Off the treadmill: Achieving Work/ Life Balance

Abstract

This article is the final chapter from the report: Off the treadmill, published in Ireland in 2003. It first outlines the findings in the rest of this very comprehensive policy review, providing a detailed study of comparative findings from over 900 practising companies. Finally, this chapter sets out indications of the future challenges for a wider implementation of work life balance.

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Issues & Challenges in Achieving Work/Life Balance

This chapter draws upon the findings and conclusions of the previous six chapters and presents the issues and challenges ahead for achieving Work-Life Balance.

- Chapter one set out the objectives of the study and outlined the methodology used.
- This was followed by a review of the Family Friendly/ Work-Life Balance literature drawing upon a range of international sources.
- In chapter three, international statistics were examined to show the position of Ireland relative to other EU countries in relation to the uptake and practice of flexible working options. The chapter also provided a summary of previous surveys conducted in Ireland on flexible working arrangements and childcare.
- Chapter four presented the findings of the survey of 912 employers in relation to the availability/take-up of flexible working time options and leave arrangements. It set out the costs/benefits to the organisation of such practices and their views on work-life balance.
- In chapter five the survey of 1006 employees in five organisations is covered. It dealt with the uptake/experience of, and attitudes towards, flexible working/leave arrangements of employees, managers and colleagues of employees who have availed, with a view to ascertaining the dis/advantages for employers and employees as well as obstacles to the further development of these arrangements.
- Chapter six set out the qualitative findings of the study obtained in the interviews with key informants, open-ended responses to the employer/employee surveys and focus group sessions.

This chapter synthesises the key findings from the chapters, as outlined above, by setting out the issues involved, followed by the challenges arising from these in terms of wider adoption of work-life balance.

Forces Supporting/Constraining Work-Life Balance

There are many forces operating that will increase, rather than reduce, the pressures to move towards greater flexibility and/or work-life balance. Section

7.1.1 outlines a number of forces supporting the demand for greater work-life balance namely: the increasing heterogeneity and changing nature of the labour force; economic conditions; information and communication technologies; public versus private sector adoption. Balanced against these is the increasingly pervasiveness of 'long hours' working. It is increasingly obvious from EU statistics that employees are heterogeneous and, over a life span, they seek different patterns of working initially casual and part-time while in school/college, shifting towards full-time working on a contract/permanent basis on entry to the labour market. Subsequent attachment to the labour market has traditionally been highly gender-tracked, with men remaining in full-time continuous employment, while women exited, took career breaks, switched to part-time/jobsharing and/or availed of flexitime. These arrangements were predicated upon the predominantly 'male breadwinner' model, with a dependent partner whose working life adjusted to parenting/caring roles. Across the European Union, this pattern is becoming less distinct with a falling birth rate and a rise in single person households, childless couples and dual career families.

Employers have noted in their survey responses that the current/changing profile of their workforce will require them to make progress towards the provision of work-life balance. In the current climate where family friendly working arrangements remain the most common forms of flexibility available, there are signs of resentment among employees between those who are allowed to avail (e.g. parents) and those who are not 'eligible' (e.g. single people). These divisions will need to be addressed as more employees seek multiple roles involving combinations of employment, parenting/caring, leisure/sports, business ventures, community/political involvement during their careers.

Apart from the grade divisions there are also major differences in the utilisation of work-life balance arrangements that relate to gender. While flexitime is utilised by women and men, homeworking is more common among men, particularly in managerial, professional and technical posts. In contrast, reduced working time, in the form of part-time working and job-sharing, is a predominantly female working pattern, particularly among women with small children. It is also significant that proportionately more women would like to avail of reduced hours, while men (including fathers) would prefer flexible full-time working and working from home. This increased demand by women for specific work-life balance arrangements that support reduced hours of working has to be offset against the finding from the focus groups sessions that suggest there is a 'penalty clause' in relation to the uptake of part-time working/job-sharing, that is not observed in relation to flexitime. The existence of this negative impression that opting for reduced hours signals that an employee has put their career "on hold" means that such arrangements will not attract men, nor more senior and managerial staff. There is a very real danger that part-time working/job-sharing will continue to remove employees from the career ladder.

