's field operative employees have less consistent views in this area.

Continuing to monitor employee work-life balance is important to meet expectations, but People and Talent professional regard this as challenging

The office-based employees that participated in the focus groups were clearly content that WWU is meeting their expectations around work-life balance. Clearly, this is a major positive and something that WWU will want to sustain.

However, tracking the effectiveness of flexible working over time is not a straightforward task, as the 'ideal' will be different for different employees. This is compounded by the fact that employees tend to think in terms of outcomes rather than thinking in terms of about flexibility and types of flexibility. One could measure the outcomes directly, but even with the common themes identified in previous sections, these will differ significantly from employee to employee. More generally, it was noteworthy that, in multiple focus groups, employees remarked upon the fact that work-life balance and flexibility is very important but not something they'd given much thought to until actively prompted to by participating in this research.

Drawing on the learnings of People and Talent decision-makers in similar organisations may be a useful starting point in developing strategies to monitor performance here over time. These decision-makers were keen to stress that, even if senior management talk about flexibility and working arrangements in terms of company interests, performance, and productivity, it is really important to *also* assess the effectiveness of working arrangements in terms of wellbeing, as this is a good predictor of work-life balance and so this ensures it is not downplayed in assessments of flexible working.

“ Wellbeing measures [are the best way to measure the success of working arrangements]. We might choose at management and leadership level to talk about productivity. But what I would want to talk to colleagues about is their wellbeing and how that's impacted by them having that choice [of working arrangement]. ”

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

The literature review did not directly discuss whether wellbeing is the best yardstick of the success of flexible working measures in promoting work-life balance, but it makes sense given the findings of that initial literature review. One study in particular from Affinity Health at Work identified that factors around work-life balance were the largest determinants of wellbeing.³

But measuring this is also regarded as far from straightforward. There is a feeling that, as a byproduct of the emphasis on *physical* health and safety in organisations with a significant proportion of field operative employees, mental wellbeing often goes unexplored, and organisations often know very little about how they are performing on this front.

“ We've got no idea, collectively, how well people feel. I think that's probably symptomatic of being in an organisation where physical health and safety is so prioritised, for obvious reasons [i.e., because of the large proportion of field operative workers]. ”

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

The interviewees were keen to stress that qualitative approaches and informal engagement are key here though – there *is* a place for employee engagement surveys, but frustration was expressed at the fact that they are often designed generically, such that metrics don't properly latch onto what is actually important to that organisation's employees, *or* that attempts to find a unified story gets in the way of actually addressing feedback.

As a preliminary step, decision-makers encourage regular *qualitative* engagement at scale, to gather as much qualitative insight as possible on the topics of wellbeing and work-life balance – which can then, at a much later date, be used as the basis of survey metrics to be tracked, rather than these metrics being generic. See, for instance, this decision-maker from a similarly-sized organisation to WWU in the water industry:

³ Chartered Institute of Personnel Development. 2023. *Hybrid working and employee wellbeing: International SOS Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/case-studies/international-sos/>

“ We've had a formal enterprise-wide engagement survey, which goes out twice a year. As far as I'm concerned, it's absolute [rubbish!], because it does nothing to talk to how colleagues feel. Instead, I've now got a group of about 80-90 colleagues from across the organisation who are going to act as wellbeing leads. Instead of looking at all the existing datasets and trying to fudge them together to tell a story about wellbeing, we're just going to give them some really simplistic tools, to go and facilitate qualitative conversations with as many people as they can reach, over the course of the quarter.

We want to build a really rudimentary comparison of how people's wellbeing feels, in their area, across several different wellbeing 'goals' or facets, and keep it as informal and conversational as possible, to start to give us some of those indicators. Hopefully, then, when we show those indicators to our exec, they can start to notice some patterns, and *that's* when we can bring out the data and surveys. Eventually, hopefully, we can start to map some of that back against the colleague lifecycle, so we can see which facets feel the most important. Though from a maturity perspective, we're way off doing that.

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers ”

Another challenge for WWU here is reconciling work-life balance and flexibility with in-person development and training

One challenge that WWU likely faces with office-based employees is trying to reconcile the autonomy and flexibility that employees value with the view that training and development – another area which is important to them – is regarded as being supported by in-person attendance by People and Talent professionals, particularly for those early in their careers:

“ I always say, if you're a graduate, you should be in the office five days a week. You're not going to be able to get the best learning experience and development experience being remote. You're not going to overhear your colleagues, and you're not going to learn from that and pull on people. Because working remotely, you have to put a meeting in with people if you want to tap into their knowledge or experience, which doesn't always work so well to be that formal. It's that informal water cooler moments that really get people far and network and get exposure.

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers ”

Unsurprisingly, People and Talent professionals think that, where there have been mandated returns to solely or mostly office-based work, employees have seen this as a removal of the flexibility that enables them to have work-life balance, which has a pronounced impact on their satisfaction.

“ There's a big push to return to the workplace but there's a reluctance from everyone – now people have got flexibility, work-life balance, they've got school runs to do!

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers ”

“ I think there are probably some employees – probably even myself included – who, if they were asked to return to the office on a full-time basis, would start to question whether it's the right role for them.

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers ”

However, this is a topic that was discussed in the literature review, and the finding there still stands: reconciling these effectively doesn't have to mean prioritising one over the other. Whilst feedback and training do *tend* to be more effective and frequent in person,⁴ this is often because insufficient thought is given to how to give feedback online. The solution here therefore consists in conducting more work to understand and normalise ways of effectively and regularly delivering remote feedback, rather than mandating in-person sessions (especially, as Chapter 2 notes, having to travel for training sessions is already a challenge for WWU's employees). In the literature review, three key considerations for delivering effective remote feedback were identified:

1. Ensure that feedback effectively balances assertiveness and compassion, and emphasise that feedback is to enhance their development – it's not just for the business' benefit.
2. Give employees time to echo key takeaways and ask questions, making adequate time to discuss feedback rather than to merely share it within a document.
3. Give feedback that is specific, consistent and actionable with measured goals, as checking in remotely is less organic and therefore has to be more structured.

The interviewees tended to prioritise either autonomy or development in this context, but the finding here is that these do not need to be mutually exclusive. Owing to the lack of solutions from People and Talent decision-makers in the interviews, this may be one area in which WWU can differentiate itself from other employees and make itself more appealing to prospective employees – especially early-career joiners who expect flexibility.

