

An ESRC Future of Work Programme Seminar Series



# The Future of Work-Life Balance

by Robert Taylor



Future of Work

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The Future of Work-Life Balance summarises key lessons from the latest social science research on the shifting boundaries between paid and unpaid work and the implications for family life.

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# Foreword



THE CHANGING STRUCTURE, SOCIAL RELATIONS AND RHYTHMS of work have been the subject of intense policy debate and speculation. Will there be sufficient paid jobs, and will the employment opportunities of the future assume a radically different character from the past? Is the evidence in line with claims that we are witnessing a radical re-drawing of the boundaries between paid and unpaid work, with potentially profound implications for the character and composition of households?

With policymakers, 'think tanks' and other visionaries vying to impose their particular interpretations of the future, there is no shortage of responses to these complex questions. Commentators assert that the forces of globalisation, new technologies and business restructuring are challenging long established patterns of paid work while imposing new burdens on families, individuals and households. As the twenty-four hour, seven-day working week gains ascendancy, the possibility of achieving a satisfactory work-life balance is proving an elusive goal for more and more people. Others however see positive benefits in the blurring boundaries between factory, office and home life as new technologies and changes in business structures release opportunities for greater individual discretion over how, when and where paid work is performed.

The Future of Work Programme, launched in 1998 by the Economic and Social Research Council, aims to rectify existing gaps in our understanding of the changing world of work. The Programme is supporting twenty-seven projects and more than one hundred researchers at twenty-two UK universities. Topics under investigation include the nature of home-work, the employment choices of mothers of pre-school children, and the determinants and distribution of caring work. Other projects are investigating the sources of the 'long hours' employment culture and the increased dissatisfaction of employees with their jobs and working lives.

Key findings from the Programme are being brought to the attention of policymakers and practitioners through an extensive series of publications, seminars, workshops and conferences. The aim is to help improve the quality of information available to all parties with a direct interest in shaping the political, economic and social determinants of the future of paid work and its bearing on other aspects of social life.

This is the second Report by Robert Taylor, the renowned international expert on work and employment. It takes as its point of departure the results of a workshop held in October 2001 at the UK Department of Education and Skills. Led by Dr Diane Houston and Professor Clare Ungerson, the discussion focused on the distribution, status and performance of paid and unpaid work and the role of governments in shaping the character and delivery mechanisms of care work.

The Report mobilises new research evidence from these and other projects under the Programme to challenge the parameters, content and policy implications of the contemporary UK debate about work-life balance. Referencing past and present challenges to employment, Robert Taylor sets out a stimulating policy agenda for improvements in the quality of working life in the future.

**Professor Peter Nolan** Montague Burton Professor of Industrial Relations  
Director, ESRC Future of Work Programme

*Globalisation, new technologies and business restructuring are challenging long established patterns of paid work while imposing new burdens on families, individuals and households.*

# Commentary

**by Rita Donaghy** Chairman of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)



ATTEMPTING TO DEFINE WHAT IS MEANT BY work-life balance and identifying whether boundaries can be established represents an important contribution to the current debate. It also emphasises the importance of the research being carried out as part of the ESRC's 'Future of Work' Programme.

Patterns and times of working have always been subject to change but the pace of change is now more rapid than ever. The driving force for this change comes from both organisations and individuals.

Organisations are under constant pressure to produce goods and services, of the right quality and price, and when customers want them. This pressure can often mean that new ways of working have to be found to make the best use of staff and resources. For example the cost and complexity of capital equipment may mean that organisations cannot afford to leave it standing idle: this may necessitate the introduction of shift work to allow 7-day or even continuous working. Increasingly customers want goods and services outside traditional standard working hours and organisations must also cater for this alongside seasonal peaks and troughs and the consequent fluctuation in the demand for employees during the year. Employers may also require high-level specialist skills but only for a temporary period, for example to design and install a new computer network. At the same time some employers face staff retention challenges and skills shortages in certain areas. Many are now looking at "family friendly" packages in order to retain their best staff.

Employees may have their own reasons for preferring one pattern of working time to another. For example people with responsibility for the care of children, the sick or the elderly may not be able to work certain shifts,

weekends or during school holidays. In the UK, necessity has created a self-help form of work-life balance, particularly for women workers. They take part-time jobs and care for their children and elderly in their non-paid time. Other employees may have interests outside paid work and be unavailable to work at certain times or wish to take career breaks. Some people may want time-off or work part-time because of religious observances or continued education.

The commitment of employees can make the difference between those companies which compete in the market place and those which cannot. Employers who can best combine the requirements of their business for flexibility with the needs of employees and potential employees will be well placed to succeed.

There is a very important role for ACAS in helping organisations to develop the type of cooperative working relationships that serve the increasingly complex and competitive realities of successful business in the 21st Century. Facilitating constructive dialogue between employers, trade unions and employees on matters relating to work-life balance is one crucial area.

