



European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Work–life balance attitudes and practices in British workplaces, 2007

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Wyattville Road, Loughlinstown, Dublin 18, Ireland. - Tel: (+353 1) 204 31 00 - Fax: 282 42 09 / 282 64 56
e-mail: information@eurofound.europa.eu - website: www.eurofound.europa.eu

The Third Work–Life Balance Employer Survey for 2007 provides an up-to-date picture of work–life balance practices and attitudes in British workplaces with five or more employees. As the third survey in the series, it offers the opportunity of assessing change over time in relation to work–life balance issues and the impact of new legislation in this area. The research covers a wide range of issues including working hours, provision and take-up of flexible working arrangements, awareness of legislative changes, leave provisions, support for working parents and employers’ attitudes to work–life balance measures.

About the survey

The Third Work–Life Balance (WLB3) Employer Survey (987Kb PDF) was conducted by BMRB Social Research (BMRB) on behalf of the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) to coincide with the introduction of the provisions outlined in the Work and Families Act 2006 (131Kb PDF) on 1 April 2007.

The survey was conducted among a random sample of 1,462 British workplaces – representing a 39% response rate – with five or more employees. Workplaces were randomly selected from the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR). Larger workplaces were over-sampled; hence weights were applied to produce nationally representative estimates. All figures presented in this report are weighted. Interviews, lasting an average of 40 minutes, were conducted by telephone with a manager at each workplace who has day-to-day responsibilities for human resources and employment relations issues. The fieldwork was carried out between March and August 2007 with the aim of completing as much research as possible before the introduction of the new legislation.

The employer survey had three broad aims. It was designed to monitor changes since the previous WLB surveys of 2000 (WLB1) and 2002/3 (WLB2), to provide a baseline for future evaluation of the Work and Families Act 2006 and to examine any other issues relating to **work-life balance**. Subjects covered in the survey included working hours and patterns, provision of flexible working practices, maternity and paternity leave, as well as attitudes towards work–life balance.

A companion survey of employees (3.29Mb PDF), also the third survey in the series, was also conducted between February and March 2006. This survey included a sample of 2,081 adults of working age employed in organisations with five or more staff.

Attitudes to work–life balance

Employers were presented with 10 statements relating to work–life balance and were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with each. The level of agreement was scored on a five-point scale. The employers’ responses are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Employers’ attitudes towards work–life balance and level of agreement with 10 statements, WLB3 (%)

	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
People work best when they can balance their work and other aspects of their lives *	92	3	4
Employers should make a special effort to accommodate the particular difficulties parents of	87	6	6

young and disabled children face in balancing work and family life *			
People who work flexibly are just as likely to be promoted as those who do not *	78	6	13
Employees should not expect to be able to change their working pattern if it would disrupt the business *	73	8	18
It is not easy trying to accommodate employees with different patterns of working *	67	8	23
Everyone should be able to balance their work and home lives in the way that they want *	67	9	24
Providing flexible working practices improves customer service	50	13	34
When some employees take up flexible working practices, it causes resentment among other employees	45	12	39
Policies that help employees balance work and other interests are often unfair to some employees *	41	12	43
It is not the employer's responsibility to help people balance their work with other aspects of their life *	35	10	53

*Notes: Base – all workplaces with five or more employees. Excludes 'Don't know' and 'Refusal' responses. * Measures also included in the WLB2 survey.*

Source: Third Work–Life Balance Employer Survey: Main findings, Table 9.1, p. 62.

Responses for the eight measures above marked with an asterisk were also measured in the WLB2 survey and show little change in the latest survey. The only measure for which a significant change was recorded since WLB2 was in relation to the statement that 'Employees should not expect to be able to change their working pattern if it would disrupt the business' – in WLB2, 63% of employers agreed with the statement compared with 73% of employers in WLB3.