As the literature review covered, focussing on the specific expectations of Generation Z is going to be increasingly important as they join the workforce, and this might be one way in which WWU can position itself ahead of similar organisations to this group, who tend to expect more flexibility.

With the perceptions of office-based employees and associated challenges covered, we now turn to the experience of WWU's field operative employees.

Field operative employees' perceptions of flexibility, and learnings from People and Talent professionals

Field operative employees are not dissatisfied with the amount of flexibility in terms of location they have, as they accept the limited extent to which this is possible

As discussed earlier in this chapter, field operative employees are realistic about the very limited extent to which they can have flexibility in location in their roles. However, as noted, it is something that – were it possible – would be appealing.

In this context, other organisations with a significant proportion of field operative employees are exploring ways in which they can increase the extent to which previously in-person tasks can be conducted remotely and overseen via laptop, including robotics.

⁴ Deloitte. 2023. *Rebuilding office culture in a post-pandemic world*. Retrieved from <https://action.deloitte.com/insight/3178/rebuilding-office-culture-in-a-post-pandemic-world>

For instance, in the steel industry, engineers and other technical field roles are increasingly asking about remote working at the point of recruitment. As such, organisations are trying to make certain engineering and manufacturing tasks achievable remotely:

“We're trying to automate a lot of things. A lot of the sensors, a lot of the detectors in our processes, they can now be viewed from a laptop rather than the big computer on site. There are some technical 'field' roles that we're offering, we're able to offer, where you can work hybrid, because you can still do that job through that computer. But we have to still be careful. Safety considerations. Well, if someone was monitoring certain levels of CO2 in a blast furnace and their internet crashed and they're unable to monitor it...”

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers”

However, as the end of this quote illustrates, even with technological advances, it is likely to be the case that health and safety concerns will limit the extent to which such jobs can be conducted remotely. This may be an area for WWU to explore, but it is not clear that the opportunities here outweigh the costs and risk.

That being the case, WWU has limited levers to increase flexibility in location for its field operative employees beyond what was mentioned earlier about giving employees the flexibility to choose the order in which they visit sites where possible.

As mentioned earlier, field operative employees are not particularly expectant of this kind of flexibility, and so are not dissatisfied with the lack of it. *But*, they do expect empathy, given that this flexibility is something they would ideally like. Further, if they do not feel empathised with here, it can be a source of animosity between field operative employees and office-based management, leading to dissatisfaction. This featured as a theme in both the employee focus groups *and* the interviews with People and Talent decision-makers, and was often framed in terms of working conditions and weather – as field operative workers don't feel that office workers understand that challenges that this poses:

“Nobody seems to think about the boys who are on the ground, in the trenches, in the holes just getting battered by all weathers, by all sorts. There just doesn't seem to any thought from management other than what's on the computer screen.”

Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales”

“We've often talked about really great things that are happening in the organisation in terms of working arrangements. And actually, they're happening for central colleagues who work in a nice warm building. And then we get the population of field workers who think, 'I can drive around for 4 hours and I can't find a toilet,' or, 'The electricity's not working on this operational site and there's no teabags.' So what does equality look like? And I think that's probably part of the reason that we see lower engagement with our field colleagues. Not because they feel less engaged with what they're doing but I think that's some of that comparison that drives that.”

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers”

When pressed on what showing this empathy looks like in practice, employees cite two main measures:

1. Acknowledging the challenging conditions that field operative employees face, and giving them small rewards and flexibility on hours on tougher days to make them feel appreciated.
2. Acknowledging that flexibility in terms of location is a job perk that office-based employees have, and ‘offsetting’ the fact that field operative employees don’t receive this benefit (for obvious reasons) with other benefits.

On the latter point, a common benefit that is given to field operative employees but not office-based employees is regular, task-based bonuses.

“ We've tried to say, 'Look, these are our core hours. So, we'd like for you to be there between these fairly limited core hours but if you want to start a bit earlier and leave a bit earlier, then you can. So, time's a common benefit but then also with office employees, maybe at Christmas we'll give a bonus but the [field operative employees] get more bonuses throughout the year. So, if we've got a project and we say, 'Right, we really need you to finish this piece of work,' then we'll use bonuses as the incentive with them. It will be, like, we've got [this task] and it needs to be done within the next week – and if you get it done we'll give you this amount of bonus. ”

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

WWU might want to explore if such perks are feasible, but also to explicitly position them as being the perks that field operative employees receive in view of the fact that flexibility in location is only possible to a very limited extent for them.

If doing this, it is worth WWU exploring how best to raise awareness of individual benefits, as a common theme in the focus groups was field operative employees’ lack of awareness of the benefits *currently* available to them, and limited ability to access information since they spend very little time on the company intranet as field operative employees:

“ It's not advertised for us, as employees. I know we've got our own intranet and there is a section there with all these in there, but you've got to go in search for it, and look for it. it's not easy for us to navigate, to be honest with you. I think they could probably benefit from having, like, actual sit-down sessions with people like us to explain, go through and explain. When you see the odd email and you get, like, something to read, like a hand-out you could read it, but for someone to actually sit down with people and go through it and say, 'Right, these are the options. This is how we do this, this is how we do that,' that would probably be really beneficial, I think. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

Experiences of flexibility in terms of hours worked differ markedly depending on team

As established, flexibility in terms of hours worked is something that field operative employees expect. Perceptions on the extent to which WWU is meeting their expectations here varies markedly. There appear to be three main barriers to this kind of flexibility being available to the extent that field operative employees would hope: challenges associated with standby, lack of trust from some direct managers, and location tracking on employees’ vans.

This section discusses each in turn. A theme running across these is that experiences appear to be markedly different depending on which team employees work in:



There seems to be differences in the different departments, and how people are treated, and definitely morale.



Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West



One of the other things I've noticed from being on this [focus group], just appears to be how inconsistent, experiences of the company itself, are. Going from B&R, to EMS – everything is just one end of the scale, or the other. There doesn't seem to be much transparency or common ground in the middle. It's either it happens, or it doesn't.



Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

These observations were not exclusive to conversation around work-life balance, but there were particular reasons identified for some of these differences by team with respect to work-life balance specifically, which are discussed below.

