

Transitions

GOOD PRACTICE REPORT

for the EU Framework 5 study
'Gender, Parenthood and the
Changing European
Workplace'

Research Report #7
[Http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions](http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions)



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GOOD PRACTICE REPORT

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Transitions is a qualitative cross-national research project which aims to examine how young European adults negotiate motherhood and fatherhood and work-family boundaries in the context of labour market and workplace change, different national welfare state regimes and family and employer supports. The project is examining individual and household strategies and their consequences for well-being at the individual, family and organisational levels. This is studied in the context of parallel organisational contexts and macro levels of public support in the 8 participating countries: France, Portugal, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, the UK, Bulgaria and Slovenia.

Transitions

Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace

GOOD PRACTICE REPORT

This report explores employer “good practices” from the perspectives of new parents working in private and public sector organisations in seven European countries: studies were carried out in one public sector (social services) and one private sector (primarily finance) organisation in Bulgaria, Norway, Portugal and the UK, a private sector (finance) organisation in the Netherlands and Slovenia, and a public sector (social services) organisation in Sweden. Our analysis is based on organisational case studies and in-depth interviews (see Transitions Reports #3 and #8). Whilst we are critical of the concept of good practice – that there is one way of doing things that can be transferred to other organisations regardless of context – we are interested in what can be learnt from a cross national comparison of what parents say they find helpful for reconciling employment and family life. Our findings confirm that whilst there is not one set of good practices that works in all contexts, it is possible to pinpoint some basic principles of good practices that apply more broadly. The context-specificity of what counts as good practice is illustrated by the varying experiences of employer “good practices” across national, workplace and family contexts. In particular, national policy on leaves and rights to flexible working has an important impact on what is perceived as good practice in the workplace setting; in some national contexts there is less reliance on organisational policy. However, since statutory regulations rely on implementation at the workplace level, organisational practices are important in all contexts in determining how employed parents negotiate the paid work-family interface.

Good working arrangements for parents are important for individual, organisational and societal well-being

Finding ways of reconciling paid work and family life is a key challenge for European countries¹. This report looks at the experience of parents within organisations and their perceptions of “good practice” in a general European-wide context of deregularisation of some aspects of the labour-capital relation, and a corresponding intensification of work experienced by most of the parents in our study (Transitions Report #3). However, the promotion of organisational “good practice” is *not* presented here as the key to overcoming the complex problems facing employed parents as they try to negotiate paid work and family. One major reason for this is that “good practices” are not enforceable. Workplace practice is dependent on organisational culture, which in turn is influenced by the business and operational imperatives of private and public organisations within national and international contexts.

As our study shows, these imperatives are very often at the expense of socially sustainable working practices, since they focus on productivity and profitability, considered crucial in a period of intense international competition (Transition Reports #3 and #8). Such a focus tends to be narrow and short-term in the

context of rapidly changing market conditions – longer term considerations which take into account wider, societal issues that go beyond the logic of organisational imperatives are likely to be overlooked. The ability of parents in the workforce to ensure a healthy family environment – desirable on a variety of levels; individual, family, organisational and societal – is one such issue which is likely to be excluded from organisational agendas.

Appeals to “mutual advantage” which emphasise positive outcomes for both business and employees can, to some extent, play a role in encouraging businesses to be more “socially responsible” and to adopt workplace practices which engender “healthy organisations”. Workplace practices to reconcile parenthood and paid work can benefit organisations in terms of retention, productivity and commitment, and can be simultaneously beneficial for society in the long term because of their impact on gender equality, and individual and family well-being. However, whilst some far-sighted organisations may recognise these mutual benefits, many more are unlikely to alter their organisational practices without external regulation.²

There is a risk therefore that the promotion of good practice, since it is an individualised solution, is an inadequate response to the challenges facing European organisations and wider societies. Whilst government policy has a major role to play in facilitating the work-family interface³, our study shows that statutory policies designed to reconcile paid work and family life also need to be accompanied by cultural shifts at the organisation level.

We also need to guard against the idea that individualised solutions offer real choice to employed parents. The choices made by the parents in our study, as well as the desired solutions they expressed for their specific situations, are considerably constrained by their socio-economic status within different national welfare state frameworks. Choice is often used as a rhetorical device to encourage the acceptance of procedures that are in practice double-edged. In the UK public sector organisation, the choice to work more flexibly was an important factor in gaining employees’ acceptance of the outsourcing of an elderly persons’ home. However, whilst this may have seemed attractive at the time, particularly for those with young children, employees lost out in terms of a re-negotiated and less favourable pension scheme.

