

HOLDING A JOB - HAVING A LIFE

EQUAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO IMPROVING THE WORK-LIFE-BALANCE OF WOMEN AND MEN

THE DILEMMA OF RECONCILING WORK AND FAMILY

Flexibility of work organisation has increased significantly in recent years. However, it is often the needs of enterprises with respect to the production process and market competitiveness that drive this flexibility. Consequently, it does not necessarily contribute to a better reconciliation of work and private life. Too few employers understand how a flexible, family-friendly work organisation can enhance the overall performance of a company.

The dilemma of reconciliation is mainly perceived as a "women's problem" and this is reflected in female employment patterns: 37% of women with care responsibilities for children are working part-time^[1], compared to 17% of women with no such responsibilities and 6.5% of men^[2]. Whilst this choice is predominantly a voluntary decision, a growing number of women have no other option. Particularly in retail or personal services, employers are increasingly organising jobs on a part-time basis. But, whether by choice or not, and even if those reduced working hours help to cope with a job and various care and family tasks, there is a price to pay. Part-timers have fewer opportunities for training and career progression, lower salary levels and reduced access to supplementary payments and social protection benefits^[3].

Striking a balance between work and family life is an enormous challenge for people regularly working full-time, overtime or atypical hours. Those patterns have been increasing during the last decade^[4]. In the EU15 more than 30% of all employees are working on Saturdays, with figures for women being only slightly lower than for men. Whilst night work remains a male domain, evening work has become a normal routine for 20% of female and 33% of male workers.

EU POLICIES TO PROMOTE WORK-LIFE-BALANCE

Both the Report on Equality of Women and Men 2004 and Report of the Employment Task Force (2003) emphasise the need for more flexible work organisation. Flexible, family-friendly working-time arrangements are emphasised as key to making gender equality a reality in the labour market, but also to improving quality and productivity at work. Also, in the framework of the Consultation of Social Partners at Community level concerning the revision of the Working Time Directive (93/104) EC, the European Commission proposes to strengthen workers' rights to reconciling work and private life, and encourages the Social Partners to negotiate measures that improve compatibility of work and family.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH FAMILY-FRIENDLY PERSONNEL POLICIES

EQUAL has developed good practices that made a visible difference for women and men who want both gainful employment and career, and a more satisfying family and personal life. Comprehensive work-life-balance policies enabled cultural change in companies and organisations that have committed themselves to implementing new flexible work organisation and various family support services.

Convincing employers

Many companies, and particularly SMEs, shy away from work-life-balance policies because they assume they cannot afford the costs. To overcome the reticence of employers EQUAL partnerships have been collecting and studying a large body of success stories from throughout Europe, the US and Canada. Those good practices are clearly indicating that employers can gain substantially through work-life-balance packages. Hard facts such as presented in the following example proved to be a driving force for companies to introduce family-friendly personnel policies.

- On behalf of the German Government, a major European business consultancy undertook a cost-benefit analysis of flexible work organisation and other support measures for parents in a representative sample of enterprises. Results show that, on average, a basic **"family package" (counselling for parents, individualised flexi-time, telework and childcare)** helped each company to save up to several hundred thousand euro in reduced costs. Model calculations based on the loss incurred through staff turn-over and absenteeism on the one hand, and on the cost of the "family package" on the other, demonstrate that on average **a return on investment of at least 25% can be generated.**

Working time flexibility benefiting employees and employers

A careful analysis of employees' and employers' needs in terms of working time flexibility, enabled EQUAL partners in all Member States to design and test a variety of different solutions.

- EQUAL supported companies to introduce full-time hours over four days, periodic home working and telework, combinations of long and short days and working longer hours over a defined period to accrue non-working blocks of time. Those banked hours could for instance be used during schools holidays or family emergencies. Results were very satisfying, especially for female employees. Mothers appreciated the **general reduction of stress** and also the opportunity to **balance working time and childcare provision better**, and to spend more **quality time with their children and partners**. Employers came to recognise that both **job performance and productivity increased.**

In some cases the experience facilitated the **transfer of those models to other target groups.** What began as pilots for parents in the framework of EQUAL is increasingly becoming regular practice benefiting other categories of staff.

