

Modern Families Index 2018: how employers can support the UK's working families



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Foreword from Jasmine Kelland

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This report is critical to aid understanding of how modern families are combining work and family life, pointing to a position of increased equality of responsibility for working parents. For example, it highlights that both mothers and fathers now consider childcare before taking on a new role. However, it is suggested that the organisational systems and cultures that facilitate the management of combining work and family life continue to be problematic, with many parents believing accessing support within the workplace will have negative consequences (such as parents needing to leave employers or stall their careers).

My research with parents and managers identified that fathers are less likely to obtain part time work to facilitate an increased involvement in parenting than mothers who wished to do the same. Potential explanations for this occurrence were identified as being due to the automatic association of mothers with children rather than fathers; and assumptions that caregiving fathers are idle, viewed with suspicion and a subject of mockery. This report observes that fathers appear to be more sensitive to organisational culture than mothers and provides evidence that both parents have been found to face a 'parenthood penalty' in the workplace.

Such adverse outcomes are not restricted to parents and are also observable for employers, resulting in loss of talent within the organisation, challenges in attracting talent, organisational performance and employee engagement.

This report identifies many practical steps that organisations can take to tackle the challenges facing working parents and navigate this territory through the identification of a 'Road Map' of activities. Such activities have a key part to play in changing the organisational experience of parents to ultimately elicit organisational culture change. To create a 'new normal' in which if a father wishes to work on a part time basis he will not be viewed as 'idle' or 'with suspicion' and that such a request by either parent would not have any implication on the perception of their commitment to their employer.

I hope you find this report as useful as I have.

Jasmine Kelland, Lecturer and Researcher,
Plymouth University

INTRODUCTION

What do the 2018 *Modern Families Index* findings mean for employers? This report explores this question, offering advice and solutions to help working families and businesses thrive. It covers working time and work organisation, flexible working practices and the need for sustainable working practices. Most importantly, it considers the depth of change needed to bring about the cultural shift needed to create genuinely flexible and family friendly workplaces. And, in the first year of gender pay reporting, it examines the work-life aspirations vs. realities both for working mothers and fathers, offering solutions that will engender equality at work, closing the gender pay gap.

The *Index* is an annual study exploring how working families, however configured, are managing the combination of work and family life. It does this by looking at how parents are experiencing family life through the lens of their employment and asks parents what needs to change for them to better integrate family life and work.

In 2018 the study was based on a survey of 2,750 working parents with children under 13. The sample is drawn from across 11 UK regions and nations equally, to help achieve a balanced picture of working arrangements, types of employment and income. The *Index* also seeks gender balance in its responses; this year the split between mothers and fathers is 53/47 per cent respectively.



WORKING TIME

The number of hours parents work – particularly the number of extra hours they work – is key to how they are feeling about their family and work balance. Mothers that took part in the study were more likely than fathers to work reduced hours (fitting national patterns), but part time arrangements didn't necessarily prevent them from working extra hours: 34% of parents who work 25 hours per week were doing extra hours - with 30% of these parents putting in enough hours to qualify as full time workers, at around 35 hours per week. Similarly, parents that work full time were putting in extra hours: of parents who are contracted to work 35 hours per week, 40% were putting in extra hours, of whom almost a third were putting in an extra seven hours (the equivalent to an extra working day) each week.

The reasons for the extra hours (shown in figure 1) fall broadly into two distinct but mutually reinforcing categories: (1) poor work design or organisation; and (2) workplace culture. Tackling both is crucial because they significantly impact parents' ability to balance work with family life.

The *Index* finds that where working time intrudes into family life, parents feel resentful toward and dissatisfied with their employer. Those parents who cannot (or do not want to) put in longer hours for family reasons often find themselves at a disadvantage in terms of pay and progression, reinforcing resentment and dissatisfaction. This has consequences for employers, with parents making meaningful changes to secure a better family and work balance (page 12). Neither employer nor employee is getting a good deal where work design isn't accurately reflecting the realities of the role, and control of working life is compromised as a result. This isn't a sustainable way to organise work.

- Ensure that work is organised in a way that is sustainable. Be realistic about the hours required to get the work done. Set clearly defined and realistic outputs to manage employee career progression against.