Over-worked and stressed parents are bad for families, society and organisations

“Sometimes I’m so tired that I don’t have much patience for my children. In the tough periods we work long hours and we even work Saturdays. It is so absorbent that we sometimes can’t think about anything except work matters.”

Portuguese father (manager), private sector

Happy parents can be good for workplaces

“If you take the employers point of view, if you only hire people without children, because they are more effective, you’ll miss a lot of the workforce. So the employers should give flexible arrangements. Because it has a lot to do with well-being, if you like being at work you’ll do a better job. If you feel guilty because you’re not at the nursery, I think that can make you work less effectively.”

Norwegian mother, private sector

Finally, good practices are context-specific, as our discussion in Section 1 illustrates. The context within which parents negotiate the reconciliation of paid work and family is multivarious: national context, socio-economic status, access to various resources and support networks, position within the organisation. All these factors play a role in how workplace practices are experienced and how relevant “family-friendly” practices are. Gender, and cultural attitudes to gendered parenting roles within different European countries, greatly influence perceptions of good practice and the sense of entitlement to different types of practices related to paid work and family.⁴

A major focus of this report, therefore, is on principles of good practice, rather than good practice *per se*. Section 2 draws on our organisational case study and interview data to establish broad principles that set the framework within which employees and their representatives can negotiate in their workplace organisations.

Section 3 of the report details some workplace practices which parents in our study point to as helpful. However, it is important to recognise that these practices work in specific contexts and are therefore not a blueprint for enhancing paid-work and family reconciliation.

SECTION 1

ISSUES IN DEFINING GOOD PRACTICE

Context matters

Good practice is generally understood as a set of practices or actions which result in optimum outcomes, ideally benefiting both employees and the organisation, and which can set standards to which organisations can aspire. However, our cross-national and cross-sector investigation into paid work and family reconciliation shows that context is very important. What works in one setting is not necessarily applicable to others. What constitutes good practice in one country, or for one family or organisation, can be perceived as bad practice in another.

Not only is workplace good practice interpreted differently from country to country, but it is also perceived as largely irrelevant in some countries. In some cases this is because a long tradition of mainstreaming gender equity in both policy and society in general has created a workplace context which is regarded as relatively supportive for parents. This is the prevailing view, for example, in the Swedish public sector organisation in our study. In other cases, for example, in the Bulgarian public and private sector organisations, good practices are considered irrelevant because job insecurity and low wages are currently of greater concern than specific workplace practices. There is also a feeling among Bulgarian parents that “good practices” are unrealistic unless enforced by regulation at the state level.

Perceptions of good practices are highly subjective and influenced by the support parents feel entitled to expect. National and cultural contexts shape employees' sense of entitlement to workplace support for the reconciliation of paid work and family life. This works in a variety of ways. For example, cultural attitudes to the needs of young children shape perceptions of good practice. Portuguese interviewees in our study stressed the importance of the role of the mother in childcare in the early years, whilst Norwegian interviewees stressed the role of parents in general in the early years of childhood. Good practice in these countries may focus more on long maternity leaves or parental leaves, respectively. Attitudes to gender equality and related social policies also influence perceived good practice. In countries with a strong tradition of promoting gender

“[the organisation] has many fine words on paper on many things, among others, gender equality and consideration for the life situation of employees. Maybe they could get even better at following up what they have on paper? That would make this company even better for everybody.”

Norwegian mother, private sector

equality, good practices identified by both parents and managers are those that encourage a more equal participation of women in the labour market and fathers in the family. Whilst egalitarian gender ideology and policy at the state or workplace level are not necessarily experienced as influencing practice sufficiently, they do raise expectations of support for employed mothers and fathers.

Sense of entitlement to support also varies across sectors. In all the countries, public sector workers tended to have higher expectations of good practices than those working in the private sector.

Social comparison influences perceptions of good practice

Employees in our study often compared their conditions with others in similar situations and this influences the way they evaluate their own employer' practices. Social comparison operates on different levels, both within and between sectors and countries. In some cases social comparison contributed to parents' acceptance of bad practices, in the belief that conditions would be worse elsewhere.

On the other hand, a growing awareness of good practices in countries thought of as having more gender equitable solutions to work-family challenges has in some respects raised expectations amongst employed parents.

"A private employer might exploit me and demand that I work more than 8 ours a day"

Bulgarian mother, public sector

"[France has] high birth rates thanks to protective legislation since de Gaulle's times."