Challenges associated with standby

One barrier to meeting expectations around flexibility in terms of hours is standby. Being 'on call' naturally poses a challenge to being able to shape one's own boundaries between work and non-work, and thereby poses a challenge to employees' ability to switch off from work and spend time with loved ones – the ideal outcomes discussed earlier.

Employees are understanding of this as an inevitability of the job to an extent, but nonetheless identify it as a major challenge, and would like to see WWU do more to minimise the impact it has on work-life balance.



There is always a struggle finding coverage for standby. We've had it before where they've drawn names out of the hat. Which I thought was a bit unfair, but I think that has a lot of impact on employees up here as well. If you have something planned in like a wedding or something, one of your family members' wedding, that can be taken away from you. At the minute there's two of us and then one other person being mentored. So, I only have [one colleague] to swap with. So, if [he] says, 'No, I can't do that day.' Or if he's off sick then it's only me.



Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

Smaller teams exacerbate this challenge – especially since those who are being trained up can't provide cover. Illness also proves difficult, with employees reporting that this makes standby particularly difficult from a work-life balance perspective in the winter months when more team members tend to be ill.

Employees identify two measures that they would like to see from WWU to help mitigate this challenge:

1. Encouraging and supporting cross-team cover, to increase the pool of people who can respond to a call – and thereby making it easier to manage standby without it having a

pronounced impact on flexibility.

2. Widening the pool of people who receive training to handle standby calls, even if it isn't a core part of their role – to increase the team's flexibility and resiliency.

These calls for training are linked to a wider sentiment that training isn't always available where needed, even if the will is there, and that progression can sometimes feel contingent on roles being vacated. This is a point which will be discussed further in Chapter 2:

“ The only thing I can think of, and we've mentioned it before, is about training. It's about training a few operatives up to have their leakages and service lay in. So that, if we are struggling on call, or if there are any team leaders that can't do calls, at least we've got lads in place and as well they can gain the experience as well.

Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

“ We're not short staffed. We've got plenty of mates, but what's needed in training them up to the higher level – yes it's a few thousand or whatever it is in salary, but not much. I don't see the issue with two team leaders working together. In my opinion, you'd get the job done more efficiently anyway and then obviously, you've got backup options then as well.

Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

Lack of trust from some direct managers

As mentioned, office-based employees mentioned the fact that they felt trusted by their immediate managers to manage their own workload and weren't micromanaged, and identified this fact as a significant driver in their expectations around work-life being met.

The experience of field operative employees with their managers is more varied – some feel trusted, but some feel monitored and not afforded much discretion to organise their our workload and the hours that they work. This limits the extent to which those employees can pursue work-life integration. As established earlier, having these fluid boundaries was particularly appealing to field operative workers when discussed in both focus groups.

“ I speak to people from different patches and, 'Ah well, we wouldn't be allowed to do that.' You can see that it's managed very differently in different areas but I'd hope the majority of managers are flexible with things like that, especially when it comes to the school runs and children and families and things like that.

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

“ 100%, yes, I'd like a bit more [autonomy], to be honest with you. You just feel like you're always being watched by them, and scared of nipping here and there. Like we discussed earlier on, if the job's been completed an hour early, or whatever, if they can give us just a bit of flexibility on the way home, if we can just nip to the shops, nip to a supermarket or whatever, that would be great. But they just want you to go direct from your job, direct to your house. They don't really want you veering off to go shopping. If we had that flexibility off our managers, it'd go a long way with the lads, as well, I think. I think everybody would appreciate it.

Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

That said, it is not always clear to employees whether this is a result of their specific managers, or if the perceived lack of flexibility is something that has been decided by central management – it can impact upon perceptions of WWU as an employer where frustrations are associated with senior management.



Employee 1: I don't know if it's a departmental thing, because in workshops, they don't really mind us nipping here and there, sort of, especially on the way home. They're flexible.

Employee 2: Talking amongst all the lads on courses, it always seems to be the BnR departments that are struggling. It's not too much of an issue with me. It might be down to different managers, though we don't always know that either because, obviously, like, the lads that have issues with it think it's coming from above them.



Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

Van tracking

As well as lack of trust from managers, field operative employees also point to the tracking of their vans, and attitudes towards this tracking, as an impediment to work-life integration and flexibility in terms of hours:



So, if you're nipping off, because you're in-between jobs, and somebody's then looking at your trackers, and you're not on the site, because they're so heavily, heavily focused on the tracker, [it's a challenge]. They're so strict with it, I'm not sure how they're going to be able to, like, ease off the pedal with it. It's one of their, like, key things that they love hounding on is, 'Where are you going? You're on the trackers. You started your van at this time, you turned it off at this time.'



Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

Employees feel that this focus on tracking sometimes comes at the expense of common sense or leads to 'wasted time' that doesn't benefit WWU or them as employees:



With B&R, you work a certain shift and there's an hour left after you finish a job when, realistically, you're not going to be able to go on to do on another job anyway. But you still have to be in the van until the shift ends. They want us to stay on site, especially in this end, I don't know what it's like down south, but they want us to stay on site until 4:30 and then you travel home after 4:30. So, regardless of if you've finished your task by 3:30, 4 o'clock even, yes, they'd rather have you sit in the van until 4:30, then you can travel home.



Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

Empathising with field operative employees in these sort of situations could go a long way – this focus makes them feel a lack trust and materially limits their ability to have fluid boundaries between work and non-work. But again, participants felt that this doesn't happen to the same extent in all teams – so there may be a further preliminary piece of work to understand what the approach of different teams and locations on this point is.

Considerations for WWU

WWU may wish to consider the following in order to better meet employees' expectations around work-life balance and flexible working.