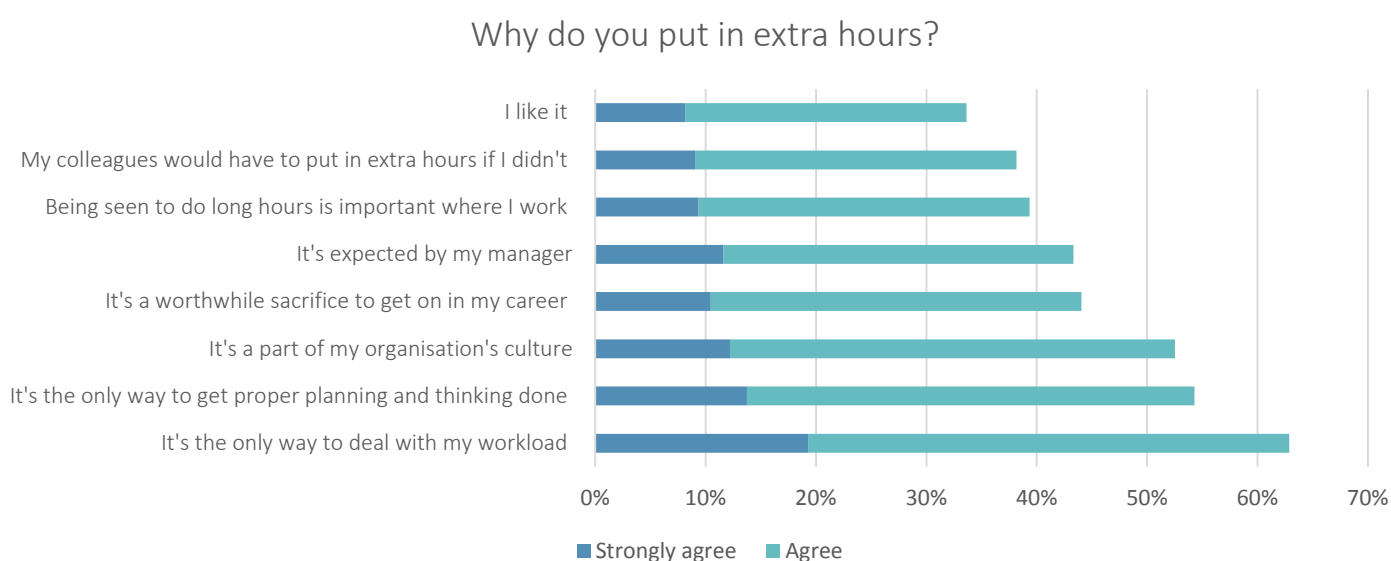


Figure 1

GENDER

From a gender perspective, longer working hours negatively affect mothers primarily because they are more likely to work part time or reduced hours. The *Index* shows that fathers are more sensitive to organisational culture than mothers, feeling that they must meet their manager's expectations and work the long hours their job requires to progress their career.

Both mothers and fathers identified unequal expectations in the workplace about who should be caring and who should be working. For example, both fathers and mothers felt that it was more acceptable for mothers to take time off if there was a childcare or eldercare issue, and fathers (especially younger fathers) were also more likely to fake illness to meet family obligations. This suggests that, in their experience, it is difficult to go against the grain of outdated employer expectations that it is mothers, not fathers, who should look after children and any deviations from this will be looked on negatively.

But the sands are shifting. Fathers are making compromises for a better family and work balance and deliberately stalling their careers. What used to be acceptable in terms of sacrificing involvement in family life for the job is changing.

To prevent a 'parenthood penalty' affecting their talent and skill retention, organisations need to focus their efforts on changing their workplace culture (of which job design and organisation are crucial elements) - and the perception of that culture by fathers (and men in general) - to one where not working full time hours (and beyond) is synonymous with a stalled career and prospects.

- Explore and address the inequalities and barriers that have accompanied parents' choices around who works and who cares.
- Examine afresh equality in terms of pay and opportunity for mothers (and women).
- Invest effort in increasing the proportion of fathers (and men) working part time and flexibly and give them practical and cultural permission to keep to their hours. Demonstrate that this is no impediment to workplace success, sending out positive messages to other men and creating real and lasting change.

FLEXIBLE WORKING

The *Index* finds parents are using flexible working to integrate family life and work, but it also finds limits in their access to flexibility, and its efficacy in terms of affording parents a better family/work fit. For some parents, flexibility offers the ability to simply 'keep going', without conferring improvements in quality of life.

Use of and access to flexible working amongst parents was mixed. Where parents did work part time and flexibly, mothers were more likely to do so than fathers (shown in figure 2). Fathers were more likely than mothers to believe that working flexibly is seen negatively, would harm their career and cause problems with their line manager.

Other research¹ suggests that men avoid using flexible working patterns that require a formal process using the Right to Request legislation, instead favouring informal arrangements as they believe these will allow them to work flexibly under the radar, to some extent concealing their need for flexibility from what they perceive as an uncomfortable prevailing organisational culture.

