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**WORK-LIFE BALANCE 2000:  
RESULTS FROM THE BASELINE STUDY**

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**Background**

In Spring 2000 the UK Government launched its *Work-Life Balance Campaign*. The campaign aims to raise employers' awareness of the business benefits of introducing policies and practices which help employees obtain a better balance between work and the rest of their lives. Based on questionnaire surveys of employees and employers the Work-Life Balance Baseline Study assessed the extent to which employers operated work-life balance practices and whether employees felt existing practices met their needs.

The Baseline Study was conducted by the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick in conjunction with IFF Research Ltd.

**Key Findings**

- There is a high level of support for work-life balance from both employers and employees. Employers and employees agreed that while organisational goals have priority, employers have a responsibility to help employees balance work and other aspects of their lives. Nevertheless, evidence relating to the current state of the work-life balance was mixed.
- Most workplaces had staff working in excess of their standard working hours. Slightly over half of all employees worked some hours in addition to their fixed or standard hours - on average 9 hours a week.
- More than a quarter of full-time employees worked long hours (49 or more hours a week). Over 10 per cent of full-time employees worked very long hours (60 or more hours a week).
- In 62 per cent of workplaces at least some staff were allowed to vary their usual hours (such as start late and make time up during lunch break).
- Other than part-time working, only a modest proportion of employers operated flexible working time arrangements such as flexitime, term-time contracts, reduced hours, *etc.*
- There was a substantial demand for flexible working time arrangements from employees. More men wanted flexitime, compressed hours, and annualised hours than women. Women were more likely than men to want term time working or reduced hours.
- Approximately 20 per cent of employees worked from home at least occasionally. Of those employees not currently working from home, around a third said they would like to.
- Only a modest proportion of employers reported a detailed knowledge of changes in the maternity leave regulations or the new parental leave regulations. Only a small proportion provided benefits in addition to the statutory minimum.
- Where employed full-time before, the majority of women returning from maternity leave switched to part-time work. More women preferred greater flexibility in their working arrangements on their return to work.
- Overall, just under 18 per cent of workplaces provided some kind of help with childcare needs but this usually related to providing information. Only a tiny proportion of employers provided workplace facilities such as a crèche.

- The extent of consultation over work-life balance between employers and employees varied across workplaces and workforce. Other than consultation over hours of work, employers reported that management tended to decide alone about issues relating to leave or working at home. Where consultation took place, the incidence of flexible working practices was greatest.
- Generally, the incidence of work-life balance practices and their take-up by employees was greatest in the public sector.
- The more people employed in a workplace the more likely that work-life balance practices would be provided and taken up by employees.
- There was a consensus amongst employers that work-life balance practices improved certain aspects of work - work relations and staff motivation/commitment – and helped retain female employees and lowered labour turnover.

## Introduction

The Baseline Study's aim was to assess the extent to which employers operated work-life balance practices and whether employees felt existing practices met their needs. The study looked at policies and practices that:

- permitted some flexibility with respect to hours of work; and/or
- allowed people to work from home; and/or
- granted leave arrangements that allowed people to either meet their non-work commitments or realise their non-work goals; and/or
- provided workplace facilities to assist employees to attend work; and/or
- promoted communication and consultation between employers and employees over relevant issues.

## The Study

Three questionnaire surveys were conducted as part of the Baseline Study:

- a representative survey of 2500 workplaces with five or more employees (the Employer Survey);
- interviews with the head offices of 250 workplaces that participated in the Employer Survey (the Head Office Survey);
- 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. The samples of employers and employees were independently drawn.

## Support for work-life balance

The key message from both the Employer and Employee Surveys was the high underlying level of support for the idea of work-life balance from both employers and employees. Overall, the views of employers and employees were similar. 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'*. Employers almost always held the view that *'the employer's first responsibility has to be to ensure that the organisation meets its goals'*. Forty-three per cent of employers thought that work-life balance practices were unfair to some staff and 26 per cent of employees thought that work-life balance practices policies were unfair to people like them. People without caring responsibilities were no more likely to see work-life balance practices as unfair to them compared to people with caring responsibilities.

Employers who had adopted work-life balance practices were more likely to have positive attitudes to work-life balance. These employers were also just as likely to agree that an employer's first responsibility was to ensure that the organisation achieved its goals. They did not seem to regard achieving business goals and achieving work-life balance as contradictory aims.

## When and how much people work

The majority of employees worked outside the 'standard working week'. Working additional hours was relatively common across all grades of staff and particularly widespread amongst professional and managerial staff (who rarely received payment or time off in lieu of payment). Around 39 per cent of workplaces, covering 40 per cent of employees, operated Monday to Friday on 'standard hours'; 11 per cent of workplaces covering almost 19 per cent of employees 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.

