

Work-family balance practices in action: innovation and barriers in the private sector

Margaret O'Brien

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**Centre for Research on the Child and Family, University of East Anglia, University of East Anglia,
Norwich, NR4 7TJ., UK. Tel: + 44 (0) 1603 592068 Email: m.o-brien@uea.ac.uk**

This focus of this paper is on work-family balance practices in action with a particular emphasis on private sector employment contexts. Using research evidence and organisational case examples, I explore factors that facilitate and challenge the implementation of work-family balance practices. Despite variation in underpinning cultural, demographic and labour market environments across the world, employers are being called upon to create more humane and family-friendly workplaces. Much of the evidence on work-family balance good practice originates from developed countries, particularly from their time of economic boom, when arguably more resources were available to deploy on these measures.

A main tension for private sector employers is balancing corporate or government driven family-friendly ambitions with administrative burden (often described as too much regulation or “red tape”). However, there is a growing correlational evidence base for “business benefits” of work-family practices, particularly in productivity, retention and lower absenteeism (Yasbek, 2004; Dex & Scheibl, 1999). Notwithstanding this evidence, international comparisons show that many companies disregard or assume no responsibility for employees’ private lives conducting their business with an assumption of an autonomous worker (Chinchilla, Las Heras & Masuda, 2010). Companies that are insensitive to family issues, with no formal policies to support employees’ family obligations, are described by Chinchilla et al (2010) as contaminating companies. These organisations are contrasted with “family-responsible” enterprises, argued to enrich the business and social environment of their communities. While companies do vary in how they respond to observations such as these, it is noticeable that consideration of the wider family context of workers’ lives is becoming more common place, as well as a key component in modern corporate responsibility approaches.

1. Business dialogue with Governments and other stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of county level work-family problems

The development of a shared understanding of country level work-family problems (e.g. demographic changes in family structures, fertility and population renewal, shortages in female labour market supply, employee retention) can be facilitated when the business community engages in dialogue with government and other key organisations. Informal meetings between government ministers, civil servants and CEOs or leaders of employer organisations are important lobbying opportunities for private sector employers for instance on employment legislation. However, typically informal and formal meetings with a broader set of interest groups/stakeholders, including employee and family organisations, promotes greater dialogue, awareness and knowledge of potentially conflicting needs and shared solutions. In countries with developed work-family policies and practices *formal* as well *informal* channels of communication between business employers and governments exist. Examples include:

Public-Private Summit for Promotion of Work-life Balance- Japan

On the occasion of a Government change, a special Public-Private Summit for the Promotion of Work-life was held in June 2010. It was led by the Prime Minister, other ministers and the representatives from Nippon Keidanren, the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and

Japanese Trade Union Confederation. Immediate triggers were the declining birth rate (low point of 1.26 in 2005), the problems women have managing to continue working after the arrival of children, a long hours corporate work style (Ministry of Health, Labour & Welfare, 2011). In this meeting and subsequently companies have contributed to developing a *Work-Life Balance Charter and Action Policy*, containing a set of new societal principles embedded in revisions of the Child care and Family Care Leave Law. A *shared vision* was articulated in *Work-Life Balance Charter*,

“A society where each citizen works with a sense of satisfaction, finding his/ her job rewarding, executes work-related responsibilities, and at the same time, chooses and lives a variety of lifestyles in different stages of life (e.g. during childrearing, middle and old ages) as a member of a family and a community.” (Ministry of Health, Labour & Welfare, 2011)

The summit and charter are contributing to gradual cultural change across Japanese society and so raising the principle of workers having obligations to their “personal family” as well as to their “corporate family”.

The Productivity Commission Inquiry -Australia

On 29 June 2010, the Australian Parliament passed the Paid Parental Leave Act 2010, which introduced universal paid Parental leave for the first time in Australia. The Act paid Parental leave to eligible primary carers who have or adopt a child from 1 January 2011. <http://www.pc.gov.au/>

The implementation of this scheme followed an earlier public inquiry into the social costs and benefits of providing paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental leave in Australia, conducted by the Productivity Commission. Private sector engagement was strong in the Productivity Commission Inquiry driven by a national concern with talent shortages, long working hours, underutilization of female skills. With a mixed culture of collective bargaining and management discretion at company levels, employers were able to leverage strong help and guidance from government. In addition to publicly provided information on the workings of a statutory paid parental leave scheme, the Australian Government agreed to provide specific supports, for instance: a web-based calculator that shows which employees would be eligible and the net benefits they would receive, and that sets out any obligations by employers.

