



London School of Economics provides support to working fathers

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The London School of Economics has introduced several initiatives to help provide support and guidance to parents working at the university – particularly new fathers and fathers-to-be. These include webinars to educate managers about the importance of work-life balance, workshops for new fathers offering tips on how to manage the demands of work and home, and a network of mentors for new parents.

About: London School of Economics and Political Science

LSE is a specialist university with an international intake and a global reach. Its research and teaching span the full breadth of the social sciences, from economics, politics and law to sociology, anthropology, accounting and finance. It employs just over 3,000 people; around 1,000 academics and 2,000 in support roles.

Benchmarking the university's approach to working parents

In 2011, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) decided to benchmark its approach to working parents – looking at its maternity, paternity and adoption leave and pay policies, as well as its position on flexible working. 'We felt we were generous and forward-thinking in our approach, but we wanted to measure ourselves in comparison to others,' says Gail Keeley, HR Manager, Policy and Employment Relations, at LSE. 'It seemed like a good time to find out where we were as there was a lot of change going on in the area at that time, with the introduction of additional paternity leave and the Government's consultation on modern workplaces and extending the right to request flexible working.'

University employees with 26 weeks' continuous service qualify for 18 weeks of leave on full pay, followed by 21 weeks of statutory maternity pay (£135.45 or 90 per cent of normal weekly earnings, whichever is lower) and 13 weeks of unpaid leave. Male employees qualify for two weeks' leave on full pay.

Top employers for working families

To gain a more detailed picture of where it stood in relation to other organisations, the university opted to complete the 'Top employers for working families' benchmark survey, which is owned and operated by [Working Families](#) – a charity that provides advice and support for employees and employers to help working parents and carers find a balance between their responsibilities at home and at work. The survey is run once a year and there is an annual awards ceremony at which Working Families names the top 30 organisations for working parents. Employers can also choose to receive a detailed feedback report on their submission, together with suggested action points for making improvements.

'We were pleasantly surprised to make it into the top 30 employers list,' says Keeley. 'This was a great validation of what we were doing and it helped reinforce to existing and prospective staff that we are a great employer. But perhaps more importantly it helped open our eyes to areas in which we could improve. In particular, it showed us that we could be doing more to recognise that fathers are now taking on a bigger role in childcare than they perhaps had done in the past – and we should be offering them more support.'

Making a flexible working request

Employees wishing to make a request to work flexibly are required to complete a form and submit it to their line manager. This asks:

- What are your current working arrangements (days/hours/times worked)?
- What are the working arrangements that you would ideally like to change to?
- When would you like the proposed arrangement to start?
- What do you think would be the impact on your manager and colleagues?

- What do you think would be the impact on the people to whom you provide a service?
- What do you think would be the impact on your job?
- How do you think any difficulties might be overcome? What would you need to do differently?
- Do you have any flexibility on the days / hours / location (that would limit the impact on your job?)

Tips for applicants

The form suggests that applicants should look at the flexible working options from the point-of-view of their line manager, colleagues and the people to whom they provide a service. It suggests that they are more likely to be successful if they can show that they have thought through how their new pattern of working could impact on others – and how they would solve these potential issues.

Applicants are warned not to assume that they will get to work the pattern they ask for and to make sure they leave enough time to process the request, as it could take 14 weeks to go through every stage.

They are also told to think about how they want to make their first approach to their manager: verbally, in a letter or by e-mail, or using the request form. It suggests that if they have a good relationship with their manager, and/or they have known each other for a long time, they might find that a conversation before they put anything in writing could help.

Providing support for working fathers

On the back of this feedback, Keeley worked with Liz Morris, Director of Consultancy and Training at Working Families, to develop some ideas to help support and engage new fathers and fathers-to-be across the university. 'Our overall aim was to try and make taking paternity leave and asking to work flexibly "unremarkable" for new dads,' says Keeley. 'We wanted to change this culture and help them achieve a better work-life balance.'