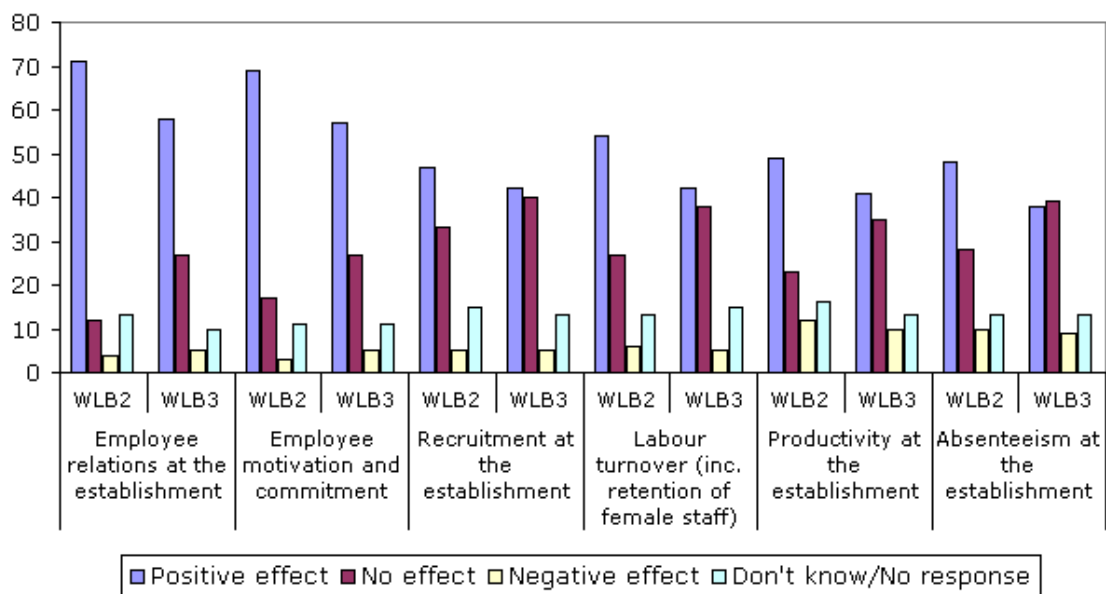
Attitudes among respondents to work–life balance practices and policies have been generally positive. To achieve an overall view of employers' attitudes towards work–life balance, an index was created using all 10 statements which are equally weighted. Each of the statements was assigned a score between '-2' (indicating a strongly negative response) and '+2' (indicating a strongly positive response). By adding these scores from the 10 statements, 52% of workplaces were categorised as positive, 33% as neutral and only 15% as negative in terms of possibilities for work–life balance.

This index was found to be strongly associated with the flexible working practices already present at the workplace. In companies where five or six flexible working practices were available to staff, 63% of employers were found to have a generally positive attitude to work–life balance compared with only 13% of employers with no practices in place.

Other factors affecting the overall work–life balance score include public (61% positive) versus private sector (50% positive) and size of the workplace and organisation. Workplaces with 100 or more employees were more positive (58%) than those with less than 100 workers (52%) and workplaces which were part of organisations with 1,000 or more employees were more positive (66%) than those with less than 1,000 workers (45%).

Employers were also asked about the effects flexible working practices and leave arrangements had on employees and human resources management at their workplace. Across the six measures used in the analysis – employee relations, employee motivation and commitment, recruitment, staff turnover, productivity and absenteeism – relatively few employers thought flexible working practices had a negative effect, with the majority considering that they either had a positive effect or no effect. Over half of employers thought that work–life balance practices had a positive effect on employee relations (58%) and employee motivation and commitment (57%). Positive scores on the other four measures were slightly lower (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Perceived effects of flexible working and leave arrangements at the workplace (% of employers)



Perceived effects of flexible working and leave arrangements at the workplace (% of employers)

Notes: Base – all workplaces with five or more employees.

Source: Third Work–Life Balance Employer Survey: Main findings, Figure 9.2, p. 65

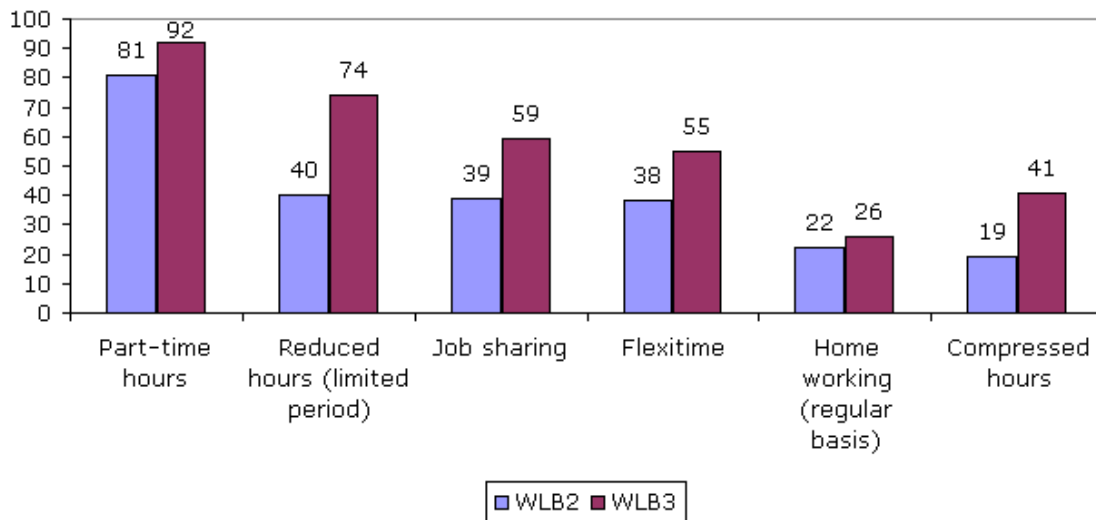
In relation to all six areas analysed, employers were significantly less likely in WLB3 to say that work–life balance practices had a positive effect compared with WLB2. However, rather than the proportions of negative responses increasing, the trend has been that the neutral category has increased and the negative responses remained relatively unchanged.

