A labour of love – or labour versus love?

Our relationships *at* work; relationships *and* work

relate
the relationship people

RELATIONSHIPS SCOTLAND
counselling, mediation & family support across

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Acknowledgements

This report summarises information collected from online polling undertaken by YouGov of a UK sample of over 5,000 people aged 16 and over, weighted to account for representativeness. Any inaccuracies or errors in the further analyses of these data are the sole responsibility of Relate.

We would like to thank Relate's Policy and Research Advisory Group for their advice with this project.

And thanks also to all in the Relate team who have contributed to *The Way We Are Now* (Huw Thomas, Sarah Creighton, Sarah Dyer-Hall, Kim Creus, Emma Sullivan, Tim Butcher, and Clare Lemon) and to Ross McCulloch of Relationships Scotland.

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Forewords

Prof Sir Cary Cooper CBE, President, Relate

Relationships and work are closely intertwined. An expansive and increasing body of research evidence confirms both that our relationships at work and the extent to which we're able to balance work with relationships at home are significant factors in our satisfaction with work, our performance at work, and our overall wellbeing.

This report shows our relationships with colleagues and bosses are mostly in good health. However, it also throws a light onto some disquieting findings: a third of employees believe their employer thinks the ideal employee is available 24 hours a day; a third believe their employer thinks the most productive employees put work ahead of family life.

The good news is that, with the right support, we can all build the strong, good quality relationships which are so vital to our wellbeing. And there's much that employers can do to support family-friendly working – by enabling employees to choose to work flexibly, for instance (the importance of the need for people to control and have autonomy in their work comes across strongly here) – and to create relationally-healthy workplaces. The case for investing in good workplace relationships and good work-family balance is clear, and I hope this important report will help us on our way.

Stuart Valentine, Chief Executive, Relationships Scotland

Relationships are at the heart of what it means to be human, and it is within our relationships that we most fully live our lives. This report gives a unique insight into the relationships that exist within the work place across the UK. For many people, almost half of our waking life is spent at work, or travelling to and from work, and there is an inescapable link between our overall wellbeing and happiness and the quality of our working life.

By examining issues such as our working relationships with bosses and colleagues, work-life balance and the impact of working life on our families, this report reminds us again of the need to value and prioritise the relationships that we have with those around us. By doing so, we can become happier, more satisfied and indeed more productive people. This in turn can only help nourish the organisations and communities within which we spend so much of our lives.

Sarah Jackson OBE, Chief Executive, Working Families

Today's workplace is a highly pressurised place, with more demanding workloads, uncertain hours and higher levels of stress and burnout. This report highlights the real impact this can have on personal relationships. Working Families' latest polling for National Work Life Week 2016 similarly underlined the link between work and family life: three quarters of working parents told us their working patterns/hours affects the quality and time they have in talking and listening properly to their children, partner, friends and wider family. Another three quarters say that work affects the time they spend with their

partner. And a huge number - two fifths – of working parents say their work has increased stress in their current or past relationship with their partner. For a fifth of working parents, work has contributed to the end of a relationship.

As this report highlights, a reasonable balance between work and family/home life is essential to our wellbeing. Flexible working arrangements are associated with lower work-family conflict, aiding work engagement and productivity, and home-life can be a real driver of motivation and performance at work. So it's in employers' interests to support work-life balance and flexibility. Yet access to control and autonomy at work is unequal: our polling found that higher-earning parents are more likely to work flexibly than those on lower incomes. As this report recommends, flexible working arrangements must be available for all employees, and we need a culture shift. Finally, the report highlights the efficacy of parental leave with quotas for each parents, paid at salary replacement rates, to help many more families to share work and care between them. Working Families agrees - and is calling on government to introduce a more radical policy on parental leave, better allowing men and women to share care more equally from the start.

I would recommend this report to anyone seeking to understand the inter-connectivity between relationships at work and at home.

Summary

Meaningful and satisfying work is important to our wellbeing. But the extent to which work contributes to – rather than hindering – our wellbeing depends in large part on relationships, and there's now plenty of evidence which demonstrates that work and relationships affect each other. On one hand, workplace relationships (with colleagues and line managers) are a significant factor in our satisfaction with our work. On the other, our relationships at home are both affected by and in turn impact upon our work, and achieving an effective balance between work and family life is essential to our wellbeing, as well, in fact, as being important to our performance at work and therefore ultimately to productivity.

When we're overworked and struggling to balance work and family, we're more likely to become ill, perform less well, and leave our jobs; when we're satisfied with work and work-life balance, we're more likely to perform better and be more productive. When we're overworked, our relationships also tend to suffer, as the build-up of stress outside the relationship takes its toll on the ways in which we relate to one another. But, in their turn, personal relationships can also impact upon our work, when relationship dissatisfaction and distress affect our overall health and wellbeing and thereby reduce work engagement.

This report – the first in a series of reports presenting findings from our landmark *The Way We Are Now* survey of over 5,000 people across the UK, which provides a unique window into the state of the nation's relationships – examines the quality of our relationships at work and the extent to which we're able to balance work and relationships effectively.

Although some research suggests job satisfaction is on a long-term downward trend in most advanced economies, there's good news that our workplace relationships are mostly in good health:

- Three-quarters (75%) of employees reported good quality relationships with colleagues.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) said their relationship with their boss was good.
- However, digging a little deeper, we observed some quite unequal experiences here in terms of gender, age, sexuality, social grade, disability and whether or not employees worked flexibly. And overall, 12% said their boss behaves in an intimidating/bullying way towards them.

In terms of balancing work and family, the picture is bleaker:

- A third (33%) of employees agreed that their employer thinks the ideal employee is available 24 hours a day
- 27% agreed that they work longer hours than they would choose and this is damaging their wellbeing
- A third (33%) agreed that their employer thinks work should be the priority in a person's life
- Over a fifth (21%) agreed that attending to care responsibilities is frowned upon at work
- A quarter (25%) agreed that stress experienced at home adversely affects them at

work.

However, the good news is that this conflict between work and relationships is not simply a fact of (working) life; there's much that can be done to improve work-family balance as well as workplace relationships – with clear benefits not only for employees and their families but also for employers. A recurring theme across many of the findings in this report is the importance of control or autonomy at work: employees who reported flexible working arrangements were doing better than those who didn't against many of the indicators of workplace relationships and work-family balance. Besides offering flexible work to employees, employers may also offer employees relationship support services through Employee Assistance Programmes, for example – and we found 43% of employees would support this.

Given the clear ways in which our relationships and our work are linked, there is a powerful case for employees, employers and government to take action to invest in and support good quality relationships, with important benefits for employees and their families as well as employers and productivity.

Introduction

Work is important to our wellbeing – and not just because of the money it brings. A good job provides more than merely the financial means to a good life in the form of wages. It can provide a sense of purpose and of being valued, a place in society, social connections, and opportunities for personal development. Satisfaction with work also impacts on our mental and physical health and overall satisfaction with life.[1]

But not just any job will do, of course. In fact, research suggests job satisfaction is on a long-term downward trend in most advanced countries,[2] and recent evidence shows job satisfaction in the UK has dropped to its lowest level for more than two years while almost a quarter of employees are looking for another job.[3]

However, job satisfaction and the links between work and wellbeing cannot be wholly understood looking at the individual's work in isolation: our work and relationships are closely linked. The quality of our relationships is important in determining the quality of work and the extent to which work contributes to – rather than hindering – our wellbeing, in two senses. On one hand, our relationships within the workplace – with bosses and colleagues – affect our job satisfaction and the extent to which work supports our wellbeing. And on the other, our relationships outside the workplace (with partners and families, for example) are both affected by and in turn impact on our working lives, and a reasonable balance between work and family/home life is essential to our wellbeing. In this report we therefore take a look at how we are currently faring in the UK in terms of our work and relationships – both relationships at work, and balancing work and family relationships.

Workplace relationships

Why workplace relationships matter

Job satisfaction

Relationships at work matter to job satisfaction: studies show that when we are satisfied with our relationships at work, we're much more likely to also be satisfied with our jobs.[4] Some research even finds that the quality of our best friendship in the workplace is predictive of our overall job satisfaction.[5] Other research by the Work Foundation has also identified strong workplace relationships as a key feature of 'good work' – that which balances the interests of individuals, employers and society in order to deliver performance, engagement and fairness, and therefore promotes employees' wellbeing.[6]

Productivity

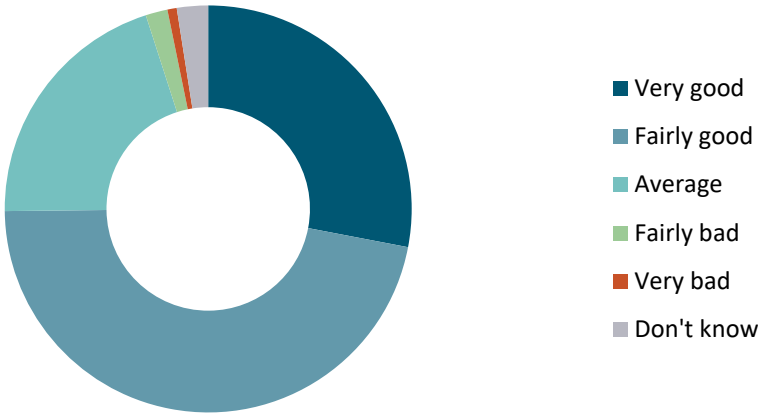
How we relate to one another in the workplace is clearly important to how satisfied we are with our jobs, but it matters for employers too. Job satisfaction is strongly linked with staff retention, and greater cohesiveness and friendships between employees have been found to reduce staff turnover.[7] Furthermore, enhanced social relationships within the workplace ultimately boost employees' task performance[8] and are therefore linked to higher organisational performance.[9] And our individual wellbeing (which is so closely entwined with our relationships) also affects our job performance: higher employee wellbeing is associated with boosted productivity and creativity, reduced sickness

absence, and increased customer satisfaction.[10]

Our relationships with work colleagues

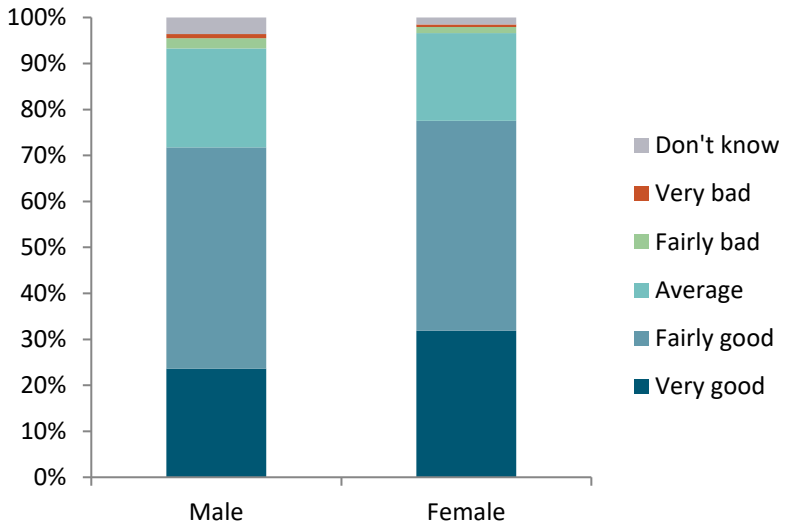
So how are we doing as a nation in terms of the quality of our workplace relationships? Overall, the good news is that **75% of employees reported good relationships with colleagues** (28% reported these to be very good) – and this is an increase on our 2015 survey, in which we found 71% of employed people had good relationships with work colleagues,[11] and on the 2014 survey where this was 70%.[12] Only a tiny minority (less than three per cent) reported bad relationships with their work colleagues – as Figure 1 below illustrates.

