









## Attitudes to flexible working and family life

Allowing employees to have greater flexibility in their jobs is part of the government's work-life balance campaign. However, the most widely available form of flexible working – working part-time – has shown consistently low uptake amongst men and has been linked with a substantial pay gap between male and female workers. This research, by Diane Houston and Julie Waumsley of the University of Kent, compares men and women's attitudes and intentions about flexible working and family life. A survey was carried out with full-time employees who were members of the Amalgamated Electrical and Engineering Union (AEEU) and with shop stewards. The research found:

-  Women's preferred option for combining work and family life was for both parents to work flexibly and to share childcare and work in the home. Men were also strongly in favour of this option, but showed a slight preference for women working part-time and men full-time.
-  Seventy-two per cent of employees said they would use flexible working arrangements if they became available to them. Women, and those with caring responsibilities, were the most positive about flexible working.
-  The majority of male and female employees thought flexible working would be beneficial to both employers and employees.
-  Employees were concerned that using flexible working arrangements would damage their promotion prospects and even their relationships at work.
-  The majority of employees reported that their family provided them with support that helped them at work. Despite this, half also reported that work pressures had negative effects on their family life.
-  Those employees who were already using some form of flexible working were more committed to their employer and reported better psychological health.
-  The shop stewards, who were skilled workers in predominantly male employment contexts, thought flexible working would undermine men as breadwinners and threaten traditional patterns of work and family life.
-  The researchers conclude that unions would be advised to note the differences in attitudes of its male and female members, that flexible working is likely to require greater promotion amongst male workers, and that more could be done to establish that flexible working does not necessarily mean poor career prospects.

## Background

From 6 April 2003, parents with children under six years old, or with disabled children under 18, have had the right to request a flexible working pattern. Their employers have a duty to consider their applications seriously. This legislation has been introduced three years into the Government's campaign for better work-life balance and reflects changes in the economic and political climate as well as social changes.

This change in practice is, to some extent, related to the needs of employees. The traditional model of fathers who work and mothers who remain at home to care for children represents a declining proportion of families. In many families both partners work, and there are many lone parent families. This highlights the need for both men and women to balance home and work, in order to be effective workers, effective parents and to maintain their psychological and physical health.

However, the change is also related to the needs of employers. Global competition and changes in customer demands and expectations for access to goods and services 24 hours a day means that organisations must operate outside the traditional nine to five structure. Some organisations therefore employ people who are prepared to work flexibly outside traditional hours.

Working part-time has been the most widely available form of flexible working for some time. Despite decades of part-time working by women, men have shown a consistently low uptake of part-time work. This may mean that men will be less likely to use other forms of flexible working in the future and that current gender divisions in work may be amplified.

## The project

The overall aim of the research was to examine attitudes to, and uptake of, flexible working practices amongst employees who currently work full-time. Comparisons were made between women and men, people who do and do not have caring responsibilities, and those of different occupational levels (semi-skilled workers, skilled workers and managers).

The research examined the ways in which workplace culture (here traditionally male-dominated) and individual circumstances determine attitudes to flexible working. Perceptions of the career implications of flexible working were also explored. The research set out to investigate:

- What types of employment rights and benefits do workers prefer?
- Do attitudes to flexible working arrangements differ according to employees' gender, caring responsibilities or occupation level?
- What do shop stewards understand by the term 'flexible working' and how do they view such arrangements?
- Do employees who use flexible working arrangements have lower levels of stress, sickness leave, and conflict between work and family?
- Do employees who use flexible working arrangements have higher levels of employee involvement in their job?
- Are employees concerned about the effect that flexible working will have on their career and promotion prospects?

## Employment rights and benefits

The AEEU members were asked to evaluate a range of employment rights and benefits. The three most popular employment rights and benefits were: contributory pension scheme, paid time off for emergencies in the family, and statutory maternity leave. In general, there were stronger preferences for general employment benefits, for example, pensions, extra holiday entitlement, and health insurance, than for policies which provided flexibility in working hours or locations.

Women expressed significantly stronger desires than men to have flexibility in working hours, namely job share, term-time only working, part-time working, and the ability to move between full and part-time work. Employees with any kind of caring responsibility were more strongly in favour of working parents being given specific rights and benefits than were those without caring responsibilities. Managers expressed strongest approval for all the employment rights and benefits (with the exception of retail vouchers).

## Preferences about combining work and family life

Employees were also asked about their preferences for how families can divide work and childcare. Women's most strongly preferred option was for

both parents to work flexibly and to share childcare and work in the home. Men also strongly favoured this option, but showed a slight preference for women working part-time and men full-time. The option of both parents working full-time was viewed negatively by men and women.

