

Working and fathers

Combining family life and work

Foreword



We have, over the last 30 years, been living in very interesting times for work and life integration. Female participation in paid employment has dramatically increased over this time and, as more women have sought to combine work and family, there has been an accumulation of rights around maternity leave and flexible working. Encouragingly, men have gained some rights too, although nowhere near as many as women.

In this gap between men's and women's work-life balance opportunities can be found much of the discussion around the whys and wherefores of fathers and work. Should policy and legislation seek to level the playing field for men and women? Do men actually want more access to work-life balance arrangements? How will this affect employers' ability to deliver and compete?

This research cannot answer all these questions. It does, however, look at the crucial issue of what men themselves think about the effect that the opportunity to work flexibly has on their lives as employees and in their family lives. What we see is the often intricate, but always necessary, balancing arrangements that men make to allow them to make their lives actually work. In this picture, flexible working is appreciated and vital. It also seems that it is a positive for employers, with benefits to the organisation flowing from flexible working.

This research is more than a chance to hear the voices of working fathers, though. It is an insight into how the interplay between workplace practice and home life affect each other. It has been apparent in this project that there is an appetite for and understanding of flexible working amongst working fathers, and that focussed and well-managed flexibility can elicit the sought after 'win-win' for families and for organisations, too.

There is much food for thought here for employers who are keen to engage with their employees; for policy makers as they consider how parental rights to leave and time off might be shared; and for all those who are involved in investigating and understanding the complex interplay of work and family life today.

A blue ink signature of Sarah Jackson OBE, written in a cursive style.

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of the two-year research project between Lancaster University School of Management (LUMS) and Working Families. The project examined how fathers in paid work combined work and family life. It also measured the stress and wellbeing of fathers at work in relation to their integration of work and home life. In particular, the project gave specific consideration to the extent to which flexible working practices enabled 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 is increasing. 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.

Overview

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 childcare are in a period of profound change. Fewer fathers than mothers believe that it is a mother's job to 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.

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 school.²

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.

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

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.

One of the reasons that this might be the case – and that fathers may 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 help explain the difference between intention and practice: the pay gap; ideas about being a ‘breadwinner’; prevailing workplace culture; and social/gender expectations and norms.

Fathers as employees have more opportunities to work flexibly than they did as little as five years ago. In many organisations the idea of men working flexibly for work-life balance reasons is acknowledged (if not encouraged). However, the development and implementation of policies supporting fathers in their role as parents lags far behind that of mothers. Organisational attention has been concentrated for many years around policies relating to maternity and policies aimed at fathers are relatively underdeveloped.⁴ Additionally, legislation does not allow fathers to use indirect sex discrimination arguments when arguing for flexible working arrangements, leaving them underpowered when attempting to negotiate changes in work patterns.

Politically, fathers have risen up the policy agenda. Over the last decade, fathers have acquired stand-alone rights to paternity leave and since 2003 have been able to use the right to request flexible working to negotiate with their employer to rearrange their working schedule to better fit in with family life. New legislation allowing fathers to ‘share’ up to six months leave with the mother of their baby came into effect in April 2011. Political rhetoric around father involvement is similar across the three main political parties.⁵ All envisage improving opportunities for men and women to find a better balance between work and family life through a combination of policy initiatives and a maturing understanding of the benefits of work-life balance within organisations.

A body of evidence around the benefits to employers and employees of work-life balance has grown up over the last decade. This has benefited fathers in terms of arguments in favour of allowing them to take up work-life balance options, although, as noted above, other factors such as societal and organisational culture are still formidable barriers. It cannot be claimed, additionally, that there is widespread uniform employer recognition of the benefits of work-life balance initiatives for all employees. Employer groups and representative organisations have consistently counselled against what they see as over-generous accommodations to employees to work flexibly. They argue that these are difficult for businesses to implement and manage, and negatively affect organisational effectiveness and profitability. However, the idea that work-life integration can benefit both employee and employer has gained traction in mainstream organisational operational thinking, and this is a significant development.

⁴ Working Families *Top Employers Benchmark* 2010

⁵ See Working Families’ *Tomorrow’s World* (2010) for essays by Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour MPs

Key findings

The findings below show some of the key points which emerged from the research.

The research was carried out in organisations in the public and private sectors and it is important to note that the findings in each organisation can be considered separately. The main findings are set out below in a way which encourages consideration of the individual results to the same degree as the overall headlines.

General findings

A general trend showed that fathers who have more flexible working options tend to be less troubled by stress, and have an improved sense of purpose and wellbeing.

Fathers who work flexibly have better work-life balance and are able to deal with work overload more effectively than those with no flexibility.

Work relationships appear to be significantly more troubling for fathers on a low income compared to the higher earners. However, when they use flexible working in some way, these concerns become much less troubling.

Private sector

Working flexibly has a significant positive impact on fathers over those who do not work flexibly. Fathers who work flexibly have better physical and psychological health, are less stressed, are more committed to their employer and enjoy better relationships with their colleagues.

Fathers whose partners are employed have significantly higher levels of both wellbeing and sense of purpose.

Fathers on a low income feel less stressed and more in control if they are able to work flexibly.

There is a general trend where fathers with one child or three or more children are more stressed than those with two children. Within this trend, fathers who are on lower incomes appear to suffer worse physical and psychological health when they have three children.

Public sector

Fathers who work flexibly are far less troubled by their work-life balance and sense of overload.

