

PARTNERSHIPS MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE
**Workshop A1 focused on Work-life-balances and explored the
 mainstreaming of EQUAL success stories**

EQUAL GOOD PRACTICES ARE BENEFITING EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS

“A satisfying work-life-balance for both women and men should be an integral part of economic development policies and practices”. This opening assertion from Lydia Goldberg, Deputy Director of the Polish Government Plenipotentiary for the Equal Status of Women and Men, set the stage for [Workshop A1](#) “Holding a job – having a life”. The success stories presented by the advocates from three EQUAL Development Partnerships (DPs) showed that her message was true not only for people who seek to reconcile working and private life but also for their employers. In addition, the impact of EQUAL on the organisation of working time and the provision and timing of services can be attributed to the commitment and effectiveness of partnerships, which bind together key players and stakeholders.

PILOTING NEW WORKING TIME MODELS

Partnerships established by the Irish DP [“Work-Life-Balance-Network”](#) in six major organisations brought together representatives of management, trade unions and employees. These groupings became the driving force for the development of multi-faceted, flexible, working time arrangements that went far and away beyond the well trodden, traditional path of part-time work. Maria Cronin, Director of Strategy and EU affairs at the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, emphasised the crucial importance of having a variety of pilot schemes that were all adapted to the specific needs of the participating companies. These schemes included term-time working with 4-14 weeks leave that can be used during school holidays and also for education or travelling, job sharing as a recruitment tool to attract women, compressed working weeks and e-working. Some 7000 employees took part in the pilot projects and 54% of these were men. According to the evaluation, the managers in all six organisations agreed that these new work-life-packages had not had any negative impact on business performance – in fact the reverse was true, as they had actually improved work satisfaction and productivity. Today, 80 to 90% of all the personnel policies related to work-life-balance that are adopted in each of the six organisations are based on these initial EQUAL achievements.

EQUAL good practices from many Member States point to the leading role of local governments in forging territorial coalitions for work-life-balance and this is often the decisive factor in the success of these new approaches. This was certainly the case for [the “Rennes égalité des temps”](#) DP in France that develops “territorial time policies” to enable a better articulation of the job and family commitments of women and men. Michelle Kergoat, Professor of Economics at the University of Rennes and the evaluator of this DP, explained how the Rennes City Government had set an example for other employers – both public and private. It ran a model programme that made a real difference to those people who had particular difficulties in reconciling their work with their private lives - the cleaning staff of all of the municipal buildings which are scattered throughout the city. The scheme succeeded in dismantling the “broken shifts” that were the usual pattern for this kind of work. To make enough income, the predominantly female staff had 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 this new model. Whilst in the past, one person had been assigned a certain number of square metres, two women are now sharing the work of cleaning a larger floor area. In addition, the new scheme is currently provided training that will widen the women’s career prospects. It has also enabled these cleaners to swap workplaces so that they now live closer to work and need less time to commute. As a result of the whole arrangement, absenteeism has dropped by 40%. No wonder other municipalities and also private companies, have expressed a keen interest in replicating the Rennes model!

NEW IMPROVED SERVICES ARE SAVING TIME AND MONEY

To help people meet the conflicting demands on their time, the public authorities in Rennes pioneered “one-stop-shops” and “neighbourhood town halls” that provide all kinds of administrative and social services under the same roof. Together with several neighbouring municipalities and employers operating in a nearby industrial area, the DP has created a childcare facility which offers flexible services from 6.00 to 21.30. With the support of EQUAL, emergency services are now available in all public childcare centres, and in cooperation with an NGO, the DP has established home-based childcare to look after sick or very small kids.

Pierpaoli Dettori, representing CONSER, which is an employers' consortium with a membership of 300 small and micro enterprises, demonstrated how a combination of innovative services can benefit employees and employers. Together, these companies have more than 3000 employees and are all operating in an industrial zone based in the Italian city of Prato. CONSER is famous for having created an outstanding system of water recycling and energy saving that is minimising the impact of industrial production on the environment. This system provided economies of scale for its member companies that, each on their own, they could never have achieved. As a partner in the EQUAL project “[Il Laboratorio del Tempo](#)”, the consortium applies its ambitious, joint-venture approach to the dilemma of reconciliation. It has developed work-life-balance solutions for the whole industrial area that also can also contribute to the environmental policies, which it has adopted. In cooperation with the municipality of Prato, which donated ten electrical vans, CONSER has set up a transport service so that people can travel to work in groups rather than individually in their own cars. In addition, by using this service and travelling earlier or later, employees are saving time and money and helping to reduce traffic congestion and pollution. This new mode of commuting only exists because the companies involved were prepared to harmonise their working hours with the schedules of this transport system. Another joint venture with the municipality involves the creation of a childcare centre. On a piece of land provided by the city free of charge, CONSER is investing in the construction of a new building that will house the care facility. The centre will be equipped with CONSER's energy saving technology which will help to minimise the fees. In addition, to make the lives of working parent a lot easier, postal services have been set up in the zone and centralised laundry and shopping services are being established. All these services can be accessed by using a credit card that offers special reductions in the local supermarkets and in other stores in Prato.

