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# Helping dedicated parents be dedicated workers

Parenting and work remains a challenging issue for employers and employees alike despite at least a decade of attention. A recent EEO Trust survey that explored the needs of parents in the paid workforce received a far bigger response than previous EEO Trust surveys. A total of 4,475 parents answered the on-line survey.

Flexibility emerged as the primary requirement of working parents. This includes flexible starting and finishing times and the ability to occasionally change working hours. One respondent wrote, "I need an understanding boss and an understanding environment in which colleagues don't frown on changes to working hours to suit family needs."

Another wrote, "The most important issue for me is flexibility so that I can, for example, take my children to the doctor or attend their music class occasionally."

The survey was designed to collect information that could be of use to workplaces while allowing respondents to comment on other issues of importance to them, for example, parental leave payments and childcare issues.

Affordable, quality, conveniently located childcare is important to working parents, with a number of respondents saying it would be helpful to have childcare

facilities located close to work. "It would help immensely if my employer could provide a workplace crèche, or facility close by for childcare."

## Part-time work which challenges and stimulates

Part-time work options also rated highly with 64% of respondents saying it was important or very important to be able to work part-time in one's normal occupation and 63% saying it was important or very important to be able to transition to part-time work and back to full-time as one's circumstances change.

One respondent described how this would have helped her after parental leave, "I didn't have the opportunity to return to my old job because it was deemed to be full-time. However, after six to eight months back at work I'm now ready to resume full-time. I may need to seek another job to do this."

Another described why she left paid employment, "My employer wouldn't accommodate my wish to work part-time on returning to work after 12 months parental leave. As a result, I left my job to become a full-time mother. It is a big organisation and it would have been easy for them to accommodate my wish but there was no will on their side to do so."

If quality part-time work cannot be made available, employers may miss out on some of the expertise of parents returning to work. One respondent wrote of her frustration with her part-time job, "I felt that due to not being able to go back to my old job part-time, I was forced into a job I didn't really want, and my future career has stalled. After many years of hard work to get to a decent job, I'm sitting here wasting my brain on brain-dead admin."

A recent study<sup>1</sup> confirms the scarcity of quality part-time work in the UK. Fifty-three per cent of the women surveyed, who were working in low paid, part-time jobs, were working below their potential, and managers were often unaware of the skills and talents of these women. Some of the women had demoted themselves to this type of work, partly because of the absence of effective work-life practices in their workplaces.

## Loyalty and commitment result

Some respondents described how employers benefit from helping valued employees balance their responsibilities at work and at home. "It's hard at times juggling everything and an employer that understands this reaps the rewards of loyalty and an employee going beyond the call of the job description. My employer doesn't blink an eye if I have to leave work suddenly because the school has called. I have never had my pay packet jeopardised and this keeps me going at work!"

Another said, "Having returned to work twice to management that were accommodating and supportive makes

<sup>1</sup> *Working below potential: Women and part-time work*. 2005. Linda Grant, Sue Yeandle, Lisa Buckner. Funded by the UK Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and the European Social Fund. ISBN 1 84206 162 3

## EEO Trust Parenting Survey: What helps parents do paid work

	% imp't & very imp't combined	% very imp't
Flexible start and finish times at work	93	75
Ability to occasionally change working hours	92	68
Affordable, quality convenient childcare	83	68
Ability to bring work home occasionally	68	41
Ability to work part-time in normal occupation	64	39
Ability to cut down to part-time and increase to full-time again in normal occupation	63	37
Ability to progress my career while working part-time	59	29

me very loyal and far less likely to move to another job for a very long time.”

This respondent’s appreciation of management understanding illustrates the importance of people, rather than just policies, in supporting parents at work. A recent US article<sup>2</sup> describes how organisations that encourage supervisors to be supportive of work-family issues and give employees autonomy over their work are more likely to benefit from increased employee satisfaction and decreased stress than organisations with purely formal measures in place.

### Sick children add to stress

For many respondents, caring for sick children out of their limited sick leave allowance is an on-going stress, particularly if their workplace is not supportive. One wrote how uncomfortable she felt about taking time off, “Sick children are the most difficult thing to deal with. I feel slack taking time off work but I often don’t have any other options.”

Another described the challenges facing parents when their children enter daycare, “Young children entering daycare for the first time get sick constantly. It is the worst aspect of returning to work as one or both partners have to take time off to look after a sick child even if there are other family members available in an emergency.”

