
Daddy works in a library: flexible working fathers



Daren Mansfield,
Academic Subject Librarian
University of Lincoln
01522 886094
dmansfield@lincoln.ac.uk

Becoming a father is probably the most life-changing event in a man's life. Certainly for me, it was an event that I could not compare to anything else, and I was walking on air for several days afterwards. Yet throughout my wife's maternity leave I struggled to decide upon the best course of action; whether to reduce my hours or leave work entirely to take up childcare responsibilities. I decided to stay at work, but to reduce my hours, and I now work as a job-share with another male colleague. Finding another job is difficult and I didn't want to re-enter the labour market in my late forties, or even later. Juggling work and home life was inevitably a compromise, but in the end we made the best of it. Using nursery for childcare undoubtedly provided my son with variety, learning and social skills, but it was the hardest decision to make, and for a while he didn't enjoy going to nursery. The heart-rending 'I stay at home with Daddy' as I'm setting off for work early in the mornings is never easy. Fortunately I work in a library where flexibility is an option.

As libraries have extended opening hours, they are natural places to incorporate flexible working. Flexibility and work have become central to family life, and libraries, like any other organisation, are changing their culture to adjust to the needs of fathers. Since 2009 fathers with children under 16 years of age have had a statutory right to submit a flexible working application, but not for it to be accepted; in April 2011 fathers acquired the right to share parental leave. These initiatives reflect the findings from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which said that 60% of fathers agreed with a statement that it is desirable for both partners to share childcare equally, that the scales have tipped too far in favour of mothers and that Britain had the most unequal parental leave arrangements in Europe (Hegewisch, 2009). Other surveys posit a strong desire to share

childcare responsibilities (Fatherhood Institute.org 2010; HomeDadUK, 2009). Mike Buttery from DadTalk.co.uk declares: 'From educational achievement to emotional development and healthy self esteem, the contribution that dads make to the life and the development of children is unique and enduring' (Fatherhood Institute.org, 2010). Becoming a father is even a biological event, as medical research shows that new fathers have increased levels of oxytocin, the 'cuddle chemical' released into the blood during labour (Macrae, 2010). Health benefits of flexible working are well recorded (Joyce, et al., 2010) and employment rights are steadily catching up. Flexible working for fathers is on the increase, influenced by economic conditions such as the cost of childcare, redundancy and the rise in female pay meaning that men are not necessarily the main breadwinners (Kelan, 2008). Evidence from some studies shows that sharing childcare ought to be woven into the fabric of society (Hegewisch, 2009).

I wanted to know how many fathers are working flexibly because of childcare responsibilities, but research into the emergence of flexible working fathers in libraries is not a feature of library studies. Taking into account that several other sectors are omitted, there are just over 34 000 FTEs (full-time equivalent workers) in university and public libraries (2010–11), but it is harder to know how many men work in libraries, and how many of those have applied for flexible working (LISU, 2012). Even these figures, if obtained, would not take account of how many fathers work part-time or flexible hours without applying for a change of contract, or have children over the ages of 16.

As obtaining facts and figures about fathers in libraries is problematic, I posted a brief survey to the LIS-Link forum, and received 37 responses. These are the questions and a summary of the responses:

1 As a father, have you taken, or are you planning to take paternity leave?

Yes 89.2% (33)
 No 10.8% (4)
 Planning to in the future 0%

2 As a father, have you submitted a flexible working application since the birth of your child?

Yes 40.5% (15)
 No 59.5% (22)

3 What sector were you working in at the time of the application?

Further Education 13% (3)
 Health 4.3% (1)
 Higher Education 78.3% (18)
 Private sector 4.3% (1)
 Other (4)

4 What is your working as an outcome of the application?

Compressed working time 17.6% (3)
 Flexi-time 35.3% (6)
 Home-working 17.6% (3)
 Part-time 29.4% (5)

5 Would you recommend flexible working for fathers?

Yes 96.2% (25)
 No 3.8% (1)

6 What are your experiences of flexible working?

Respondents believed that flexible working is a positive contribution to happiness, welfare and productivity. However, creating minimal disruption was a consideration for some fathers. Minor contractual changes, such as shedding a day or tweaking a contract, can be implemented to alleviate impact upon the library service. Maintaining the library service and the needs of non-parents are factors to take into consideration in an application for flexible working. In some cases, existing contractual arrangements eased childcare responsibilities into the working pattern with the minimum of fuss. Arranging an alternative working schedule appears to be dependent on the age and needs of a child, such as picking a child up from school or nursery or school holidays.

The success of a flexible working application appears to depend on organisational culture, the status of the applicant, support of colleagues, and whether managers are favourably disposed towards an application. Respondents also stressed a need for greater flexibility, but this again may depend upon the organisational culture. There was a need to clarify the

definition of flexible working in some cases.

Some recognised that the application process could be long-winded. Anxieties over tension between working parents and those without children were raised, as were issues such as pressure of part-timers having the same workload as full-time staff, arranging cover, and remaining focused when working from home.

7 Any other comments...

Working in a flexible culture and having supportive managers were praised by some respondents; these factors increased well-being at work and at home. Some participants mentioned the challenge of juggling work and children, as well as their child-caring responsibilities not being understood by colleagues. There was some indication that working fathers are treated less favourably than working mothers and may be suffering discrimination.

SURVEY DISCUSSION

The responses were predominantly from higher education employees (78.3%), so the survey cannot be seen as genuinely reflective of the library sector as a whole. Over half of fathers did not take up flexible working (59.5%) but most took paternity leave (89.2%). Of those who did work flexibly, most worked flexi-time (35.3%) and were overwhelmingly in favour of recommending flexible working to others (96.2%). The overriding concern around flexible working mentioned in the comments section appeared to be causing the least disruption to the service and the work environment, and being inclusive. Whether this was for some other reason than being a father is not clear, owing to the limited nature of the survey. However, there was an indication that fathers may be being discriminated against, and were not viewed as favourably as mothers, and many of the adjustments mentioned in the survey may be regarded as minimal, perhaps indicating a wish by fathers not to stand out from the crowd. Small steps may be needed on the road to positive attitudes towards fatherhood towards a society that provides 'conditions that allow affirmative forms of self-definition for fathers who assume care-giving responsibilities' (Höfner et al., 2011, p. 683). Almost without reservation, a flexible culture is praised; but it is not without its difficulties, such

as sharing workload and critical office culture. There was recognition that spending time with your children is a special time, above the practical stresses of maintaining a work-life balance.

The survey illustrated a tentative shift towards flexible working, although because of the small size of the survey, and because higher education participants far outweighed those from other sectors, it is not truly representative. Interestingly, in a longitudinal study by Aarseth (2009) it was found that housework had become degendered, couples dividing tasks as a team rather by gender. The survey may be considered as a sign that over the decades, incrementally, the gender gap in parental responsibilities may be equalised too. It is hard to predict the future, but perhaps one day the UK will share the same childcare culture as their continental neighbours, such as the Netherlands, where shared childcare is the norm. There's still a long way to go in the UK: several countries, most notably Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands, have introduced statutes which provide a right to apply for flexible working to all employees, irrespective of their reasons for seeking change. This may help to redress the unease between parents and non-parents in the workplace, and address everyone's needs.

Further discussion points, such as the health benefits of flexible working, the 'new man' – phenomenon or myth – barriers to flexible working, long-hours culture, career prospects and flexible working, male identity, and linking part-time working with child-rearing fathers, leaves an appetising taste for further research into this under-represented area. Because of their traditional flexible working culture, libraries are ideal places to conduct research into the gradual emergence of child-rearing fathers.

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