

Employers, lone parents and the work-life balance

The *National Centre for Social Research* was commissioned by the Employment Service to carry out a study of employers' perceptions of lone parents as employees, the provision of and attitudes towards family-friendly working practices, and views and requirements of the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). The study began with a literature review of existing research on lone parents in the workplace and employers' approaches and attitudes to family friendly policies. 40 in-depth interviews were then carried out with representatives from a diverse range of organisations varying in size and sector, and including national or regional headquarters and local organisations.

Key findings are as follows:

- 'Family friendly employment' covers a variety of employment practices including flexible working practices, leave arrangements and childcare support. Most British employers offer at least one family friendly arrangement. Most employers offer part-time work and allow time off at short notice for domestic emergencies. Other arrangements are not widespread, and very few employers offer comprehensive packages of practices.
- Practices which may suit people with parenting responsibilities are not necessarily introduced explicitly with that aim as systematic and planned policies. They may be introduced primarily as ways of structuring work which suit the needs of the business, or ad hoc arrangements to meet the needs of individual employees.
- There is a large gap between the availability of practices and their use. Policies are often discretionary without formalised written conditions of entitlement or universal applicability. Much decision-making about entitlement rests with line managers, and concerns were sometimes expressed by people with more strategic personnel responsibilities about inconsistency and variability in implementation.
- Where individual employees seek flexibility or a change in their working hours or other conditions, line managers consider two key issues: how easily the change can be accommodated without compromising business needs, and the relationship with and perceived value of the employee. This means that flexibility may be less available to a potential recruit than to existing members of staff.
- Lone parents were rarely seen as a distinctive or cohesive group by employers. Some felt that they faced additional difficulties to those of couple parents particularly in terms of their availability and flexibility, and these were sometimes seen as so significant that lone parents were not viewed as potential employees. But others felt that the issues raised by lone parents were not particularly significant.
- The concept of a New Deal programme aimed at lone parents did not always have an immediate salience, and employers found it difficult to identify the type of support it could usefully offer to them. They also questioned the labelling of the NDLP which they felt had connotations of neediness and vulnerability. It is clear that engaging employers widely in the NDLP raises some significant challenges.

Executive Summary

Research findings

Eighty four per cent of British workplaces with more than ten employees offer part-time working and just over a third (36%) offer full-time employees some choice over the placement of hours in a day or week. Around 16 per cent offer term-time working and just over a quarter allow job share. It is extremely rare for an employer not to grant permission to take time off at short notice, although this is generally not paid. Very few workplaces offer help with childcare. Just five per cent of British workplaces provide a selection of practices that would be considered ideal in facilitating a work-life balance. There is evidence that lone mothers are more demanding of family friendly practices than couple mothers. Seventy-five percent of lone parents would like paid time off when their children were sick, 66% want term-time only work and 44% want flexi-time (Le Valle et al 1999).

The main barriers to the implementation of family friendly practices are: administrative costs; a lack of understanding of the benefits and costs of family friendly practices; difficulties coping with staff absences; and an absence of legal obligations. However, most employers who have these policies perceive them to be of benefit. Key benefits were seen to be happier staff, increased retention of employees and a reduction in absenteeism.

Employers' images of lone parents

A striking feature of interviews with employers was the limited extent to which lone parents were seen as a distinctive and cohesive group. Employers identified a range of issues which they felt were raised by employing people with family responsibilities and there was some

recognition that some may be particularly pertinent to lone parents, given the absence of a partner to share parenting. In particular, there were views that lone parents have constrained availability for work, more limited flexibility and need more time off. There was diversity in employers' responses. Some did not see lone parenthood as being in any way problematic for them, and others saw active value in employing people from a range of different backgrounds and circumstances. Some saw the employment of parents or lone parents as raising some challenges and requiring deviation from the ideal, but felt employers should meet these challenges at least to some extent. A final group were more concerned about the issues raised by lone parenthood and saw them as potential barriers to the employment of lone parents.

Family friendly practices and policies

Not all practices were introduced deliberately as family friendly policies. In some instances flexible working practices (e.g. flexi-time, shift working, part-time work) had simply arisen de facto out of the way in which work was structured to suit the needs of the business.

In other cases, policies and practices had been introduced specifically as family friendly practices, to meet recruitment and retention difficulties; to match to the provision of other employers; in response to the needs of employees; as a result of personal direction from individual managers, or as an expression of organisational culture and philosophy or commitment to equal opportunities and diversity.