As the British labour force becomes more diverse, there will be an urgent need to ensure good employment relations and fair treatment for all, including those parents, individuals and families with crucial caring responsibilities. Drawing upon the latest research findings, and building on three decades of helping organisations develop effective practices ACAS is ideally placed to assist organisations and employees develop a mutually beneficial balance between the responsibilities of work and of life outside the workplace.

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# The Future of Work-Life Balance

by Robert Taylor



## The Wider Significance of the Work-Life “Balance” Debate

THE SO-CALLED “BALANCE” THAT IS PRESUMED to exist between the paid work we perform and the lives we lead outside our job has become the focus for an important public policy debate in Britain. The flow of research monographs, seminars and conferences over this issue seems to have grown endless in a remarkably brief period of time. From the Prime Minister downwards, national as well as local government, private companies both large and small are preoccupied with where the equilibrium of that “balance” should lie and how the supposed requirements of firms for better business performance and higher productivity can be reconciled with the demands and needs of their employees who are facing burdensome responsibilities beyond the workplace as parents and citizens.

Under new Government legislation, to come into force in April 2003, men and women with children under the age of six and parents with disabled children up to 18 will be able to request forms of flexible working from their employer, including being employed in a part-time capacity. Companies are not compelled by the law to grant such a request, although they could be taken to an employment tribunal to challenge that decision, which has to be on the grounds of business needs.

However, we need to make a cautionary note from the beginning. It must be highly questionable whether the arbitrary and self-imposed division between work and life assumed in the concept of a “balance” between them really makes much theoretical or even practical sense. The word in the context of the workplace looks like a bogus artefact that sounds modern and cool and yet obscures more than it clarifies about the nature of the genuine problem. In reality life and work over-lap and interact. Many people gain meaning to their lives through work whether they are being paid for doing so or not. The attempt to differentiate work from life in public policymaking threatens to establish a false dichotomy between the two that obfuscates our attitude to the changing world of paid employment. We need to demystify what we are talking about if we hope to establish a sensible and realistic public policy agenda that can reconcile the conflicting pressures of the workplace and the home.

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Up until now the public discussion on work-life “balance” has concentrated almost exclusively on its gender dimension, to how working mothers and fathers can rear their children while performing paid work effectively. To a lesser extent, we have also seen an increasing public concern on how to reconcile the “balance” between paid work and the time off required to deal with family emergencies or to care for elderly and dependant relatives. This particular difficulty looks set to grow as the ageing of our population can be expected to intensify the role of siblings at work to take on unpaid caring responsibilities.

The current focus on the relationship between paid work and parenting and caring is understandable. Over the past twenty years we have witnessed a rapid transformation

in the British labour market with the dramatic growth in the proportion of women of adult working age who are in paid employment. Today nearly 70 per cent of mothers in two parent households with at least one dependant child under the age of 18 choose to do paid work. The greatest rise in the employment rate over the past ten years has been among mothers with children aged four or under. Moreover, almost half of the country's lone mothers are now in some form of paid work, although only one in five of them are in full-time employment, a much lower proportion than in the United States or even France. The resulting feminisation of the British labour market since the 1970s has raised inevitable interest on how women and men together can raise families and also participate as much as possible in paid work.

In its December 2000 consultative document on the work-life "balance" issue, the Department of Trade and Industry emphasised the need to encourage more women to participate in the labour market in order to help improve the country's competitive performance. It pointed to a range of recent public policy changes that have sought to underpin a move into paid work by women and to encourage their active involvement in the labour market irrespective of whether or not they were bringing up children. The introduction of statutory maternity pay or the maternity allowance as well as the arrival of the working families' tax credit provide a minimum support that is already making some positive impact on working household living standards. In addition, we have seen the growth in unpaid maternity leave, the provision of limited paternity leave and unpaid time off to look after dependants.

But a focus on the difficulties of balancing paid work and parental responsibilities remains much too narrow an approach for our understanding of the importance of the work-life debate. We also need to encourage a much broader discussion and place this issue firmly within the context of the wider political economy. This will require us to look more rigorously at the changing character of paid employment under the pressures it is having to face from intensive business competition and technological innovation. We need to know whether or not such work is growing both more intensive and insecure, whether business pressures on employees are crowding out the genuine concerns of society and the state about social cohesion as well as the genuine exercise of personal self-fulfilment. It means not only addressing the crucial question of just how much our labour markets are being reshaped as a result of the clear increase in the proportion of women in active paid employment but also the impact of contemporary paid work on men of all ages, a subject that remains rather under-researched.