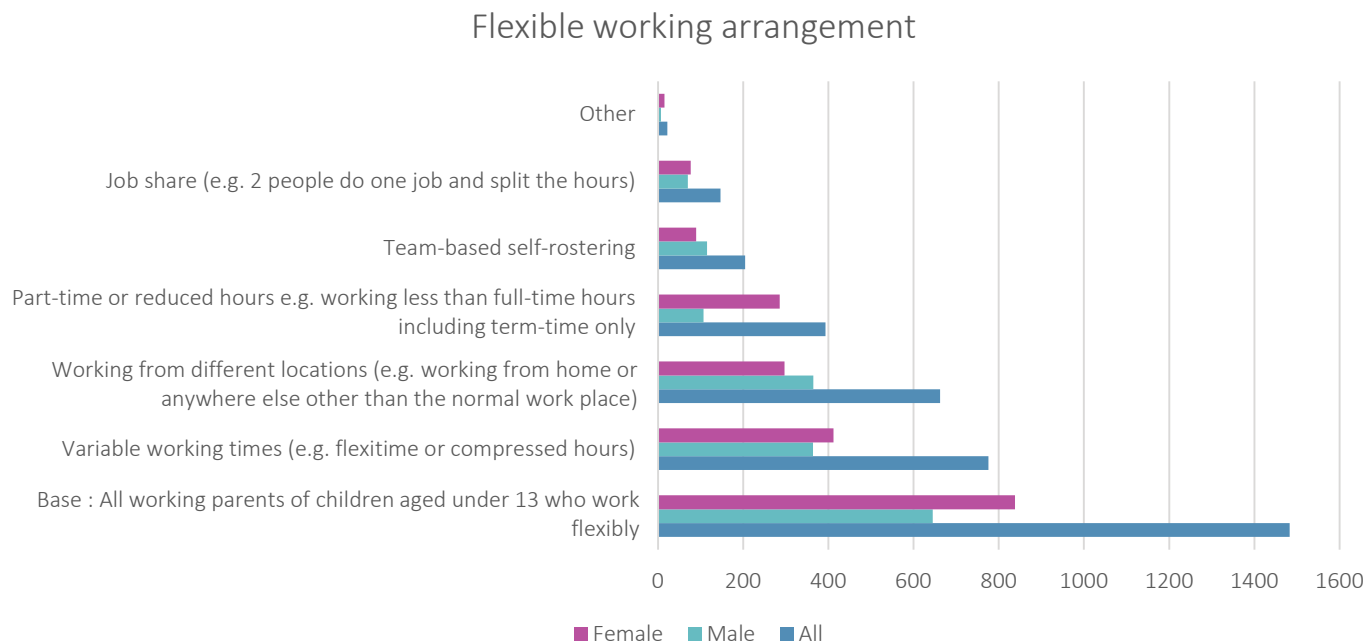


Figure 2

However, almost a third of parents in the *Index* were effectively prevented from working flexibly by a range of factors ranging from structural (job type and organisational policy, for example), to cultural (manager opposition, fears about perceived lack of commitment, and disadvantage in terms of promotion and pay).

This reveals several issues around access to flexibility. Whilst some jobs are not able to accommodate flexibility, organisational bans (it's not available, for example) are unlikely to be sustainable for a number of reasons: changing expectations of workers (especially millennials) who expect flexibility; the increasing need for many companies to operate in an agile and flexible way to meet customer needs; and for organisations to not be left behind as 'employers of choice' as their competitors adopt flexible working practices. It may be that employees are not familiar with their Right to Request and their employers have not seen their 'no flexibility' position tested. Or it may be that managers are hostile because the benefits to the business of flexibility have not been set out, or they may lack training and support in implementing flex.

The Taylor review of modern working practices² recommends employment rights are clearly communicated and this is relevant here, because ensuring employees know what their rights are is crucial to improving access to flexibility.

- Make sure all information around both statutory parental rights and organisational policies on family-friendly and flexible working are clearly signposted and easily accessible.

¹Flexible working and Performance, Cranfield University and Working Families 2007

²<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-work-the-taylor-review-of-modern-working-practices>. Retrieved April 2018.

For parents that work flexibly, it is still the best way of gaining some control over their working lives in terms of when, where and the amount of work they do (shown in figure 3). But it is not a panacea. More than a third of parents who worked flexibly said that their work life balance wasn't working for them or their family.

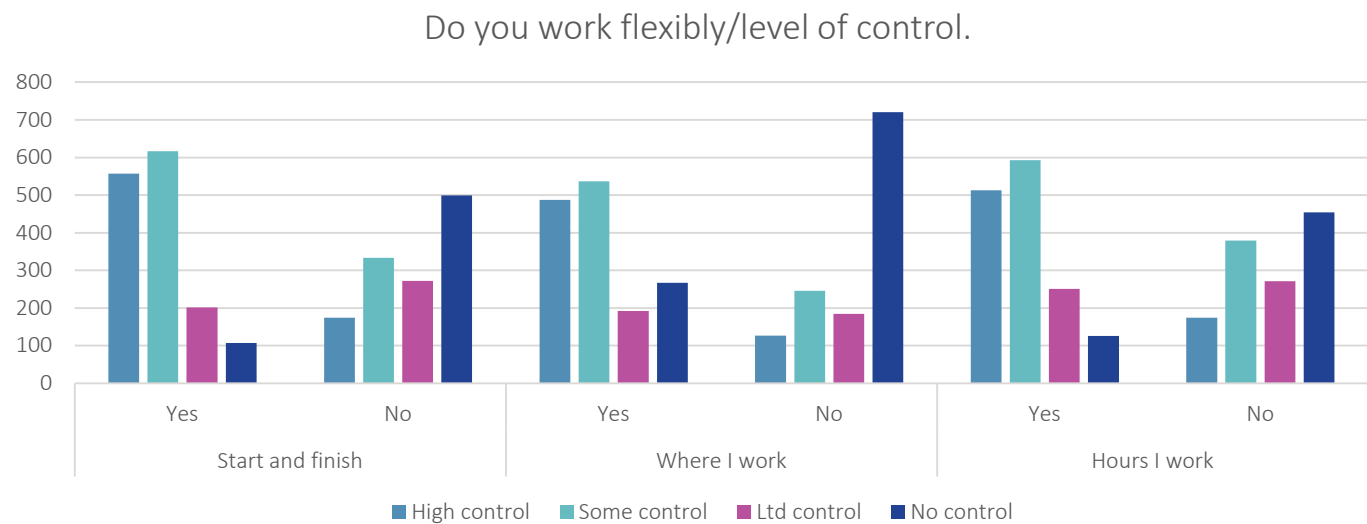


Figure 3

The highest levels of control were found amongst those who were able to work from various locations (including from their home). This confers the highest levels of control over start and finish times and number of hours worked. Part time or reduced hours working offers lower levels of control, particularly in terms of location. It may be that part time work, although it affords parents some work life balance, offers less scope for flexibility because it is unable to accommodate further deviation from a full time ‘norm’.

