

Making the city a better place to live and work

Like many European cities, Prato, in Italy's Tuscany region, is having to adjust to economic and social change. Most local employers are small or micro enterprises in traditional industry sectors such as textiles. To compete in the global market, they are required to be ever more flexible to respond to fluctuating demands. Employees, meanwhile, find it difficult to cope with irregular or atypical working hours, because they do not coincide with the availability of services such as childcare, schools, shops and stores, and even public transport.

Reconciling working time with citizens' private and family needs is one of the key issues being addressed within the municipality's multi-annual action plan, which was set up to respond to challenges linked to the reorganisation of production systems and its impact on the labour market. In this context the city established a "Time Agency" (Consulta permanente degli Orari e dei Tempi della città), which helps people, and predominantly women, to balance jobs with care and other family tasks.

The "time lab" – a community service

The Laboratorio del tempo Development Partnership (DP) was launched by the Prato Time Agency, in cooperation with the municipality, a large employers' consortium and the University of Florence. Together they designed a "time lab" consisting of a local resource centre and a series of pilot actions implemented in companies and public administrations.

The local resource centre provides a wide range of services for both women and men of all age groups and from different life situations. For instance, baby-sitting and childcare services, available in the afternoon when kindergartens and schools are closed, became a lifeline for parents with irregular working times. Entrepreneurship training and courses in ICT, Internet use, knowledge management and foreign languages were set up to meet the needs of various target groups, always including the offer of childcare. ICT courses attracted greatest demand, since these skills are critical for today's labour market. These courses brought together the old and young – many become "regulars" in the Laboratorio's much frequented Internet Café.

Other services focused on providing family support to young parents. A key priority was to overcome gender stereotyping and encourage men to share in household duties or care tasks. This included, for example, a course entitled "S.O.S – Il Casalingo" (SOS Male-Household) which trained men in household tasks, such as ironing, cooking, washing and cleaning. Most participants not only acquired new skills, but also came to value the unpaid work of women in the home.

Creative solutions from employers

The DP's cooperation with CONSER, an employers' consortium with a membership of 300 small and micro enterprises, has been particularly beneficial to the local workforce. Together, these companies employ more than 3 000 people, predominantly in the textile sector. CONSER has already helped its members to introduce changes that have environmental benefits, such as a water recycling and energy saving system, and recruitment of a joint "mobility manager". Participation in this EQUAL project enabled the consortium to turn its attention to improving the work-life balance of their employees.

A detailed analysis of the situation revealed that considerable time was being lost in carrying out daily routines. As Pierpaolo Dettori, CONSER's Mobility Manager, explains: "We found that, on average, of the 3 000 employees working here, 1 000 go every day to the supermarket, to the dry cleaners, the post office or to take their kids to school and 2 400 drive to work in their own cars causing regular traffic jams." CONSER therefore decided to set up its own transport service. Using 10 electric vans



Childcare services allow parents more flexible working hours

donated by the city, employees were able to travel in groups and at times when there is less traffic congestion. This new mode of commuting was only possible because the companies involved harmonised their working hours to fit in with the transport schedules.

Another joint venture with the municipality involved the creation of a childcare centre with opening hours adapted to the working times of parents. The city provided a piece of land free of charge, and CONSER is now investing in the construction of a new building to house the care facility. In addition, to make the lives of working parents a lot easier, postal services have been set up in the zone and centralised laundry and shopping services are being established.

A lasting impact – in Prato and beyond

Thanks to the involvement and commitment from the municipality and employers, the DP's initiatives will bring about lasting change in the city of Prato. The "Laboratorio del tempo" community centre, for example, has now become a permanent institution, managed and financed by the municipality. And after assessing its costs and benefits, several of the larger participating companies decided to fund part of the running costs of the transport service.

But the EQUAL project's impact is also being felt beyond the city's boundaries. Says Christina Pugi, the project director of the Laboratorio del Tempo DP: *"Through visibility events and networks our good practices have been disseminated beyond the partnership. Social, political, economic, cultural and civic institutions that are interested in bringing about change in the city and in the perception of the gender roles of its citizens are adopting our approaches. We are also receiving additional EQUAL funding to multiply and mainstream the Laboratorio model outside the Tuscany region and even outside Italy."*

Collaboration with partners in France and Spain has also produced some interesting results. For example, the Laboratorio del Tempo imported a training scheme developed in Spain that had proved to be successful in supporting women in the creation of small or micro enterprises. The French DP, on the other hand, showcased Prato's household management courses for men in Rennes and is now planning similar activities.



Men have been very receptive to training courses on household tasks

A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm

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