



FACTSHEET

Resources for employers

Tackling the long-hours culture

Offering a good range of flexible working options, and promoting them to your male as well as female employees, is an important way to set about supporting the dads in your workplace.

But the ability to work flexibly may not fully solve the challenge faced by many working dads – that is, how to play an equal role as a parent while coping with the sheer number of hours they work.

Latest figures from the Trades Union Congress suggest that long-hours working is on the rise in the UK. The number of people working more than 48 hours per week (not including the self-employed) rose to 3.4 million in 2015 – an increase of 15% since 2010¹.

Three-quarters of people working such long hours are men. The biggest industries affected are mining and quarrying (where 64% of people work 48 hours or more per week), agriculture, fishing and forestry (43%), accommodation and food services (36%), health and social work (32%) and education (31%).

The growth in long-hours working affects the whole of the UK; in Scotland it rose by 6% between 2010 and 2015. Our average working week is now 43.6 hours, compared with a European average of 40.3 hours.

Unhealthy Habits

It is well known that long-hours working can be bad for your health – heightening one's risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and poor mental health. The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health suggests that people whose working days are longer than the traditional eight hours have a 40 to 80% greater chance of heart disease, for example.

Employees in a wide range of sectors, and at many levels within organisations, can feel pressured to work long hours.

Even in higher-paid, more highly skilled sectors like finance, accounting and law - where employers often lead the way in offering staff a range of flexible working options - companies are increasingly operating a round-the-clock work culture.

Inequality 'Locked In'

US researchers have found that in fact, the combination of long-hours working and apparent flexibility can tend to 'lock in' gender equality, with men much less likely to take advantage of flexible options, and women stunting their careers by doing so².

In the UK, it is being a father, rather than being at a particular stage in one's career, that predicts men will work longer hours - whatever their earnings, education and partner's work status. Being in a professional occupation also predicts working longer hours for all men, whether or not they are a father³.

US sociologist Mary Blair-Loy has suggested that despite women's increased participation in the workplace, cultural expectations about men needing to be devoted to their work, remain deeply ingrained.

Required to be SuperHeroes

"It's not really about business; it's about fundamental identity and masculinity," Ms. Blair-Loy told the New York Times. "Men are required by the culture to be these superheroes, to fulfil this devotion and single-minded commitment to work. Women have an out, because they have an external definition of morality or leading the good life, which is being devoted to their children."⁴

That's why making clear that flexible working options are available to men as well as women – and actively encouraging men to use them - can help redress the balance, and increase your chances of retaining both male and female talent.

But unless your organisation also moves away from a work culture in which success equates to number of hours worked, at least one parent – normally the father – is still likely to feel under pressure to spend so long at their desk that their home-life, and potentially their health, suffers.

Rethinking Work Culture

Achieving this might require your organisation to rethink many aspects of its operations.

In Sweden, a range of public and private sector organisations in Gothenburg have been experimenting with six-hour working days on full pay. Car manufacturer Toyota introduced two six-hour shifts in its service centres and reports a 25% increase in profits. Smaller technology start-ups claim staff are more motivated and productive; care homes say they are providing higher quality care, and staff wellbeing is improved, leading to reduced sickness⁵.

Virgin hit the headlines recently for introducing a policy whereby staff at its HQ can take as much holiday as they like – the idea being that it's getting the job done, rather than being physically present at one's desk, that counts.

And in France, where there is already a 35 hour statutory working week, new rules to protect people working in the digital and consultancy sectors from work email outside office hours, were introduced in 2014. The deal, signed between employers' federations and unions, said that

employees must switch off work phones and avoid looking at work email, while firms cannot pressure staff to check messages⁶.

Walking the Talk

Pushing for shifts in your organisational culture, as well as more formal changes to working hours and policies, may also prove fruitful. For example, if you can encourage male directors and senior managers - especially dads - to 'walk the talk' on working efficiently and achieving a healthy work-life balance, this may help men lower down the career ladder to see that progression is about performance more than hours worked.

Helping dads spend less time working can have a huge positive impact on their children. A study in Western Australia found that boys whose fathers work more than 55 hours per week, were more likely to display delinquent and aggressive behaviour, for example⁷. So by supporting dads to reduce their hours you could bring about hugely positive change for the next generation.

The Bottom Line

But even beyond such altruistic considerations, research suggests there are good commercial reasons to fight the long-hours trend.

Men's failure to juggle work and family commitments successfully can have a big negative impact on their relationships, motivation and workplace performance. And there is a growing recognition that long-hours working is, in fact, bad for productivity.

Studies from the US, where as many as 40% of people claim to work more than 50 hours per week, suggest that workers' efficiency declines when they work this many hours; after 55 hours it 'falls off a cliff'⁸.

Empty Labour

And in organisations operating a long-hours working culture, as many as three hours per day are spent not actually working – a phenomenon described by Swedish productivity expert Roland Paulsen as 'empty labour'.

So perhaps for your organisation's 'bottom line', the question is not whether you should take steps away from long-hours working...but what those steps should be, when to take them, and how to measure their impact.

Notes

¹<https://www.tuc.org.uk/international-issues/europe/workplace-issues/work-life-balance/15-cent-increase-people-working-more>

²Miller, C, 2015. The 24/7 Work Culture's Toll on Families and Gender Equality, The New York Times, 28 May 2015. Available online: http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/05/31/upshot/the-24-7-work-cultures-toll-on-families-and-gender-equality.html?_r=0. Last accessed 20 November 2015

³Biggart, L. and O'Brien, M. 2010. UK fathers' long work hours: Career stage or fatherhood? *Fathering* 2010 vol 8: 341-361

⁴Miller, *ibid*

⁵Crouch, D. 2015. Efficiency up, turnover down: Sweden experiments with six-hour working day. *The Guardian*, 17 September 2015. Available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/17/efficiency-up-turnover-down-sweden-experiments-with-six-hour-working-day>. Last accessed 20 November 2015.

⁶de Castella, T, 2014. Could work emails be banned after 6pm? *BBC News Magazine*, 10 April 2014. Available online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-26958079>. Last accessed 20 November 2015.

⁷Sarah Johnson et al. Mothers' and Fathers' Work Hours, Child Gender, and Behavior in Middle Childhood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75 (February 2013): 56-74 DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.01030.x

⁸Sullivan, B, 2015. Memo to work martyrs: long hours make you less productive. *CNBC Personal Finance* 26 January 2015. Available online: <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/01/26/working-more-than-50-hours-makes-you-less-productive.html>. Last accessed 20 November 2015.

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