It is important to explore whether and how flexibility is really delivering for your employees. Is it enhancing quality of life and allowing genuine control and choice? Is this understanding of the fundamental role of flexibility understood by your line managers, and finding its way into your workplace culture? What is flexibility really delivering for your employees?

- Invest effort in exploring how flexibility is working in your organisation that goes beyond policy accumulation and measuring levels of use, to properly examining its effect and effectiveness.

FLEXIBILITY AND CONTROL

Recognising that flexible working isn't a one size fits all solution when it comes to supporting employees to reconcile family and work, is vital. Although flexibility can be good for employees, there is also evidence³ that flexibility can increase working time, reinforcing the message that it needs to be accompanied by better job design and organisation, and better understood and managed.

³Gendered discrepancies in the outcomes of flexible working: the case of overtime and income in the UK. Heejung Chung and Mariska van der Horst 2017. Conference paper 2017

Many parents (72%) said that they bring work home in the evenings or at weekends to catch up. Many of these parents also worked flexibly. So, on one level it is working: it is giving them the ability to manage their day and fulfil their childcare or other family responsibilities. This may be working from home to be available for school pickups, or working part time around the school day, for example. However, the ability to adjust their work pattern isn't necessarily giving parents a better work life balance, where family life is less affected by work.

Work is shifted through flexibility, but overall tensions between family life and work remain. Neither work intensity or work volume is really addressed. Flexibility can only go so far, highlighting the need for a workplace culture that truly supports balanced working lives. Almost twice as many parents who said that they never had to bring home work in the evenings and at weekends did not work flexibly. This suggests that flexibility needs to be accompanied by improved job design and organisation and closely managed if work overspill is to be avoided, and that for some jobs (often those that are inherently better designed, do not lend themselves to extra hours and/or are better managed) predictable and fixed hours work well in terms of avoiding work impinging on family life.

EFFECTS OF WORK ON FAMILY LIFE

Parents were asked to estimate how frequently work affected their family life across a range of everyday activities. The results are shown in figure 4.

