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THE RISE OF FRACTIONAL WORKING IN THE UK & IRELAND

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OVERVIEW

Fractional working, the practice of engaging talent on a part-time, flexible basis across multiple organisations, is on the rise. In the wake of pandemic driven workplace shifts, businesses are rethinking traditional hiring models in favour of more agile, cost-effective approaches. During recent economic uncertainty, many UK employers have turned to contractors and fractional hires to maintain business activity. This report explores the origins of fractional working, its growing prevalence in the UK and Ireland, ideal use cases, and the benefits it offers. It also provides a practical checklist for companies considering fractional hires. The goal is an insightful, sector-agnostic white paper for senior leaders, with an engaging yet factual tone that highlights why fractional talent can be a game changer in today's evolving employment market.

This underscores how significant non-permanent work already is in the labour market. Official statistics show that roughly 95% of UK employees hold permanent jobs and 5% are in temporary positions – which equates to about 1.5 – 1.6 million people in temporary roles in early 2025. Not included in that figure are the self-employed independent contractors, a category that accounts for further millions of workers.

Post-pandemic trends indicate a shift toward more contracting and fractional engagements. Recent data from the Association of Professional Staffing Companies (APSCo) reveals that even as permanent hiring cooled, demand for contractors remained buoyant, with employers turning to temporary resources to stay agile. At the end of 2024, the number of new contract jobs in the UK was up 33% year on year.

This divergence suggests that companies, uncertain about long-term commitments, are hiring expertise on a contract or fractional basis to fill immediate needs. The increase in contractor jobs demonstrates that demand for expertise is growing, but caution remains in adding full-time headcount."

In short, firms are choosing flexibility, plugging critical skill gaps with temporary talent, until confidence in the economy fully returns.

UK EMPLOYMENT MIX

PERMANENT VS CONTRACT

UK's employment mix has traditionally been dominated by permanent, full-time roles, but a substantial and growing segment is comprised of contractors, freelancers and part time workers. According to the Recruitment & Employment Confederation (REC), the UK recruitment industry places over 1 million people into permanent jobs each year, yet over 1.3 million temporary or contract workers are on assignment in any given week.

Ireland shows a similar picture of workforce flexibility. Part-time employment accounts for about 20% of the total workforce in Ireland (over 580,000 people as of late 2024), and this share has been gradually rising. While not all part-time workers are "fractional" in the multi-client sense, the statistic indicates an openness to reduced hours roles.

Ireland's business community, too, is witnessing the emergence of fractional executives as an "integral part of the business ecosystem", especially as companies seek specialist skills on flexible terms.

WHAT IS FRACTIONAL WORKING?

Fractional working refers to individuals working on a freelance or contract basis but holding a portfolio of part-time assignments simultaneously. In practice, a “fractional” professional might dedicate, say, two days a week as a marketing director for one company, while spending another day or two consulting as a project lead for another, and so on.

Unlike traditional contractors who often engage full-time with one client at a time, fractional workers truly split their week among multiple organisations, contributing part of their capacity to each. This model has been most visible with fractional executives, e.g. fractional CFOs, CMOs, CTOs, CISOs, seasoned C-level leaders who offer their expertise to several businesses at once on a part-time schedule.

Now, the approach is spreading beyond the C-suite into middle and junior positions, enabled by remote work and the growing acceptance of flexible schedules. Characteristics of fractional roles: They are typically ongoing (not one-off gigs) but without a predefined end date and the engagement is part-time by design.

A fractional executive might be retained for a few days per month or a certain number of hours per week, indefinitely or for a lengthy period, to provide continuous expertise without being a full-time employee.

This differs from interim roles (which are usually full-time but short-term) and from pure consultants (who often deliver specific project outcomes and move on). Fractional workers become embedded advisors and leaders, but with a scope limited to a “fraction” of a full-time role. For example, a company may not need a full-time Finance Director, but a fractional CFO can offer high-level financial strategy one day a week, giving the firm top-tier guidance at a proportional cost. It’s important to note that fractional working isn’t yet ubiquitous, it’s still an emerging trend.

In the UK, most freelancers today still work one contract at a time (effectively acting as single-client contractors). However, the fractional model, long established for certain senior roles, is gaining traction and starting to appear in more layers of the workforce.