Bulgarian mother, private sector

"...you get better maternity rights and flexible hours for parents... overseas – Scandanavia. Things could be better."

UK father, private sector

There are different perspectives on good practices

Individual factors such as status in the organisation, gender and family structure and responsibilities also contribute to different perspectives on what might constitute good practices. For example, managers in our case studies tended to report more good practices than employees. In many cases, managers perceived their organisation as "family-friendly" in terms of both formal organisational policy and equitable implementation of that policy. However, the day-to-day experience of some of the new parents conflicted with management accounts. This discrepancy is greatest where managers perceive employee and employer needs as mutually exclusive rather than overlapping, and are therefore reluctant to make efforts to ensure the success of supportive practices.

Perceptions of good practice are also highly gendered in our study, with women being more conscious of the need to have good practices in this area. Mothers also expressed different needs from fathers. For example, in the UK private sector and the Netherlands mothers were more likely to want to reduce their overall working hours with fathers preferring flexible full-time hours – influencing what is perceived to be good practice. Perceptions of good practices also tend to be different in single and two parent families because of their different support needs.

A Dutch manager on compressed hours in the Netherlands

"4x9, [working 4 9 hour days] some people have that because of the free day, but as a manager I am not very happy with it. Nothing really is done in the ninth hour, it's not a productive hour, it just costs money. I discourage that. It's also quite a burden for people. All these work patterns make it harder to make arrangements for the management."

A Dutch employee on compressed hours

"Because I work 4x9 I have one day a week alone with the children and then I have the weekends and the evenings, although the evenings are very short. I think I have enough time for the children."

Good practices can be double edged

An added complication in identifying good practices is the double-edged nature of many contemporary practices. This has become particularly apparent where parents are experiencing intensification of work. Flexible working, for example, despite being often presented as a positive practice for employees, can also have negative consequences, such as "allowing" employees to work longer hours to manage intense workloads, in return for more flexibility. Our study shows that many parents seem to accept these negative aspects of "good" practices, which can sometimes undermine the reconciliation of work and family. Addressing the double-edged nature of potential good practices is important if European organisations are to meet the challenge of promoting socially sustainable work practices.

SECTION 2

PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING GOOD WORKPLACE PRACTICES

Our organisational case and interview studies highlight basic principles underpinning good practices for sustainable and effective paid work-family reconciliation.

1. Implementing statutory entitlements – with attention to culture and practice change

Good practice at its most basic level is simply implementing statutory policy. Some employees, in Portugal for example, emphasised how important it was to be able to use the full range of statutory rights available to them, thereby implying that these rights, though universal in theory, are not universal in practice. Implementation of statutory policy often varies according to organisational context and sector. In Bulgaria, for example, both public and private sector managers and employees stressed the role of the state in regulating organisational policy. However, our study showed significant differences between the private sector and the public, with the Labour Code being adhered to more strictly in the public sector.

In the Netherlands, a private sector manager described his company as a “caring” organisation, despite it doing having no special measures in place for part-time work and leave arrangements beyond those demanded by the law – it does, however, have policies relating to flexible working and childcare facilities that are specific to the organisation. A Norwegian manager thought that so long as state regulations are adhered to, nothing more is needed from the employer. However, many employees in all the countries recognised that the implementation of state policies is necessary but not sufficient. There is also a need for culture change and change in working practices. This involves creating an organisational culture and climate in which parents do not feel discriminated against when they make use of policies aimed specifically at their needs. The Norwegian private sector employees feel that their organisational culture makes it relatively easy to take up their statutory entitlements but note that this is not the case in all workplaces. Implementation of rights is also often undermined in all the countries by gendered assumptions about parenting roles.

Workplace attitudes can deter parents from taking up their rights

Interviewer: What do you think an employer could contribute in a context like Norway?

A: The culture and the attitudes, in addition to the rights.

L: Yes, that you don't get ostracised if you make use of your rights

Norwegian mothers, private sector

Fathers have parental responsibilities too

“I feel it's fully accepted that fathers take their share of parental leave. This is not always the case with employers.”

Norwegian manager, private sector

“For Holly’s birth, I had a different manager. He’s got a young family as well and he knew his rights and things like that”

UK father, private sector, who missed out on the newly introduced paid paternity leave when his first child was born

My sister in law works for [name of other company]. When they learnt about these changes in the legislation, they were very open with their employees and told everyone...Whereas our company has kept it all quiet and we’ve all found out about it through our own method.”