Figure 1: Quality of relationships with colleagues



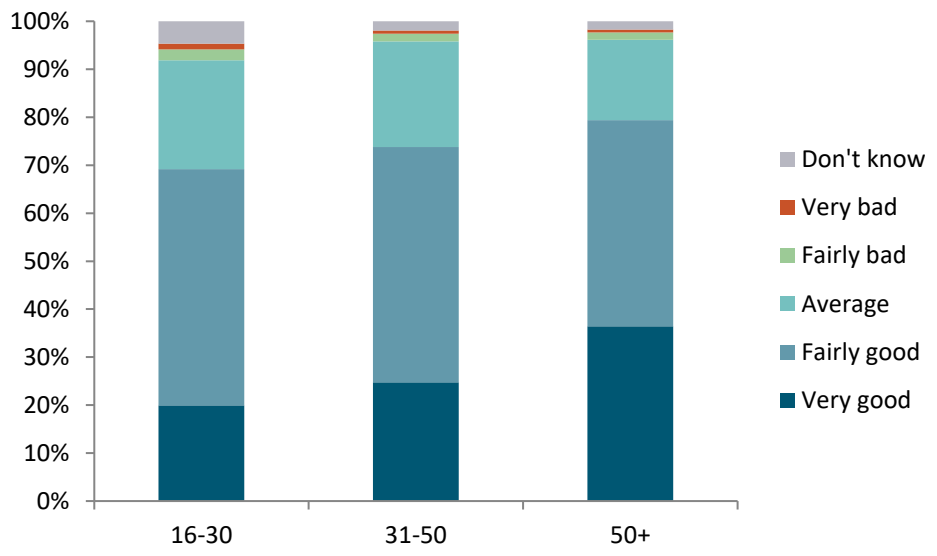
However, beneath this overall positive picture, our analysis of the data revealed some differences between different groups of people in terms of their relationships with colleagues. Women are doing better than men here: employed women were more likely than men to report good relationships with colleagues: as Figure 2 below shows, 78% of women said they had good relationships with colleagues compared to 72% of men.

Figure 2: Gender differences in colleague relationship quality



It appears that the older we are, the better our relationships with colleagues: 69% of employees aged 16-30 reported good relationships with colleagues compared to 74% of those aged 31-50 and 80% of those over 50 (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Colleague relationship quality by age of employee



There were also observable differences relating to respondents' socio-economic class (as classified by the NRS social grades).[13] Employees classified in higher social grades were more likely to report good relationships with their work colleagues: 77% of people in higher managerial, administrative or professional occupations (grade A), intermediate managerial, administrative or professional occupations (B) and either junior managerial, administrative or professional or clerical/supervisory occupations (C1) (characterised by demographers as 'ABC1') reported good relationships with colleagues, compared to 70% of skilled manual workers (C2), semi- and unskilled manual workers (D) and casual and lowest-grade workers, those on state pensions, or unemployed with state benefits only (E) (known as 'C2DEs').

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our analysis also revealed that employees who had flexible working arrangements (such as job share, working from home, working part-time, compressed hours, and flexi-time) were more likely to report good relationships with colleagues too: 80% of those who had such arrangements said their relationships with colleagues were good, compared to 70% of those without. Those who worked part-time, for instance, were more likely to report good relationships with colleagues (89% reported good relationships compared to 74% who did not work part-time). Perhaps more surprising was the finding that working from home seemed to be particularly associated with better relationships: 82% of employees who worked from home reported good relationships with colleagues compared to 74% of those who did not work from home.

We observed a concerning difference in our survey with regards to employees' sexuality too: 76% of employees who identified as heterosexual reported good relationships with their colleagues, compared to 64% of those who identified with other sexualities.[*]

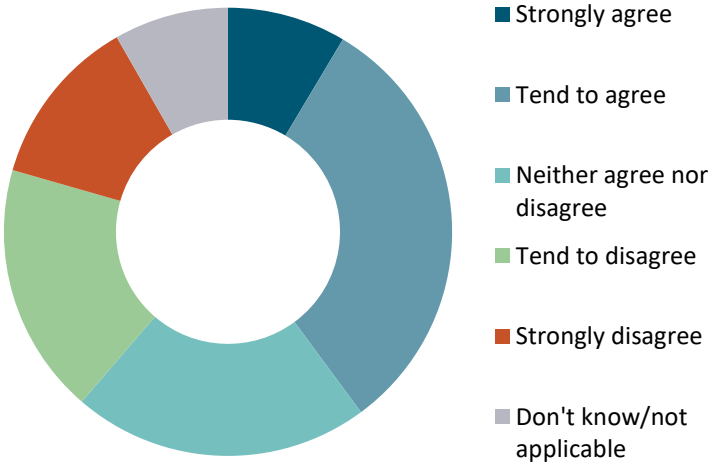
[*] However it should be noted that due to the smaller sample size of employees who identified as gay/lesbian/bisexual/other (n = 354), this difference was statistically significant at a slightly lower confidence level (94%)

Research by Stonewall has similarly found that a quarter (26%) of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the UK are not 'out' to anyone at work, for fear it will affect their career prospects, one in five (19%) have experienced verbal bullying from colleagues, customers or service users because of their sexual orientation in the last five years, and one in eight (13%) would not feel confident reporting homophobic bullying in their workplace.[14]

Our analysis also showed a number of factors which do *not* appear to be associated with employees' quality of relationships with colleagues. Whether or not employees were parents of children under 19 or not, for example, was not associated with the quality of relationships with colleagues. Similarly, there was good news that people limited by a long-term health problem or disability did not show different levels of quality of relationships with colleagues.

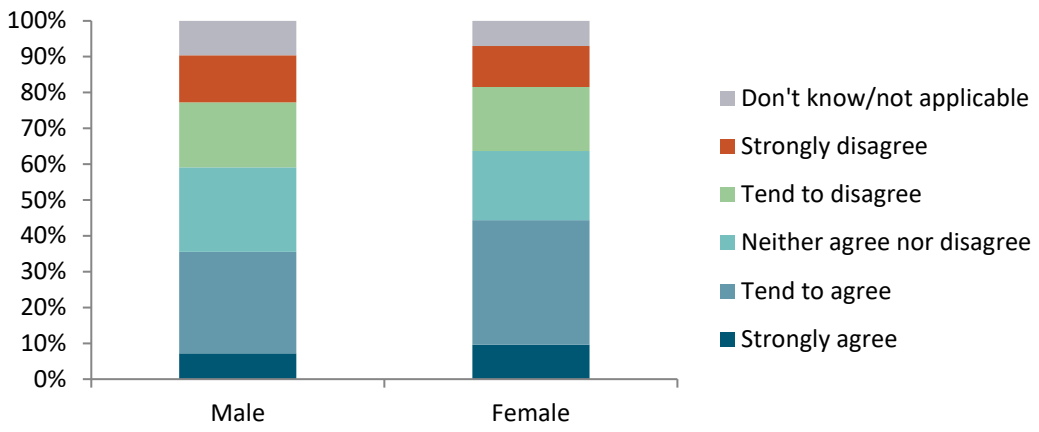
While our relationships with colleagues seem to be mostly in good shape, this contrasts with our findings regarding the extent to which people feel able to talk at work about personal problems going on at home. Unhappily, **nearly a third (30%) of employees said they did not feel able to discuss personal problems going on at home during work**, while only 40% said they felt able to do this (see Figure 4 below). This perhaps calls into question the depth of our workplace relationships: whilst we may get on well with colleagues, how much are we really able to connect on a deeper level?