Regions like Europe have seen it more frequently, and now UK professionals and employers are warming to the concept. As fractional success stories accumulate and cultural attitudes shift further toward flexibility, we can expect more fractional roles to come onto the market, allowing candidates to mix-and-match their work schedule between multiple employers.

PERMANENT EMPLOYMENT STILL FORMS THE BACKBONE OF UK AND IRISH WORKPLACES, BUT THE MIX IS TILTING TOWARDS FLEXIBILITY. A GROWING CADRE OF PROFESSIONAL'S WORK IN NON-PERMANENT ARRANGEMENTS, WHETHER AS CONTRACTORS ON SINGLE FULL-TIME PROJECTS OR INCREASINGLY AS FRACTIONAL TALENT SPLITTING TIME ACROSS MULTIPLE CLIENTS. THIS EVOLVING MIX SETS THE STAGE FOR FRACTIONAL WORKING TO FLOURISH.

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BENEFITS OF HIRING FRACTIONAL TALENT

For businesses, engaging fractional staff can yield a wide range of benefits. Below is a list of key advantages to consider:

Cost savings and efficiency

Perhaps the most tangible benefit, fractional hires save money. You pay only for the portion of time you need rather than a full annual salary. Companies report seeing 40–60% reductions in labour costs by using fractional executives compared to full-time hires. There is also less “wasted” capacity, fractional engagements allow very precise allocation of hours, tasks, and targets. You aren’t funding downtime; every hour you pay for is focused on priority work. Especially in high-paying executive roles, the ability to access top talent at a fraction of the cost is a clear win for the budget.

Access to top talent and expertise

Fractional working opens doors to high calibre talent that might otherwise be unavailable or unaffordable. A small firm likely cannot entice a FTSE 100/250 to join full-time, but on a fractional basis that expertise becomes accessible. As one executive search firm observed, organisations are embracing the idea of hiring top-tier executives for just one or two days a week in areas like finance, marketing, and HR.

Focus and high impact

By definition, fractional professionals focus on what they do best. They are typically brought in with clear objectives and deliverables, and they concentrate on those strategic or specialised tasks rather than getting pulled into routine operational duties. Many fractional executives say these roles let them operate “almost exclusively in that high-impact space”, applying the top 20% of their skills to the job. For the business, this means the work you get from a fractional hire is high-value work. A fractional CTO, for example, will spend their hours on architecture, technology strategy, and critical decisions, not general management meetings or low-level minutiae. This can increase the quality and speed of outcomes in the areas that truly matter.

Flexibility and scalability

Fractional arrangements are inherently flexible. Need more time or an extra project handled this quarter? It’s often feasible to temporarily expand a fractional engagement (if the individual’s schedule permits) or layer on another fractional resource. Conversely, if needs diminish, you can scale down without the complex process of restructuring a full-time role. This scalability is especially useful for businesses with seasonal or cyclical needs, or those in unpredictable markets. It also affords companies the agility to pivot quickly, if market conditions dictate a change in strategy, fractional talent can be reoriented or swapped out more readily than permanent staff.

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Faster hiring and onboarding

Recruiting a senior full-time employee can take months of search and negotiations, and additional months before they are fully effective. In contrast, fractional specialists (many of whom are former senior executives or career consultants) can often be identified and onboarded quickly through their networks or agencies. They are used to hitting the ground running. There's also less red tape; these hires are typically contract engagements, avoiding lengthy HR processes. As a result, a critical skills gap can be plugged in a matter of weeks or even days, which can be crucial for fast-moving projects or crisis situations.

Objective viewpoint and innovation

A fractional executive, by virtue of working with multiple organisations, can offer a fresh, outsider perspective to your business. They are less likely to be encumbered by internal politics or the "this is how we've always done it" syndrome. Fractional leaders often introduce innovative ideas and challenge groupthink, drawing on cross-industry insights. In the words of one account, because they work across different companies and sectors, they can "bring fresh and innovative perspectives" and even new networks of contacts to the businesses they serve. This can spark creativity and prevent blind spots, giving your organisation a competitive edge.

