

Modern Families Index 2019

EMPLOYER REPORT



What employers should do today to be ready for tomorrow

The *Modern Families Index* is an annual study exploring how working families combine work and family life. It looks at how parents are experiencing life outside of work through the lens of their employment and asks parents what needs to change for them to better manage the demands of home and work. In 2019, the study was based on a survey of 2,750 working parents with children under 13. The sample is drawn equally from across 11 UK regions and nations to help achieve a balanced picture of working arrangements, types of employment and income. The *Index* also seeks gender balance in its responses; this year the split between mothers and fathers is 53/47 per cent, respectively.

Focussing on flexibility tells us a lot about how parents are doing at work. Are they progressing? Are they able to balance family life and work? Do they feel that the way their work is designed and organised allows them to do their best? From a work-life fit and flexible working point of view, we have considered the key takeaways for employers.



Key themes for 2019

As employers will know, 2019 sees important policy developments: the evaluation of the extension of the right to request flexible working, as well as the government's proposal for a duty on employers to consider whether a job can be done flexibly and to make that clear when advertising roles. This report therefore focuses on flexible working and the reality of flexible jobs from the perspective of working parents in the UK.

The experience of parents shows that flexible working is widespread, although patchy in some sectors and for some workers. It is beneficial in helping parents get a better work life fit, although it is not a panacea. Issues around job design, workloads and organisational culture undermine some of the benefits of flexibility, and proper management of flexibility to ensure it works is, for many parents, missing.

Flexible recruitment and job design are potential solutions to some of these issues and are central to many of the recommendations. It is clear that flexibility is an attractor and retainer: if jobs are flexible and well-designed, people want to stay in them. But when it comes time to move on, this can be problematic when opportunities are limited. Flexible recruitment can address this, and in doing so can also help tackle the issue of human-sized jobs. Rethinking how a job might be done flexibly also means thinking about how it can be optimised – in a way that isn't exclusive to those with caring responsibilities or those who want a different balance between work and life.

Parents and progression

The *Index* shows that part-time work negatively impacts promotion and affects more mothers than fathers (women are more likely to work reduced hours). Whilst working reduced hours is a positive choice in terms of family and work balance, it should not come at the cost of career progression. The intersection of hours and pay is well documented, with the part-time pay gap widening to 30 per cent by the time a child is 13¹. When organisations value presenteeism, reduced-hours workers are at a disadvantage. Too often, being visible and working late are still the best way to get on at work, and parents in the *Index* still report that presenteeism is often part of company culture and is expected by line managers.

“For every man in the *Index* working part-time, there were 10 women.”

¹The Gender Pay Gap, House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper 7068, 8 November 2018

Key takeaways

Now: Challenge assumptions that reduced hours means reduced commitment. Start tracking performance appraisals to ensure that flexible workers, and in particular part-time workers, are not penalised by a workplace culture that values long hours and presenteeism.

Medium term: Assess the career opportunities for part-time workers. Are there clear routes of progression to senior levels for staff that work part-time? Demonstrate it is possible to truly progress whilst working part-time.

Long term: Develop strategies to ensure men understand the part-time and flexible working options open to them and encourage them to use them. For every man in the *Index* working part-time, there were 10 women.

Flexible working

The *Index* clearly shows the power of flexibility as a retention tool and as an attractor (58 per cent said a flexible employer would positively encourage employees to stay; 51 per cent said they would recommend an employer because of their family-friendly policies). Both mothers and fathers reported that they would stay in their jobs because of the flexibility they had. Parents said that flexibility is also a great tool for boosting employee happiness (68 per cent), effort (51 per cent) and performance (55 per cent). However, flexibility can also act as a trap, confining parents to jobs because they are unable to find new roles that will allow flexibility. In some cases, parents are downgrading to find the flexibility they want.

Flexible working brings benefits, but it needs to be managed. Senior managers, for example, can derive less satisfaction from flexibility than more junior colleagues because the pressure and size of their jobs limit the benefits of being able to work flexibly. Similarly, where workplace culture emphasises the value of long hours and presenteeism, flexibility will struggle to deliver. Flexibility will only work within a positive work-life balance culture, where human-sized jobs are the norm.

