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Supporting fathers – the role of workplaces

EEO Trust and other research consistently shows that New Zealand fathers want to spend more time with their family and have more flexibility in their work hours. What is the role of workplaces in supporting fathers?

In the 10 years since the launch of the EEO Trust Work & Life Awards (then the Work & Family Awards), our understanding of work-life issues has broadened to include all aspects of people's lives outside work, whether they relate to their family responsibilities or other interests and commitments. And while work-life balance is often assumed to be a women's issue, research has shown that men also want to lead full lives outside the sphere of work.

A recent EEO Trust literature review built on previous EEO Trust research to fill out our understanding of the expectations of men, particularly fathers, around meeting their commitments at work and at home and how workplaces help them.

Fathers say that they want to be more involved in parenting and are as likely as women to want greater flexibility in working hours but overseas research shows that men are less likely than women to use workplace provisions supporting work-life balance, particularly in the area of parental leave.

The barriers to men's use of work-life provisions are many and varied. They include traditional social norms about men's roles, unsupportive workplace cultures and government parental leave policies that are a disincentive to use by men, largely as a result of the gender pay gap.

Women, especially women with children, are doing more paid work than ever before, while more men are working long hours. The first trend indicates that men are needed more on the home front, the second that this is unlikely to happen.

Ideals of gender equity in childcare and housework

Local and international research shows that while people often hold an ideal of gender equality in sharing childcare and housework, this ideal is not usually met in reality.

Most men (76%) and women (83%) responding to a Ministry of Social Development survey of parents said that housework and childcare should be shared equally when both parents work full-time. Yet this same survey found that only 32% of parents working full-time do share housework equally and 53% share childcare equally (MSD, 2006).

A high 92% of parents in this survey agreed that a father should be as much involved in the care of his children as the mother. These results are not reported separately for men and women but data on similar questions from an ISSP survey of all New Zealanders ie. not just parents, showed very similar views by both men and women on gender roles in the home and at work. (unpublished data analysed by Dr Mervyl McPherson¹).

Work-life balance for men and women

New Zealand men are generally slightly less satisfied with their work-life balance than women are, mainly due to the longer hours they spend in paid work.

In a 2006 survey on work-life balance by the Department of Labour, 52% of people reported good or excellent work-life balance, with 40% having some or a lot

of difficulty achieving work-life balance. More women (33%) than men (23%) reported very good or excellent work-life balance and 20% of men reported significant work-life conflict compared with 17% of women. The highest levels of work-life conflict were associated with long hours, varied hours, rotating shifts and working at night.

This survey also found that 30% of men would prefer to work fewer hours even if it meant earning less, compared with 25% of women, while 63% of men were satisfied with their current hours, compared with 66% of women.

The EEO Trust's 2003 survey on fathers and paid work found that 80% of fathers wished they could spend more time with their children. A similar proportion (82%) said that their paid work negatively affected the *amount* of time they spend with their children, while 52% said their paid work negatively affected the *quality* of time they spend with their children (EEO Trust, 2003).

Almost half of the fathers who responded to a more recent EEO Trust online survey, this time on paid work and parenting, said it was important or very important for them to be able to work part-time in their normal occupation, and 40% thought it important or very important to be able to progress their career while working part-time. Men are equally as likely as women to want flexible start and finish times at work and the ability to occasionally change their working hours (EEO Trust 2005).

Other surveys also show that men are as likely as or more likely than women to want flexible working options.

¹ ISSP survey on work carried out by Dept of Marketing, Massey University with total sample results published by Gendall, 2006.

Paul Callister (2005) draws on New Zealand's time-use surveys to highlight that while men do more paid work than women and women more unpaid work than men, the combination of paid and unpaid work hours is equal across the genders. And for couples with a child under five, men's combined paid and unpaid work hours are higher than women's. It is therefore difficult for men to take on more household duties without reducing their time in paid work. International comparisons in Callister's paper show that New Zealand men are working longer total paid and unpaid hours relative to women than men in other OECD countries.

Parental leave uptake by men

Although New Zealand legislation allows mothers to transfer paid parental leave to the child's father or her partner, very few women do transfer their leave. This is not surprising as paid parental leave starts when parental leave starts, which is generally just before or just after the birth when most women want or need the leave.

