

**Flexible (or family friendly) working arrangements in the UK.
Are they a good thing?**

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Introduction

Balancing the demands of paid work and care since women entered the labour force in large numbers has become an important policy topic in most industrialised countries. Some would say it is a key workplace issue of our time. The growth of 1.5 earner families, increasing family breakdown, increasing pressures and intensity at work have been linked to feelings of pressured lives, and have their workplace outcomes in increasing levels of sickness, turnover, stress and absence from work. Business leaders and government are regularly noting the large costs involved. That many families, and society more generally, need greater work-life balance is not disputed. How to obtain this goal is more of a challenge. Greater work-life balance is one of the ways politicians have identified to help address increasing work-related stress and ill health and possibly, in due course, the rising costs of care for older people. It is important to know whether or not this makes business sense across different sizes and sectors of business.

This paper reviews the findings from the latest 1998-2003 employer-based research on flexible working within UK organisations. New findings have emerged under a number of headings covering a range of workplace issues.

- The business case for flexible working arrangements;
- Awareness and take up issues relating to flexible working arrangements;
- The effects on employee commitment of flexible working;
- The effects on careers of taking up employer offers of flexible working arrangements;
- Approaches to flexible working in SMEs;
- The problems employers would face in introducing flexible working arrangements;
- The employee's perspectives on flexible working; and
- Equity issues relating to flexible working arrangements.

The business case

The view that there is a business case for introducing greater flexibility in employees' working arrangements has been put forward by employers' organisations like

Opportunity NOW (previously Opportunity 2000), the government and other interested business parties. It has been claimed that there are productivity, recruitment and retention gains to be had from allowing employees to work more flexibly. In addition, even where there are costs to the new provisions, the potential benefits and savings on things like absence, sickness and staff turnover may make it beneficial to carry out some changes. Evidence has been mounting for this viewpoint, although necessarily, it has accumulated in a somewhat piecemeal way. One could argue, from the fact that many businesses have been adopting more flexible working arrangements, led originally by innovation in the financial services sector, that it must make business sense and improve the bottom line, or they would not be doing it. Certainly it was possible, up to 1998, to collate over 30 case studies of organisations that had introduced some kind of flexible working arrangements. A review of these cases found that many had registered benefits from comparing their performance measures before and after the introduction of flexible working (Dex and Scheibl, 1999; Bevan et al, 1997). The then DfEE also commissioned work to demonstrate that performance benefits accrued from having flexible arrangements in 10 small businesses (Bevan et al, 1999). Through the government's Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund which started in 2000, there may, in due course, be several hundred further cases of employers who demonstrably have benefited from introducing flexible working arrangements.

But a more extensive investigation of the case for there being benefits to a wide range of industries and workplaces had foundered on the lack of suitable data. Case studies of individual workplaces where flexibility has been introduced, even if performance is measured carefully before and after, still leave the possibility that such workplaces are not typical; they could be a set of organisations that are more likely to benefit by using flexible working arrangements. A large-scale study of a nationally representative sample of organisations, some of which have flexibility while other do not, would be able to control for other differences between the organisations and measure whether flexibility adds to performance, after controlling for these differences. Such a dataset became available in 1998 in Britain, The Workplace Employee Relations Survey data (WERS98). WERS98 is a nationally representative sample of British workplaces collected by the DTI, and it provided a

unique opportunity for an examination of the potential performance benefits from flexibility across a wide range of workplaces. Ideally, of course, a stronger case would be made if longitudinal data were available for a nationally representative sample survey of workplaces. But such data are very expensive to collect and it is difficult to get good quality data since many cases drop out over time. Nonetheless, the WERS98 data, collected only at one point in time, provided a very valuable opportunity to examine this issue. Given that the WERS98 data included a large amount of other information about the workplaces that it surveyed, it was possible to control for a very large range of workplace characteristics in assessing whether flexible working arrangements have had beneficial effects on the bottom line of business.

This analysis of WERS98 data found that improvements in performance were associated with flexible working arrangements after controlling for a wide range of other influences on performance (Dex and Smith, 2002). However, the picture is complex. Out of the measures examined, financial performance, labour productivity, quality of product or service, sales, staff turnover and absence - some flexible arrangements were associated with certain business performance measures, but not with others. So, for example, 3-4 per cent fewer staff turned over per year where there was either flexitime working, job share arrangements, help with child care or support for working at or from home during normal working hours. Some flexible working arrangements had no statistical associations with performance. There were a few cases where flexible working was associated with lower performance. But the message overall from the results was that performance benefits were associated with flexible working arrangements.

Several case studies of smaller businesses, carried out for another research project, illustrated how the flexibility might produce business benefits (Dex and Scheibl, 2002). The smaller businesses that had embraced flexible working arrangements and had made flexibility integral to their business and culture were both having good performance and low staff turnover. The viewpoints of the MD, the factory manager and an employee all told the same story:

'Our business priority is to encourage staff to develop. ...It is central to our approach that workers can come to us and ask - we will listen and accommodate their needs when we can...We just get the feeling it is working so well. Profits are up and we can afford to increase pay. We all get flexibility, for example, to go and see a school teacher, or go and do extra shopping. The staff come in extra time to make up if necessary.' (Managing Director - see Dex and Scheibl, 2002)

'We like to be able to give the staff what they want knowing that we will get it back. We get back what we give them in loyalty and effort. We have an open phone policy to make sure that all teams can get cover.' (Factory manager - see Dex and Scheibl, 2002)

'If we are busy we pay them back. Because they are so good to you - you want to be good to them and show our commitment. I do not think anyone would abuse it (the system of flexibility).' (Employee - see Dex and Scheibl, 2002)

Access and awareness

In the case study research within organisations there was no widespread evidence of selected groups of employees being entitled to policies offering flexible working with others failing to have access. However, where formal policies were absent, groups of workers did experience different degrees of informal access to flexible working arrangements, although expectations about the type of work and how it needed to be organised played a large role (Dex and Scheibl, 2002). Studies did not find any examples of policies where women (or men) had access to company policies and the other group did not. Also, there were no gender differences in the use of the policies, after taking into account the gender and age breakdowns of the workforce. However, line managers did exercise discretion over employees' access to flexibility (Bond et al, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002; Phillips et al, 2002). Eligibility could and did vary by work group. Given the tendency for many work groups to be predominantly female or predominantly male, employees' eligibility could vary indirectly by gender for this reason.