Access to flexible working correlates with a more negative reported perception of working fathers' work relationships, job security, control, commitment and wellbeing.

This negative correlation was heavily influenced by the political and economic climate in which the survey was undertaken. It was conducted in the height of the recession, amidst political change, and in anticipation of much publicised severe monetary and manpower cuts to all government departments.

Under such conditions flexible working practices would not be expected to alleviate these concerns.

Methodology

The research was carried out over a two-year period (2009-2011).

The project took a combined quantitative/qualitative approach, as these have previously illuminated the challenges faced by career couples in a more rounded manner than is possible with an 'either/or' design.⁶ The qualitative component of the research therefore formed a crucial element.

The research took place within two large organisations, one in the private sector and one in the public sector. Organisations in different sectors were chosen to facilitate comparison between the experiences of fathers in each.

Quantitative data collection and analysis

The quantitative phase of the project surveyed over 1000 fathers using the psychological stress-risk management tool 'ASSET'. ASSET is a validated tool that enables organisations to see the human 'wellbeing' aspects of the workplace that impact business level outcomes, such as: productivity, customer satisfaction, staff retention and sickness absence; by objectively measuring and reporting what it feels like for individuals to work there. This information is compared with a databank of more than 50,000 people across 60 institutions and collated into an aggregated feedback package for the organisation concerned. This provides a comparative, grassroots view of how effectively these real drivers of performance are being managed in relation to other similar organisations.

Fathers were recruited in each organisation on a voluntary basis. The research project was publicised within each organisation, and the eligibility criteria set out. Fathers who wished to take part then registered online directly with the ASSET software interface, and were then able to complete the ASSET questionnaire. Responses were anonymised, ensuring that neither the employers nor research team could identify individuals who had submitted a response. In total, 638 responses were collected from the private sector organisation and 428 from the public sector.

Once the results were collated, statistical models were applied in order to explain variations in stress levels. Descriptive statistics were obtained – for example what percentage of fathers with children under eighteen years old experience unsupportive relationships with colleagues, in comparison with other groups of men. Following exploratory statistical analysis comparisons between the two groups of men were possible, for example, using analysis of variants (ANOVA). We also sought to explain individual differences in stress levels using a range of covariates.

⁶ Brannen, J. & Moss, P. (1991). *Managing Mothers: Dual Earner Households after Maternity Leave*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Qualitative research

Towards the end of Year 1, as patterns emerged from the statistical analysis, the researchers began in-depth qualitative research interviews with 75 working fathers. The sample was recruited from across the two participating organisations, with an online advert on their respective intranets.

A sequence of focus groups and one-on-one interviews was arranged. Some of the interviews were carried out face-to-face; others were conducted using teleconferencing facilities. Using this technique, fathers across a wide geographic range were able to participate. An advantage of using teleconferencing to conduct focus groups was that fathers felt less inhibited in sharing their views than if they were in a face-to-face setting with colleagues, particularly as both senior and more junior grades were often in the same focus group.

The quantitative findings

Below are presented the key findings of the data from the combined public and private sectors:

The relationship between fathers' wellbeing and flexible working

1. To what extent is the wellbeing at work of working fathers (as measured by its composite factors) related to whether or not they work flexibly?

The mean scores for any statistically significant relationships found in the analysis are shown in the table below. 'Significant' refers to a correlation that has not been affected by other factors.

	Average scores	
	Flexible working: NO	Flexible working: YES
Work relationships	21.82	20.59
Work-life balance	12.74	11.44
Overload	13.43	12.41
Job security	13.62	12.23
Control	15.19	14.05
Resources & communication	13.72	12.53
Aspects of the job	25.65	23.69

Higher score is more negative

More positive result Less positive result

The statistical analysis shows that flexible working has a significant positive impact on the composite factors of fathers' wellbeing. Those who work flexibly in some way are far less troubled by their work relationships, work-life balance, overload, job security, control, resources and communication and aspects of the job, than those who do not.

There was also a positive, but not statistically significant, effect of flexible working on fathers' commitment and physical health.

2. To what extent does the wellbeing of working fathers (as measured by its composite factors) vary depending on whether they use one (or more) of the following types of flexible working?

- Homeworking
- Flexi-time
- Job-share
- Part-time
- Other

Multiple types of flexible working

The analysis then looked at the difference on the wellbeing factors between three groups:

1. Those who **do not** work flexibly
2. Those who use **one type** of flexible working
3. Those who use **more than one type** of flexible working

The mean scores for any statistically significant relationships found in the analysis are shown in the table below. 'Significant' refers to a correlation that has not been affected by other factors.

	Average scores		
	No flexible working	1 type of flexible working	More than 1 type of flexible working
Work relationships	21.77	20.74	19.97
Work-life balance	12.75	11.33	11.87
Overload	13.44	12.40	12.39
Job security	13.57	12.38	11.60
Control	15.16	14.18	13.51
Resources & communication	13.68	12.69	11.87
Aspects of the job	25.62	24.03	22.08

Higher score is more negative

■ More positive result ■ Less positive result

As shown in the table above, there were a series of nuanced relationships between flexible working frequency and the composite elements of wellbeing. These are outlined on the following page.

Fathers who use 1 type of flexible working were significantly less troubled by both their work-life balance and overload levels than those who do not work flexibly.

Those who used more than 1 type of flexible working were significantly less troubled by their work relationships than those who do not work flexibly.

