

Special feature

Results of the Second Flexible Working Employee Survey

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Key points

- Awareness of the employee right to request flexible working has increased significantly since the right was introduced in 2003.
- By nation, awareness was highest in Scotland (69 per cent) and lowest in England (65 per cent). In Wales 66 per cent of employees were aware of the right to request. Awareness varied by English region from a low of 58 per cent in London to a high of 70 per cent in the West Midlands.
- Almost a quarter of employees who were eligible to make a request had done so in the past two years.
- The rate of employer refusal of requests has almost halved since the right was introduced.
- One in five employees reported taking time off to care for someone in the past two years.

Introduction

In April 2003 the Government introduced an employment law which gave parents of children under 6, or parents of disabled children under 18, the right to request to work a flexible working arrangement. Employers have a statutory duty to consider such applications seriously.

This article discusses the results of the Second Flexible Working Employee Survey, carried out as part of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)'s employment relations research programme. The aim of this survey was to monitor changes in awareness and take up of the right to request flexible working since the law was introduced in April 2003. This was achieved by comparing the results to those of the First Flexible Working Employee Survey (2004)¹ and the Second Work-Life Balance Study (2004).

For the Second Flexible Working Employee Survey, the DTI commissioned British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) International to include a module of

questions about flexible working and leave arrangements in its Access Telephone Omnibus Survey. A total of 3,222 employees in Great Britain were surveyed over three consecutive weekends in January 2005.² The average overall response rate for the Omnibus Survey was 62 per cent.

Awareness of the right to request flexible working

Employees were asked whether they were aware of this new right to request flexible working arrangements. Lack of awareness of the right can hinder people's ability to achieve a better work-life balance. Focusing specifically on the right of parents of young or disabled children to request flexible working, the survey found that awareness of this right has continued to increase since the introduction of the legislation.

Awareness of the right was higher (see **Figure 1**) if the employee was:

- a woman rather than a man (71 per cent and 60 per cent respectively);

- ▶ a parent of dependent children rather than not (67 per cent and 63 per cent respectively);
- ▶ older rather than younger (74 per cent of those aged over 55 were aware, compared with only 49 per cent of those aged between 16 and 24).

Awareness levels varied across regions. Awareness was highest in the West Midlands at 70 per cent (up from 51 per cent in the First Flexible Working Employee Survey). Awareness was also high in Scotland, the South West (both at 69 per cent) and Yorkshire and the Humber (67 per cent). Awareness was lowest in London at 58 per cent (compared with 56 per cent in the First Flexible Working Employee Survey).

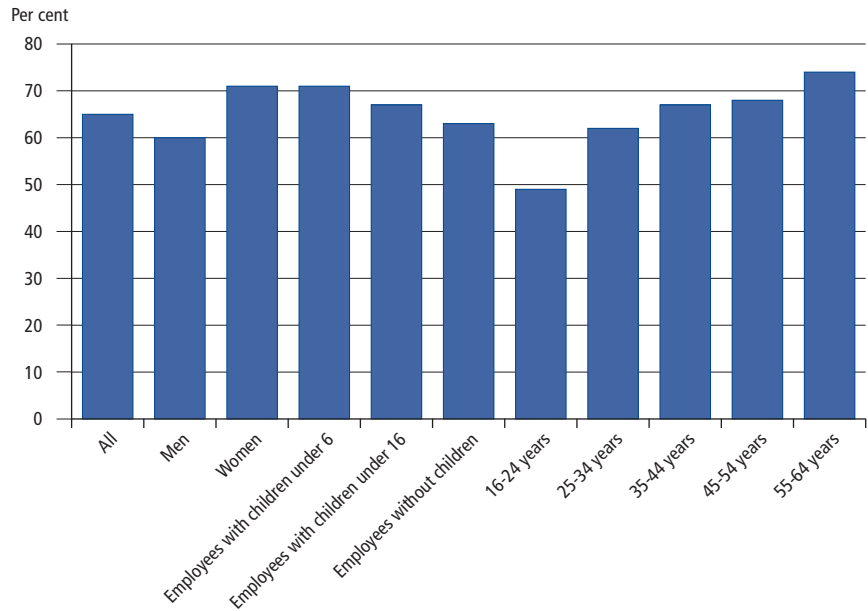
Awareness in the first survey was joint highest in London and Wales. All regions had seen an increase in awareness compared with the First Flexible Working Employee Survey. By nation, awareness was highest in Scotland (69 per cent) and lowest in England (65 per cent).