The paid work ethic lies at the core of the Government's social and economic policies. Employment opportunities for all has become one of its favourite mantras. A whole range of formerly disadvantaged groups - the long-term jobless, lone mothers, the disabled - are being exhorted to join active labour markets and take up paid work through a mixture of tax incentives and sanctions that involve benefit withdrawals or cuts. It is widely argued that it is only through active and paid participation in formalised labour markets that men and women as worker citizens can achieve

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both increased prosperity and personal salvation. The modern state is to become the enabler in this process in what represents a strategic shift in government strategy - away from a primary concern to provide universal and acceptable benefit levels to those outside active paid employment towards the creation of an essentially workfare system that emphasises individual responsibilities as well as rights for all men and women, irrespective of their personal circumstances. Integration into active participation in paid work has become a crucial test for the Government of what it constitutes as social citizenship.

However, this essentially moral-based strategy of individual emancipation through a code of rights and obligations in the labour market is paralleled by a conflicting public policy trend, which suggests limitations need to be placed on the length of time that we spend carrying out paid work in the interests of both employees and companies. Over-work in our society is seen as a primary cause of growing ill health, both physical and mental. It is argued that men and women are having to work at a more intensive pace than in the recent past. Stress has become an increasingly intractable problem in the modern workplace as much for managers as for their office staff and shopfloor workers. Moreover, Britain suffers from a particularly long working hours culture by comparison with most of the rest of western Europe.

The emphasis on salvation through paid work is said to be having an adverse effect on the quality of the rest of our lives because this country has lacked until recently the kind of legally enforceable individual and collective rights at work enjoyed by our mainland European neighbours. It is true that minimum regulations have protected women and children from excessive exploitation in the workplace since the early industrial revolution. Negotiated voluntary agreements between employers, trade unions and employees have also played an important part in ensuring workers are not compelled to work excessively long hours and enjoy limited holiday breaks and do secure at least some mutually acceptable control over the pace and content of their work. But by the standards of continental Europe this approach has been neither universal nor comprehensive. The long-recognised concept of social partnership between capital and labour in mainland European countries helped to stimulate the emergence of a range of legal rights and practices in the workplace that have sought to regulate the "balance" between paid work and life outside employment. This is why our neighbours established, a long time ago, commonly accepted rules and laws based on a clear set of legal rights that have sought to tilt the so-called "balance" between work and life towards the protection of the perceived interests of employees but without at the same time endangering business competitiveness and productivity. Indeed, in the Nordic countries in particular it is widely acknowledged that such an approach has actually proved beneficial for corporate performance.

In Britain recent moves to a more rights-based approach to workplace regulation - stemming in the main from acceptance of the European Union's social directives in

this area - have proved to be more uneven, uncertain, contested and incomplete. They have tended to emphasise the individual rather than the collective, motivated primarily by a concern for the creation of effective labour markets rather than the establishment of greater social cohesion between workplaces and the wider society. This is why the concept of work-life “balance” has emerged as a somewhat late arrival in our public policy debate on the future of employment.

The fundamental question we must answer is how far we can now go in reconciling our lives outside employment with paid work without either damaging corporate profitability and productivity performance or failing to address the concerns of employees who are under strain in more competitive environments.

The dilemma has been well expressed by John Monks, the Trades Union Congress general secretary. As he has explained: “One of the most essential ingredients in the organisation of work is time - when we work, for how long and how we are able to balance working time with our time outside of work. British men work the longest hours in the European Union, stress is the greatest cause of absence from work, many organisations have not introduced family-friendly working. Family-friendly concerns are not the only consideration. Finding the time for learning or for taking part in the life of the community, are equally powerful motivators when it comes to balance life at work with life outside.”

It is not only trade unions that are increasingly concerned in arguing the case for a better work-life “balance” as a means of combating the increase in pressures at work that are helping to destabilise what are already often fragile households and fragmented, shattered communities. The Confederation of British Industry acknowledges that “achieving an appropriate balance between work and other aspects of life has advantages for society as a whole. Employers also recognise that people facing conflict between their roles as parents and their responsibilities as employees may be less productive at work. The removal of unnecessary obstacles that prevent parents from achieving their full potential within the labour market will help prevent skills shortages which continue to be a widespread problem. Demographic changes will maintain the momentum in favour of flexibility.”

It is true that not all employer associations are so understanding. The Institute of Directors, for example, has taken a much more sceptical view of the whole work-life debate. “People, on the whole, are not working unacceptable hours against their will; there is much employee satisfaction with work and the stress “epidemic” is grossly exaggerated; Britain already has more flexible working practices and the push for many more can be sentimental and unrealistic,” Ruth Lea, the institute's research director has asserted.

But for the most part, both capital and labour in Britain acknowledge the saliency of

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the “balance” debate. Their differences are less over fundamental principles and more about the details of how employer-employee concerns can be resolved or at least mediated through either regulation or negotiation or a combination of both approaches.