Fathers who either use 1 type or more than 1 type of flexible working were significantly less troubled by their job security, control and resources and communications than those who do not work flexibly.

The score for aspects of the job are most positive for the group who use more than 1 type of flexible working, followed by those who only use 1 type of flexible working, and finally those who do not work flexibly at all.

More than 1 type of flexible working is better than both only 1 type of flexible working and no flexible working.

It was found that those respondents who use more than 1 type of flexible working perceive higher levels of commitment from their organisation than both those who only use 1 type of flexible working and those who do not work flexibly.

It was also found that fathers who use more than 1 type of flexible working display higher levels of commitment to their organisation than both those who only use 1 type of flexible working and those who do not work flexibly.

Homeworking, Flexi-time and reduced hours

The following table compares the mean for the different types of flexibility (homeworking, Flexi-time, reduced hours) against the composite wellbeing factors, with the no flexible working group remaining for comparison.

Due to the low numbers of respondents who exclusively selected the Job-share and Part-time options, these groups were combined to 'Reduced hours'.

	Type of Flexible Working			
	No type	Homeworking	Flexi-time	Reduced hours
Work relationships	21.82	19.95	21.15	20.71
Work-life balance	12.74	11.95	10.88	12.29
Overload	13.43	12.47	12.30	12.87
Job security	13.62	11.76	12.58	12.85
Control	15.19	13.04	14.76	13.76
Resources & communication	13.72	11.32	13.46	11.93
Aspects of the job	25.65	21.58	25.27	23.66
Pay & benefits	3.83	3.99	3.75	3.46

Higher score is more negative

More positive result Less positive result

The table on the previous page shows that fathers who use homeworking score most positively on a range of wellbeing factors, excluding pay and benefits.

Fathers with no flexible working options scored most negatively across all the other wellbeing factors.

The moderating impact of flexible working on the relationship between wellbeing and demographic variables

A series of ANOVA tests were carried out to compare the mean scores of the composite wellbeing factors against the different demographics. A summary of the key findings is presented below:

Yearly income

There is a general trend whereby those on a higher income (more than £35,000) generally score more positively on the series of wellbeing factors.

However, those within the 'high income' band are significantly more troubled by their work-life balance.

Age of working fathers

Respondents over 50 years old were significantly more troubled by their job security than younger working fathers in the sample.

Domestic chores

Those fathers who said that they do the majority of the housework have the best work-life balance overall. In contrast, those who indicated that they paid for help with the domestic chores were the most troubled by their work-life balance.

Partner in employment

Fathers whose partners were in paid work (either full or part-time) were less stressed than fathers who were the sole income earners within a household.

Disability

Working fathers with a disability score more negatively on a wide range of the wellbeing factors. This is a common finding, which does not appear to be limited to working fathers alone.

Moderating the impact of flexible working

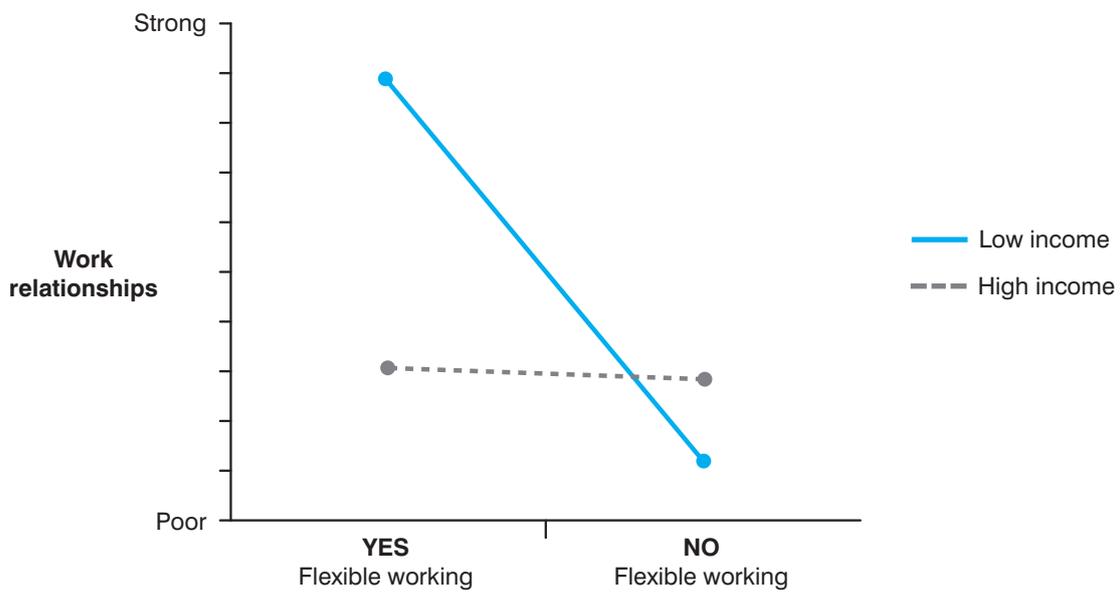
Regression analyses were run which first included the independent variable 'Flexible Working' and then a series of other demographic variables, along with the interaction effect between them. This shows whether flexible working has a moderating effect on the relationship between any of the demographic variables and wellbeing.

The following statistically significant moderation effects were found. ‘Significant’ refers to a correlation that has not been affected by other factors.

Annual income

Dependent variable: work relationships

Flexible working, annual income and the interaction term between the two were all found to significantly predict the levels of work relationships.