Awareness was highest among employees working as managers or senior officials (76 per cent) and lowest among skilled trade occupations (52 per cent). However, awareness had increased in all occupations since the First Flexible Working Employee Survey (see **Figure 2**).

Turning to sector, awareness was highest in the banking, finance and insurance industry (77 per cent), followed by the education, health and public administration sector (74 per cent). Awareness was lowest in the energy and water industry (49 per cent), followed by the agriculture and fishing sector (53 per cent).

Figure 1

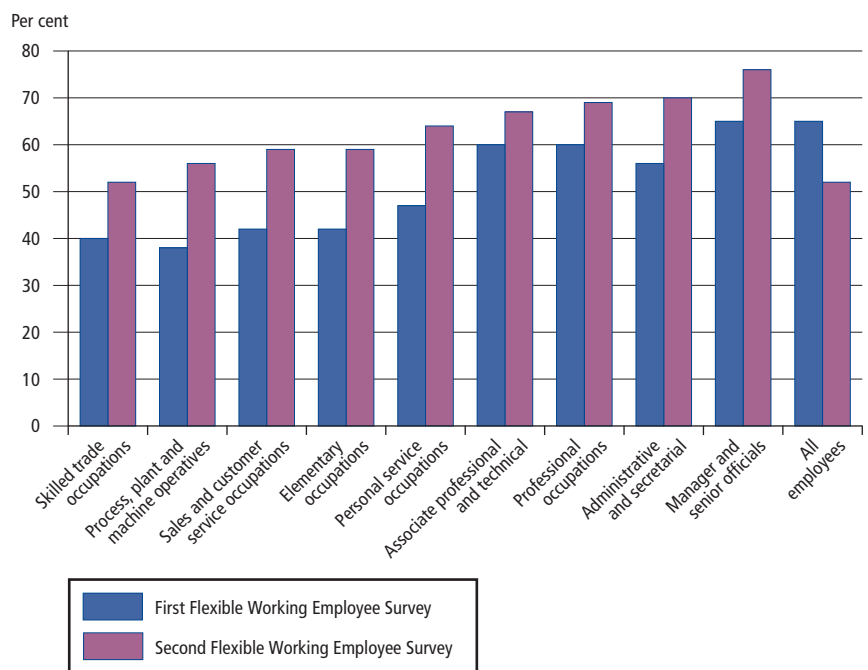
Employees' awareness of the right to request flexible working by various characteristics; United Kingdom; January 2005



