

# Simon Beard

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*Interviewed by Marie Synakewicz*

On a normal working day, Simon takes his eldest child to school for 9am and then walks to the railway station to start his journey from Kent to Cambridge. During these 3 hour commute he does most of his reading and listens to relevant audio-books. The use of noise-cancelling headphones and good text-to-speech software makes his life a lot easier. After he arrives in the office around lunchtime, he can fully concentrate on the social and networking aspects of his work. The afternoon he spends with answering emails and in meetings, before he then gets ready for the journey back home. "It is a very long day," he says, "but it is productive and it is nice to have it broken down like that. I think it increased my efficiency in certain respects".

After spending a few years in politics working for different think-tanks, charities and even the House of Lords, Simon returned to academia to do a PhD in Moral Philosophy at the London School of Economics. Subsequently, he did a short post-doc at Oxford before coming to Cambridge to work for the CSER on global threats and population ethics. Already in the interview for his current position he made clear that he would like to work from home some days to accommodate his caring responsibilities. The reason why Simon and his wife decided to continue living in Kent was that his parents are close by. Both Simon and his wife have disabilities: he is visually impaired and his wife suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome. When he is working from home, he does a lot of writing and other tasks that are difficult to do in a noisy office. At the same time, he can do a lot to support his wife and children throughout the day. When he is away, they rely on his parents to provide help with childcare and in the household.

At the beginning of every week, Simon talks to his group leader to make plans for the up-coming days and to arrange the relevant meetings. His working hours are an informal agreement that is very flexible and can be adapted from week to week if necessary. By now his arrangement feels natural, and it simply requires some more organisation and forward planning such that he is not missing out of anything important. Sometimes, he cannot attend spontaneous meetings or the random trip to the pub. "Working flexibly is not cost-less", he says. Simon likes his group and his work, and it would be nice to have more time with his colleagues. But he also wants to spend time with his family and therefore has to compromise. When one works flexibly it is very easy to feel guilty, something he really struggled to come to terms with. At home he always thinks "I should be working", while at work he thinks "I should be helping out at home". Especially on his long working days, he has to take some time for himself as he comes home. In his experience, it is better to take a quick break before spending the rest of the evening with his children rather than feeling forced to give them all available time.

Having the flexible working agreement with his group allowed the whole family to stay where they are, as it would have taken a considerable amount of time, effort and finances to move to Cambridge, get settled and arrange for childcare. It might be harder to maintain such an arrangement when Simon finishes his post-doc and is able to secure a role with teaching and administrative responsibilities. But by that time, his youngest child will be in school which will reduce the caring load for him and his wife. Hence, this unique working arrangement might come to an end naturally in 2 years' time anyway.