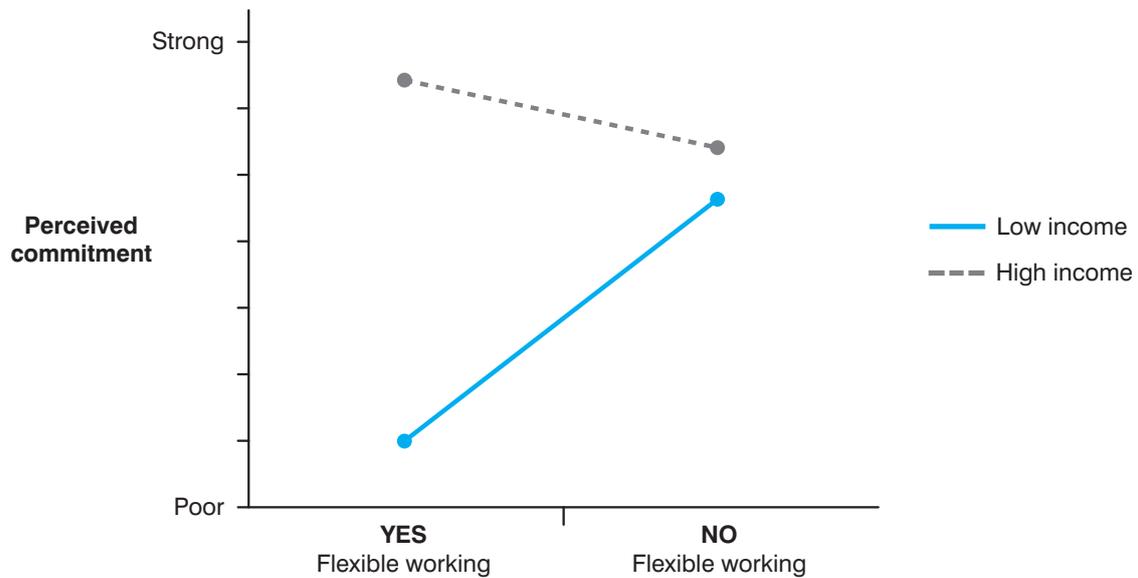


The graph above shows that flexible working significantly moderates the relationship between income and work relationships. Therefore work relationships appear to be significantly more troubling for those on a low income compared to the higher earners. However, when they use flexible working in some way, work relationships become much less troubling – in fact the relationship now acts in the opposite direction, where work relationships are least troubling for the low income group.

Dependent variable: perceived commitment of organisation towards employees

Flexible working, annual income and the interaction between the two were all found to significantly predict the levels of commitment employed fathers perceived from their organisations.

As can be seen from the graph on the next page, flexible working has an opposite effect on levels of perceived commitment from the organisation, depending on whether the respondents are in the low or high income group when both private and public sectors are combined. It seems that allowing flexible working creates a greater feeling of commitment by the organisation for higher earners; however the respondents in the lower income group perceived more commitment when they do not work flexibly.



Differences between the public and private sectors

There were noteworthy differences between the public and private sectors, in particular relating to the positive effects of flexible working on a number of wellbeing factors.

As demonstrated, the results from the private sector are positive. Flexible working is working for men, for their families and also enhancing work performance. The evidence points in the direction of the much sought after 'win-win' with fathers and the employer enjoying the benefits of flexible working practices. Qualitative data revealed organisational policies which were broadly supportive of flexibility for fathers. Additionally, flexibility was spread over a range of jobs and through the hierarchy of the business.

In the public sector, a more complex picture is found. The data was gathered at a time of much discussion of the role of the public sector. In particular, this took the form of Government proposals to cut the public sector workforce, to impose pay restraints on public sector employees and to carry out deep reforms to the way that the public sector was funded and how it operated. This was against a background of public sector institutions and employees receiving media and political criticism claiming they were ineffective and unfairly insulated from the economic downturn which had affected private sector employers. This rhetoric resulted in feelings of uncertainty and job insecurity amongst the fathers who took part in the research. Many fathers felt that the outside economic pressure would inevitably negatively affect their jobs. Interviews and focus groups with these fathers revealed the way that the fathers felt about the uncertainty of their employment:

"My only concern would be that I think there's nothing more sure (than) that there's going to be less people working for the department. Well they've said that we've already seen, you know prior to the spending review, people leaving and not being replaced. And although there is less and less staff, the work's definitely not diminishing. It's whether there will

be more pressure on things like flexible working but at the moment I haven't, you know that's just conjecture really. We don't know what's going to happen and until we do we can't really deal with it."

Unsurprisingly, in this context, the wellbeing and organisational commitment levels of fathers is lower.⁷ This negative correlation that occurred between factors such as job security, control and work relationships was heavily influenced by the environmental impact of the political and economic climate in which the survey was undertaken. Under such conditions flexible working practices would not be expected to alleviate these concerns. However, the correlation between work-life balance and overload with flexible working were significantly positive, demonstrating the robust value of flexible working practices in a recession.

It is worth noting that there is a gap where fathers' fears and practices diverge. As demonstrated in the qualitative interviews, it can be argued that the fact these flexible fathers are simultaneously more troubled by job security and work relationships is indicative of a residing belief that when numbers have to be reduced those who work traditional, highly-visible non-flexible office-based patterns will be safe, whilst those who operate flexibly will not. As over 80% of the public sector workforce sampled presently works flexibly, there is arguably a distinct gap between reality and the individualised reported perceptions of reality. It is highly likely to be this gap, rather than flexible working practices themselves, in the context of the recession and spending cuts, which is resulting in the poorer scores witnessed.