Source: Department of Trade and Industry/BMRB

Figure 2

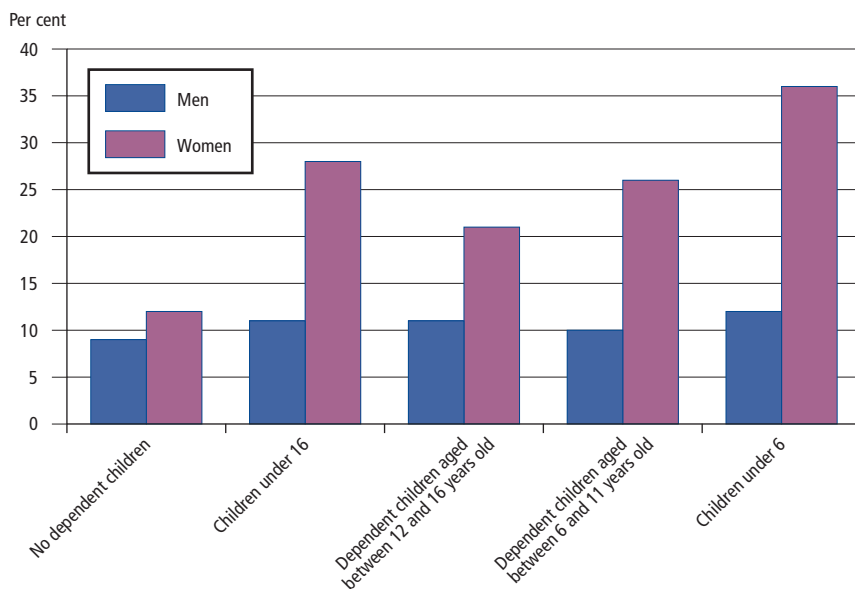
Employees' awareness of the right to request flexible working by occupation; United Kingdom; 2003/2004 and 2005



Sources: Office for National Statistics; Department of Trade and Industry/BMRB

Figure 3

Proportions of employees who requested to work flexibly over past two years by sex and presence of children; United Kingdom: January 2005



Source: Department of Trade and Industry/BMRB

Requests by employees to work flexibly

Eligible employees are able to request a change to the hours they work; a change to the times when they are required to work; or to work from home. This covers working patterns such as annualised hours, compressed hours, flexi-time, home-working, job-sharing, self-rostering, shift working, staggered hours and term-time working.

Respondents were asked whether they had made a request to their employer in the past two years to change their working arrangement for a sustained period of time. Overall, 14 per cent of employees had requested a change to their working arrangements in the past two years. **Figure 3** shows that when sex and presence of dependent children were combined, requests were higher among female

employees than male employees and requests were much higher among those with dependent children than those without.

Employees under the age of 35 were more likely to have requested to work flexibly than older employees. Almost one in five (18 per cent) of employees aged 16 to 24 and 17 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 had requested to work flexibly, compared with 12 per cent, 10 per cent and 13 per cent of those aged 35 to 44, 45 to 54 and 55 to 64 respectively.

Within occupation, the number of requests was highest among employees working in sales and customer service occupations and administrative and secretarial occupations (19 per cent). Requests were lowest among managers and senior officials, and skilled trade occupations (10 per cent). Within industry sectors, requests to work

flexibly were highest among the banking, finance and insurance sector, where 20 per cent of sampled employees had made a request. Requests were lowest in the manufacturing sector where only 9 per cent of employees had made a request. Sample sizes within agriculture and fishing, energy and water, and construction were too small to provide reliable estimates.

Types of flexible work working requested

Respondents who had made a request to work flexibly in the past two years were asked what change to their working pattern they had requested.

Of those who had requested a change to their working pattern, 25 per cent had requested to change to part-time hours, 23 per cent had requested to work flexi-time, 16 per cent had requested to work reduced hours for a limited period and 7 per cent had requested to work a compressed working week (see **Figure 4**). Around one in six (16 per cent) of respondents had requested a more complex working pattern that combined different working arrangements. Various other types of working arrangement had also been requested including working from home on a regular basis and job-sharing (sample sizes for these were too small to provide reliable estimates).

Female employees who had requested a change to their working pattern were most likely to have requested to work part-time, at 30 per cent, compared with 18 per cent of male employees (see **Figure 4**). This confirms the results of the Second Work-Life Balance Study where 39 per cent of women and 16

► per cent of men had requested to work part-time. Male employees were more likely to request to work flexi-time (28 per cent) than female employees (19 per cent).

Reason for making a request to work flexibly

Figure 5 shows that 35 per cent of those who had made a request had done so because of childcare needs, a further 10 per cent reported making the request in order to have more free time. The same proportion (10 per cent) requested a change to their working pattern in order to take part in education and learning, and 9 per cent to spend more time with their families. Slightly less (8 per cent) said they had made the request in order to make life easier, with 6 per cent making the request because of health problems. Respondents also reported other reasons for making a request, including to accommodate travel arrangements, to reduce the demands of the job or to care for family members. However, the sample sizes in these categories were too low to give reliable estimates. Childcare needs was also the main reason given by respondents who made a request to work flexibly in the First Flexible Working Employee Survey.

