



2014 THE EUROPEAN
The Year of EMPLOYERS' FORUM
Workplace FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE
Reinvention

9 September 2014 - Säätytalo, Helsinki, Finland

CONFERENCE REPORT

On the 8-9th September 2014, a number of key experts gathered in Helsinki, Finland, to discuss how to reinvent the workplace, how to make it more family friendly.

Working conditions and working time arrangements are a primary preoccupation for the majority of families, as well as the place of work and commuting have a great impact on family life. The central point for departure of our conference was that employers have a great responsibility in this matter, and even if not everybody can do everything, every employer can do something to positively impact on the wellbeing of their employee carers and parents.

The conference took place under the auspices of the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and it was thanks to the generosity of the Ministry that we could organise the conference on the 9th September in the prestigious Säätytalo, the House of Estates, which greatly contributed to the success of the event. The conference was financed by the European Commission Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion PROGRESS programme, and organised in cooperation with COFACE's Finnish member organisation, Väestöliitto, the Family Federation of Finland.

Väestöliitto organised a pre-conference on the 8th September, highlighting the issue from the Finnish perspective, with many excellent speakers and contributors, which already a number of international participants attended.

On the evening of the 8th September, Väestöliitto hosted a get-together party at their premises, entertaining the Finnish and international delegates with music and food, making them feel very welcome in Helsinki. This informal moment was the perfect opportunity for networking and exchanging more informally, and also created a great link between the pre-conference and the conference on the day after.

The conference particularly highlighted the great diversity of challenges faced by working parents and carers in Europe, as well as the different approaches and solutions, both in the public and in the private sector.

Some of the most discussed topics were contextualised around the growing number of dual-earner households, and the mass entry of women on the labour market as main societal trends that not only change family life and impacts the organisation of everyday activities of a family, but it also has a profound impact on the labour market.

The conference embraced a truly multidisciplinary approach and offered a 360° view on the subject. The speakers were from very different backgrounds, from academia, to employers, from trade unions to NGOs. The common objective for the individual organisations is to understand the barriers and cultural challenges that exist in the field of reconciliation, and each in its own way and within their own possibilities aims to address it to bring about organisational and social change.

There are a number of factors that define the work-life balance landscape in every country, and many of the topics that emerged as important are cross-cutting. The conference and the speakers tried to address a great number of these, among which:

In the moment of transition to parenthood **Leaves** play a crucial role, and often this is the time when things go wrong in terms of the relationship with work, and the way organisations/employers handle leaves has a huge impact on the continuity of the career and working life. The issue of fathers' leave is of course a very interesting Europe-wide issue, in the particularly gendered situation of parenting and childcare. One of the many myths is that economic factors determine fathers' taking or losing out on their right to leave, yet research shows, that it is rather gender equality within the family. Unfortunately workplaces that have solid leave policies for mothers and fathers are still few and far between. It is mainly in the industries which require highly skilled and specialised employees that have made the link between good leave policies and talent retention.

The issue of **working time** was addressed by most of the speakers, as we are generally still stuck in a post-industrialist work arrangement, in which employees and workers need to be seen and supervised during specific hours as a proof of doing the job they are supposed to. There are great variations across Europe around the prevalence of part-time work as in some countries it is very rare and in some other countries almost the norm. Participants also had the chance to hear some new research findings around the impact of parents' working hours on child development and school performance. Irregular and unpredictable working hours not only have a devastating effect on workers' health, but also on their sleep, and the number of hours the children in the household can sleep. Working time has a huge impact on family time, and the number of hours a family can spend together, especially in what some presenters called the "24 h economy". However not all is bad, as non-standard working hours can also offer opportunities for reconciling work and family life, but again, mostly for the higher socio-economic classes of society, and those with the highest skills. A few speakers also agreed, that flexible working times are not necessarily the silver bullet, but an overall reduction and rationalisation of demand on staff, reduction of hours and more stable and more predictable working time and workload.

The issue of **gender equality** cannot be uncoupled from the discussion on work-life balance. As women are a majority in the workforce, they are changing the rules of the previously male dominated labour market. Yet, as with any social and culture change, policies carry a stigma if they seem to be only addressed to a certain part of the population, and this way flexible or reduced working hours are not seen as also being for men.

Even though the conference focused specifically on what employers can do to make reconciliation easier, the discussion around the accessibility of **childcare** and other services came up regularly during the two days. Childcare provision again seems to be seen as a measure of supporting working mothers, yet the lack of such services can also seriously compromise the career and work-trajectories of older women, who are grandparents and need to reduce working time or leave the labour market to help out with grandchildren. The two systems of leaves and childcare are interconnected, and have a profound effect on women's working lives, especially those with unpredictable and irregular working hours, and especially single mums and those far away from other family support.

The **leadership** of the organisation has a lot of responsibility in shaping a certain organisational culture, and it is often this culture that imposes norms and behaviour on its managers and workers. Unfortunately there are still many workplaces that penalise people who prioritise their family, or as a matter of fact other outside interests. The culture of the organisation is as difficult to change as the policy and legislative framework, and is especially at risk of not being sustainable due to change of leadership. The values, attitudes and practices are so embedded in the culture, that not only are they difficult to change, but they have a profound impact on the lives of their employees. There was also a special focus on small and medium sized organisations, as they are less likely to have formal work-life balance policies, yet it may be easier for them to transform the workplace and perhaps the discussions and culture is also more informal, but some policies may be too costly for them to implement. Micro-companies, with less than 10 employees represent 90% of companies in Europe. There are significant business benefits to implementing work-life balance policies, but these take a number of years to put in place and managers are often confronted with external and internal pressures that compromise these achievements. There were some diverging views around the role of HR departments, whether they are to be leaders in their organisations pushing for these new measures and drive the change, or are they merely implementing the relevant policies and actions. Without a doubt, they have a crucial role to play.

An overall message emerging from the conference was about the need to extend work-life balance policies beyond the reach of only the most highly educated, or those with top managerial jobs, supported with a lot of IT, that enables remote working. Combining or integrating work and family life is an absolute necessity if we want to affront the current demographic challenges. Unless we tackle the issue of working time, childcare and other care services and leaves systems, the existing inequalities will only grow.

The organisers wish to thank everyone who came and who contributed to the success of our conference! The presentations and the videos of the speakers are to be found here: www.coface-eu.org/europe/employers-forum-for-work-life-balance



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