

2009 Working Parents Survey

September 2009

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Care™



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Making work+family work

Childcare, Eldercare & Flexible Working

The Working Parents Survey was conducted by My Family Care in September 2009. We contacted over 5000 working parents to explore what working parents need and want from their employers.

The questions address childcare, eldercare and flexible working issues.

The first part of this report collates the survey results to identify the main issues and problems for employees. The second part compares and analyses the solutions that employers can offer.



Contents

1. Background	4
2. Demographics	5
3. Issues & Problems	6
4. Employer & Employee Solutions – What’s Being Used?	8
Employer & Employee Solutions – What’s Out There?	9
5. Conclusions	11
6. Additional Parent Comments	12

1

Background

Fifteen years ago most women had a simple choice to make: be a mother or build a career. Employers didn't offer flexible working and it was simpler to turn away unusual working requests rather than try and accommodate them.

This has changed dramatically. Technology has been the main driver but demographics and the legislative background have also played a part with diversity and equality requirements coming to the fore. In 2003 the right to request flexible working was introduced for parents with young children and the rights were extended in 2009 to parents with any children under the age of 16.

The Internet, mobiles and home offices have made a massive difference. The business case for flexible working is now much easier to make. People do not have to be at their desks to be in touch. And whilst not all jobs can be flexible, the trend to more flexible working is having a positive effect across nearly all industries.

Improvements in culture and technology are providing many working parents with the possibility of a successful career and a successful family unit. The employees who often benefit most from the chance to work more flexibly are those with care commitments – typically those with young children and increasingly employees with elderly parents. Employers who have found ways to support the care needs of their working parents have experienced an enormous payback in both tangible and non-tangible benefits:

- Increased loyalty and retention rates
- Increased employee engagement and productivity and
- Reduced absenteeism.

The working parent who has found a way to combine work and family and achieve a semblance of balance is about the best employee a business can have!

Recent attitudes towards flexible working and supporting working parents have been shaped by the economic background. In times like these it's essential for employers to be maximising the potential of their human capital. Working parents and carers can make up **40%** of a typical workforce so finding cost effective ways to support and engage them is more important than ever.

The survey investigates the current working environment and attitudes of working parents. This report combines the results with our experts' insights and identifies what employers could and should be doing.

2

Demographics

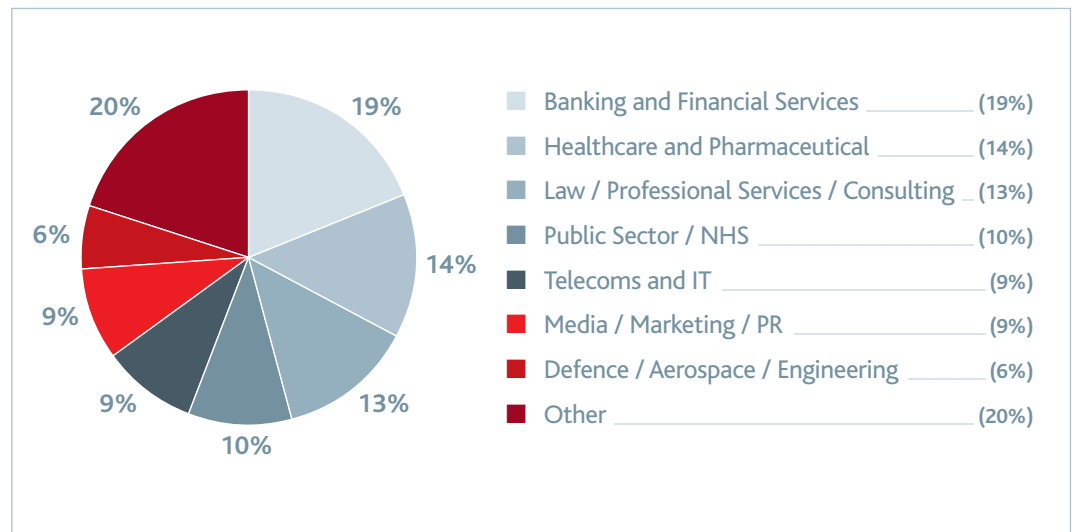
Over 450 working parents completed the survey

There was a good spread of respondents across different age groups and industries. Whilst 40% of the working parents we asked to participate in the survey were fathers, 85% of respondents were working mothers. It's true that fathers play an increasingly important role in the family dynamic but like it or not the primary responsibility for childcare, for the time being at least, remains with the mother.

Figure 1.0 Number of people that answered the survey



It's still more about mothers than fathers



People are having children later and our survey results validate that trend. The majority of participants were aged between 31 and 45 whilst less than 7% were under 30.