Through this work the pair developed a three-pronged approach, incorporating a webinar training session for managers, a short workshop for staff and the establishment of a mentoring network for parents.

Raising awareness among managers

Working Families developed a series of half-hour webinars for managers at LSE. These were designed to ensure they were up-to-date with current legislation – especially on the introduction of additional paternity leave and the extension of the right to request flexible working – but also to increase awareness of the importance of work-life balance for staff, particularly new fathers. 'We wanted to make sure our managers understood the expectations of our staff – and the benefits of flexible working for staff and for the university,' says Keeley. 'So the webinars also covered the practical side of how to deal with a request for flexible working and how best to manage a flexible worker.'

The three webinars, which were all held during November 2011, were called:

DOES DAD MATTER?

This webinar looked at 'the business case for the 21st century dad' and how to engage fathers and maximise their contribution and career at work.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE – FOR EVERYONE

This webinar explored work-life balance: what it is, why it is important and how flexible working can help to design a team that meets the needs of the manager, the organisation and employees.

HIGH PERFORMANCE, FLEXIBLE TEAMS

This webinar explored how to manage, motivate and build high performance into everything the team does.

Balancing work and being a dad

The second initiative was a short workshop, entitled 'Balancing work and being a dad', that is designed to provide support and advice for new fathers and fathers-to-be. As with the webinar for managers, the workshop was developed by Working Families for LSE and it covers all of the practical issues around taking paternity leave and how to make a flexible working request – including tips on how best to make an application – but it also goes beyond this. 'It covers employees' rights, but

it also addresses the cultural issues surrounding being a working father,' says Keeley. 'Some men can feel they are viewed as less committed or less reliable if they take all of their paternity leave or request flexible working, for example. So the workshop is intended to provide a supportive environment for a group of new fathers to talk and give and receive general advice on how best to manage the demands of work and home.'

The workshop lasts for 90 minutes and is run during a lunchtime once every term. 'We wanted to keep it short to make it easier for people to attend,' says Keeley. Each workshop can accommodate around eight people and attendance is restricted to men only. 'We only allow men to attend to encourage openness and honesty,' says Keeley. 'But we have opened it up to non-employee partners of women who work at the university, and they have taken up the offer and clearly valued the workshops. They're not our employees, but it is still in our interests to offer them support and advice on maintaining a good work-life balance – and the feedback we have received from their employee partners has shown that it has helped them.' The course is delivered by an external trainer, but it is introduced and the group is joined during lunch by one of the university's Pro-Directors (the LSE's equivalent of a Pro Vice-Chancellor) – who is also a working father. 'He talks about his own experiences of balancing work and being a dad,' says Keeley. 'It really helps to show the commitment of senior management to the workshop, and to the wider issues of flexible working and work-life balance.'

ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTS

All attendees are given a workbook that contains the workshop slides, along with the university's paternity and maternity policies in full, a flexible working request form and two factsheets from Working Families. All of this information is also available on the HR pages of the university's intranet, along with some examples of flexible working patterns – such as flexitime, term-time working, compressed hours and job sharing – and their advantages and disadvantages for both the employee and employer. A list of real-life case studies of employees who are working flexibly at the university is also provided (with the names changed). 'We try to give staff as much information as possible to help them decide which pattern might work best for them,' says Keeley.

Case studies of flexible working

Jim has two young children who are under school age. He works a compressed 3-week period which means that every third Friday he is not at work. The arrangement is subject to work pressures and so the Friday is flexible and can change with mutual agreement. Both he and his manager gain from this arrangement, he can take care of his children every third Friday and save on childcare costs and his manager benefits from a committed worker who works outside core office hours and can therefore be more productive during 'quieter periods'.

Keith is a senior manager. His partner gave birth to their premature baby while they were on annual leave outside the UK. Mother and baby could not be discharged from hospital care for a number of weeks. Keith and his manager agreed that remote working would work on a short term basis. Everyone gained. Mother and baby are well and back in the UK. Father was able to provide support to his family at a worrying time, reduce his level of stress and continue to work at the same time. And his manager was able to manage business continuity, did not need to arrange replacement cover, and retained a valued and even more committed member of staff.

