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Tories call for 'work revolution'

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Nine-to-five jobs must be ditched in favour of more flexi-time, job-sharing and working from home, the Tories said today.

Without a shake-up of the way employment is viewed, Britain's economic prosperity could be threatened, the shadow work and pensions secretary, Phillip Hammond, warned.

Employees could switch from working for just one firm to a freelance-style approach, signing on to the books of a number of companies under a "zero-hours" contract.

They would then sell "slivers of time" by the hour or by the project to employers, Mr Hammond said in a speech in Stratford.

The "job for life" has already become a thing of the past - and the distinction between "employed and unemployed" would soon follow, he added.

"We have no doubt that to deliver both our economic and our social goals, we must see a huge increase in flexibility in employment patterns.

"Human capital is the natural resource of Britain."

He said the question facing employment in the future is: "Is the rigid nine-to-five working day pattern of conventional employment fit for purpose in the 24-hour/365 day global economy, where firms have to work across time zones and accommodate different cultures if they are to remain competitive and thus to survive?"

"We in the Conservative party have no doubt the answer is a resounding 'no!'"

Under the party's vision, more people will work from home or at different times of the day to meet both the demands of their employers and the pressures of their own lifestyle.

Older people will never completely retire, staying on the books of their employers for ongoing occasional work.

"Flexible working will open the workplace to more people, and will make it more attractive and more satisfying to more of them.

"They will maintain our global competitiveness and our national prosperity by continuously improving labour productivity."

The government must take a lead as Britain's biggest employer "not by regulating to require flexibility, but by deregulating to permit it".

Mr Hammond also used the speech to re-open the debate on immigration.

It emerged this week that 427,000 immigrants have arrived in Britain from eastern Europe in two years.

He spoke of the "need to find the right balance between the needs of business for a ready supply of labour and the needs of society for a supply of flexible employment opportunities for as many of the 5 million people on out-of-work benefits as possible.

"To ignore them in favour of an unrestricted flow of migrant labour is not only to pass over the best opportunity for social and economic reintegration of excluded groups within our society but it is also to impose a huge and unnecessary burden on our infrastructure and our built environment as additional homes and facilities are provided."

He added the 2.7 million people on incapacity benefit should not be overlooked.

"To ignore the talent and potential they offer, and to write them off as 'unemployable' is a terrible waste of human resource that can no longer be tolerated."