The Workplace Employee Relations Survey and other case studies and project surveys of employees all revealed a consistent picture about the levels of awareness of employees. However, cannot assume that those who are aware of their employers' policies are the sum total of those who could access flexible working arrangements. Awareness was determined by a mixture of the employee's personal characteristics and circumstances, the constraints of the job, and the value of the employee to their employer. Being female, a parent of young children, a union member or having had recent training made employee awareness and possibly access to flexibility more likely (Dex and Smith, 2002; Bond et al, 2002). Higher qualified workers and those in higher grade or clerical jobs were also more likely than other workers to perceive they had access to flexible working arrangements (Dex and Smith, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002; Dex and Scheibl, 2002). However, as well as workers' characteristics helping to explain which employees got offered access to flexible arrangements, some workplaces were more likely than others to offer flexibility. Public sector employees were far more likely than private sector employees to offer access to a wide range of flexible working arrangements (Dex and Smith, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002). Workplaces with union recognition, large size, more developed and good human resources policies, consultation procedures and active equal opportunities policies were also associated with an increased likelihood of being offered flexibility (Dex and Smith, 2002). The research on the WERS98 data offered a rigorous analysis of employees' access to and awareness of flexible working arrangements by controlling for other potential determinants of employee awareness and access at the same time. The fact that the case study findings overlapped with the statistical analyses strengthened the conclusions.

Clearly some workplaces faced operational constraints on the flexible arrangements they could offer (Dex and Scheibl, 2002). However, the fact that workplaces which employ mainly men and those in traditional craft industries and occupations were less likely to be offered flexible working arrangements suggest that traditional attitudes may be playing a role as well as operational constraints (Yeandle et al, 2002; Dex and Smith, 2002; Houston and Walmsley, 2003). Research on smaller businesses confirmed that traditional attitudes from some male employers and managers led to an exaggeration of the problems to the production process or

service delivery that would result, were the business to adopt flexible working arrangements (Dex and Scheibl, 2002).

Factors increasing awareness

Awareness of employers' policies was generally fairly low. It was not uncommon for half or more of employees in a workplace to be unaware that their employer had policies relating to employees' caring responsibilities (Yeandle et al, 2002; Phillips et al, 2002; Houston and Walmsley, 2003). Awareness was found to vary:

- Those who were likely to benefit were more likely to know about the policies, but awareness was far from perfect even then;
- Where managers and the organisations as a whole put more effort into informing employees about their policies, along side a favourable workplace culture and methods of implementing flexible working that involved employees, they were far more likely to know about the policies and be appreciative of them (Yeandle et al, 2002);
- Awareness in the financial services sector was found to be greater where policies involved paid leave compared with those offering unpaid leave (Bond et al, 2002);
- Awareness was lowest for provisions that had only recently become statutory and were not yet in the Staff Handbook (Bond et al 2002);
- Employees also showed greater levels of awareness in unionised workplaces (Bond et al, 2002);
- Smaller organisations often did not have the formal policies, but employees in these smaller organisations were often well aware of the informal practices that might be available to them (Dex and Scheibl, 2002).

Line managers' awareness

In addition to employees failing to be aware, there was evidence that line managers were similarly unaware of their organisation's policies in both the private and public sectors (Phillips et al, 2002; Yeandle et al 2002; Bond et al, 2002). Line managers were better informed in unionised workplaces, where policies were formalised and where they had received training (Bond et al, 2002). There was a tendency for line managers to direct employees to take up policies they were familiar with, especially

where they were inexperienced or unsure about the alternatives or more recent provisions (Phillips et al, 2002; Bond et al, 2002). However, individuals' values had a role in how policies were implemented. One manager expressed the view that she saw emergency leave as a safety net after an employee's annual leave had been used up on the emergencies (Phillips et al 2003). Other line managers made fine distinctions between deserving and undeserving cases. For example, an individual might be entitled to paid leave if it was a serious illness they needed time off for, but unpaid leave if it was an accident; paid leave if it was close family, but not otherwise (Yeandle et al, 2002).

Although training can assist in line manager's knowledge about their organisation's policies (Bond et al, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002), with the best will in the world, there is a limit to how much line managers, and employees at induction sessions can take in about an organisation's policies. Often employees and managers will be given the information at a point when they do not need to know it. Strategies need to be devised, therefore, that allow for these inherent knowledge gaps to be filled, more especially in contexts where company policies may change. In the case of line managers, they need to be able to access the information when it is needed. Alternatively, and more flexibly, they need to be given freedom (and training) to decide what to do for individual cases, based on assembling and then evaluating the business case for an employee's request. Some larger organisations have been experimenting with such approaches and finding they have benefits all round. For employees, there is a need to understand that the organisation and managers are approachable and open to hearing their requests. This is a simpler thing to get across to employees and employers, although there is considerably more work to be done in getting at least employees to believe it.

Take up

In view of the fact that employee awareness of employer policies was low, and not all employees will want to take the opportunities offered, it is perhaps not surprising that take up was also low. The WERS survey found that in 25 per cent of workplaces that offered some kind of flexible working, no employees had taken them up. For establishments where there had been some take up, in two thirds of these cases, it

was a small proportion of the workforce only who had used the provisions (Dex and Smith, 2002). These WERS survey responses are unlikely to be based on precise calculations. The vast majority of the organisations researched in these studies did not keep accurate records about take up of their policies. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that managers' impressions of take up will be drastically inaccurate. The research projects that surveyed their organisations' employees about take up found very low levels of take up (Yeandle et al, 2002; Phillips et al, 2002; Houston and Walmsley, 2003). If employers are worried that the cost of take up would be prohibitive were they to offer flexible working, then they can be reassured by these levels of take up.

