

POPULATION & SOCIETIES

No. 440
DECEMBER 2007

How do employers help employees reconcile work and family life?

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France has a long tradition of pro-birth family policies, including measures to help parents reconcile their work and family life. How do employers, for their part, contribute to the work-family balance? Are the public and private sectors equally committed in this area? In this issue, Cécile Lefèvre, Ariane Pailhé and Anne Solaz present the findings of the "Familles et Employeurs", (families and employers) survey of public and private sector establishments employing at least 20 people.

In France, government family policies and the Labour Code entitle employees to certain basic rights – such as maternity or paternity leave, parental leave, three days of leave to care for a sick child – to help them reconcile work and family life. These rights are reinforced in some cases by collective labour agreements, or by the civil service statutes.

But employers also implement their own family-friendly policies, either directly or via a works council. From the Christmas show to the company day care centre, their contributions are many and varied, taking the form of flexible work schedules, cash benefits or services. The *Familles et Employeurs* survey (Box 1) which covered establishments with at least 20 employees, shows that the degree of employer involvement varies greatly by sector, by company size and, above all, by type or status (Box 2). For parents of young children, what would be the best type of employer?

◆ Most employers feel a duty to implement family-friendly policies

Three-quarter of employers report that they know the family situation of all their employees and the same

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proportion believe it is their duty to help reconcile work and family life (for 14% it is an absolute obligation, and for 62% it is necessary under certain circumstances). Only 16% claim that they have no role to play in this area. Employers in the non-profit private sector, and those in state and public health civil service sectors most often report feeling a duty to implement family-friendly policies, their main aim being to reduce absenteeism, to enhance employee well-being and to improve productivity and performance (for 70%, 68% and 62% of employers respectively). Employee loyalty and concern for the company image are less frequently mentioned (45% and 27% respectively). Improved productivity is the number one reason given by private companies which are part of an enterprise group, while concern for employee well-being is more often mentioned by private non-profit organizations. Reducing absenteeism is most often mentioned by public sector companies, the three civil service sectors and companies belonging to an enterprise group.

◆ Benefits in kind are rare and exist mainly in the public sector

Child care services are mentioned by employers as one of the most important measures for reconciling work

and family life. They are nonetheless rare (Table 1), with less than 2% of employers reporting that their establishment runs a day care centre or provides places in a nursery or leisure centre for children outside school hours and during school holidays. In terms of the numbers of employees concerned, one in fifteen people working in an establishment of at least 20 employees has access to day care centre places, one in twenty to a leisure centre.

Day care places are provided mainly by the local government and public health civil services and by establishments of over 1,000 employees, while the local government civil service and public sector or nationalized companies provide greatest access to places in leisure centres for school-age children. Corporate day care centres are often set up to address the needs of employees with non-standard work schedules [4]. Yet day care projects are rare. In 2005, a year after the introduction of the “family tax credit” to promote the development of child care provision by employers (Box 3), only 1% of establishments not already offering day care places were planning to do so in the future.

A larger proportion of employers (28%) offer places in children’s holiday camps, which are available to 43% of employees. They are offered mainly by public sector or nationalized companies (80%), by the public health civil service (79%) and the state civil service (64%). In the private sector, the finance and banking industry offers this service more often than others. More incidentally, children’s Christmas shows are a tradition in four establishments out of ten (i.e. almost six employees in ten).

Table 1 – Benefits in kind and cash benefits offered by employers with at least 20 employees, France, 2005

	Percentage of establishments offering the benefit	Percentage of employees potentially concerned
Benefits in kind		
Pre-school day care centre or day care places	2	7
Day care for school-age children	2	5
Domestic services (laundry etc.)	3	6
Services of a mutual insurance fund	25	33
Access to housing	27	39
Children’s holiday camps	28	43
Canteen or subsidized catering services	41	60
Recreation room	59	64
Cash benefits		
Childcare benefit	18	29
Child education benefit	21	31
Meal vouchers	26	25
Marriage bonus	34	43
Holiday vouchers	37	51
Childbirth bonus	55	66
Maternity or paternity leave supplement or full wage	64	72
Employer contributions to a mutual insurance fund	65 *	60