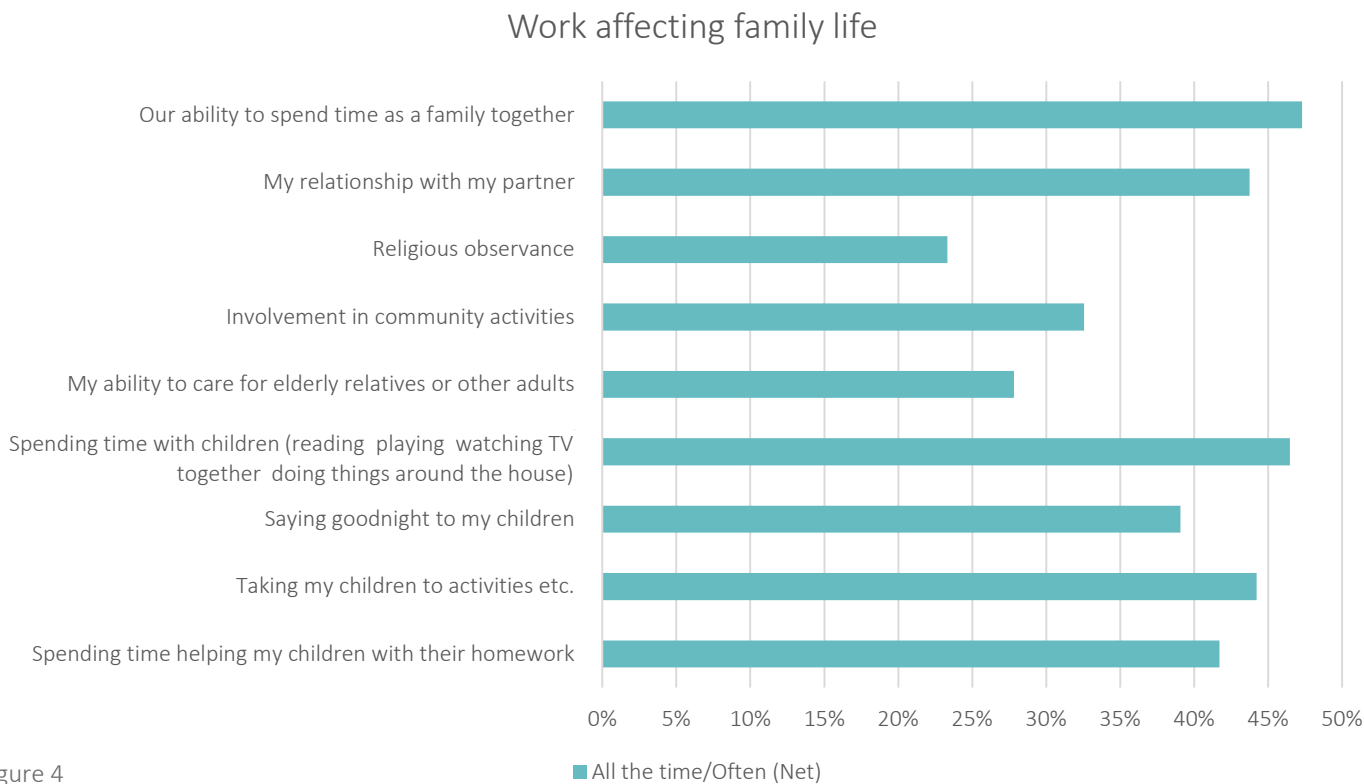


Figure 4

In addition to these activities, parents also said that working time had a negative impact on both themselves and their families. Most notably, working time affected their wellbeing, for example, their ability to eat healthily and to exercise. Parents also noted negative effects on their relationships, as working time led to more arguments with children and partner. Bearing in mind that parents overwhelmingly identify family as their highest priority, working arrangements that interfere with this are likely to be viewed negatively.

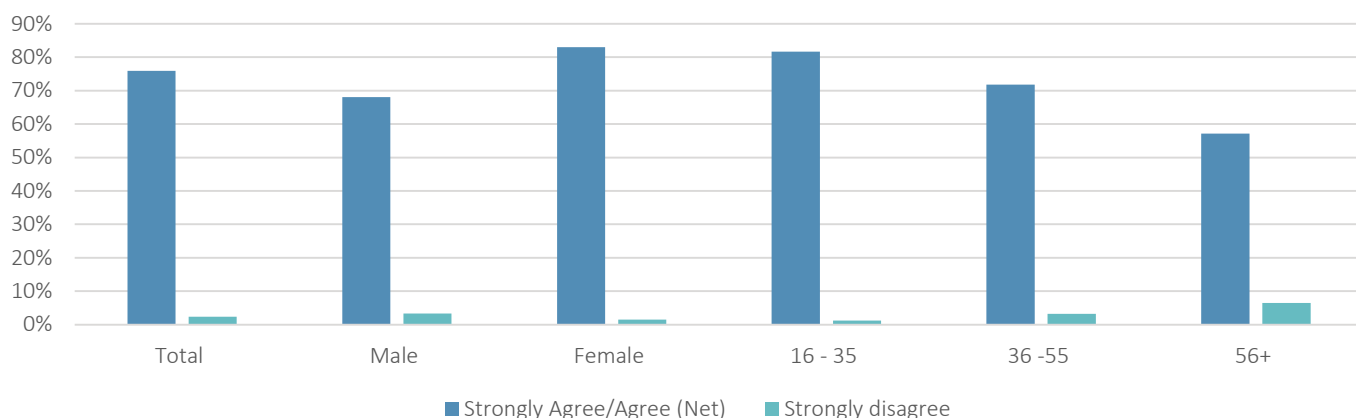
This contributes to resentment towards employers from parents. When parents were asked how they felt about their employer in terms of work-life balance, over a third (34%) of parents said they felt resentful, with more fathers than mothers agreeing (37% vs. 32%). Millennials were the most resentful; 46% of millennial fathers felt resentful, the highest proportion of any group of parents. Parents working flexibly did not have lower levels of resentment, which again illustrates that flexible working is not a panacea and may, in fact, act as a ‘sticking plaster’, patching up work and home arrangements sufficiently to allow parents to function without adding much in the way of control or genuine work life balance.

How parents reconcile family and work life, and the choices that they make, are affected by their workplace experience and the level of support that they are afforded in getting the right balance for them. Flexibility, choice and quality of life are key considerations, as are stress, lack of control and unsupportive workplace cultures on the flip side.

- Be aware of the effects that work can have on family life. This means ensuring that work isn’t organised and incentivised in a way that brings family and work into conflict.
- Ensure your commitment to family friendly working is matched by the on the ground experience of your employees.

As we have seen, there is evidence that parents are choosing family ahead of work; and it is not only mothers who are making these choices, but fathers too. This suggests that for some families at least, outdated assumptions that fathers will go all-out for their jobs at the expense of participation in family life is no longer the way that they want to organise things. When asked, for example, about childcare, a high proportion of fathers as well as mothers said that they would put this before career considerations (shown in figure 5).

I would carefully consider my childcare arrangements before taking a promotion or new job.



Fathers' involvement in their children's care means that it is likely that they will seek work, jobs and employers who allow them to combine work and family. Employers who do not offer these opportunities, or who have workplace cultures that are hostile to work life balance may find that for parents they are not an employer of choice. It also highlights the importance of getting flexibility into jobs from the start.

- Assess the way work is organised and designed in your organisation, particularly its impact on employee workload and burn out.
- Use the *Happy to Talk Flexible Working* strapline and logo with line managers, as a key part of your recruitment process. It takes line managers through thinking about the way the job is designed and the flexible ways it can be delivered, flagging flexibility at the recruitment stage and opening the role up to a wider pool of talent.



Parents were asked about their intentions around work over the next two years. Of interest were the gender and age profiles of respondents (shown in figure 6): broadly speaking fathers and mothers were planning on taking what they saw as corrective action against work and life imbalance, and this was more prevalent amongst younger parents, perhaps reflecting changing generational attitudes.

