

# Work–Life Balance: here to stay?

## Conference Report by **Anna Hayward**

IT'S A FEW short years since the term work–life balance started to appear on the workplace agenda. Whilst the words seem to have entered the vernacular, the issues for those with an interest in promoting health and wellbeing at work are whether organisations are taking it seriously and what are likely to be the future trends.

These were addressed by a Symposium Events conference in London on 13 July 2006, entitled **Work–Life Balance: Challenging Assumptions and Sharing Best Practice**. The body of speakers covered the political, demographic and legal backdrop influencing organisational thinking, latest research and case studies. The audience represented a diverse range of organisations, public and private sector, demonstrating the spread of interest in these issues.

**Jenny Watson**, Chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission, gave a passionate résumé of why she believes this agenda is not standing still and why flexible working should be extended to all. She argues that the need for improved productivity and competitiveness is transforming the workplace, forcing employers to think differently and act flexibly. Pregnancy, caring responsibilities for young children and the elderly, changing attitudes among families, particularly fathers, all highlight an increasing demand for different ways of working. Some of the statistics she used to demonstrate her arguments were: 30,000 women lose their jobs each year because of pregnancy; the sandwich generation of women, a quarter of whom have young children and also have responsibility for caring for elderly relatives; 7 out of 10 fathers would like to be more involved in the upbringing of their children, with research demonstrating that greater involvement from fathers improves the wellbeing of children.

Changing legislation is also driving the work–life balance agenda. **Nick Hine** of Thomas Eggar points out that whilst the Flexible Working Regulations 2002 give those with responsibility for a child's upbringing (under 6 or if disabled under 18) the right to request variation in working hours or working from home, the government is under pressure to extend flexible working to all employees. In April 2007 workers will have the right to request flexible working if caring for an adult. The Work and Families Bill, which also comes into effect on this date, will entitle all pregnant employees to up to 12 months' statutory maternity leave from day one. Maternity pay will be extended from 26 to 39 weeks, with the government aiming to amend this to 52 weeks pay by the end of the parliament.

The view of **Stephen Bevan**, The Work Foundation, is that work–life balance is now a mainstream issue as a result of demographic and social trends. The recruitment pool is undergoing a fundamental shift. In 2010 only 20% of the workforce will be made up of white able-bodied

men under 45 years in full-time work, 80% of 16 year olds will stay at school and 80% of workforce growth will be women. Coupled with people looking for greater influence over their working time, this spells job design challenges for managers.

**Dr Tobias Kretschmer** of the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics offered a contrasting view of work–life balance. In a study of 732 firms across the UK, Germany, France and US, it was found that whilst improving work–life balance is desirable from a worker's viewpoint, the effect on productivity is neutral. The researchers maintain that firms and policymakers should not expect a 'free knock-on effect' on productivity by introducing work–life balance policies but neither should they use a potential decrease in productivity as an excuse not to introduce them.

Two case studies from PricewaterhouseCoopers and City of London Police provided examples of how work–life balance issues are being tackled in organisations. **Emma Appleby** of PricewaterhouseCoopers outlined how the firm has reviewed their support to parents, working towards making flexible working a reality for all. Through a survey of their parents, they found that 85% of mothers are in dual-income families, whereas the figure is 54% for fathers. This led to a deeper understanding of childcare issues, the introduction of emergency back-up care, discounts on childcare providers and reviewed childcare voucher policies. The impact of this focus is that 75% of people now feel able to flex their work arrangements to accommodate outside commitments and 92% of flexible working requests have been approved in the last 18 months.

For City of London Police, **Carolyn Woolley** described an audit of organisational stress and health, benchmarking their results against other police forces. This gave them clear indicators of where they are doing well and where there are issues. The conclusion was that the audit was key in promoting and developing a work–life balance agenda, with the benefits of improved commitment and involvement of staff and a high performing force.

**Imelda Redmond** of Carers UK made a concluding plea for better work–life balance for carers. Six million people are carers in the UK, twice as many as the number of people who work in the NHS or social care. She argues that it is important for employers to recognise and keep carers in the workforce. Carers are twice as likely to be in poor health or suffer from depression, leading to social isolation and loss of identity. An ageing population without an expanding social care network puts greater pressure on individuals, particularly in the 45–59 years age bracket.

The conference ended with a panel discussion, which focused on the need for employers to improve communication and think creatively when it comes to work–life balance. Trust in individuals was also seen as key, a fitting point for reflection.

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