⁷ *No security: A meta-analysis and review of job insecurity and its consequences.* Sverke, Magnus; Hellgren, Johnny; Näswall, Katharina
Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, Vol 7(3), Jul 2002, 242-264

The qualitative findings

The results of the sequence of interviews and focus groups with fathers grouped around the themes of: work responsibilities and fatherhood; being an involved parent; how the domestic arena 'worked'; and access to flexibility at work.

Across the private and public sectors, responses in these areas were consistent with no great variation. However, it should be noted that fathers in the public sector expressed much higher levels of concern about work overload and job security than fathers in the private sector.

When discussing access to flexible opportunities, most of the fathers who took part had some access to flexibility. This was often informal, without resorting to formal organisational policy:

At the moment I have found a degree of flexible working. I am currently a full time home worker, unfortunately by default. Having that is very much given by the whims of senior management to a certain degree. (private sector)

OK, my employer is generally very good in as much that I can work in the office and I have two desks in different offices, but one of them is my desk, you know, one of your hot desks so I just turn up and use what I want. If I need to work from home – let's say my wife's not very well or I need to run the kids to school and pick them up – then generally its OK for me to work from home. So the only demand my employer places upon me is to be at a specific place at a specific time if I have got to meet customers or have a particular meeting with other colleagues or something. Apart from that, it's "XXXXX, do your work but do it where you want". (private sector)

If I need to take time out during the week and therefore sort of do some work on a Saturday or Sunday morning for example, to make sure I hit the deadline, well that's fine as well. But I mean my bosses take the view: as long as I can deliver what I need to deliver at the right time. (public sector)

The relationship with the line manager was felt to be crucial by many fathers, and a stronger enabler or barrier to flexible working than organisational policy:

...you know, all I know is that my line manager's supportive but I'm not sure the culture of XXXX is as advanced as he is. (private sector)

Quite frankly, if you're a father, you're not seen the same way as a mother. What was even worse was I had a manager who is a single woman in her 50s, never had children, has no concept whatsoever about what it's like being a child carer and quite frankly was completely anti the idea. In fact, she even refused to discuss it and I was appalled. If I'd have been female and if she'd have been a man, I'd have probably had a case for sexual discrimination. But of course the flip side is I'm a white male in my early 40s, so I wouldn't have had a leg to stand on. And it was a real battle and actually her boss made the decision (to let me work flexibly). (public sector)

In the public sector, there was a reliance on underlying policy entitling them to Flexi-time, which was then finessed through discussion with their line manager to allow extra flexibility.

I just take advantage of the flexi. We have a flexi thing where you can work any time between 7am and 7pm. As long as you give notice. As long as we've got cover and you're not leaving colleagues in the lurch. It's normally worked well, I've never had any problem with it. (public sector)

What the guidance tells us is where it's (flexible working) mandatory and where there's an element of discussion for local practice. And it's pretty much on that basis that we work, that if it's OK for the business and it's not going to have any detrimental effect, then that's fine. (public sector)

Some fathers felt that line manager control of flexibility meant that a formal arrangement was preferable

Basically I agreed it with my line manager. Obviously they then ratify it through HR. The reason I got it formally, was that my concern was if, you know, you can always have an agreement with a manager but then they move on and someone else comes along and says "well I'm sorry I can't give you that time to look after the children". (public sector)

Most of the fathers worked flexibly for childcare reasons, with the majority working flexibly in a household where their partner worked, also flexibly. Nearly all the fathers interviewed recounted that they provided direct childcare.

I suppose the easy answer is we share that completely. So my wife works three days a week. The days that she's working I normally take responsibility for taking the kids to school and for picking them up later in the afternoon. And at the end of the week when my wife's not working, she runs all of that and then I will just come into work and get home late, maintain my hours. So it's generally shared. (public sector)

Bedtime stories we take in turns every night, no need of my wife. If I have work on and she's not working then we'll take it over but there's no problem with that. Whoever feels like it, basically, but generally we alternate. (private sector)

A proportion of the fathers had sole care of their children, and for these men direct care was not divided with a partner. Instead these men used flexibility to meet work and domestic responsibilities which were supplemented by wider family members providing childcare, or child caring services (minders, after-school clubs etc).

For those men in partner relationships, providing indirect care was also something they did, with most feeling that they made a valuable contribution to the running of the household at home. However, some of these fathers felt that the domestic burden was not equally shared.

I'm the guy with the hammer but my wife is the woman that smells nice because doing washing powder and so forth. Well, if there is an average split, I do DIY and stuff like that. My wife does mostly cooking and usually all the cleaning and washing and ironing and stuff. (private sector)

I follow all her instructions and have everything ready for when she comes home. Yes, as long as it's clearly detailed of what I have to do and what temperature what should be on and so on, then it's quite easy. But in that way, it's shared. But I make no secret that she would do 80% of the tasks in the house, compared to my 20%, because she only works four days. Not that I'd ever say that to her but she only works four days a week so... (public sector)

The pressures of balancing a job and maintaining family life meant that very few of the fathers had any sense that flexibility was useful for anything other than finding necessary time to facilitate family life.

