

INTERNATIONAL

WORK/LIFE COUNTRY BRIEFING SERIES

UNITED KINGDOM

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The Center for
Work & Family
BOSTON COLLEGE

Carroll School of Management
140 Commonwealth Avenue
Chestnut Hill, MA 02167
ph: (617) 552-2844
FAX: (617) 552-2859
http: //www.bc.edu/cwf

Editor: Ellen Bankert
The Center for Work and Family

Country Expert: Suzan Lewis
The Centre for Research on Work,
Family and Community
Manchester Metropolitan University

Graphic Design: Naomi Sheehab
Designkartel

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OVERVIEW

Although work and family is a hot topic in the UK, progress by both the government and the private sector has been considerably slower than many neighboring European countries. Similar to the limited government support of families in the US, there has been a prevailing sentiment in the UK that it is preferable to avoid government "interference" in the daily lives of families. However, the election in May 1997 of Prime Minister Tony Blair from the Labour Party has resulted in considerable speculation

about future progressive changes in social policy. The subject of work and family is not only a hot

one at the government level, but also among employers, trade unions, and the media. An increasing number of employers are implementing family-friendly policies, focusing primarily on child and elder care, flexible work hours, and family leaves.

SOCIAL / DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

There are several significant social trends impacting the increased attention to work and family, including:

- **Massive growth of female employment.** 52% of women with children under 5, 71% of those with children age 5-10, and 79% with children over 11 are economically active.
- **Aging of the population.** Surveys suggest that about one third of the working population at any one time have caring responsibilities for an older adult.
- **Longer working hours.** More than one in four fathers work 50 hours a week or more, and those who do are less involved in family activities.
- **Rise in dual earner families.** 59% of mothers and 53% of fathers live in dual-earner families.

An increasing number of employers are implementing family-friendly policies, focusing primarily on child and elder care, flexible work hours, and family leaves.

- **Increasing number of single mothers.** Single mothers are one of the groups being targeted by the new government's welfare to work program, which should raise the issues of how employers will accommodate them.

PUBLIC POLICY SUPPORTING FAMILIES

Traditionally in the UK, government policy has been based on the principle of individual responsibility and the care of

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dependents within the family. Despite trends towards dual earner and more single parent families, social policy has been based on the ideal of the single earner family. The government recognizes that more women are working, but this is constructed as a choice (while it is often a necessity), and it is considered to be the parents' responsibility to ensure adequate child care

while they are working. Two out of three working mothers in the UK rely on family

and friends to take care of their children. In terms of elder care and other adult care, there is a policy of care in the community, encouraging people to live independently in their own homes. In 1996, a new agreement on leave to care for children was reached by European employer and worker representatives and has been adopted as a Directive (law) by the EU. The agreement deals with two specific issues: parental leave and brief work absences for urgent family reasons. While some of the general guidelines were outlined, many of the details were left to be regulated nationally. Initially, the UK was exempt from this Directive, but the Labour government has decided to implement it and companies are now preparing to address the issue of parental leaves.

There is also current debate about a Working Time Directive, which Britain is now required to implement. The Directive requires a maximum 48 hour week (although employees can decide to work longer if they so choose), a maxi-

mum 6 day week, and a minimum statutory requirement of 3 weeks annual vacation.

Child Care

Because family is regarded as an individual responsibility, there is minimal provision of publicly funded child care. What is available is targeted at children "in need" because of health or related problems, and not at children of work-

ing parents.

Relatives are the most common source of child care while parents are working.

There are also childminders,

who must be registered and approved, and who care for children in their own homes. In terms of center-based care, there are several types of nurseries, including a small but growing number of workplace and privately managed organizations.

In 1996 the former government published a document on work and family that acknowledges the growing number of women in the workplace and the business case for encouraging the provision of affordable, accessible, quality child care. The document stops short of taking responsibility for this provision, despite considerable pressure from leading employers including British Airways, the BBC, and Shell, for the government to play a larger role in the provision of child care.

