
Work/ Life Balance: Overview

What are Work Life Balance Policies and Work Arrangements?

Abstract

The following short introduction provides an overview of those practices employed by companies in the implementation of work/ life balance. It illustrates the breadth and range of option available, some of them are tried-and-tested, others are newer.

The case studies included in this edition give best practice examples of how well-known companies and individuals are putting them to good use.

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Overview

Work life balance policies are those policies which help workers in combining employment with their family life, caring responsibilities and personal and social life outside the workplace. This definition includes statutory entitlements such as maternity, adoptive, force majeure, parental and carer's leave and other non-statutory measures such as childcare and employee assistance schemes.

There are many reasons why someone might be interested in work life balance working arrangements. They benefit employees by allowing flexibility in the workplace which allows them to effectively combine work and family responsibilities as well as their personal life. The benefits to the employer are that the policies allow for better retainment and recruitment of valuable employees which can save employers from costs associated with recruitment and training of new staff. The policies should aim to facilitate equality of opportunity for men and women in the workplace.

Flexible Hours Arrangements	Reduced Working Time
Flexitime	Job sharing
Annualised Hours	Job splitting
Flexible Leave Arrangements	Work sharing
Non-Statutory Leave Arrangements:	Part-time Work
Paternity Leave	Fixed part-time working
Compassionate Leave	Voluntary Reduced work-time
Term-time working	Flexible Location
Employment or career breaks	e-Working
Sabbaticals	Virtual teams
Study Leave	

Flexible Hours Arrangements

Flexitime: This is an arrangement whereby employers and employees negotiate hours of work that are of advantage to both. It usually involves defining 'peak' hours when all employees must be in work. Starting and finishing times, on the other hand, are normally flexible and there is usually provision for taking leave in lieu of additional hours worked.

Annualised hours : This scheme means that an employee is contracted to work a defined number of hours per year rather than per week. Working time can be scheduled to deal with seasonal variations and fluctuations in the demands of the business throughout the year – for example an employee may work longer hours at the one time of the year and shorter hours at another.

Non Statutory Leave Arrangements

Apart from statutory entitlements such as annual leave and maternity, adoptive, force majeure, parental and carer's leave, other leave arrangements are increasingly common. These include:

Paternity Leave: There might not be a legal entitlement to paid or unpaid paternity leave. On the other hand, a number of employers are recognising the importance of making some provision for such leave.

Compassionate or emergency leave: Most employers recognise the need for leave in emergency situations. Arrangements vary from organisation to organisation and are frequently informal.

Term-time working: This system means that the employee works during school terms but not during the school holidays. It appeals, in particular, to parents of school going children.

Employment or career break: At certain stages in working life a break may be needed, for example: to devote more time to other things or for personal development reasons. The facilitating of such breaks can assist in retaining valued staff. A growing number of organisations provide such breaks on either a formal or less structured basis.

Sabbaticals: This is a period of absence from work, which may or may not be on full pay, and duration is normally related to length of service. They provide an opportunity for employees to take a break from or reflect on their work, or engage in new activities.

Exam and Study Leave: When an employee is pursuing further education (this may or may not be job-related), an organisation may provide paid leave for the purposes of study and to enable the employee to sit exams. In the case of workers under 18, in some countries this may be mandatory.

Job sharing

This is an arrangement to divide one full-time job or to share work between two people with the responsibilities and benefits of the job being shared between them. The job can be shared in a number of ways:

On the basis of a split week; (eg: 2 and 3 day weeks).

On the basis of a split day.

On the basis of week on, week off.

Good management and communication are essential to effective job-sharing and this can be assisted where the job-sharer's can build and operate close working relations.

Job Splitting

This is an arrangement similar to job sharing except that the tasks involved in a full-time job are split between two people and each has responsibility for their own tasks rather than being equally responsible for the whole job. The need for co-ordination is, therefore, reduced. An advantage of job splitting is that a job can be split in such a way that certain tasks requiring particular skills can be grouped together. In addition, in certain situations the working times of those who have split a job can also overlap.

Work sharing

Work sharing is a development of the job sharing/job splitting concept which attempts to achieve business tasks while allowing for a wider range of attendance patterns. This arrangement requires a high level of employer/employee co-operation with a view to achieving the tasks that make up the job. It is important that the tasks are clearly defined, targets identified and the level of service decided upon before the workload is divided up. At this stage the manager and jobholders can agree on a system of work attendance to complete the work that best accommodates the staff.

Part-time work

Part-time working basically means working fewer hours than a comparable full-time worker in the same organisation.

There are various forms of part-time working:

Fixed part-time working : This is the most popular model. The employee works a reduced number of hours per day, or fewer days per week or even alternate weeks. This system is easy to understand and easy to manage.

Voluntary Reduced work-time : This is a scheme whereby an employee is allowed to reduce working time for a limited period with a right to return to full-time work.

E-Working:

The concept of e-Working means working at a distance, or even a remote location, and using technology to ease communications. It can also include a combination of e-Working and office based work. It is well suited to performing information technology tasks and works well in certain situations where the employee has a high degree of autonomy, eg: Architecture, journalism. Difficulties to be overcome can include issues of control, lack of face to face contact and consistency of service provision.

Virtual teams :

A further development in this area is the putting together of teams of e-workers to work in a mutually supportive way. The members of the team may never meet and

may not even be in the same country. This form of teamwork may be suitable in certain situations but the lack of personal interaction and human contact will render it inappropriate in situations where these factors are considered important.

References:

Further information and examples is available from: Irish Work Life Balance
<http://www.worklifebalance.ie/index.asp>)