This short briefing - the second in a series which will highlight some of the key research findings that are emerging from the Economic and Social Research Council's on-going Future of Work Programme - seeks to place the so-called work-life “balance” debate in a wide context. It will look, first of all, at the changing nature of paid work and assess what impact this is making on how employees who are also parents are able to manage to juggle their work and family responsibilities in these uncertain and difficult times. This will be followed by an analysis of some of the Programme's initial main findings in this often complex and opaque area for policymakers. The conclusion will contain a number of practical proposals on how public policy objectives in work-life “balance” might be developed - emanating from the evidence coming from some of the Programme's wide range of research projects.

The present Government is strongly committed to addressing the issue of work-life “balance”. However, it seems to be doing so from an often single-minded conviction that public policy should be shaped in order to increase and not reduce the incidence of paid employment. Ministers are pledged to increase the overall employment rate from 74 to 75 per cent of the adult population within the next five years. Their concern is to encourage the greater spread of paid work and the creation of more active labour markets. As Stephen Byers, when trade and industry secretary, argued in his preface to the Government's consultative document on the subject of work-life “balance”: “Jobs and prosperity go hand in hand. The more people who want to work and are able to do so, the stronger the economy. The more people who make use of scarce resources, the better for business. The more parents in work, the lower the level of poverty, including child poverty. As standards of living rise, the quality of life matters more.”

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The Government says it wants to make it easier for parents with dependant children who choose to work to do so. It believes we can create a society where the objective of being a good parent and a good employee are not in conflict. The Future of Work Programme research provides some clear evidence on how this might be done. However, it also suggests we need to take a much broader view of the whole work-life question. In doing so it may enrich and deepen our current debate about the nature of employment in a more competitive economy.

### **The Realities of the Contemporary Workplace**

A WIDE RANGE OF EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE NOW EXISTS that reveals there has been an unmistakable trend in Britain over the past ten years towards an intensification in the length and intensity of paid employment. Jobs in general are becoming more stressful

and time-consuming and consequently less satisfying. On-going research being carried out by Michael White at the Policy Studies Institute and Stephen Hill from the London School of Economics under the Future of Work Programme has already produced some important empirical findings that underline that this is happening on a much greater scale than many yet seem to realise. In a comparison between attitudes to paid employment in 1992, when the first employment survey was carried out, and 2000 they found a significant decline in the level of work satisfaction had taken place among both men and women over a wide range of job facets during the intervening period. This included the size of the workload they had to cope with, the number of hours worked, access to training opportunities and the degree of job security. As many as 27 per cent of employees surveyed in 2000 said they found they had less time available to carry out their family responsibilities than they would have liked. This compares with 21 per cent who thought so eight years earlier. The authors argue that there has been a "very substantial change over time" in employee perceptions "with a marked apparent deterioration in people's experience of work."

What they found to be the most striking trend was the much greater fall in worker satisfaction over the number of hours worked and the amount of work that was required to be done. By contrast, the decline in satisfaction on such job facets as the nature of the work, the variety it offered and the use it made of an individual's abilities was much less pronounced. The Hill/White research also suggests that the largest fall in job satisfaction recorded between 1992 and 2000 occurred among men at the top and bottom of the occupational hierarchy, among higher level professionals and managers as well as semi and unskilled manual workers. By contrast, the sharpest decline in job satisfaction among women in that period of time came among those employed in semi and unskilled manual work.

A number of changes in the workplace over the past decade appear to explain this clear sign of a marked rise in pressures on paid work. More employees are using computers or computerised equipment in their jobs, which is seen as an important factor in increasing work intensity. In 1986 a third of women and 46 per cent of men used such modern technology in their work; by 2000 the proportions had risen to 64 per cent and 65 per cent respectively. The growth during the 1990s in the use of performance-related pay systems, particularly based on group incentives, is also seen as a key factor in reducing work satisfaction. In addition, the increase in team-working over the same period of time is cited as a reason for growing job dissatisfaction. It is true that a larger proportion of men and women may have a greater control over when they start and finish work and there is less time-keeping of them by management than there used to be. Such signs of more flexibility in working hours may have lessened work-family pressures.

However, those limited improvements hardly compensate for the rising stress experienced in paid work. The survey suggests contemporary work practices are

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also adding to the pressures on both men and women. The proportion of employees experiencing serious work strain went up from 31 to 35 per cent between 1992 and 2000. As many as 40 per cent experienced what they described as “excessive” pressure at work.