I feel its work/home, work/home. And not very often do I find that I've got some time to myself. I find that quite hard work sometimes. You feel that whilst you're covering and making sure everybody's sorted out, there's a bit missing. It's caught me out a couple of times when I just need a day to myself somewhere along the way. (public sector)

If I finish early, the first thing I'll do when I get home, because we've got quite a big garden, I'll go out and do some gardening and my little lad loves gardening. So you sort of combine functional with the quality time in those situations. He potters around behind me and helps me and stuff, so that's quite nice. (public sector)

It doesn't free up more time for a kind of leisure activity but it allows me to choose the way I use it – it enables me to meet fixed commitments like taking the children to school, perhaps getting them to the dentist or back and things like that. (private sector)

Fathers were broadly untroubled by their relationships with their immediate colleagues.

...with my immediate colleagues there's no problem whatsoever. You know they understand my circumstances and I understand theirs so there's no issues whatsoever about people that I work with immediately. (public sector)

Well I don't think so because our unit's been quite proactive in encouraging home working even for, how can I say it – I'm not trying to cast aspersions here – but for people who don't have childcare responsibilities you know. There's several people who work at the XXXX office close to home or they work from home who don't have any children. So no I don't think it's impacted my relationships. (private sector)

Whilst most fathers felt that their careers had not been impeded by the use of flexible working practices, there was a widespread belief in both the private and public sector that to 'get on' would mean potentially having to give up working in a family friendly way.

I would say it definitely hampers your promotion prospects. You have more responsibilities, you can't put the extra hours, the extra time that's required in. For instance, tonight I will be finishing work at 6 o'clock, regardless of what I've got to do, because I've got to pick up the kids from nursery straight away sort of thing. Whereas, you know, someone who's single may have, you know, if there's an extra bit of work, they can earn some brownie points then. They would certainly be able to stay and do that. (public sector)

If it's something that you don't need to maintain in order to move on, sideways or upwards, then that's fine but if it's something that you need to hold on to because of personal circumstances, then yes a great issue I am afraid. (private sector)

I am afraid I worked in a part of the company that the director is very keen to see the whites of your eyes. You know, the kind of person who walks around on a Friday and says "where is everybody?". I would say absolutely that my chance of promotion are jeopardised by the fact that I am not visible. (private sector)

Some fathers reported that they felt 'invisible' as parents, in a way that did not apply to mothers.

As far as managers go – my manager – no, they wouldn't give a xxxx. They couldn't care less whether I've got children or not: they just see me as a dot on a bit of paper that produces results. (public sector)

I think there's still a perception that mothers are the carers and fathers are the providers... if I asked now for a period of unpaid leave – no. For looking after children I would suggest it would probably raise more eyebrows than rounds of applause. I think mothers have still got the positive image as carers. (public sector)

Being recognised as a father. I think people only discuss that being out socially and its really only discussed (with) the fellow parents because then it's always something you have in common outside of work. From a business point of view, you just get on with your job really. (private sector)

Am I defined by it? Certainly not, but I think my colleagues are aware that I am a father and we talk about it and we share stories but that's about it. It doesn't impact on my work life. (private sector)

However, some fathers did not believe that they received less preferential treatment than mothers in relation to flexible working and work-life balance opportunities:

I've never felt that I was disadvantaged by being male. Much as I'd like to say "yes – hateful company, say one thing, do another": I have to be fair to them and say "no I can't say they have ever been or I have ever heard of anybody not being allowed to do it because they are a guy and not a girl". (private sector)

The effects of the economic downturn which ran throughout the period of this research (2009-2011) were felt by fathers in both sectors. Fathers in the private sector had largely emerged from a period when the main effects were felt within the organisation, and were less concerned about the future, although they identified some cultural shifts which the recession had had. On the whole, private sector fathers did not identify the recession as a future threat:

A few years ago XXXX was a very sort of family company. They would always say to you, yeah you've got children, we'll look after your family. But now I think its totally the wrong way, its totally different shall I say. It's a business and its not a family company any more, it's business.

Public sector fathers were very concerned about the effects of the recession on their employment, although they had received little detail about how they personally would be affected, leading to a feeling of uncertainty and concern:

In the unit I work for our biggest overhead is wages. And we know we're going to have to reduce in numbers, you know, of possible grades. Who that's going to be, we don't know yet. And yeah, I suppose at the back of your mind you do think to yourself "well, I don't work the same way as everyone else, does that make me a target?"

At the moment I mean I think with the stuff that's coming out, certainly for us we're not sure exactly how that's going to impact on our work. I mean I do worry that, my concern is that they could turn round and say: "well we don't want you to do it in that way and we want to change things".

I mean, as far as family friendly goes, I think the spending cuts could have a massive effect on the civil service generally and people's wellbeing because I don't know about XXXX but my wife works for XXXX as well. So you know, if huge cuts start going on, it's not just one person who could be out of work, it could be both people. So I think that could have a massive effect.

Further discussion

Do fathers have the opportunity to work in a way which allows them to reach their full potential and also have the involvement in family life to which they aspire?

The results of this research present a mixed picture, with many positive aspects and some negative ones. The majority of fathers who took part in the project are able to work flexibly in some way, and the reason they did this was to make time for more involvement with their children and home life – through providing both direct and indirect care.

