

We can make a difference

The Estonian employers' confederation takes the lead in a flexi-work initiative

Creating win-win situations for employees and employers

Flexible working time arrangements are not common in Estonia. The statistics indicate that over 80% of mothers who have infants and toddlers would like to combine their care responsibilities with gainful employment. The EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) "Choices and Balances" assumes that the unemployment and inactivity of this group of women are directly connected to the lack of family-friendly, flexible work schedules. Besides the traditional forms of part-time and some emerging tele-work initiatives, both employees and employers are not really aware of the benefits of flexible working.

Led by the Estonian Employers' Confederation the DP has taken on the challenge of helping both women and men to reconcile their professional and family life and, at the same time, it is also supporting companies in developing work-life-balance schemes as part of their personnel policies. Three women managers based at the Confederation's head office in Tallinn are the movers and shakers behind the ambitious project. Kadri Seeder, Communications Manager and Coordinator of the EQUAL DP, is one of them. "Choices & Balance was born from real life situations," she says, "without flexi-time arrangements and the possibility of working from home, we would not have been able to continue our careers. Our organisation is a pioneer in this field. We know exactly how valuable family or women friendly personnel policies are when you have small children. Our DP can make a real difference". Together with Training Manager Kristi-Jette Remi and Katrin Reimann, who is responsible for communications within the EQUAL project, Kadri convinced the decision-makers in the Confederation to take the lead in bringing about change and to introduce less rigid work organisation and schedules. This commitment given by the Confederation, which represents 24 branch associations with 1500 enterprises

which employ 150, 000 people, was also due to the fact that many companies in Estonia are facing skills gaps and have to attract qualified women and young parents, particularly in the construction and metal industries, but also in trade and sales.

Step by step towards more family- friendly, flexible work

To make new, flexible work organisation a reality, the DP has set up a work programme that combines a vast array of interlinked activities, that include:

- An interdisciplinary background survey that is currently being undertaken to analyse the obstacles to the introduction of more flexible work organisation at state and company level. This survey takes on board the hurdles that might be faced by individual parents and it also seeks to identify best practices in reconciling family and professional life through flexible forms of training and work not only in Estonia but also in other EU Member States. Since not all forms of flexible work are covered by Estonian law, the remit of the survey includes a comparative analysis of relevant legislation in other countries and recommendations on how new or improved legal regulations in Estonia could enhance the use of flexible work and the competitiveness of parents who are unemployed because of childcare obligations.
- A nationwide publicity campaign that puts the spotlight on flexi-work and its advantages for both parents and employers. This will involve the public media and also use the networks and dissemination channels of NGOs.
- A basic counselling and training programme is being developed for women and men who – after the birth of a child – are economically inactive. The programme, which takes account of employers' needs, will be piloted with a group of 50 par-



ents who will be offered tailored counselling and support to (re)-access the labour market. Four groups of parents will be organised in different parts of the country and participants will be chosen via questionnaires, the main selection criteria being that the applicants really want to work. The training programme includes career planning, CV and interview preparation, time and self-management, psychological support, and ICT and other refresher courses to enhance their employability. This programme will be based on a study that focuses on the attitudes and needs of parents with young children. The researchers are looking into the economic and legal circumstances that govern activity or non-activity and are also analysing the influence of social factors such as attitudes, values, behavioural norms and gender stereotypes. The study will involve a sample of 30 people: ten parents of toddlers who are already taking advantage of flexible forms of work, ten parents who are considering returning to gainful employment and another ten who do not really want a job.

- A final stage of activities that will concentrate on working with employers and on introducing the new flexi-work models developed thanks to EQUAL into the personnel policies and practices of companies in different economic sectors. A good practice catalogue and guidebook will be produced to further disseminate and mainstream the DP's results.

The project's multi-faceted activities are mirrored by the composition of the partnership. The Employers' Confederation has joined forces with other key players. These players include the Bureau of the Minister of Population Affairs that plays a leading role in national family policies and outstanding educational and research institutions such as the Estonian Law Centre Foundation, the Praxis Centre for Policy Studies, the Tallinn Univer-

sity and the Estonian Women's Studies and Resource Centre. Through involving the Confederation of Midwives the DP has forged a coalition with an NGO that has a huge capacity to reach out to its target group. In addition to those partners, the Steering Committee of the DP also involves the Gender Equality Department of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Services and Social Protection Department of the Estonian Labour Market Board.

Transnationality: learning from difference

"When we were building the transnational dimension of the project", says Communications Director Katrin Reiman, "we looked for different rather than similar approaches to tackling the dilemma of reconciliation. We now have partners in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland whose contexts, target groups and strategies differ from ours, but we all share the aim of making labour markets more accessible for disadvantaged groups." Whilst the Polish partner is experimenting with telework centres, the German DP is supporting women in accessing many different kinds of jobs. The Dutch project is developing comprehensive pathways for unemployed women to help them create businesses and the Italian project is also focusing on business creation. However, this DP has a very innovative approach: top managers who have lost their jobs are working with disadvantaged groups with a view to all of them creating their own jobs as entrepreneurs.

The partners have agreed to jointly develop a number of products such as a good practice catalogue, dissemination and mainstreaming strategies and a common website.

Contact

Kadri Seeder
Estonian Employers Confederation
Kiriku 6
10130 Tallinn
Tel.: +372 6999 301
Fax: +372 6999 310
E-mail: kadri@ettk.ee
Website: <http://www.ettk.ee>
Project Website: <http://www.cb.ee>
Link to EQUAL database description: EE-4