The Hill/White analysis also suggests that workers are facing an increase in the pressures they experience outside the workplace that determine their outlook to their jobs. They suggest that both rising consumer debts and more house mortgage commitments are compelling people to work longer hours and reduce the amount of time they spend outside the workplace in order to meet their financial obligations. Their survey found 70 per cent of men and half the women questioned saying the main reason they worked was to “earn money for necessities.” While dissatisfaction has grown among employees over the number of hours they spend on their jobs, with the resulting pressure this inflicts on the balance of their work with family responsibilities, a mere eight per cent said they were prepared to take a pay cut in return for a reduction in the amount of their working time. The key change, however, appears to be that while two-earner couples with their higher earning power are able to reach a bargain over time which takes more account of family needs, this is no longer true in households containing only one wage-earner. As Hill and White explain: “A single earner does not have the same earning power as a dual earner household and is progressively pushed by financial pressure towards hours that have negative family consequences.”

Further research carried out on the Future of Work Programme by Jeff Hyman, from Glasgow Caledonian University along with academic colleagues in Scotland, reinforces those rather bleak conclusions. As they argue: “Whilst there is considerable rhetoric about the desirability of achieving work-life balance, there are no definitions or standards of work-life balance or family friendliness to draw upon. Even in terms of temporary flexibility there are considerable doubts as to whether the arrangements introduced into organisations over recent years are designed to suit employee needs rather than the productive needs of their employers.” They point to the increasing complexities of people’s lives outside paid work as our wider society goes through profound social changes. This is not only reflected in the dramatic growth in the proportion of lone parent households but in the increase in the population of those aged 65 and over.

In their survey of workers in eight companies drawn from call centres and software development firms in the central belt of Scotland they found compelling evidence of the way in which paid work now impinges increasingly on the quality of home life. A significant majority of women and managers said they believed their jobs prevented them spending enough time with their family and partner. On the other hand, they also thought they could not get ahead at work unless they placed a higher priority on their jobs than on their families. Moreover, many men think about their work when they are not actually working. Both software employees and those working in the call centres

experienced varying degrees of stress, leaving many of them feeling exhausted at the end of the day and less able to cope with their domestic responsibilities.

The most important finding from the Scottish study suggests that paid work - despite its intensities and long hours - does not remain an end in itself for most employees. Workers might take work home with them, work extra hours at the workplace, even think about work when not at work but apparently they still make a “clear distinction between their personal goals and the work-related goals of the organisation” which employs them. The case studies of software and call centre workers does not suggest they have a new more positive attitude to their jobs. Working is still seen as a means of securing enough pay to enjoy life outside the job, as it was forty years ago when the sociologist John Goldthorpe and others first wrote of what they described as “instrumental collectivism” among manual workers in Luton.

The Hill/White survey evidence also suggests this crucial point from the age of the “affluent worker” in the 1960s still remains highly relevant. One in three of their respondents said they worked extra hours in order to increase their earnings while only one in six added they believed their overtime work would improve their chances of promotion. It is also clear that occupational class differences are still important in assessing why employees are working longer hours. As many as 81 per cent of skilled manual workers and 70 per cent of the semi and unskilled manual workers said they worked extra hours in order to make more money, while only 14 per cent of the higher level professionals and managers said they did so for the same reason. It is worth noting that occupational class differences are also apparent in the job satisfaction survey figures. Only 28 per cent of skilled manual workers said they enjoyed job satisfaction compared with two thirds of higher level professionals and managers.

Hyman and his colleagues in their Scottish study found few signs in the new workplaces that employees are in a position to exercise any meaningful control over their working lives. “Employee control over individual work boundaries, a necessary element for securing genuine balance between work and non-work, was not really evident,” they conclude. “In these circumstances, to talk of work-life balance as being achieved or achievable through forms of temporal flexibility suggest an element of detachment from the realities of contemporary work, even in ostensibly knowledge economy sectors.”

In other words, the modern workplace does not make it any easier than in the past to ensure a reasonable “balance” can really be struck between the job and life outside paid work. Unless we recognise the inequalities of power and authority that continue to exist between the employer and their employees, we will not be able to pursue a work-life “balance” strategy that is both effective and credible.

But the research findings from the Future of Work Programme also suggest that we

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need to recognise job dissatisfactions are not always related directly to the work-life “balance” issue. Indeed, some intriguing evidence in the Hill/White survey points us in quite another direction. “There was little evidence that children were becoming a more salient factor in employees’ experience of work demands during the 1990s,” they suggest and go on to argue: “There is no indication that dissatisfaction with work loads was affected by marital and partnership status. However, this status was related to work-family pressure. In both 1992 and 2000 having a non-employed spouse or partner was associated with more work-family pressure while having an employed spouse or partner was associated with less work-family pressure. It may be that in two-earner families, it becomes more possible for the partners to shape work demands so as to achieve a better balance between work and family. Where only one partner works, the working partner is less able to control work demands because of dependence on that partner’s earnings.” However, there is little doubt that women with children worked longer hours in paid jobs during the 1990s than before and as a result they were “more exposed to potentially adverse work demands.” albeit indirectly.

