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Delivering Fairness and Success with Flexible Working in STEM

The ongoing revolution in digital and biological technologies together with the explosion in available healthcare data and current COVID-19 pandemic has ignited unprecedented growth in the life sciences sector. This in turn has created a surge in demand for people with STEM-based skills to support the development of new medicines, medical diagnostics and devices. Nevertheless, despite being a small Belfast-based company, [Exploristics](#) has managed to build an experienced team of statisticians, programmers, software developers and data scientists able to provide specialist biostatistics software and consultancy services for clinical stage global life sciences organizations of all sizes. Flexible working has been a vital approach in helping us to achieve this.

The valuable STEM skillset of our team and their flexible problem-solving approach has been key to helping the company grow through developing our flagship study design software [KerusCloud](#) alongside end-to-end [biostatistics support](#) on clinical development projects. To keep delivering cutting edge solutions to advance healthcare breakthroughs we have worked hard to attract and retain the best talent despite our size. Here, the provision of flexible working has helped to unlock important talent resources, weather the pandemic storm and deliver a fairer, more diverse workplace.

Many years before the pandemic, we recognised that to develop the creative STEM team needed to reach our global goals as a small company, we must adopt a flexible working approach which included home working. This would allow us to unlock the valuable skills of a more diverse set of people who were perhaps largely untapped by the wider industry. Initially, these mainly included highly qualified women either returning to STEM following a career break to raise a family or those looking to remain in their careers whilst still fulfilling their care-giving responsibilities. This has proved to be both popular and successful, and at Exploristics we are proud to have almost an equal number of women and men in the company, with the majority in technical roles.

This more flexible approach to working has not only chimed with our passion in advocating greater female representation in STEM but is also paying dividends at the Leadership and Board level as many of the women we have recruited have moved into more senior roles in the company as we strive towards reaching gender parity at all levels. This is particularly important to us as an equal opportunities employer as while the Pharmaceutical

Industry has traditionally employed a high proportion of women this is not always reflected in the higher positions. However, what has also become apparent is that flexible working is not only an issue for women but is now widely valued across the organisation as more parents share childcare responsibilities and individuals seek to develop their skillset through pursuing external qualifications or improve their work-life balance.

Whilst increasingly popular, flexible working is not without its challenges. The needs of the individual must still be balanced with those of our customers who expect seamless delivery of the support we offer. Many of our roles and activities are not greatly impacted by home or flexible working whereas we acknowledge that not all areas of STEM lend themselves so easily to this. Flexible working also requires more active engagement between staff and management so that everyone is clear about what is expected. Nevertheless, flexible working has had a positive impact for our organisation and business performance, improving employee engagement, helping to increase gender diversity and progression while keeping the company resilient and competitive when COVID-19 hit.

Going forward, implementing flexible working has highlighted further areas in need of change in the workplace to embed greater equality and inclusion such as the current disparity in parental leave and pay. However, these will require Government support to provide a legal and financial framework that can help employers offer a genuinely more equal working environment and ensure that companies remain competitive in the global life sciences market by unlocking the value of the full range of STEM talent available.

Read more on the STEM career journeys of Exploristics female team members with our [STEM stories](#) blog series.