Flexible working practices

Since flexible working can take many forms, it was decided for the purposes of WLB3 to concentrate on the practices which were considered to be most widespread across workplaces in the UK. The six practices used to define flexible working were: part-time working, job sharing, flexitime, working a compressed working week, working reduced hours for a limited period, and working from home.

Although the provision of flexible working arrangements has increased significantly since WLB2, the take-up of these arrangements has not increased at the same pace (Figure 2). Long-established and popular methods of flexible working such as working part time are less likely to increase significantly than some of the newer practices such as job sharing.

Figure 2: Availability of flexible working arrangements (% of employers)



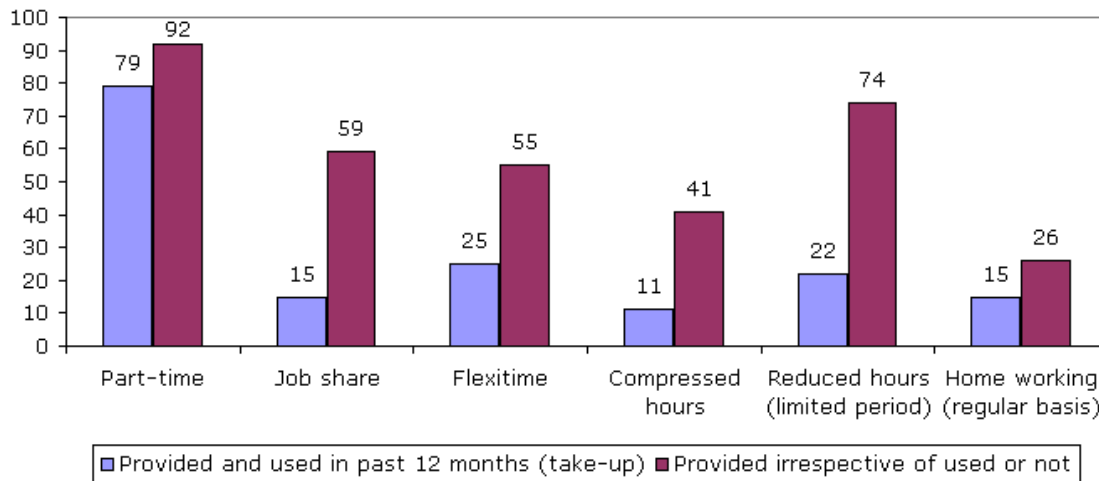
Availability of flexible working arrangements (% of employers)

Note: Base – all workplaces with five or more employees.

Source: Third Work–Life Balance Employer Survey: Main findings, Figure 4.1, p.26

However, opportunities for growth of some of these practices may be limited by incompatibility (real or perceived) with certain business models – hence, limited growth in the take-up of these practices (Figure 3). For example, the provision of flexitime increased from 38% in WLB2 to 55% in WLB3, yet the take-up of this practice remained almost static at 24% in WLB2 and 25% in WLB3. Similarly, the provision of job sharing increased from 39% in WLB2 to 59% in WLB3, whereas the take-up of this practice increased by only one percentage point to 15% in WLB3.

Figure 3: Take-up of flexible working arrangements, WLB3 (% of employers)



Take-up of flexible working arrangements (% of employers)

Note: Base – all workplaces with five or more employees.