On the other hand, we might want to consider the reasons for the lack of use of the policies from the employee's point of view. A comparison between retail bank branches, supermarkets and local councils found that employees' use of policies was considerably greater in the councils than in the other organisations (Yeandle et al, 2002). However, the gap in take up between these organisations was much reduced in the case of the policy that allowed employees to reduce their hours. In general, studies found differences in take up were likely to be related to a number of factors (Yeandle et al, 2002; Bond et al, 2002; Houston and Walmsley, 2003):

- whether the flexibility was paid or involved loss of pay;
- different income levels of the jobs in these organisations - affecting the ability to cope with loss of earnings;
- different age and lifecycle profiles of the workforce that affected their need for flexibility;
- how long the policy had been offered and whether it was relatively new or well established;
- levels of staffing and whether colleagues had to work more as a result; and
- workplace cultures influencing whether it was seen to be an acceptable thing to do.

Employees clearly differentiate between the various policy provisions of their organisations. Employees use paid leave options if they were available in preference to unpaid options (Bond et al, 2002). This is a well-known employee preference. In part it was one of the early arguments for introducing policies like emergency leave,

in order to stop employees abusing paid sick leave, and give them an option where they could be honest instead of deceitful about the reasons for their absence. Where there are paid and unpaid options for leave sitting alongside each other, there is a tendency and built-in incentive for one to undermine the other. The legislation allowing unpaid days off for family reasons is expected to be of limited benefit in these cases. A single paid option to have leave when necessary is a simpler system that does not give employees an incentive to shirk or lie.

In hard-pressed under-staffed departments, employees also expressed feelings of guilt and not wanting to let down colleagues as reasons for not taking up the flexible opportunities (Phillips et al, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002).

'I've known people come in next to death and have an attitude that, unless I physically can't walk, I'll get into work somehow. You get this mindset that you've got to go in at all costs because of the pressure on other people, and I think because you are dealing with a lot of emotive issues...you'd almost feel responsible if you didn't see them (the service user) today and something happened to them' (Social Services manager – Phillips et al, 2002).

The case study work in financial services found that policies were more generous in the context where there was an acceptance of long hours of work and less likelihood, therefore, that employees would seek to use their entitlement either to take leave or reduce their hours (Bond et al, 2002).

The effects on employee commitment of flexible working

Because of the unusual elements of the WERS98 survey, containing information from managers and employees, it was also possible to examine whether employees' experiences of work varied according to whether they were aware they were being offered flexible working arrangements or not. The study found that, after controlling for a wide range of influences on commitment, flexible working arrangements were associated with higher employee commitment (defined as loyalty, pride and sharing the values of the organisation) in private sector workplaces. The case studies of smaller private sector businesses that offered flexibility supported this finding that

increased loyalty and commitment were produced as a result of employers agreeing to flexible working arrangements (Dex and Scheibl, 2002). Workers expressed this as direct cause and effect, (as quotations cited earlier in this paper illustrate), even though the statistical analysis on the cross-sectional survey data could only establish statistical associations and not causal links. However, in the public sector this relationship was not evident. In some cases, flexible working arrangements were associated with lower employee commitment in the public sector workplaces. This is a puzzle. The assumption at the outset had been that the longer duration and more extensive provision of flexible arrangements in the public sector would be welcomed by employees and their commitment raised. The WERS98 survey did not provide data that could be used to examine this issue further. However, other research studies did focus on public sector organisations and have some suggestions to offer to explain public sector employees' responses.

It may be the case that longer exposure to flexible working in the public sector has made staff take it for granted. However, other studies found evidence of window dressing in some public sector organisations. Although the policies were formal and written, the workplace culture did not always reward or encourage flexibility (Phillips et al, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002). Also, staff shortages made it difficult for employees to take up provisions that were offered by the employer knowing it would increase the workload of already hard-pressed colleagues. Feelings of being disloyal were common. However, in a few cases, staff were felt to have abused the provisions. These experiences could lead other staff to become cynical about the arrangements as one social services department manager expressed.

'The Department isn't actually very good at taking the policy to its final conclusion and saying 'Bye bye' to anybody...I think it's demoralising to other people around...I'm a bit cynical sometimes about stuff, especially, I think, as a manager, one of the things is that you feel hurt when people lie to you over their real situation and you remember those...I'd like to see quite stern repercussions for people who abuse it...it does seem a bit toothless at times.' (Social services manager. Phillips et al 2002)

These studies suggest that some public sector contexts are not conducive to employees benefiting from the flexibility their employer has offered. Window-dressing, staff shortages, lean staffing policies, no cover for absence and possibly some abuse will reduce the potential benefits from flexibility. Employees will not feel able to take up the provisions where the workplace culture sends a message that they should not do so, or they feel they will be letting colleagues down by doing so. These elements need to be managed more equitably if improved performance and staff appreciation are to be achieved.

Effects on careers

An important issue that is raised by different working arrangements is: How do they affect individuals' careers? This is a particularly important question in the light of the rewards attached to working long hours in some organisations. If working part time, or more flexible arrangements is seen as a 'mummy track' for women with children and definitely not for those interested in promotion or a career, then it will only help family life at the expense of creating a new set of gender stereotypes to reinforce the old framework of occupational segregation. This is a difficult area to research. One ideally needs organisations that offer flexible working arrangements to employees at all grades of staff. There needs to be some clear career routes in the organisation. Ideally a longitudinal study is required to follow individuals who either take up or do not take up flexible working arrangements, to compare how they progress through the career hierarchies. One can shorten the data collection process by asking individuals to recall their career moves within organisations but one has to be aware of the errors that can creep in to their recall, especially of dates and less salient events over short periods of time. However, one cannot easily get over the problem that organisations can change over the period they are being researched (even by recall methods). Changes to organisations' policies and culture along the way can affect later generations in ways that make it difficult to compare with earlier ones.