UK mother, private sector

Even in Norway, organisational culture often makes it difficult for fathers to take up all their entitlements. Only 13 per cent of Norwegian fathers take more than one month of parental leave – considerably less than they are entitled to take. As this illustrates, policy is not enough. Statutory policy is important but there is also a need for a change in organisational culture and practice to facilitate a more gender equitable distribution of childcare responsibilities between parents. One of the Norwegian fathers in the private sector organisation took nearly half of the couple’s parental leave: five months, while his partner took seven months. However, he felt that, as a result of taking this leave, his manager thought he lacked commitment to his job.

Communication of policy is a key element in ensuring that parents can make use of policies which allow them to reconcile their paid work with their family responsibilities. Employees need to know what their rights are, and that they will not be judged for making use of them. Managers should ensure that workers are fully briefed on national and company policy and encouraged to use them.

Awareness of statutory rights is an essential tool for parents in negotiating paid work and family reconciliation. In the UK, a private sector company organised meetings and a poster campaign to raise awareness of the introduction of “Childcare vouchers”, a government scheme permitting parents to claim back national insurance on childcare costs.

2. Management support

Parents emphasise the crucial role of the support of local managers. Where managers are supportive, parents feel confident in negotiating their needs and reaching mutually effective solutions. Take-up of the full-range of statutory entitlements is facilitated by sympathetic management. A group of Norwegian mothers talked about “stretching” their rights in pressing conditions, suggesting their discomfort in using their rights. In this example, their discomfort was overcome by supportive management.

Whilst management support is important in all countries, the impact of management discretion is reduced to some extent in countries where the state plays a more regulatory role in relation to work-family reconciliation. Nevertheless, organisations need to be aware that, whatever the national welfare regime, universal rights relating to work-life reconciliation are mediated through local managers and local workplace contexts.

Contrasting accounts of management support

“My manager was very unsupportive and made it very clear that she didn’t agree with four days a week, although there were other people in the same position as me, working four days a week. Somebody else asked to go four days a week, to the same manager, and she got it and I got turned down.”

UK mother, private sector

“The manager is a very available and human person.....The pregnancy period took place easily and when I came back I had my place. They even made me pregnancy uniforms.”

Portuguese mother, public sector

3. Trust and mutual understanding

The centrality of manager support can be problematic if parents are dependent on individual managers. Trust and mutual understanding between managers and employees are crucial where there is a reliance on informal practices, but is also essential in relation to the take-up of formal policies. Trust emerges as key, for example, in the case study in the UK private sector, in the context of moves to more informal methods of flexibility, and is also important in the Norwegian organisations. Bulgarian interviewees in the public sector stressed that without trust and mutual understanding “things just won’t work”.

“If you feel your manager understands you, then its easier to claim what you are entitled to”
Norwegian mother (senior manager), private sector

“My supervisor has children of her own. So when you knock at her door and you tell her “my child is sick”, she knows what you are talking about.”
Dutch mother, private sector

4. Management consistency

Equitable treatment is an important principle underpinning good practices. If managers in some departments in an organisation are less supportive to parents than other managers, employees feel very unfairly treated. This was particularly prevalent in the UK public and private sector organisations, and keenly felt by employees because there was a sharp contrast between management discourses of work-life balance and the actual behaviour of some managers who did not “walk the talk”.

“I think they mean well, but they need to sort out the management and they need to get some consistency, because there are some really good, fair managers there, but there’s some really bad ones as well.”
UK mother, private sector

5. The role of colleagues

Whilst management attitudes can dominate workplace environments, colleagues also play an important role in determining whether parents feel confident in asserting their rights. Many parents in our study referred to the importance of colleague solidarity and reciprocal arrangements in coping with work and family responsibilities. This worked well in the Swedish social services. Workplace environments that create a climate of supportive team spirit are important in contributing to the well-being of employed parents, particularly in organisations in Portugal, Slovenia and Bulgaria. As with management support, trust is important in facilitating the negotiation of informal reciprocal arrangements.

Colleagues are important.....

“When I was pregnant my colleagues gave me a great collaboration. They handled the heaviest tasks.”

Portuguese mother, public sector

.....but support can be inequitable

“I work in a small team, 10 people, and half of them are parents and the other half aren't, and everything will be arranged between the parents to avoid burdening the people without children.”

Dutch father, private sector

However, team dynamics and equity can be undermined when there is a combination of intense workloads alongside “family-friendly” policies that do not take into consideration the whole team. This can result in parents being unwilling to make use of flexible policies or practices, for example to take time off if a child is ill, because they know that their colleagues will be even more overloaded. This creates extra stress for families.