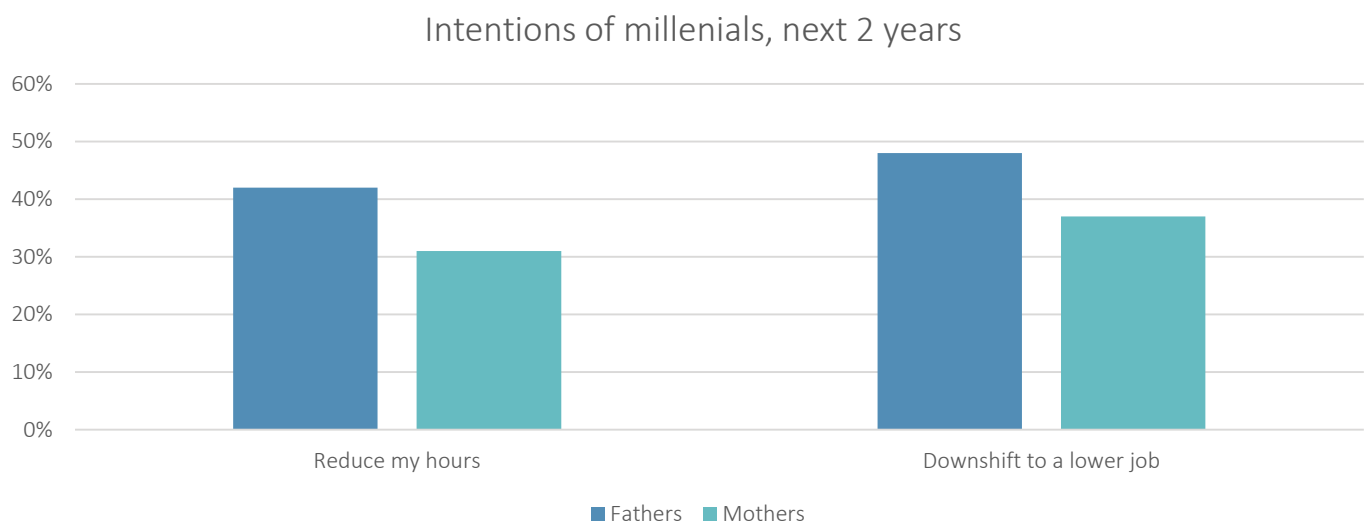


Figure 6

The struggle to achieve a good family and work combination is also shaped by external factors. A high proportion of parents that took part in the 2018 *Index* had both parents working full time, bringing with it a greater reliance on childcare. Over half of parents noted that it was getting more difficult financially to raise a family. Combined with the in-work pressures that many parents face in terms of extra and long hours working, with a lack of flexibility and control as a result and the financial difficulties they are experiencing, it is unsurprising that a third of parents reported they were 'burned out' - where work and/or family demands have led to mental exhaustion.

A third of parents said they felt burnt out all or most of the time, with only 30% reporting this rarely or never happened. Fathers were slightly more likely than mothers to say they regularly felt burnt out and millennials were the most likely age group to feel burnt out (37%). Most parents (53%) identified work as the main cause of their burn out, with only 12% attributing it to family life.

Parents deploy short term remedies for this burnout. Most popular was to take annual leave (37%) or go off sick (33%). Just under a quarter (24%) said they would cut their hours, and a further fifth said they would ask for a reduced workload. For employers, the benefits of avoiding burnout, in terms of unplanned and sickness absence are clear. In addition, burned out employees are less likely to be productive and effective.

- Consider the positive effect better designed and flexible jobs have on unplanned absence and individual performance. Evaluate existing policies against these, giving fresh impetus to family friendly initiatives that may have stalled or lost momentum.

PARENTS AND THE WORKPLACE

As we have seen, stated intentions of parents to make changes to their working lives in pursuit of work life fit have been seen for several years in the *Index*. But what action have parents taken? Figure 7 shows the choices that parents have already made in changing their working lives to better fit with their families.

What have you done to try to get a better fit between work and family life?

