

Line managers and family-friendly employment

Employers are encouraged to become more 'family-friendly' and to support their employees in developing a better 'work-life balance'. Research by Sue Yeandle (Sheffield Hallam University) and colleagues at other universities focuses on the role of the line manager. It considers the issues that arise in everyday situations, as employees and managers try to implement family-friendly employment. The researchers found that:

-  Although some 'progressive' line managers demonstrated detailed and up-to-date understanding of family-friendly policies, many others could be categorised as 'vague', 'ignorant, or 'resistant' about employment policies for enhancing work-life balance. Managers commonly confessed to 'muddling through' and 'relying on common sense' in responding to their employees' needs and requests for flexible working arrangements.
-  Many line managers felt they were expected both to operate modern human resources policies and to achieve demanding business targets. None felt they had received adequate training to help them resolve these tensions.
-  Although most line managers displayed positive attitudes to employees with parental/caring responsibilities, there was considerable variability in their interpretation of the family-friendly/flexible policies available to them. A few were operating with gender stereotypes about how employees ought to deal with parental/caring responsibilities.
-  Managers' behaviour in implementing family-friendly employment policies was affected by organisational factors such as size, structure and operational arrangements and by the recruitment, labour supply, and skills context in which they operated.
-  Different managers emphasised the importance of discretion, organisational values, knowledge of their staff, empathy, fairness and consistency. In specific cases, many had grappled with both defining and clarifying the situation, and with making judgements about employee reliability, commitment and effectiveness.
-  Some line managers based requests for flexibility on employees' previous record of 'commitment', defined by long hours' working and acceptance of short-notice changes to working time. This could work against employees whose domestic responsibilities already caused them to limit their working time and patterns.
-  Most managers were conscious of - and some were troubled by - the discretion they could exercise. Their responsiveness to employees' circumstances drew on personal values, operational constraints, notions of equity, policy precedents, and how confident they felt about bending 'official' rules.

Background

Over the past decade, in a context of widespread debate about family-friendly employment and the achievement of work-life balance, many organisations have taken action to develop policies which offer their employees more flexibility at work. These policies typically also offer some support to employees at times of stress or pressure in combining employment with parental or caring responsibilities.

Previous research has shown that merely having such policies in place does not resolve all the issues with which employees, managers and organisations have to deal. All the evidence has been that individual line managers exert just as much - if not more - influence over the way individual employees are enabled to negotiate work-life balance than do senior managers, human resources departments, or legislation.

The study

This new study re-analysed over a hundred line manager interviews in over thirty workplaces. The relationship between managers' personal attributes, attitudes and experiences was found to be linked to the organisational and policy context in which the managers were operating. Most of the organisations included in the study had adopted, either formally or informally, some family-friendly working arrangements. The organisations, from both public and private sectors, included health and local authorities, companies providing financial services, supermarkets, and small and medium-sized enterprises, including some in the manufacturing and high technology sectors.

Managers' understanding of family-friendly policies

Although some 'progressive' line managers demonstrated detailed and up-to-date understanding of family-friendly policies, many others could be categorised as 'vague', 'ignorant', or 'resistant' about employment policies for enhancing work-life balance. It was particularly striking that these categories did not match readily managers' other characteristics. Most of the categories contained both male and female managers, managers with and without direct personal experience of caring or parental responsibility, and a spread of ages and length of managerial experience.

Many line managers confessed that when issues linked to family responsibilities arose in their management of a staff group, they resorted to 'muddling through' and 'relying on common sense' in how they responded to their employees' needs and requests for flexible working arrangements.

The need for training on implementing family-friendly employment policies

Many line managers felt they were expected both to deliver on a progressive human resources agenda (which valued diversity, responded positively to staff combining work and family/caring responsibilities and encouraged staff in their personal and career development) and to achieve demanding business targets. None felt they had received adequate training to help them resolve these tensions, and only a small minority of those interviewed could be described as both committed to and really knowledgeable about what their organisation's policy was in the context of a family-friendly organisation.

Where training and communications strategies in this sphere were more developed, as in one of the supermarkets, managers showed both enhanced policy awareness and greater commitment to policy implementation. However, in most workplaces, the line managers reported that they had received no training or guidance beyond having access to a human resources adviser or to a managers' guide or manual.

Managerial attitudes to employees with parental/care responsibilities

Most of the line managers were positive about supporting employees with parental/caring responsibilities, yet there was considerable variability in their interpretation of their organisation's family-friendly/flexible policies. Most managers emphasised that in cases of genuine distress, difficulty or stress, they tried to be humane, sympathetic and resourceful.

The study did not find widespread resentment about either the organisation's family-friendly stance, or the fact that some employees were trying to balance both work and family responsibilities. However, a few managers did reveal strong expectations based on gender about how employees ought to deal with parental/caring responsibilities, and indicated stereotypical attitudes about the type of employee who was likely to request flexibility or support at work.

Interpreting and implementing the policies

It was evident that line managers' behaviour in implementing family-friendly employment policies was affected by several organisational factors. These included the size of their organisation or working group, the way production or service delivery tasks were structured, and the details of operational arrangements. Thus opening or operating hours, and the extent to which organisational performance was led by customer or client demand, especially with regard to hours of work, were important influences. Other important points mentioned by managers included the ease or difficulty with which they could recruit replacement staff, general issues of labour

supply, and the skills context in which the business was operating.

