

# BULLETIN

## Work-Life Balance in Britain

### What is Work-Life Balance?<sup>1</sup>

Some of us love our work. So much so that we work extraordinary long hours with our social lives merging almost seamlessly with our work. We stay late at the office, attend work events in the evening, and socialise with colleagues at the weekend. There is abundant survey evidence to show that most of us are satisfied (if not *very* satisfied) with our jobs.

So why does government need to promote work-life balance if most of us are so satisfied? In Spring 2000 the UK Government launched its *Work-Life Balance Campaign*. The campaign aimed to raise employers' awareness of the business benefits of introducing policies and practices that help employees obtain a better balance between work and the rest of their lives. Central to the campaign is a belief that everyone benefits from good practice in work-life balance. For instance:

- business benefits through easier recruitment, improved retention, and easier service delivery;
- the economy benefits as the labour market grows and more skilled and experienced people are available to work;
- parents and carers benefit because they can spend quality time at home as well as providing financial support through work;

- the workforce as a whole benefits because they are better able to balance their work with other aspects of their lives.

### The Business Case for Work-Life Balance

Perhaps the introduction paints too rosy a picture. Perhaps its orientation is too middle class, too male, too professional. Ask, for instance, a lone parent who had been up much of the night for most of the week because her young son had a typical childhood illness and you may not find the same enthusiasm to work long hours at the workplace.

This is when you need an understanding employer. Everyone, not just parents, from time-to-time needs to spend more time than usual away from work. For some people the demands made on their time outside of work – carers come to mind – may be more permanent and limit the type of work they can do.

It might be argued that the work-life balance has swung too firmly in favour of the employer. The pressures on employers from increased global competition and the need to increase competitiveness have driven them to make increasing demands of their workforce. Whatever demands are made on our time outside work, we are often unable to give them the priority they deserve. We, employers and employees alike, have come to accept this with a stolid stoicism. But this need not necessarily be the case. Perhaps things could be a little better, more balanced, if employees demanded more of their employers, and employers were a little more understanding of their employees' needs. This may sound somewhat weak set against the demands of global capitalism but there may well be something in the notion that we have all come to accept a *low work-life balance equilibrium* that, ultimately, is to no one's benefit.

<sup>1</sup> This *Bulletin* reports on research undertaken by Chris Hasluck, Terence Hogarth and Gaëlle Pierre, in collaboration with IFF. Hogarth, T., C. Hasluck and G. Pierre with M. Winterbotham and D. Vivian (2001) *Work-Life Balance 2000: Results from the Baseline Study*. DfEE Research Report No: RR249, Sheffield, Department for Education and Skills. Contact: C.Hasluck@warwick.ac.uk; T.Hogarth@warwick.ac.uk. Tel. 44 (0)24 7625 4420.

Accordingly, employees request little flexibility from their employers because, or so they think, it would be refused. Consequently little flexibility is provided. Nonetheless, there are examples of companies that have established working practices that take into account their employees' needs, often with startling results: lower absenteeism, higher staff retention, more profit. The business case for encouraging other employers to consider work-life balance is that the benefits to employees are offset by benefits to employers arising from a more flexible, happier and, ultimately, more productive workforce.

### Work-Life Balance Baseline Study 2000

During 2000, the Work-Life Balance Baseline Study (WLB2000) was undertaken by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER) to ascertain the state of work-life balance in Britain. Three questionnaire surveys were conducted:

- i. a representative survey of 2500 workplaces with five or more employees (the Employer Survey);
- ii. interviews with the head offices of 250 workplaces that participated in the Employer Survey (the Head Office Survey);
- iii. a survey of 7500 persons in employment in workplaces with five or more staff (the Employee Survey).

The surveys covered Great Britain and interviews were conducted by telephone between April and July 2000. Together, these surveys form the single, most comprehensive study of the state of work in Britain today. For the first time it is possible to gauge the extent of the balance between work and the rest of our lives.

### How is Your Work-Life Balance?

To measure the extent of work-life balance, attention was turned to how long people worked, when they worked, and where they worked. It has been recognised for some time that the British work longer hours than their European counterparts. Evidence from WLB2000 indicates that average weekly hours were 45 for men and 34 for women. What is more, many of us were working longer hours than we were contracted to do. Over 10 per cent of full-time employees worked very long hours - 60 or more hours a week - and around a third worked longer than 49 hours a week. Very long hours were particularly prevalent amongst male professional and managerial staff, and amongst men who lived in households with children. Only 6 per cent of women in full-time jobs worked very long hours compared to 12 per cent of men.

If the traditional 40-hour week is something of a myth, so too is the idea of the typical Monday to Friday working week. Only 39 per cent of workplaces - covering 40 per cent of employees - operated the traditional working week: Monday to Friday, from about 9 to around 5 o'clock. The remainder operated less traditional working times with almost 19 per cent of employees in workplaces that operated

24 hours a day, seven days a week. Approximately 15 per cent of employees reported working on Sundays and one in eight worked both Saturdays and Sundays.