Figure 4: 'I am able to discuss personal problems I have going at home during work'



Consistent with what we know from wider research about men's unwillingness to talk about their problems,[15] women were considerably more likely than men to feel able to discuss personal problems going on at home during work: 44% of employed women said they agreed they felt able to do this compared to 36% of employed men (see Figure 5 below). This reinforces other research findings: a 2009 survey by mental health charity Mind, for instance, found only 31% of men (compared to 47% of women) would talk to a family member about their feelings if they were unhappy, and only 29% of men (compared to 53% of women) would talk to friends.[16] Similarly, the Open University *Enduring Love* research project found that the most commonly-chosen response option among men asked about what they would do when facing relationship difficulties was not to consult anyone, with 23% of men selecting this.[17]

Figure 5: Gender differences in ability to discuss personal problems during work

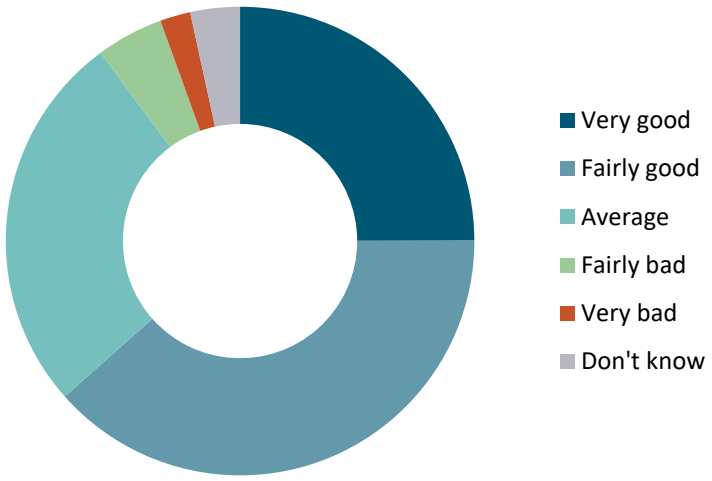


We also looked for any patterns in terms of the quality of our workplace relationships and our wellbeing. Analysis of the data showed the quality of relationships with colleagues to be positive correlated with feeling good about oneself (r = 0.20) and feeling close to other people (r = 0.23), and negatively correlated with feeling lonely (r = 0.18) and feeling down/depressed/hopeless (r = 0.20). Thus, people with better relationships were more likely to feel good about themselves and feel close to others, and less likely than those with poor relationships to feel down or lonely. These correlations were statistically significant.

Our relationships with our bosses

Our relationship with work colleagues appear to be in fairly good health. What about our relationships with bosses? Again, there's good news that **63% of employed people reported they have a good relationship with their boss** (for one quarter this was 'very good') (Figure 6). This compares to 59% when we asked this in 2014[18] and 57% in 2015.[19] Only a small minority (seven per cent) reported a bad relationship with their boss (this has not changed since 2014).

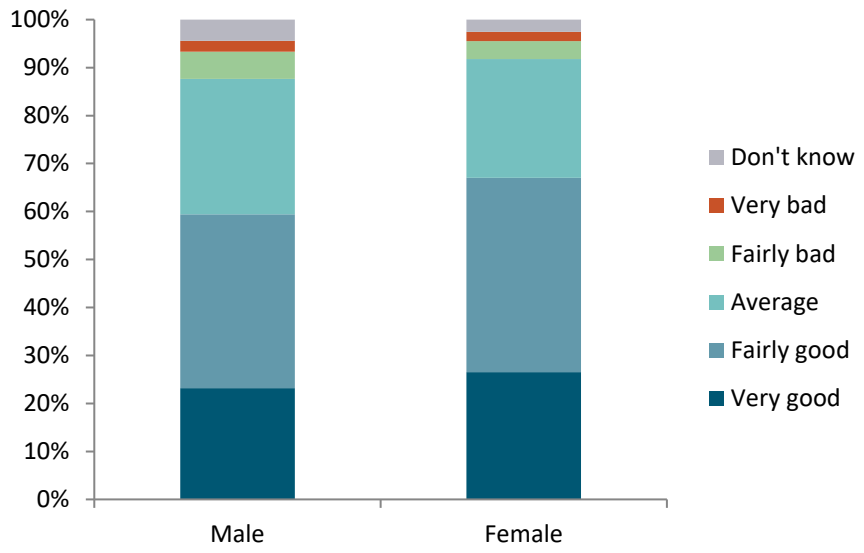
Figure 6: Quality of relationships with bosses



As with our relationships with colleagues, however, there were notable differences

beneath this overall positive finding. Just as women reported better relationships with colleagues, so too employed women were more likely to report good relationships with their boss – 67% of women said they have a good relationship compared to 59% of men (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Gender differences in boss relationships



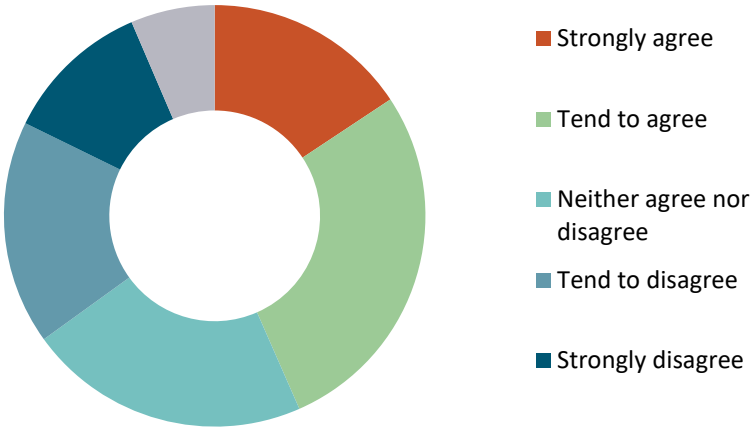
And just as with colleague relationships, again, people in higher demographic social grades were more likely than those in lower grades to report a good relationship with their boss: 67% of people in demographic social grades ABC1 reported a good relationship with their boss compared to only 56% of those in grades C2DE. We found a similar pattern in 2015 – where 53% of C2DEs reported a good relationship with their boss compared to 60% of ABC1s.[20] The varying degrees of *control* or *autonomy* over one's work may be a factor here: when we feel we have little autonomy in how we work and what we are expected to do, we may feel more like a cog in a machine than autonomous individuals, and that our work becomes something alien to us – in which case our manager may also feel more like an external force standing over and above us than another person in a relationship with us. Research has thus indicated that our ability to influence what happens in our work environment (our job control) is closely linked to job satisfaction. A meta-analysis of a number of studies, for example, found high levels of perceived job control were associated with 'high levels of job satisfaction, commitment, involvement, performance and motivation', as well as with 'low levels of physical symptoms, emotional distress, role stress, absenteeism, intent to turnover, and turnover'.[21] Research has also shown that job control is important for health, and people in jobs characterised by low control had higher rates of sickness absence, of mental illness, of heart disease and pain in the lower back.[22]

Unsurprisingly, just as with relationships with colleagues, employees with flexible work arrangements in our survey (including job share, working from home, working part-time, compressed hours, and flexi-time) were more likely to report good relationships with their boss: 70% of people with flexible working arrangements compared to 58% of those without. This would also support the possible role of autonomy and control over how we work in determining our satisfaction with work. People who had flexi-time working arrangements in particular were more likely to report good relationships with their boss: 71% of those with such arrangements reported good relationships (28% very good),

compared to 62% of those without. Similarly, 71% of employees who worked compressed hours reported good relationships with their boss compared to 64% of those without.[†]

While nearly two-third of people reported good relationships with their boss, our survey also revealed some worrying signs. **Overall, 30% of employees agreed that they feel pressured to work by their manager even if they are ill**, and less than half (49%) disagreed with this. Women were slightly more likely to feel this pressure from a manager to work even when ill than men: 33% of employed women agreed compared to 27% of men (Figure 8).

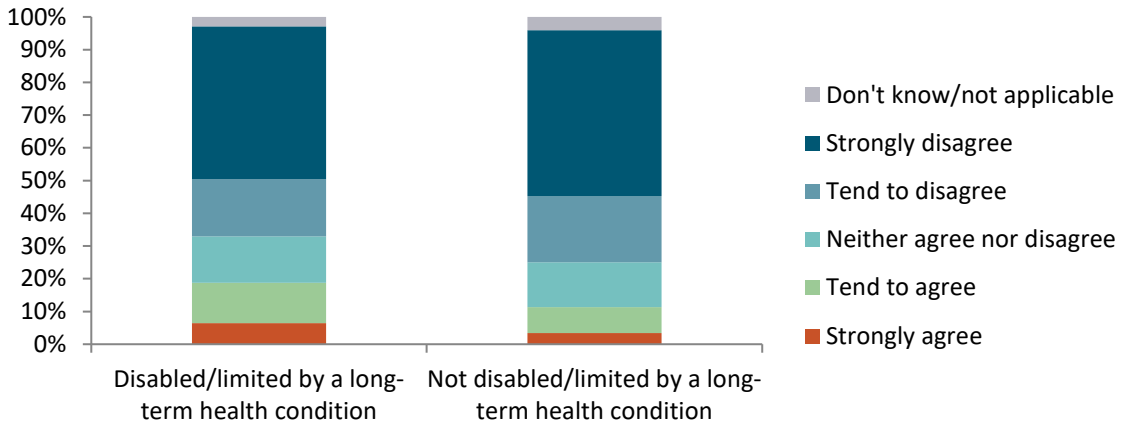
Figure 8: 'I feel pressured to work by my manager even if I am ill'



Our survey also revealed some concerning differences in the experiences of people who are disabled or living with a long-term health condition. Employees who were disabled or limited by a long-term health problem (including those who said they were 'limited a lot' and 'limited a little') were slightly less likely to report good relationships with their boss: 65% of those without reported good relationships compared to 61% of those who reported such a condition. People who were disabled or limited by a long-term health problem were also more likely to feel pressured to work by their manager: 36% agreed that they feel pressured by their manager to work even if they are ill, compared to 29% of people who were not disabled/limited by a long-term condition. Similarly, employees who were disabled/limited by a long-term condition themselves were considerably more likely to agree their boss behaves in an intimidating and/or bullying way towards them, with these people almost twice as likely to agree that their boss behaves in an intimidating or bullying way towards them: 19% compared to 10%. This was a bigger difference than what we found in 2015, when 15% of people who were disabled/limited by a long-term condition said their boss was intimidating or bullying, compared to 11% of those not disabled/limited by a long-term condition (see Figure 9 below).[23]

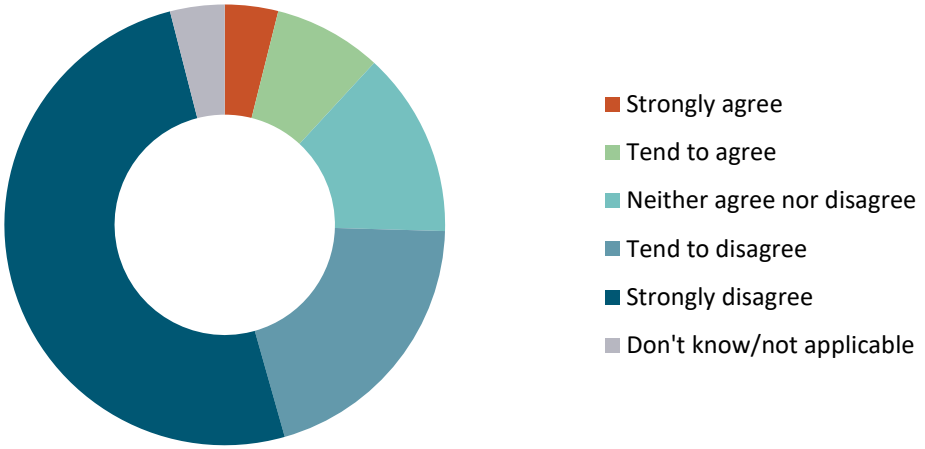
[†] However it should be noted that due to the smaller sample size of employees who reported compressed hours (n = 301), this difference was only statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

Figure 9: 'My boss behaves in an intimidating and/or bullying way towards me' – by long-term condition/disability



Thankfully, overall, **seven-in-ten (71%) employees disagreed that their boss behaves in an intimidating and/or bullying way towards them**. However, while a minority, it is concerning that **12% of employees did agree that their boss behaves in an intimidating and/or bullying way towards them**. Further, we observed a disconcerting pattern that employees with caring responsibilities other than for their own children were more likely to feel that their boss behaved in an intimidating and/or bullying way towards them: 16% of employees with caring responsibility agreed that their boss behaves in an intimidating and/or bullying way towards them compared to 11% of employees without care responsibilities.

