
Improving Work-Life Balance – What Are Other Countries Doing?

Abstract

This article from the Canadian government summarises developments in work-life balance in western nations setting out the issues which requires governments and the private sector to explore different solutions.

The Government of Canada is committed to building strong social foundations by providing supports to meet the needs of families and to ensure that children receive the best possible start in life. One approach to implement this commitment is to support working parents so that they can build strong and cohesive families. The Labour Program, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) encourages the development of workplace measures that improve work-life balance and support working parents.

The Labour Program has published several research studies to assist public policy development on work-life balance issues, and to help organizations design and implement programs and policies that facilitate work-life balance. This report is part of that body of work and is intended to provide valuable information on work-life balance issues to managers, unions, employees and human resource professionals.

This report provides an overview of different types of work-life balance initiatives that have been developed by industrial countries around the world. It shows that these governments are increasingly committed to reducing the social, health and business costs of work-life conflict.

Data from the European Union, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States illustrate that work-life conflict is a growing issue in these jurisdictions. Many workers report that they are dissatisfied with their working hours, stressed from high levels of work intensity, and suffer from health problems due to work demands. To improve their work-life balance, many workers would prefer to work reduced and more flexible hours.

Some countries, such as the U.K., New Zealand and Australia, actively endorse work-life balance as an explicit policy goal. They have launched work-life balance campaigns that focus on promotional activities and the voluntary compliance of employers to develop and implement work-life balance practices in their organizations.

These three countries have all developed websites on work-life balance that provide newsletters, case studies, publications and links to other relevant information and legislation. Work-life balance is also promoted through award programs. New Zealand and Australia, for example, both offer award programs to highlight organizations that demonstrate best practices. In addition, some governments have introduced legislation to support work-life balance. The U.K.

legislation to give parents the right to request flexible working arrangements is notable in this regard.

These work-life balance campaigns include a variety of resources to support employers. The U.K. and Australia have published guides to assist employers in evaluating whether work-life balance policies are well integrated into the organization's overall business plans and whether the programs are actually being used by employees. Guides are also aimed at making the "business case" for work-life balance – helping employers to understand that work-life conflict has significant business costs associated with absenteeism and turnover rates. In addition, the U.K. has programs to provide funding and consultancy services so that employers can develop practices that support work-life balance.

Other countries, such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden, focus less on promotional activities and are more involved in developing legislative and other measures that support broad social policy goals to help workers balance paid work with unpaid responsibilities. They primarily seek to improve work-life balance by redressing gender inequities in the labour force and in the division of unpaid work, particularly with respect to care-giving.

Paid parental leave benefits in these countries, especially the parental leave schemes in Denmark and Sweden, are designed to encourage parents to take an active role in care-giving while staying attached to the labour force. For example, Denmark and Sweden both allow parents to work part-time and prolong their leave beyond the usual benefits period. Sweden's leave program includes an information campaign to emphasize the importance of the father's involvement in care-giving.

Initiatives to give workers more control over their working time, such as the Netherlands' Adjustment of Hours Law and Denmark's amendments to the Act on Part-time Work, also assist workers in improving their work-life balance. Other initiatives, such as the Netherlands' "leave savings" and Sweden's sabbatical leave, allow workers more time to devote to care-giving and to pursue other interests outside of work.

In addition, Sweden has implemented an action plan to reduce costs associated with sick leave and to reduce the impact poor health has on work-life balance. Gender inequities are also addressed. Swedish research indicates that women are more likely to be employed in occupations with inferior working environments and to have heavier workloads than men, when both paid and unpaid work is considered.

Finally, several countries have adopted individual pieces of legislation or policies that address some aspect of work-life balance. These initiatives are not necessarily part of a comprehensive program or policy approach to achieve work-life balance, but these measures could be seen as one way to improve an employee's balance between work and other responsibilities. Examples include France's reduction of hours in the statutory work week, Belgium's introduction of time credits, Ireland's "Work Life Balance Day" and the U.S. resolution to proclaim "Work and Family Month."

This report shows that there is not likely to be any "one size fits all" answer to work-life balance issues. A variety of approaches are available to support work-life balance, ranging from promotional programs that emphasize the importance of balance and provide support to employers to reduce the business costs associated

with work-life conflict, to legislation that supports parents with care-giving responsibilities.

It is clear that improving work-life balance is an important component of the policy agenda for many industrial countries, and the issue is likely to become even more important in future. Canadians can learn from the initiatives of other countries and determine whether these approaches could be adopted to suit the needs of Canada's workplace partners.

This report available from:
<http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/lp/spila/wlb/iwlb/02summary.shtml>