- In [Ireland](#), flexi-time models were adapted to the needs of **older workers and people with mental health problems.** Personalised flexible working hours, for instance, helped women and men suffering from depression. The solutions are based on the fact that between the recurrent spells of the illness, people have periods when they are well enough to work. Experience showed that they can be empowered to lead a more balanced life from this experience of work. EQUAL good practice convinced employers to give older employees the choice of phasing out of gainful employment through flexible work arrangements. This includes gradual retirement packages offering the option to work part-time for two years prior to retirement (2, 3 or 4 days a week). Along with this, the employee's pension contributions are paid in full. Thus upon retirement, the employees receive their full pension benefits, which is particularly important for women. The approach helped enterprises to meet the emerging skills gaps due to demographic change and to transfer the knowledge and skills of older workers to the next generation.

Tackling the disadvantages of flexibility

In some Member States, EQUAL managed to change atypical working patterns that severely hampered reconciliation. In France, EQUAL partnerships were, for instance, linking new work schedules to a process of (re)assessing and reorganising work environments and job contents.

- In one case this resulted in dismantling the "broken shifts" that were the usual pattern for cleaning all municipal buildings of the city of [Rennes](#). Before, to make enough income, the predominantly female staff had to work two shifts, one in the early morning and another at night. Thanks to EQUAL, they now have full-time jobs and can either opt for a schedule from 7.30 to 15.30 or from 10.45 to 18.45. **Team work** is a key element of the new model. Whilst in the past one person has been assigned a certain number of square metres, two women are now sharing the work in a larger space. The size of the space is calculated in such a way that one can replace the other in case of absence. Moreover, the new scheme enabled the women to swap workplaces so that they **live closer to work and need less time to commute.** As a result of the whole arrangement **absenteeism has dropped by 30%.**
- In a second case, thanks to EQUAL, a large hotel chain was able to **reduce the alarming turnover and absenteeism of its female staff.** For example, a new solution was found for receptionists who, in the past, had been covering two rush periods - one in the morning when guests were checking out and another in the evening when new arrivals were piling up. The free hours in between did not really help to improve family life, since employees had to leave for their second shift just as their children or partners

would be returning home. A **multi-skills programme was the turning point towards more family-friendly work patterns**. Employees were trained to qualify for more than one job. As a result, a person can now, on the same day, work first as a receptionist and then as a waiter. This allows HR managers to propose full days instead of "broken" schedules. In addition, the approach helps employees to develop a career and get an increase in pay.

Meeting care and other family needs

Lack of affordable and flexible care for children and other dependants is a major barrier to balancing work and family life in many Member States. EQUAL partners solicited the financial support of employers to establish or improve care services for their employees. Another successful approach to meeting family needs while at the same time helping companies attract and retain qualified staff was the introduction of "**help desks for family matters**", based in companies or local authorities.

- In [Germany](#), [Italy](#), [Spain](#) and [Portugal](#), EQUAL training programmes enabled women, both employed and unemployed, to provide **counselling and practical advice to employees**. This may include support to locate the most suitable childcare or elderly care service and to find quick solutions to almost any kind of emergency. Developing personalised working time arrangements and career planning for parents and people with care responsibilities are also part of the task. The "help desks" that have in many cases become permanent facilities are also ensuring that **people on parental leave can stay in touch with their company**. This includes to facilitate regular or occasional part-time work and participation in training, both enabling parents to keep their skills up-dated and to return well prepared to the workplace.
- Company help desks were particularly successful when **working closely with regional initiatives for work-life-balance** or with Time Agencies. This cooperation widened choices and availability of support measures and resulted in lasting coalitions of local or regional employers, municipalities and relevant service providers. A French example demonstrates how a local partnership resolved the problems of women working in precarious jobs in a large super market chain. To increase both quality of work and job security, the partnership offered basic ICT training to the employees, to help them meet the most essential skills requirements for cashiers and stock-clerks. But the women declared themselves unable to afford the time. An innovative scheme changed the situation: **Employees could barter each hour they spent on training for an hour of housework, supplied by a local social economy enterprise and paid for by the company**. In addition, needs-tailored services with local providers of childcare were negotiated and more suitable solutions to transport, found, particularly late in the evening and on weekends.