Fathers are, to some extent, at the edge of great potential change in the way they work. The legislative changes noted earlier in this report offer the possibility for some men to take significant periods away from work for childcare reasons. At the same time, if the trend for time spent with their children continues to increase, the way that men organise their working lives will have to change. The men who took part in this research viewed it as sensible that they should take the opportunity to work flexibly. The complexities and financial necessities of family life required a flexible approach.

However, it is important to recall the wider cultural and policy context of father employment before predicting unimpeded development of flexibility for fathers. Although there has been the development of a plurality of options for working parents, outside the organisations in this research the old-style full-time working week often still dominates. Flexible working options are still less available in male-dominated settings; and fewer men make requests to work flexibly, have their requests granted or are successful when taking their cases to tribunals.⁸ Persistent beliefs that idealise the always-available full time employee, coupled with suspicions about the commitment of the flexible worker, do little to encourage fathers to make the move to a more balanced working pattern or increase their flexibility. By exploring the interface of work and ‘home’ for fathers, it will be possible to develop a more finely calibrated understanding of the approaches which might benefit fathers, their families and their employers.

The workplace and fathers

There is little doubt that working fathers face stress at work; in this they are not unique. The data offers insight into interesting triggers of stress, which will be useful to employers who are looking to develop more targeted approaches to their father-centric policies. Stress levels amongst fathers with one or three children, and the ages of those children mean that specific policy developments to tackle the issues these fathers face might bring positive returns for employers and employees. Testing these findings in the qualitative phase of the research showed fathers were aware of the extra stress that the number of children had on their working lives:

Having three kids means that I am often juggling in different directions. I can take two of them to school and one goes to nursery and they are kind of diametrically opposed in terms of direction from my house and that sometimes can be difficult. It can be quite difficult when all three kick off at the same time and you've got three kids screaming.
(private sector)

⁸ Working Families 2006

Thinking back to the days when we had one. When you've got one it's new, you know, you wonder "why's this child thrown up?" or "what do I do now?". With two, you've learned. (private sector)

Similarly, fathers were aware of the effect and influence their work arrangements had on their relationships with colleagues. The finding that flexible working is positively associated with workplace relationships is an interesting one as resentment towards those who are able to work flexibly is often cited as a cause of workplace tension between the flexible 'haves' and 'have nots'. In this research, the organisations surveyed were mature in their flexible working cultures and do not limit flexible working only to a group of employees (e.g. parents and carers). This confirms our earlier research⁹ which has shown that parents find it easier to ask for and obtain flexibility in an organisation where flexible working is available to all employees. The argument for making flexible working available to all employees, regardless of their caring responsibilities, was identified by fathers themselves, who saw this operating at a team level:

No I've never had any problems with it because I think most colleagues that I work with have got similar responsibilities in one way or the other, whether its children or elderly relatives or whatever. And we all work round each other. I think where it can become a problem is when somebody's not willing to be flexible at all. But I've never experienced that. (public sector)

I think pretty much everyone in my team is a flexible worker, so in terms of the relationship I have with them it obviously makes no difference because we are all flexible. We're not all home workers; some people are flexible, kind of in that they work in offices or around the country. (private sector)

Arranging flexibility

The arrangement of flexible working by fathers was often referred to in the qualitative research as being within the 'gift' of their line manager, and that their attitude to flexibility was often informed by their own caring experiences and arrangements. Whilst operating within a framework of organisational policy, many fathers agreed their flexible pattern with the line managers without making a contractual change as they felt this option afforded extra flexibility. This is consistent with other research, which found that men preferred to make informal arrangements.¹⁰ However, the downside to this is that fathers lack the protection a contractual change ensures, and some fathers expressed concern that a new manager coming in could take a different view of flexible arrangements and amend or cancel existing informal agreements. This closely corresponded with men's own views about their visibility to the organisation as fathers, and some expressed their interest in a scheme which would allow them to register in some way as having paternal responsibilities, with a flexible work arrangement which they could transport with them if they changed role or a new manager was appointed to manage them. This is an idea which employers might wish to explore further – along the lines of a father or carer's 'passport' to which employees might voluntarily sign up:

I'd add to that I think, when my little boy was very small and obviously we had the whole problem with sleeping routines and everything, the fatigue was a huge fact and I think, yeah, I think I thought that my performance had dipped at that time as well. I just didn't have it in me to put in the effort that was needed some days. And I think that needs to be recognised. And sometimes it isn't. You know you don't use that as an excuse, so if there's a time like a mechanism for that being acknowledged, like if you're a new dad and you could potentially be in a difficult position where your performance might not come up to its usual standard, some kind of recognition of that I think would be well worthwhile. (public sector)

⁹ and ¹⁰ Working Families and Cranfield University Business School *Flexible Working and Performance 2005*

Father involvement

Explored through the qualitative phase of the research, the effects on 'domestic' life of flexible working were apparent. Most fathers who worked flexibly felt that this was the only way in which family life was manageable. For single fathers who had sole custody of their children, flexible working was the key enabler which allowed them to remain in employment, with complex arrangements around childcare only possible because of the flexibility they were able to use.

Fathers provided both direct and indirect care, although, as previously noted, some of this care divided down traditional gendered lines. Fathers frequently used flexible working to share caring responsibilities with a working partner – most commonly working part-time. Fathers' flexible working practices can, in this regard, be viewed as an enabler for mothers' employment. There was no specific insight into whether fathers would like more flexibility to allow their partners enhanced employment opportunity, but it is worth noting that men whose partners were employed enjoyed better wellbeing. This finding should be considered alongside the evidence that fathers who do more housework are less troubled by work-life balance than those whose partners do most of the housework. The findings could be interpreted as implying that similar hours spent by mothers and fathers both in paid employment and in domestic work leads to better wellbeing, at least for fathers.