Figure 10: 'My boss behaves in an intimidating and/or bullying way towards me'



Our relationships with our bosses are also associated with how we feel. Our analysis of the data showed the quality of relationships with bosses to be positively correlated with feeling good about oneself ($r = 0.16$), and negatively correlated with feeling lonely ($r = 0.17$) and feeling down/depressed/hopeless ($r = 0.21$). Thus, people with better relationships were more likely to feel good about themselves and less likely than those with poor relationships to feel down or lonely. These correlations were small but statistically significant.

Balancing work life and family life

Besides the link between workplace relationships and job satisfaction – and its importance not only for employees' wellbeing but employers' balance sheets – the other key way in which our relationships and our work are linked is through the often difficult act of holding them in balance. A reasonable balance between work and home life is generally recognised as an essential feature of a workplace that provides for good wellbeing.[24] When we're overworked we're often under-the-weather. A recent European study found people working more than 40 hours per week had lower wellbeing.[25] Sir Michael Marmot's review of health inequalities therefore recognised the importance of flexible working practices for parents of young children and the wider importance of the flexibility to balance work and family life for tackling health inequalities.[26]

But getting the balance between work and family life right is not only about individual wellbeing and not being over-worked; striking the right balance is important for both sides. When our work and family life are in conflict, both can suffer.

The impact of work on family relationships

Perhaps the most obvious way in which work and family may conflict is through the pressure from work encroaching into home life. While we may try to keep our work and home lives separated, it can be a difficult juggling act, and different spheres of our lives are never entirely sealed off from each other. When pressure builds in our working lives, this can spill over to create pressure in our relationships. Working long hours can result in increased relationship strain,[27] arguing with partners;[28] increased family conflict[29] – especially for parents of pre-school children,[30]and relationship breakdown.[31] Similarly when work-related mobile phone use spills over into family life, this is linked to higher levels of distress and lower family satisfaction.[32] Research consistently shows balancing work and family life to be a major stressor on relationships. In the *Enduring Love* study, balancing work and home life was ranked fourth for women and sixth for men in the least liked things of their relationship,[33] and other research has found people who work long hours or cope with stressful employment situations come under increased relationship strain, highlighting the distress participants felt daily when juggling work and home life.[34]

The impact of family relationships on work

The link between family lives and work lives also runs in the opposite direction, however. Relationship problems at home can have an impact on work, including lower job satisfaction, greater likelihood of wanting a new job, greater psychological strain, increased somatic/physical symptoms, higher depression, and greater likelihood of burnout.[35] Research by OnePlusOne and Working Families found the degree to which people are engaged in and fulfilled by work is associated with the quality of employees' couple relationships.[36] Studies also indicate that employees' job performance is associated with their wellbeing and their relationship satisfaction,[37] and research with senior HR staff in London also showed 95% agreed that employees' couple relationship difficulties affect their work performance, and a third said they came across employment issues related to employees' relationships with partners every 1-6 months (and 2/5 came across it every 6-12 months).[38]

It's not surprising, therefore, that where we're supported by our employers to achieve a good balance between work and family, this can have positive impacts on our work.

Research indicates a positive link between flexible working patterns and improved work-life balance, reduced stress, improved performance at work, improved employee relations, higher employee commitment and motivation, reduced absenteeism and increased productivity.[39] And since home life can have such a significant impact on their motivation, satisfaction and performance at work, this gives employers very good reason to be interested in their employees' work-family balance – not only out of humane concern for employees' work-life balance, but also for employers' balance sheets.

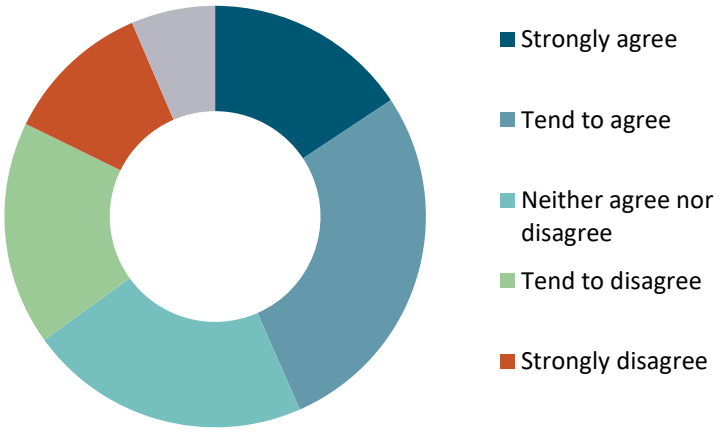
The evidence indicates, therefore, that relationship quality and work engagement are positively associated and significantly predict each other, with high or low levels in either correlating with high or low levels in the other:[40] when we're more satisfied with our relationships we're more likely to be productive at work, and vice versa.

Working nine to five... or longer?

So how are we doing in the UK today in terms of balancing work and family life? The first indicator of balance might be the extent to which UK employees work long hours. In 2015, research by the TUC found the number of people working more than 48 hours a week had increased by 15% since 2010.[41] Overall in our survey, **27% of employees said that they worked longer hours than they would choose and this was damaging their physical or mental wellbeing**. Younger employees were more likely than older employees to report this: almost a third (31%) of those aged 16-30 agreed with this compared to just a quarter (26%) of those over 50. We also observed a pattern here regarding flexible working arrangements: employees who had flexible working arrangements were considerably less likely than those who did not to report that they worked longer hours than they would choose with negative impacts on their wellbeing. Only 23% of employees with flexible work arrangements reported this, compared to 34% of those without.

Besides the extent to which people report working long hours, with negative impacts on wellbeing, it is important to also address employees' perceptions of their employers' expectations in terms of working long hours. Here, we found that **almost a third (29%) of employees said that they felt pressured by their employer to work long hours to advance their career**. In our sample, 43% agreed that they did not feel this pressure, but 29% disagreed and thus indicated they did feel pressure to work long hours (Figure 11).

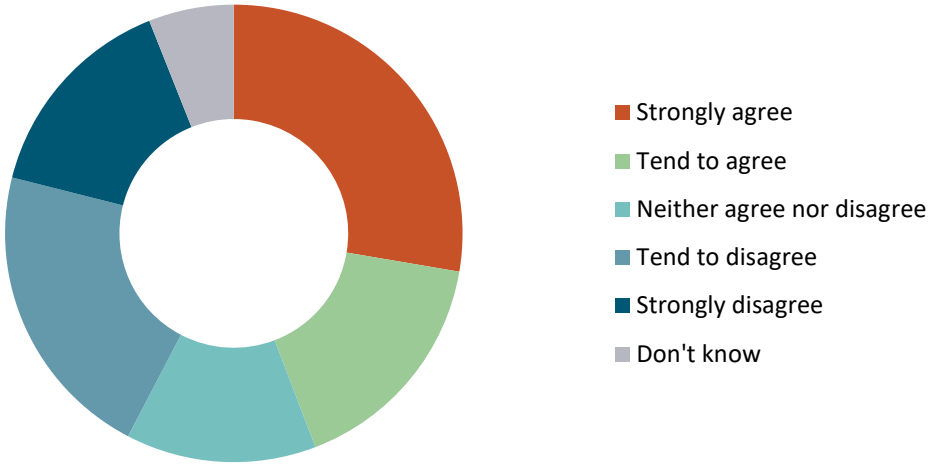
Figure 11: 'I don't feel pressured by my employer to work long hours to advance my career'



Unsurprisingly, being at an earlier stage of their careers, young employees were more likely to feel this pressure: whereas nearly a third (32%) of people aged 16-30 said they felt pressured by their employer (disagreeing with the statement 'I don't feel pressured to work long hours to advance my career'), only a quarter (25%) of employees over 50 said this. People without flexible work arrangements were slightly more likely than those with such arrangements to report feeling this pressure: 30% of people without flexible work arrangements disagreed that they felt pressure to work long hours to advance their career, compared to 27% of employees with flexible work arrangements.

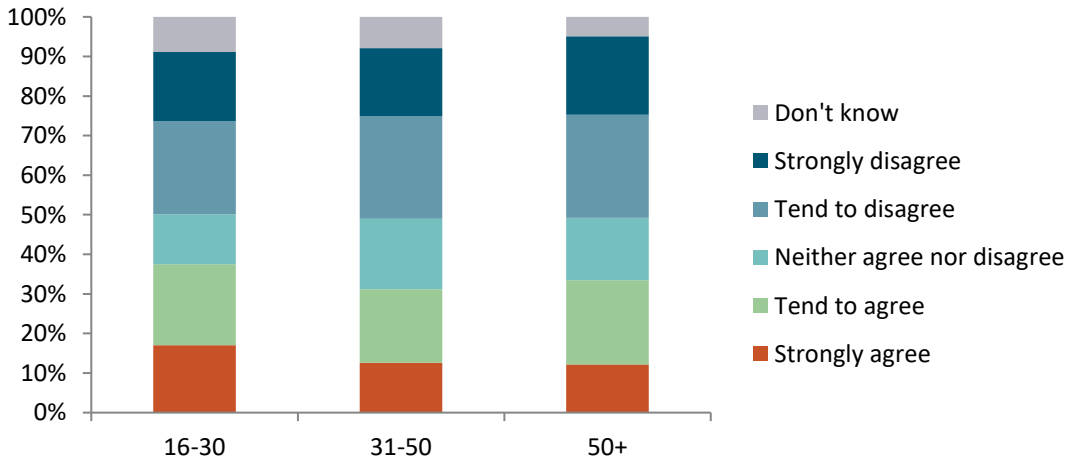
Perceptions of employers' expectations regarding the ideal employee also revealed considerable pressure felt by many workers to be on hand 24 hours a day. Overall, **33% of employees agreed that their employer thinks that the ideal employee is available 24 hours a day** (Figure 13).