James has two school-age children. He starts work at 8am which means that he is able to be at home when his children finish school and his manager has someone in the office who can offer a customer service outside office hours.

Ann is disabled because of a health condition and has an elderly widowed mother who lives over 250 kilometres away from her without any close family support. She works a 9-day fortnight which means that she can look after own health whilst at the same time visiting her mother on a regular basis to provide support. This type of flexible working fits in with the nature of her work and she uses her iPhone and laptop to check if there are urgent messages and act on these on the day that she is not in the office. Her manager gains because Ann's sickness absence is below the School's average of 3.8 days per calendar year.

Geraldine is a senior manager of a large team of staff and a single mother of a school-age child. The Easter and Christmas School closures are very convenient for her in terms of childcare and she takes paid and unpaid leave every summer for the same reason. The unpaid leave arrangement suits her manager very well because most of some of units close down over the summer period.

Rosemary works for an hour at home from 6am, then stops to get her children up and have breakfast with them, so that she has a little time with them before leaving for work. She then travels to work to resume working. Her manager travels abroad a great deal and he appreciates getting a response to the emails that he has sent from the other side of the world during the early hours of UK time. One day of the week she works from home so that she can take her children

to and from school. Her manager knows that the flexibility works both ways, and if there are urgent deadlines or meetings she is happy to come in early or work late on those occasions.

Matthew is a new father and he wants to be home for his baby's final feed of the day so his manager has agreed to change his working hours to 8.30-16.30. His manager gains because he knows that Matthew is prepared to log on to his email inbox in the evening in order to meet any urgent deadlines.

PUBLICISING THE WORKSHOP

The workshop is recommended to anyone who contacts HR to ask about paternity leave or pay, and line managers may suggest the course to their staff if they think it's appropriate. The workshop is also listed on the university's training portal and it is advertised in the weekly staff newsletter.

Network of parents and parents-to-be

The third initiative involves directing employees who are about to go on maternity or paternity leave to a network of mentors across the university. The ten members are all mothers or fathers, with children of all ages – from newborns to grown-ups. The group was fully trained by Liz Morris, Director of Consultancy and Training at Working Families, to provide mentoring to other working mothers and fathers. They provide advice and guidance on coping with the transition of becoming a working parent, such as learning how to cope with sleepless nights. 'We are also seeing some informal mentoring relationships springing up, where working parents are offering help to other parents and parents-to-be over a quick cup of coffee, so we are working to provide further mentoring training in the near future,' says Keeley. 'We actually have a waiting list of applicants for the next training session we schedule.'

If someone is interested in approaching a mentor, he or she can contact HR and receive a short blurb on each of the members, including his or her role, experience and background. It is then left to the individual to contact the mentor he or she thinks would be most appropriate and to go from there. 'We encourage the two parties to remain in touch for 18 months, starting from before the baby is born. But we leave the specifics of how and when they meet down to them. It could be that all they need is a quick ten-minute chat every few weeks or they may find they benefit from more regular, longer meetings – whatever works for them,' says Keeley. 'But once we have put them in touch, we leave them to it.'

Evaluation


According to Keeley, all of these new initiatives have been well-received – but perhaps none more so than the workshop. 'People have also said that it is useful to spend time with other people going through the same thing and that it is great to be able to look at the experience from a father's point-of-view,' says Keeley. 'We ask participants to complete a short evaluation form at the end of the course, and every single person has said they would recommend it to others.'

This success has led to the development of similar workshops for both mothers and carers. 'We are also exploring a new workshop aimed at parents of older children and teenagers,' says Keeley. 'Of course, running these courses isn't entirely altruistic – if we can help improve job satisfaction and give our employees a better work-life balance, it should lead to increased commitment to the organisation and lower staff turnover. Also, as a top university, we feel we should be helping to lead the way in these areas.'


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