

Work-life balance

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Over recent years, demographic changes, a more diverse workforce, business imperatives and government policy have all been driving work-life balance up the agenda. Individuals increasingly expect to have the time and energy outside work to pursue interests, manage other responsibilities and generally lead a healthy, balanced life. Employers also stand to gain from having policies that facilitate work-life balance, for example through improvements in employee commitment, morale, recruitment and retention.

However, although many employers have a range of work-life balance provisions and initiatives, they often find the take-up among staff to be low. At the same time, 11 per cent of UK employees now work over 48 hours a week, an increase over the last decade and more than any other EU country.

Through its research based expertise and adeptness in consultancy and staff surveys, IES helps employers develop policies and practices on work-life balance that fit their own situations.

What are employers offering?

Individuals with childcare and eldercare responsibilities clearly have particular needs, but many employers now recognise that options to work flexibly should be available to all employees, not just to those with caring responsibilities. So what options are employees being given?

Examples of good practice in supporting work-life balance abound, as organisations compete keenly to be recognised as 'an employer of choice'. Research by IES has found employers to offer their staff a comprehensive range of flexibilities, including career breaks, extended maternity and paternity leave, adoption leave, paid

dependency leave, compressed weeks, job share, leave for community and volunteer work.

Family-friendly employment

One particular area that has been given much attention is practices that allow employees to combine their work and caring responsibilities more effectively. A study by IES identified a range of family-friendly policies in operation, including:

- childcare allowances
- paid family, 'special' or carer leave
- paid paternity leave
- enhanced maternity leave & benefits
- phased return from maternity leave
- job-sharing
- flexible starting and finishing times
- voluntary reduced-hours working
- unpaid leave during school holidays
- family access to learning resources
- childcare voucher schemes
- guaranteed Christmas leave for employees with families
- homeworking and teleworking arrangements.

Absence policies

Illness and injury are not the only causes of staff absence. Employees in the UK now have a variety of statutory

rights to time off work, including annual leave, maternity leave and ante-natal care, adoption leave, domestic emergencies, paternity leave, parental leave, career breaks, civic responsibilities and religious holidays.

The ease and effectiveness with which absence is managed varies between employers: while some have ad hoc and somewhat reactive approaches, others have well-established practices that allowed them to respond to most incidences of absence.

Overall, employers seem to put more effort into managing and minimising the amount of absence due to, or attributed to illness than any other type of absence. Nonetheless, some employers have developed absence policies that are seen to be more supportive of employees' work-life balance. These include providing more opportunities for planned absence, and being more flexible with giving employees time off to deal with emergencies.

Working hours

One way of measuring work-life balance is the hours we work. As defined by the Working Time Regulations 1998, eleven per cent of UK employees now work 'long hours' (over 48 hours a week), an increase over the last decade and more than any other EU country.

Who works long hours?

IES research shows that the likelihood of employees working long hours varies according to a number of factors. Long working hours are more common among men than women, and most common for managers, professionals, and operative and assembly workers. Further, while women with children are less likely than women with no children to work long hours, this is not true for men: in fact, men with children are slightly more likely to work long hours than men with no children.

Why do we work long hours?

Reasons for working long hours differ, in particular between manual and non-manual workers and, related to this, depending on whether overtime is paid or unpaid. For example, where overtime is paid, the main reason given for longer hours is to increase pay. By contrast, where overtime is unpaid, the main reasons relate to the requirements of the job, specifically the sheer volume of work employees have. Factors that can lead to increases in employees' work include:

- organisational initiatives, such as flatter structures and project-based working
- a greater emphasis on customer focus

- staff shortages
- an increase in the amount employees travel for their work.

Employee take-up of options

While a number of people have enjoyed the benefits that progressive policies can bring to work-life balance, other employees do not take up the options given them. IES research suggests that a number of employers find that despite making significant efforts to introduce flexible working practices, take-up amongst their staff is relatively low. For example, higher take-up of recent leave entitlements seems an unlikely prospect for a number of employers: IES research has found the take-up of parental leave to be very limited because it is unpaid and relatively little known.

It seems that the latent demand for new work-life arrangements is generally high. Sizeable proportions of workforces studied by IES felt unable to take up work-life balance options. There are a number of reasons why may be the case, including:

- perceived impact on career prospects
- incompatible organisational cultures, such as an entrenched long hours culture and unsupportive attitudes and behaviours of senior managers, line managers and colleagues
- heavy workloads, which can make it difficult to see how an alternative way of working would work
- a lack of knowledge of what is available and feasible, especially when the employer relies on the creativity of the individual to identify solutions for themselves
- infrastructure that does not support the take-up of initiatives, such as the technology needed to work from home
- the impact on earnings: many flexible working practices result in a reduction in pay (for example, part-time work or career breaks) which low-paid employees in particular simply cannot afford.

Addressing the take-up gap

Clearly, it is not always enough for employers to have policies that give staff options for improved work-life balance. One thing they can do to further help staff is provide effective internal communication about the practices on offer. Another is to encourage a change in organisational culture so that more accommodating ways of working become the norm.

Individuals also need support with some of the difficulties they might encounter when taking up such policies: trying to fit a full-time workload into a part-time working week, backlash from colleagues and a perception that they are not fully committed. Employees often need support and guidance on how to make a new way of working (such as job sharing, or working from home) a success, and how to deal with unexpected problems.

Challenges for the organisation

Difficulties are not confined to the individual taking up the work-life balance option. In some cases, co-workers also report difficulties when their peers have taken up work-life balance options. Particular problems include being 'left at work to carry the can', and a feeling that the pressure is on them to stay at work and to deliver on the team's targets.

However, the most serious challenges may be for line managers whose subordinates take up work-life balance options. IES research has found some managers in want of guidance and support to help them implement and deliver arrangements for improved work-life balance. In particular, they looked for help to decide who should have access to which options, and to deliver workloads with reduced or differently organised resources. For example, line managers may know the appropriate workload for a full-time member of their team, but judging a suitable workload and managing individuals who are working in different ways, presents new challenges.

Nonetheless, the challenge of catering for employee work-life balance should not be overstated, as in some areas the problems seem to be relatively minor for many employers. For example, IES research suggests that employers are generally unconcerned about most types of absence and have other more pressing human resource priorities. It is the unpredictability of certain absenteeism that tends to cause the greatest problem for employers.

Business benefits

Despite challenges to the organisation in facilitating work-life balance, IES research shows that employers perceive business benefits: eg, policies promoting family-friendly employment have been seen to:

- reduce casual sickness absence
- improve the organisation's ability to recruit
- improve employee productivity
- improve staff morale
- improve employee commitment.

Similarly, IES research on absence management found employers to perceive benefits from progressive policies:

- Providing opportunities for planned absence was thought to send a positive message to employees, making them feel more valued and increasing the likelihood that they would reciprocate in their commitment and 'go the extra mile' when needed.
- Allowing employees time off to deal with emergencies was said to improve productivity, as employees spent less time at work worrying about problems and trying to sort things out.
- The introduction of new absence management policies also led managers to rethink their labour requirements and how they organised and allocated work. Where this happened, it often led to wider, sometimes unanticipated benefits to the business.

Contact

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About IES

IES is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in human resource issues.

IES aims to help bring about sustainable improvements in employment policy and human resource management. We achieve this by increasing the understanding and improving the practice of key decision makers in policy bodies and employing organisations.

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We believe that HR can make a significant impact on the success of organisations of all types. In order to help bring this about, we help organisations:

- decide what they want HR to achieve
- identify what high performing HR people are like
- design and deliver bespoke development programmes for HR people
- evaluate how they are progressing against their goals