



Perception is Reality

Cultural effects on the uptake of family-friendly policies by fathers in SMEs



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

This research was undertaken by **Brynja Rún Benediksdóttir**, as part of an MSc in Human Resource Management at the University of Edinburgh Business School.



Background

Fathers are now experiencing work-life conflicts at a comparable rate to mothers - especially in relation to work overload.

In spite of the evidence of the positive impact of family-friendly policies on productivity, reduced turnover and higher levels of job satisfaction, take up remains low for fathers. This may be due to perceived negative career consequences, gender stereotyping or for financial reasons. A “fatherhood penalty” is increasingly in evidence, whereby fathers find it necessary to seek lower-paid and lower quality work in order to take on more caring responsibilities. (Working Families Modern Families Index 2017).

*“There is also a significant aspect in terms of the perception around what this (using policies) would do to your career. I don’t think the statistics necessarily back that up in terms of our organisations but the perception is there is a negative impact and this is part of the issue: **perception is reality**”*

This summary report was commissioned and produced by Fathers Network Scotland on behalf of Family Friendly Working Scotland.



Why we did this research

This research set out to understand how the culture of SMEs (small private organizations with between 50-250 employees) in Scotland impacts on the utilisation of family-friendly policies and what can be done to eliminate any barriers so that more organizations and families can benefit from such policies.

What we did

Ten individuals (2 HR personnel and 8 dads) working in SMEs were interviewed for 45-60 mins about their company policies, culture and how dads used the policies, in order to understand what is currently the practice in SMEs in Scotland. The work was carried out by an MSc student from University of Edinburgh Business School studying Human Resources Management.

“As a dad it is really nice to just be there after school to wait to see her. To see her face when she comes running out the door and listen to her stories when it is all fresh and she can tell me.”

Findings

Values and policies

Employees value the practices, culture and friendliness more than the policies themselves.

“What matters more to me as dad is the practice on the ground as opposed to the policy.”

“The policy makes no difference... it is the culture. In a big company, it's down to who your manager is. Do they have the right attitude and behaviour and approach?”

Many interviewees thought the size of the company made no difference regarding policies and some believed larger organisations were not as family-friendly. SMEs were perceived as more supportive and flexible with closer more trusting relationships compared to larger organisations.

Culture

Culture is the shared values, beliefs and norms which influence the way employees think, feel, and act towards others inside and outside of the organization.

SMEs were described as modern, supportive, inclusive, open and flexible, in contrast to other research findings.

“I think we have a supportive culture and I wouldn't have stuck around if there wasn't a supportive culture”

Many believed the culture emerges from the leadership style where employees are comfortable enough to request to use the policies.

“It's an informal style and think she sets a good example in terms of flexibility.”



A supportive manager

A supportive manager is one who wishes to fulfil the employees' desire for work-life balance, providing flexible working arrangements and tolerating some family commitments during working hours.

If managers utilise the family-friendly policies or openly support uptake, it sends a much-appreciated message to other employees that it's okay to use these policies.

“Where managers are promoting the policies ...I suppose it gives staff permission to come and ask”

One barrier to fathers utilising policies was the feeling of guilt and associated worries about the attitudes of other employees. Having other co-workers who were parents made them feel more comfortable. Policies can be perceived as creating inequality for those without families.

“It's very important that people don't feel if you make a flexible working request that you are letting your colleagues down or leaving them with more work”

“Dads will look around and see that colleagues who work flexibly are mainly their female colleagues.”

Some colleagues may be more supportive of women using these policies but for men there is a perceived bias and lack of understanding.

Gender Stereotypes

Findings (cont.)

Awareness & Communication

A lack of awareness followed by little or no discussion about policies and low utilisation allows inaccurate perceptions to thrive. Most agreed that little or nothing was done to increase knowledge - though everyone knew where to find the information.

“It would make me feel awesome if I did not have to chase that information and it was made readily available”.

“We cannot rely on staff going through policies handbooks because we know they don't. We know managers don't do this either so more needs to be done to grow understanding and knowledge in order to pass it onto staff.”

All employees thought it would be useful to showcase dads using policies to increase work-life balance in order to reduce anxiety.

Leading by Example

Most employees were not aware of managers' utilisation of policies, which was often informal and not widely communicated.