- Ensure that company-wide messaging talks about work-life balance in terms that employees care about, such as measures to enable you to 'spend more time with loved ones' or 'better switch off from work'. **Talking in terms of work-life models and types of flexibility has a place, and is the best way to conduct research to identify measures that can better support these outcomes, but 'outcomes' are a more impactful framing when publicising or communicating what WWU is doing to employees and prospective employees more widely.**
- Setting out a vision of what flexible working can look like. A one-size-fits-all – or even a two-sizes-fit-all – approach to flexibility is not likely to meet all employee expectations, and so WWU needs to emphasise to line managers and employees that employees can expect some degree of autonomy. **However, setting the bounds within which that autonomy can be expected will be really important in ensuring that expectations between employees and managers are not misaligned.** For example – setting out what constitutes a 'reasonable' reason to take time out of the workday (Is it only family commitments? Is it also doing the weekly shop and going to the gym?). At present, the lack of clarity here – at WWU *and* other comparable organisations – seems to have created an implicit sense that some employees are 'taking advantage' of flexible work, or taking it 'too far'. WWU clarify its vision of flexible working would head off this ambiguity.
- Think about the ways in which field operative employees are interacted with about working hours, in view of the fact that they would like to see a more empathetic approach. **This may involve clarifying expectations of managers, and signposting the steps that WWU is taking to mitigate some of the barriers to flexibility that WWU employees identify** – such as low team resilience and van tracking.
- **Conduct regularly informal qualitative engagement with employees.** Talent and People professionals think that investing the time into an engagement 'framework' and then engaging at scale, regularly and informally, is the best way to identify painpoints as circumstances change. Developing a framework of the wellbeing measures that are most relevant to WWU employees would be a useful starting point – and is something that could be partly informed by this piece of research.

Chapter 2: Development and progression in role

Recap of the literature review

The literature review showed that seeing a clear path to development and progression is more directly important for attraction and retention than ever.

Employees also want more autonomy than they currently receive with regard to upskilling. Workers want more control over their skills development, and want employers to upskill them in line with their career goals, not merely in strict accordance with the necessary skills and responsibilities in their current role. Meeting workers' expectations of support in developing their skills and pursuing their career path, beyond their current role, is closely linked to employer openness to internal recruitment.

Giving employees autonomy in their job roles and upskilling also has managerial relevance – again, creating a psychologically safe environment in which employees can discuss their views without fear of judgement or reprimand. To cater for these expectations, it is essential to equip line managers to meet these needs, and to show empathy and receptivity to employees' individual priorities.

This chapter expands on the literature review with qualitative insights around three broad themes:

1. Autonomy over skill development.
2. The importance of line managers in facilitating development.
3. Perceptions of progression *within* a current role versus progression to more senior roles.

Autonomy over skill development

One of the main conclusions of the literature review was that, in line with the importance of feeling valued at work, employees demand that employers support their long-term development goals and career ambitions.

Interviews with People and Talent professionals revealed that organisations – from diverse industries – have responded to these changing expectations by handing ownership of development to individual employees.



We try and have it where it's the 80/20 split of 80% is you looking to pursue your own development and then 20% will be, you know, 'This course has come up, we think you should go on it.' So, we do have, when we have our performance and potential review, there's also the development plan is mentioned, and that is entirely autonomous. So, entirely what you want to do depending on the skills you want to learn and, yes, just developing whatever way you want to. That said, then it's not a guarantee. You know, I can't say, 'I definitely want to do a masters degree in the next year,' and expect the company to pay for it. [who?]



People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

It should be noted that this autonomy comes with certain expectations. One People and Talent professional works for an organisation that offers extensive training through a local college. They link training opportunities to remuneration, to empower employees to consider their long-term development *and* the commercial case for their upskilling: “We’ve said, ‘Look, if you do a course and the skills that you learn are going to make us more money, then we can pay you more money.’”

In both cases, the employer has communicated to employees that they have autonomy to pursue their professional interests – as long as there is a broad business case for that development.

Insights from the focus groups suggest that WWU employees are broadly content with the level of autonomy they have over their development. Many participants feel able to approach their manager and express an interest in certain training/development, even if it does not pertain to their current role.

“ I went to my manager, ‘I want to be more involved with say valve movements,’ he will then try and get me more involved with it. So, you do have a bit of say in what you can do and how they can help you progress. I know you can do a development plan, I personally haven’t done one but I know if you ask to do a development plan, I think they do honour it and help you work towards that level you want to get to. But yes, in my performance review I get told, ‘What do you want to do? Do you want to progress to anything? Do you want to do more training on stuff?’ Whether or not I get the training is a different story. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

WWU employees with managerial responsibility – and, by extension, responsibility for the development of others – understood the need to strike the balance that People and Talent professionals alluded to. On the one hand, facilitating progression and development in line with the employee’s interests and aspirations. On the other hand, avoiding a situation where ‘*the floodgates open*’, and multiple employees request training that may not be relevant to the needs of the organisation. WWU employees – both office-based and field operative – felt confident that if training serves a clear purpose that upskills the individual and benefits their department, it will be allowed.

QUICK WIN FOR WWU:

WWU could consider making development plans a mandatory part of the performance review process, to encourage employees to take more ownership of their own development.

Training does not always follow

While WWU employees believe they can shape their own development, they are sceptical as to whether WWU will fulfil its commitment to facilitate training. As the field operative employee in the previous case study said: ‘*whether or not I get the training is a different story*’.

This sense of frustration was a common thread through the focus groups, with a focus on four issues:

1. **Budget constraints.** Field operative employees recalled experiences where they made a clear case for practical training – e.g. operating new machinery, towing – that would have made a tangible difference to project fulfillment, yet they were told there was not sufficient budget.
2. **Budget allocation.** To compound the previous frustration, there is a perception that budget is often allocated to mandatory training that does not serve a clear purpose. One field operative employee in the South West & Central group is due to attend a course for deep excavations, despite being able to ‘*count on one hand*’ how many times he has been involved in a deep excavation in 20 years. There may be a clear purpose for this training, but it has not been communicated to this employee.
3. **Inconvenient training locations.** When WWU does facilitate training, the location of the academies in Treforest and Bridgewater is inconvenient for employees who do not live in the vicinity. If they were to attend, for example, a five-day course, they would have to decide between staying in a hotel or travelling back-and-forth each day. Both options have a negative impact on work-life balance.
4. **Time constraints.** People and Talent professionals stated that it is often difficult to clear time for field operative employees to undergo training: “*We have the assumption that, if we make the resources available, people will have the time to do them, and they don't.*”

It is crucial that WWU not only gives employees agency over their development, but also follows up with the provision of accessible training. Or, if training is not possible, communicate that clearly with an explanation. A clear finding from the literature review, corroborated by the qualitative research, is that a perception among employees that WWU does not follow through with its training commitments will negatively affect development and retention.

QUICK WIN FOR WWU:

1. Consider moving courses online where possible, and tailoring the location to the candidates on the course. In the words of one field operative employee: “If you can see that 5 of your candidates are from Plymouth and one's from Cornwall, why would you make them all travel to Bridgewater?”
2. Create ring-fenced time slots for field operative employees to undergo training. One People and Talent department clears a ‘window’ every other week for this purpose.