'Employers for Work-Life Balance'- UK

In March 2000, the British Government outlined its plans for encouraging the growth of work-life balance within the UK in the discussion document ' *Work-Life Balance: Changing Patterns in a Changing World*'. The document announced the launch of the Work-Life Balance Campaign. One aspect of this campaign was the setting up of an employer-led alliance: 'Employers for Work-Life Balance', with the aim of promoting the benefits of work-life balance to employers in the UK by demonstrating its success within their own organisations. Firms such as Lloyds TSB, HSBC and BT were among the first to sign up. In the discussion document the Government, in partnership with Employers for Work-Life Balance, drew up a six-point checklist outlining the key considerations for employers if they are committed to work-life balance. It states:

An organisation that is committed to work-life balance:

- Recognises that effective practices to promote work-life balance will benefit the organisation and its employees.
- Acknowledges that individuals at all stages of their lives work best when they are able to achieve an appropriate balance between work and all other aspects of their lives.
- Highlights the employer's and employees' joint responsibility to discuss workable solutions and encourages a partnership between individuals and their line managers.
- Develops appropriate policies and practical responses that meet the specific needs of the organisation and its employees, having regard to:- Fairness and consistency; Valuing employees for their contribution to the business, not their working pattern; Monitoring and evaluation;
- Communicates its commitment to work-life strategies to its employees.
- Demonstrates leadership from the top of the organisation and encourages managers to lead by example'.

Source: ' *Work-Life Balance: Changing Patterns in a Changing World* (March 2000: 4)

<http://www.dfee.gov.uk/work-lifebalance>

The discussion document also announced a new Ministerial Advisory Committee on Work-Life Balance that was set up to advise ministers on ways to promote work-life balance in employment practices in the UK. Three years later an Employment Act introducing a range of work-family legislation was passed – including requiring employers to commence a legal 'duty to consider' requests for flexible working time arrangements from employees who are parents with responsibility for children aged under six (or under 18 in the case of disabled children) .

European Social Partners dialogue

Prior to any EU wide legislative change in employment, a series of consultative meetings takes place between European social partners (BUSINESSEUROPE, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), European Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public services (CEEP) and The European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises- UEAPME). A consensus must be agreed. For instance, in the most recent dialogue on a revision of the new Parental Leave Directive (2010/18/EU) adopted on 8 March 2010 by EU ministers for employment, social affairs and equal opportunities, BUSINESSEUROPE and UEAPME supported an extra fourth month but resisted any change in payments to employers.

The revised Directive on Parental Leave gives each working parent the right to at least four months leave after the birth or adoption of a child (up from three months). At least one of the four months cannot be transferred to the other parent – meaning it will be lost if not taken – offering incentives to fathers to take the leave. The new Directive also provides for better protection against discrimination and a smoother return to work. It put into effect an agreement between European employers and trade union organisations, resulting in a decision that matters regarding the income of workers during parental leave were left for Member States and/or national social partners to determine.

BUSINESSEUROPE is the main horizontal business organisation at EU level. Through its 41 member federations, BUSINESSEUROPE represents 20 million companies from 35 countries. Its main task is to ensure that companies' interests are represented and defended vis-à-vis the European institutions with the principal aim of preserving and strengthening corporate competitiveness. BUSINESSEUROPE is active in the European social dialogue to promote the smooth functioning of labour markets.

<http://www.businessseurope.eu/>

UEAPME is the European SME umbrella organization and incorporates 83 member organizations consisting of national cross-sectorial SME federations, European branch federations and other associate members. Across the whole of Europe, UEAPME represents over 12 million enterprises with nearly 55 million employees. <http://www.ueapme.com/>

2. Government support and incentives to companies developing work-family practices and policies

For companies in the early stages of developing work-family practices and policies “start-up” support from Governments is important. Through targeted funding Governments can create incentives and firm based training opportunities. Such support may be particularly helpful for small or medium size private sector enterprises with less reserve capacity on which to draw.

The *Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund* (WLB-CF), initiated by the Department of Trade and Industry in Britain in 2000 at the start of national effort towards promoting work-life balance practices, is good example of this approach. Over 400 organisations were supported by advice from specialist consultancy firms for a time-limited period of one year. These firms assisted employers in carrying out tailored projects to develop work-life balance policies and practices.