One study addressed the issue of how accessing career breaks and more flexible options affected longer term prospects in 3 types of organisation; two local councils; two branches of both a retail bank and a supermarket (Crompton et al, 2003). Since the supermarket and the retail bank branch studied were relatively small-sized

workplaces, career advancement for staff involved mobility to the organisation's other sites. This was not welcomed by many female staff who ruled themselves out of considering promotion for this reason. It also proved difficult, given the sizes of the workforces, and the fact that men do not take up flexible working arrangements to the same extent as women, to make comparisons between men who had and men who had not taken up flexible working. That such comparisons would be highly informative on this question cannot be doubted, but must be left to other research to consider.

The study did find examples of women matched by similar positions and circumstances, who had and had not taken a career break in the retail bank or the council. The comparisons found that those who had taken a career break had not risen through the ranks of the retail bank or council grades to the same extent as those who had worked full time without a break. However, it was not entirely clear whether this was because they were discriminated against, or regarded as less committed workers, or because they had less job experience. The question could not be fully resolved because insufficient time had elapsed up to the point of the interview to see whether, in the fullness of time, and having accumulated years of job experience to compensate for the time of the career break, individuals may have reached the same promotion grades as those who did not have a break. It was not clear, therefore, whether those taking career breaks would have been able to move up through the full spectrum of organisations' career structures but at a slower pace. Organisations' representatives did suggest career progress was now the allowed and encouraged following career breaks, because the organisations were committed to it in order to make the most of their human resources. This was recognised as being a change of policy and culture from an earlier set of policies when such moves would not have been allowed. There were early signs that this was making a difference to women's promotions.

It was clear that the retail bank's change of policy had facilitated some mothers' careers, compared with those in earlier generations. It was now possible in the retail bank to have a career break and/ or work part time and still be considered for promotions. This certainly had not been possible when some of the older women had

been at the same stage of their career. In order to work part time these older women would have had to leave the company. These signs of flexibility and change were welcomed by those who were benefiting and even by women who had never had such opportunities. Overall, this study's findings offered some encouragement for flexible working albeit from one small-scale study.

On the other hand the supermarket championed flexible working among its lower grade staff but there was little by way of career structures to move up. Its managers worked long hours. The policies here appeared selective in their operation. Taking up flexible arrangements did not seem practical for managers, given their workload. It was not the case that managers' failed to be promoted if they did work flexibly. They did not even consider doing so. However, this was often a reluctant acceptance by managers that long hours were needed to manage responsibly and effectively.

Smaller organisations

Smaller organisations have been thought to offer their employees fewer opportunities than larger organisations to work flexibly. The results from the Workplace Employee Relations Survey supported this expectation. But case study work on smaller organisations disputed this earlier impression of a relationship between size and flexible working arrangements (Dex and Scheibl, 2002). Many smaller organisations were found that did not have any formal policies offering flexible working arrangements to their employees, but which nonetheless allowed individuals who came forward with requests, to change their working arrangements. These research findings suggest that it may well be the wording of survey research questions that has given rise to the impression that small means inflexible. Certainly, small means informal, but this is not the same as inflexible. In practice, a spectrum of approaches to allowing employees to have flexible working arrangements was found in smaller businesses. At one end was a whole-hearted embrace of flexible working arrangements making them central to the working arrangements, business plan and culture of the organisation. At the other end of the spectrum was resistance. In the middle was the selective use of flexible arrangements, often as a perk or concession, for individuals who asked, and who were regarded as worth retaining as an employee. This middle position of selective and informal provision was evident

across a range of small businesses including ethnic minority family businesses (Basu and Altinay, 2003). Family membership was sometimes a lever for obtaining flexible working arrangements in all types of business. Owners' or partners' family members were allowed flexibility in some family businesses or partnerships when other employees were not, often, it was claimed, because they could be trusted.

Small businesses in Britain also have a reputation for being anti-regulation. Managing Directors and senior managers of the organisations included in this study expressed some of the same views in their interviews about how flexible working arrangements, if they were to adopt them, might affect their business. The problems they anticipated included:

- having no substitutes for certain jobs if employees were on leave or worked part time;
- fears of losing customers;
- disruption and lower productivity;
- more work for managers; and
- problems of inequities and resentment from other employees.

What was very interesting about the problems they anticipated was that other small organisations, similar in their products or type of work, did not find these problems arose when flexible working arrangements were used, or they had resolved them by changes in the organisation of work, often to their benefit.

Example. *'Since returning to work full time (after a period working part time for 6 months while his wife was very ill) the employee had been given a promotion and was given a new role as a trainer because, during the time he had taken off, colleagues had learned how to fix their own faults. This meant the employee was freed to take on a new and better-paid job.'* (Dex and Scheibl, 2002)

In addition, employers suggested their employees did not want flexibility. This turned out to be far from the truth. This implies that many of the problems anticipated are

the (mis)perceptions of small business owners and managers and would not necessarily arise in practice. It may be that employers who were opposed to flexible working arrangements would resist any changes. Certainly, attitudes that resisted the use of new technology often went alongside resistance to new working arrangements. But small business owners were also under severe time pressures, and since introducing and implementing change takes time, this was undoubtedly part of the problem.

One challenge for government policy to face if it wants small organisations to change is it needs to find them some time. The UK government's *Work-life Balance Challenge Fund* has gone some way towards providing more time for organisations, in the form of paid consultancy. But the companies had to come forward and apply for this. The small businesses that were resistant to introducing flexible working would be unlikely to come forward, and even those who are more sympathetic might find the time it takes to apply prohibitive.

Certain ways of organising the work can assist the smooth operation of flexible working arrangements in smaller or even larger organisations (Dex and Scheibl, 2002). For example, working in teams that are multi-skilled helps work groups to provide cover, without disruption, when employees are away, either on leave or during normal holiday entitlements. Having a policy of rotating employees or sending them on sabbaticals in other teams also helps to gain experience of their colleagues' or other teams' work. Flatter management structures also helped the operation of flexible working since this was often associated with overlaps in employees' tasks and responsibilities. Flexibility did not appear to work so well under the 'command and control' style of management. For example, it requires more trust to let people work at home, out of sight, but employees can respond very positively to such arrangements. Trust also underpinned use of flexible working arrangements in ethnic minority family businesses (Basu and Altinay, 2003) Using a system of reciprocity, preferably one that is explicit, to allow flexibility to employees who had shown they were good workers was popular in several organisations.