“I think it makes a difference if CEOs or senior managers are doing it as well”

Employees in flat structures with close relationships with their managers who also use the policies are more comfortable using the policies.

“What would be good is (for managers) to sit down with dads to remind them of what policies are there”

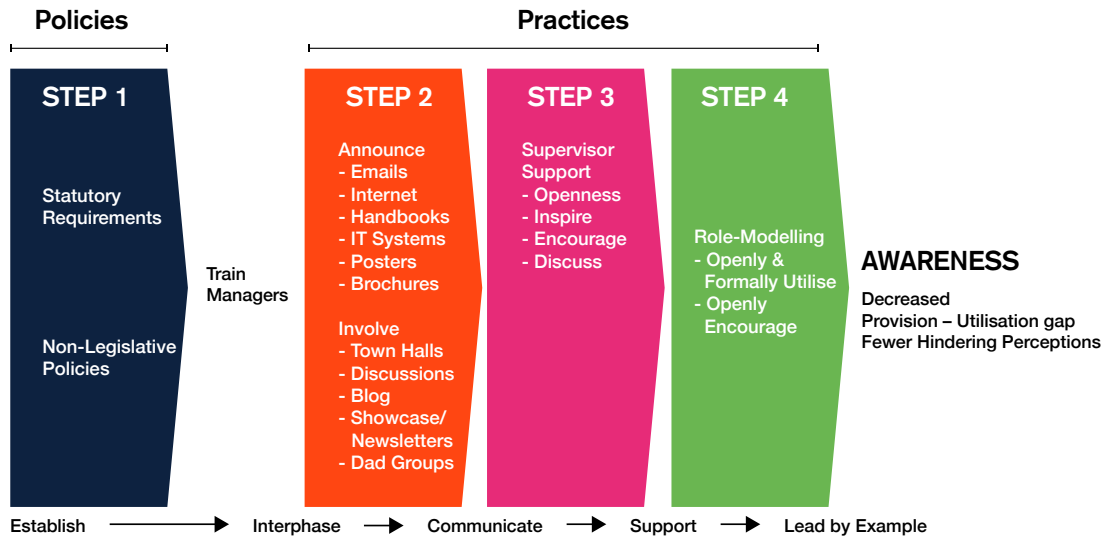
However, many managers felt frustrated and uncomfortable making decisions about such policies and sought HR for support.

“The biggest issue is who your boss is”



Recommendations

Creating a Family-Friendly Culture Model



Step 1

Policies, both statutory and non-legislative to be written up in one place.

Interphase

Enhance managers' awareness to increase confidence in giving advice, having open discussions, or advising other employees.

Step 2

Announce the policies through common procedures such as emails, websites and handbooks. Establishing dads' groups could foster an environment where dads could share experiences, advice and support.

Step 3

Get support from both managers and co-workers, so that employees feel comfortable utilising policies. Managers to openly discuss and encourage the uptake of family-friendly policies, and to outline the potential positive outcomes for the employees, families and the business as a whole. Reduce perceived barriers regarding co-worker attitudes by opening sharing myths and concerns.

Step 4

Lead by example, by openly supporting uptake of the policies, and formally and publicly modelling that where possible.



We would like to thank the University of Edinburgh Business School for working with us on this project and Dr Emily Yarrow for supervising this MSc report.

This work was brought to you through Family Friendly Working Scotland – a collaborative partnership between Working Families, Fathers Network Scotland, Parenting Across Scotland and the Scottish Government.

Family Friendly Working Scotland is supported and funded by the Scottish Government. Our mission is to create and support working culture change in Scotland that builds economic success and improves the lives of families.

JOIN US!

Everyone benefits when dads are empowered as caregivers – women, children, families, employers and society at large. So help us build a world where diversity is celebrated and the nurturing role of fathers is recognised and respected.

To find out more contact us.



Fathers Network Scotland
info@fathersnetwork.org.uk

 [www.facebook.com/
FathersNetworkScotland](https://www.facebook.com/FathersNetworkScotland)

 @FathersNetScot

 www.youtube.com/FathersNetScot

 www.linkedin.com/company/5302807



Family Friendly Working Scotland
0141 353 5627

ffws@workingfamilies.org.uk

 [www.facebook.com/
FamilyFriendlyWorkingScotland](https://www.facebook.com/FamilyFriendlyWorkingScotland)

 @ffworkscot