Do we have much flexibility when we work our long hours over six or seven days a week? A number of flexible working time arrangements were investigated:

- part-time
- shift-work
- job-share
- term-time contracts
- flexitime
- compressed working week
- reduced hours
- annualised hours.

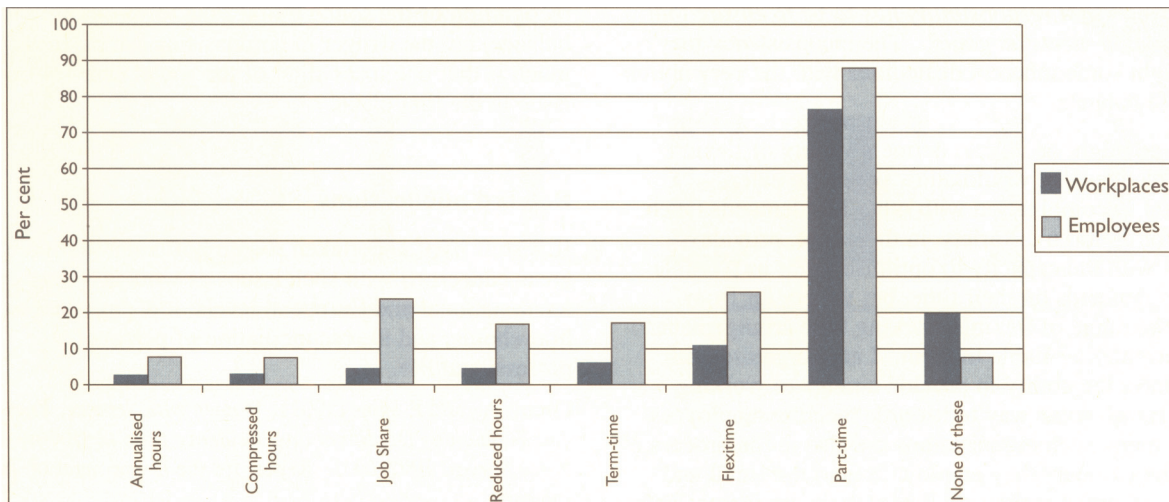
The proportion of workplaces providing flexible working time arrangements other than part-time employment was small (see *Figure 1*). Similarly there was little evidence of flexible working time arrangements being taken up by employees other than flexitime and part-time working (see *Figure 2*). Many employers - 62 per cent - reported that they allowed staff to vary occasionally their usual hours of work.

Despite low current take up, there appeared to be a considerable demand for flexible working time arrangements from employees: 47 per cent of employees not currently using flexitime would like to do so; 35 per cent of employees would like to adopt a compressed working week. Only 16 per cent of employees would like a job share. The proportion of men wanting flexitime, compressed hours, and annualised hours exceeded the proportion of women wanting such flexibility. Women were more likely than men to want term-time working or reduced hours. The desire to switch to part-time working was greater amongst women than men.

Working from home provides a way for employees to balance the demands on their time by cutting out the time to travel to work or allowing them greater flexibility to manage home and work. There was little evidence of extensive working from home during what may be considered normal working hours. Approximately 80 per cent of employees worked exclusively within the workplace that employed them and only 20 per cent worked from home even occasionally. In the main, working from home was restricted to senior staff, typically trying to catch up on a backlog of work. Around 22 per cent of workplaces reported that they had staff who worked from home, mostly on an occasional basis. Notwithstanding this low incidence, there was a demand amongst some employees for the additional flexibility such a practice would provide. Of those that did not work from home, almost 90 per cent of employees felt their employer would not allow them to work from home, but one third said they would like to work from home, at least occasionally.

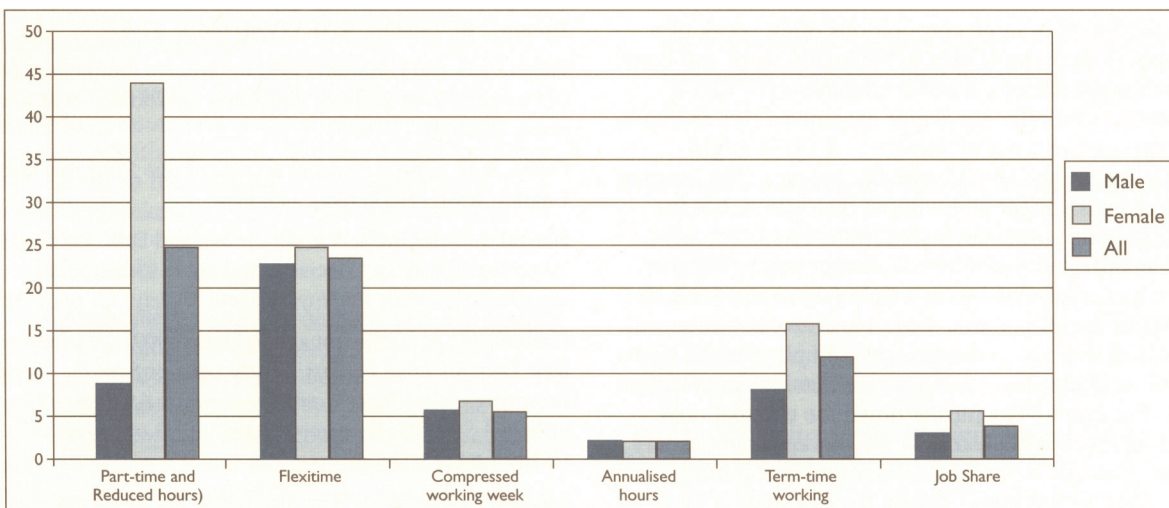
It is often parents of young children that are in most need of flexible working hours. Improved maternity rights and the new right to parental leave were introduced in the Maternity and Parental Leave *etc.* Regulations 1999, which came into force from 15 December 1999. Only a modest proportion of employers had any detailed knowledge of changes in the maternity regulations or the new parental leave regulations,

