INTERNATIONAL
Work/Life Country Briefing Series

UNITED KINGDOM

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.

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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.

• 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... continued on page 2
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 recog-
nizes that more women are working,
but this is constructed as a choice (while
it is often a necessity), and it is consid-
ered to be the parents' responsibility to
ensure ade-
quate child care
while they are
working. Two
out of three
working moth-
ers in the UK
rely on family
and friends to take care of their chil-
dren. 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 repre-
sentatives and has been adopted as a
Directive (law) by the EU. The agree-
ment 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 regu-
lated 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 leave.

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 statu-
tory requirement of 3 weeks annual
vacation.

**Child Care**

Because family is regarded as an individ-
ual 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 par-
ents 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 pub-
lished a document on work and family
that acknowledges the growing number
of women in the workplace and the
business case for encouraging the provi-
sion of affordable, accessible, quality
child care. The document stops short of
taking responsibility for this provision,
though considerable pressure from lead-
ing 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 par-
ents 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 consid-
erable movement towards greater
flexibility of working hours. There has
been growth in several flexible options,
including part-time work, job sharing,
flexit ime 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 prevail-
ing 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 high-
lighted 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>All</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexible working hours</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annualised working hours</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four and a half day week</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
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<td>Term-time working</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine day fortnight</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job sharing</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All full-time employees¹</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>(=100%) (thousands)</td>
<td>10,872</td>
<td>5,953</td>
<td>16,734</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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


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 organizational culture by management workshops, company newsletters, and other contexts.

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Barclays Technology 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.

continued on page 4
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 maternity 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**

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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.