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CREATING WIN-WIN-SITUATIONS THROUGH FLEXIBLE WORK ORGANISATION

Part-time work, job-sharing, term-time working, work-sharing, reduced hours, a shortened working week, tele-working, mobile working, flexitime and innovative use of parental leave - the list of potential arrangements for flexible working is both long and impressive. However, people who face problems in reconciling their work with their family life have probably never heard about all these options. The Irish “National Flexi-Work Partnership” has tested each of them in different settings - to the benefit of both employees and employers.

PILOTING FLEXI-WORK INITIATIVES AND STUDYING ATTITUDES TO WORK-LIFE-BALANCE

This Development Partnership (DP), which was coordinated by the Centre for Gender and Women’s Studies at Trinity College Dublin, started from the recognition that inflexible work practices often exclude individuals from becoming members of the workforce and also prevent them from having a satisfying career. Facilitating the work-life-balance of parents and people with other care responsibilities through innovative work organisation was the major objective of the DP. In addition, it supported older workers and people with mental health difficulties, enabling them to access or maintain employment. Five pilot projects were breaking new ground, testing work-life-balance practices at ten sites. Whilst including social economy and public enterprises, the pilots were predominantly located in the private sector where flexible work arrangements are less frequently in evidence. To ensure a strict gender balance, half of the beneficiaries were women and the other half men.

IMPROVING WORK ORGANISATION FOR PARENTS AND OTHER CARERS

To date flexi-work for parents in Ireland appears mostly to concern part-time arrangements. In the framework of the first two pilot schemes the DP offered parents and people with other care responsibility a much wider choice of working time variations. The test runs targeted those employed in management and non-management positions and also parents and other carers who were seeking to return to the labour market after a longer absence. The pilots demonstrated that flexible working is clearly a viable solution for managers and they shattered the myth that management jobs must be full-time. Options successfully tested were flexible hours and also reduced hours, such as working a three or four day week. Having been relieved of their major sources of stress, beneficiaries experienced greater job satisfaction and their productivity improved.

OPENING DOORS FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES

The goal of the third pilot programme was to make the workplace more welcoming to people with mental health problems. It addressed the stigmatisation and ill-informed perceptions that surround mental illness and the practical difficulties relating to employing someone with such a problem. Options tested included part-time, job-sharing and personalised flexible working hours. This last solution, for instance, greatly helped women and men suffering from depression. It is based on the fact that between the recurrent spells of the illness, people have periods when they are well enough to work. The pilot showed that they can gain a lot of satisfaction and be empowered to lead a more balanced life from this experience of work. In all of the enterprises involved in this programme, the DP trained supervisors and/or HR personnel to develop their competences in handling mental health issues in the workplace. This training, which included knowledge and skills to assess the employment potential of people with relevant disabilities and to design job content and work environments for such specific target groups. It was found that such arrangements led to greater labour force attachment and they clearly constitute a means to facilitate social inclusion in the workforce.

USING THE POTENTIAL OF OLDER WORKERS

Emphasising the value of older workers as a human resource in companies was the underlying principle of this fourth project. The idea was to convince employers that this group of employees should be given the choice of retiring at the statutory age or of gradually phasing out their commitments to the company through the introduction of flexible working arrangements. This 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.

ATYPICAL CHILDCARE WORKERS

The last pilot project linked the needs of working parents and at the same time helped to destroy the myth that only females are capable of caring for children. It experimented with innovative staffing approaches involving the recruitment and training of men for as childcare workers. This endeavour was very successful and it is clear that the childcare facilities want to recruit more men. The men were highly appreciated as childcare workers and were seen to be an asset to the centres by the centre managers, their female colleagues, parents and children. FAS, the national training authority, who collaborated in the pilot, intends to mainstream this project and to retain the policy of recruiting more men in this area. Clearly, there is a need to reach out to young men to attract them to the profession, as it is still not seen as a masculine job. The issue of Men in Childcare has been highlighted nationally through two conferences and by the establishment of a Men in Childcare Network. These activities, in which EQUAL played a major role, has brought together childcare providers, trainers, social policy groups and others with an interest in promoting and developing this area in Ireland.

EXPLORING PEOPLES' NEEDS

In addition to running pilot projects with the different target groups, the project carried out research, which provided a fuller picture of the actual situations and the work life balance needs of these various groups. Two studies were undertaken. The first was a Nationwide Survey on Work-Life Balance, based on a representative sample of 1,212 people. The second was a Survey on Mental Health and Employment: Promoting Social Inclusion in the Workforce, based on a sample of 133 people suffering from depression, half of whom were currently employed and half of whom were not. The key findings from the nationwide survey included the following:

- Women across all of the age groups reported having more day-to day caring responsibilities for their children than men.
- Women in the childbearing and rearing age groups also reported a higher level of stress than their male counterparts.
- Women's stress was mostly related to juggling work and domestic and child care responsibilities.

In the light of this it is not surprising that a large majority of the nationwide sample supported a national programme of publicly subsidised childcare. There was also strong push for statutory paid paternity leave and paid parental leave. While there was a high level of support for flexible working, a majority still felt that if men worked part-time or job shared they would be seen as less serious about their careers, whereas a majority did not feel this way if women used these working patterns. The study found that the greater flexibility people have in deciding their own working hours and the greater the satisfaction with one's work schedules and arrangements, the greater one's well-being, as demonstrated on a number of psychological measures.

PARTNERSHIP TRIGGERS TRANSFER AND MAINSTREAMING

The partnership linked major players on the labour market with civil society organisations and the world of research. In fact, the National Training Authority (FAS), the Irish Employers Organisation and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions joined forces with Age Action Ireland representing older people and AWARE advocating the interests of people with mental health difficulties and, of course, the Centre for Gender Studies. Setting up Advisory Committees with representatives of the beneficiaries and relevant NGOs and Advocacy Groups ensured that the target groups could influence the project and that more opportunities were provided for individuals to become

empowered. A Working Group of Employers was also convened, which cooperated closely with the members of the project staff who implemented the pilot schemes.

The DP's activities were completely in line with those of the Irish Government's National Framework Committee for the Development of Family Friendly policies, a fact that enabled sustainability and transfer of achievements. For instance, a set of Guidelines helping employers to implement the new models, which were disseminated throughout Ireland and through national events, is clearly making an impact on personnel policies of Irish companies.

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