

# How to improve gender equality in the workplace

Evidence-based actions for employers

This guide is part of the 'How to improve gender equality' toolkit



## "To move the dial on equalising pay, we need to debias systems, not people."

This guide forms part of a wider toolkit on evidence-based actions for employers to improve gender equality.

The toolkit includes a series of detailed guides on how to implement five of the effective actions:

- How to set effective targets
- How to establish diversity leads and diversity task forces
- How to run structured interviews
- How to use skill-based assessment tasks
- How to increase transparency of progression, pay and reward processes

Throughout this guide we indicate whether additional resources are available wherever relevant, and provide links for you to access the step-by-step implementation guide for effective action.

"To improve gender equality, we need to debias systems, not people. Human resource management must be based on rigorous evidence of what works to level the playing field, treat everyone fairly and benefit from 100 percent of the talent pool. Evidence-based design of hiring practices, promotion procedures and compensation schemes helps our organisations do the right and the smart thing, creating more inclusive and better workplaces. This evidence-based guide is an important step towards helping employers know what works."

Iris Bohnet – Academic Dean, Albert Pratt Professor of Business and Government and Co-Director of the Women and Public Policy Program, Harvard Kennedy School



### **Contents**

- 02 How to improve gender equality in the workplace evidence-based actions for employers
- 03 Which actions to implement
- 04 Evidence categories

Effective actions
Promising actions
Actions with mixed results

	Area of focus	Effective actions	Promising actions	Mixed evidence
06	Leadership and accountability	Set internal targets for gender representation and equality		
		Appoint diversity leads and/or diversity taskforces		
08	Hiring and selection	Offer flexible working by default in job adverts	Use targeted referrals	Diversity statements
		Use structured interviews for recruitment and promotions	Remove biased language from job adverts	Diverse selection panels
			Recruit returners	
		Use skill-based assessment tasks in recruitment	Anonymise CVs	
		Make expectations around salaries and negotiation clear	Make it possible to list experience in terms of years not dates in CVs	
			Include more women in shortlists for recruitment and promotions	
			Make decisions about applicants in batches	
12	Talent management, learning and development	Increase transparency to promotion, pay and reward processes	Request 'advice' for actionable ways to improve instead of 'feedback' on past performance	Performance self-assessments
				Unconscious bias training
			Offer mentoring and sponsorship	Diversity training
			Offer networking programmes	Leadership development training
18	Workplace flexibility	Share local support for parental leave and flexible working	Improve workplace flexibility for men and women	
			Encourage the uptake of Shared Parental Leave	

- 20 Evidence used in this review
- 21 Further reading

# How to improve gender equality in the workplace

Evidence-based actions for employers

Diversity can have many benefits for organisations. Diverse views and perspectives lead to better decision-making and creativity. Employers have asked us to share evidence on actions that are likely to improve gender equality.

This guide summarises approaches that have been shown to improve outcomes for gender equality.

It also indicates those which need more evidence before they can be recommended as widespread approaches. This will help employers create more effective action plans.

Wherever possible, we have also consulted research related to wider characteristics, for instance considering race and ethnicity as well as gender. See <u>page 20</u> for more information on the evidence used in this review.

This resource groups actions into four different areas of focus:

- Leadership and accountability
- Hiring and selection
- Talent management, learning and development
- Workplace flexibility

This work was funded by the Government Equalities Office as part of the Gender & Behavioural Insights Programme.



## Which actions to implement

#### Every organisation is different and may face different challenges. To know where to focus your efforts, we recommend taking a data-driven approach.

Answering the questions in Box 1 will help you identify where gender imbalance is occurring and address the specific issues in your organisation.

Targeted actions are important but gender equality in an organisation is not achieved by implementing just a few actions – it is driven by a sustained approach that reaches every part of the organisation.

"We recommend taking a data-driven approach"

#### **BOX 1**

#### Using data to target your actions

Employers who use high quality data to understand the drivers of their lack of diversity will be able to target their actions and achieve the most effective results.

To identify areas for improvement in your organisation, start by answering these questions:

- 1. Are women more likely to be recruited into lower paid roles compared to men?
- **2.** Do particular aspects of pay (such as starting salaries and bonuses) differ by gender?
- **3.** Do men and women receive different performance scores on average?
- **4.** Is there gender imbalance in your promotions?
- **5.** Do people get "stuck" at certain levels within your organisation?
- **6.** Do you support part-time employees to progress?
- **7.** Do men and women leave at different rates?
- **8.** Are you supporting both men and women in your organisation to take on caring responsibilities?