Fathers/partners are entitled to share the remaining 38 weeks of unpaid parental leave and also have a special father/partner entitlement of two weeks unpaid paternity leave.

National data on the use of parental leave provisions by men is not available but public sector data shows that less than one in five men is taking parental leave and when they do it is for much shorter periods than women. However, there is a trend to increasing numbers of men taking longer leave.

Other countries report similarly low levels of uptake of parental leave provisions by men. In Denmark, which pays its public sector employees their full wages during parental leave, the parental leave taken by fathers is highest of the 12 European and North American countries reviewed by Gornick and Meyers (2003).

A survey of 1200 fathers in the UK found that men in managerial and professional positions were more likely than other men to take more than eight weeks parental leave as men at this level are more likely to be paid their full pay rate (Thompson et al, 2005). In this survey, a quarter of fathers used annual leave rather than

paternity leave so that they could receive their normal income while on leave.

This survey also found that most of the fathers who did not take leave wished they could have done so and that a third who took time off would have liked to have taken more.

Barriers to work-life balance

There is little New Zealand data on gender differences in the use of workplace provisions to support work-life balance but overseas research consistently finds that women are more likely than men to use them (Weston et al, n.d.; O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003:ix)

In New Zealand, it appears that men in senior positions do have more access than women to some work-life balance options. The ISSP work survey found that men were freer to decide how daily work is organised and to have flexible start and finish times, and take an hour or two off during working hours.

A number of barriers to men's use of work-life provisions appear consistently in the overseas literature (HREOC, 2005; Thompson et al, 1992). These are:

- Gendered assumptions
- Gender pay gap
- Management and workplace culture not supportive

US research shows that assumptions about gender roles in the workplace are embedded in work structures and cultures. Work-family policies are therefore not applied gender neutrally and men experience problems when they try to step out of their gender roles (Bailyn et al, 2000). They may be acclaimed for taking on short-term family responsibilities but it is far more difficult for them to use long-term arrangements.

Managers generally decide whose request to grant based on perceived need and assumptions about gender roles. It is difficult for men to make a case based on need as the assumption is that mothers take care of the family so there is no need for men to do it. Many employees also believe that longer term arrangements are available only to women.

"Men here are seen as wimps by senior management if they talk about their desire to spend time with their families" (Bailyn et al, 2000: p.170).

In the UK, very few of the men involved

in a qualitative study would consider part-time or flexible working. They felt that this was acceptable for mothers but not for fathers. It was generally accepted that mothers not fathers would make changes to work patterns and cover in emergencies (Hatten et al, 2002).

This study also found that fathers have low awareness of the types of family-friendly policies available in their workplaces or assume they are not available to them or not aimed at the main breadwinner. According to the authors, there is evidence that some organisations are reluctant to promote these policies to fathers even though they acknowledge they could assist in staff recruitment and retention.

Fathers involved in the study felt that using parental leave would send a wrong message regarding their commitment to the organisation ie. the culture of the workplace is such that fathers felt they had to choose between career and family.

The small amount of New Zealand research on whether workplace cultures support work-life or work-family balance indicates that there is less support for men using work-life provisions than there is for women.

In the Ministry of Social Development work and family survey, men (58%) were much less likely than women (79%) to agree that their workplace had a positive work-life culture ie. that employees who took leave for family reasons were just as likely to get ahead in their jobs and careers.

Solutions

This EEO Trust review of the research on men and work-life balance shows that a number of key factors encourage the use of work-life balance options by men including:

- A supportive workplace culture
- Management support
- Needs assessment of staff
- Gender audit of policies and practices

A number of researchers say that public policy solutions are of limited use unless workplaces actively promote work-life balance for men and women through programmes which are integrated into organisational objectives and have top management support and ongoing evaluation as to the effects of the policies and programmes.



Policies and practices need to be based on an understanding of the needs of staff within each organisation. They also need to be examined in relation to gender roles and career norms.

Parental leave is one of the main areas of gender difference in the workplace and has a major effect on women's career trajectories. The take-up of parental leave by fathers could be increased by increasing the pay rate and

communicating the policy more positively within organisations (O'Brien and Shemilt, 2003:viii).