Source: Third Work–Life Balance Employer Survey: Main findings, Figure 4.2, p.27

Awareness of legislative changes

As WLB3 was timed to coincide with the April 2007 introduction of the provisions of the Work and Families Act 2006, the study sought to measure the level of awareness among employers regarding the changes to maternity legislation brought about by this act. The main legislative changes affected mothers with babies due after 1 April 2007. By this time, 35% of fieldwork interviews had been completed.

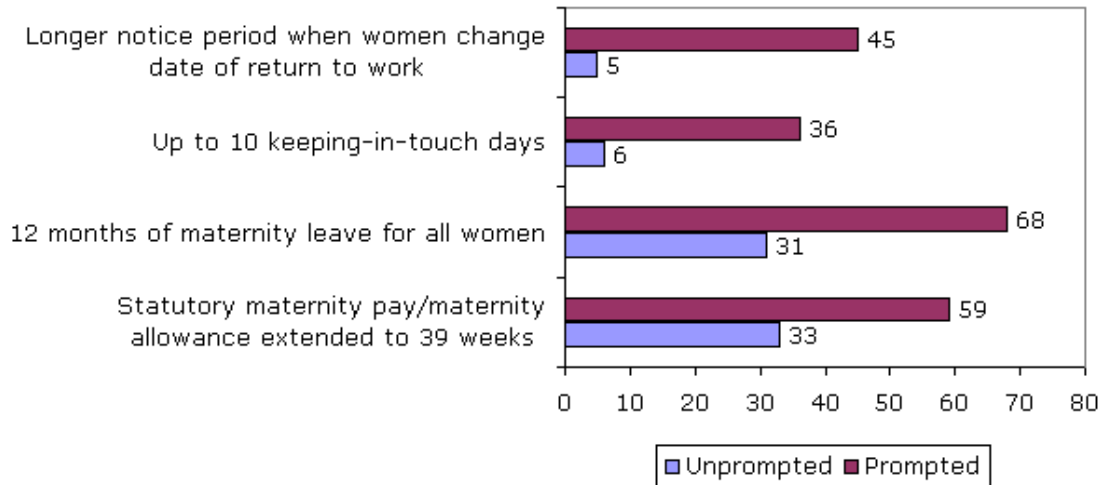
Rather than only using prompted measures, WLB3 first used unprompted measures of awareness; employers were initially asked to describe what they thought were the main changes being made to employment legislation that would affect maternity leave and pay. Four main changes were introduced:

- the extension of statutory maternity pay (SMP), maternity allowance and statutory adoption pay (SAP) from 26 to 39 weeks for women or adopters whose babies were due or adopted on or after 1 April 2007;
- the extension to twelve months of maternity leave for all women, due to the relaxing of length of service eligibility criteria for additional maternity leave;
- an increase in the notice period that women have to give in relation to their return-to-work date from four to eight weeks if they intend to return to work earlier than the full duration of the maternity leave period;
- the introduction of up to 10 ‘keeping-in-touch’ days during maternity or adoption leave where women or adopters are allowed to go into work during their leave period without losing their SMP or SAP.

Overall, half of workplaces (50%), accounting for 73% of employees, were able to identify at least one of the four main changes being made to maternity rights legislation. Less than 1% of workplaces could spontaneously identify all four changes, with three changes being identified by

just 5% of workplaces. Without prompting, managers were most likely to identify the extension of maternity leave (31%) and the extension of maternity pay (33%) as legislative changes. Few employers were able to identify keeping-in-touch days (6%) or the longer notice period in relation to the return to work date (5%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Prompted and unprompted awareness of specific changes to employment legislation coming into effect in April 2007, WBL3 (% of employers)



Prompted and unprompted awareness of specific changes to employment legislation coming into effect in April 2007, WBL3 (% of employers)

Note: Base – all workplaces with five or more employees.

Source: Third Work–Life Balance Employer Survey: Main findings, Figures 3.2 and 3.4, pp. 20–21

Factors which were associated with the likelihood of spontaneously identifying one of the four legislative changes included the date of interview, trade union presence at the workplace, size of workplace and whether or not there had been a recent pregnancy at the workplace.

Unsurprisingly, employers interviewed after 1 April 2007 were more aware of the legislation (56%) than those interviewed before this date (40%). Respondents in workplaces without any trade union presence were less aware (46%) than those where a union was present, whether it was recognised or not (59%). Awareness increased with workplace size for both public and private sector organisations. In public sector organisations, 37% of employers with five to 24 employees were aware of at least one change, while this figure increased to 61% for companies with 25–99 employees and 78% for workplaces with 100 or more employees. In private sector organisations, the corresponding figures were 46%, 58% and 81%.