Use the full <u>guidance</u><sup>1</sup> for more information on how to answer these questions.

## Evidence categories



#### **Effective actions**

There is strong evidence that shows these actions are effective, and that they are worth implementing. We recommend prioritising these actions above the actions in the categories below.



#### **Promising actions**

These actions are promising but they still need further research to improve the evidence of their effectiveness and how best to implement them. The government has policies in place supporting some of these actions to improve women's participation in the workforce. The government is evaluating their effectiveness and we recommend that employers evaluate their actions too.



#### Actions with mixed results

These actions have been shown sometimes to have a positive impact and other times a negative impact. This might be due to how they are implemented or other factors that we do not fully understand yet. As a result, investing in these actions is a more risky use of resources. We cannot, therefore, make a general recommendation that these are good ways to reduce gender inequality.

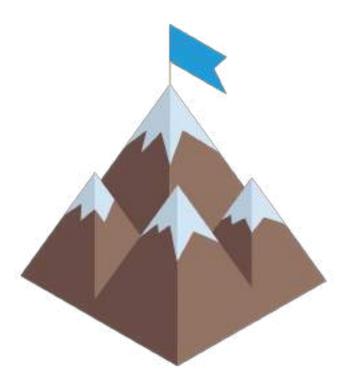


## Leadership and accountability

Leaders play a key role in driving gender equality in their organisations. The first concrete thing leaders can do is to set specific, ambitious targets.

The second thing is to create strong accountability mechanisms to ensure that every hiring manager and people manager feels accountable for diversity outcomes in their team.

"Making a public commitment makes it more likely that the target will be achieved"





## Effective action: Set internal targets for gender representation and equality

The first thing many organisations do is set goals. Unfortunately general goals such as "we will change our culture to be more inclusive" are not effective unless they are accompanied by specific goals. High-level goals do not spur action or assign responsibility. Targets are most successful when they are:

- Specific and clear. What are you aiming to change and how big will the change be?
- Time-bound. By when will the goal be achieved?
- Challenging but realistic.
- Public.<sup>2</sup> Organisations should consider making their targets public. Making a public commitment makes it more likely that the target will be achieved.
- Monitored. Progress towards goals should be tracked and reviewed regularly.

For more information on how to implement this action, see our step-by-step guide.





## Effective action: Appoint diversity leads and/or diversity taskforces

Diversity leads and diversity taskforces hold all parts of the organisation accountable for diversity and inclusion efforts and outcomes. Having a diversity lead is associated with better representation of women and minority groups in organisations.<sup>3</sup>

However, simply appointing a diversity lead or taskforce is not enough. Diversity leads and taskforces should be able to review hiring, progression and talent management decisions and ask for justifications for them. This creates accountability. When people know their decisions may be reviewed by a senior manager or taskforce, they pay closer attention to the information they are basing their decisions on, and make less biased decisions.

Diversity leads and taskforces should:

- Have a senior or executive role within the organisation. They need to have enough influence to hold people accountable for making progress on equality and diversity goals.
- Care about equality and diversity. They should also seek to continually develop their expertise about proven approaches to improve diversity and inclusion.
- Have visibility of internal data so they can track progress and outcomes.
- Be in a position to ask for more information on why decisions were made.
- Be enabled to develop and implement diversity strategies and policies.

For more information on how to implement this action, see our step-by-step guide.

"Having a diversity lead is associated with better representation of women and minority groups in organisations"

### Hiring and selection

Unconscious bias and stereotypes can creep in at various stages of the hiring and selection process, reducing the chances that an employer hires the best candidate for the job.

An effective way to overcome bias is to standardise processes to ensure all candidates are assessed in the same way and according to the same criteria. Even structured interviews and task-based assessments can be biased unless they are standardised and conducted in a consistent way.



## Effective action: Offer flexible working by default in job adverts

Nine in 10 people looking for work want flexibility.<sup>4</sup> Advertising specific flexible working options has been shown to increase applicant pools by 19–30% on the global job site Indeed<sup>5</sup> and by 50% at John Lewis.<sup>6</sup> Advertising new roles or promotions as open to part-time or job-sharing by default increased applications from women to senior roles by 19% at Zurich Insurance<sup>7</sup> and 35% at John Lewis & Partners, and few hiring managers opted out.<sup>8</sup>

Prompting hiring managers to clearly list specific flexible working options at the moment of posting a new role is key.