**Figure 1**  
**The incidence of flexible working time arrangements reported by employers**



Base: All workplaces (establishment and employee weighted measures)  
 Source: WLB 2000: Employers Survey (IER/IFF)

**Figure 2**  
**Take up of flexible working time arrangements by employees (per cent of employees)**



Base: All employees  
 Source: WLB 2000: Employee Survey (WIER/IFF)

and few provided either type of leave beyond the statutory minimum.

Four out of ten employees returning from maternity leave had greater flexibility over their hours of work. In the case of those formerly working full-time, around 70 per cent switched to part-time working on their return. Given a choice, 55 per cent of women who had taken maternity leave said they preferred greater flexibility over working hours to a longer period of maternity leave.

The provision by employers of facilities to assist with work-life balance was limited. Around 26 per cent of workplaces provided workplace counselling/stress management. In contrast, only 2 per cent of workplaces provided a crèche, 1 per cent provided subsidised nursery places, and 3 per cent financial help with employees' other caring needs.

Overall, the evidence reveals that it was in small and medium sized enterprises that the idea of a work-life balance was least well developed.

**Support for Work-Life Balance**

Both employers and employees indicated a high level of support for the *idea* of work-life balance. Around 62 per cent of employers and 80 per cent of employees agreed with the statement that: *'everyone should be able to balance their work and home lives in the way they want'*. There is, however, a striking contrast between this support for the idea of work-life balance and the reality of long working hours and lack of formal flexibility in the way hours were organised. Part of the answer lies in the belief that work-life



balance must always be subservient to the interests of business. Most employers and employees held the view that 'the employer's first responsibility has to be to ensure that the organisation meets its goals'. The inconsistency may also highlight some inherent difficulties with the very notion of work-life balance.

*A priori*, one might be able to define a variety of flexible working practices that would allow people to enter employment in combination with other life demands (such as caring for children). Variety, in this sense, provides employees with the capacity to optimise as far as possible the various demands on their time, but variety far from describes the range of flexible working time arrangements that are currently available to them. Large organisations may well have the ability to provide a range of working practices that go some way towards meeting employees needs, but many such organisations are also in the process of reducing the numbers they employ. It is to the small and medium sized organisations that employees are increasingly looking to secure employment and it is here that the idea of work-life balance is far from being firmly established. Small and medium sized enterprises, especially in the service sector, offer a much more limited range of flexible working time arrangements, principally part-time work.

Senior management in large corporations often speak of a need to support their employees in balancing work and home life. In such organisations it is not uncommon to find a range of services on offer for senior executives (for example, concierge services or a nanny service). A cynic might observe that this is less about work-life balance than keeping executives at work longer and without distraction, but the economic rationale is that such conditions of employment are simply manifestations of labour market power. Higher level executives, especially so in a tight labour market, can demand higher wages and non-wage benefits. In one sense, the market is delivering to this group of employees the terms and conditions of employment that ease outside demands on their time. For employees further down the occupational hierarchy it is much less clear how the market might satisfy their needs. Though some local labour markets exhibit conditions close to full employment, the evidence is far from conclusive that employers are more directly addressing the work-life balance needs of employees or potential employees as a means of recruiting and retaining staff other than for professionals and senior managers.

Arguably, this is where the business case, writ large into the Work-Life Balance Campaign, begins to break down. There is a significant, as yet unmet demand for flexible working time arrangements. Much of this is concentrated amongst employees located in those parts of the labour market where employers are unlikely or unwilling to provide flexible working time arrangements because it 'is not compatible with the work undertaken'. Many of these jobs are in areas of employment growth (for instance, distribution and retailing). This suggests that jobs in which employees do not enjoy a work-life balance may become more widespread in the future.

In many respects the business case is a curiosity. If one could make a business case for ethically dubious but legal

working arrangements would these be worthy of support? Clearly not because underlying the business case is a recognition of the sound moral case for promoting work-life balance, but the danger in emphasising the business case so much is that one loses sight of the social case for raising the issue in the first place.

### Related publications

IER staff have undertaken research in a number of related areas concerned with such issues as women's employment at local, national and European levels: low pay; dual career households; and the reconciliation of personal and professional life.

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