Key takeaways

Now: 2019 sees the review of the right to request flexible working. Employers should ensure that their flexible working policies are up to date, available and transparent, and that all employees know that they have this right.

Medium term: Are working practices supportive of work-life balance? Once flexible working arrangements are agreed, whether formal and informal, how are they monitored and managed? Is working flexibly delivering a better work-life balance for your workers?

Long term: Understand the culture of the organisation and bear in mind changing expectations. The *Index* shows that younger parents have different values when it comes to parenting and balancing work and family. Are you set to meet these changing expectations? Who is setting the culture presently, and how will this change in the future?



Technology: a mixed blessing for work-life balance

The *Index* showed that flexible hours and remote working enabled by technology was common, particularly amongst men. Overall, technology was seen as a positive contributor to work-life balance, although it is worth noting a degree of uncertainty with almost a third of parents (31 per cent) saying they weren't sure. One reason for this was that parents noted that the ability to work from anywhere had probably increased their overall working time. Related to this was the fact that parents felt that, although technology provided opportunities for flexibility, it had 'gone too far' in the blurring of the boundaries between work and home. Senior and middle managers in particular were more likely to feel this way, wanting more separation between work and home than they currently have.

An illustration of the way that technology has expanded work in a negative way is the pressure to be available outside of working time (for example in the evening). Forty-four per cent of parents said that they found it hard to avoid dipping into work emails after they got home from work (rising to 50 per cent of all fathers). They did this primarily because of workload pressure (44 per cent) and manager expectation (32 per cent). For these parents, the potential work-life benefits of technology are undermined by organisational culture, reinforced by manager expectation and jobs that have expanded beyond the normal working day.

Key takeaways

Now: Ensure that there are robust policies and procedures around the use of technology to work flexibly (both formal and informal), and that employees know that they can and should disconnect without penalty.

Medium term: Train managers to use technology in a way that respects work-life balance. Parameters around use need to be agreed, and this includes senior managers and leaders to avoid people feeling that they need to be 'always on'. Technology should not be reinforcing long hours or digital presenteeism, but facilitating smarter working. 'Anytime, anywhere' doesn't mean 'all the time, everywhere'.

Long term: Take a life stages view. Work with employees to understand how the relationship to technology and working changes over the course of life. Parents are clear about wanting more separation, but this may not fit other employees so well, who prefer a blend.

"Anytime, anywhere" doesn't mean 'all the time, everywhere.'"



Supporting equality of work and care

Both mothers and fathers reported in the *Index* that it was easier for women to take time off work for eldercare than it was for men. Although for many families this might be what they prefer, the key here is choice: families should not feel corralled into the decisions they make about who works and who cares because organisational policy, pay or cultures constrain real choice. Gender pay reporting has sharpened the focus here on the realities for employees and provides a platform to build genuinely supportive practices.

The *Index* shows that parents, especially millennial ones, are interested in sharing work and care. For example, an equal proportion of mothers and fathers (33 per cent) said that they were thinking about downshifting into a job that gave a better work-life fit within the next two years. This rose to 38 per cent for millennial parents. There's evidence that change is already happening, with 71 per cent of fathers and 85 per cent of mothers saying they would consider their childcare options before considering a new job or promotion. Ten per cent of parents in the *Index* have already downshifted for work-life balance reasons, almost equally mothers and fathers.

Some parents with young children (25 per cent) reported that they shared work and care equally between them. Organisational culture played a key role. They were less likely to have a workplace culture or manager expecting them to put in extra hours. They were also likely to have sufficient income and to have achieved some level of autonomy and control over their working lives by being in a role where they could access flexibility.





About Working Families

Working Families gives employers the tools they need to support their employees while creating a flexible, high-performing workforce.

For more information about membership options and to learn more about our resources and training (including training for line managers), please contact the Employer Services team on **020 7153 1230**

or email **employers@workingfamilies.org.uk**

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