Succession planning through development

People and Talent professionals emphasised the role of development in succession planning. A proactive approach to development allows organisations to foresee and shape changes to the workforce, rather than react to them once an employee has left.

Organisations participating in the interviews have introduced various schemes to encourage succession planning through development:

1. **Buddy programmes.** Senior field operative employees have a junior colleague who ‘shadows’ them and becomes familiar with their role. This ensures that specialist knowledge – both technical and implicit – is not lost when the senior colleague leaves. It also signposts a clear pathway for employees to progress: “*They [the junior*

colleagues] have naturally stepped in to the shoes of people that are leaving the company.”

2. **‘Lecturing’ as an alternative to retirement.** One organisation encourages senior field operative employees to form part of its training academy once they feel physically unable to continue ‘on the tools’. Again, this ensures that specialist knowledge remains in the organisation beyond the retirement of an individual. It also benefits the field operative employee by allowing them to remain in work (on a full-time or part-time basis). “You get people who say, *‘My back is going I can't keep doing this.’* We say, *‘Well, look, we'll reskill you, we'll put you on a Train the Trainer course.’*”
3. **Lower-level recruitment.** This refers to a situation in which an employee is ready – or almost ready – to fill a more senior vacancy. Rather than recruiting for that more senior, vacant position, People and Talent professionals explained how they create a training plan for the internal candidate to prepare them for the vacant role. They then recruit at the internal candidate’s existing level. This approach encourages progression and, by extension, means employees feel valued and rewarded for their contribution.

Line managers are key to facilitating development

A prominent theme throughout the literature review was the changed role and expectations of line management. Managerial responsibility extends to more areas of the employee’s life than ever before. Managers have an increased role in helping employees navigate mental health discussions and resources, in encouraging employees to discuss and resolve the challenges that arise from hybrid working, and – amid the rising cost of living – in reducing stigma around personal finance in the workplace.

As one People and Talent professional put it: managers have to be *‘everything to everyone’*. Managers certainly have increased responsibility for development. People and Talent professionals presented line managers as fundamental to the process, as they usually hold the initial conversation about career objectives and how development fits within those. In the focus groups, most WWU employees said they would go to their line manager to discuss upskilling.

WWU employees value empathy, trust, and recognition

As a starting point, it is useful to explore which traits WWU employees look for in a manager. Three came through in the focus groups as especially desirable.

1. **Empathy.** *“I think that makes a good manager but then just being able to talk to them about different stuff and it doesn't seem like they're just like, ‘Oh god, here he goes again.’ They've got that listening ear and they'll help you out and that sort of thing I think.” [Field Operative Employee in the South West]*
2. **Trust.** *“I think you need to trust them as well, don't you? That's the big thing. They need to be approachable and you need to trust them.” [Field Operative Employee in the South West]*
3. **Appreciation.** *“Something simple like when you finish a job and they go, ‘Good work, thanks for that.’ My manager, every time you do something he just drops that in and it's something simple but it makes you feel that bit valued.” [Field Operative Employee in the South West]*

The literature review suggested that empathy is especially important to Gen Z, who are more demanding of their managers than other generations. Yet the focus groups suggested that

empathy is fundamental to WWU employees of all generations. Indeed, employees often discussed empathy in the context of caregiving – that managers are empathetic to childcare commitments.

WWU employees have inconsistent experiences with managers

A clear finding of the focus group research was that the overall employee experience at WWU is highly dependent on the individual line manager. Some managers meet changing expectations by being empathetic to personal commitments. They understand, in the words of one office-based employee, that *‘there is life outside Wales and West’*. Yet other managers are less accommodating. As a result, employees have little sense of a coherent, company-wide approach to line management.

As outlined in the previous chapter, this inconsistency has implications for work-life balance. Flexibility and autonomy vary according to the line manager’s personal preferences and style, rather than an overarching WWU policy.

“ It doesn't come across to me that there's a company-wide understanding about it because I've been lucky I've had quite a few good managers but I've seen some that sometimes don't seem like they are very understanding about stuff. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

Managerial inconsistency also impacts development. One field operative employee in Wales expressed a perception that it’s easier to progress if your ‘face fits’ with the manager. We

“ I mean, if you're quite pally with your manager, so you actually have a better rapport, as compared to somebody who just comes in, does his job, and goes home. If you've got that relationship with him, either way I feel that when it comes down to there being training or progression within your job role, that person is looked on more favourably than the person who is just quiet and just gets their head down and gets on with the job. Because they've built that talking relationship, they're, almost, friends. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

asked them to elaborate on what they meant by a face that ‘fits’:

This perception adds weight to the idea that employees would benefit from a more coherent approach to management, both for work-life balance and development.

Managers need training on how to manage effectively

In order to oversee and facilitate the development of their colleagues, managers need to be upskilled to respond to these changing expectations. One People and Talent professional corroborated a finding of the literature review – that this process starts with clarification of what an organisation expects from its managers.

Given how many new expectations workers have of managers, organisations such as WWU should make it clear how managers should allocate their time and redesign their roles where necessary.

I think most organisations probably have a big piece of work to do to understand what they mean by the word 'manager'. And I think we've got a massive population of managers across the organisation. Some are excellent and some are terrible. But we've never defined what we want those people to be managing. And a lot of the time what we see is managers doing a full-time job, but also having really large spans of control when it comes to a team. So, they're just not able to do either effectively. And I think L&D is probably a really good example of where that manifests, because all of our conversations about training tend to be a bit point-and-shoot. 'You need to complete that by X date.' Rather than, 'What's your learning style?'

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

As well as clarifying expectations of managers, People and Talent professionals emphasised the importance of providing targeted training to mitigate the widening managerial skills gap. This can take different forms.

- **'Manager Mondays'**. One organisation runs monthly sessions designed to upskill managers to meet the aforementioned expectations. *"There are distinct topics that get covered and we rotate it around the People and Talent team or talent management team where they get run"*. In this People and Talent professional's view, the benefit of this approach is that it is ongoing, as opposed to a standalone, one-day course. This allows them to instil managerial principles over time.
- **Authenticity**. Another People and Talent professional took a different approach, focusing more on a broader 'mindset' shift than targeted training. *"I think the biggest skill at the moment is being authentic in the way that you lead. [...] We don't want them to be really prescriptive, so we need something authentic. Back to the authentic point. So, therefore it's not just reading from a guide, it's really thinking about you as a person, your style"*. The challenge with this is making authenticity compatible with a coherent, company-wide approach.