Some parents in our study feel that colleague solidarity is undermined by feelings of resentment if it is felt that employed parents are receiving too many entitlements or special treatment in the workplace. For example, in the UK public sector, one of the fathers feels that fathers get a raw deal, whilst some workers and supervisors feel that senior managers who are mothers are given preferential treatment. This can be avoided if flexible working arrangements are mainstreamed in organisations. This involves thinking differently about the way work is done and reorganising work so that everyone has opportunities to work flexibly to meet (realistic) organisational goals as well as personal needs, whatever they may be. If flexible working is only available and approved for parents, especially mothers, it creates backlash and remains marginalised.

Employees in the Slovenian public sector report that they can generally take sick leave for childcare when necessary, in contrast with employees in the Slovenian private sector. However, they feel uneasy about doing so because co-workers would have to work more. They deal with this by taking annual leave instead, thereby voluntarily limiting their entitlements.

6. Realistic workloads

The role of heavy workloads in undermining good practices is often underestimated. Parents in our study spoke of experiencing a growing intensification of work in recent years. This is an issue for all employees but is experienced particularly negatively by new parents whose family lives can suffer considerably because they are working too hard. As noted above, flexible working practices can sometimes actually increase workplace and family stress if they provide flexibility to manage unrealistic workloads, and may, for example, increase sickness absence. Monitoring the effects of increased workloads is a way of avoiding the more negative, double-edge effects of flexible working practices.

Flexibility that is equitable (recognising diverse needs) and mutual (“give and take” by managers and employees) can produce positive outcomes for motivation, retention and recruitment.

7. Collaborative agreements and communicating policy

Our study shows that much of the support employees receive in the workplace is arbitrary and therefore inconsistent. This demonstrates the importance of collaborative agreements or similar processes that involve employees in decisions regarding good practice in the workplace.⁵ Involving employees in decision-making also allows concepts such as work-family reconciliation to be discussed and explored within the organisational context. This can encourage group problem-solving and may result in innovative solutions. It can enhance mutual understanding both in terms of management/employee and employee/employee relationships.

Employees are key to identifying what works in their particular contexts and should be involved in elaborating practices which can meet their work-life needs without compromising, and sometimes even enhancing, efficiency.

In a context of organisational change, organisational decisions which have negative effects on the reconciliation of work and family life can be keenly felt by employees who are constantly having to develop strategies to manage their commitments. Collaborative agreements, via employee representation (e.g. unions) allow employees to have their needs and grievances taken into account, thereby enhancing the outcome of organisational decisions.

In the UK private sector company the replacement of a workplace crèche by childcare vouchers without discussion had a negative affect on parents in the organisation. Consultation with employees aimed at seeking out alternative solutions to closure, taking account of various constraints and barriers could have produced a more satisfactory outcome.

8. Gender equity

It is overwhelmingly women in our study who make use of practices aimed at reconciling paid work and family life, from flexible working to leave for family illnesses. This has important gender equity implications:

- The role of women in the family as the primary child-carer is perpetuated despite women's increased role in the labour market.
- Women are often held back in their careers following the transition to parenthood, particularly if they reduce their working hours (and it is overwhelmingly women who do this rather than men). In particular, there was a common pattern of women in the UK private sector being demoted when they moved to part-time working. Demoting skilled staff is bad for both employees and the organisations, resulting in staff demoralisation and the inefficient use of resources.
- Fathers often feel deprived of time with children. They also often lose out on opportunities to develop important relational skills in the family context that could be transferable to the workplace.

"And the minute I asked to go part-time, everything changed and my career just went downhill."

UK Mother, private sector

"If a woman dares to give birth to a child and be absent for two years, it will be the end of her career."

*Bulgarian mother, private sector
(Statutory paid leave in Bulgaria is 2 years)*

SECTION 3

SOME WORKPLACE PRACTICES THAT PARENTS VALUE IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Most parents feel that flexible working practices are a major resource enabling them to organise their work more effectively around childcare responsibilities, although, as we discussed in Section 1, this provides only a veneer of “choice”. Moreover, as with all working practices, the value of flexible working arrangements depends on specific contexts.

Most parents are clear that the flexibility they need is different from employer-led flexibility to adjust workforces according to business needs, but many say that the organisation can benefit from mutual flexibility. Effective, mutual flexibility often entails a move to a focus on outputs rather than how long or where employees work. But again it depends on context. In client-based positions for example, a rethinking of the allocation of human resources may be needed to ensure cover, as well as providing mutual flexibility.

What types of helpful flexible working practices do parents identify?