Consultancies carried out audits and research included benchmarking activities with similar organisations using staff surveys, focus groups, interviews and workshops. The most common practice was supporting organisational change around flexible working hours and practices (remote and home-working, part-time working, Job sharing, health awareness materials, information packs or toolkits).

An evaluation showed that support from *Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund* increased work-life balance awareness in the funded organisations and the majority developed flexible working practices (Nelson, 2004). As this innovation occurred before the formal introduction of flexible working practice legislation in Britain in 2003, it was a useful pilot. The project also indicated that, the private sector, sometimes seen as a laggard on work-life issues, can be a fertile place to pilot new working practises to help establish foundations for further developments.

3. Leading workplace cultural change

Most research points to the critical role of leadership in initiating and sustaining workplace cultural change around work-family practices. Simple implementation of a family-friendly policy, such as flexible work options, will not necessarily lead to better work-life balance outcomes without appropriate organisational support (Behson, 2005; Lewis, 2001). CEO's and senior managers have a significant influence in communicating expected organisational behaviour, including time to arrive and leave work, amounts of “over-time”, formal holidays, leave or flexible work entitlements

individuals should take. Senior management 'buy-in' is both a success factor in promoting work-family practices if present and a barrier if absent. One problem is that although senior executives often have much more individual flexibility about when they personally work, they have little scope to reduce hours. Research and case study evidence suggests that symbolic actions, such as taking parental leave by CEOs, particularly when they are successful males contesting local norms, can be important in shifting organisational barriers (Russell & Hwang, 2004).

Case Study – BT Global Partners

Chris Ainslie is a father of three and managing director of BT Global Partners, a business with sales of more than £500 million a year. From Monday to Thursday, he works 10-hour days. Then he switches off his laptop and mobile and devotes Friday and the weekend to family and outside interests. Ainslie, 40, made his four-day week a condition of accepting a senior job with the telecommunications company when he was headhunted in 2005. He does it in 40 hours by 'ruthless prioritisation', self-discipline and delegation. 'I make decisions far more quickly. I've never been more efficient than I am now.' In his three years in the job, his directorate's revenues have doubled internationally and grown 14 per cent in the UK, while profit margins have risen from 18 per cent to 23 per cent. The key business benefits are the creation of a group of seven experienced deputies, who take it in turn to run the business when Ainslie is away and increased employee satisfaction levels in his division. *Source: Equality and Human Rights Commission Working Better 'Meeting the changing needs of families, workers and employers in the 21st century' (2009)*

In the same organisation in parallel to this individual CEO case, an informal code of work-family practice titled The BT Passport Scheme was initiated, to enable employees to confidentially inform supervisors about specific family responsibilities, personal or health conditions. Once stored these allow managers to support employees under a "duty of care" approach. Research on private sector companies shows that employee perception that the work place has a caring ethos is a significant predictor of take up of parental leave by fathers (Haas & Hwang *).

Leaders of governments can also act as social norm changers as reflected when two European prime ministers, in the UK and Finland, became fathers around the same time in 2000. Cherie gives Blair paternity leave hint": Cherie Booth dropped a broad hint last night that she would like her husband, Tony Blair, to take a break from running the country and spend some time with her and the baby after it is born in May. ... "Our children need their male role models as well as their female ones if they are to grow up into well-rounded, well-balanced individuals." She drew comparisons with the Finnish Prime Minister, who had taken advantage of his right to paternity leave. (The Guardian Newspaper, March 21, 2000).

Competition between countries and companies in terms of their relative positions on the range of "family-friendly" league tables also has a place in changing attitudes towards work-family policies and practices.

4. Formal work-family practices in the workplace and private sector flexibilities

Most evidence, using representative surveys rather than case studies showcasing exceptional generosity, indicates that that, on aggregate, employees who work in large private and public sector organisations, and in unionised workplaces, experience an optimum system of work-family support

(in terms of higher income replacement flexible work practices and family leave) (Adema & Whiteford, 2007; Hegewisch, 2009; EuroFund, 2010). Larger organisations are more able to provide a human resource infrastructure. However, private sector companies have greater discretion to “top- up” basic provisions and develop personalised conditions and benefits for highly valued employees. For instance, some multi-nationals companies report examples of innovative work-family schemes to retain high skilled female staff when they have babies. *Maternity coaching* starts before the child is born and is offered to women and if relevant their managers.

