

Howard Stone

University Lecturer, Department of Material Sciences and Metallurgy

Interviewed by Marie Synakewicz

Since Howard has been working at the Department for Material Sciences and Metallurgy he has neither been derided for being an active dad, nor has he received special accolades. He laughingly says, the most common reaction from people who hear about his working arrangements, is a raised eyebrow and the exclamation: “4 children?!”

Howard and his wife had their first child prior to him starting as a member of academic staff in DMSM in 2006. More than eight years ago, following the arrival of their second child, he wanted to change his working hours to be able to care for his children during weekday evenings so that his wife could return to work. The department was very supportive during the process: the Departmental Secretary informed him about his options and he submitted a formal application, which was approved directly. Howard, now a dad of four, still works full-time, but starts and finishes earlier on some days of the week. During the afternoons and evenings of these days, and every other Saturday morning he is taking care of the children, while his wife is working as a veterinary surgeon in a local practice. He finds that being the primary care-giver for a large block of time results in a better relationship with his children. Having had his children prior to the introduction of Shared Parental Leave, he wished he could have spent more than the statutory two weeks of paternity leave available when they were born. After the birth of his daughter he took 4 weeks of holiday in addition to paternity leave. Fortunately, she was born at the end of June enabling him to have a whole summer with his family when academic commitments were sparse anyway. Since the Rolls-Royce University Technology Centre is jointly led by two established members of academic staff and a senior research assistant, other responsibilities like supervision of PhD students could be re-distributed.

Between his first and second post-doc Howard worked in a management consulting company, where long hours and presence in the office were required. He experienced himself that one “cannot maintain the highest levels of effective productivity over an excessively long working day.” Based on these experiences he leads his group with the motto that productivity is more important than presenteeism, e.g. by encouraging his PhD students to work in places they can work best on a paper manuscript even if that is not the office.

In very busy weeks, when grants or papers have to be written or exams have to be marked, Howard says that managing the work load can be quite a struggle because of childcare. He usually prioritizes his children, but has also learned to be more forward planning and selective about what he does which helps with finding the right balance. He accepts that those people that choose to put in extra hours at work rather than time with their families probably will always have a career advantage in an output-focussed area like academia. “The over and above of what a normal person can do in full-time is a personal choice”, he says, “but his choice is to have family.” In future years, as their youngest will be old enough to go to school, Howard and his wife might even make use of more flexibility and re-balance their working patterns differently.