



Work-life balance: working for fathers?

Introduction

This interim report discusses the findings of the two-year research project between Lancaster University School of Management (LUMS) and Working Families. The project is examining how fathers in paid work, particularly those on a low income, combine work and family life, and measures the stress and wellbeing of fathers at work in relation to their integration of work and home life. In particular the project gives specific consideration of the extent to which flexible working practices enable them to remain both a committed employee and a fully engaged parent.

The role of fathers is of importance as their direct involvement with their children's upbringing increases. The role of the father is changing. Fathers say that they want to spend more time with their children, and attitudes towards childcare and work are shifting.

The changing landscape

It is becoming increasingly evident that the expectations that fathers have of the way and amount they are involved directly with their children is altering. Fathers want to spend more time with their children, and are doing more of the direct care for them. Research suggests that this desire for more time with their family is widespread, with 82% of full time working men saying they would like this.¹ There is also evidence which suggests that received social ideas in relation to family and child care are in a period of profound change. Fewer fathers than mothers believe that it is a mothers job look after children. When it comes to working and caring, more fathers than mothers believe that the highest earner should work full time, regardless of gender.²

The Fatherhood Institute observes that a substantial number of fathers are now full-or part-time 'home dads': among fathers of under-fives, 21% are solely responsible for childcare at some point during the working week and 43% of fathers of school-aged children provide care before/after school².

¹ Park, A., Curtice, R., Thomson, K., Phillips, M., & Johnson, M. (2007). British Social Attitudes, the 23rd Report: perspectives on a changing society. London: the National Centre for Social Research.

² EHRC (2009b). Working Better: fathers, family and work contemporary perspectives. Research summary 41. London: Equality and Human Rights Commission

INTERIM REPORT - NEW FINDINGS

There is a background of 'equalling up' in the domestic sphere which supports the assertion that fathers are becoming more involved in family life. Men are spending more time doing housework than they have before.³ They are also providing more direct childcare. However, this is not to assume that the domestic work and childcare load is evenly distributed: broadly, women still do more.

One of the reasons that this might be the case, and that fathers might be hitting some limits in the amount of time they can put into domestic life is their relationship with work. Although fathers have expressed a desire to work more flexibly, they do not do so in the same numbers as women. There are a number of factors which may explain the difference between intention and practice: the pay gap; ideas about being a 'breadwinner'; prevailing workplace culture; and social/gender expectations and norms.

Why is it important for organisations?

There are a number of reasons why the changing role and expectations of fathers is important for organisations. By understanding better the decisions and attitudes fathers take and have in relation to their work, and how these are influenced by how well they can reconcile work with their family responsibilities, employers will be able to strategically adapt work to be more father-friendly. In doing this, benefits will accrue for the individuals and the organisation.

Data from the qualitative research undertaken for this project (to be released in March 2011) shows that fathers who work flexibly do not consider themselves unusual, or viewed in a negative way because of their work patterns. Fathers who have worked in a flexible way for a number of years identify a change in individual attitudes over time; where previously their working pattern drew (sometimes negative) comment, fathers working flexibly is now seen as mainstream and commonplace. However, flexible working is perceived by many fathers as being something within the gift of line managers, with overall organisational policy being of less relevance than the attitude of the immediate manager when attempting to agree a flexible working arrangement.

Organisations need to ensure that policies around flexible working are relevant to all employee groups, and not constrained by managerial attitudes and beliefs. This may, of course, mean that additional training is necessary at managerial levels about decision making around flexible working.

No organisation wants to cultivate a culture of dissatisfaction and low morale, yet the interplay between arrangements in the domestic sphere and the work one can be significant influencers on 'performance' in both. However, the interplay is subtle and difficult for organisations to capture and understand. How many organisations, for example, know about the varying level of stress in fathers in relation to the number of children they have, and how these are mediated by the income. Further efforts to engage meaningfully with fathers, to the same degree that mothers are engaged with, will be beneficial to fathers not only in terms of understanding more, but also in increasing the visibility and opportunities for engagement with fathers.

³ Kan, M-Y., Sullivan, O., & Gershuny, J. (2009). Gender Convergence in Domestic Work: discerning the effects of interactional and institutional barriers in large-scale data. Unpublished Paper. University of Oxford.

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Key points

- Working flexibly has a significant positive impact on fathers over those who don't work flexibly. Fathers who were working flexibly have better physical and psychological health, are less stressed, are more committed to their employer and enjoy better relationships with their colleagues.
- There is a general trend where fathers with **one** child or **three** or more children appear to be more stressed than those with **two** children are. Within this trend, fathers who are on lower incomes appear to suffer worse physical and psychological health when they have three children.
- Fathers who said that their partner does the majority of the housework were significantly more troubled by their work-life balance than those who claimed that they do most themselves
- Those fathers whose *partners* are in full-time employment appear to have significantly higher levels of both positive psychological well-being and sense of purpose
- Fathers on a low income feel less stressed and more in control if they are able to work flexibly.

The findings

The following data is all taken from the results of the private sector organisation – which had 638 working fathers responding. We await to the completed statistical analysis of the public sector organisation. However early indications indicate similar results.

Overall analysis: flexible working works

Research question: To what extent is the well-being of working fathers related to whether or not they work flexibly?