1. Reducing contracted hours

“I’ve worked here since 85 so this is my everyday life and as far as I’ve seen it there aren’t any negative sides when getting children..... When I came back from leave I asked to have 60% work, and there was not a problem. I can continue with that for years if I so wish.”

Norwegian mother, private sector

“It can be quite negative when you’ve promised x, y, z to somebody, ... people forget that you only work three days.”

UK mother, private sector

“I’m here every day but stop work at 14:30 and now, suddenly, people expect me to work 100% or to do as much as all the others do. So it’s not only the manager but also my colleagues - they ...expect me to do as much as they do.”

Swedish unit manager, recently moved from 50% to 75% working time

Many of the mothers in our study, particularly those in two parent families in the UK, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden who can afford to do so, want to reduce working time on returning from maternity leave. Some fathers talk about wanting to work less, but most do not feel comfortable asking for this, even in the organisations in Sweden and Norway. For mothers who can take advantage of opportunities to reduce their working hours, this is a key factor in attitudes to returning to work and increases job commitment.

In Portugal, there is little part-time work, but the issue of reducing working time hours takes on a different form as it involves avoiding the working practice of split shifts which prolongs the working day.

However, reducing hours following transition to parenthood can be problematic if workload does not decrease proportionally to the reduction in work hours.

Not all parents can manage with a part-time salary. None of the Bulgarian interviewees, in the public or private sector, had taken up the part-time possibilities allowed for in the Labour Code. Mothers in higher wage economies or with higher earning partners are more likely to find this solution satisfactory. Low-wage, single mothers in the various national contexts rarely find part-time working financially sustainable, though they are often the parents most in need of reduced working hours.

2. Compressed hours

Where part-time working is impractical for parents, compressed hours are sometimes used as a way of organising the working week more effectively. This is particularly prevalent in the Netherlands, where in some cases employees are working longer daily hours over 4 days rather than 5. This has been facilitated by the reduction in the working week in the banking sector from 40 hours to 36 hours that came into force in the 1980s as part of a collective agreement for the sector. Taking one day off per week, without loss of salary or job status can be a useful strategy, if it is experienced as good both for family and efficiency in the workplace.

The downside of this, for parents, is that the days worked are very long, leaving little time in the evening for the family, and drop-offs and pick-ups at crèches can be complicated. Also it can only work if a partner can also schedule their working week around this. It would be very difficult for a lone parent, in the absence of long opening hours at crèches. So while this can be a great solution for some working parents, it won't be right for everyone.

3. Flexible working hours – with autonomy

Flexible working hours help in organising work and childcare arrangements. The degree of flexibility desired or possible can vary in different contexts, but most parents regard some flexibility in working hours as essential. It works best when there is give and take by parents and their managers.

Some managers believe that flexibility is more difficult to arrange in certain jobs, for example in front-line public services or more client-based positions. However, perceived restrictions on flexible working can be overcome by creative and innovative problem-solving, or by self-managed teams, which work well in some of the organisations. In the Swedish social services organisation, managers described how they endeavoured to organise the work in such a way *“that allows people to suddenly leave for different missions”*. Unit managers also described how they tried to meet individual needs, negotiating agreements, such as allowing employees not to have to work evenings, or excluding some employees from working schedules which demand staffing until 4:30 in the afternoon.

“It is all very flexible, and my team is output oriented.”
Dutch manager, private sector

“Just to understand, and to, to let them sort of work with you, to find a solution. And to accept that when you’ve got a bit more time, you’ll make a bit more time up.”
UK mother, private sector

Successful, mutual flexibility is necessarily framed by two-way trust and an organisational emphasis on outcomes and task completion rather than hours in the workplace.

All parents find that some autonomy and control over work is important, and this can have positive effects on attitudes to, and quality of, work. In the Slovenian private sector organisation there is a flexitime system in one department (employees are able to arrive between 7pm and 9pm and leave between 5pm and 6pm), with employees organising their work in a relatively autonomous way. This is experienced as an example of good practice in contrast to the rest of the organisation's more rigid practices.

“I have technical autonomy in here. I have a certain freedom of expression. No one tells me that I have to be twenty minutes with this client and five minutes with that one. I have to manage my time and [I] provide a quality service.”
Portuguese mother, public sector

“...I can work more one day and less the next, depending on the situation. But I’m flexible too so if I have a day off and there’s an important meeting, I will make time for going into work anyway.”
Norwegian mother, private sector

However, this is sometimes double-edged. Some employees who have the autonomy to organise their own time and work schedule find themselves working harder, especially in the context of intense workloads. Whilst, parents may accept this in return for the flexibility offered by organising their own workload, this can result in unsustainable work and family stress. Managers need to be vigilant in this respect. Autonomy is also much appreciated in other contexts and usually results in “give and take” to meet operational, as well as family, needs.