Turning work-life-balance schemes into a process of cultural change

In some countries, work-life-balance programmes as described above were only the beginning of a long-term process of change. Milestones are already visible and indicating lasting impact.

- In [Italy](#), [Portugal](#) and [Spain](#), EQUAL has involved the social partners in a geographical area or economic sector, and succeeded to influence collective bargaining. Awareness raising and training for decision-makers in trade unions and employers organisations led to "Memoranda of Understanding". These committed employers and unions to negotiate **work-life-balance measures for women and men as part of collective agreements** and to include relevant EQUAL achievements. In Spain, those collective agreements are granting reduced working hours and flexible leave schemes for parents and employees with care responsibilities that go beyond the current legal provision.
- [In Ireland](#), a large partnership linking six major companies operating in key economic sectors, has developed a **model for a "continuum of change"**. The idea is that organisations move through four stages that are described as formative, broadening, deepening and mature. While at the first stage a company may be complying with the relevant legislation and offering a small number of family-friendly measures mainly for women with children, the second stage extends those measures to a wider group, involving fathers or more generally people with care responsibilities. During the deepening stage a more consistent combination of policies is emerging and becoming available to all personnel. Policies are now seen as a response to business needs and to

attract and retain staff. At this point relevant HR skills are being developed and the up-take of programmes monitored. When reaching the mature stage an **enterprise is meeting its organisational goals and its employees' work-life-needs without either side suffering.**

To enable all partners to embark on this "continuum of change", EQUAL established a Work-Life-Balance Group in each of the participating organisations. The groups involve representatives of management and trade unions who diagnosed the work-life-balance provision of the company. The next step was to apply the work-life-balance criteria that are based on research and good practices collected earlier and to identify the stage of the continuum from which to start moving. Diagnostic checklists produced by the partnership successfully assisted the organisations during this evolutionary process. All partners agree that cultural change is well underway and that - thanks to EQUAL- their organisations look considerably different than at the beginning of the endeavour.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To secure productivity and competitiveness in Europe, enterprises must become more flexible to respond to sudden changes for their goods and services and to the increasing demand for quality which is related to workers family needs and personal preferences. It is paramount that stakeholders perceive work-life-balance as a concept that is targeting both women and men.

- **Employers** are encouraged to **build on EQUAL good practices** and to make use of the large variety of business cases, diagnostic tools and support materials.

Yet, employers are not the only players when it comes to take action. Their willingness to embrace change, social responsibility and gender equality as part of personnel policies should be enhanced by appropriate strategies of other key actors.

- **Social Partner Organisations** should integrate **work-life-balance in the process of collective bargaining**. This requires awareness raising and training of those involved in the negotiation of collective agreements at company, sectoral or regional level.
- **Local and Regional Governments** should play a more pro-active role and initiate **territorial alliances for work-life-balance**. This is particularly relevant for SMEs, which often lack the resources to develop such policies of their own.
- **National Governments and Legislators** should review the existing legal framework and consider amendments to remove obstacles to and raise the attractiveness of flexible work arrangements for employers and employees.

Endnotes

[1] Part-time arrangements vary greatly between Member States. See details in [Employment in Europe 2003](#).

[2] Ibid., % of total male employment.

[3] European Working Conditions Observatory: [First Topic Report on new European working conditions](#).

[4] Rachel Silvera: Articulier vie familiale et vie professionnelle en Europe, 2002