All of these practices were evident in the organisations that were benefiting most from their use of flexible working arrangements. They were also potentially transferable to organisations that did not offer flexible working arrangements. As well as being popular with employees, there were other spillover benefits to the business from some of these practices. Employees got a broader view of the business and were more involved in it and more supportive of its overall aims. There was a genuine sense of partnership between the employer and employees, the latter being able to offer useful suggestions for operational improvements, as earlier quotations illustrate.

Family and care responsibilities – the employee's perspective

As well as hearing from employers about their arrangements, many projects were also able to examine the employee's perspective in the same workplaces. If it is hoped that flexible working will ease the pressures of work on family life, the test of this is in employees' accounts. Here we focus only on whether problems of paid work for families with children or those with responsibilities for caring for older adults are eased when they have flexible working arrangements.

Business size

Employees in small businesses were the most positive that flexibility at work had beneficial carry over effects to the employee's family and personal life.

'It is very good here; all of the partners have got children themselves....It is very helpful to have this flexibility. It is hard to think of ways that they could make any improvements because this job cannot be done from home. Nothing at this firm makes coping with work and family life difficult.' (Employee – Dex and Scheibl, 2002)

More problems of combining paid work and care were expressed by employees in larger organisations, in small businesses resistant to flexibility, and where policies were not always translated into practice. Many parents of young and older children noted that school holidays were a problem for them (Yeandle et al, 2002; Backett-Milburn, 2001; Mauthner et al, 2001; Skinner, 2003); few expected the employer to be responsible for a solution.

As well as satisfied users of flexible working arrangements, studies found examples of employees who would very much like to have access to flexibility, even some who had left their employer because of the lack of flexibility (Dex and Scheibl, 2002; Backett-Milburn, 2001). It is likely that current usage under-estimates levels of interest in these sorts of working arrangements. Larger-scale surveys have also confirmed that there is substantial demand for flexible working time arrangements (Hogarth et al, 2001).

Carers of Older adults

Policies that ideally suited the needs of employees caring for older adults were seen to differ from those needed for parents caring for children. Caring for older adults was less predictable, more variable, could be some distance away and was less visible and less accepted in comparison with caring for children (Phillips et al, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002).

Earlier studies of working carers of older adults found they experienced tiredness (43%), stress and anxiety (50%) and that caring affected their career progression (32%) (Princess Royal Trust, 1995). Many had given up trying to care and do a paid job. The same survey suggested that 7 out of 10 carers under 50 years and 8 out of 10 in the 56 to 60 age group had given up paid work. Of those who had given up work, 47 per cent said they would have carried on working if there had been more flexibility at work. The studies of working carers uncovered some of the same problems (Phillips et al, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002). Clearly employers' policies to help working carers of older adults are not well developed. This is a cinderella policy area in organisations' human resource management, but it should not stay so. Given the demographic trends and the possibilities of needing to work longer to finance pension contributions, developing policies to assist working carers needs to become more of a priority.

Where employees had caring responsibilities for older adults they tended to use annual leave and time off in lieu to cope with the caring responsibilities when they arose (Phillips et al, 2002). This was the case even where the organisation had more

specifically targeted policies to address these needs. This meant that working carers did not always benefit from their organisation's policies. There were likely to be longer-term consequences for employees and the organisation in the cases of severe carer responsibilities where employees were not getting any rest through using up holiday entitlement on caring responsibilities.

Studies of working carers found that many employed carers were reluctant to publicise their caring responsibilities at work and to use the specific workplace provisions that were there to help (Phillips et al, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002). This reluctance to access their organisation's provisions may be due to fears about this knowledge affecting their career prospects. Certainly there was a widespread belief among carers they needed to be 'seen to be coping' in the workplace. Lone parents in Edinburgh expressed the same concerns (Backett-Milburn et al, 2002). The existence of these feelings also indicates that there is long way to go before organisations, and even employees themselves, face up to and are comfortable with the fact that all workers have more than one identity; they are all workers **and** mothers, fathers, sons or daughters.

Also, few of these carers of older adults accessed the state's provisions (Phillips et al, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002). While the state resources are being stretched to meet current demands for care services for older people, it is clear, therefore, that demand is far from being at full capacity. A lot of unpaid work is being carried out by many employed carers, some of whom have demanding paid jobs.

Unsocial hours

Businesses throughout the industrialised world have been facing increased competition in the now global market places and the 24/7 society. This has increased pressure to be competitive to keep the costs and wage bill low, to seek out new efficiency gains and to introduce lean production processes that use the minimum of workers. For some employers, one response has been to design jobs so they can be filled by the newer, often lower paid, supply of women's labour. For others, expecting employees to work longer hours and harder has been an implicit strategy in their recruitment and reward systems. In both cases there have been

increases in working early mornings, evenings and at weekends. In some cases employees' contracts have specified these new times of working as standard; in some cases employees are paid overtime or special rates and in other cases employees work beyond their contract hours unpaid in order to get the job done. This proliferation of working time arrangements has resulted from the same pressures operating in different product market environments. Large proportions of parents have got caught up in these trends and are more likely than other workers to be working non-standard hours and patterns as part of formal paid arrangements. The government's own studies have shown the extent of some forms of 'atypical work'. Further survey work has been undertaken to investigate both the detail of how parents combined their working time schedules and what the effects were on family life.

Fathers have two main reasons for working long hours. One is linked to financial necessity and job insecurity (La Valle, et al, 2002). This is clearly the driver for lower income families. The other is career ambition, a motivation that operates higher up the income scale. Working long hours, unpaid and beyond contracted hours, has been a growing expectation in higher qualified occupations for both men and women (Hogarth et al, 2000; Dex and Scheibl, 2002). Mothers' reasons for working at atypical times were often linked to the desire to balance work and family life and were seen, therefore, as part of the solution to combining work and family for mothers. However, a smaller proportion of mothers worked long hours for the same reasons as men.