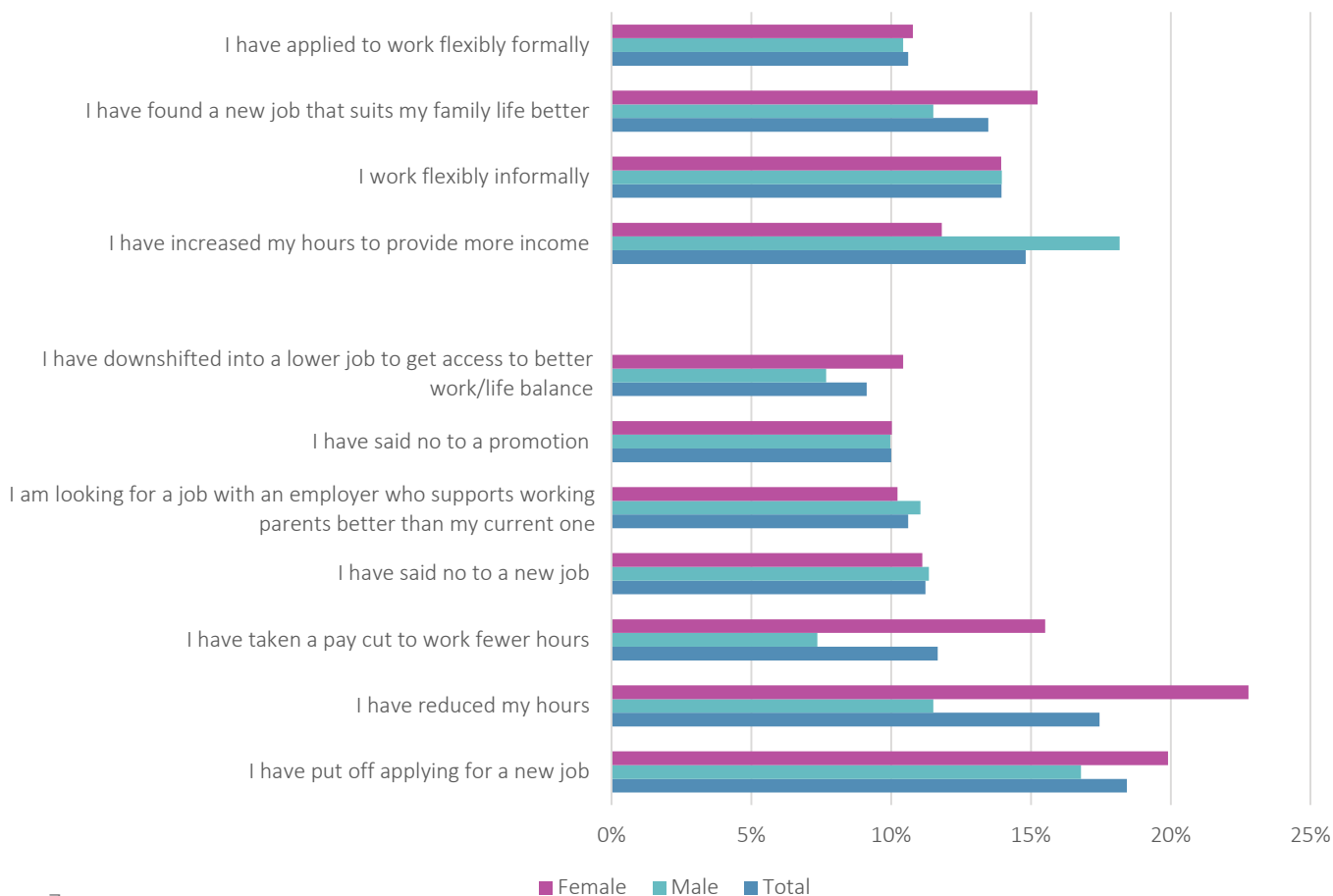


Figure 7

There are both positives and negatives here. Parents are taking advantage of flexible working or reduced hours to help find the balance they want. However, they are deliberately stalling their careers (18%), 13% have left their employer and 11% have refused a new job because of a lack of good work life balance opportunities. Again, this is illustrative of the limits to flexible working, in isolation.

- Consider the positive effect that genuinely family friendly working and better work life balance can have on recruitment and retention, and on the talent pipeline (when parents' skills and experience are fully utilised), in your workplace.

It is notable that fathers as well as mothers are making these choices - an emerging 'parenthood penalty', where work life balance and caring for children make it difficult or impossible to fulfil career aspirations and parents' economic potential. This is not a new problem, having been identified (as something affecting mothers, primarily) by researchers consistently over the last 30 years. Since the problem has not been resolved and is now starting to affect fathers, the issues are more visible and prompt closer scrutiny of work life balance measures: who is flexibility for, and is it functioning as intended? Employers need to understand flexibility at this deeper level.

The issue of organisational culture is paramount; flexible working practices must be accompanied by a cultural acceptance of work life balance as the 'new normal' within at all levels within organisations.



WORKPLACE CULTURE

The key to unlocking parents' potential at work is changing workplace culture. Its importance cannot be overstated, and is understood by parents, who were asked what their organisation could do to improve work life balance (responses shown in figure 8).

The importance of culture is clear, with two of the top three choices (change culture/encourage take up) relating to this. So, it's not simply a lack of policy that prevents employees from getting a good work life balance; parents infer that work life balance is not compatible with other organisational values, including presenteeism, hours and career progression.

What should employers do to ensure a good work life balance?

