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Executive Summary

This aim of this paper is to evaluate flexible working patterns to improve work-life balance and enhance well-being at work.

Research showed that the stereotypical view that men derive their identities from work and women largely from family life was not supported. Changes in demographics and social trends are forcing organisations to re-think their approach to flexible working arrangements and consider offering the initiative to all employees to ensure equality within the business. A Government plan that the right to request flexible working should be offered to all employees is suggested for implementation in 2015.

Case studies of successful implementation of flexible working initiatives are also investigated and identify many benefits on employee work-life balance and enhancing well-being at work; resulting in less stress, improved productivity, reduced absenteeism and low staff turnover for the employee and increased staff loyalty and improved business outcomes for the organisations. Issues relating to implementation, communication and leadership are also discussed.

An Evaluation of Flexible Working Patterns to improve Work-Life Balance and Enhance Well-Being at Work

A healthy workplace is defined by Sauter *et al* as any organisation that:

“maximises the integration of worker goals for well-being and company objectives for profitability and productivity”.

1.0 Introduction

Grawitch *et al* (1) state that this definition aims to suggest that for an organisation to become a “*healthy workplace*”, it must consider the whole organisation and all individuals. Recent years have seen individual’s lives affected by social, lifestyle and employment changes. Despite these shifts, people still have the same basic physical and mental needs for social support, physical safety, health and a feeling they are able to cope with life.

This is further supported by Browne (2) who argues that human resource practices are only progressive if the concern for organisational level outcomes is matched with a concern for the well-being of employees who are directly affected by the policies and practices.

The CIPD define well-being as:

“Creating an environment to promote a state of contentment which allows an employee to flourish and achieve their full potential for the benefit of themselves and their organisation” (3).

The concept of employee well-being has grown in popularity and has been considered a buzz-phrase for over a decade (3) (4), however, employers are now embracing it more than ever. Surprisingly, much of the driving force for well-being at work has come from employers, as they believe they will achieve a win-win situation; by helping employees to balance the demands of work and home will improve staff engagement and retention, and ultimately business performance (5). Research shows that when people work with a positive mind set, improvements are seen in productivity, creativity and engagement (6). Therefore, in their ideal form, well-being initiatives are pro-active and work to enable employees to achieve their full potential on all levels – physical, mental, social, intellectual and spiritual.

The PATH (Practices for the Achievement of Total Health) framework, shown in Fig. 1 offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the link between organisational practices, employee well-being and organisational improvements.