A simple prompt led to a 20–30% increase in employers advertising flexible jobs on Indeed.



## Effective action: Use structured interviews for recruitment and promotions

Compared to structured interviews, unstructured interviews are more likely to allow unfair bias to creep in and influence decisions.

Use structured interviews that:

- Ask exactly the same questions of all candidates in a predetermined order and format.
- Grade the responses using pre-specified, standardised criteria. This makes the responses comparable and reduces the impact of unconscious bias.<sup>10</sup>

For more information on how to implement this action, see our step-by-step guide.

"Advertising new roles or promotions as open to part-time or job-sharing by default increased applications from women to senior roles by 19% at Zurich Insurance and 35% at John Lewis & Partners"





#### Effective action: Use skill-based assessment tasks in recruitment

Interviews alone may not give all candidates a good opportunity to demonstrate their suitability for a role. During recruitment, ask candidates to perform a range of tasks they would be expected to perform in the role they are applying for. This could involve situational judgement tasks, work samples or assessment centres. Using tasks that assess a variety of skills and abilities may help to reduce differences in how men and women are rated overall.<sup>11</sup>

Like other forms of candidate assessment, skill-based assessments need to be designed and conducted in the right way in order to minimise bias. Specifically:

- Have pre-specified scoring criteria.
- Make sure the assessment task resembles the real-life task.
- Develop the task and the scoring criteria with input from different staff members to ensure they are not too narrow or reflect gendered expectations about the role.<sup>12</sup>

For more information on how to implement this action, see our step-by-step guide.



## Effective action: Make expectations around salaries and negotiation clear

Women are less likely to negotiate their pay on average.<sup>13</sup> This can lead to women having lower starting salaries on average than men.<sup>14</sup> These differences persist over time.

Women are affected more than men by the lack of information about whether negotiating is an option or what salary range is on offer. Employers should clearly state the salary range available and they should also state whether the salary is negotiable. These are effective ways of increasing the number of women who negotiate.<sup>15</sup>

However, another reason why women do not negotiate their salaries is that they are more likely than men to face backlash, for example with people seeing them as "too demanding". Employers therefore need to ensure that women are not unfairly penalised when they do negotiate. Employers should monitor negotiation outcomes and starting salaries to see if any gender gaps emerge.

"Using tasks that assess a variety of skills and abilities may help to reduce differences in how men and women are rated overall"



#### Promising action: Use targeted referrals

Many applications result from employees sharing vacancies with people they know. However, these referrals typically reflect the existing demographics of the organisation. Using targeted referrals, where employees are encouraged to share vacancies with underrepresented groups, balanced the proportion of women referred to maledominated roles at the Ministry of Defence.<sup>17</sup>



#### Promising action: Remove biased language from job adverts

The language you use in job adverts may discourage women from applying. Women assume roles advertised with stereotypically masculine words are in male-dominated teams and they may not fit in. <sup>18</sup> There are tools available to help with this – search online for gendered language bias tools.

Women may also be less likely to apply if requirements are expressed as traits (e.g. 'you are a natural leader') rather than behaviours (e.g. 'you have good leadership skills') without affecting men's application rates.<sup>19</sup>

"Recruiting returners can give employers access to skilled and experienced talent seeking to re-enter the workforce"



#### Promising action: Recruit returners

Returners are people who have taken an extended career break for caring or other reasons. They may face challenges finding a new position or may take on a role that does not reflect their capability. Recruiting returners can give employers access to skilled and experienced talent seeking to re-enter the workforce.

Use our <u>guidance</u><sup>20</sup> to see how to attract and hire returners. For example:

- Target places where returners are likely to be looking.
- Ensure the recruitment process is returner-friendly.
- Offer support before and during the assessment.



#### Promising action: Anonymise CVs

Anonymising a CV means removing any identifying information – like the applicant's name or contact details – before giving it to the people who are doing the hiring. Removing identifying information makes it more difficult for people to tell an applicant's gender, race or ethnicity. This can prevent biases from influencing the decision-making process.<sup>21</sup>

You should consider CV anonymisation if the minority proportion who successfully make it through the CV sift is substantially smaller than the proportion who applied. For example, if 40 percent of applicants to certain roles in your organisation are women, but only 20 percent of candidates who make it through the CV sift are women, then you should try CV anonymisation.