Another way of increasing fathers' use of parental leave provisions is to offer more flexibility on when they use the leave, including the ability to use single days of leave rather than whole weeks (Thompson et al, 2005).

While government and workplace policies and practices can assist in

increasing fathers' participation in home and family life, the ultimate driver of change may be social changes forced by the younger generation who are showing signs they will not accept the rigid gender roles of work and home of the past. Employers who want to attract and retain the talent and skills of the younger generation will need to learn how to meet the needs of dual worker/dual parent young men and women.

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Latest research

Balancing work and family gets harder in the UK

Almost three-quarters of people living in the UK think that balancing work with raising a family and caring responsibilities will be harder in ten years, according to a recent poll exploring views on family and community.

The ICM poll was released by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in February this year. The findings include:

- 82% of people said it was difficult for parents to balance work and home life with 72% saying it will get harder in 10 years.
- Almost two-thirds of Britons (62%) said the world of work should change to suit the needs of families rather than the other way round.
- 68% said the traditional model of male breadwinner and female homemaker was a thing of the past.
- Spending time with the family or finding time for key relationships is the biggest concern in daily life (64%) for men and women ahead of money, health, work and local safety. This concern is felt most strongly by fathers where 74% express this view, compared to 68% of mothers
- 77% say that it should be as easy for men to take time off for caring responsibilities as it is for women – with 84% of those with children agreeing
- 96% say it is difficult for carers to balance work and home life with 83% saying it will be worse in ten years' time.

On releasing the results, EOC Chair Jenny Watson argued that the 'unfinished social revolution' created by changes in family life and participation in the workplace must be completed to avoid serious breakdown in family and community life.

"Family life has changed dramatically in the last generation and three out of four people say it should be as easy for men to take time off for caring responsibilities as it is for women," said Jenny Watson.

"Far more mothers are in the workplace. Fathers want to be hands-on dads. And more of us will need to provide some support, often unforeseen, for older relatives in the future. Add globalisation

and the rapid rise of technology to the mix and it feels as if the world has changed but society has failed to keep up."

For the research, ICM Research interviewed a random sample of 2004 adults aged 18+ by telephone in January this year. Interviews were conducted across the country and the results were weighted to the profile of all adults.

[For more information.](#)

Working below potential

Other research from the Equal Opportunities Commission released in April this year explores how flexible working opportunities impact on people's ability to find jobs which match their experience and skill levels.

The project used data from a survey of 2317 respondents aged 18-65 living in the UK. Students, self-employed people and respondents with low qualification levels were excluded from the analysis. Answers to a number of questions were used to identify:

- Employed people working in jobs below their potential
- Unemployed people who would take a job with flexible working arrangements.

The analysis found that 6.5 million people in Britain are not fully using their talents in the labour market but might be able to do so if better flexible working practices were available. This figure includes:

- 1.7 million unemployed people who could be encouraged back to work
 - 5.8 million employees who feel they are working below their potential and would have made better choices if flexible working options were available to them
- The 6.5 million people identified by the analysis includes a range of people – fathers and mothers of younger children and people without direct caring responsibilities for children.

The report concludes by saying, "This analysis suggests how better flexible work options could provide answers to the drain on the economy of people out of work or working below their potential."

[For more information.](#)

Australians feeling pressured and stressed

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) recently launched its final work-family report: *It's about time: Women, men, work and family.*

The report is the result of two years of research and national community consultation. It sets out a framework for reform which recognises changing family and carer responsibilities across the life cycle.

The HREOC research found that many Australians are not living the lives they want. They feel pressured, stressed and constrained in the choices they can make, particularly at key points in their lives. The demands of paid work increasingly undermine the time people have to care for their children, parents and other family members.

It's About Time makes the case for a new framework to support a balance between paid work and family responsibilities. This new framework recognises changes in caring needs and responsibilities across the life cycle, addresses equality between men and women. It proposes a series of changes to legislation, workplace policy and practice and government programmes to support this new approach.