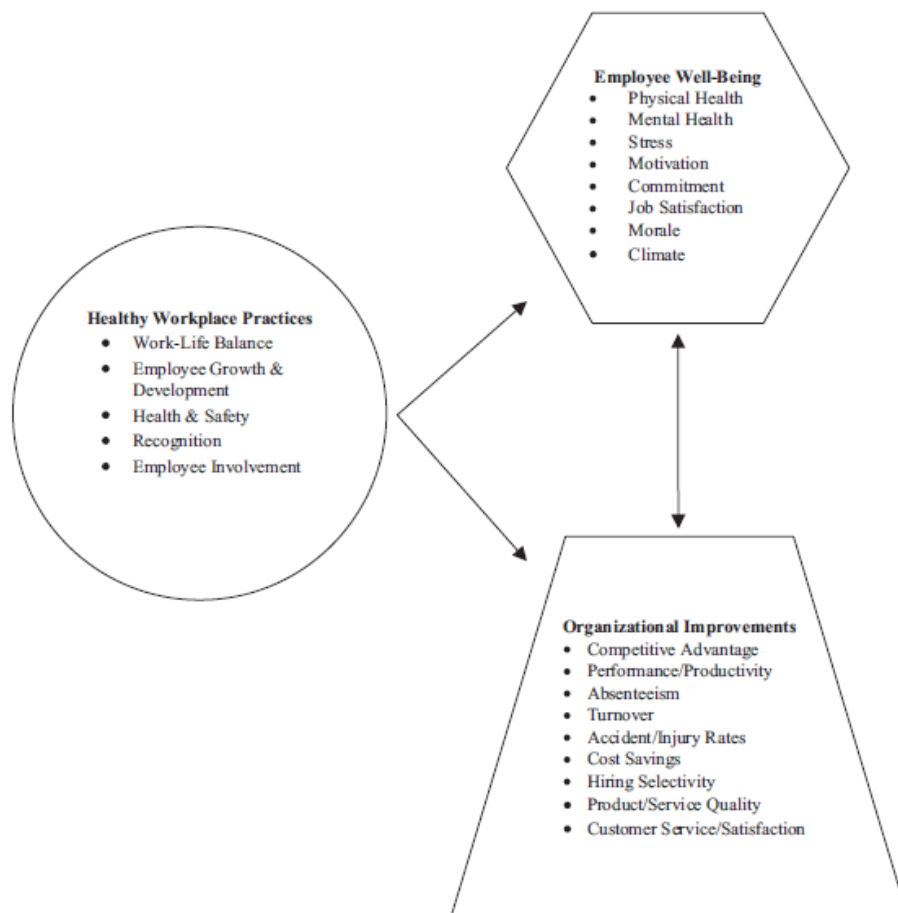


Fig.1 PATH Framework identified by Grawitch *et al*

(1)

Grawitch *et al* (1) state that the PATH framework identifies five categories of organisational practices, under which the vast array of health programs and policies which organisations use to achieve maximum employee well-being and organisational effectiveness can be classified. The five identified categories are:

- Work-Life Balance
- Employee Growth and Development
- Health and Safety
- Recognition
- Employee involvement

This paper aims to focus on the influence of work-life balance on an employee and the organisation as a whole.

2.0 Work-Life Balance

The Work Foundation provides a brief overview of work-life balance:

“Work-life balance is about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work, leading them to be able to enjoy an optimal quality of life. Work-life balance is achieved when an individual’s right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society” (5).

Paul (7) states that long hours are seen as the norm in the UK. Factors such as 24/7 delivery demands from customers, increased attendance at meetings, memo’s and e-mails to read and answer, frequent travel and insufficient resources have contributed significantly to the phenomenon. Paul (7) adds that long working hours can have a detrimental effect on:

- The individual well-being of the employee (physical, psychological and behavioural)
- Health and Safety
- Absenteeism
- Staff turnover

Until recently, most organisations have taken a one-sided “systems” approach to their work-life efforts. Their focus has been on adopting organisation policies, benefits, and procedures to solve the work-life-balance problem. Although helpful, the systems approach overlooks a critical fact: At its core, work-life balance is more an individual issue that affects the organisation than it is an organisational issue that affects the individual (8).

Hill (9) suggests that today’s workforce is full of employees who display enterprise, innovate and add immense value to the workplace. Hill (9) further suggests that these employees are likely to get the organisation noticed because of what they do and will therefore attract the attention of competitors.

“Keeping your valued employees is about building and incentivised work environment – emotionally, as well as financially – so that the risk of your best people leaving is minimised...by creating an environment where employees can feel valued, respected and supported in the endeavours” (9).

A 2010 study by Akintayo (10) investigated the impact of emotional intelligence on work-family role conflict management and reduction in withdrawal intention among workers in private organisations. The study found that emotional intelligence significantly influenced work-family role conflict and withdrawal intentions. Hill (9) found that one of the most popular tactics for retaining top talents was the offer of flexible working arrangements.

A detailed case study of effective work-life policy implementation can be found in Appendix A. Due to the volume of work-life balance initiatives, the remainder of this paper will focus on flexible working patterns and its affect on work-life balance. More specific examples of effective flexible work practices will be discussed.

3.0 Flexible Working

The term 'Flexible Working' is used to describe an array of non-standard working patterns that go beyond traditional part-time working. Some examples provided by the CIPD (11) are:

- **Part-time working:** work is generally considered part-time when employers are contracted to work anything less than full-time hours.
- **Term-time working:** a worker remains on a permanent contract but can take paid/unpaid leave during school holidays.
- **Job-sharing:** a form of part-time working where two (or occasionally more) people share the responsibility for a job between them.
- **Flexitime:** allows employees to choose, within certain set limits, when to begin and end work.
- **Compressed hours:** compressed working weeks (or fortnights) don't necessarily involve a reduction in total hours or any extension in individual choice over which hours are worked. The central feature is reallocation of work into fewer and longer blocks during the week.
- **Annual hours:** the period within which full-time employees must work is defined over a whole year.
- **Working from home on a regular basis:** workers regularly spend time working from home.
- **Mobile working/ teleworking:** this permits employees to work all or part of their working week at a location remote from the employer's workplace.
- **Career breaks:** career breaks, or sabbaticals, are extended periods of leave – normally unpaid – of up to five years or more.