Figure 12: 'My employer thinks that the ideal employee is the one who is available 24 hours a day'



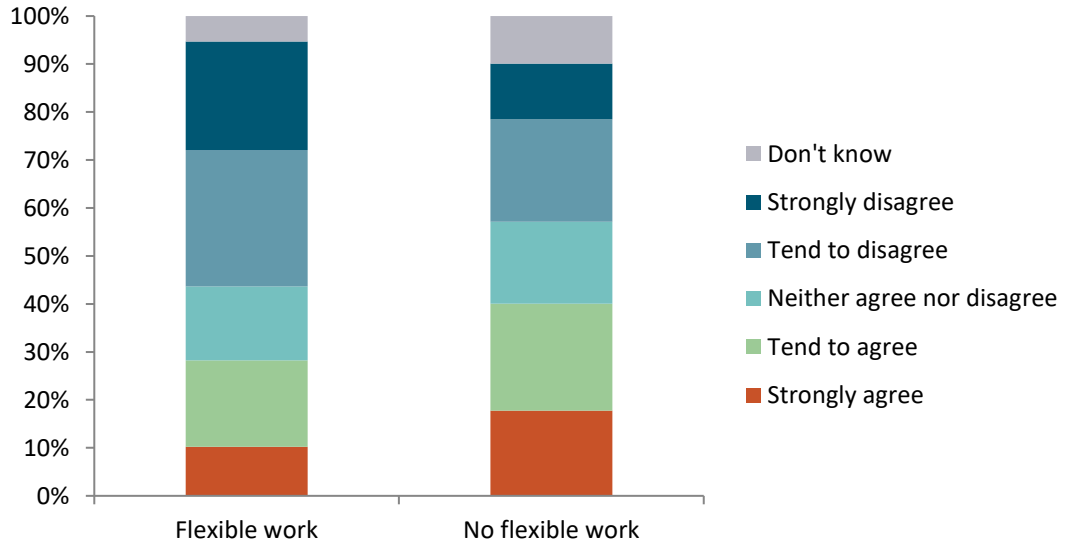
There were observable differences by age here, with younger employees slightly more likely to agree: 38% of employees aged 16-30 agreed, compared to 31% of those aged 31-50 and 33% of those over 50 (Figure 13).

Figure 13: 'My employer thinks that the ideal employee is the one who is available 24 hours a day' – by age group



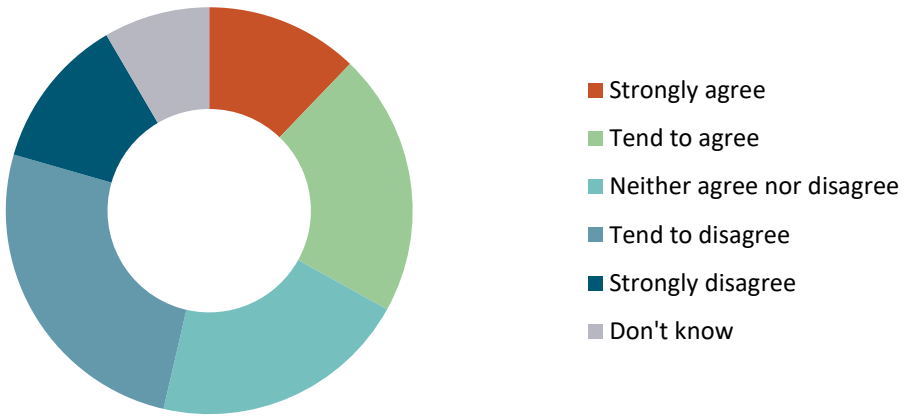
Unsurprisingly, employees who worked flexibly were considerably less likely than those who did not to agree that their employer thinks that the ideal employee is available 24 hours a day. As Figure 14 below illustrates, 28% of employees who worked flexibly believed that their employer thinks the ideal employee is available 24 hours a day, compared to 40% of those who did not. We do not know whether this indicates that flexible working arrangements lead to employee's perceptions of employers improving and feeling under reduced pressure; whether employers who are less exacting of employees are more likely to offer flexible work arrangements; or whether flexible work reduces pressure and employees with flexible work arrangements achieve a better work-life balance, for example.

Figure 14: 'My employer thinks that the ideal employee is the one who is available 24 hours a day' – by flexible working arrangements



A similar picture was observed for employees' perceptions of their employers' views on whether or not work ought to be the priority in an employee's life. Overall, **a third of respondents (33%) agreed that their employer thinks that work should be the primary priority in a person's life** (Figure 15).

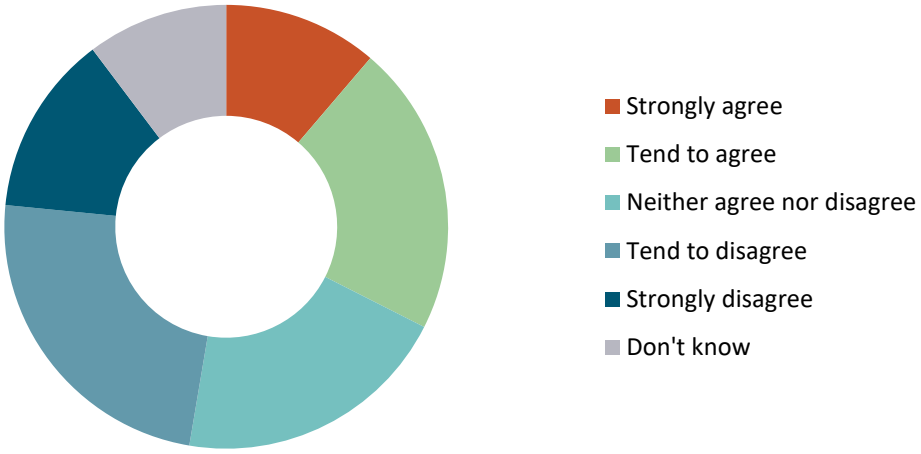
Figure 15: 'My employer thinks that work should be the primary priority in a person's life'



Work vs. family life

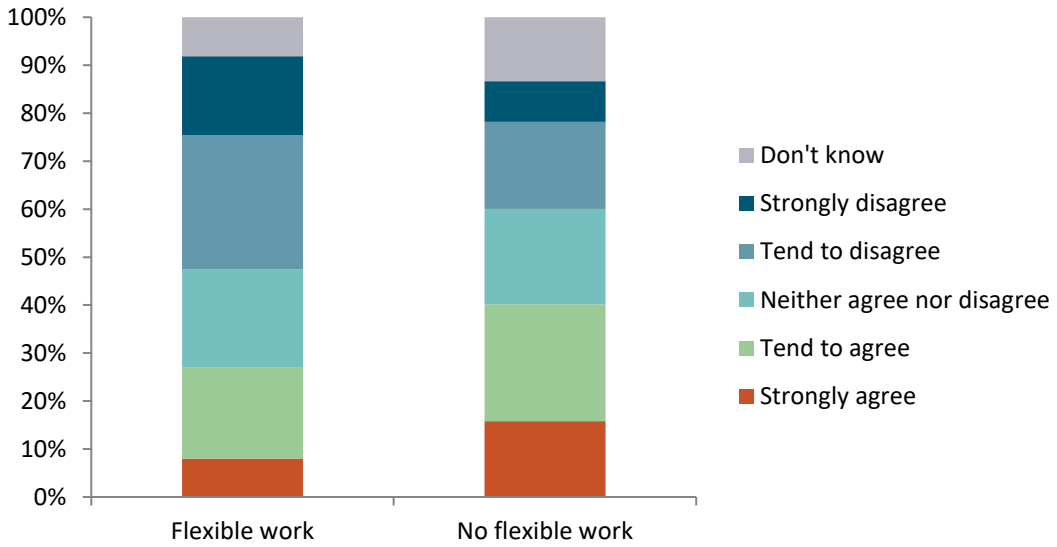
Given the findings above, it is not surprising that our survey revealed a very sizeable minority of employees feeling expected by their employers to put work before family in order to be productive. Overall, as Figure 16 below shows, **a third (33%) of respondents agreed that their employer assumes the most productive employees put work before family life**.

Figure 16: 'My employer assumes that the most productive employees are those who put their work before their family life'



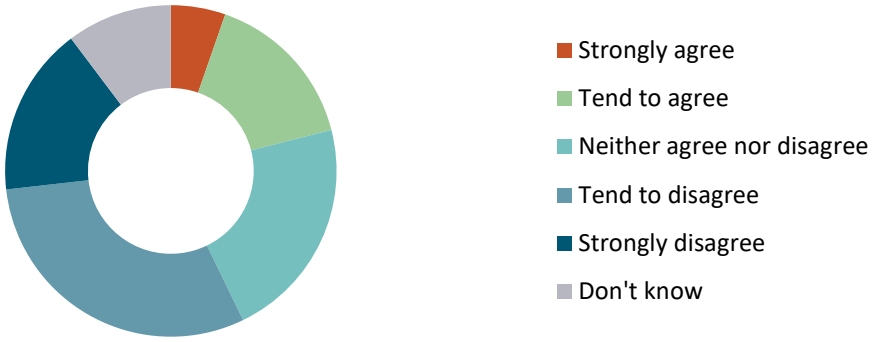
Interestingly, we did not observe any noteworthy difference between respondents who reported having children or other caring responsibilities. There was a marked difference between employees who had flexible working arrangements and those without, however: 27% of employees who worked flexibly agreed that their employer assumes the most productive employees put work before family life, but among those without flexible working arrangements this jumped up to 40% (Figure 17).