For one respondent, being able to work from home occasionally when children are sick would help enormously. “The ability to work from home as required in children’s early years would be ideal as children are often sick at this age and require parental care.”

One described the dilemma she found herself in with limited sick days, “Extra sick leave provisions would be great. I have already run out and don’t feel I can take sick days for myself in case I need them for my family.”

Flexibility to change working hours would help another parent cope with the unpredictable demands of parenting, “I would like to have flexible working hours for when you need to take time for your children, whether they be sick or on a school trip. It would be great to be able to work overtime to make up the time absent at a later date. To have flexible

work timeframes, as long as it does not interfere too much with work deadlines, would be a benefit to all parents.”

Another respondent wrote about how their workplace helps by letting children come into work whether they are sick or other arrangements have gone awry. “We have a time-out area so if you need to pick up a sick child you can bring the child into the office if you need to finish a project. Also when we had bus strikes, the older children were able to spend time in the office after school.”

Not all parents agreed. One respondent was adamant that children should not come into work. “No kids in the workplace please.....it’s not a crèche!”

A number of respondents wrote about the different issues facing parents of teenage children. One said that support tended to be geared towards very young children and s/he found it increasingly difficult to manage work and home as the children became teenagers.

Another wrote, “I have a 16 and a 17 year old. There are some things I would really like; the opportunity to duck out to a meeting for an hour during the day on a very irregular basis without feeling guilty, work experience for older children... A few small concessions would go a long way towards maintaining the momentum gained with the initial return to work incentives.”

### Working for more than money

The survey also asked people why they worked and, not surprisingly, found that most people work mainly for financial reasons, but there are a host of other reasons for doing paid work. Social, personal fulfilment, career development and being a good role model rank highly.

One was very clear about why she came to work: “Other than the mortgage, there are three reasons I work - to finish my sentences, to drink hot coffee, and to go to the toilet on my own!!”

For another, work provided a forum to extend herself beyond her roles at home. “I really enjoy working because it is time for ‘me’ rather than as a wife and mother, plus I love what I do.”

Another respondent wrote of the multiple benefits of being in paid work. “Ability to build a comfortable life for myself and my family. To show my child

that it should never be an option to be a beneficiary.”

### Returning from parental leave

The survey explored a range of issues around parental leave to find out what helps people return to the workforce after being on leave. Respondents rated a gradual return to work as the most important option, echoing their high rating of flexible work options in response to other questions. One respondent said, “Having a flexible employer made my return to work relatively stress-free. I was able to arrange my work around my life to a large extent. That is the ideal situation!”

While “keeping in touch while on leave” was the second most important initiative, breastfeeding facilities also rated highly. These initiatives tended to be rated most highly by parents who did not identify as Pakeha/European.

The suggestion of providing breastfeeding facilities at work sparked a large number of comments, mainly positive but with a number of respondents saying mothers should not return to paid work while they are breastfeeding. For example one wrote, “I don’t believe that it is desirable for both parents to work full-time while they have young children. I think providing more flexible hours and more holidays is more helpful than providing a breastfeeding room.”

Many respondents reported their positive experiences of continuing to breastfeed while working. For example, one wrote, “My team leader was very understanding. He paid for my car park across the road so I could breastfeed at home at lunchtime.”

Another described how the workplace facilities made breastfeeding difficult, “I returned part-time after nine weeks with my second child. I wanted to continue breastfeeding so I needed to express at work and store the milk. There were no facilities available so I had to sit in an electrical cupboard under the stairs! We all laughed about it but really it would have been nice to have had a different environment.”

One needed more information on the facilities that were available and felt embarrassed asking, “I found it very difficult to carry on breastfeeding after returning to work because there

<sup>2</sup> Behson, S. J. (2005). *The relative contribution of formal and informal organizational work-family support*. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 66(3), 487-500.

were no breastfeeding facilities. I was embarrassed to approach anybody to find out about facilities. Info should be given to all staff on maternity leave on how and where they can access the breastfeeding facilities without them having to ask for it!”

More than a quarter of the survey’s respondents of both genders expected to take parental leave (paid and/or unpaid) in the next five years.