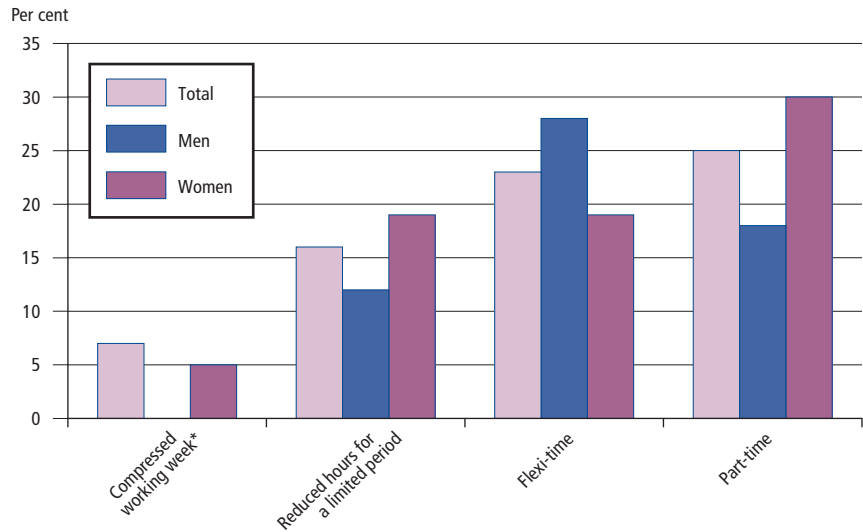
The majority of female employees reported making the request in order to meet childcare needs (43 per cent), with the second most popular reason being to spend more time with their family (10 per cent). Male employees were also most likely to have made the request because of childcare needs, although fewer men gave this response than women (22 per cent).

Outcome of requests to work flexibly

Those employees who had made a request to their employer to work

Figure 4

Type of flexible working pattern employees requested; United Kingdom; January 2005



Source: Department of Trade and Industry/BMRB

* Sample size for men too small for a reliable estimate.

flexibly were asked the outcome of their application (see Figure 6).

The majority of employees (81 per cent) who had made a request to change their working pattern had their request either fully or partly accepted. This is below the number who had their requests accepted in the First Flexible Working Employee Survey (86 per cent) after the new law had just been implemented, but is higher than the 77 per cent of requests which were reported to have been accepted in the Second Work-Life Balance Study, which was carried out before the law was introduced.

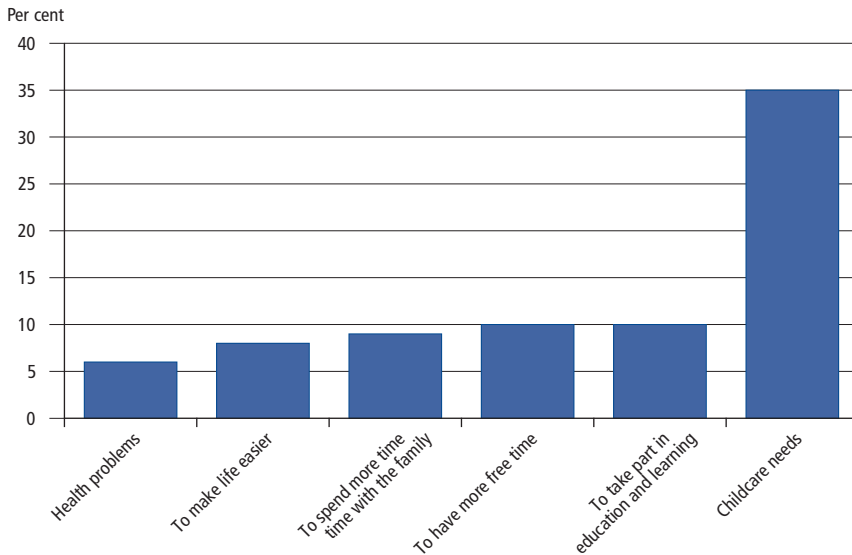
Over two-thirds (69 per cent) of requests had been fully accepted and 12 per cent had been partly accepted; 11 per cent of requests had been declined. A small number of people were currently awaiting a decision following their application and some reported that they were unsure whether their request had been fully or partly accepted. Full acceptance