Figure 17: 'My employer assumes that the most productive employees are those who put their work before their family life' – by flexible work status



Not only did we observe that more than a third of employees felt required to prioritise work over family; we also found that a smaller but still considerable minority of employees felt that attending to caring responsibilities was actively frowned upon at work. We found **over a fifth (21%) of employed respondents agreed that attending to care responsibilities is frowned upon at work** (Figure 18).

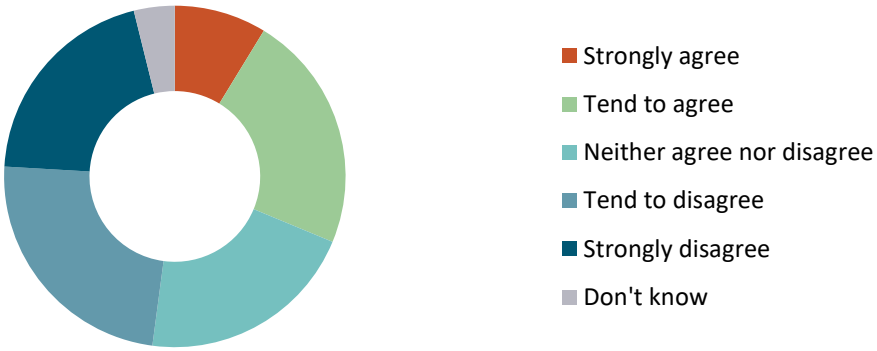
Figure 18: 'Attending to caring responsibilities (e.g. for children or partners) is frowned upon at work'



As with employees' perceptions of employers' assumptions about putting work before family to be productive, interestingly – and encouragingly, perhaps – there did not appear to be any significant difference here between employees who reported caring responsibilities and those who did not. However there was a quite a pronounced difference between employees with flexible work arrangements and those without, and it appears that people who work flexibly also feel their caring roles are more accepted at work: less than one-in-five (18%) employees with such arrangements agreed that attending to care responsibilities was frowned upon at work and 56% disagreed, whereas over a quarter (26%) of employees without any such arrangements agreed and only 35% disagreed.

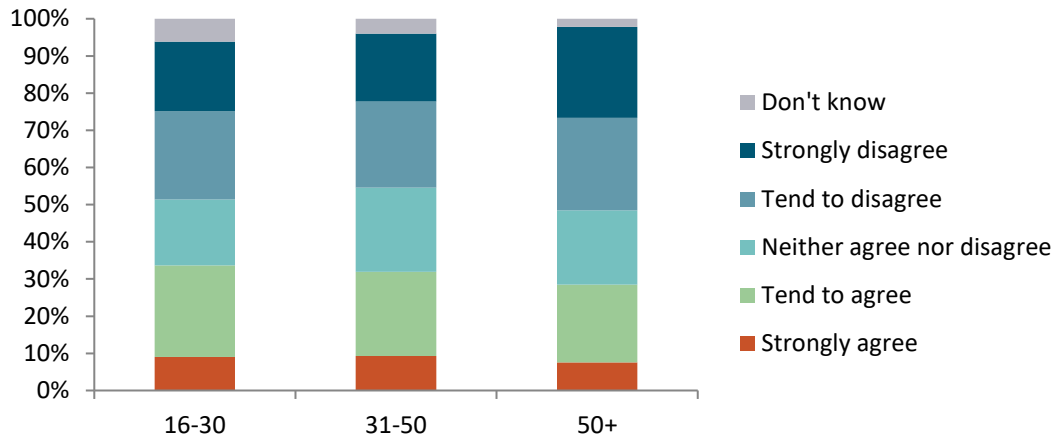
In addition to asking respondents about whether they felt caring responsibilities were accepted at work, we also asked directly about the extent to which their work interferes with their home and family life. Here, we found that overall across our sample, nearly **a third (31%) of employees said that their work interferes with their home and personal life and caring responsibilities** (Figure 19).

Figure 19: 'My work interferes with my home and personal life and caring responsibilities'



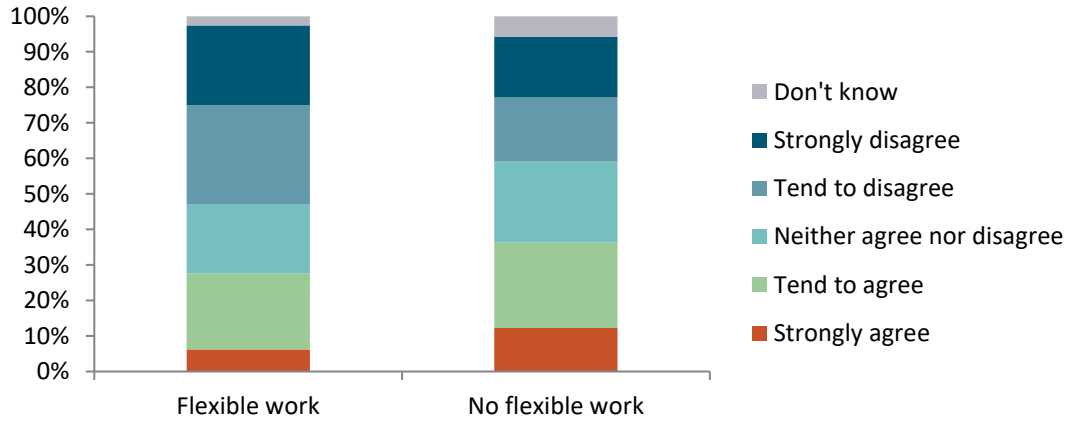
Younger employees were more likely to struggle with this balancing act than older employees: 29% of those aged over 50 agreed that their work interferes with home life, whereas 36% of those aged 16-30 did so (Figure 20).

Figure 20: 'My work interferes with my home and personal life and caring responsibilities' – by age



We also observed a slight difference here between employees with children under 19 (35% of whom agreed that work interfered with home life and caring responsibilities) and those without (where 30% agreed). A much more noticeable pattern emerged however when we looked at whether or not employees had flexible work arrangements. Employees without such arrangements were considerably – nearly a third – more likely to agree that work interfered with family/home life and caring responsibilities. As Figure 21 below shows, nearly four-in-ten (37%) people who did not work flexibly reported this, compared to less than one-in-three (28%) of people with flexible working arrangements.

Figure 21: 'My work interferes with my home and personal life and caring responsibilities' – by flexible work arrangements



A further indication of the impact work can have on home and family life was the extent to which employees listed lack of work-life balance as a strain on their couple relationships: 28% of people in work and in a relationship listed lack of work-life balance (respondents were asked to select up to eight strains from a list of 23 options) as a strain on their relationships. Our survey of nearly 300 relationship support practitioners working for Relate, Relationships Scotland and Marriage Care similarly found that over the last year,

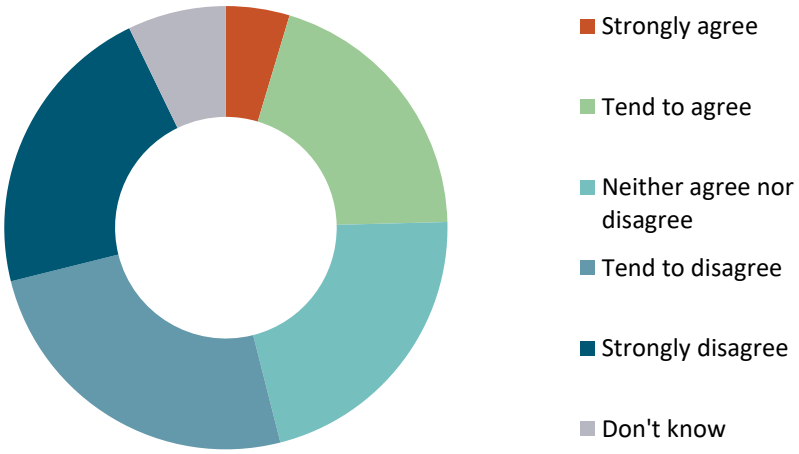
nearly half of relationship counsellors have at least 'often' encountered in their practice clients whose relationships have come under pressure from work: nearly a fifth (18%) said that they have seen this 'very often', a third (33%) said they had seen this 'often', and 41% had seen this 'some of the time'. Lack of work-life balance was also identified by counsellors as the third biggest strain on couple relationships, with 69% of counsellors selecting this out of a possible 23 strains. Furthermore, thinking about their practice over the last year, **38% of counsellors reported that they are seeing an increasing number of clients whose relationships are affected by work-family conflict** (most of the remainder – 52% - said this was about the same; only one per cent said it was decreasing).

Balancing work and family is not only an issue for parents. Many grandparents help their children out with childcare for their grandchildren to enable their children to work, and grandparents are the largest provider of childcare in Britain (after parents themselves) and it is estimated that 63% of grandparents provide childcare, equating to eight million grandparents.[42] Research by the Oxford Institute of Ageing has estimated that people over 60 in the UK provide up to £50bn in unpaid family care per year, approximately three per cent of GDP,[43] and a study commissioned by the Department for Education found that grandchild care is commonplace in the UK, with 26% of parents responding to the survey receiving help from grandparents in the previous week.[44] But as the pension age rises and we're working for longer, many grandparents are also now balancing this care for grandchildren with work. In our survey, **one quarter (25%) of grandparents who provided care** (formal or informal) **for grandchildren were also balancing this care responsibility with some work responsibility** (part-time or full-time).