Currently, there is no overall tax relief for child care expenses for the majority of working parents. Low income parents who can claim some benefits and work can set aside £40 a week for child care costs against their earnings before benefits are reduced.

Leaves

Paid maternity leave has been available to certain women since 1975, and to all women since 1994. Paid maternity leave is 18 weeks in the UK; the actual leave policy is complex, but all women get 18 weeks, although the rate of pay differs. This leave can be extended by a period of unpaid leave by women with the required length of service, to up to 29 weeks after birth.

In practice, most women who return to work do so well before this time.

Women most likely to return to work early include those with high levels of education, those who are highly paid, and women in the public sector. Many women wish to return to work on a part-time basis, at least initially.

HOT TOPICS IN WORK AND FAMILY

Hours of Work

In recent years, there has been considerable movement towards greater flexibility of working hours. There has been growth in several flexible options, including part-time work, job sharing, flexitime and annualized working hours. (see chart)

Despite the interest in greater flexibility, there is a clear trend towards longer working hours, partly fueled by a growth in temporary work and prevailing job insecurity. British men and women who are employed full-time work the longest hours in Europe.

British females average 37.6 hours/week and males at 41.9. This issue was highlighted by a campaign in 1995 by the voluntary group Parents at Work. In a highly visible campaign, the group sent information packages to employers and the media to draw attention on the

FLEXIBLE WORKING PATTERNS FOR FULL-TIME WORKERS

United Kingdom	Percentages		
	Males	Females	All
Flexible working hours	9.5%	14.7%	11.3%
Annualised working hours	5.6	6.8	6.0
Four and a half day week	3.3	3.2	3.3
Term-time working	1.1	4.5	2.3
Nine day fortnight	0.5	0.2	0.4
Job sharing	"	"	0.1
All full-time employees ¹			
(=100%) (thousands)	10,872	5,953	16,734

¹ Includes employees who did not work flexible working hours or did not state them.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Central Statistical Office. Spring 1995

impact of long hours on families and the negative effects on productivity.

Parental Leave

With the election of the labour government, the UK has reversed the opt out of the parental leave policy negotiated by the previous government (see section on public policy). As a result, companies are now considering how best to implement leave policies and are eager to learn about the experiences of other European companies.

Welfare to Work

The Labour government is discussing offering employers subsidies to provide jobs to the unemployed, including single mothers. This effort has led to a growing awareness of work/family and child care issues for those with young children.

Public/Private Sector Collaboration

As progress is made within leading companies and the Labour government begins to make changes, there is a growing interest in determining how

the private and public sectors can work together to find solutions for work and family issues.

EMPLOYER ROLE

The focus on work/family policies in the workplace grew out of discussions on equal opportunities, which began in the 1970s after the passing of equal opportunities legislation. This legislation led to the implementation of several initiatives, particularly within the public sector. In the late 1980s there was considerable discussion of demographic shifts, in particular an anticipated skills shortage as a result of a decline in the

number of young people entering the work force. Consequently, the need to develop family-friendly policies to recruit and retain women with family responsibilities was emphasized. Industries such as the financial sector, which relies heavily on an internal market of female

labour, were among the leaders in developing family-friendly policies such as the career break.

In the 1990s, other arguments have continued to fuel the push for expanded family-friendly policy. In the context of downsizing and reorganization, employers are recognizing the need to support a reduced core workforce. In some cases, however, the expansion of family friendly policies in a period of downsizing has caused resentment among workers, who perceive this as giving favors to some workers while discarding others.