Other sources of pressure have arisen in the tightening labour market associated with economic boom, especially in the mid to end 1990s which witnessed an excess demand for labour, reverse out-migration, greater encouragement to women returners and rising female participation rates. This excess demand for labour created opportunities for an increasing proportion of

women to work part-time while paradoxically, the economic constraints of the early 1980s created similar opportunities for work sharing in the Irish Civil Service that led to the introduction of job-sharing and career breaks. Hence the Irish experience to date shows that the impetus for flexible working arrangements can arise in conditions of economic growth and/or downturn. However the quality and/or quantity of work-life balance options available may be adversely affected by an economic downturn.

A further factor contributing to demand for work-life balance has come through changing technology. From an historical perspective, the industrialisation process based on technological innovation brought about the separation of home from workplace (when hitherto production was either farm or workshop and hence home based) as employment became factory and subsequently office based. Improvements in information and communication technologies (ICT) now offer support for 'working from a distance', either from home or a community located workplace. E-working and tele-conferencing are examples of alternatives to workplace-bound location patterns. There is also a recognised danger that ICT can militate against work-life balance by making employees constantly 'on call' via their mobile phones/emailing and that sometimes working from home can be a substitute for formal childcare arrangements and thereby place increased pressure on employees to juggle work/family in the home.

It is notable from the survey of employers that the Irish public sector, as in many other industrialised countries, has taken the lead in making available arrangements that contribute to work-life balance. In these organisations the preoccupation is with restrictions relating to eligibility and career prospects, since line mangers are not responsible for the 'bottom line' results that would prevail in the private sector. In contrast, the private sector has been slower to make such arrangements available – with the frequent comment "We're not the Civil Service". It is evident that more supports are required to promote work-life balance especially in the private sector, to encourage the emergence and promotion of 'employer of choice' arguments through emphasising gains in terms of recruitment/retention, greater diversity, health and safety, higher morale/loyalty levels and greater productivity. There is evidence from this study that while these benefits are recognised by managers in both the private and public sectors, it is much more difficult to implement work-life balance arrangements in a manner that is equitable and allows access throughout different levels within organisations.

Against these forces that support the introduction of greater work-life balance, there is a growing pattern, in both the private and public sectors, that long hours of work, beyond the standard hours expected in the job, are the norm and, of even greater concern, working these hours has come to be seen as the hallmark, and price, of career progression into managerial grades. This leaves many line managers with the role of responding to demands for work-life balance arrangements that they may be unable to avail of themselves.

Benefits/Constraints

Unlike many previous studies that have concentrated on reconciliation issues for employees with children/other caring responsibilities, particularly women, this study has identified a much wider demand on the part of employees for work-life

balance regardless of their gender, family or marital status. The study shows that from an employer perspective, organisations are becoming increasingly conscious of the need to attract and retain high calibre staff and to accommodate them in achieving a better balance between their working and non-working lives. It demonstrates that the majority of employers rank work-life balance as important to their organisations. They also recognise from the profile of their workforce that demand for work-life balance is likely to expand rather than contract/remain stable in the future. The results of the survey demonstrate that for employers the benefits of work-life balance arrangements outweigh the constraints and costs, by acknowledging the direct benefits derived from increased satisfaction, morale, productivity and loyalty among their employees. Employers are also aware that there are additional indirect benefits through retention and reduction in recruitment/training and development costs of replacing valued staff.

Most employers support the view that their employees should be able to balance work and home life, though this has to be reconciled with the more widely held view that employers' first responsibility is to achieve their goals and employees should not expect to be able to change their working pattern if it disrupts the business goals of the organisation. Against these benefits are the constraints mentioned by employers in terms of complexity of implementation, lack of demand by employees and competition from other organisational priorities.