(C. Lefèvre, A. Pailhé, A. Solaz, *Population & Societies*, no. 440 INED, December 2007)

** In 54% of cases, all employees contribute to the mutual insurance fund, and in 11% of cases, senior personnel only.

Source: *Familles et Employeurs survey, employer section, INED 2005.*

Among services not directly related to children, more than half of all public sector companies, and more than one-third of private companies belonging to an enterprise group report helping employees with housing. A quarter of establishments offer the services of a mutual insurance fund, such as health and dependence

Box 1

The Familles et Employeurs survey

With the exception of a few corporate reports and studies [1] [2] [3], there is little quantitative information on the way employers respond to the family constraints of their employees. The *Familles et Employeurs* survey conducted in 2004-2005 by INED and INSEE provides an original new dataset. It was a matched survey conducted in metropolitan France on a sample of 9,547 men and women aged 20-49 and on their employers (if applicable). Only data from the employer section are analysed here. They are representative of establishments with at least 20 employees in France. The sample includes all branches of activity and both the public and private sectors. A total of 2,673 establishments – 63% of those contacted – answered the survey.

The general manager, personnel manager or human resources manager was asked to fill in a paper questionnaire or to reply via a secure internet connection. The questionnaire concerned the organization of work and the support provided by employers to employees with pre-school or school-age children.

Box 2

Seven types of establishment

In the private sector, a distinction is made between non-profit organizations and profit-oriented enterprises. Among the latter, being independent or belonging to an enterprise group is an important factor with respect to family-friendly policies. Public sector or nationalized establishments have a specific tradition of social measures implemented via their works councils. Last, a distinction is made between the three civil service branches – state, public health and local government – whose policies in this area are quite varied.

The results are presented by category of establishment. As measures offered by larger establishments cover larger numbers of employees, and as size varies by category, it is also useful to reason in terms of employees potentially concerned. For example, independent, private sector non-profit organizations form one-third of the survey sample but employ only one-fifth of the workforce of establishments with at least 20 employees in France.

insurance, access to health care centres, loan guarantees etc. Last, three-quarters of establishments subsidize employees' meals, in the nationalized sector, and in the state and public health civil services especially, most of which provide canteens or subsidized catering services. Meal vouchers are more common in companies belonging to an enterprise group and in nationalized companies.

◆ Child-related cash benefits in the public sector, mutual insurance fund contributions and bonuses in the private sector

The frequency and level of family-related cash benefits increase with the size of the establishment. The largest and most long-standing form of financial support provided by employers is the maternity leave supplement (and in some cases a supplement for paternity leave, introduced in 2002). Civil servants on maternity leave receive a full wage. Elsewhere, the amount is laid down by a collective agreement. A full 97% of public-sector or nationalized companies, 70% of private non-profit organizations and 59% of companies which are part of an enterprise group offer maternity leave supplement, or even a full wage, though this is the case for only 35% of independent private-sector profit-oriented enterprises.

Whatever the sector, the size or the status of the establishment, 65% of employers contribute to a mutual insurance fund, 37% give holiday vouchers, 21% contribute to education costs and 18% to child care costs (Table 1). A very high proportion of establishments in the public health civil service offer benefits to families with children (Figure 1). More than 8 in 10 contribute to holiday, education and childcare costs. The same is true for public sector and nationalized establishments, where the proportion is 6 in 10. Private sector companies rarely offer such benefits, however, notably those which do not form part of an enterprise group, though they more often contribute to a mutual insurance fund than civil service establishments.