WWU could use a blended approach to upskilling managers, with ongoing sessions to embed specific principles, while simultaneously encouraging authenticity as an overarching mindset. It is important to bear in mind that this could represent significant change. Much like managers showing empathy to managees, senior leadership being empathetic about the scale of change required from line management and being realistic about the pace at which this can happen is important to maintain welfare.

WWU employees content with progression within current role, but frustrated by lack of opportunity to 'climb the ladder'

WWU employees are broadly happy with the opportunities they have to progress within their current role. This is underpinned by a perception, as explained at the start of this section, that they have autonomy to shape their own development and pursue their professional interests.

I think in terms of progression in their current role, I think they're quite good at that. If the roadside guys want to get more involved in different operations, and different upskilling in those bits I think we're quite good at that, it's just where do they go from there is an issue.

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

There is a clear perception that there are opportunities at WWU to upskill. And, crucially, that individual employees have a say in which skills they want to develop. But as the employee quoted above noted, the issue is *'where do they go from there'*.

Limited progression to more senior roles

Despite satisfaction with progression *within* their current role, WWU employees expressed frustration that they have limited opportunities to progress to more senior roles.

WWU employees identified three main barriers to this 'upward' movement:

1. **Promotion is only possible if a senior colleague leaves or retires.** Both office-based and field operative employees remarked that there is not a clear 'pathway' within the organisation, because progression is contingent on vacancies opening at more senior levels. As a result, many employees do not feel that strong performance in their current role will be rewarded with promotion.

“ There has to be a vacancy at the top for somebody else to move into. It's almost a pyramid because you might have 280 SCOs or whatever we've got across the company, out of those 280 SCOs there's probably, I don't know, say 15 management jobs. And then from 15 managers, there's only 4 performance managers. So, as you come up the level of how many jobs that are there to move into is less. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

“ I think in terms of development of people, I think we're quite good at giving them the opportunity to progress a bit further in their current role and giving them the option to have a little bit more to do and take on a bit of extra responsibility in the current role that they're doing. It's just that thing of going, actually, where do you then go from there because if the job is not there for you to promote into. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

There is also a geographical element. As the office-based employee said above, there is a sense that those based at Celtic Springs enjoy clearer progression pathways. While resentment toward Head Office was not a widespread sentiment across the focus groups, it is worth noting in the context of broader perceptions of regional inconsistency. Field operative employees in North Wales, for example, believe that they have fewer opportunities to progress than their colleagues in South Wales.

“ There isn't a pathway to go from an admin point of view. There is no pathway. [...] unless you're at Celtic Springs you're kind of shafted. ”

Office-Based WWU Employee

2. **Promotion often requires relocation.** Employees noted that while an opportunity to progress may exist. In such cases, focus group participants suggested that the personal

strain of relocation – especially with a family – negates the potential benefits of the opportunity.

While office-based and field operative employees raised this issue, the latter group were more likely to emphasise familiarity with their ‘patch’ and colleagues as a reason to *not* relocate.

As the field operative employee from South West and Central noted, the need to relocate in order to progress becomes more keenly felt once ‘*you get to a certain level*’. The implication is that WWU may struggle to retain mid-level and senior employees who want to progress but are unwilling to relocate, or risk that employees develop a sense of ‘*staleness*’ within their role.

“ I think a lot of people, if you've been doing a job in a patch for 15, 20 years, and you know your local area and you know the team you work with, if somebody then said, 'Yes, we've got a really good opportunity for you to go into management but it means you've got to move to Exeter,' it's like, yes the opportunity is there but this is what I know and this is what I've lived with and these are the guys I work with. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

“ You get to a certain level and then, unless you're willing to up sticks and move to different areas and things like that, you become a little bit stale really. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

3. It is harder for employees to progress if they excel at their current role.

Several employees – both office based and field operative – perceived that their opportunities to progress are limited because they have become indispensable to WWU in their current role.

The flipside of this is a perception among field operative employees that colleagues who are poor ‘on the tools’ have a clearer path to management. Though said in jest, this came across as a genuine observation.

“ I think once you get to a certain point in your role, if you're good at something then they just leave you doing that and that's it. I do repex, I've done repex as a team leader for about 9 years now. We do planned work and we do emergencies, I don't ever get the opportunity to do anything like that because I'm good at what I do so they just leave me to do that and I don't see a lot of progression above me. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

A key finding of the literature review was that internal progression is a vital consideration in retaining talent. WWU should establish clearer pathways to remove the perception that

“ I think there's a running joke that they say, 'If you're poor on your tools you get pushed up to management,' as a joke. ”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

employees are beholden to the vacancies that happen to open above them in order to progress. With the current situation, some employees see circumstance as a determining factor on progression, rather than performance, aptitude, or hard work.

It should be noted that progression means different things to different WWU employees. Not every focus group participant strives to progress ‘up the ladder’. Some are content in their current role and view progress in less conventional terms – as improving their work-life balance, for example. That said, it is still important that clear pathways are in place across the organisation to enable linear progression for those who aspire to it.

Considerations for WWU

WWU may wish to consider the following in order to embed a positive culture of development and progression across the organisation.

- Instil confidence in employees that not only do they have autonomy over their development, but that WWU will **provide the relevant, accessible training courses**. There is currently a sense of scepticism, captured by the statement: *‘whether or not I get the training is a different story’*. WWU employees suggested greater flexibility over training location, while People and Talent professionals have created ringfenced ‘windows’ so employees have time to complete training.
- **Development encourages succession planning, and vice versa**. WWU could consider replicating schemes that other People and Talent professionals have implemented to facilitate progression and ensure knowledge remains in the organisation.
- **Offer increased training to managers** to help them respond to changing workplace expectations – the need to be *‘everything to everyone’*. This, in turn, should create a more coherent, company-wide experience for managées.
- **Consider how to make performance of the key determinant of progression**, rather than circumstance. Many employees see their progress as dependent on more senior colleague leaving, or their willingness to relocate, rather than how qualified they are to perform a higher-level job. Moving toward a more explicitly performance-based approach would make employees feel valued at work improve retention.