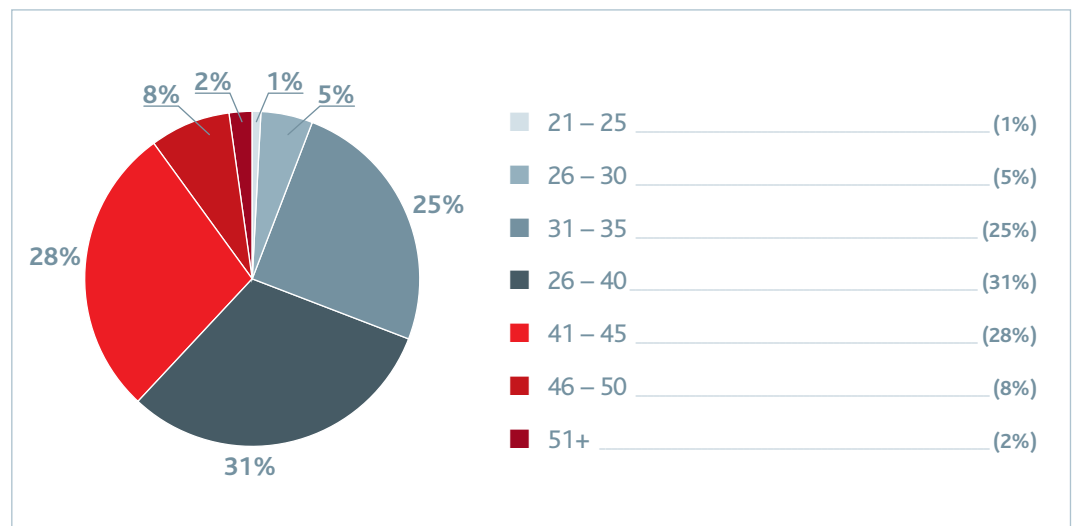
This could suggest either people are having children later in life, or the mothers most able to combine work and family are older (and consequently in more senior positions).

31–45 year olds are also the age group that is best supported by their employers, suggesting that there remains a high proportion of talented younger mothers who might not be returning to work.

Figure 1.1 Number of people that answered the survey from different age groups



Younger mothers being lost to the workforce



3

Issues & Problems

We identified 3 main areas of stress and concern for parents trying to combine work and family:

- Returning to work – Finding trusted and reliable childcare
- Arranging emergency childcare when usual care arrangements break down
- The impending likelihood of eldercare issues in the future



Practical support a better option than extended leave?

Returning to work – Finding trusted and reliable childcare

The survey results showed that finding good and trusted childcare was often one of the biggest hurdles for returning mothers. 77% of parents felt supported by employers when returning to work but 70% still thought it was difficult choosing the right childcare option that allowed them to return to work. 74% of parents said they would be or were nervous about leaving their child in care when returning to work. 76% of parents said if they couldn't find a reliable childcare solution that they trusted then they'd consider not returning to work.

This suggests HR departments should look very carefully at what they spend on their maternity packages. Maternity packages are often comprehensive and can represent a significant cost to a business. They can include:

- Extended maternity leave
- Return to work bonuses
- Maternity coaching and training
- Employer supported parenting events

The UK has a good and increasingly flexible childcare market. Many working mothers would return to work sooner if they could find the right balance between work and family and could put the right childcare solution in place.

It seems clear from many of the respondents that practical childcare advice and support might be better for both employer and employee than a generous maternity package.



Everyone suffers from breakdowns in care

Normal care arrangements breaking down

Nearly all those surveyed (91%) had experienced a childcare breakdown in the last 12 months and 96% found it very stressful.

77% said in the last 18 months they had experienced a situation where they would have benefited from having backup childcare and 90% said having backup childcare would considerably reduce their level of stress.

Attitudes – Great flexible working policies can be irrelevant if managers don't accept that childcare and work commitments occasionally collide.

On this side there was some good news. The survey highlighted that 69% thought their managers supported the additional pressures that working parents face however 64% thought their colleagues' attitudes were less attuned.

Money invested in helping managers manage the differing needs of working parents and carers seems to be paying off. The improving attitude of managers is also great validation of the contribution made by working mothers – managers are best placed to evaluate the direct commercial impact. But there is clearly more work that needs doing on culture and attitudes generally.

It wasn't clear how much of the negative attitude of peers towards working parents was perception and how much was reality.

30%

of respondents think childcare is not seen as an acceptable excuse for absence

Typical of the kind comment we received was this:

“My employer is quite good, but you always feel like you’re taking liberties and parents sometimes self-inflict the stress because of a perceived atmosphere rather than an actual problem at work. Employers just need to embed the supportive approach rather than pay lip service to it to tick boxes.”