Deutsche Bank

Having introduced a maternity coaching programme in 2008, Deutsche Bank has seen this benefit grow in popularity year on year. The coaching is not only offered to pregnant women, but also to all managers of women going on maternity leave. For women, the coaching program is designed to support a successful transition from and back into work. For line managers the program highlights and reinforces the benefits of good communication and planning. The workshops also provide a support community for mothers, as well as access to information and materials. The coaching programme also offers a 12-24 month session to some women, as this has been identified as the point when women tend to question their career. There is an ante-natal healthcare programme for expectant mothers, and ante and post natal yoga classes. Expectant mothers can also use the on-site medical centre; having these facilities on site/ within close vicinity has resulted in less disruption for expectant mothers to their working routine. A wider benefit of the maternity provisions is that Deutsche Bank has seen an increased retention rate of women returning from maternity leave.

Source: *Top Employers for Working Families Awards* www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Deutsche Bank’s maternity programme dovetails with statutory “Keeping in Touch” provision available in Australia and Britain to all eligible parents, while on parental leave, whether employed in the private or public sector. Subject to employer and employee consent, the Australian Government’s statutory paid parental leave scheme allows the employee to work up to 10 days while on paid parental leave, where that work strengthens the connection to their workplace. There is also scope for eligible self-employed parents to maintain some oversight of their businesses while on leave.

Private Sector Time Credit system - Belgium

In some countries private sector work-family balance practices have evolved out of public sector schemes as in Belgium (Merla & Deven, 2011; Vandeweyer & Glorieux, 2009). Legislation enabling citizens to have entitlements to time-out breaks from employment with job protection and part income replacement was introduced by the Belgian government in 1985. Initially, the legislation was aimed at achieving a redistribution of labour to counter rising unemployment. Each person taking a career break was to be replaced by an unemployed person, and would only be paid their allowance if this condition was fulfilled. In 2002, the system was given a radical overhaul, decoupling from conditionality with unemployed replacement.

By 2011 Merla & Deven (2011) report that the Time Credit system (*Tijdskrediet / Crédit temps*) applied to employees in the private sector (and a similar scheme – ‘career breaks’ – applying in the public sector). According to both schemes all eligible workers have a basic right to one paid year of this type of leave. This period can be extended up to five years by collective agreement negotiated at the sectoral or company level.

For each company, there is a 5 per cent threshold of employees who can use the time credit system at any one time; priorities are settled within the company according to certain rules (e.g. priority in the case of care for a severely ill family member). From March 2010 on, employees need two years

(instead of one) of previous work with the same employer to be granted his payment. There is a guarantee in principle to return to the workplace following a career break or time credit period. Payments to time credit users are funded by the Federal social security system, which is financed by contributions from employers and employees (Merla & Deven, 2011).

As Vandeweyer & Glorieux (2009) suggest career break schemes, such as the Belgium example, are not only intended for parents but represent a societal recognition of personal needs for a break from employment at any age for a range of reasons from switching careers, having a rest from high work intensity, caring for grand-children, pursuing a hobby or to take care of elders.

Challenges for Small and Medium Size Businesses (SMEs)

Although the size of small and medium sized businesses can mean they have greater flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, this low staff critical mass can also create problems in staff substitution and cover, particularly in relation to extended parental leave periods. Some governments and regions give SMEs exemptions in relation to compliance with national work time directives. For example in the Netherlands, SMEs are not required to comply with the working hours adjustment flexibilities available to all other work places.

The Working Hours Adjustment Act- The Netherlands

Under the Working Hours Adjustment Act (WAA), all employees who have completed one year's continuous employment with their present employer have the right to increase or decrease their working hours. The right to adjustment of working hours is, however, conditional: the employer can refuse to grant the request if the interests of the business or service might be seriously harmed; *and the law does not apply to employers with less than ten employees* (Groenendijk & Keuzenkamp, 2011).