These research findings confirm some of the findings in the work-life “balance” 2000 survey published in March 2001 by the Institute of Employment Research at Warwick University and IFF Research Ltd. This revealed that a majority of employees work an average extra nine hours a week in addition to their basic working week, with over ten per cent of those in full-time jobs working 60 hours or more a week. On the other hand, the survey found most employers and employees agreed with the general statement that: “everyone should be able to balance their work and home lives in the way they want.” Interestingly the majority of companies surveyed did not believe their pursuit of business goals were in conflict with the achievement of work-life “balance” for their employees.

But the early evidence from the Future of Work Programme suggests we ought to take a much more questioning attitude to some of the important assumptions that lie behind our current focus on work-life “balance.” Today’s workplaces are certainly more stressful and many jobs more intensive than they were only a decade ago. But the experience of workers is not always easily linked directly to their household circumstances and family responsibilities. Indeed, it must be arguable whether it makes public policy sense to narrow the debate down to concentrate simply how employees can manage at the same time both their work and family responsibilities. The debate over work-life “balance” needs to extend beyond questions of gender, on how working mothers and fathers can cope with dependant children. This important concern must be seen as only a part of a much more comprehensive public policy strategy that aims to address the work pressures and dissatisfactions experienced by both men and women in paid employment, irrespective of their household circumstances. Current worker dissatisfactions and the nature of modern work in a more competitive environment than in the recent past suggests an approach that seeks to address much wider questions than those posed by working mothers and fathers.

## The Emergence of Work-family Balance Policies

THE GAP BETWEEN ENLIGHTENED RHETORIC ABOUT THE need for a readjustment in the work-life “balance” and the reality in most workplaces remains disturbingly wide. Not enough employers across Britain provide sufficient or adequate parental or maternity leave arrangements for their employees. The “general awareness” of the newly introduced statutory provisions remains limited among companies, according to a survey carried out in 2001 for the Department of Trade and Industry by NFO World group. It found that larger firms and public sector organisations in general share a “higher awareness” than privately owned medium and small enterprises. But nearly a third of all employers surveyed said they were unaware of the parental leave provisions, while nearly a quarter expressed a similar lack of knowledge about maternity leave entitlements and as many as 60 per cent knew nothing of the new time-off arrangements now in place for employees who needed to care for dependants.

The figures were even more unsatisfactory when it came to assessing the extent of leave provisions offered to employees by companies. Only 18 per cent of private firms surveyed bothered to provide a written policy statement to their employees on their entitlement to a specific period of leave, with a further 35 per cent adopting a discretionary approach. As many as 78 per cent offered no time-off at all to their employees to deal with family emergencies. The lack of any financial support was cited by six out of ten respondents for not taking up any of their parental leave entitlement.

A recent survey of parents also carried out for the Department of Trade and Industry by MORI the polling organisation, reveals the existence of clear class differences embedded in the work-life “balance” problem. As many as 53 per cent of those categorised as either operatives or unskilled workers said they had no experience of maternity leave compared with 76 per cent of those coming from managerial and professional grades. Again, those employed in the public sector were more likely than those in private employment to enjoy such leave. Sixty one per cent said they did not take all of the unpaid leave on offer to them because they could not afford to do so. An investigation by the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux in March 2001 suggested “hundreds of thousands of workers - many of them working for small and low profitability firms - are still not enjoying their basic minimum rights at work.”

But it would be wrong to suggest employers are being obstructive or wilful in their attitudes to the introduction of “family friendly” policies. In fact, they face genuine difficulties that need to be recognised. Small firms in particular find it hard to comply with time-off work requirements. As many as 48 per cent of companies surveyed by the NFO World group said they experienced problems in arranging for work cover for those who were absent from the workplace. This contrasts with only 13 per cent of companies saying that such leave added to their business costs and 12 per cent who were concerned at the disruption it involved for team-working.

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*Findings reveal widespread resentment and frustration among mothers at existing maternity and paternity leave regulations.*

Such findings should be set alongside the broader conclusion contained in the 1998 workplace relations survey. They suggested that “in spite of the topicality of family friendly policies, such arrangements are at present, by no means widely (or equally) available.” It found only a quarter of employees were allowed to take time off from work on parental leave and a mere four per cent said help with child care was available either in nursery facilities or meeting child care costs.

The wide range of evidence emerging from the Future of Work Programme provides us with further knowledge that adds to these other research findings on the current inadequacy of work-life “balance” arrangements for mothers and fathers in our workplaces. Research carried out by Susan Himmelweit and Maria Sigala at the Open University into the work experience of 34 mothers with pre-school children in Milton Keynes draws attention to what they regard as the potentially contradictory objectives in furthering a work-life “balance” agenda. They point out that a commitment to improve parental choice, balancing the needs of children with those of the workplace or enabling people to contribute more fully to the economy are not all the same thing. More specifically, their findings reveal widespread resentment and frustration among mothers at existing maternity and paternity leave regulations. The fact that such leave is unpaid is clearly a handicap for those mothers who are living in low income households. The length of service conditions attached to leave entitlement is seen as an added difficulty. Some mothers would prefer the option of returning to work on a part-time rather than full-time basis but this was not always found to be possible. Much depends apparently on the personal attitude of line managers and supervisors rather than a generalised company commitment to family-friendly policies.