Among the issues to which the line managers drew attention were the following:

- *Discretion* Many managers saw discretion as a key component of their role, allowing them to make judgements and take decisions on the basis of their experience and managerial skills. Some managers were conscious that, in exercising their discretion, unfairness could sometimes result.
- *Organisational values/key principles* Managers in some organisations were aware that their directors or senior managers now viewed adopting 'work-life' or 'family-friendly' approaches as key components of organisational success. These managers were more likely than others to feel they would be supported and encouraged in implementing flexible employment policies.
- *Personal knowledge of their staff* Line managers commonly emphasised their view that the key to managing people was to know them well. It was not widely recognised that this approach could be difficult for employees who found it hard to disclose personal information or who were encountering family pressures relating to mental health, relationship breakdown, or managing their children's or dependants' behaviour.
- *A capacity for empathy/understanding* Some managers suggested that this was not so much a managerial skill as a personality trait. While certain managers prided themselves on having this attribute, which they claimed helped them to operate flexibly, others openly admitted to lacking this capacity, and to discouraging employees from bringing them what they saw as 'problems from home'.
- *Fairness and consistency* Many line managers saw achieving this as an important goal in their management of work-life and family-friendly issues. However, some also recognised that it was rare for employees to share identical work-life issues, so that relying on precedents, or comparing cases, was not a sure way for a manager to be both fair and consistent.

Managers were often able to cite specific cases where they had struggled to define and clarify both the situation with which they were dealing and the policy to be applied. Many recounted evaluating how reliable, committed and effective the employee in question was, as part of the process through which they decided upon their response.

Some managers appeared to use an employee's willingness to work long hours, or to deliver work beyond what was normally required, as an indicator of commitment, without realising that this approach could lead them to evaluate employees with caring or

parental responsibilities less positively than those who did not have such concerns.

Most managers were conscious of - and some were troubled by - the discretion they could exercise. Their responses drew on personal values, operational constraints, notions of equity, policy precedents, and how confident they felt about bending 'official' rules.

Policy implications

The researchers have established several policy implications affecting main players:

For line managers

- Experienced line managers have a wealth of detailed knowledge of employees' needs for support in combining their domestic and employment roles. This could be used in the development of guidance and codes of practice about employees and their circumstances, such that individual needs can be taken into account without intrusion into employees' privacy.
- A culture change has yet to be seen in some workplaces in order for employees to request, and for line managers to consider it acceptable to respond to, employees' family responsibilities.
- Line managers are often a weak link in organisational communication strategies relating to policy on work-life balance. Where work-life issues are raised as part of a routine and regular role for managers they play an important part in achieving effective communication.
- Managers could pool experience of how they have dealt with difficult cases involving employees who are parents and carers. This could be fed into organisational 'banks' of good practice, using suitably 'anonymised' examples. Organisations with sufficient numbers of line managers might usefully consider initiating ways which could enable them to share experience and practice.
- Managers could keep records of the way they respond to employee requests for family-friendly employment or flexibility at work. These could be fed into human resources departments for proper assessment of the costs and benefits of the policies.

For human resources departments and employers

- The researchers suggest that human resources departments could prioritise the development of imaginative training for line managers in the implementation of family-friendly employment. They consider it unhelpful that virtually all managers are implementing new and innovative policies and legislation without access to training and appropriate support.
- Human resources departments could assess and evaluate the data provided by managers about the take-up of family-friendly employment, and report

regularly to senior management and trade unions/ staff representatives on their findings.

- When organisations are restructuring, down-sizing or otherwise redeploying staff, specific attention could be paid to how the work-life balance of staff will be affected. The researchers consider it important that care be taken to ensure that managers given new responsibilities at these times have appropriate opportunities to develop relevant skills as well as training.

For trade unions

- Trade union involvement featured very little in the managerial interviews. There is a constructive role for unions to play in sharing good practice across different organisations, bringing ideas from one organisation into another, supporting good communications on these matters, and including the effective implementation of family-friendly employment in their bargaining strategies. Good dialogue with human resources departments on effective ways of implementing family-friendly employment could be a routine goal in collective bargaining.

For government and policy-makers

- Policy guidance and new legislative developments could take account of the different organisational settings and of the different labour markets in which family-friendly employment will be implemented.
- Government - not least in its role as an employer - can take a lead by linking the gender equality and family-friendly agendas, and by promoting more take-up of these options by men. This could benefit organisations which are currently strongly female-dominated.
- Government guidance could include good practice examples drawn from a wide range of different employment sectors and organisations. Specialist advice and guidance may be needed for small and medium enterprises, highlighting effective examples of how small firms can successfully be family-friendly.

About the project

This report brings together research data from four previous research projects supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation through its *Work and Family Life Programme*. Those projects were conducted between 2000 and 2002 at Cambridge, City, Keele, Napier and Sheffield Hallam Universities. For this new study, the research teams pooled the interview data they had collected from line managers, yielding data from over one hundred managers in a variety of organisations in

Scotland, Kent, the Midlands, East Anglia and Yorkshire.

The pooled interview material was analysed by Sue Yeandle during 2003, in close consultation with Judith Phillips, Fiona Scheibl, Andrea Wigfield and Sarah Wise, the other authors of the report. With this (non-random) sample of line managers in twenty organisational settings, the new analysis focused on answering the following research questions:

- How far do line managers' personal characteristics structure their attitudes and behaviour in implementing policies?
- What is the impact of factors such as staffing levels, staff turnover, and the type of work being managed?
- How aware are managers of the policies in place, and how does this affect the line manager's role?

How to get further information

The full report, **Line managers and family-friendly employment: Roles and perspectives** by Sue Yeandle, Judith Phillips, Fiona Scheibl Andrea Wigfield and Sarah Wise, is published for the Foundation by the Policy Press as part of the Family and Work Series (ISBN 1 86134 556 9, price £13.95)