#### Promising action: Make it possible to list experience in terms of years not dates in CVs

Reduce bias against women returning to work after a break to care for children by making it possible to list experience in terms of years rather than dates. Positioning experience in terms of years (e.g. 'four years') rather than dates (e.g. '2016–2020') on a CV increased callback rates from employers by 15% for women returning to work after a break to care for children.<sup>22</sup> By making years salient, employers are more likely to see returners in terms of their relevant experience rather than negative stereotypes.



#### Promising action: Include more women in shortlists for recruitment and promotions

When putting together a shortlist of qualified candidates, some evidence suggests that it is important to make sure that a certain number of women are included on the list so that individual women are not seen as "token".<sup>23</sup>

Instead of considering whether there is a "magic number" of women to have on a shortlist, employers should set themselves ambitious targets for the gender proportions they want to have on their shortlists. This can mean specifically asking recruiters to look for equally well qualified women, or investigating whether there are equally well qualified women in your organisation who have not applied for an internally advertised role.



#### Promising action: Make decisions about applicants in batches

When people consider job applicants one at a time, they are more likely to end up comparing the candidate to certain stereotypes. For example, a well-qualified woman applying for a job in a predominantly male team may be rejected because she appears too different from the team's current image of a talented team member.

This can be addressed by evaluating candidates in batches to reduce bias. In the previous example, comparing the well-qualified woman to two other new candidates who have applied for the role could allow her excellent qualifications to stand out more. There is some evidence that this approach can help gender equality.<sup>24</sup>

Your organisation may already make decisions about applicants in batches if you have recruitment or promotion rounds where you evaluate multiple candidates against each other. However, some organisations may have ongoing or open recruitment or promotion processes, which mean that a decision is made about an individual candidate in isolation as they apply. If this is the case, look for points in your processes where multiple candidates could be considered in parallel and weighed up against each other.



#### Mixed evidence: Diversity statements

Organisations often use diversity statements in their job adverts, on their websites and elsewhere to communicate that they care about diversity. Unfortunately, it is not clear that they work. Little research has been done so far looking at how they affect women's likelihood to apply to the organisation. Slightly more research has been done on whether diversity statements make ethnic minority groups more likely to say they would apply for jobs, but the results are mixed. Diversity statements might work in some contexts but backfire in others.

While diversity statements are one way of trying to communicate that your organisation cares about diversity, based on current evidence you should not rely on them as a way to attract more diverse candidates.



#### Mixed evidence: Diverse selection panels

Having selection panels with a mix of men and women seems to help women's prospects sometimes and harm them at other times. Some studies show that the more women there are on a panel, the more likely women are to be selected for a role, 28 while other studies find the opposite. 29 The effect can also depend on the role being recruited for 30 or the role of women on the committee. 31 More research is needed to understand the conditions under which a diverse selection panel is or is not effective for improving gender equality.

"Having selection panels with a mix of men and women seems to help women's prospects sometimes and harm them at other times"





### Talent management, learning and development

Many organisations invest heavily in learning and development, including unconscious bias and diversity training programmes. Unfortunately there is little evidence suggesting that these are an effective way to change behaviour.

Instead, we recommend employers to focus on transparency across all processes and enabling women to access opportunities at equal rates to men. We also encourage tracking the effectiveness of other initiatives, such as networking programmes, mentoring or sponsorship schemes.





#### Effective action: Increase transparency to promotion, pay and reward processes

Transparency means being open about processes, policies and criteria for decision-making. This means that employees are clear for example about what is involved to get a pay increase or exactly how promotions are decided. Managers also understand that their decisions need to be objective and evidence-based because those decisions can be reviewed by others.

Without transparency and the accountability it creates, it can be easier for decisions to become biased. It can also be harder for minority candidates to know what is expected of them in order to progress – or to question inconsistent or unfair decisions. Increasing transparency to promotion, pay and reward processes can reduce pay inequalities.<sup>32</sup>

For more information on how to implement this action, see our step-by-step guide.



#### Promising action: Request 'advice' for actionable ways to improve instead of 'feedback' on past performance

Women are more likely than men to receive vague feedback, which holds back their development.<sup>33</sup> Asking for "advice" rather than "feedback" seems to produce more specific and actionable feedback overall.<sup>34</sup> Consider separating developmental feedback processes from evaluative processes, as evaluative feedback is less likely to lead to performance improvement.<sup>35</sup>



#### Promising action: Offer mentoring and sponsorship

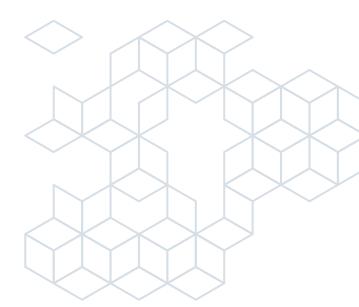
Mentors provide guidance and advice to their mentee while sponsors advocate for and champion the person they are sponsoring. Some evidence suggests that mentoring programmes are somewhat effective for women from minority groups, but are not necessarily effective for women of all backgrounds.36 It is not clear, based on existing evidence, whether sponsorships are more effective than mentoring, or how best to run mentoring and sponsorship programmes so they are effective. It is possible that, for mentoring or sponsorship programmes to be effective, they must give women access to and advocacy from highly influential people in an organisation.



