

A NEW BALANCING ACT: WORK, LIFE AND OTHER CHALLENGES!

AN INTERESTING TWIST TO A FAMILIAR STORY

Discussion of the trade-offs involved in balancing a full and rich life with building a successful career are a familiar story to many people, and achieving this work-life balance (WLB) has become a well established aim that has received attention by policy makers, employers and employees alike.

Typically, debate of WLB issues centres upon the often competing pressures presented by childcare responsibilities, heavy workloads, job insecurities and frequent career changes - issues compounded by global economic trends towards increased competition between firms. In many respects, progress has been good: the debate around WLB is becoming increasingly sophisticated and more flexible and appropriate work practices are becoming mainstream. However, the debate – and therefore the responses developed – has been missing a key dimension: WLB for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

The '*Adjust the balance*' project, funded by EQUAL and led by West Midlands Quality Centre (WMQC), takes familiar WLB issues and tests approaches in order to develop solutions for groups commonly excluded from the WLB debate: people with disabilities, older people and self-employed women with caring responsibilities for example. These groups face the same WLB issues, but often with added complications and challenges which require new and innovative solutions.

Achieving balance for these groups is at the heart of the approach adopted by *Adjust the balance*. Anita Brenen from the Circle Network – a key partner organisation - illustrates this point in relation to people with disabilities: "*Work-life balance for many people with disabilities simply means that there is no work and just life!*"

The focus on older workers is also pertinent against the backdrop of the demographic and labour market challenges facing Europe: an aging workforce, the issue of increasing retirement ages and public pension reforms, and skills shortages in many sectors - each of which present a compelling case for action!

The work of *Adjust the balance* sets out to refine the crude view of a conflict between work and life - employees leading a full and rich life do not necessarily conflict with the 'bottom line' motivations of employers! As Dave Kennedy, the project coordinator, puts it: "*Addressing WLB issues can help them become the employer of choice when people are deciding who they want to work for*".

Adjust the Balance is working on a number of important issues and it is clear that lessons learnt from the project could be of interest to a wide range of people across Europe!

'A FREE-FLOATING EXPERIENCE'

One interesting aspect of Adjust the Balance is the partnership itself. There are currently 24 organisations in an evolving and flexible partnership spread across the whole of the West Midlands. Partners are drawn from a range of areas: the voluntary sector, e.g. Birmingham Voluntary Services Council; the public sector, e.g. ACAS, University of Central England, Birmingham City Council and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council; the private sector, e.g. Harris Associates, the West Midlands Quality Centre; and social partners, e.g. the Trade Union Congress.

The partnership itself has been designed to be as open and accountable as possible, so that - as Amanda Wright, the project manager, says – "*...most people see most things.*"

This approach has influenced the development of project activities in a very concrete and fruitful way; for example, all partners were responsible for generating initial ideas and appraising each proposed intervention against the objectives of the project and EQUAL programme. This meant that ideas were well developed and had broad support from partners before coming to full development, which is essential for their longer-term sustainability and impact.

Project meetings are also influenced by the approach taken and the WLB philosophy! As far as possible, they are held at venues that relate to the history of WLB issues; for example, meetings have been held at industrial museums to remind partners of the changing nature of work. Early meetings were also used as development sessions to help bond the partnership. At one such meeting – held at the Black County Museum – partners were divided into teams and asked to explore the museum to find examples of exhibitions that demonstrated the EQUAL principles!

At the start of the project, some partners were not used to this way of working and one even described it as "a free-floating experience".

This way of working is now really valued within the project and has proved to be a creative and empowering way of running a partnership. As WLB specialist and *Adjust the balance* evaluator, Anita Pickerden, puts it: "*This partnership has even managed to make risk assessment an innovative, inclusive and vibrant process!*"

Much more work has been done within the partnership itself to improve the effectiveness and capacity of the project. One example of this has been the possibility for partners to access leadership and project management training to support their implementation of their EQUAL work, as well as any future work. But *Adjust the balance* has not just stopped there. It has also offered a range of language courses to support and improve the transnational working. The transnational partners of *Adjust the balance* are: RESSORT (Spain); STORE (Italy) and OZ Klub strieborných hláv (Slovakia), and members of the project have been learning the relevant languages to further the pan-European spirit of EQUAL - Dave Kennedy has even found himself learning a few phrases in Slovak! A few words maybe, but nevertheless an essential part of fostering good quality communication and relationships across transnational boundaries.

TESTING THE CONCEPT

The multi-faceted nature of WLB issues and the target groups involved means that activity is very wide ranging. In order to keep the work focused, the project has three thematic sub-groups, which are underpinned by a 'Mainstreaming and Dissemination' group.