Irene Bruegel from South Bank University has carried out research on the educational and employment experiences and expectations of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in Oldham, Lancashire that provides us with some insights into the genuine inequalities of treatment between mothers and fathers in paid work. The labour market disadvantages suffered by the experience of motherhood in terms of access to full-time rather than part-time paid employment as well as low pay and low status at work has spilled over into women without young children. But Bruegel has also found prime-age male workers are becoming more vulnerable as a result of deindustrialisation in a way that is not evident in other European countries because we have more gender-segregated barriers to employment.

Research by Diane Houston and Gillian Marks at the University of Kent into the employment choices for mothers of pre-school children throws fresh light on the decisions that such women make about work and childcare after the birth of their first child. The preliminary findings reveal important changes of attitude over time from before birth and by the end of the first year of the baby. What emerges is that women who have chosen to stay at home and look after their child for the first twelve months believe this has been a good thing for the child but not for them. However, those who are in full-time or part-time paid jobs are less certain they have made the best decision

for their child. As they argue; “Returning to work is not an easy option resulting in higher levels of stress and uncertainty about the impact working is having on their children.”

So far, most of the research findings are concerned with the dilemmas facing women with small children who may or may not want to remain active in the labour market. One observation does need making at this stage, even though it may seem an obvious one. The financial and parental circumstances of each woman are crucial. With one in every five households in Britain with no wage earners at all in them, we can gain a clearer understanding of this problem. For non-skilled and semi-skilled workers earning relatively low wages the costs involved at present in reconciling paid work and childcare can often be prohibitive. Too many of the lobby groups on this issue, however, tend to concentrate on the concerns of professional women who have children and how they face, as a result, discrimination at work in their efforts to break through the glass ceilings that continue to obstruct many of them in their road to senior managerial posts. But the evidence emerging from the Future of Work Programme suggests we need to refocus this discussion to cover the millions of working mothers and fathers who lack the financial means at present to lessen the difficulties of bringing up children and working at the same time.

### **Towards a Wider Public Policy Debate**

THE DIVERSE RANGE OF INTERIM RESEARCH FINDINGS from the Future of Work Programme on work-life “balance” point to a number of possible ways forward which the policymakers ought to consider. But they also suggest we need to take a more comprehensive view of what is required. Are we approaching the issue at present in a sensible way? It is arguable whether the word - balance - conveys the significance of what the problem really is. It is only during the past few years we have - perhaps unthinkingly - begun to use the balance concept to discuss what has after all been an ageless debate of how and where the boundaries between paid work and the rest of our lives ought to be drawn. In the experience of most people no clear-cut distinction can be established between the world of work and the world of family, friends and social networks and community. In practice, over the length of our lives it is impossible to establish neatly-constructed demarcation lines. Moreover, the word - balance - implies the existence of a settled equilibrium that can be achievable between paid employment and a life outside the job. This is highly questionable.

It is also debatable just how much free choice really exists on how individual employees can make any rational choice between the length of time they spend in paid work and the amount they can set aside for other activities. The paid work ethic remains strong in our society. It is buttressed by many of the Government’s economic and social policies for good reason. Having a paid job is not only vital for the achievement of material prosperity but it is also a necessary precondition for the encouragement of a greater sense of individual self-esteem and worth in the eyes of others.

*“We need to refocus this discussion to cover the millions of working mothers and fathers who lack the financial means.”*

However, research evidence coming from parts of the Future of Work Programme also indicates we need to place the work-life issue in the wider context of our political economy and this means explicitly acknowledging that social inequalities of treatment continue to exist in many workplaces. Class has become almost a taboo word in the social sciences. Nor is it used very often nowadays among public policymakers. And yet differences in the distribution of income, wealth as well as power and authority within workplaces have not gone away. Indeed, in some important respects they grew more acute during the 1990s. Any sensible approach to work-life policies cannot ignore the intractable phenomenon of occupational class in the amount of access and take-up of work-life balance entitlements. Women in managerial and professional jobs with higher incomes and benefits are in a much better position to achieve a balance than their much lower-paid and insecure counter-parts employed, for example, in the retail trade and textiles.