Whilst employees may feel supported at work, over 30% of respondents confirmed that childcare was still NOT seen as an acceptable excuse for absence... whilst a train running late was!



60% of respondents want eldercare support

Impending likelihood of eldercare issues

The number of employees that will be faced with eldercare issues is set to increase due to an aging population; although the best way for employers to support them isn't yet known. Only 15% of those surveyed had both childcare and eldercare issues, which suggests that the "sandwich" generation is still a relatively small percentage. Despite the small number who had both child and eldercare issues, nearly 60% of respondents wanted eldercare support, and knew they would be affected in the future.

Working parents have traditionally received far more support than working carers. Working mothers are easier to spot; parenting networks are more active; and there is a natural tendency for new mothers to share experiences and knowledge.

Specific eldercare support is not only needed but it's essential if you are committed to diversity and equality goals. Employees will choose to become parents; they do not choose to become carers for their own parents. Many employees do not realise they are carers but even an occasional commitment to help and visit a loved one can create huge pressure when combined with work responsibilities.

It was also clear from some of the comments we received how very emotive and difficult eldercare / dependent care issues can be. There are more parties involved and finding out what support the state provides is extremely difficult compared to the childcare market.

4

Employer & employee solutions

What's being used?

We asked the survey participants what benefits they were aware of and what they had access to. We've included a summary of the results below. We've highlighted the highest figures.

Childcare / Eldercare Solution	Yes	No, but I wish we did
Specific helplines – advice on childcare/eldercare issues	36%	39%
Employee Assistance Programme	47%	35%
Childcare Vouchers	80%	15%
Specialist advice on childcare solutions when relocating or returning from maternity/paternity leave	13%	50%
Help with finding and sourcing permanent solutions	17%	62%
Access to a range of emergency childcare options – nannies, nurseries childminders and school holiday clubs	14%	77%
Financial help to ensure backup care is affordable	12%	75%
Active Parenting Network	14%	75%

If Childcare Vouchers are to be phased out then employers need to find alternative ways of supporting their working parents and carers as a matter of urgency.

Surprisingly, only 45% of parents had heard of companies supporting their emergency childcare needs! This figure is over 90% in the USA.

What's out there?

There are a number of solutions available to employers and employees. Below we've listed the advantages, limitations, considerations of the different solutions and benefits for working parents.

Solution	Description	Advantages	Limitations / Considerations
Childcare vouchers	A Government initiative to help support working parents by offering tax and NI relief on a percentage of a parent's wage	<p>Tax and NI relief for both employer and employee. Meaning employers save money and employees get to spend more money direct on childcare</p> <p>This is the most common solution currently offered to parents. 80% of participants said their employers had a Childcare Voucher supplier</p> <p>Most employees know if they have access to Childcare Vouchers</p>	<p>Limited to only financial help, no direct support or advice</p> <p>Gordon Brown has suggested they'll be abolished by 2015</p> <p>All working parents are eligible</p> <p>Some people still misunderstand the benefits of Vouchers</p>
Backup childcare	A service allowing the ability for employees to book last minute or short term care for babies and children under 16	<p>Allows workers to not miss work or take unplanned holiday</p> <p>Reduces absenteeism</p> <p>Reduces stress for an employee</p> <p>Effective emergency care systems can be used anytime, anywhere, at any notice</p> <p>Cost effective – pay on a per use basis or on a cost per head basis</p>	<p>Prices can vary region to region</p>
On site nurseries and crèches	Some employers provide on site childcare for employees children	<p>Parents can pop in and see their children during the day</p> <p>Close by in an emergency</p>	<p>77% of parents would prefer a nursery close to home rather than near to work</p> <p>Nurseries usually have time restrictions</p> <p>Small companies won't be able to buy permanent nursery spaces</p> <p>Permanent nursery spaces that are not used will remain empty and waste money</p> <p>Limited to a set amount of spaces, so some employees could miss out</p> <p>Usually means parents bringing their children on a typical British commute which isn't always ideal</p>
Specialist advice and support	One to one support for employees relocating or returning to work	<p>Personalised support</p> <p>Expert advice</p> <p>One to one support – usually offered pre and post maternity</p> <p>Individual child/eldercare solutions sourced on behalf of employees</p> <p>Employee can continue to focus on work whilst support is put in place</p>	<p>One to one can mean more expensive</p>