Family life vs. work

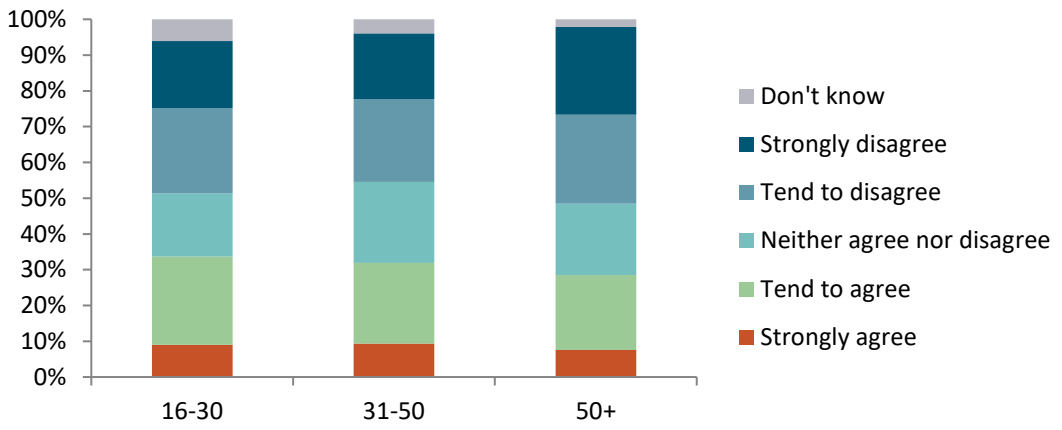
When we looked at the other side of the work-family conflict – the impact of family on work – we observed that overall **a quarter (25%) of employees agreed that the stress they experience at home adversely affects them at work** (Figure 22).

Figure 22: 'The stress I experience at home adversely affects me at work'



Younger employees were more likely than older employees to report stress from home adversely affecting them at work, with one third (31%) of those aged 16-30 reporting this compared to just a fifth (19%) of those over 50 (Figure 23).

Figure 23: 'The stress I experience at home adversely affects me at work' – by age



Interestingly, the extent to which people feel stress from home adversely affects them at work did not vary depending on whether or not they reported any flexible working arrangements. It may be that different flexible working arrangements are associated with different effects in terms of family-work conflicts; our sample sizes for different flexible work categories were not large enough to tell. The sub-groups large enough to extrapolate from are suggestive: people who reported flexi-time arrangements showed no difference from the sample overall (both were 27%), whereas respondents who worked part-time showed lower agreement (22%) that stress from home affected their work adversely. Similarly, while a small group, it is at least quite indicative that those who worked from home (n = 139) were the most likely of all to say that stress from home affects their work, with 36%[‡] of this group reporting this.

Gender

Families' working patterns are changing. One-in-three working mothers now earn at least half of their families' income, and just over half of female breadwinners are in couple households (rather than lone mothers).[45] Maternal breadwinning is the highest since records began, with over two million working mothers now the main family earner, a rise of 80 per cent in the last 15 years.[46] Over 2011-2013, the proportion of sole male breadwinner households decreased in 16 out of 17 European countries,[47] while many families across Europe have moved from a full-time-father-and-part-time-mother earning model to both parents working full-time: in 2001 37% of families had this '1.5' earner model and 26% were dual-earners; by 2013 these proportions were equal at 31% of families.[48] UK dads once worked the longest hours in Europe, but recent research shows UK dads' working hours has declined as mums' have increased (although UK full-time working dads still have the second longest working hours on average in Europe).[49] UK employees working long hours are mostly men (2,544,000 men compared to 873,000 women in 2015) – but the number of women working 48 hour plus weeks increased by 18% between 2010 and 2015, compared to a 15% increase for men.[50]

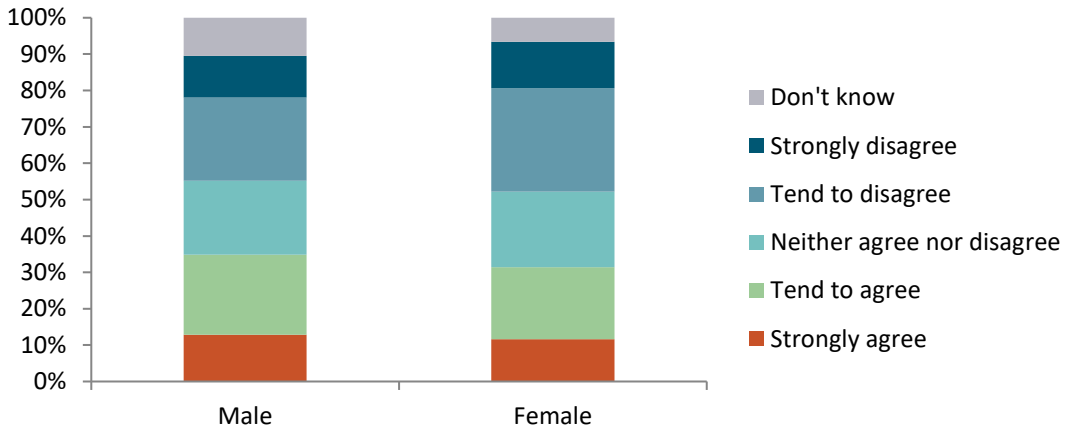
Despite advances towards greater gender equality, UK dads remain more likely to be the primary earner while mums are more likely to care for children. Across OECD countries, women consistently bear a disproportionate burden[51] of unpaid work (estimated to account for between a third and a half of all valuable economic activity).[52] In the UK, the

[‡] Due to the smaller sample size here this is only significant at a much lower 75% confidence level

Fatherhood Institute found men spend less than 24 minutes per every woman's hour caring for children, and they spend just over half the time UK women do on housework and cooking.[53] Over a fifth (22%) of UK families still relies on the father being the sole full-time breadwinner, despite the significant growth in families where both parents work full time.[54]

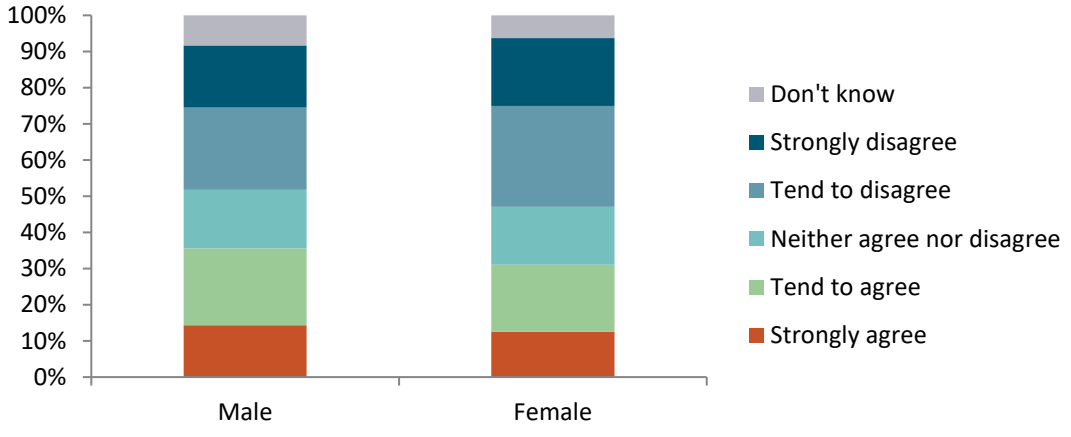
This division of labour unsurprisingly means that we see some gender differences in terms of employee perceptions of employers' expectations around work. Men were very slightly more likely to agree that their employer thinks work should be the priority than women, with 35% of men agreeing compared to 32% of women.[§] Similarly, men were more likely to say their employer assumes that a productive employee puts work before family life than women, with 35% of men reporting this compared to 30% of women (Figure 24).

Figure 24: 'My employer assumes that the most productive employees are those who put their work before their family life' – by gender



Men were also more likely than women to feel that their employer thinks the most productive employees are available 24 hours a day (36% compared to 31%) (Figure 25).

Figure 25: 'My employer thinks that the ideal employee is the one who is available 24 hours a day' – by gender



[§] This difference was statistically significant at a slightly lower confidence level (94%)

Flexible work

Studies have shown that flexible working arrangements are associated with higher job satisfaction, lower turnover intentions and lower work-family conflict.[55] Similarly, we have observed above a number of patterns where employees with flexible working arrangements were less likely to say that their employer thinks the ideal employee is available 24 hours a day, less likely to feel their employer assumes the most productive employee prioritises work over family life, less likely to say work interferes with home life and more likely to say that attending to caring responsibilities is accepted at work.

However, it should be noted that 'flexible working' may not necessarily be a 'silver bullet' for family-friendly work: some studies actually suggest flexible working is correlated with slightly *lower*, not higher, levels of relationship quality – likely due to higher conflict between work and family life as boundaries between the two blur.[56] And some studies indicate that informal work support (e.g. a supportive supervisor) is more important in reducing work-family conflict than formal flexible working.[57] Similarly, while our sample sizes were not large enough to break down by type of flexible work, there were apparent differences between different types, and we may expect that working from home, for instance, may bring particular challenges around blurred boundaries, for example, whereas compressing hours might involve other challenges. It is perhaps quite telling that a quarter (25%) of employees with flexible work arrangements in our survey listed household chores as a strain on their partner relationships, compared to less than a fifth (18%) of employees without these arrangements. Are some partners who work from home expected to undertake a greater share of household chores, for example, despite the possibility that they work as long hours? It appears that the *typology* of the working arrangements (whether it is full-time, part-time, flexible, etc.) may be less important than the extent to which *genuine balance* is achieved between work and relationships.

Recommendations

We have seen that work and family may both exert an influence on each other. But, interestingly, research suggests that the influence of work spill-over at home may be more powerful and detrimental than the influence of stress from home at work. Research shows that the negative effect of work life on family life has a stronger negative influence on both work engagement and relationship quality at home than stress originating from family life.[58] So an increase in work pressures may therefore create a 'negative feedback loop' for employers – increased work stress is likely to have negative impact on relationships at home, which, in turn, decrease work engagement – while alleviating pressures at work can establish a virtuous circle that benefits both.[59] And this suggests that not only is it clearly in employers' interests to do what they can to improve employees' relationship quality (such as supporting flexible working, reducing working hours, or offering employees relationship support services through employee benefit schemes), but also that, since the impact of work on family has a stronger link to work engagement and relationship quality than vice versa, employers may be best-placed to address work-family conflict and family-work conflict.[60]

What might **employers** actually do, then, to support employees to effectively balance work and family life – with benefits for both? The evidence suggests it is clearly in employers' interests to recognise relationship quality as an asset which aids work engagement and productivity. Employers can support employees' relationship quality both indirectly – by organising work in ways that do not undermine employees' relationships (by supporting flexible working, for example) – and directly – by investing in programmes to support employees' relationships.