Working hours

Employers were asked to define their business hours in terms of which days they were open and when during that time employees were working. Overall, 46% of workplaces were open only on weekdays (Monday to Friday), 13% were open six days a week and 33% were open for business seven days a week. Additionally, 6% of companies reported being open five and a half days a week. Monday to Friday opening hours were more common in the public sector (61%) compared with the private sector (43%).

In terms of the hours of working, 68% of employers reported having staff who worked standard office hours, while 45% had staff working at weekends and 18% reported staff working night shifts. More varied working hour patterns were reported in larger workplaces. Larger workplaces were also more likely to employ shift workers. Overall, 27% of employers revealed that some of their employees worked shifts, but the respective figure was 72% for workplaces with 500 or more employees and 18% for workplaces with between five and nine employees.

Managerial and non-managerial groups are treated differently when they work more than the contracted hours. Paid overtime for non-managerial employees is much more common (61%) than for managerial employees (14%); however, both of these figures represent a decrease from WLB2, when the comparable results were 67% and 22%. While paid overtime is the most common situation for non-managerial employees, unpaid overtime is the most common arrangement for managerial employees (44%). Table 2 presents an overview of policies concerning overtime for both managerial and non-managerial employees.

Table 2: Pay arrangements for employees working beyond contractual hours, comparison of managerial and non-managerial staff (%)

Pay arrangements	Managers		Non-managers	
	WLB2 (%)	WLB3 (%)	WLB2 (%)	WLB3 (%)
Paid	22	14	67	61
Unpaid	41	44	9	8
Time taken off in lieu	26	28	16	16
Some other arrangement	3	5	4	7
Never work beyond contracted hours	4	2	3	2
No set policy	-	5	-	5
Don't know / None of these options	4	3	2	2

Note: Base – all workplaces with five or more employees.

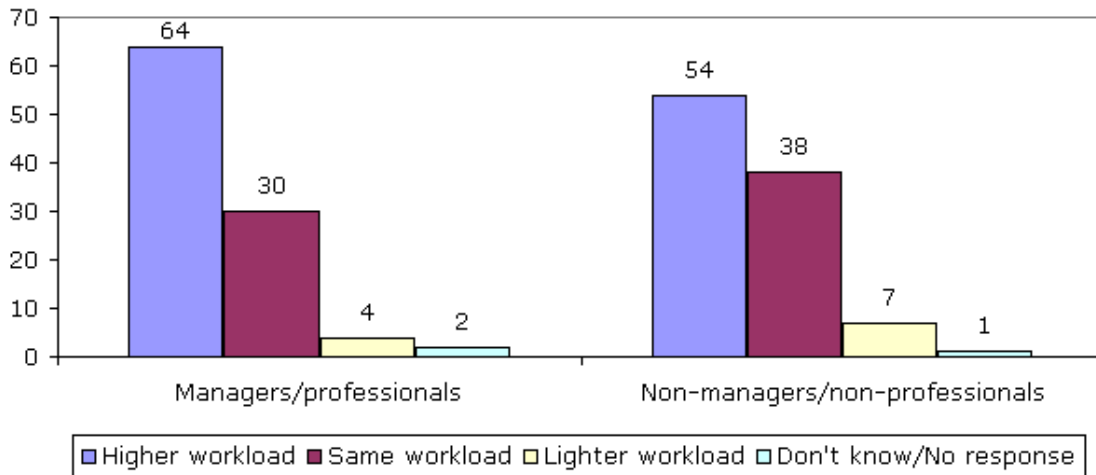
Source: Third Work–Life Balance Employer Survey: Main findings, Table 2.1, p. 14

As part of the survey, employers were asked if any of their managerial or non-managerial staff had worked 'long hours' in the past 12 months. In line with the Working Time Directive Regulations that came into force in 1998, long hours were defined as working more than 48 hours a week for a continuous four-month period. In total, 21% of employers reported that some managerial staff had worked long hours compared with 25% during WLB2. Moreover, 9% of employers answered that some non-managerial employees worked long hours, which represents a decline from 15% in WLB2. As in the case of WLB2, the proportions of companies indicating that staff had opted out – that is, waived their right to limit the working week to 48 hours – of the Working Time Regulations was small. Only 6% of employers revealed that managerial staff had opted out of the regulations, while non-managerial staff decided to opt out at 5% of workplaces.