Solution	Description	Advantages	Limitations / Considerations
Helplines (Employee Assistance Programmes)	A dedicated phone line to support employees with different issues. These could include legal, counselling or childcare	Usually well promoted and accessible Cheap Can cover multiple subjects	Some services are face to face but most are over the telephone Level of support can vary
Parenting networks	Networks set up to help employees support other employees	Easy to arrange face to face gatherings between parents When in full swing and supported by employers they can be great opportunities for parents to share advice and support	Need to have someone to drive the network. Without proactive participants they tend to fizzle out
Online help	Websites and online information available to staff on childcare or eldercare issues	Quick and easy access More and more people like to view things online now	Sometimes online and written advice can be difficult to interpret. Some people prefer to speak to someone directly for important issues. Usually good for basic information and assistance

98%

of working parents confirmed that having good quality trusted childcare was a pre-requisite of being engaged and productive in the workplace

There is no easy solution for small and medium sized businesses or self employed people. They have all the same stresses but less of the solutions available to larger employers. Unsurprisingly **98%** of working parents confirmed that having good quality trusted childcare was a pre-requisite of being engaged and productive in the workplace.

75% said the provision of specific backup care nurseries would be MORE valued if it was close to home rather than close to work. Having a nursery close to home can make co-ordinating 'pick-ups' and 'drop-offs' with a partner easier to organise.

The childcare sector has received substantial Government funding over the last ten years.

In all probability there will be a good nursery with spare occupancy close to the employees' homes. Given the typical UK commuting experience it's understandable that a workplace nursery isn't top of everyone's agenda.

91% of parents said backup childcare would considerably help them when usual care arrangements fall through. If considering the backup care solution then as a general rule it needs to be accessible, affordable and trusted.

Employers should also be aware that the Government is committed to offering new maternity and paternity rights, to give parents more flexibility and rights to maternity related leave. Changes will give mothers the option to transfer the last six months of their maternity leave to the father, with three months paid. The change will be introduced in April 2011.

As for working carers with eldercare responsibilities, it's clear that employers are still searching for solutions. It's a problem that is exacerbated by the complexities of what the State provide and the often unfathomable conflict for users between the role of the NHS and Social Services.

5

Conclusions

There is some good practice out there; and there are some very cost effective ways for employers to make their working parents the most engaged and loyal members of the team. Below are some of the most important points to emerge:

- Working parents are getting older and holding more senior positions. They are people most likely to have had time and money invested in them by employers and are the people companies want to retain.
- Supporting working parents is essential - more and more companies have specific working parent benefits in place. **94%** of working parents said when choosing between employers they would look at how they support their working parents.
- **98%** of those surveyed said they are more likely to be loyal to an employer that supports its working parents.
- To ensure you make the most of your flexible working policies and working parents you must get the culture right - managers and colleagues need to be aware of the contribution as well as the compromises that working parents make.
- Working parents face unique stresses. Find a way to help them and the payback in terms of loyalty, retention and productivity is enormous.
- Some of the strongest results we received were in relation to how working parents view their employers. Working parents represent close to **40%** of the workforce. You cannot afford to ignore them!
- Employers need to acknowledge the rising number of employees with eldercare issues, and begin putting solutions in place.

6

Additional parent comments

"I simply wouldn't dedicate my time and effort to an employer that wasn't supportive – there are plenty of places that understand the contribution I make and the occasional compromises that are needed"

"Forced to go part time which has effectively ended my career"

"It's not the policies in place that cause the issues/stress, it's not knowing what your new manager is going to be like that is stressful, I am sick of having to explain myself as though being a lone parent and a professional is in some way a hindrance to my employer. Whereas a male officer with a sick parent they look after is to be admired"

"Emergency Childcare has often allowed me to work, without it I would have lost contracts and clients"

"I consider myself extremely fortunate in working for an employer with very flexible working policies for working parents. They also make a very significant financial contribution to my childcare through a generous Childcare Voucher scheme. If my childcare arrangements were to break down they would extend me a degree of latitude (e.g. allow working from home, perhaps a period of unpaid leave) while I sorted things out but this would ultimately be my responsibility, and I think this is fair. Of course I would be delighted if I received additional support from my employers to help me with backup childcare but I do consider that my employers are already very supportive, more supportive than many"

"Working for a large company, they are not consistent on the work/life balance it is often down to the individual managers on how they handle situations"

"Affordable emergency childcare is a must, as in today's society most employees live away from extended family"

"There is such a small amount of help and we have no back up that if my child care breaks down it's dire. I am already suffering from panic disorder and on occasion this is exacerbated by worry regarding child care"

"Parents would benefit from employer nursery/afterschool care, especially for those who do shift work and not just 9 to 5"

"Both of my children are at school now, but this is hard when things go wrong. More so than when they were at nursery"

"Companies should help finding part time child care, i.e. after school care at the parents home. Most people I know would pay for after school care in their home and avoid after school clubs but identifying carers is very difficult"

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