1. **Offer employees flexible work arrangements**

Flexible working policies are quite widespread, and all employees are entitled to request flexible working. In our survey, 59% of employees reported some flexible work arrangement. However, other research indicates that only 8.7% of job vacancies over £20k are advertised as being open to flexibility – despite evidence that 14.1 million employees want to work flexibly,[61]and access to flexibility is often unequal. Occupations lower down in organisational hierarchy are less likely to offer flexibility, and sectors where flexibility is least available (such as administration and customer services) tend to be dominated by women.[62] Similarly, people who are better-paid report more use of flexible work – perhaps because employees on higher incomes also have greater autonomy in how they manage their work.[63] Interestingly, flexibility in employment is a predictor of higher work engagement,[64] yet men tend to take up formal flexible working arrangements much less often than do women[65] – perhaps due to lingering cultural expectations regarding divisions of paid and unpaid labour.

Employers can increase employees' ability to balance work and family life, with benefits for both, by ensuring that flexible working is available to all employees and developing a workplace culture where employees feel able to discuss workload and hours and empowered to balance paid and unpaid work effectively, and as they choose. Offering flexible working by default, unless there is a demonstrable business case for not doing so, would increase access to flexible work, with benefits for both employees and employers. Evidence suggests there are actually few roles which could not accommodate flexible

work.[66]

2. **Provide relationship support, e.g. through Employee Assistance Programmes**

Employers may also support employees to maintain or improve relationship quality by providing relationship support and counselling to employees. As awareness around mental health and wellbeing grows, employers are increasingly looking at what they can do to support employees' wellbeing, through counselling, for instance. Relate, for example, has developed a range of business solutions including professional training and development and counselling services (either face-to-face, digital or through a blended learning model), which may be delivered as a component of employers' Employee Assistance Programmes. A recent survey of Human Resources staff by the CIPD found that more than half (53%) have provided counselling to employees in the last two years, with two-thirds saying that mental health issues are a major issue in their workplace. Of the directors, managers and assistants surveyed, 22% said they had provided marriage or relationship counselling to employees.[67] There are gaps in many employers' awareness of the link between work performance and family life, and how to respond appropriately, however. And employers primarily refer employees to individual counselling rather than relationship counselling, whereas evidence suggests individual counselling is less effective for relationship difficulties.[68]

There are indications that many employers are open to providing relationship support through employee benefit schemes, however: in one study, almost half of employers said they would consider offering relationship counselling to employees if presented with compelling evidence of the links between work performance and couple relationship problems.[69] And this would also meet with support from many employees: in our survey, **43% of respondents in employment said they would support their employer offering relationship support to employees and their partners/families** as part of employee benefit schemes, and only 11% were opposed.

3. **Provide relationship-focused skills development and training**

Additionally, employers also have a key role to play in terms of how their employees relate to one another at work and in supporting workplace relationships. Thinking relationally in the workplace is not just about how home life and work life interact and supporting employees to balance work and their non-work relationships; it also extends to relationships within the workplace. As we have seen, enhanced social relationships in the workplace boost task performance,[70] thus achieving benefits for employers (productivity, reduced sickness absence and staff turnover)[71] as well as for employees (reduced stress/anxiety, increased resilience and emotional intelligence, improved communication, and better workplace relationships). There is therefore a compelling case for training for HR departments to help them see the importance of relationships in the workplace and think about how they might best support them. Furthermore, employers may also provide skills development and education and learning courses focused on workplace relationships, delivered by experts, to equip employers to support a positive working environment built on good quality relationships.

And what might **government** do to support businesses to develop family-friendly workplaces – both to boost competitiveness and families' wellbeing?

4. Ensure application of the Family Test

The 'Family Test' launched in October 2014, which requires all new domestic policies across Whitehall to consider the impact they might have on family relationships,[72] has been an important step forward for more joined-up, family-friendly policy which supports families to balance work and family life, ensuring that potential impacts of policies on family relationships and functioning are made explicit and recognised. However, a review of implementation of the Family Test a year after its introduction by the Family and Childcare Trust, Relate, and the Relationships Foundation found that the response of government departments had been patchy and the majority had shown limited commitment so far to implementing this.

In order to maximise the effect of the Family Test, transparency – i.e. routine publication by departments of impact assessments of policies against the Family Test – is now needed, and government should give the Test teeth by putting it on a statutory footing, requiring all departments to publish records of assessments.

5. Ensure parental leave policies are family-friendly

Finally, if families are to be able to achieve a good work-family balance and decide for themselves how to balance paid and unpaid work, leave policies need to give families choice. The UK still has long statutory maternity leave[**] but just two weeks' paternity leave.[††] Since April 2015, if the mum returns to work, parents have been able to take the remainder of her maternity leave as Shared Parental Leave (SPL). Evidence indicates many families do indeed want to share work and care. In 2014, more than a fifth of dads wished they had looked after their children rather than returning to work,[73] and two-thirds used annual leave to bond with and care for their new babies.[74]

However, barriers to sharing work and caring remain. There's a cultural barrier in that employers can be less accepting of dads' leave. In one survey, more than a third of dads said they wanted to share in the care of their babies but their employers did not offer any flexibility.[75] Other research shows this was a key factor explaining why fewer than one-in-ten dads took more than the statutory leave (before SPL).[76] A recent survey also found 81% of employees feared the impact of taking SPL on their careers.[77]

Additionally, many families also face a financial barrier. Since the male breadwinner model still predominates, many parents are unable to afford sharing work and care. Dads who take leave tend to be from more advantaged backgrounds with more secure and well-paid jobs,[78] while research has indicated that low pay has discouraged dads from taking more than the statutory leave.[79] Similarly, a recent survey found finances were the major reason behind dads not taking SPL, cited by 55%,[80] while polling in April 2016 showed 85% of employees believed families could not afford it.[81] Another recent survey found employers who offered enhanced shared paternity pay were twice as likely to receive requests for SPL from employees as those who paid the statutory rate.[82]

And while SPL has been welcome, the UK remains a long way behind some other European nations. The Nordic countries which have focused much more on gender

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[**] 52 weeks, 39 weeks paid at 90% of average weekly earnings (before tax) for the first 6 weeks; £139.58 or 90% of average weekly earnings (whichever is lower) for the next 33 weeks

[††] Paid at £139.58/week or 90% of average weekly earnings – whichever is lower

equality have supported both parents to share work and childcare: Swedish parents are entitled to 480 days' paid parental leave per child,[‡‡] of which two months are reserved specifically for each parent,[83] while Iceland has nine months' well-paid parental leave, with three months reserved for each. Parents' leave-taking is greatest when it is well-paid and when a portion is reserved on this 'use-it-or-lose-it' basis for each parent.[84] Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and Finland have all pioneered this approach, which has been successful in increasing fathers' take-up. In Iceland and Norway, dads' leave-taking is up to 80% and 90% respectively, from tiny proportions previously.[85] In Iceland, dads take up approximately one-third of parental leave,[86] while Swedish dads take a quarter of parental leave.[87] A Norwegian study over ten years found that fathers spent significantly less time working and more time together with their children following the introduction of the paternity quota,[88] and Swedish research found 95% of dads reported their parental leave resulted in a closer relationship to their child.[89] Furthermore, more equal sharing of work and care may also lead to improved parental couple relationships: evidence from Sweden indicates that fathers' leave-taking and involvement in child-rearing affects the stability of the parental relationship, with the risk of divorce lowered if the dad took parental leave.[90]

Reconfiguring SPL with quotas for each parent, paid at salary-replacement rates, following the Nordic model would help many more families to share work and care between them.

[‡‡] paid at nearly 80% of normal pay for 390 days

Methodology

The survey was carried out by YouGov and was conducted using an online interview survey administered to members of the YouGov UK panel of over 800,000 individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. An email was sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. YouGov normally achieves a response rate of around between 35% and 50% to surveys although this does vary according to the subject matter, complexity and length of the questionnaire.

In total we polled 5,071 UK adults (16 and over) across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Fieldwork was undertaken between 18th June and 7th July 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 16+). YouGov is a member of the British Polling Council. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc.

The results of our poll were weighted to make the data more representative of the population in terms of age, gender, region and country, and an indicator of social class (based on census information). However, the results do come with some caveats around representativeness. While the results of our survey are weighted according to these criteria, our sample may still differ according to other unobserved factors, including those that are the subject of our survey, such as relationships and sexual behaviour.

These data were further analysed independently of YouGov on behalf of Relate using STATA 13 with individual weights attached to all sample members; direct replication of the statistics featured in this report using the tables published by YouGov may therefore be subject to rounding errors. Additional variables, such as relationship status, which were not available in the standard output provided by YouGov, were subsequently created and feature throughout the report. All of the bivariate analyses that we present represent statistically significant patterns and differences – these are patterns that we would not expect to see by chance. Throughout the report, unless specified otherwise, all data are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Definitions of terms

Throughout this report, the following terms are used in the description of findings:

‘**Agree**’ – including respondents who selected ‘strongly agree’ and ‘tend to agree’

‘**Disagree**’ – including those who responded ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘tend to disagree’

‘**Good**’ – including those who responded ‘very good’ and ‘good’

‘**Bad**’ – including those who responded ‘very bad’ and ‘bad’

‘**Support**’ – including those who responded ‘strongly support’ and ‘support’

‘**Oppose**’ – including those who responded ‘strongly oppose’ and ‘oppose’

‘**People who are disabled or living with a long term health condition**’ – including people who reported that their day-to-day activities are limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted or is expected to last at least 12 months.

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This report forms the first of a series of reports which together comprise our major study into the state of the UK's relationships, *The Way We Are Now*. In subsequent reports we will examine the state of our family, partner, sexual, and social relationships.

About Relate

Relate is the UK's leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people through information, support and counselling every year. Our vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis of a thriving society.

We aim to develop and support healthy relationships by:

- Delivering inclusive, high-quality services that are relevant at every stage of life
- Helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better
- Helping both the public and policy makers improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

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Relationships Scotland's network of 22 affiliated local services provide relationship counselling, family mediation, child contact centres and other family support services across all of mainland and island Scotland. Our work supports individuals, couples and families experiencing relationship difficulties. Around 30,000 people have contact with our services each year.

We are a national voice for relationship support services and we influence policy and legislative policy development in the area of family life and wellbeing. We support people to live with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy and respectful relationships.

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