4. Working from home

“I consider [working from home] positively because I live far from here, and the long queues getting here... it would have made me more effective, if I could work from home one or two days a week.”
Norwegian mother, private sector

Enabling employees to deal with some tasks at home, for example using email and access to employers’ servers, opens up a variety of ways in which time can be used more efficiently: avoiding rush hours; working from home on certain days of the week, again cutting down on weekly commuting time; working from home during family emergencies.

“I have noticed that after I have got an office at home, it is contributing to give me more time for my children when I get home. So that it is a good arrangement my manager gave me. But it is nothing that is official: it’s something she gave me.”
Norwegian father, private sector

Home-working is not always practical of course. Some positions demand presence at work, particularly for service and front-line staff. Other considerations can also prohibit home working. In less affluent countries or in areas where housing is very expensive, parents may be living with their own parents and there is often not enough space to work from home. Norwegian social workers in the study could not work from home due to confidentiality issues. However, the Norwegian financial organisation in our study was making arrangements to enable more of its staff to work from home and parents welcome this.

There are also risks of blurring boundaries between paid work and family when home is also the workplace. Employees can feel that work is imposing too much on their family life. Organisations can try to guard against this by, for example, respecting homeworkers unavailability at certain times.

5. Arrangements for dealing with family emergencies

One of the major problems that all new parents experience relates to the inevitable periods of childhood illness. Statutory rights to take leave – paid or unpaid – to care for a sick child exist in all the countries. The most generous is Bulgaria with paid sick leave for up to 60 days per year. Workplace practices that enable parents to deal with such emergencies without reproach or feelings of guilt are considered by the parents in our study to be a basic requirement of good practice. However, catching up on workloads on return to work following absence due to family illnesses or other crises can put stress on parents.

Parents need to be available in times of family emergencies. Employees are unlikely to focus well at work if they are unable to deal with family crises.

“In this unit there is great understanding. When my great grandmother died, I was not entitled to time off, but one of my children became very sad and I had to take care of her. All I had to do was fill in a form and it was all right!”

Norwegian mother, private sector

The practices highlighted in this section of the report demonstrate there is no one good practice or set of good practices applicable to all contexts. However, as we outline in Section 2, there are principles which employers, managers and employees can refer to in order to look at ways of finding innovative solutions for specific contexts.

1. See Transitions Report #1: Context Mapping (2004).

2. Employers' organisations are often resistant to increased rights to "family-friendly" or employee-led flexibility. However, research in the UK has pointed to the positive effects of such policies in terms of staff retention and motivation:

http://www.cipd.co.uk/pressoffice/_articles/12092005151417.htm?IsSrchRes=1.

3. See Transitions Report #11: Final Report on Transitions (forthcoming).

4. Lewis, S and Smithson, J (2001) Sense of entitlement to support for the reconciliation of employment and family life, *Human Relations* 55(11). 1455-1481

5. Rapoport, R, Bailyn, L Fletcher, J and Pruitt, B (2002), *Beyond Work-Family Balance: Advancing Gender Equity & Work Performance*; Lewis, S and Cooper, C (2005) *Work-Life Integration*. Case Studies of Organisational Change, Wiley.

A CASE STUDY FROM THE UK

Mary has been working as a Mental Health Support Worker in a centre providing supportive accommodation for mentally ill adults since 1997. Mary had been at the centre for only 7 months when she went on maternity leave. She wanted to spend some time staying at home with her child. After the 18 weeks paid maternity leave she took up the option, provided by her public sector workplace, to take a year's unpaid leave. She also was owed some annual leave, and returned to work after a period of 15 months at home. On her return, her manager was very supportive. He made provisions for her to work part-time hours on a regular daily basis (10 am to 2 pm Monday to Friday) to enable her to put in place the routine she required to look after her daughter. The hours allowed her to spend time with her daughter in the morning before dropping her off at the local nursery, and in the afternoon after picking her up. Mary is still the only member of staff at the centre working 'regular' hours, as opposed to shifts.

When her daughter became seriously ill, Mary was able to rely on the support of her manager. After providing a letter from her daughter's GP, she took several days off each month over a period of several months. Beyond the 5 days' dependents' leave, she took either annual leave or time off in lieu. It is notable and indicative of good employment practice that Mary is able to take dependents' leave. The organisational case study showed that this type of leave was commonly subject to managerial discretion and knowledge of the policy was poor among staff.