Although long hours were not being reported in the majority of workplaces, some indications emerged that both managerial and non-managerial staff were being asked to complete more work in the same amount of working time. Employers who were able to comment on the situation three years earlier were asked about the workloads of managerial and non-managerial employees. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the rate of response, higher numbers of employers reported an

increase in managerial workloads (64%) than in non-managerial workloads (38%). On the other hand, for the two groups of workers, the proportions of employers who reported lighter workloads amounted to 4% and 7% respectively (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Comparison of workload of managerial and non-managerial staff in WLB3 compared with three years earlier (% of employers)



Comparison of workload of managerial and non-managerial staff in WLB3 compared with three years earlier (% of employers)

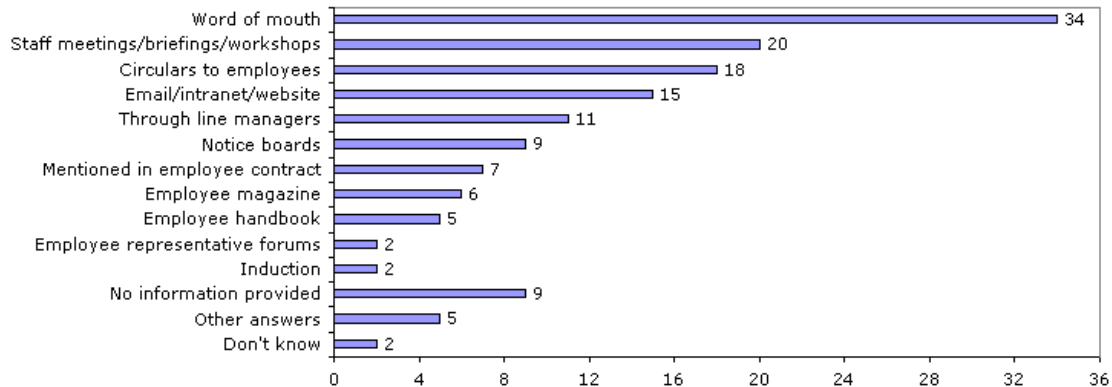
Note: Base – all workplaces with five or more employees where respondents had been in the job for three or more years.

Source: Third Work–Life Balance Employer Survey: Main findings’, Figure 2.2, p. 15

Disseminating information on flexible working

Employers use a wide range of methods to communicate information to employees about entitlements to flexible working patterns or facilities to help them achieve a better work–life balance (Figure 6). The most commonly cited method of informing staff is perhaps the most informal – word of mouth was cited by 34% of employers. It is interesting, and perhaps also alarming, in 21% of workplaces, word of mouth was cited by employers as the sole means of disseminating information to employees.

Figure 6: Methods used to inform employees about available working patterns, leave arrangements or facilities supporting work–life balance, WLB3 (% of employers)



Methods used to inform employees about available working patterns, leave arrangements or facilities supporting work–life balance, WLB3 (% of employers)

Note: Base – all workplaces with five or more employees.

Source: Third Work–Life Balance Employer Survey: Main findings’, Figure 10.2, p. 74

Commentary

Monitoring of work–life balance practices has taken on increased significance since the UK government launched the Work–Life Balance Campaign in 2000. This campaign encourages employers to introduce practices for their employees which will help them to balance their work and private lives more successfully. In some ways, the results of WLB3 present a relatively mixed picture. On the one hand, employers’ attitudes to flexible working practices are generally seen as positive, yet some tension remains between employees’ and employers’ attitudes to such practices; for instance, while flexible working might be desirable for an individual employee, the employer has to consider the needs of the business and the attitudes of other employees when deciding whether or not to allow possibilities for flexible working.

With regard to the lower levels of take-up of flexible working, compared with the growth in the provision of such practices, the companion survey of employees provides some potentially revealing results. Some employees choose not to take up any of the new flexible work options available to them, while others due to the nature of their job or a decision by their employer had no opportunity to request flexible working arrangements. The survey of employees also reveals that only slightly over half of employees were aware of the rights introduced in 2003 for some employees to request flexible working, although this figure increased to almost two thirds for those with dependent children under six years of age.

Employers’ attitudes towards flexible working remain positive and provisions in this area have increased. However, people in managerial positions should be urged to think carefully about the most effective ways of communicating information on entitlements to employees; this is to ensure that all staff members who might wish to take advantage of any of the various flexible working practices are fully aware of what options are available to them.

Duncan Adam, University of Warwick

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