

Can you teach dads how to work flexibly?



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LSE course shows 'being a great dad is not adverse to your career'

A pioneering course at the London School of Economics (LSE) is offering support and guidance for male staff about to become dads who want to do their share of parenting without damaging their career.

Set up with the assistance of Working Families, the 90-minute course, entitled 'Balancing Work and Being a Dad', covers topics such as 21st century expectations of fatherhood, the potential for conflict between fatherhood and careers, the pros and cons of working at home and flexible working.

Imran Iqbal, group manager of the information systems and innovation and management science groups at LSE, now has two children, but enrolled on the course before the birth of his eldest.

"There was no one I knew within my working environment who was a new dad, so it really helped me to talk to people who had recently gone through what I was about to go through."

The course arose from a desire to "address the perception that there are negative career prospects for men who take out family working patterns", said Gail Keeley, HR manager of the policy and employment relations HR division at LSE.

As part of the course, people who had already successfully juggled fatherhood and work shared their experiences, including one of LSE's pro-directors. The classes are kept small, just 8-10 men, and Imran found it helpful to have a space to talk about things which are generally unspoken in a work environment, such as professional pride.

"You may feel sheepish. You don't want people to think you will be less driven, less professional, just because you are becoming a father.

"After taking the course I did speak to my line manager about certain things, for example time off. I know I want to get home at a certain time now; if I worked late the way I did when I didn't have any children I wouldn't get to see them."

Imran's new working arrangements have had an effect on his productivity too. "Its made me more focused in my work," he said. "I know there are particular things I need to do to catch that train to get home in time for bath time and bed time."

The course has led to the establishment of a mentorship scheme, which Imran is now a part of. "Our names [of recent fathers] are on a web page, anyone can contact us and say: 'Hey, can we meet up for a coffee?'. That really helps."

Two new fathers in Imran's faculty have already sought his experience, and he has helped them adjust their expectations and overcome the psychological barriers of talking about flexible working.

Support for staff beyond the course is available in other forms too, including a toolkit with comprehensive information on policies and procedures and guidance on requesting flexible working. It also provides information on benefits for working families.

The reaction to the course has been overwhelmingly positive.

"We held it in the first place as a pilot and asked the participants if they would recommend it to others," said Gail. "Every single person said yes. In fact since we held the first course everyone has said they would recommend it.

"It reflects today's values that fathers want to get more involved in parenting."

Although the course is only currently offered within LSE, those attending don't have to be employees, as partners of employees are welcome to attend.

For those working in environments which may not be as sympathetic as LSE, Imran advised: "Maybe off your own back join a local group. In my area there is a dads' group that is helpful for would-be dads to ask the questions that maybe they would be otherwise afraid to ask."

For more on how life for working parents is changing read our feature 'Mums vs Dads' published in the January issue of PM