Chapter 3: Technology and communications at work

Recap of the literature review

The pandemic has led to an increased focus on technology in the workplace. The rise of hybrid and flexible work models has heightened expectations of the technology that enables them. Increasingly, employees expect workplace technology to be of a quality at least high as the technology they use in their personal lives.

The literature review argued that technology plays a dual role – properly functioning technology and sufficient upskilling to use this technology is integral to employee satisfaction and so job *retention*, but cutting-edge technology also allows WWU to position itself compellingly to prospective joiners, especially those in Gen Z – who have higher competence using and expectations of technology.

The qualitative findings strongly support the first of these findings – WWU employees, particularly field operative employees, stressed the importance of addressing technology challenges in maintaining their satisfaction. The appeal of technology as an attractor at talent *acquisition* stage was less widely discussed. The findings here do not disagree with the literature review per se, but discussion with People and Talent professionals instead focussed on technology in the context of communications, a topic which again is closer to the literature’s review discussion of technology’s role in employee satisfaction more than it is technology’s role as a competitive differentiator.

With that greater focus on communications in mind, this chapter begins by discussing challenges that employers face relating to communications and technology, before discussing the impact that employee expectations here could have, structured as follows:

1. The challenge of utilising technology to engage with employees across multiple channels to cater to different preferences, without just bombarding them with an excessive amount of information – People and Talent decision-makers identified this as an important balance for organisations to be attentive to.
2. The stakes of removing communication and technological stumbling blocks for both employee retention and acquisition.

Understanding employee preferences around communications while avoiding overwhelming people

One of the most significant communications challenges identified by People and Talent decision-makers concerned maintaining ‘fluidity’ in communications channels without simply overwhelming employees with information. There is a widespread view that a one-size-fits-all approach to company communications is not effective in an organisation the size of WWU – for instance, field operative employees aren’t likely to be monitoring company emails (if they even have a device which enables them to do this) while out in the field. *But*, People and Talent professionals also stress the need to do more to make sure that all relevant communications are read by all employees.

At the moment, many are aware of an overreliance on emails and the fact that communications might not be reaching all employees, especially those out in the field:



We are an incredibly email-heavy company. Our email traffic is abysmal, not just from day-to-day people doing their jobs, but from an absence of a properly channel-driven communication strategy. So, it feels like, now, that email is our only way to reach everyone. When I say only way, that's because everyone has an email address and we've got some nice easy distribution lists.



People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

In this context, most People and Talent decision-makers had or were looking to improve the efficacy of their other channels of communication – to take a multichannel approach which best fits the needs of different employee types.

However, this brings a separate challenge. In order for a multichannel approach to internal communications to be successful, different employees' communication channel preferences need to be gauged. People and Talent decision-makers are of the view that it is much easier to gauge the success rate of email communications than other communications channels. Moreover, even keeping track of 'open rates' holds limited value for People and Talent professionals, as they *"want to know what they felt and what they did, once they absorbed that information"*.

In this context, many default back to a different kind of one-size-fits-all approach to company communications, where all messages are sent to all channels to ensure messages reach most employees. However, there is an awareness that this is far from ideal and can lead to employees feeling bombarded and overwhelmed by information. This *"bombardment of communication"* is challenging as it not only disrupts workflow and reduces productivity but could lead to increased stress, worsening employee wellbeing.



We are in a position where it's almost a bit of a blanket approach to people. It's, 'Let's send every message to every person on every device, because we just hope that somebody will catch the right one.' You know, to link back to the wellbeing piece, that's having an impact, because people are saturated, and they don't know what to pay attention to.



People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

Exploring how to implement an effective, more focused multichannel approach (or omnichannel approach) to internal communications could be worth exploring in this context – one that effectively understands which employees engage with which channels, so that WWU can be more selective with the channels used for specific purposes rather than using all channels for all information.

To give an example of how some communications might be diverted away from emails: some organisations interviewed as part of the research are exploring AI-enabled chatbots for more day-to-day questions, so that emails can be reserved for significant announcements. As well

as avoiding overloading employees with information, it is more efficient from a People and Talent perspective:

“ The other big push that's happened over the last few years is, we've downsized HR in terms of personnel, significantly, and we're using chatbots to answer a lot of questions. So, whether someone might come to us and say, 'Well, what's my paternity leave allowance?' They would come to the human being and ask that previously, now it's all done through this chatbot, and it's very effective – but it's taken a long time to get there, so there's a lot of data behind it. ”

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

The increasing sophistication of chatbots, as detailed in Savanta's separate Customer Service Trends research for WWU, may make this a viable option – but likely requires significant work to implement. For customer service chatbots, a central store of customer data is needed for it to function effectively. Analogously here, a central repository of the kinds of information that employees might have questions about (company processes, policies and so forth) would be needed in order to work well. The fruits of such an approach can be significant, but the legwork to implement it should not be underestimated either.

These challenges are particularly pronounced for organisations with a large proportion of field operative employees like WWU

Overreliance on particular communications channels (particularly email) is a particular problem in organisations which have a large proportion of field operative employees. People and Talent leaders regard these employees as either not being included on company email or central communications platforms, or not having regular access in work hours due to the nature of their role:

“ I think we have some complexities in the workforce, again between, like, office-based and non-office-based. Not everybody has an email address. And also [some field workers] will have an email address, but they're not at their laptop for much of the day. And we then have the, you know, geographically, dispersed teams [which is a further challenge]. ”

People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

For field operative employees in particular, misalignment on communications channels can create disengagement. People and Talent professionals stress that this needs to be a focus when improving communications, and suggest adopting something similar to a customer-centric approach – mapping the journey and context in which employees engage with communications:



I'd describe it as communications and engagement. But I think it's less about the content of those two things, and more about *how* we choose to share, store, and organise information for colleagues. Most organisations have not got a proper grip on how each of those personas of people prefer to interact with information. And that has lots of knock-on effects for us. Particularly managers in the field. Because there are some things that we perceive as quite simple to do. But they pick up their device while they've got gloves on, and they're trying to find an answer to something that their team's asking about, 'Where do I go for that? How do I get it? Oh, I've got no internet connection. I can't bookmark that on my phone.'