## Flexibility rates highly for dads

The survey was completed by more than 1000 men (around a quarter of respondents) who also value flexible hours very highly, although they rated part-time work options less highly than women did.

More than a quarter of the male respondents said it was important to have breastfeeding facilities in the workplace. As one wrote, “I obviously do not have a

direct need for breastfeeding facilities. However, I am continually stunned (and was before I became a dad) that breastfeeding is still considered offensive. Well, so long as it is considered offensive, facilities must be made available.”

One father was irritated about the lack of understanding around his decision to care for his children full-time for seven years. “I still get comments about why I looked after the children and why doesn’t or didn’t my wife – very annoying.”

## Tapping into parents who want to work

Three-quarters of the 247 respondents who were not in paid work said they would like to be, with numbers similar for men and women. Compared to those in paid work, these out-of-work parents rated childcare, part-time work options and the ability to bring work home occasionally as more important. They also had stronger feelings about the importance of flexible

start and finish times.

Those who were not in paid work but wanted to be were less likely than those in paid work to rate financial reasons as an important reason for doing paid work and more likely to rate contributing to society as very important.

The full survey report is at [www.eeotrust.org.nz](http://www.eeotrust.org.nz).

### For workplaces wanting to make the most of dedicated parents

- Can people change their starting and finishing times?
- Can people work from home occasionally?
- Can people work overtime and take time off in lieu?
- Can people leave work suddenly to attend to family emergencies?
- Is there a room or space at work that sick children can use?
- Could nearby car parks be allocated to pregnant or breastfeeding women?
- Would quality part-time work help retain valuable staff?
- Is it possible to create job share positions to meet parents’ needs?
- Do you ask mothers returning from parental leave if they need a place to express milk or store breast milk?
- Do mothers feel comfortable storing breast milk in the fridge at work?
- Do other employees feel comfortable about breast milk being stored in the work fridge?

## Who completed the survey

The survey was publicised through the EEO Trust’s membership, many of whom distributed it to their employees. The EEO Trust also promoted the survey through paid advertising in national print media and on-line channels.

Comparing the survey respondents against New Zealand parents generally shows that mothers were over-represented in the survey and the survey tended to be answered by parents aged 25-44, spanning the main childbearing years.

Respondents were more likely to have pre-school children than New Zealand parents in general and were also more likely to have small families. They were more likely to be in paid work, with most working 30-40 hours a week. Only 247 respondents were not in paid work and 76% of these would like to be.

There was reasonable representation of Maori at 11%, and under-representation of Asian people at 4%.

As with most on-line surveys, respondents were skewed towards white-collar occupational groups.

# Motherhood and work go hand in hand at Briscoes

One mother has found a way to combine her work as an accountant with raising two small boys by having maximum flexibility with her working hours.

Toni Hastings joined Briscoes towards the end of her accountancy training in 1996. Her first son was born at the beginning of 2003 and Toni took 12 months maternity leave. When she left she knew she wanted to return to a less demanding role.

“I said I didn’t want to go into the same position because it was so demanding,” she explains. “I didn’t really mind what

I did, I just enjoyed working for the company.”

When Toni returned to Briscoes she worked two days a week and occasionally did extra work when it suited her and the business. She could also borrow a company laptop so she could work from home but she tended to do most of her work in the office.

Her manager is financial accountant Shaun Lynch who has done all he can to accommodate Toni’s needs in recognition of the value she brings to the business. “I’m actually being quite selfish here,” he

says. “I’m making an investment in the future. Toni’s got retail experience, she’s an excellent worker and I have complete trust in her. I’d be a fool not to do what I can to help her. It’s all about making sure you’re looking after the right people.”

Toni’s second son was born at the beginning of this year and she took six months parental leave. “I told Shaun I’d see how I felt about coming back,” she says. “This time round, rather than working set days I’m just working the days I can. I work at least 15 hours each week, mainly in the St Lukes office.”

Toni recently told Shaun she would like to do more work from home so Briscoes has provided her with remote access so she can access the main system and have even more control over when and where she works.

Shaun says the flexibility doesn't all go one way. "I can give Toni ad hoc jobs and, if she can do them she will. This can

really take the pressure off me at critical times."

For Toni it's her dream job and she doesn't take it for granted. "I know I'm just so lucky," she says. "I've got a great job and I know my children are being looked after. Briscoes are just unbelievably flexible.