*A written check-list of legal entitlements should be provided to workers when they receive their formal contract of employment.*

This may not lead immediately to the introduction of an over-rigid imposition of universal legal rights on unwilling firms to ensure equality of treatment. The enforcement of statutory regulation needs to be a last resort in this area although it cannot be ignored this can often be an effective means of introducing some agreed minimum standards into workplaces. However, it is still best done through voluntary agreement. But if we accept - and the government appears to do - that some forms of legal entitlement are needed for this country to comply with European Union social directives freely entered into, we must ensure all companies and employees are well aware of the parental and maternity leave and other time-off work rights to which they are entitled. It would make sense therefore that a written check-list of legal entitlements should be provided to workers when they receive their formal contract of employment. Of course, the wide range and complexity of those rights cannot be conveyed through a series of bullet-points on a single sheet of paper. But at least everybody would be much more aware in the broadest terms on what their rights are than they are at present.

There is also a strong case to be made to ensure that mothers and fathers are able to receive equal access to paid and not just unpaid leave entitlements. At present, it is clear that those on the lowest incomes or in manual private sector jobs find themselves in a disadvantageous position when it comes to the exercise of such rights. It would also be sensible to enable mothers when they return to work from maternity leave to enjoy exercising the choice of doing - at least for a specified period - part-time work. Greater flexibility through job sharing and other such flexible schemes for managing working time also ought to be encouraged. The public sector - where work-life measures are more apparent - ought to take the lead in this matter. The National Joint Council for Local Government Services has recently published an informative booklet on what more enlightened councils are doing in this area in cooperation with public sector trade unions. Family friendly policies could also be encouraged by the government in the development of partnerships at work between private companies and their employees. Generous and sensible policies that reconcile

work with responsibilities outside the paid job might become one of the benchmarks of a company's commitment to wider social obligations and part of the definition of what constitutes the good firm.

What we also need to see is the development of a more comprehensive nation-wide child care system for pre-school children, available to all who need it at a price all parents can afford to pay. It is not acceptable to leave child care to the often unfair and arbitrary vagaries of the market or to the voluntary efforts of a family's elderly grandparents or relatives. But the present provision of support remains uneven, limited and beyond what many households can afford. Nannies are available to the middle-classes at a cost but not to most other people. Child-minding availability in our society is still at an alarmingly primitive stage of development by comparison with the experience of the Nordic countries. There needs to be a clear and strong assertion of the public interest in the provision of reliable and safe childcare with generous incentives as well as training of carers for such a task.

But the evidence coming from the Future of Work Programme and elsewhere also suggests we must approach the work-life debate in a more holistic way. Public policy in this area must not simply confine itself to the needs of mothers and fathers. It needs to grapple with the problem of the intensification of paid work as it affects everybody in employment. Only in this way can we avoid the emergence of divisions and resentments between employees, especially those working in small firms who are being asked or compelled to fill-in or take on more responsibilities to cover for colleagues away from work to meet family obligations.

In fact, we need to map out a radical approach that begins to recognise the importance of wider and fundamental questions about the future of paid work. This will require much more research into the nature of modern paid employment, to the character of local labour markets and the recruitment strategies of employers. This would mean the creation of a more systematic public policy programme covering the introduction of longer paid holidays, greater flexibilities in working hours, the use of sabbaticals and more flexible time-off arrangements to encourage more education and training. By adopting a much more dynamic and open strategy we can start to transcend the contemporary pre-occupation with questions about work-life "balance" for working parents and respond more sensibly to the myriad of experiences that are being uncovered by the Future of Work Programme. In doing so we may also begin to appreciate that the current public policy debate on "balance" is not really a new one but is concerning itself with fundamental questions about the relationships between paid work and life outside employment commitments that have troubled employers, employees and the state in Britain for many generations.

**Robert Taylor** is Media Fellow on the ESRC's Future of Work Programme and former employment editor of the *Financial Times*. He is also a visiting fellow at the Industrial Relations Research Unit at Warwick University Business School and the London School of Economics and Political Science.

*We need to map out a radical approach that begins to recognise the importance of wider and fundamental questions about the future of paid work.*

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*The Determinants of Caring Behaviour: An Evolutionary Approach*

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*Employment Choices for Mothers of Pre-School Children: A Psychological Perspective*

*Paid and Unpaid Work in Early Parenthood: Psychological Causes and Consequences*

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***Employment and Working Life beyond the Year 2000:  
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***Work Orientations and the Changing Division  
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***Gender Restructuring and the Future of Work:  
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***An Inter-Generational Family Study of Employment  
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***Changing Employment Relationships, Employment  
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***Shifting Boundaries of Paid and Unpaid Work: Cross  
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## Future of Work

The Economic and Social Research Council's Future of Work Programme is an exciting and innovative initiative bringing together leading researchers in the United Kingdom in an investigation of the future prospects for paid employment and work opportunities in the next millennium. The most systematic and rigorous enquiry of its kind, the ESRC programme will provide the evidence-based research to assist policymakers, practitioners and researchers to interpret the changing world of work in an era of rapid social, technological and economic change.



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