People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

The Customer Service Trends research that Savanta recently conducted for WWU notes that some utilities organisations are exploring AI-enabled voice assistants for field operative employees. Such a voice assistant would be more concerned with hands-free information such as maintenance history and guidance on processes, but it is also worth thinking about with regard to important company updates.

However, one further barrier is that – according to People and Talent professionals – field operative workers have particularly pronounced technology-related challenges in their organisations. According to these professionals, field operative workers are less tech-savvy and less willing to engage with technology than office-based employees, despite being well-acquainted with the particular technology used in their roles. Whether this is true for WWU's employees is unclear, and was not tested by this research.

Whatever the solution, it is clear that finding an effective multichannel approach to communications is important to balance the need for personalisation and avoiding bombardment. A prerequisite for this is better understanding what employees want, and so an immediate first step for WWU might be a qualitative piece of work to understand the context in which employees engage with communications and what their preferences are. While this piece of work has covered communications as a topic, it did not granularly discuss different types of communication and how preferences differ – so this is not a question this piece of research can answer. However, it is clear that this work to understand the context in which employees engage with communications (and how it shapes preferences) is important:



I think the root cause of the issue is that we've never done the piece of work to understand the different personas of colleagues that work for us, therefore, what device do they prefer to use and in what way do they prefer to consume information? So, there's a bit of the personal element and a bit of the technological element, and it's only recently that I've started to bring these conversations together under the banner of colleague experience. Prior to that, we would always have, I want to say comms strategy, but we don't have a very good one of those, but the comms would've been considered separately to our device strategy, would've been considered separately to what else is happening for that colleague in their day-to-day. So, we are in a position where it's almost a bit of a blanket approach to people. Understanding the day-to-day context has to come first.



People and Talent decision-maker in a UK organisation with a large proportion of field operative workers

The stakes of doing this are not insignificant – as the next section argues, the removal of communications- and technology-related stumbling blocks are amongst the foremost priorities for field operative employees, and it is also their view that this would significantly improve WWU’s outward-facing brand image too.

The stakes of removing communications and technology-related ‘stumbling blocks’

Whilst technology is an enabler of hybrid work, which can support the wellbeing of certain employees for whom this offers a better work-life balance or integration, for others hybrid work and the technologies involved in enabling it can lead to increased pressure and struggles with not only disconnecting from work but working to the best of their ability due to technological challenges.

Focus groups discussions found that apparently minor technological issues are regarded by field operative employees as a major hindrance in their ability to perform their jobs efficiently. It is felt in some cases that the involvement of technology in processes makes tasks more cumbersome rather than more efficient:

“For me, the IT side of things is what holds us up down here. It really is. If your laptop's not working, we've been given an iPad that is useless. Some of the programmes that we've got on our laptops are really poor. The timesheets that they've just chucked out at us now are an absolute farce. All the IT side of things and the apps that we've got to use, it all needs to be streamlined and made easier for sure.”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

“Connectivity on the laptop for instance is an issue. Some of the programmes don't really work very well. So, yes, I remember when we used to have the Android phones and you could just Bluetooth pictures to your laptop but then we went from Apple and we got the Thinkpads and things, it's just not very fluent.”

Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

Understanding where upskilling is the solution and where new technology is the solution is something that WWU will want to look at here – as there are cases where the technology is regarded as confusing, and cases where the challenges aren’t to do with usability (e.g., connectivity).

Field operative employees expressed a desire for WWU to be more bold in embracing innovation and new technologies. So it is clearly not as simple as this cohort being technology-averse – it is that they don’t regard WWU’s current technological capabilities as meeting their expectations:



If I could have one wish for Wales & West – I think they've come a long way in twelve months – but to really push forward with innovations and new ways to do things, because sometimes we just keep doing things the same way because that's how we've done them for the last 15, 20 years. But the tools and the kit and the stuff that's out there which we're starting to see now, but they really need to just push forward with it and just keep doing it. I do trial a lot of the stuff that comes out and some of the kit we've got now is just fantastic – but if you want to complete more work and get the best people, you need to invest in the latest stuff that's coming out. That'd be my one thing.



Field Operative WWU Employee in the South West

In this context, seriously exploring the technologies discussed like voice assistants, AI-enabled chatbots, and the like, may be worth exploring. As the above quotation makes clear, employees see this as important for their experience and for productivity – but also for attracting talent. This concurs with the literature review’s finding that technology is important in being appealing at the talent acquisition stage – though it is worth caveating that the literature review discussed this specifically with regard to Generation Z, whereas the focus groups – unsurprisingly – didn’t talk about differences by demographic groups.

In addition to technological ‘stumbling blocks’, employees also discussed the stakes of improving communication. This was couched in terms of performance and therefore external brand image, more than individual employee experience.

In particular, several participants lamented the time lag between obtaining information from a relevant internal party and relaying it to customers – for instance, if a household asks a field-based employee for more information on the work they’re doing (e.g., when someone will next be attending the property if there are multiple stages to the job, or when an office-based employee will follow up with them), there can be frustration for both the field operative employee and the customer where this information isn’t available. Employees feel unsatisfied about how unprofessional this can make them look, and lament its impact on perceptions of the organisation. In this context, field operative employees call for better communication between departments:



It's just sometimes it doesn't seem like there is a lot of fluidity between the different departments. It does seem sometimes like we work a bit against each other. I think it's our biggest weakness because if we worked together a little bit more, we'd achieve a lot more.



Field Operative WWU Employee in Wales

Considerations for WWU

- **Explore the other channels of communications that could be used for internal communications.** Ensuring that multiple channels of communication are used, without this leading to communication overload, is important for ensuring that the diversity of employee needs and preferences are catered to. Conducting further employee research to understand different communications channel preferences would also be useful in this context.

- **Conduct regular, informal engagement to understand the specific technological painpoints that field operative employees are having**, in order to better identify where challenges are caused by a need for upskilling, and where challenges are caused by the technology itself. Responding to some of these challenges quickly and effectively is likely to have a significant impact on field operative employees' satisfaction, based on the weight they gave to this area in the focus groups.
- Explore innovative technologies that can streamline workflows and improve efficiency, such as **AI-enabled tools or mobile applications tailored to field-based tasks**, and **be bold about implementing new technologies**. Invest in pilot projects or trials and engage employees – especially field-based employees – in the process of evaluating and adopting these new technologies, ensuring that their input and feedback are considered.