#### Promising action: Offer networking programmes

Some evidence suggests that formal networking programmes where members meet and share information and career advice can be helpful for White women but not other groups of women.<sup>37</sup> This may be because networking needs to give participants access to people in senior positions. It may be less common for minority women to get connected to people like them in senior positions via networking. More work is needed to understand the effects of networking programmes, and whether they need to have particular features in order to be successful.

"Increasing transparency to promotion, pay and reward processes can reduce pay inequalities"





#### Mixed evidence: Performance self-assessments

There is some evidence that women underestimate their abilities in the workplace. They may also be more conservative in their assessment of their abilities than male peers.<sup>38</sup>

Managers' judgement can be unconsciously influenced when they look at employees' self-assessment scores, for example as part of 360 degree performance feedback.<sup>39</sup> We know that performance appraisal scores can be biased in a particular direction by this sort of information.<sup>40</sup> This is particularly a problem if those self-assessment scores are shared with the manager prior to performance review sessions. The lower scores women give themselves mean that managers might then give women lower scores than they otherwise would have. This can affect performance-related outcomes such as pay rises, bonuses and progression.

We recommend that if a review process contains an element of self-assessed scoring, these scores should not be shared until after a manager has made their own assessment of the employee's performance.

"There is currently no evidence that unconscious bias training changes behaviour or improves workplace equality"



#### Mixed evidence: Unconscious bias training

Unconscious biases can influence a person's judgement without them being aware of it. Unconscious bias training in the workplace aims to make people aware of potentially harmful unconscious biases and to reduce the impact of those biases. While some types of unconscious bias training may have some limited positive effects such as creating awareness and shifting people's attitudes in the short-term, there is currently no evidence that this training changes behaviour or improves workplace equality.<sup>41</sup>



#### Mixed evidence: Diversity training

Diversity training can help raise awareness but is unlikely to change behaviour. 42 Some research in the US has found that mandatory diversity training either does not change the number of women in management positions, or actually reduces it. 43

This backfiring may occur for a number of reasons. It may be because people resent being made to do something and so do not take the training seriously. The training might also bring to mind unhelpful stereotypes which people then act upon. Alternatively the training might make people think that the organisation has now solved its diversity problems.

We therefore do not recommend prioritising the use of resources on unconscious bias or diversity training.



### 11

#### Mixed evidence: Leadership development training exclusively for women

Leadership development programmes aim to teach skills including management competencies and self-confidence. While there are some very small-scale studies of the effects of leadership training programmes for women, particularly in medicine and academia, there is currently no high quality evidence that such programmes help women progress. Some people feel that these programmes imply that the women themselves are the problem. For now, organisations should not expect these programmes to greatly improve the representation of women in senior positions.

"Some research has found that mandatory diversity training either does not change the number of women in management positions, or actually reduces it"



### Workplace flexibility

Flexible working arrangements and generous parental leave policies are increasingly important in attracting the best talent. It is important for employers to 'walk the talk' and ensure that take up of these policies is genuinely encouraged throughout the organisation.



## Effective action: Share local support for parental leave and flexible working

Men may privately support other men taking longer parental leave and working flexibly, but incorrectly believe that their male colleagues think differently. Informing men about the high levels of support among their male colleagues, including managers, increased rates of men intending to take 5–8 weeks of parental leave by 50%.