Three types of barrier emerged: an absence of perceived need; resistance from senior management if it was felt that such policies would undermine productivity, and operational barriers where it was felt

that the scope for flexibility was hindered by the nature of the work undertaken and the way in which it was structured. Some specific barriers also emerged to the provision of childcare support, particularly cost and feasibility.

The practices and policies employers spoke about were not always formalised or written. Nor were they necessarily construed as an entitlement to employees, but could be discretionary benefits with a high level of control retained by the organisation in their operation and availability. Line managers emerged as key decision-makers. This was particularly the case in terms of the number and distribution of hours, responding to ad hoc requests and one-off changes to hours, and deciding whether emergency leave should be allowed and how it should be treated. There was some concern about diversity and inconsistency in the way decisions were made, or a concern that line managers may not always share the organisation's commitment to family friendly policies and working practices.

There were also broader factors which appeared to influence the way in which family friendly practices were implemented and operated. The size, sector and area of operation of individual organisations did have some influence, although they did not seem to be critical determinants in themselves. What was more important in shaping the way in which policies were implemented and operated was the culture of the organisation and the degree of existing flexibility in the workforce.

Family friendly working practices were sometimes more available to existing than to potential members of staff. Such practices did not always appear to be given a great deal of emphasis at the recruitment stage, nor were positions necessarily

advertised as available on a part-time, job share or flexible basis.

One of the key benefits of flexible and family friendly working practices was felt to be the fact that they help to create a happier, more focused, more flexible and thus more productive workforce. Where policies had been introduced to address difficulties in recruitment and retention, there was a general sense that they had improved the situation, although this seemed not to have been systematically assessed. There were also, however, perceptions of negative impacts. Dealing with alternative working practices was perceived to increase the administrative burden and financial costs. There was a perception that flexibility can have a negative impact on the productivity and efficiency of the organisation as a whole. It was also said that such policies can give rise to resentment amongst other staff members.

Employers' reactions to the New Deal for Lone Parents

Few employers were aware of having had any direct contact with the New Deal for Lone Parents. The concept of a New Deal for Lone Parents did not always have an immediate salience.

Positive reactions were underpinned by a number of influences. First, there was a view that lone parents are particularly deserving of additional support, given that they may face greater difficulties in moving into work, particularly in finding and funding childcare. Secondly, there was also a view that the NDLP would widen the recruitment pool and provide access to what was seen as a useful group of potential employees. The third set of factors lay in positive experiences of other New Deal programmes. Finally, positive reactions also came from the belief that

anyone who wants to work should be given help to do so.

There were also negative reactions. The explicit labelling of the programme was felt to have connotations of vulnerability, neediness and charity, even amongst employers who were generally positive about the programme. There was uncertainty about why lone parents in particular had been targeted for support. This sometimes reflected the fact that lone parents were not seen as a distinctive or problematic group. These views were also underpinned by broader concerns that lone parents were being treated more favourably than other groups (e.g. young people) who more obviously merited support. A final influence underpinning negative reactions to the concept of NDLP was scepticism about New Deals in general, or about the service provided by Jobcentres.

With the exception of increasing access to and funding of childcare, employers sometimes found it difficult to identify ways in which the programme could provide support. They also tended to see the appropriate focus for support as lone parents rather than employers themselves. Employers generally saw increasing the provision of accessible and affordable childcare as critical. Other areas where it was suggested that the NDLP could support the employment of lone parents were: pre-work preparation for lone parents; screening and recruitment support; financial support for lone parents to make work pay, and in-work support. There were mixed views about the role of financial incentives for employers.

The limited sense of lone parents as a distinctive group, the fact that the label of lone parenthood has some negative connotations, and the lack of universal salience of the concept of a New Deal specifically for lone parents all suggest

that engaging employers in the NDLP will be a difficult task. The research would seem to endorse the approach taken of at least some NDLP adviser teams of not identifying themselves or their clients as being attached to the programme, but this is likely to limit the scope for more general marketing of NDLP to employers. More generally, the study reinforces the value of broader initiatives aimed at addressing fairness in the workplace, increasing access to childcare and supporting employers and employees in improving the work-life balance.

For further information contact:

Jane Lewis or Laura Mitchell

National Centre for Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London EC1V 0AX

Tel: 020 7250 1866