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Work–Life Balance in the 21st Century

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Working longer and longer hours is not good for business – or for you. Worrying about childcare or eldercare will only add to your stress levels. Returning to work too soon after a major life event such as birth, death or illness is likely to take its toll in the end.

But if you work with your employer (or with your staff if you’re an employer or manager yourself), together you can find ways to be more flexible about working arrangements. And there’ll be benefits all round.

Work–life balance isn’t only about families and childcare. Nor is it about working less. It’s about working ‘smart’. About being fresh enough to give you all you need for both work and home, without jeopardising one for the other. And it’s a necessity for everyone, at whatever stage you are in your life. (Department for Trade and Industry, UK, 2001)

In March 2000, the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, launched the Government’s campaign to promote a better work–life balance at a business breakfast at 10 Downing Street. The ongoing government campaign aims to encourage employers to introduce flexible working practices and stresses the need for work–life balance for all workers, not just those with caring responsibilities. In April 2003, a legislative measure was introduced giving parents with children aged under six, or disabled children under 18, the right to request a flexible working pattern and their employers the duty to consider their applications seriously. In order to monitor attitudes, demand and uptake of work–life balance policies and to examine the impact of such policies on business, a baseline study of both employers and employees was conducted in 2000 (WLB1, Hogarth et al., 2000) and this was followed up in 2003 (WLB2, Woodland et al., 2003; Stevens et al., 2004).
Why work–life balance?

The current promotion of work–life balance in the UK reflects changes in the economic and political climate as well as social changes. The drive for change in employment practices is, to some extent, related to changes in families and family life. The gap in economic activity rates between women and men has declined from 22 per cent in 1984 to 12 per cent in 2001. This reflects increasing employment rates among women in the 1980s, and decreasing labour market participation among men in the 1990s. (Dench et al., 2002). One key aspect of women’s increasing economic participation has been the employment rates of women with preschool children which almost doubled from 28 per cent in 1980 to 53 per cent in 1999 (McRae, 2003). Decreasing numbers of families now assume the traditional model of fathers who work and mothers who remain at home to care for children and/or the elderly. In addition there has been dramatic growth in the number of one-parent households from 9 per cent in 1971 to 25 per cent in 2001. Lone parents are predominantly mothers (22%), rather than fathers (3%) (Dench et al., 2002).

Political pressure for legislation to promote work–life balance has come from the European Commission as part of the European Employment Strategy, which aims to modernise and reform EU labour markets. With European Social Funding (ESF) funding, key priorities in the first six years of the 21st century are to prevent the drift into long-term unemployment, reintegrate marginalised groups into the economy and society, and help in the transition towards the knowledge-based economy. In the UK, the 2001 Labour Party Manifesto made commitments to ‘fair and flexible work’ and to increase maternity leave and introduce statutory paternity pay. As a consequence, rights to flexible working for parents and additional maternity leave for mothers, as well as a new right for fathers, were implemented in 2003.1

Despite political and social pressure for work–life balance, the drive for more flexible working is strongly related to the needs of employers. Within business, globalisation and the new economy have resulted in changes in customer demands and expectations for access to goods and services 24 hours a day. Increasingly this means that organisations must operate outside the traditional nine to five structure. Therefore organisations have to employ people who are prepared to work flexibly outside traditional working hours. Flexible working is popularly viewed as a means of increasing work–life balance for the individual, however, from an organisational perspective the benefits of flexible working may be related to non-standard contracts and the elimination of overtime payments, rather than greater work–life balance for employees. Purcell et al. (1999) found that contract flexibility did facilitate labour market participation for certain groups, such as students. However for many employees flexible working resulted in greater job insecurity and poor conditions of employment.