Diverse talent and inclusion

Engaging fractional workers can also support diversity and inclusion goals. Companies can cast a wider net beyond the location and typical profile of a full-time hire. For example, an organisation could engage a fractional female CTO who lives in a different region, or a professional returning to work after a career break who prefers part-time hours. Fractional workers as a group are likely to be diverse, in background, location, and experience, which can enrich a company's culture and problem-solving.

Trial run for roles or talent

Fractional engagements can serve as a low-risk trial, both for the individual and the company. Businesses can see the impact of, say, having a dedicated marketing strategist on the leadership team without committing permanently. If the value is tremendous, some fractional roles can later be converted to full-time (with a much clearer justification and fit). Conversely, if it's not providing expected benefit, it's easier to conclude a fractional contract than to handle a full-time exit. Some firms also use fractional hires as a way to "try out" a particular executive's fit with the company culture and strategy, potentially recruiting them full-time later if both sides are amenable.

Continuous learning for teams

A side benefit is that fractional experts often mentor and upskill internal team members. They might train your junior staff, implement best practices, and leave lasting knowledge in the organisation. Because fractional leaders usually collaborate closely but briefly, they tend to document processes and build capabilities so the team can carry on strongly after they scale back. This knowledge transfer can be incredibly valuable, effectively giving you a consulting deliverable (improved team skill) beyond the immediate work.

IN AGGREGATE, THESE BENEFITS ILLUSTRATE WHY FRACTIONAL HIRING IS TERMED A "WIN-WIN" FOR EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONALS AND BUSINESSES ALIKE. COMPANIES GET JUST-IN-TIME, HIGH-QUALITY TALENT WITH CONTROLLED COSTS AND FLEXIBILITY. FRACTIONAL PROFESSIONALS GET REWARDING WORK AND AUTONOMY. THE RESULT IS OFTEN A MORE RESILIENT AND RESPONSIVE ORGANISATION, ONE THAT CAN DRAW ON EXPERTISE-AS-A-SERVICE AS EASILY AS IT TAPS CLOUD COMPUTING ON DEMAND.

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FRACTIONAL HIRING CHECKLIST FOR COMPANIES

If your organisation is considering engaging a fractional executive or professional, it's important to approach it thoughtfully. Below is a checklist of key steps and considerations to ensure a successful fractional hire:

Identify the need

Pinpoint the specific skill gaps or strategic needs in your business that do not require a full-time role. Common triggers for fractional hires include needing high-level guidance in finance, marketing, tech, etc., but only a few days a week, or requiring an expert for a defined project/period. Be clear on why a fractional solution makes sense (budget limits, interim coverage, specialised project, etc.).

Define the role and scope

Clearly articulate what you expect the fractional professional to accomplish. Outline the scope of responsibilities, deliverables, and decision-making authority. Because they won't be present every day, it's crucial to set focused objectives and priorities for their time. For example, is the fractional CMO's primary goal to revamp the digital strategy? Should the fractional HR lead implement a new performance system? Having a well-defined role prevents wasted time and maximizes impact.

Determine time commitment and duration

Decide how many days per week or hours per month you will need the fractional hire, and for how long (is it an ongoing role with no set end, or a 6-month arrangement?). This will guide discussions with candidates and ensure you budget appropriately. Keep in mind flexibility, you might start with one day a week and adjust later.

Budget and contracting

Set a budget for the fractional role that reflects its part-time nature but is attractive for top talent. Fractional executives often charge premium day-rates or retainers (they bring 100% of their expertise for your fraction of time). Research market rates or consult agencies to ensure your offer is competitive.

Sourcing the right talent

Look for candidates with the precise expertise and the ability to operate fractionally. Many fractional executives come via referrals or specialised networks (e.g., interim/fractional recruitment firms, professional associations). You may also find talent on LinkedIn or via industry contacts who are known to take on part-time consulting gigs.

Cultural and team fit

Even though a fractional hire isn't a full-time employee, cultural fit matters. Especially if they'll interact with your leadership team or staff regularly, they need to mesh with your values and work style. During interviews, gauge their adaptability and how they build relationships. It's often wise to involve key internal stakeholders in the selection, so everyone is comfortable and supportive.