Engagement

The issue of employee and employer engagement is particularly important. This is a two-way process: the perception of the commitment of the employer to the employee and of the employee back to the employer. The research revealed a mixed picture in this area. Private sector employees, where they had access to flexible working, displayed higher degrees of commitment to their employer than those who are unable to work flexibly. They also perceive their employer as being more committed to, and trusting of, them in turn. In the public sector this was not replicated, which could be interpreted as a negative relationship between flexible working and commitment as part of a compromised psychological contract, where the beliefs of employees about their employer are negatively associated with flexible working patterns. However, the context of the other external factors which the qualitative work uncovered offer an explanation of the more negative findings, in that the relatively abrupt and unsettling threats to the organisation, in terms of job cuts and organisational change, were negating the positive effects of an established flexible working framework which had become 'part of the furniture'.

The way that flexible working is communicated within the two organisations is important in this regard, as its perceived value and effectiveness are clearly influenced by outside factors. Both organisations could be said to have well-developed, widely available flexible working policies, and flexible working opportunities are available in both. However, in the private sector fathers felt that flexible working was a valuable enhancement to be utilised, whereas public sector employees viewed flexible working as a routine entitlement and part of the employment package, which had become 'part of the furniture'. This difference in perception (not organisational practice) helps explain why flexibility did not assuage the negative effects of threatened organisational change in the public sector, and highlights the importance of effective and continuous communication about flexible working even in flexibly 'mature' organisations. If, initially, it appears that flexibility, in the public sector, has low value and possibly unexpected consequences during tough economic times, it is vital to recognise that fathers perceive the benefits

of flexible working in terms of their own work-life balance, and organisations (and policy makers) may need to message the benefits differently. The example of the private sector would indicate that, when organisational turbulence is removed, flexible working is of great benefit to fathers both in terms of their own wellbeing and in terms of their commitment and work relationships. But it may be necessary to re-communicate the benefits and address concerns that flexible working arrangements might make employees especially vulnerable when workforce restructurings are proposed.

The flexible organisation

Fathers from both the public and private sectors identified their organisations as family friendly places to work. It is particularly notable that in the public sector, despite the uncertainties around the future staffing of the organisation, fathers recognised and appreciated the ability to work flexibly, although they keenly felt recent organisational policy changes which restricted some types of flexible working for operational security reasons. Fathers saw the advantages as mutual:

But I would clarify that and say the main reason why they're family friendly is because it mutually benefits both parties. Instead of just staffing offices and between 9 and 5, you can staff offices between 7 and 7. (public sector)

I think, in general, I think people see it as a quite an advanced way of an advanced kind of culture of working so that you do have that flexibility. Although flexibility also can go the other way in terms of extra demands as well. (private sector)

In terms of value, although fathers appreciated flexible working arrangements, they were conscious that they operated at different levels throughout the organisations and all employees did not enjoy the same access to flexibility.

I perceive there's some envy towards me from people who are unable to get home working and I just feel so terrible that they require it, but can't get it. The company, I don't know why they just won't authorise more people to work from home when it improves people's lives. When you are working from home, you can give more to the company. If, for example, something was deadly urgent I would come in earlier to do it and that enables me to give something back to them. (private sector)

The gap between policy and practice, and the way that flexible working is 'messed' to fathers is of some concern, with the previously noted importance of the line manager seeming to be more influential than the overall policy framework. For employers to fully leverage the benefits of flexible working practices careful attention needs to be paid to the way that the value of the policies is communicated to fathers. Perversely, in the public sector where flexible working opportunities were well-established and built into the terms and conditions of employment (particularly flexibility around hours), a certain amount of 'blindness' may have resulted, where employees (not just fathers) saw flexibility as a right and lost sight of its value. This is not to suggest that flexibility should be removed or made more difficult to access; but that its value should be re-communicated to employees as part of a wider awareness of the organisation's employment values.

Further reading

Further reading on the findings of this research is available in the following articles and papers:

Published

Burnett, S.B., Gatrell, C.J., Cooper, C.L. & Sparrow, P.R. (2010), 'Well balanced families? A gendered analysis of work-life balance policies and work family practices', in the 25th Anniversary Edition *International Journal of Gender in Management*, 25(7).

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In progress

Burnett, S.B., Gatrell, C.J., Cooper, C.L. & Sparrow, P.R., 'Fathers at Work: the ghost in the machine' (submitted to *Gender, Work & Organization*).

Gatrell, C.J., Burnett, S.B., Cooper, C.L. & Sparrow, P.R., 'Work-life balance: working for parents?' (submitted to *International Journal of Management Review*).

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Working Families

Working Families is the UK's leading work-life balance campaign organisation. We support and give a voice to working parents and carers, whilst also helping employers create workplaces which encourage work-life balance for everyone. Our name defines two of the most important parts of life: **family and employment**. These are often in conflict. We feel passionately that this is unnecessary, counter-productive and must change.

Things ARE changing. By working with parents and carers and organisations alike, Working Families helps children, working parents and carers and their employers find a better balance between responsibilities at home and work. By operating in the real world of pragmatic advice and practical solutions, we are making our vision a reality.

To find out more about us visit: www.workingfamilies.org.uk

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