appeared to be higher if the request had been made through a discussion rather than if the request had been made in writing (73 per cent compared with 68 per cent).

Full acceptance of employee requests was also more likely when employees:

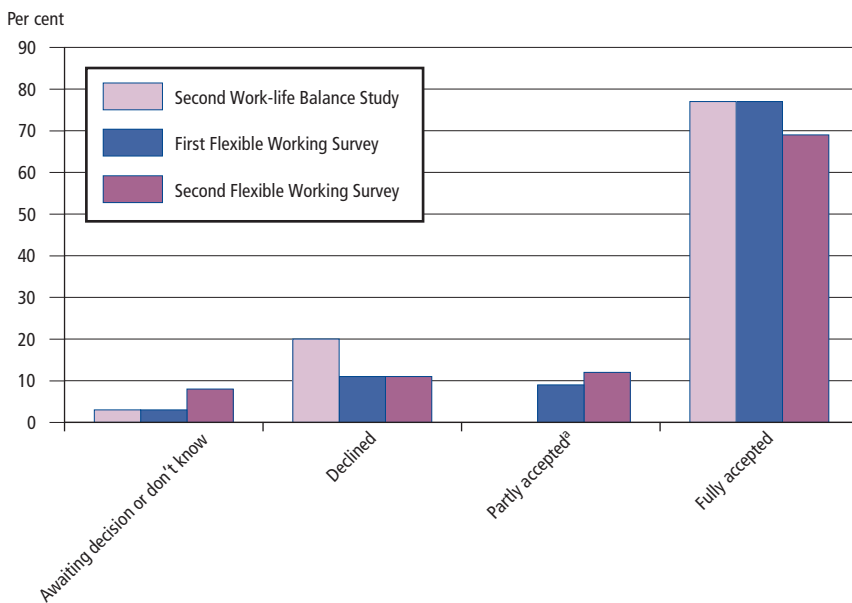
- had dependent children (73 per cent compared with 63 per cent for those without dependents);
- were women rather than men (73 per cent compared with 63 per cent);³
- worked less than 40 hours a week (72 per cent compared with 58 per cent);
- were a current or former trade union member (71 per cent compared with 66 per cent for those who had never been in a union);
- when an employee had a female rather than a male line manager (72 per cent compared with 67 per cent).

Figure 5
Employees' reasons for requesting to work flexibly; United Kingdom; January 2005



Source: Department of Trade and Industry/BMRB

Figure 6
Outcome of employees' requests for flexible working; United Kingdom; 2003, 2003/04 and 2005



Sources: Office for National Statistics; Department of Trade and Industry/BMRB

a In the Second Work-Life Balance Study respondents were not given an option of partly accepted

► The rate of declined requests remains unchanged from the 11 per cent reportedly declined in the First Flexible Working Employee Survey, but is significantly lower than the 20 per cent of declined requests reported in the Second Work-Life Balance Study.⁴ Respondents reported a wide variety of reasons for refusal including the inability to reorganise work among existing staff, costs to the business and the inability to meet customer demand.

Taking time off to fulfil caring responsibilities

Respondents were asked whether they had taken time off to care for anyone over the past two years.

Around two-fifths (19 per cent) of all employees reported taking time off to care for someone in the past two years. Employees were more likely to take time off if:

- they had children under the age of 6 or 16;
- they were women rather than men;
- they were a current or previous trade union member.