Since Mary's daughter started school (at the age of 4), Mary has been taking all school holidays off. She has been able to do this through a mixture of annual leave, time off in lieu, and unpaid leave.

Mary now works from 9:30 am to 1:30 pm. She is able to take time off at short notice which she can make up by working longer on other days. The relative flexibility she enjoys has been an important resource in her negotiation of work-family boundaries and has allowed her what she regards as the right "balance" between paid employment and motherhood. This solution works well for Mary because she has a partner who earns enough to enable her to take a cut in salary. Other UK public sector staff in the study would find such a strategy difficult.

The case of Mary is in stark contrast to many other employees in the study, particularly to frontline staff, who complained about the rigidity of working patterns and the lack of managerial support and were unable to reduce their hours either because they had no partner or their partner was in a low paid public sector job. Staff commonly had to take annual leave in order to look after children, and found it difficult to take time off at short notice. Finding solutions which ease the challenge of combining employment and parenthood has positive outcomes for staff retention.

A CASE STUDY FROM SWEDEN

Susanne is a rehabilitation therapist in Göteborg and her commuting time is 3 hours a day. She is dependent on “good practices” from her employer and colleagues in order to organise her time in an effective way. On her return from maternity leave she chose to work part-time. She wanted to work 80% over 4 days. Her manager supported her in this.

Her working time is 08.00-16.00 and officially she hasn't got any flexible time arrangements at work. However, unofficially there are some flexible time arrangements: long hours are noted and employees can use them to leave earlier or come later another time. Susanne also has a special arrangement with her manager to leave work 15 minutes before her colleagues and arrive 30 minutes later without any wage-reduction, so that she can reduce her commuting time. It works well in her case because her husband is around to take and collect the child on days she is working – she has a very long journey to work.

Susanne is very loyal to the organisation and colleagues. She is known for her competence and is a valued member of staff whom her manager wants to retain. Colleague support works on the basis of delegating tasks so that “cover” for emergencies is arranged between colleagues rather than by consulting the manager, implying a high level of trust in the workplace, and resulting in a high level of flexibility for all the workforce.

A CASE STUDY FROM PORTUGAL

In Portugal a major issue for parents is the long working day. Since 1998, public sector workers with specific needs (studying, with children below 12, etc) are able to request permission to work continuously for 6 hours a short half-hour break for lunch taken in the office. This enables employees to start work later or leave work earlier, thus extending their time for their family. In the Portuguese context where part-time work is rarely a plausible option, some parents find this solution a useful one.

Susana, a public sector worker, arrives early at her job and the “continuous journey” (continuous working day) allows her to leave her workplace quite early (at 4 pm) and to pick up her son at around 5.30 pm, which she considers a proper time.

In the Portuguese Social Services, the “continuous journey” and flexible work are supported by the central administration as a workplace policy but local services may adapt these policies according to their own institutional activities, needs and conditions.

Our Portuguese research found that the “continuous working day” was a popular solution to work-family reconciliation issues, particularly for employees in workplaces where long lunch breaks are the norm. By reducing lunch breaks, parents are able to reduce the time spent away from home.

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Appendix: Parental Leave Schemes in the participating countries

	Maternity leave¹	Paternity leave²	Parental leave³	Sick Child leave⁴
Bulgaria	19 weeks 90% pay	none specific	21 months for mother or father min. wage	60 days per year m or f full pay
Netherlands	16 weeks full pay	2 days	13 weeks each parent min. wage	10 days per year 70% pay
Norway	9 weeks full pay	4 w full pay not transferable	29 w full pay 39 w 80% pay 1 year unpaid	10 days per year full pay
Portugal	16 w full pay	5 + 15 days full pay 10 w of mother's leave can be shared	3 mths unpaid	30 days per year unpaid
Slovenia	15 w full pay	15 days full pay 75 days unpaid ⁵	260 days full pay for a mother or a father	14 days per episode/ per child 80% pay
Sweden	8 w 80% pay	8 w 80% pay	38 w 80% pay shared 12 w. wage	60 days per year per child min. wage
UK	26 w 6 w full pay rest at statutory pay	2 w statutory pay	13 w unpaid per parent	none specified

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1. Paid leave for the period around the birth of the child.
 2. Paid leave that the father is entitled to.
 3. Leave that both parents are entitled to.
 4. Paid leave when children are ill.
 5. Full employment rights without pay

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