Regarding bonuses for family events, 34% of establishments offer a bonus for marriage and 54% for a

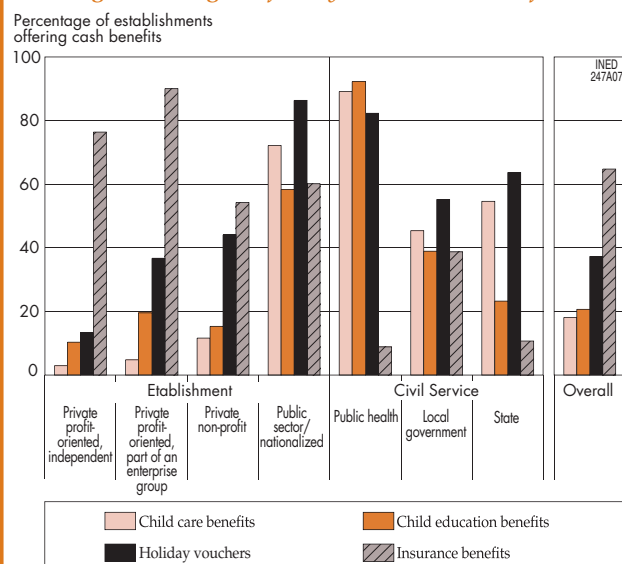
Box 3

Family tax credit

The family tax credit was introduced from 1 January 2004 with the aim of encouraging companies to implement family-friendly policies. This tax credit represents 25% of the amounts spent, up to a maximum of €500,000 per year and per employer, and concerns four categories of expenditure:

- Creation of day care centres for employees' children aged under three or funding of external care places;
- training of employees on parental leave;
- supplementary payments for paternity, maternity, parental or sick child leave;
- payment of employees' exceptional child care expenses due to unforeseeable work commitments outside normal working hours.

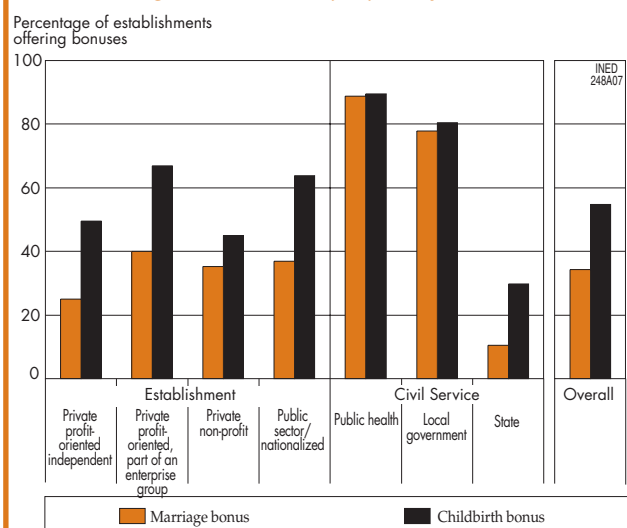
Figure 1 – Regular family-related cash benefits



(C. Lefèvre, A. Pailhé, A. Solaz, *Population & Societies*, no. 440 INED, December 2007)

Source: *Familles et Employeurs survey, employer section, INED 2005.*

Figure 2 – Bonuses for family events



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Source: *Familles et Employeurs survey, employer section, INED 2005.*

birth (though the survey does not detail the amounts given). Within the civil service, the state civil service is less generous in this respect than the two other branches (Figure 2). In the private sector, the situation varies by area of economic activity. Bonuses are most often granted by companies in the finance and banking, real estate and energy sectors.

◆ Occasional adjustments, but limited regular flexible working hours

Alongside these formal benefits, half of all employers claim to take account of employees' family constraints in the organization of work and working hours. Occasional adjustments are permitted by practically all employers. For the first day of the school year, for example, a rare and symbolic occasion whose date is known in