[For more information.](#)

Relationships breakdown in Australia

A new report from the Relationships Forum Australia argues that changing working patterns, particularly related to overwork and irregular work hours, has resulted in a general decline in the wellbeing of relationships –in families, in friendships and in the wider community.

The report, entitled *An Unexpected Tragedy – Evidence for the connection between working hours and family breakdown in Australia*, draws on existing data sets and research information to explore working patterns in Australia and their impact on relationships and associated wellbeing. The study aims to raise awareness of conclusions from existing research and to synthesise them

into a argument to provoke public debate.

The authors found that Australia combines high average working hours with a strong tendency for work on weeknights and weekends and a relatively large proportion of the working population employed on a casual basis.

They argue that people who work long and unsocial hours spend less quality time with their families and friends and that most Australian families are suffering time pressure as a result of their work.

The results of long and atypical working patterns are dysfunctional family environments which include and result in:

- Negative health outcomes
- Strained family relationships
- Parenting marked by anger, inconsistency and ineffectiveness
- Reduced child wellbeing.

These associations occur when either or both parents work atypical schedules, so the timing of the paid work undertaken by both parents matters to children.

The authors conclude the report by arguing for policy reform to support strong relationships in families and in the wider community.

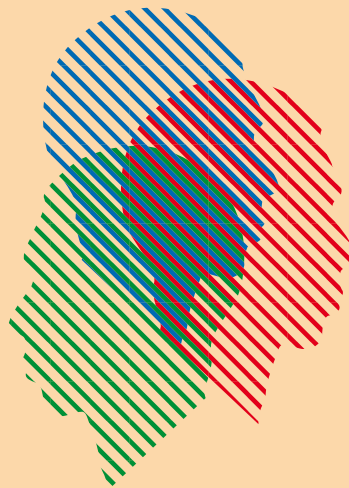
[For more information.](#)

Events

19th Women, Management and Employment Relations Conference 2-3 August, Sydney

This high profile conference presented by Macquarie University provides an annual audit of the key issues confronting women in the workplace. All sessions are interactive and will explore practical solutions. Topics include key issues in managing people, workplace flexibility, and women in transition. The keynote speaker is Nanda Pok, Founder and Executive Director of Women for Prosperity, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. EEO Employers Group members are entitled to a 25% discount on the conference fee. To qualify for the discounted fee of A\$1496.25, registrations must sent direct to Pam Morpeth: Fax: +61 2 9850 6155 or email

[Pam Morpeth.](#) [More details.](#)



THE DIVERSITY EFFECT

EEO Trust Symposium August 30

Work-life balance will be amongst the diversity issues explored at the EEO Trust's symposium, *The Diversity Effect*, being held in Auckland on the day before the EEO Trust Work & Life Awards gala dinner.

The Diversity Effect will bring international and local experts together for a stimulating day of presentations and discussions on diversity in the workplace, with an emphasis on discovering how innovative business ideas can be unleashed through diverse points of view.

Dr Sven Hansen will explore how leaders engage resilience as an individual and cultural initiative to build the vitality, resonance, focus and meaning that drives success and sustainability in our emergent communities of work. Dr Hansen is a pioneer of preventive health, stress mastery and emotional intelligence in New Zealand. He works extensively in professional firms and banks across Australasia and regularly contributes to leadership forums and courses.

Other international speakers include author of *The Medici Effect*, Frans Johansson, IBM Vice-President of Global Workforce Diversity, Darryl Harvey, and Prof. Louise Rolland of Swinburne University of Technology and Ernst & Young. Find out more at www.eeotrust.org.nz/symposium.

ANZ National Bank Limited is the principal sponsor of *The Diversity Effect*.

EEO Trust Work & Life Awards 30 August, Auckland

Celebrate 10 years of recognising and honouring workplaces which encourage work-life balance at the EEO Trust Work & Life Awards gala presentation dinner on Thursday, August 30 in Auckland. A special diversity category was introduced to mark the tenth anniversary of the awards this year. A strong field of entries have been received for this and other categories. To find out more about the EEO Trust Work & Life Awards go to www.eeotrust.org.nz/awards/awards.cfm

IBM is once again generously supporting the EEO Trust Work & Life Awards.