Examples of the work done under the three sub-groups include:

Research and Development

- Researching WLB issues relating to people living in remote and rural areas, in terms of poor access to public transport, lack of choice and flexibility in childcare provision and how employer practices can meet these needs;
- Investigation into existing European models for WLB relating to older workers to see what elements could apply in a UK context;
- Research into models of WLB for people with disabilities - both in and out of employment – to discover good practice in this area; and
- Working with groups of students to assess their expectations in terms of WLB and trying to pre-empt some of the future demands made by employees.

Employer Engagement

- Linking one Local Government stress management programme to other local authorities in the region;
- Using Health and Safety standards as a means of engaging employers with WLB issues;

- Supporting women with caring responsibilities into self-employment through a sub-project called 'Balancing Business';
- Development of a management training programme to make sure that WLB is a key part of training for those who will manage others;
- Working with Health Service bodies to develop a toolkit for spotting stress, which will be rolled out across other organisations in the sector; and
- Working with the voluntary sector to develop their policies and procedures - an area often lacking in the sector - by changing their quality assurance systems to take account of WLB.

Qualifications and standards

- Working with a local university to devise a foundation degree for WLB practitioners to raise the profile and training standards for professionals working in this area; and
- Working with Investors in People (who promote business improvement through the management and development of people) to develop a specific WLB module.

Early benefits of all this work at an individual level are promising, and the work to support women into part-time self-employment has already attracted the attention of transnational partners – particularly the Italians, who recently came over to the UK to see what they could learn by seeing the 'Balancing Business' sub-project in action.

This sub-project run by two self-employed business advisors who have expertise in supporting disadvantaged women in setting up and developing their own business. The main aim of the project is to promote self-employment as a flexible option that can be made to fit around caring responsibilities. This approach recognises that WLB changes over a life-cycle – in this case because caring responsibilities increase or diminish over time.

Balancing Business has so far supported eighty-seven women and more than ten have entered self-employment in a variety of areas, including creative industries and complementary therapies. Actions have been designed to boost self esteem and knowledge of techniques to promote a flexible approach to working. The key to the success of this action has been providing individual support to the women, enabling advisors to look at all areas of their lives.

MAKING THE CASE

Although direct work with individual beneficiaries is important to the project, effecting more systemic change is the priority. To this end, the EQUAL project – as well as each action within it - is designed to prove the case and to advance policy and practice relating to WLB. Amanda Wright's take on this approach is that: "*We want to change the environment that people are received into.*"

To some extent, the project is 'pushing on an open door' and demand for solutions to WLB issues also coming from firms themselves. The UK context of near full employment and a variety of skills shortages in the labour market has meant that firms need to look for additional ways of distinguishing themselves when recruiting. The business case for addressing other areas of employees' lives is therefore growing and many firms are recognising the bottom line benefits of addressing WLB issues - improved productivity, increased retention and happier, more functional teams within the workplace.

The wide range of activities described above have been devised in such a way as to fill the gaps and build upon the already impressive evidence base for adopting a progressive approach to WLB policies and practices; *Adjust the balance* has made a conscious use of action research to support this work. Using this evidence base to change the practice of employers is crucial, as Amanda Wright puts it: "*It's fundamental to our work that we make sure that businesses understand what WLB means and why it is beneficial to them.*"

It is one thing to produce evidence relating to WLB; it is another to ensure that the right people are exposed to these messages! In order to help with the targeting of their dissemination activity,

the project has produced a map of key actors and their interests in this area to see the demand for learning. This will be used to target messages emerging from the work.

A range of actors are being targeted by the project, these include: national policy makers in the Departments for Trade and Industry, Education and Skills and Work and Pensions; regional bodies in the West Midlands, such as the LSC, Business Links and Confederation of British Industry; major employers, such as the Health Service and Local Authorities – and the voluntary sector (through standard Quality Assurance systems).

The project is using a range of methods and tactics for increasing their ability to influence mainstream policy and practice; this includes:

- Getting involved in regional Corporate Social Responsibility networks to ensure that WLB becomes a part of their agenda;
- Using networks and existing events to gain access to national policy makers;
- Running competitions, with prizes and awards nights for businesses demonstrating good practice in WLB;
- Using formative evaluation to demonstrate early benefits, especially in terms of soft outcomes.

Ultimately, the main output from the project will be a regional WLB Strategy, with the aim of sharing good practice across the region, covering all sectors and concentrating on vulnerable groups in the labour market. Evidence emerging from the actions described above will be brought together by the partners to form the evidence base for the Strategy, which will then be used to influence other organisations at national, regional and local level.

As well as these approaches, the project is also producing a range of different products to promote the concepts tested. One of the more unusual products planned is a comedy DVD looking at WLB from a humorous perspective, rather than the dry and serious materials usually produced. Fortunately, the project benefits from having two comedy sketch writers in the partnership. This is in line with the philosophy of *Adjust the balance*, as Dave Kennedy puts it: "*We're not frightened to try things and we're not worried if some things don't work - EQUAL is about being tripped-up occasionally!*"

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