Figure 3 – Flexible work schedules

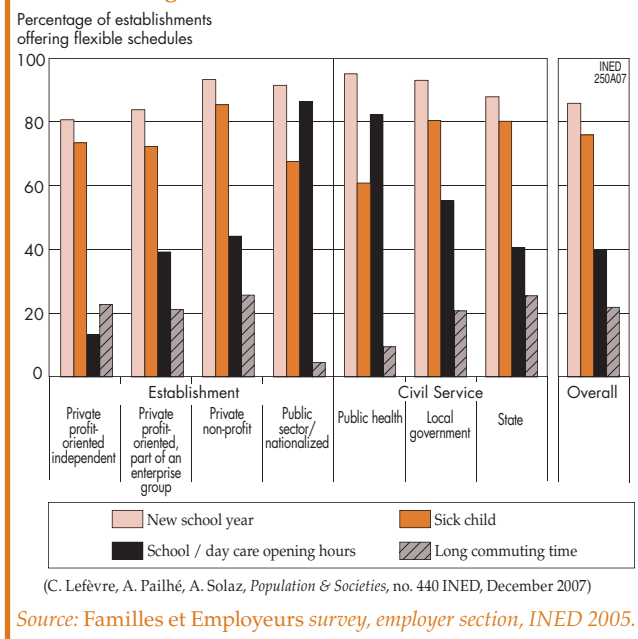
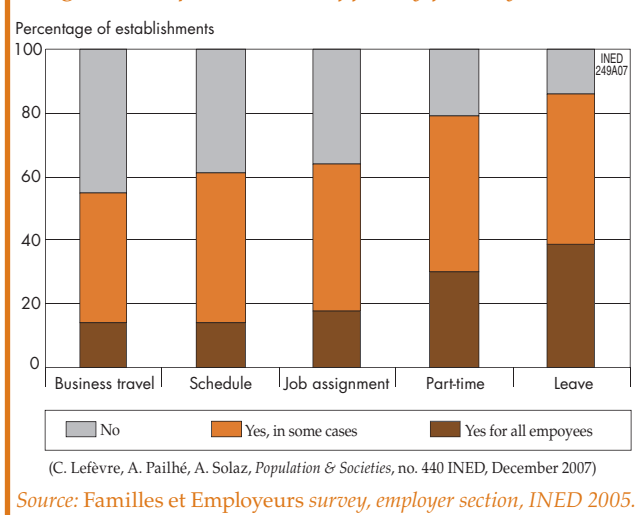


Figure 4 – Implementation of family-friendly measures



advance, 85% of employers, with no notable difference by status, size or sector, report that work schedules can be modified accordingly (Figure 3).

Flexible working hours on a regular basis, to fit in with school or nursery opening hours, for example, or for employees living far from their place of work, are granted less often. Likewise, in critical areas of work organization – such as job assignment, scheduling of business trips, etc. – family constraints are less often taken into consideration (Figure 4). Major organizational constraints, in the hospital sector for example, or a small workforce may limit the potential for work-time adjustments.

Regarding part-time working, 42% of employers claim to grant all employees' requests, 46% only the requests of personnel in certain categories or departments. The remaining 12% refuse all requests. Refusals are twice as frequent in establishments with fewer than 50 employees. Those with a large female labour force, where part-time working is more common, much more

frequently accept such requests. Part-time hours are granted least often in the automotive and construction industries and most often in the health and finance and banking sectors.

◆ More sick child leave in the public sector

The rules regarding sick child leave vary between employers. Though three-quarters authorize work schedule adjustments, the existence of specific paid leave entitlements depends on the status and size of the establishment. Practically all public or nationalized companies offer paid sick child leave, compared with 44% of private companies. Overall, the larger and older the establishment, the greater the likelihood that paid sick child leave will be offered. The average number of days granted per year and per family is 7.5, though it ranges from 5.5 days in the private sector to almost 10 days in nationalized companies and in the civil service.

All in all, family-friendly measures are concentrated in particular sectors and among particular employers, creating disparities between employees. They tend to reflect the history and traditions of the sector concerned rather than deliberate strategies on the part of employers. Their scope and the amounts involved are limited, however.

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ABSTRACT

Employers' family-friendly policies generally take the form of financial support rather than benefits in kind. Occasional benefits and services are much more common than those granted on a regular basis. Corporate day care centres are still very rare, for example, despite the fact that employers attach importance to child care provision. Some employers nonetheless offer a certain degree of work-time flexibility or agree to informal arrangements, often on a case-by-case basis. A wide range of benefits are offered by public sector companies and the civil service, often targeting families with children. In the private sector, the measures implemented, if any, mainly concern financial support and less family-oriented benefits, such as insurance fund contributions.