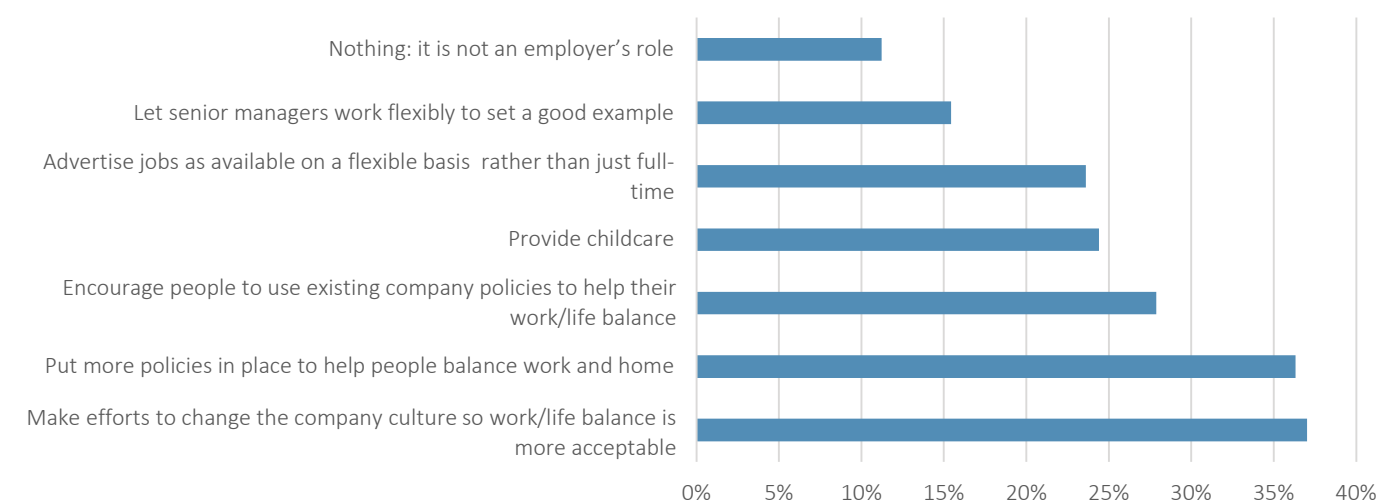


Figure 8

Parents' views on culture showed that for many, work life balance was not something they felt their employer supported. Under half (44%) of parents felt that flexible working was a genuine option for mothers and fathers in their workplace. Forty-seven per cent would not be confident asking their employer about placing boundaries on responding to calls or emails or reducing their working time. Fifty-three per cent would not feel confident discussing family related issues with their employer. Thirty-four per cent had faked being sick to meet family obligations, rising to 40% of fathers. For these employees it is often preferable to conceal the reality of family demands from their employer for fear of negative perceptions.

It is important to understand the difference here between policy availability and policy use. Three quarters of UK workplaces offer at least one type of flexible working. But what parents responding to the Index say is that flexible working policies often aren't realistic options because of workplace cultures, job design and organisation, or a combination of both.

- Seek to understand why parents might feel work life balance is incompatible with your organisation's values. From this starting point, the process of driving culture change may involve the creation of new family friendly and flexible working policies; but might equally focus on ensuring that the ones you have got, are used.
- The measures identified by parents in figure 8 provide a guide to start engaging with your culture; this might be done through partnership with employees, so that changes and solutions are co-created.
- If workplace culture is addressed, other positives will follow. Alongside being a good place to work for parents, you will begin to harness the business benefits that family friendly and flexible working brings.

ROADMAP FOR EMPLOYERS

What parents have told us and what this means for employers provides a roadmap for employers in terms of the changes needed:

1. Whilst employee's needs for flexibility will vary, flexible working is too often arranged on an ad hoc, individual basis - which can lead to certain groups e.g. mothers, working flexibly. **Make flexible working available to all employees. Advertise all jobs as flexible** and move towards a position where it's the default to justify why jobs cannot be done flexibly - as opposed to the other way around.
2. On its own, flexible working won't deliver work life balance for parents if it's simply the flexibility to manage an unrealistic workload. As recommended in Matthew Taylor's 2017 review of modern employment practice, employers should **use Working Families' Happy to Talk Flexible Working strapline and logo to recruit for more human-sized, as well as flexible, jobs**. Employers should work to make work organisation and job design skills a necessary competence for line managers. This will support organisation's efforts to recruit and retain the best talent.
3. To help prevent issues around childcare and eldercare contributing to burnout amongst parents in your workplace, **invest in employer supported family care**, for example nursery care and/or back-up care for children and adults. This should be supported by **organisational policies around flexible and properly paid time off** that can be used flexibly, to help parents to manage situations at home. These policies should be actively promoted and encouraged.
4. Make sure **all your information around both statutory parental rights and organisational policies on family-friendly and flexible working are clearly signposted and easily accessible**. Make it clear that using them isn't just an option, but something that is encouraged. Invest in supporting your line-managers, helping ensure your commitment to family friendly working is matched by the on the ground experience of your employees.
5. Millennial parents have different expectations around equality at home and at work - **your workplace needs to be father-friendly** to stay ahead of the curve and attract the best talent. Invest in communicating your policies, targeting those groups that make less use of them. **Encourage new fathers to make use of your policies around Shared Parental Leave and, crucially, encourage them to work flexibly** (and invest in monitoring and line-manager training that supports this), so their involvement in caring for their children can continue.
6. Explore why parents in your workplace might feel work life balance is incompatible with your organisation's values. **Use this knowledge to drive culture change**, which might involve creating new policies, exploring new workplace initiatives or breathing new life into those you already have, to improve use. This might be done through partnership with employees, so that changes and solutions are co-created.

This roadmap offers at least part of the solution to key employer challenges – better recruitment (particularly amongst millennials) and improved retention, the development of a skilled workforce, improved productivity and equality at work (linked to reducing your gender pay gap). Most importantly, investing in these changes will help engender the much-needed change in workplace culture key to tackling them. In terms of your 'employer footprint', the links between making these changes and improved individual wellbeing and family resilience are clear.

Working Families can help you make these changes. For more information about membership options and/or the training and consultancy support offered to employers (including training for line managers), and for more information about job design, and the *Happy to Talk Flexible Working* strapline and logo, please contact the Employer Services Team on **020 7153 1230**, or email **employers@workingfamilies.org.uk**.



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