Onboarding plan

Don't short change onboarding just because the person is part-time. Prepare a thorough onboarding process to bring the fractional hire up to speed quickly on your business context, team structure, and current challenges. Introduce them to key team members and assign a point of contact for coordination. Provide necessary access to systems and information from day one.

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Set goals and KPIs

Within the first weeks, establish what success looks like for the fractional engagement. Set specific goals or key performance indicators that you will use to measure the impact. For example, a KPI for a fractional Sales Director might be to increase quarterly pipeline by X%, or for a fractional CIO to deliver a new IT roadmap by a certain date.

Integration with the team

Make a plan for how the fractional professional will interface with your team and processes. Announce their role internally so employees know who they are and why they're there ("We've brought in a fractional CFO, Jane Doe, who will be with us on Tuesdays and Thursdays to strengthen our financial strategy and systems.").

Maintain communication and oversight

Treat the management of a fractional hire similarly to any important team member. Schedule regular check-ins to discuss progress, obstacles, and upcoming needs. Because their time is split, it's wise to have a quick touch-base at the start or end of each period they work with you (e.g., a Monday kickoff call to align on that week's tasks).

Ensure knowledge capture

Since a fractional engagement might eventually end or scale down, plan for knowledge capture. Have the fractional professional document key processes, strategies, decisions, and recommendations. If they are mentoring a team member to take over some responsibilities long-term, facilitate that mentorship.

Review and adjust

Periodically review the effectiveness of the fractional arrangement. Are the expected benefits materialising (e.g., are goals being met, is the cost justified by outcomes)? Gather feedback from the fractional hire and your internal team about what's working or any friction points. You may discover you need to adjust the scope, increase or decrease days, or refocus their efforts. Fractional working is a two-way flexible street; use that flexibility to fine-tune the engagement.

BY FOLLOWING THIS CHECKLIST, COMPANIES CAN SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE THE LIKELIHOOD THAT THEIR VENTURE INTO FRACTIONAL HIRING WILL BE SUCCESSFUL. ESSENTIALLY, IT COMES DOWN TO PLANNING, CLARITY, AND COMMUNICATION, BE DELIBERATE ABOUT WHY AND HOW YOU'RE USING FRACTIONAL TALENT, AND MANAGE THEM WITH THE SAME RIGOR AND RESPECT AS ANY KEY TEAM MEMBER. WHEN DONE RIGHT, THE FRACTIONAL PROFESSIONAL WILL OPERATE SEAMLESSLY WITHIN YOUR BUSINESS, DELIVERING OUTSIZED RESULTS IN THEIR "FRACTION" OF TIME.

CONCLUSION

For professionals, fractional working has opened new avenues to craft the careers they want, filled with variety, autonomy, and purposeful engagements.

Fractional working represents a transformative shift in how UK and Irish businesses can engage talent. What began as an emergency solution or a niche consulting option has proven to be a sustainable model for accessing expertise in a flexible, cost-effective way. Five years after the pandemic upheaval, the world of work is more dynamic than ever, and fractional talent has firmly entered the scene as a strategic asset. In the words of one industry leader, "fractional executives are here to stay, and their impact on business will only grow."

For employers, the rise of fractional working offers a compelling proposition: why hire one full-time executive, when you can leverage the strengths of several, each exactly when and where you need them? This model allows organisations to remain lean and agile, responding to challenges with precision by deploying high-level skills on demand. Companies that have embraced fractional hires speak to the tangible benefits, from major cost savings to faster project delivery and fresh strategic perspectives. Moreover, by tapping into this growing pool of fractional professionals, businesses large and small can mitigate talent shortages and punch above their weight in innovation and leadership.

In summary, fractional working in the UK and Ireland is more than a trend, it's a strategic evolution in the employment mix, blending the best aspects of contracting, consulting, and employment. Businesses that understand and harness this model can gain access to exceptional talent and remain resilient in the face of change. By recognising the scenarios where fractional hires shine and by implementing them with clear goals and support, organisations can reap a "fraction" of talent that delivers a whole lot of value. The rise of fractional working signals a future where companies are not constrained by traditional hiring boundaries, a future where, truly, talent can be fractional, but impact can be whole.

If you would like to provide any feedback, or submit a brief, please email:
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