SECURING SUSTAINABILITY AND MULTIPLICATION

These three presentations triggered a lot of interest and many questions from potential users of EQUAL good practices who were either sitting on the panel and or within the audience and the Workshop Facilitator, Mary Braithwaite, guided the session through a lively debate.

GETTING AND KEEPING EMPLOYERS ON BOARD

By insisting on more detailed information about the sustainability of these new models, Håkan Eriksson from the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, reflected the concerns of many employers, and particularly SMEs, about the costs of introducing work-life-balance policies. “Will these new models survive after the end of EQUAL funding?” he wanted to know and “how can other companies be convinced to apply the models?” Pierpaolo Dettori highlighted the fact that forming an employers' network like CONSER is an excellent strategy for smaller businesses to meet the cost of policies which an individual enterprise could not afford in its own right. The transport service, for instance, did not involve any cost for the companies, since the vehicles had been donated by the municipality and the employees, who are saving up to 2,400 € per year on fuel and car maintenance, are more than willing to pay the fares. Moreover, intensive discussions within the consortium helped to assess costs and benefits of this service package to the companies and eventually led some larger companies to make voluntary financial commitments such meeting the running costs of three of the electrical vans.

Several participants emphasised the need to inform and support SMEs that are often unaware of the various financial incentives provided by regional or national governments for the promotion of activities related to the reconciliation of working and family life. Having embarked on these kinds of personnel policies with the help of public subsidies, SMEs will experience the business advantages in terms of increased productivity and competitiveness and this should eventually lead to sustainability.

The Irish experience showed that the possibility of test runs was paramount in bringing senior management on board. Maria Cronin quoted the most convincing argument: “Putting a toe in the water, finding out what works best, can only make you win”. Which it did, and the obvious business advantages led a group of senior managers to spread the message amongst their peers in other companies. Given the low unemployment rates in Ireland, work-life-balance policies are now perceived as being an asset in attracting and retaining a qualified workforce.

INVOLVING GENDER EQUALITY BODIES AND TRADE UNIONS

For Marina Piazza, gender equality consultant and former Head of the Italian Government’s Equal Opportunities Commission, work-life-balance policies can only succeed with the backing and commitment of high level decision-makers in the public and private sector. She emphasised that “decision makers in both spheres should learn to work together and to develop a common understanding of how to improve working and living conditions in a territory.” The resulting common strategies must include better delivery of social services such as childcare and care for the elderly and also go hand in hand with serious efforts to value and up-grade women’s work in these traditional female sectors. Key actors should make use of the knowledge and experience of gender equality bodies and involve them much more than at present. This is also true for trade unions, which according to Michelle Kergoat are still “male domains with a male view on the world”. In fact, trade union support for the issue of reconciliation seems to vary from country to country. Whilst some participants criticised a lack of commitment, others reported how work-life-balance is increasingly becoming a priority issue in the social dialogue, as a result of unions being involved in EQUAL projects.

THINGS MUST HAPPEN AT THE LOCAL LEVEL – IN A MORE COMPREHENSIVE WAY

Many participants stressed the overriding importance of initiatives being taken at local level, since it is there where people struggle on a daily basis to reconcile the different spheres of their lives. Policies and practices are often too fragmented and compartmental thinking prevails in many authorities and institutions. Indrek Rothla, Chief Specialist on labour market policies in the Tartu City Government in Estonia, underlined the responsibility of local governments for launching and coordinating territorial approaches to work-life-balance. “Sometimes initiatives by enterprises or NGOs exist in the same place”, he said, “but the actors are not aware of each other. Local decision makers and authorities should act as pioneers and orchestrate comprehensive action plans that involve different policy fields and economic sectors.” Indrek also called for strategies that would make politicians more aware of the reconciliation needs of citizens and of “their power as voters”, if these needs are not addressed. Finally, he urged local governments and authorities that have benefited from EQUAL to disseminate the good practices to other municipalities and to support them in their endeavours to set up effective partnerships with all key players and stake holders in their territories.

In a concluding round, panellists agreed that even if a satisfying work-life-balance for both women and men remains a huge challenge, EQUAL, through the partnership approach, has prepared the ground for its good practices to take root and produce further positive changes.

MORE INFORMATION

EQUAL good practices related to work-life-balance are contained in two Policy Briefs entitled [“Holding a job – Having a life: EQUAL contributions to improving work-life-balance”](#) and [“Gendering the use of time: Territorial approaches to improve the co-ordination of work and private life”](#).