At Santander, 99% of men supported men working flexibly, but thought only 65% of colleagues did. When male employees were informed that their male peers were almost universally supportive of flexible working, men's intentions to work flexibly in the future rose by 4%. 45



"Flexible working arrangements are attractive to both men and women and increase the total number of applications to vacancies"



#### Promising action: Improve workplace flexibility for men and women

It is important to challenge the gender stereotype that it is a woman's role to take on caring responsibilities. Improving workplace flexibility for everyone can enable both women and men to combine work with family and other parts of their lives. 46 We know that flexible working arrangements are attractive to both men and women and increase the total number of applications to vacancies. 47

- Advertise and offer all jobs, including senior roles, as having specific flexible working options, such as part-time work, remote working, job sharing or compressed hours.
- Encourage senior leaders to role model working flexibly and to champion flexible working.
- Encourage and enable men to work flexibly, so that it is not seen as only a benefit for women.
- Avoid an organisation-wide one-sizefits-all approach (for example, specifying the number of days employees can work from home), as this could create a gender gap rather than avoid one.<sup>48</sup>
- Talk to fathers about changing their working patterns when they have children, not just mothers.



#### Promising action: Encourage the uptake of Shared Parental Leave

The unequal sharing of childcare between men and women leaves a lasting impact on women's earnings. Shared Parental Leave and Pay enables working parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay in their child's first year.

Encourage take up of Shared Parental Leave (see the government's guidance).<sup>49</sup>

#### For example:

- Inform future fathers that it is their legal right to request Shared Parental Leave.
- Provide future parents guidance and personal support to understand the scheme.
- Share and promote examples of senior leaders who have taken Shared Parental Leave in your organisation.
- Offer enhanced Shared Parental Pay at the same level as enhanced maternity pay.

"Encourage and enable men to work flexibly, so that it is not seen as only a benefit for women"

## Evidence used in this review

We focused on gender-related research and evidence, but we also included research on characteristics such as race/ethnicity and sexual orientation to understand what works for improving equality and diversity more generally. This acknowledges that people's experiences are not determined by a single dimension of identity.

For some actions, we have gone beyond gender and other diversity characteristics, drawing on a wider body of behavioural science research to make our recommendations. For example, there are no high quality studies on the impact of setting internal targets on equality in the workplace. We have nonetheless included this as an effective action because goal setting has a consistent effect on behaviour across a range of settings. So where the body of findings is robust and consistent across contexts, we have included the action even without specific evidence from the workplace equality context.

This evidence review is based on the best evidence currently available. However, highly rigorous evidence is currently scarce in the field of gender equality in the workplace. Our judgement about whether a given action is categorised as "effective", "promising" or "mixed evidence" is based on a holistic assessment of the current evidence. In this document, we cite only a sample of the studies that were used to inform our assessment of the efficacy of a given action as it was not practical to cite them all.

We will continue to work with employers to generate new research, as well as monitoring the wider evidence base. To stay up-to-date with our findings, subscribe to the <u>BIT blog</u>. If you are interested in commissioning future research, get in touch.

## Further reading

<u>Gender & Behavioural Insights Programme</u> by The Behavioural Insights Team.

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### **Endnotes**

- Eight ways to understand your organisation's Gender Pay Gap.
- 2 Mento, A.J., Steel, R.P. & Karren, R.J. (1987). A meta-analytic study of the effects of goal setting on task performance: 1966–1984. Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes, 39(1), 52–83; Epton, T., Currie, S. & Armitage, C.J. (2017). Unique effects of setting goals on behavior change: Systematic review and meta-analysis. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 85(12), 1182–1198.
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- 4 Timewise (2020) <u>Jobseeker survey:</u> the impact of lockdown.
- 5 The Behavioural Insights Team (2021)

  Encouraging employers to advertise jobs as flexible.
- 6 The Behavioural Insights Team (2021) Flexibility by default: Increasing the advertisement of part-time or job-share options.
- 7 The Behavioural Insights Team (2020)

  <u>A field trial with Zurich Insurance to</u>
  advertise all jobs as part-time.
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- 13 Leibbrandt, A., & List, J. A. (2014). Do women avoid salary negotiations? Evidence from a large-scale natural field experiment. Management Science, 61(9), 2016–2024.
- 14 Equal pay is the legal requirement to pay the same to men and women who carry out the same jobs, similar jobs or work of equal value at the same locations. The EHRC's Equal Pay Statutory Code of Practice provides employers comprehensive guidance on the Act and their responsibilities under it.

- 15 Mazei, J., Hüffmeier, J., Freund, P. A., Stuhlmacher, A. F., Bilke, L., & Hertel, G. (2015). A meta-analysis on gender differences in negotiation outcomes and their moderators. Psychological Bulletin, 141(1), 85–104; Leibbrandt, A., & List, J. A. (2014). Do women avoid salary negotiations? Evidence from a large-scale natural field experiment. Management Science, 61(9), 2016–2024.
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  requirements in job adverts.
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- 20 For our guidance, see Returner
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