Working flexibly in some way had a significantly positive impact for working fathers over those who do not work flexibly in any way on all of the well-being factors below:

Work-life balance	Overload
Work relationships	Physical health
Resources and communication	Positive psychological well-being
Job security	Commitment to organisation
Control	Perceived commitment of their organisation to them

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Even in the economic climate where uncertainty prevails, this shows that flexible working options are a good way to improve working fathers' well-being and commitment, and alleviate negative physical and psychological health issues.

The forms of flexible working polled were: 'home-working', 'flexible hours', 'job-sharing', 'part-time working' and 'other'. The most positive group overall are those who use homeworking. Both those who use one type of flexible working and those who use more than one type have more positive levels of well-being than those who do not work flexibly. However, there were no statistically significant differences between the scores for the 'one type' and the 'more than one type' groups.

Detailed analysis: the impact of demographic variables

Research question: *What impact do demographics have upon the well-being of working fathers, irrespective of flexible working practices?*

- There is a general trend whereby those with 1 child or 3 or more children appear to be more troubled by a number of the enablers and barriers to well-being than those with 2 children
- There is a general trend whereby those on a higher income generally score more positively on a series of well-being factors
- There is a consistent trend that physical health and psychological health are more negative for those aged over 40 than they are for younger fathers. This is a typical trend found in measures such as this
- Those who have 3 or more children under 18 years old have significantly poorer physical health levels than both those who have 2 children and those who only have 1
- Fathers who said that their partner does the majority of the housework were significantly more troubled by their work-life balance than those who claimed that they do most themselves

INTERIM REPORT - NEW FINDINGS

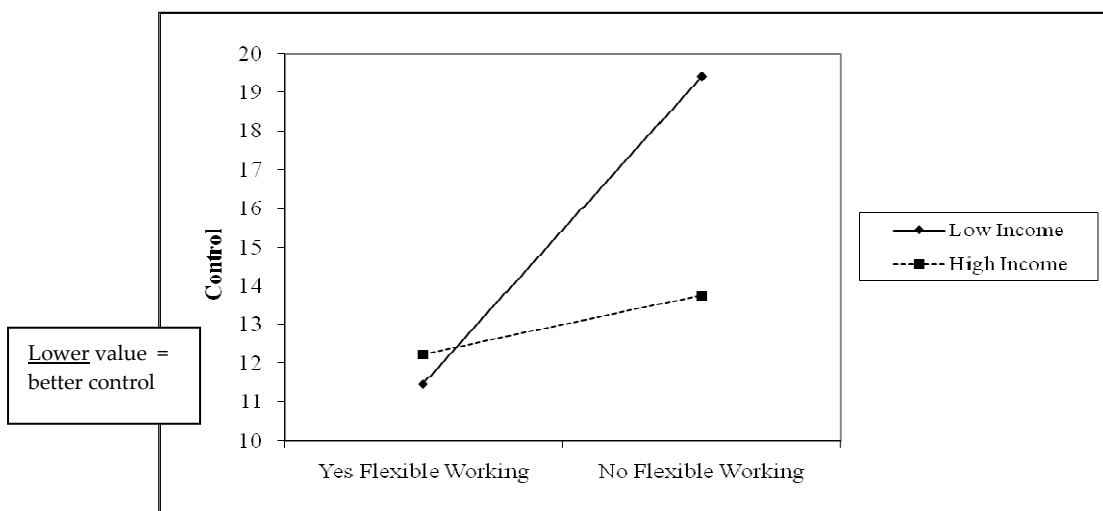
- Those whose partners are in full-time employment appear to have significantly higher levels of both positive psychological well-being and sense of purpose

Detailed analysis: Moderating concerns over 'control'

Research question: *To what extent does flexible working moderate between the independent variables 'flexible working' and 'yearly income' and the dependent variable 'control'?*

There was a statistically significant moderation effect found between the independent variables 'flexible working' and 'yearly income' and the dependent variable 'control'.

The interaction is shown in the graph below:



The graph above shows that flexible working significantly moderates the relationship between income and control. Therefore feelings of control appear to be much more troubling for those on a low income compared to the higher earners. However, when they use flexible working in some way, lower income employees can get this control back – and this difference in stress is between income groups is closed up.

Discussion points

- Repeated across both the quantitative and qualitative analysis, the success or failure of fathers requesting flexible working depended mostly on the attitudes of line managers – regardless of what is theoretically available. This

INTERIM REPORT - NEW FINDINGS

suggests the need to ensure that fathers are included in flexible working arrangements in practice as well as within policy.

"..[Homeworking] was just agreed with my line manager. They paid for a business line and business broadband at home so they were very helpful"

"I would say the company as in managers above, my manager may know [that I have children] because I tell him or her. Above that I don't think they know anything to be honest. I don't think they care. That's not an issue that they bother being in the slightest. They are only interested in whatever this week's flavour of the stats is that they want you to achieve. A bit bitter perhaps but that's honestly the way I feel"

- Flexibility does make a positive difference to work life balance, but it is not a magic solution. To enhance fathers' work-life balance it is important to look at other issues as well, particularly how fathers manage on the arrival of the first child which is a serious stress point.

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