Clearly the increases in long hours of work, particularly among the more highly qualified, run counter to the development of work-life balance policies in the workplace. It is somewhat ironical that managers, who themselves worked long hours, sometimes expressed the view that more flexible arrangements to help work-life balance were the best approach for other workers (Yeandle et al, 2002). It is an area of work organisation that is being challenged, but without obvious effect. Challenges have been made to the assumptions that underpin workplace cultures where long hours are expected (Bailyn, 1993). These assumptions have all been shown to be questionable with evidence to the contrary, that long hours equals

commitment; that productivity (per hour) is higher when hours are longer; and that productivity is higher for work that is visible. However, the practices continue despite the challenges partly through the business pressures, and employee and employer acceptance of these assumptions, but also because accurate measures of productivity are often unavailable and difficult to construct. More accurate measures of productivity may get through to employers that they need to change their employee reward systems, away from long hours per se, and towards rewarding high productivity per hour worked. Unfortunately, such measures are not available despite long attempts to generate them. Employees can, of course, work long hours for very different reasons, not all of which are attributable to the organisation of work or its culture (Crompton et al, 2003).

Inequalities in the workplace

Is the current provision of flexible working arrangements associated with inequities between employees and resentment? This is an important question. When these arrangements were discussed under the heading 'family-friendly policies', there were many fears, although little evidence, that single workers or those without children would resent special treatment being given to families. The change in terminology from family-friendly to work-life balance or work-life integration was part of an attempt to argue that employer provisions should be available to all employees and not just to those with families, partly in order to minimise the risk of resentment. Studies have illustrated that employer fears persist despite the terminology. Dex and Scheibl (2002) recorded that some small employers, who did not have any flexible arrangements, feared that introducing such arrangements would generate resentment about inequalities between employees. Surveys have also recorded these fears for a nationally representative sample of employers; for example, 43 per cent of employers in the Baseline Work-life balance survey thought that work-life balance practices were unfair to some staff (Hogarth et al, 2001). The extent to which these fears were based on bad experiences, bad practices or misconceptions was not made clear.

Research projects that carried out in-depth investigations of the operation of flexible working in organisations found little evidence of disruption or resentment about

having flexible arrangements. There were a number of reasons for this. Many of the policies did not particularly favour parents but were open to any employee (Yeandle et al, 2002; Bond et al, 2002; Phillips et al, 2002). In some cases, employees had the job of sorting out the flexibility they wanted themselves (Yeandle et al, 2002). This took away any sense of inequity or resentment. Overall, take up tended to be low. This meant that there was little to feel resentful of. In the many private sector flexible organisations, the organisation of work was designed to make sure some employees did not suffer from others having flexibility. This was less so in the public sector. In other organisations, where decisions were made about an employee's request for flexibility according to a business case, individuals' were only allowed flexibility if it were not going to be costly to the organisation (Dex and Scheibl, 2002). In other cases, employees did not take advantage of the flexibility offered because they were worried about the potential effects of additional workload on their colleagues (Phillips et al, 2002). These constraints probably had a limiting effect on any resentment. It was also the case that some employees' flexibility was accepted as part of their more highly qualified status. Other employees who did not have flexibility tended not to resent the fact that others had it since it often went alongside longer hours and more responsibilities (Dex and Scheibl, 2002; Yeandle et al, 2002). This kind of flexibility did not breach the norms of the workplace and so was accepted by all. This shows that some of employers' fears about the flexibility causing resentment are unfounded. The Baseline Work-Life Balance survey also found that the proportion of employees, 26 per cent, who thought work-life balance practices were unfair (to people like them) was far less than employers' fears suggested.

There was a lot of concern voiced by employees and managers about the exercise of discretionary power by line managers over who got to work flexibly (Yeandle et al, 2002; Bond et al, 2002). Managers with more experience were more likely to depart from the rulebook than recent incumbents (Bond et al, 2002). Having a manager with greater experience could work to the advantage of some employees who had their needs met in a way that suited their individual circumstances. This was particularly helpful for employees who developed caring responsibilities for older adults (Phillips et al, 2002). However, employees with junior managers more wedded to the rules did

not get the same treatment. Training can clearly help here. There is also a role for unions in making the implementation of flexible working more even (Bond et al, 2002).

Certainly, it is not the case that employees in the lower rungs of organisations are obviously or systematically treated worse than those higher up or have less access to flexible working arrangements. Where formal policies were in place, they did not discriminate between workers on the basis of hierarchical or income level criteria. If, in practice, some employees were not able or eligible to take advantage of the provisions it was more related to the employees feeling their job was unique (single accountant), indispensable (care workers, IT support), not suited to being done flexibly (eg. IT support, lab technician). However, employees of different qualification levels do have access to different types of flexible working arrangements, but these also varied by type of occupation. For example, flexi time was common among office staff where it seems to work well without disruption. Highly qualified engineers were able to devise their own flexible schedules as part of their higher status, but then often worked longer hours. As mentioned above, there were differences in employee awareness about their organisation's provisions (Yeandle et al, 2002; Bond et al, 2002). This may lead to some inequities. Better employer-employee communication would help here but there may be more radical solutions to this problem that are possible, as discussed below.

Where flexibility worked best and was integral to workplace culture and business objectives there were no problems of inequity although there were differences in treatment (Dex and Scheibl, 2002). These forward thinking employers had been aware of the potential problems and had devised arrangements, sometime over a period of time, that offered all employees some benefits. They also had clear rules for eligibility based on reciprocity, being a good hard-working employee, rather than on personal circumstances or needing time off. Trust between employees and managers was also more evident and voiced where employees felt the arrangements worked well (Dex and Scheibl, 2002; Phillips et al, 2002). In larger organisations, arrangements often worked better where they were devised at least with employee involvement, bottom up rather than top down, building on

partnership, good and open employer-employee communications (Yeandle et al, 2002).