Research suggests that as well as boosting staff loyalty, flexible working arrangements can also reduce stress (12).

3.1 Stress

Achor (6) suggests that stress is a central factor contributing to people's happiness at work. Many companies offer training on how to mitigate stress, focusing on its negative health effects. Achor (6) argues, however, that this often results in people being stressed about being stressed.

Robinson (13) suggests:

“Every minute of the day is not an emergency, but when you’re in time urgent mode all day, your lizard brain thinks it is. This makes time urgency, as the researchers call this little-noticed affliction, a hidden driver of stress — and a huge factor in everything from heart attacks, to dodgy attention and decisions, to conflicts in your work and personal life, to no personal life at all”.

Studies show that many employees are deeply stressed about financial issues and are experiencing the consequences of “*time famine*” (14). Hutton (15) suggests that “*working is becoming seductive again*”, or is at least a solution to monetary progression in an economy where take-home income is at its lowest since 1981. Anbarasan and Nikhil (16) further suggest that money is not the only motivator and organisations need to emphasise on the non-economic aspects of working life, where the emotional aspects of the employee should be taken care of. Studies have identified that the psychological impacts of working long hours on stress and perceived work-life balance are significant (17). These studies also suggest that the number of hours worked is not the only factor – the degree of control over when and where an individual works and the support they get from their colleagues and organisation is also imperative (17). A review by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) suggests that:

“..control over when an individual works is very important in the extent to which working long hours will impact on home and family life” (17).

Studies in 2007 estimated that the British economy was losing £2.5 billion per year (equating to £1,500 per worker) as a result of poor productivity arising from employees working in an office five days a week. Survey respondents indicated that working remotely, even occasionally, increased the productivity of staff (7). Technology has massively impacted on the ability for organisations to offer flexible working patterns, specifically to facilitate remote working.

3.1.1 Hertfordshire County Council – Remote Working to Reduce Stress

Hertfordshire County Council has recently won an award for its flexible working and work-life balance initiatives. Around 75% of their workforce are now working flexibly in one way or another (18). Flexible working arrangements here include compressed hours, job sharing and remote working, resulting in better use of resources and significant falls in staff turnover and absence. In 2006, the council conducted a broader review of the way it operated which resulted in the introduction of a change programme called ‘the way we work’ (18). The aim of the programme was to use resources more efficiently by rationalising and upgrading office accommodation. Moreover, the authority has introduced new technologies to facilitate remote working which has proven helpful for employees who found it difficult to commute to and from work:

“Giving people flexibility over where they work can help reduce the amount of mileage they need to do and that’s good in terms of sustainability but also in terms of keeping their stress levels down” (18).

This initiative aims to reduce stress and commuting time, allowing employees to work from home and spend the saved commuting time with their families. The packages of flexible working initiatives are currently helping the Council to achieve its strategic objectives. Not only has it led to more efficient use of council resources but also to improvements in staff recruitment, retention and attendance – all of which have benefited service users (18). Increased employee engagement and enhanced corporate reputation are also reported. The success of the flexible working patterns at this organisation can be attributed to extensive training and communication packages to ensure flexible working requests are dealt with fairly and will not impact on service delivery. To make a request, a simple application form is completed outlining the details of the flexible working arrangement, likely benefits and how service delivery issues will be addressed (18). For example, if the request is to job share then communication between the job share employees is essential to ensure consistent service delivery.

For many employees, finding care for young or elderly family members to allow them to work can be extremely stressful. Vermeulen (19) suggests that employees are looking to the workplace to provide some ‘relief in the form of practical solutions to their stressful existences’.