5. Implementing fathers use of parental leave: Private sector Sweden

Sweden was the first nation to grant employed fathers and mothers equal access to paid family leave, in 1974. However, the implementation gap between availability and support for use has been evident even Sweden and illuminated by the research of Haas & Hwang (2009). Tracking trends from 1993 to 2006, they find a dramatic increase in the volume of formal corporate support for fathers taking leave in large Swedish companies, but from a very low base. For instance, in 2006, 41 per cent of companies reported a formal decision to encourage paternal leave taking in contrast to just 2 per cent in 1993 (see Table 1). However, by 2006 less than half of companies in their survey reported formal policies and programmes and informal support from co-workers and supervisors. Where companies provided little formal and informal support, fathers took less leave. Resistance to fathers taking parental leave was most common in more male-dominated companies, typically blue-collar companies (Haas & Hwang, 2009).

Organizational culture at an informal level, for instance through the impact of senior managers taking parental leave, can creating a more enabling atmosphere for junior colleagues in the workplace (Haas et al, 2002). By 2006, 88 per cent of Haas & Hwang's (2009) top Swedish management had taken parental leave in contrast to 32 per cent in 1993. Fathers' participation in parental leave has risen steadily since the beginning of the programme.

Table 1: Extent of Corporate Support for Fathers taking Leave in Sweden

Percentage of companies reporting	1993 survey (N=200)	2006 survey (N=244)
Formal support for Parental leave:		
Policy decision to support fathers' leave taking	2	41
Record keeping on leave taking	19	40
Formal programme to encourage blue-collar fathers to take leave	1	34
Formal programme to encourage white-collar fathers to take leave	4	48
Group/person designated to encourage fathers to take leave	2	7
Leave taking by men in top management	32	88
Reported five or more of the six types of formal support	Nil	14
Informal support for Parental Leave:		
Positive reaction by managers when blue-collar men want to take leave	10	30
Positive reaction by managers when white-collar men want to take leave	10	37
Positive reaction by co-workers when blue-collar men want to take leave	18	39
Positive reaction by co-workers when white-collar men want to take leave	26	46
All four types of informal support	5	26
Fathers' use of Parental leave:		
No fathers took leave	2	Nil
1-20 per cent of fathers took leave	70	42
21-40 per cent of fathers took leave	16	33
41-60 per cent of fathers took leave	9	9

61 per cent or more of fathers took leave	2	15
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Source: Haas & Hwang, 2009

This research aligns with other studies highlighting the importance of work-family legislation being backed up by managerial support, support from supervisors and co-workers through formal policies and programmes (Lewis, 2001; Tremblay & Genin, 2010). Managers responsible for arranging leave and flexible workers require training in how to handle alternative working patterns in their teams. Perceptions about supervisors' support or lack of support are critical in whether employees ask for leave, flexible working and how they cope on return after leave. In the economic downturn the intensity of work, cost cuts, and tough performance targets may limit managers' ability to focus on work-family balance. Professional associations, such as human resource bodies, can provide managers with useful networking and support to compare effective policies and processes.

Conclusion

The need for work-life balance practices is becoming more accepted by employers in the private as well as the public sector, although company executives are still uncertain about the remit of their responsibilities. A range of factors have served to increase the salience of work-family policies. Even in these difficult economic times leading companies still compete fiercely for talent and need to create attractive work packages for an increasingly diverse set of workers and their 21st century families (The Economist, 2011). The growth of Family-Friendly and Working Mother awards and league tables mean that organizational reputation and compliance with legislation is more visible to business rivals and the wider community.

However, employers need further encouragement, training and incentives to develop organisational policies which embrace the diverse ways contemporary employees have to balance their work and family life throughout the life course. Responsiveness on the part of employers is important. Employers attitudes to work-family balance are affected by a range of factors notably local legislation and regulations, the social and cultural context, and also personal experiences (for instance, when Chief Executives become grandparents and observe the daily struggles of their own children attempting to manage being a good worker and parent). As the Swedish case has shown, movement towards a family- friendly environment takes time and requires a combination of national legislation, cultural change and local support policies.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

Private sector companies consider more proactive ways to engage with Governments and other stakeholders about county level work-family problems in order to develop a shared understanding and contribute shared solutions.

Private sector companies gather information on their own employees' family needs to build up a profile and assess priority areas for support, in a phased manner.

Governments create incentives and “start-up” opportunities for companies to pilot, monitor and evaluate specific work-family practices.

Company executives, particularly male leaders, should consider imaginative and symbolic ways to lead and model workplace cultural change towards better work-family balance.

Private sector companies formulate creative methods to communicate written formal and informal work-family practices and policies, including podcasts, blogs, tweets as well as traditional manual and notice-board methods.

Private sector companies to invest in team skills training of managers involved in work-family implementation.

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