We also need to ask - whether flexible working is a prerogative of the high paid. Where flexibility is obtained by reducing hours of work, this will also reduce pay. One might expect that only the relatively well-off would be able to benefit from such working arrangements. However, if anything it is the higher income earners, managers in particular, who are least likely to seek reductions in time at the workplace (Dex and Scheibl, 2002; Crompton, 2003; Yeandle et al, 2002; Phillips et al, 2002; Bond et al, 2002; LaValle et al, 2002). They are the group of men and women who feel the expectations of a long-hours workplace culture most severely. Many of the less well off mothers are already working part time as a way of adding to low household incomes by working while still managing to care for children, assisted by fathers in some cases. They have not changed their hours from full-time to part time in the same job, but actively sought part-time work after having children and, in many cases, an employment gap (Dex, 1999).

Where benefits came to parents from flexible working arrangements it was not clear that it was mainly mothers or female carers who got the benefit. Surveys suggest that mothers are the ones who feel the responsibility for children when they are ill. This would lead us to expect that it would be mainly mothers, not fathers, who took time off work when children were ill. There may well be more mothers who use the policies where they are offered, if workplaces employing men are less likely to offer leave for emergencies. This can be a source of inequity between employers such that employers who are more family-friendly get the take up, and any associated disruption costs, over employers who refuse to allow employees to have this flexibility.

Organisations and mobility

It is fairly common for larger organisations to relocate their higher grade manager or professional workers from one site to another in order to increase their experience and offer an internal career structure. One study examined this type of relocation (Green and Canny, 2003) and its consequences for family life. It proved difficult to

find any representative statistics about the extent of such practices among employers. This was partly because the concept of an employer-initiated relocation is not well defined. It can be voluntary or compulsory from the employee's point of view, or some mixture of the two. There can be individual moves or group moves when the employer decides to move the business, merge or restructure. The relocation agencies that help employers to move their employees, suggested relocation was undergoing changes, partly because increased numbers of women in the workforce made families less likely to want to move with the male partner's job. However, it was clear that employer-initiated relocations mainly affect professional and managerial employees.

The study of relocation also showed that few employers have subjected their practices to any thorough cost-benefit assessment. Relocation policies were not based on clear business rationales, more on tradition. Neither had these employers considered this aspect of organisation policy in relation to work-life balance issues. If work-life policies were on employers' agendas, it was likely to be under another heading from relocation or handled by another department. Interestingly, neither has the UK government's Work-Life Balance campaign identified relocation as a work-life issue. The increasing reluctance of some male employees to relocate was making employers consider the effects on families and so-called 'trailing spouses' although there was a reluctance to face up to the issues. Some employees were expressing preferences to commute to the new site rather than relocate. This was catching employer policies on the hop. The support families could be offered to do this, as opposed to relocate, was not thought through. The costs for employees' families of relocation could be substantial, although a few found it to be a mainly positive experience, especially where the costs of removal had been met by the employer and the family had moved up the ladder in the housing market. Since there was relatively little variation between employers in the help offered to relocating employees, it was not possible to identify whether some employer policies work better for families than others. Certainly having removal expenses paid was the minimum which all employees felt entitled to receive. Employers largely accepted responsibility for this cost. Where employees had experienced multiple relocations they had learnt to cope with it although research projects are only likely to find

families who have survived for interviews. Employees also thought that relocation agents were helpful where employers had paid them to help.

Conclusions

Flexible working arrangements appear to be on the increase. Some employers have seen the need to respond to changing family circumstances. Others have moved reluctantly down this path in response to their employees. The competition for talent has been a strong motivator for organisations to offer flexible arrangements in some sectors. In other sectors, where labour market pressures may be lower and there is no regular employer-employee communication, nor any union or employee representation, the desire from employees for greater flexibility has gone unheard. Employers were interviewed in these research projects who claimed their employees did not want more flexible working arrangements. However, their employees told researchers that they did want them.

Research has added valuable new evidence to the issue of whether it pays employers to offer flexibility to their employees. Overall the message is a positive one for flexible working arrangements. Flexible working arrangements tend not to reduce business performance and under the right conditions, they can enhance performance and employees' views of their employer. Will this make any difference to employers? Those employers who are already reaping the benefits of flexible working arrangements can be reassured. Those who have allowed individuals to work flexibly but have not offered it to all employees can also be encouraged to be bolder in their extension of new working arrangements to other or all employees. Those who are resistant to flexible working may need more of a push to try new ways of working. The adoption in UK legislation, from April 2003, of the Work and Parents Taskforce recommendations may help. This new light-touch legislation gives parents of children under 6 a right to request flexible working and the employer a duty to give their request serious consideration. This new approach is in tune with implications of recent research reviewed here. The new legislation has the potential to get resistant employers to see for themselves that allowing individual employees to have more flexible working arrangements of their choice will not damage their business and may even benefit it. It was the view of one the projects that such an

approach would work best and build more of a partnership between employers and employees if employee requests included a presentation of a business case. This proviso would facilitate the extension of such a scheme to any employee, rather than restricting it solely to parents of young children.

Some might argue that we should be able to advocate flexibility without the rationale of a business case. If employees want and like flexibility and it helps them balance work and home life to the benefit of family life, then, like sickness pay or holidays, there are social grounds for arguing the case for flexibility. However, even under such arguments, the business case evidence is still important because of its relevance to who should pay, and how much. It is necessary to know if there are business costs to flexibility in the debate about apportioning any costs of flexibility between employers, employees and the general tax purse.

It is one thing to introduce policies or the option to work more flexibly. It is another thing to implement the policies, communicate to employees and line managers about them, and support the users of the policies through their career. The lack of implementation of workplace policies in some workplaces and the importance of a supportive culture are both aspects of flexible working arrangements that have been known for some time. Research studies have uncovered and reaffirmed these same relationships. This shows that it is not just a matter of time passing that will help the implementation process and resolve some of the implementation problems. More action is needed. At the same time, the projects have brought new findings to light.