### Attitudes to flexible working

Most employees (72 per cent) intended to use flexible working in the future if possible – women more so than men, and managers more so than skilled or semi-skilled workers. Women felt more positively about flexible working than men. Employees who felt that their working life would benefit were most likely to intend to use flexible working. While many employees expressed a strong view that flexible working would be good for the employer and employee, 79 per cent did not agree that flexible working would lead to respect and promotion.

### Caring and flexible working

Fewer women than men in the survey claimed to have caring responsibilities. Women who cared for dependants devoted more than double the time of men with caring responsibilities, despite the fact that they were all working full-time. When employees with and without caring responsibilities were compared, it was found that carers and non-carers made similar use of flexible working practices. Male managers were most likely, and female semi-skilled workers least likely, to be current users of flexible working.

### Work stress and ill-health

The union members in the survey reported good psychological health. Where there was stress, higher levels were found among men, managers and people with caring responsibilities.

Women, particularly those with caring responsibilities, had taken slightly more days of sick leave than men in the year prior to the survey. The number of days off was related to the number of hours worked, but not to the extent of conflict experienced between work and family life. In this sample of full-time workers, men worked, on average, only one hour more per week than women.

There is always the potential for work and family to affect each other: family life can spill over into work, and work into family life. A large majority of employees felt that their family offered them support for their work. In contrast, half of them experienced conflict at home arising from pressure at work. The

level of conflict between work and family life was lower among employees who used flexible working.

### Organisations and flexible working

The research examined the relationship between the traditional male-dominated workplace culture and flexible working, psychological health, and intentions to leave the organisation. Employees who perceived their workplace to be unsupportive of flexibility and family life had higher levels of conflict between work and family, as well as poorer psychological health, and stronger intentions to leave the organisation.

In general, there was greater use of flexible working when employees felt that the management supported these working arrangements. Use of flexible working was associated with lower work-family conflict, more positive workplace culture and more positive attitudes to flexible working practices.

Managers felt that they had a greater degree of support from their own managers for flexible working than did other groups of workers. However, they were also more concerned about the career consequences of pursuing flexible working. Male employees tended to feel there were more organisational demands on them and less union support for flexible working practices than did female employees.

### Shop stewards' views about flexible working

The involvement of the AEEU in this study provided the opportunity to examine shop stewards' attitudes and views about working arrangements. Although stewards are not official spokesmen for union policy, they reveal something of how unions at grass roots level regard changes in working arrangements that seem to be generally welcomed by union members.

Shop stewards were asked to explain what they understood by the term 'flexible working' and to give their views about whether such working arrangements should be called 'flexible' or 'family-friendly'. One fifth of those interviewed did not know what flexible working was. The majority preferred to use the term 'flexible' to 'family-friendly' when describing patterns of work designed to improve work-life balance. Where they did understand the terms and the issues, the idea of flexible working was often viewed with suspicion and thought to be mainly in the employer's interest. Stewards saw traditionally male patterns of working - such as shift work and overtime - to be under threat from flexible working.

## Conclusions

This survey of AEEU members has shown that full-time workers have a strong desire to work more flexibly and to share caring responsibilities more evenly between men and women. Using flexible working arrangements was generally viewed as being positive for both employer and employee. However, employees are also seriously concerned about the effects of not working full-time on career progression and/or job security. Women felt more positively about flexible working than men.

The views of union members provided a strong contrast to the union shop stewards' views, which were more negative towards flexible working. This mismatch between employees' and shop stewards' views may hinder union recruitment and generate questions of the relevance of union representation to the workforce, particularly the female workforce.

The researchers concluded that:

- unions would be advised to note the differences in attitudes of male and female members if they are both to be adequately represented in workplaces;
- flexible working is likely to require greater promotion amongst male workers and more should be done to establish that flexible working does not necessarily mean poor career prospects. This means making flexible working available at all levels of occupations and challenging the notion that working long hours leads to advancement. If this does not happen, there is a risk that flexible working will further segregate men and women in the workforce.

## About the project

This study was conducted between 2001 and 2002 by Diane Houston and Julie Waumsley in the Work-Life Research Group at the University of Kent. The first stage of the research was a questionnaire survey of over 1500 male and female managerial, skilled and semi-skilled workers, conducted through the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union. Until its merger with the Manufacturing and Services Union (MSF), the AEEU was the UK's largest manufacturing union, with over 730,000 members in the public and private sector. Data analysis provided comparisons between men and women, those with and without caring responsibilities, and between

occupational levels - managerial, skilled and semi-skilled workers.

The second part of the research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 43 shop stewards during residential training courses held by the AEEU.

## How to get further information

The full report, **Attitudes to flexible working and family life** by Diane M. Houston and Julie A. Waumsley, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Family and Work series (ISBN 1 86134 549 6, price £14.95).