While there are a growing number of companies adding benefits that support employees and families, there is still considerable cultural norms at work that prevent an easy balance between work and home lives. Evaluation studies show that managers can be hostile to work/family policies even in organizations with state-of-the-art policies. Furthermore, family friendly policies often co-exist with a long-hours culture. Those who reduce their hours of work in this context are therefore regarded as second-rate employees. A small number of leading edge employers are now beginning to address the issue of orga-

nizational culture by management workshops, company newsletters, and other contexts. Barclays Technology

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Services, a subsidiary of Barclays Bank, is running a concerted campaign to raise awareness about the long hours culture and to encourage people to work smarter rather than longer.

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Described below are the workplace-based policies most common among British employers.

Child care

A small number of employers provide on-site "nurseries" for child care. A recent survey of parents revealed that just 2% use employer based child care. Midland Bank is one of the leaders in the provision of on-site nurseries; the bank began developing worksite nurseries after identifying child care as a major barrier to women returning to work after leave. The bank has 115 nurseries at locations around the country, available to the children of full and part-time employees. Other benefits include financial assistance and information and retrieval services. Some companies, including Allied Dunbar in the private sector and the Royal Borough of Kingston in the public sector, employ child care coordinators. In general, however, child care is not regarded primarily as a business issue, and a group of leading employers are campaigning for more government involvement.

Elder care

Many of the provisions for eldercare are developed from those already in place for child care (eg. family leaves, information and retrieval services, etc.). Other provisions in some large companies include counseling and referral, eldercare guides or booklets, financial assistance, and extended leaves. Some of the best elder care benefits exist in what used to be thought of as paternalistic companies as an extension of their policies for retirees. For example, Pilkington Glass, headquartered in the northern England, has extensive benefits including respite care, home visits, and meals on wheels. The services are funded by a charitable trust set up by the founding family.

Career breaks

First developed by one of the major banks, career break schemes allow parents to take leave, usually up to 5 years, without pay but with a right to return to work at the same level. Career breaks are usually available only to highly trained staff and are predominantly taken by women. Given the current unpredictability of the job market, employers now don't typically guarantee the same job but state that they will make every effort to offer a suitable job. Career breakers are usually not permitted to work for any other employer except with their employer's permission.

Parental leaves

Some employers offer enhanced maternity benefits and/or parental leave entitlement. This includes attempts to encourage men to share child care by providing unpaid paternity or parental leave for up to 3 months.

Part-time and flexible work

Part-time work is widely available, but often with poor conditions and opportunities for advancement. However, part-time or reduced hours with prorated benefits and job sharing are becoming increasingly available at all levels. There is considerable demand for expansion of part-time opportunities, as most mothers with young children work part-time. Lilly was a recipient of the Parents at Work award for family friendliness for its phased return to work and other family friendly policies.

There may also be a legal requirement for companies to consider offering part-time work after maternity leave. Under British discrimination law, refusal to allow a women to return from leave on reduced hours can constitute indirect discrimination. This is not yet clear-cut,

but has been successfully argued in a number of legal cases.

LOCAL RESOURCES

Suzan Lewis

The Centre for Research on Work, Family and Community

Manchester Metropolitan University
Hatherdsage Road
Manchester M13 0JA
Phone: (44) 161 247 2556
FAX: (44) 161 200 3518
E-mail: s.lewis@mmu.ac.uk

Daycare Trust

3 Wild Court
London WC2
Phone: (44) 171 405 5617
Contact: Collette Kelleher

New Ways to Work

309 Upper Street
London N1 2TY
Phone: (44) 171 226 4026
Contact: Pam Walton or Linda Collins

Parents at Work

45 Beech Street
Barbican London EC2Y 8AD
Phone: (44) 171 628 3565
Contact: Judith Gower

CBI (Confederation of British Industry)

Centre Point
103 New Oxford Street
London WC1A 1DU
Phone: (44) 171 379 7400
Contact: John Cridland

About the Center . . .

The Center for Work and Family at Boston College is a research organization devoted to the study of work and home-life issues. Through research, demonstration projects, corporate partnerships, and policy analysis, the Center works to promote corporate and community responsiveness to families.