"I didn't know I'd want to do more

work after my second son but it's almost not like going to work. You come in and you enjoy doing something different. It's challenging and interesting and a really nice environment.

"My children come first but I'm really committed to the work."

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## Latest research

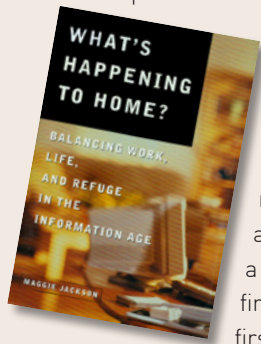
### Singapore study on effects of work-life initiatives

A team of researchers in Singapore has reported on two separate studies on the relationships between work-life initiatives and organisational outcomes. Work-life balance is a relatively new concept in Singapore and the first study of a number of Singapore firms claims to be the first extensive empirical study examining the impact of work-life practices on employee turnover and bottom-line performance in Singapore.

Work-life balance initiatives were found to have a positive effect on turnover.

The second study of a firm called Sakae Sushi included interviews with staff and management and collection of employee data from the company's records. Amongst other things, this study found that "employees who perceive top management to be supportive of work-life balance are less likely to lose productive time at work attending to family and personal issues."

Download [Studies on the impact of work-life initiatives on employee and firm performance](#).



## Please read on...

### Strategies for reshaping the workplace

This US publication outlines strategies to create what it calls "a worker-sensitive environment". It includes a range of ideas on the two "major work-life options"; dependent care and flexible working. For example, in the dependent care section it suggests a breastfeeding room, children at work days, parenting and elder care seminars and a library of resources on parenting issues.

It also includes a range of ideas of work-life initiatives including wellness days, encouraging employees to truly disconnect from work when they are on holiday, encouraging employees to take proper lunch breaks and offering work experience to employees' children.

Author: Angelina B. Laycock. Published by Roma Communications 2003. ISBN 0-9718037-1-4.

### What's happening to home? Balancing work, life, and refuge in the information age.

This US book looks at the way people are redefining "home" due to the deep changes affecting our society, for example, in ways of working and communicating, how we think about

marriage and how we define family. It describes "home", examines how people re-evaluate their work and homes in the information age and explores how people are coping with these changes in today's society.

Author: Maggie Jackson. Published by Sorin Books 2002. ISBN 1-893732-40-1.

### Religion in the workplace

*CQ Researcher* is a quarterly publication from the US which featured religion in the workplace in one issue. The publication has just arrived in the EEO Trust library as a result of a search for resources on religious diversity at work. It explores a range of issues including whether employers should do more to accommodate religious practices, how religion affects US business and whether employees should be allowed to refuse certain tasks for religious reasons.

Published by CQ Press. ISSN 1056-2036. Aug. 23, 2002. Vol. 12, No. 28, pp 649-672.

Members of the EEO Employers Group can borrow these books from the [EEO Library](#). To join the library, email [Renee Schick](#).

# Working with parents in 2006

Take the school holidays into account when planning work events for next year or risk leaving out employees who need to care for children or those who take family holidays during school holidays.

  Primary, intermediate, secondary and composite        Secondary and composite only

JANUARY 2006							FEBRUARY 2006							MARCH 2006							
S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	
1 New Year	2 New Year	3 New Year	4	5	6	7				1	2	3	4				1	2	3	4	
8	9	10	11	12	13	14	5	6 Waitangi Day	7	8	9	10	11	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
15	16	17	18	19	20	21	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
22	23	24	25	26	27	28	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
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APRIL 2006							MAY 2006							JUNE 2006							
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30						1		1	2	3	4	5	6						1	2	3
2	3	4	5	6	7	8	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	4	5 Queens Birthday	6	7	8	9	10	
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
16	17 Easter Monday	18	19	20	21	22	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
23	24	25 Anzac Day	26	27	28	29	28	29	30	31				25	26	27	28	29	30		
JULY 2006							AUGUST 2006							SEPTEMBER 2006							
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23	24	25	26	27	28	29	27	28	29	30	31			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
OCTOBER 2006							NOVEMBER 2006							DECEMBER 2006							
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15	16	17	18	19	20	21	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	
22	23 Labour Day	24	25	26	27	28	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
29	30	31					26	27	28	29	30			24	25 Xmas Day	26 Boxing Day	27	28	29	30	