The survey of employers illustrates that flexibility is commonly sought and frequently a requirement of working (e.g. shifts in 24 hour manufacturing, health services, reduced hours in retailing and flexitime in the public service) within certain organisations. What is more difficult and presents a major challenge is the need to reconcile what can be quite specific employer requirements (e.g. staff presence at start/duration of production run in manufacturing, responding to customer/client's needs in professional services) with more equitable and workable hours that may vary, on a daily, weekly, seasonal basis, for individual employees.

The major constraints to introducing flexitime and reduced working time are: customer responsiveness, production demands, grade limits (e.g. employees who manage staff may not be eligible to avail) and scheduling 24 hour operations that require all staff to be available at set up time. These constraints are most acute in manufacturing, private and public services, especially in health care provision.

In relation to homeworking there is a wider array of difficulties to overcome: business needs, equipment/remote access provision and costs, documentation /paperwork, need to see customers face-to-face, professionalism and non-applicability in distribution sectors.

The size of the organisation is also important in supporting/constraining the availability and adoption of work-life balance arrangements. It is clear that in larger, and particularly public sector organisations, formal HR policies tend to set out what flexibility/leave arrangements are available and the terms under which such arrangements can be applied for. However, in themselves, these policies do not imply that all applications are granted as there may be limits pertaining to skills, grades, staff numbers, sectoral demands or even reason for applying, that limit access among an organisation's employees. Smaller organisations tend to rely on informal arrangements that allow the organisation to respond to requests on a

'case by case' basis. In either case the ultimate decision may lie with the line manager, outside of the HR ambit.

Not all employees seek the same solutions to the need for work-life balance and individual needs may alter radically throughout a person's lifespan. For example, part-time working might offer a route into and out of the labour force, and provide a transition back to full-time employment following a career break/maternity leave. At present, flexible working tends to be dealt with independently of leave arrangements. Current working hours, well beyond the standard for the job, and expanding commuting times pose major challenges to policy makers in targeting the provision of transportation, traffic management, childcare, housing policy and working time arrangements. The consequences of these pressures run totally counter to the need for work-life balance since by increasing the levels of stress, they also pose an issue for health and safety at work, for some employees/employers. Although a radical solution to these problems would extend well beyond the limits of this study, there is a case for re-examining 'core hours' that currently contribute to extremes of traffic congestion and a scramble for parking spaces at places of work.

This study reinforces the findings of previous research in demonstrating that the take-up of work-life balance is highly gendered. The options that imply no loss of pay (flexitime and working from home) or overtime tend to be sought equally, if not predominantly, by men. In contrast to this, women who seek flexibility have opted for reduced hours (mainly in part-time working/job-sharing and to a lesser degree term-time working) and many more seek such arrangements in preference to working from home. Apart from the potential loss of earnings there is also a perception borne out by this study (along with others) that opting for less than full-time hours signals a lack of commitment to the job/organisation and/or that the individual has put their career 'on hold'. Far from finding evidence to support this perception, the focus group sessions suggest the opposite – that employees who have a degree of work-life balance are more committed and loyal, as they value the opportunity to work flexible hours, and are also more productive since they frequently manage to get their tasks done in less time.

A major challenge will be to avoid a twin track in which men are in the fast lane involving continuous and often excessive hours in full-time employment, partly from home, and women in the slow lane working/seeking reduced hours and/or opt for career breaks. If these twin track conditions continue or are accentuated it will add to the existing evidence that work-life balance is for 'mothers of young children' and hence to be avoided by all other employees. This also points to a further challenge at the level of the organisation in transforming its culture to one in which flexibility is beneficial to all; accessible on a fair and equitable basis, in accordance with organisational limits; and managed in a professional, rather than an ad hoc manner. This can only be achieved by convincing those in senior management positions, in particular men, to actively promote and adopt such practices.

References:
Irish Work Life Balance website: http://www.worklifebalance.ie/index.asp, Full report can be downloaded from: http://www.worklifebalance.ie/index.asp?locID=66&docID=-1