Figure 7 shows that 30 per cent of employees had cared for a child under the age of 6, and 17 per cent of employees had cared for a child aged between 6 and 11. Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of employees cared for a spouse or partner, yet men reported taking more time off to care for a spouse/partner than women did; and 19 per cent of employees had cared for a parent.

Conclusion

The awareness of the right to request flexible working has increased since its introduction in 2003. Almost a quarter of employees who were eligible to make a request to work flexibly had done so in the past two years. The rate of refusals has almost ►

- ▶ halved since the right was introduced. One in five employees reported taking time off to care for someone in the past two years.

A survey such as this provides evidence to assess the impact of a government policy in order to determine whether it is actually working and also explores whether the policy needs to be extended to other groups. More generally, this type of survey informs the public of how successful government policies are.

Further information

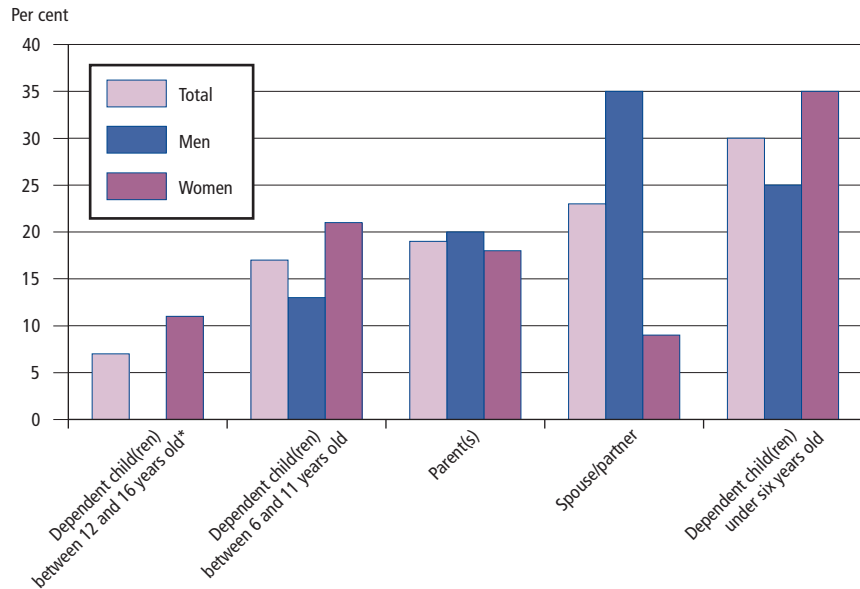
Results of the Second Flexible Working Survey can be ordered from the Department of Trade and Industry on 0845 015 0010, citing URN 05/606, or it can be accessed online (see www.dti.gov.uk/erl/inform.htm).

For further information, contact:

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Figure 7

Who employees had taken time off work to care for;^a United Kingdom; January 2005



Source: Department of Trade and Industry/BMRB

^a Percentages will not add up to 100 as respondents could give more than one response.

* Sample size for men too small for a reliable estimate.

References

Palmer T., *Results of the First Working Employee Survey*, Employment Relations Occasional Papers, Department of Trade and Industry (2004).
Stevens J. et al., *The Second Work-Life Balance Study: Results from the Employee' Survey*, Employment Relations Research Series no. 27, Department of Trade and Industry, URN 04/740 (2004).

Notes

- 1 The First Flexible Working Employee Survey was carried out between September 2003 and February 2004, that is, between 6 and 11 months after the new employment rights were introduced.
- 2 The high rate of don't know/awaiting outcome responses in the latest survey make it difficult to easily compare rates of employer acceptance and decline across the three surveys. For more detail on this please refer to Appendix C of *Results of the Second Flexible Working Employee Survey*.
- 3 This indicates a greater difference based on sex than was seen in the First Flexible Working Employee Survey where 78 per cent of women reported that their request was fully accepted compared with 75 per cent of men.
- 4 The Second Flexible Working Employee Survey asked respondents if they were in employment, and will therefore include a minority of people who were self-employed.