It is possible to learn from the more customised approach of smaller businesses in a way that may avoid some of the old chestnuts relating to implementation. Smaller businesses have shown that it is possible to move from informal discretion as the basis for employee access to flexible working, to explicit reciprocity '*You help the business and the business will help you.*' This is a way of directing line managers away from their own values and towards a consideration of the business needs. Having fewer policies but a single policy or stated ethos of approachability under which individuals needs can be addressed gets away from individuals mis-using the policies. Clearly employers have to be motivated to tackle these issues, otherwise

little progress can be made. Where these ideas have been implemented they are certainly well received by employees and thought to be fair and equitable.

Informal and discretionary practices were evident in all sizes and shapes of workplaces. They are certainly not restricted to small businesses as has sometimes been implied. Is this something to regret and take steps to stamp out? One research team investigating union involvement concluded that it would be better to have clearer formal policies, less discretion and more systematised access to flexible working arrangements. Another team researching smaller businesses argued that informal arrangements had many benefits for customising the arrangements to suit the employee who wanted them. In some ways approaches need to be devised that retain the benefits of discretion, which clearly worked to employees benefit where practiced by experienced and confident line managers. There needs to be more openness about practices and discretion. Some suggestions which might help and are being tried in other organisations are made below. Unions are well placed to help develop such arrangements and keep an eye on potential inequities, although they are represented now in a much smaller proportion of UK workplaces.

The increases in long hours of work, running counter to the development of work-life balance policies in the workplace is an area of concern, not least because of its persistence and increase, despite rational challenge. A long hours culture can be argued to be a mechanism of social and workplace control for higher grade workers who would not be prepared to work under stricter command and control management discipline. It can also give the illusion of having flexibility when in reality, no-one uses it. On the other hand, even this limited flexibility in these sorts of environments does allow many fathers to take a more active role in their children's school events than might otherwise occur (eg. sports days). So it is worth having. The challenges that long hours of work generate are likely to continue. One can hope that further demonstration of the business case for reduced hours will help to chip away at the beliefs that sustain long hours of work. There is also some hope in the next generation's stated preferences, as recorded in surveys. In the 1990s, both young men and young women were indicating that they wanted their (adult) life to be involved not only in paid work but also in family and personal life (Brannen et al,

2001). We might look to the future talent wars between organisations, therefore, as one influence that might help to chip away at long hours cultures.

Much of the research based in workplaces has examined flexible working arrangements as they were available to all employees. This was partly because most commonly organisations' policy statements and criteria were specified as applying to all, with the exceptions of parental, maternity or paternity leaves. However, it has also been a plank of policy arguments to move to making the case for work-life balance for all rather than advocating family-friendly policies, with their narrower focus on families. The evidence suggests that flexibility often makes business sense. The evidence itself was not tied to particular groups of beneficiaries. However, when one sees who does use the flexibility and who does benefit, mothers constitute a disproportionate number.

This suggests that we need not feel shy of arguing the case for family-friendly policies. They are not dsadvantaging businesses that offer them, nor are they producing large-scale resentment or inequities. However, if other groups can benefit from the same flexibility, even if those who want it are far fewer, then the same business case will apply and be a reason for extending flexible working to all who want it. Extending the use of flexible working to fathers would strengthen the business case. If there are any disruptive effects from flexible working arrangements at workplaces where mothers predominate in the workforce these would be shared across employers more equally if fathers as well as mothers took turns in addressing the issues of family life that are part of employees' responsibilities.

Access to flexible working arrangements has the potential to attract workers. This can be a bonus where there are staff shortages. However, where work is organised along lean production lines, to run with minimum staffing levels, flexibility can cause problems. However, sickness and holidays can also cause problems in such contexts, which suggests that it is the organisation of work that needs to be reviewed rather than flexible working being ruled out.

Policy implications

Policy implications from this recent research include suggestions to aid the spread of flexible working arrangements in a best practice way? They include the following points.

- Employers need to go beyond window-dressing and off the peg policy solutions.
- Customized solutions work best for employees. So, encourage an approach to the adoption of flexible working that is based on employees' requests. This assures the best success for devising solutions that will benefit the employee's particular circumstances.
- Involve employees in devising solutions to their desire for flexibility. Make employee requests for flexibility linked to the need for the employee to offer ways of organising the work so that they can have the flexibility they wish without disruption to the business. This holds out an opportunity for greater employee partnership, initiative and autonomy, all of which can benefit the business.
- Rather than bolting-on flexible working policies, employers will experience far greater benefits if they are prepared to take the chance to review their organization of work. A consideration of how the current organization of work contributes to employees' work-life problems also holds out the potential to uncover and tackle ineffective and low productivity working practices.
- Extend the Work and Parents' Taskforce approach, with its duty on employers to give serious consideration to employees' request for flexibility, to cover all employees, not just parents with a child under 6. This sort of customised approach is what is needed, especially for carers of older adults.
- Employers and government policy discussions need to bring employee relocation policies under the work-life umbrella. Employers should carry out more rigorous cost-benefit analyses of employee relocation and convince themselves it is worth it. Ways of alleviating some of the ill effects of relocation also need to be investigated.
- It is important to allow flexibility to men and women in order to avoid the promotion of discrimination in favour of one group who are not eligible, and to spread any costs more evenly between employers. If the flexibility is linked to a

business case for having it, there is no justification for allowing some but not other social groups to benefit from it, and less risk of inequalities growing wider.

- Encourage union's involvement as a partnership in devising new and more flexible ways to work in the ways outlined above.
- Encourage the spread of multi-skilling, teamwork, rotating sabbaticals in other teams, and systems of explicit reciprocity between employers and employees as the best foundation for flexible working and a way towards greater partnership in the workplace.
- Encourage better communication between employers, managers and employees and transparent policies which have benefits and are less subject to employee resentment.
- Fuller recognition needs to be given to the problems of making employees and line managers aware of a lengthy list of organisation policies, sometimes with confusing names, at times when they are irrelevant to them. One approach would be to encourage the use of a simple but highly publicised and over-arching policy frameworks. Such frameworks, like the Freedom to Work initiative developed by BT, can be used to encourage employees to come forward with their requests, and have their particular circumstances addressed, but within the constraints of the business.
- One other point that employers should consider carefully is as follows: Lean staffing may cost your business the goodwill of employees and possibly customer satisfaction.

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