Average weekly hours for men were 44.8 hours and 34.1 hours for women. Full-time employees who worked in excess of their contracted hours increased their working week on average by 9.6 hours. Over 10 per cent of employees worked very long hours (60 or more hours a week). Very long hours were particularly prevalent amongst male professional and managerial staff, and men 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.

### **Flexible working time arrangements**

Flexible working time arrangements can take a number of different forms. This study has concentrated on the following types of working arrangement:

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

The Employer Survey revealed that the proportion of workplaces providing flexible working time arrangements other than part-time employment was small. The Employee Survey revealed little evidence of significant take up of flexible working time arrangements amongst employees, other than flexitime and part-time working. Many employers (62 per cent) reported that they allowed staff to vary occasionally their usual hours of work.

Twenty five per cent of employees worked in a part-time job; 44 per cent of women and 8 per cent of men; 55 per cent of part-time workers did not want a full-time job. Most women in this category identified family or domestic reasons for their choice, but one in three men also identified family and domestic commitments as reasons for their choice.

Despite low current take up, there appears 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**

There was little evidence of extensive working from home during what may be considered normal working hours, and in the main it was restricted to senior staff. Notwithstanding this low incidence, there was a demand amongst some employees for the

additional flexibility such a practice would provide. Around 22 per cent of workplaces reported that they had staff who worked from home. Most cases of working at home were on an occasional basis. Where staff worked at home they were usually professional and managerial staff.

Approximately 80 per cent of employees worked exclusively within the workplace that employed them and 20 per cent worked from home at least occasionally. Of those that did not work from home, around 87 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.

### **Leave Arrangements**

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 in a modest proportion of workplaces was there detailed knowledge of changes in the maternity regulations or the new parental leave regulations, and few employers provided either type of leave beyond the statutory minimum. Other than bereavement leave, paternity leave and leave to care for others, the provision by employers of other types of leave was relatively limited. Employees felt that should they need to take leave their employer would accommodate their request.

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.

### **Workplace Facilities**

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.

Only 9 per cent of employees reported having access to a workplace crèche or nursery and 5 per cent said their employer offered financial help with childcare. Approximately 12 per cent of employees said their employer provided financial help with other care

needs.

### **Consultation and communication**

The extent of consultation varied across workplaces and workforce. Where consultation took place, the incidence of flexible working practices was greatest. Consultation was greatest in large and unionised workplaces. Around 69 per cent of employees reported that their employer consulted them on work-life balance matters. Consultation most commonly related to hours of work rather than leave or working from home. Approximately 64 per cent of workplaces had no mechanism in place to monitor work-life balance practices.

It was also clear that management at individual workplaces retained considerable discretion about the form of and eligibility for work-life balance practices. The greater the local discretion, the greater the incidence of flexible working arrangements.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of work-life balance**

There was a consensus amongst employers that work-life balance practices improved certain aspects of work - work relations and staff motivation/commitment – and helped retain female employees and lowered labour turnover. Approximately 72 per cent of workplaces reported that work-life balance practices fostered good employment relations. Nevertheless, a significant proportion thought that implementing such practices had increased managerial workloads and overall business costs. Fifty-one per cent of workplaces reported that work-life balance practices increased managerial workloads.

Business costs, however, need to be seen in a critical light. Long working hours and stress at work may also increase business costs through employees' sickness and decreased efficiency. The evidence points to work-life balance practices reducing such costs insofar as they are associated with happier and more committed staff.

The main advantage of work-life balance (referred to by 43 per cent of workplaces) was having happier staff. The main disadvantage (pointed out by 10 per cent of employers) was shortages of staff.

### **Conclusion**

Evidence from both Employer and Employee Surveys points to many positive messages about the state of Britain's work-life balance, such as:

- a high proportion of employers allowing staff to vary occasionally their usual hours of work;
- a high recognition by employers of the utility of work-life balance; and
- few feelings of unfairness from employees about the operation of work-life balance policies and practices in the workplace.

There was room for improvement because of:

- a substantial proportion of employees working very long hours, particularly men in professional and managerial occupations;
- a strong unsatisfied demand for flexible working time arrangements from employees not currently met by employers;
- few workplace facilities – even the provision of information services was limited.

The evidence from the surveys suggests that much can be learnt from those employers who have been able to implement work-life balance policies and practices and obtained business benefits from having done so.

*Copies of the full report (RR249) – priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfEE Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

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