3.2 Supporting Working Mothers

Employers are also recognising that work-family disconnects, especially for working mothers, is growing. Many employers have responded to this by introducing flexible working arrangements (20). This was further supported by government legislation, with the introduction of The Employment Act 2002 which provided the formal right for employees with young and disabled children to request to work flexibly (7). This right was extended to cover the carers of adults in 2007. Grawitch *et al* (1) argue that this narrow focus on the family element of life, excludes those employees with other responsibilities in their personal lives that require flexibility. Therefore, more recently, there have been calls for the formal legislation to be extended to all employees (7).

3.2.1 Abbey (Santander) – Helping Relieve the Stress of Family Responsibilities

Abbey, one of the UK's leading personal financial companies, recognises the importance of creating a workplace that offers employees choice and flexibility over how they work to help them build a better balance between their work and home life. Abbey also understands that everyone is different and aims to give employees a menu of flexible working and childcare support options to reflect the fact they may be at different stages in their lives and have different needs and priorities (21). In 2007, they launched a new work-life balance scheme called 'Passport to Balance your Life'. The aim of the programme is to *"offer employees a menu of support to recognise individual preferences and difference"* (21). The programme therefore includes a range of flexible working and flexible leave options, support for those with care commitments, and benefits – such as childcare vouchers – for employees and their families:

"Across the UK economy the care commitments of employees have increased, while at the same time there are more people working. So work-life balance issues, including childcare, have become even more important to employees".

This holistic approach to supporting its employees has therefore prepared Abbey for the Government's implementation plan for 2015; to offer the right to request flexible working to all employees within an organisation (22).

Abbey believes that when employees feel comfortable and confident with their childcare arrangements then they perform better at work. A breakdown in childcare can be extremely stressful for employees. Through regular listening groups, they have also identified that eldercare and the care of older children were areas of concern for employees. To help alleviate some of the pressure, the bank introduced a back-up care programme in 2008, to complement its other work-life balance initiatives, including flexible working options and

flexible leave (21). The package is aimed at employees who need to balance work with child and eldercare commitments. It gives employees access to a 24-hour-a-day database of certified and accredited carers through which they can source emergency childcare, out-of-school care and eldercare services (21).

Abbey introduced an innovative and automated tracking and reporting system to process flexible working applications. The system helps the business to assess policies and provide support across the business when necessary (21). For example, providing cover in emergencies.

The findings of a 2008 survey conducted by Abbey found that 20 percent of line managers felt that a better work-life balance would improve employee engagement. Abbey recognised that if they wanted to recruit, retain and engage then they needed to help their employees balance their work and home lives. The bank provides evidence that benefits to the workforce are proven both in terms of employee engagement as well as cost to the business.

The CIPD (22) acknowledge that flexibility has become a negatively associated with women. Gender divisions are therefore also considered a major factor in work-life conflict. Over recent decades, demographic and social changes (i.e. increase in female workforce and more working mothers) and a move toward global competition have changed the responsibility of both men and women in work and within their private lives. The traditional role allocation between men and women has almost disappeared and pressure has increased on employees to be more flexible and responsive to change.

3.3 What about Men?

A 2009 report identified that the number of men taking up the option is increasing. According to a 2011 report from the Families and Work Institute (FWI) and the Society for Human Resources management (SHRM), women's responsibilities at work and men's responsibilities at home have increased. This has resulted in high feeling's of work-family conflict among both men and women employees.

A quarter century after its emergence and a decade after the business case was established, the work-life field is challenged to understand the barriers that persist in preventing both employees (especially men) from fully utilising work-life options, and managers (often men) from fully integrating them (14). A study by WFD Consulting, in partnership with WorldAtWork's Alliance for Work-Life progress investigated these challenges on a global scale. Linkow *et al* (14) state that the aim of the study was to:

“start a conversation that will continue to generate stimulating dialogue and innovative solutions to a range of workplace issues that appear to defy obvious demographic trends and the social needs of workers, and which ultimately undermine the success of workers and the businesses which employ them”.

Historically, program developments and organisational culture change efforts have focused on the needs of women (e.g. maternity, childcare, out-of-school hours), as they are differentially affected by work-life challenges. This could be attributed to the traditional stereotype of the man as the worker and main breadwinner and the woman as the housewife and mother. Traditionally, work-life professionals and organisations have identified that similar programs would improve work-life integration for all, including men, those without children and those with other care responsibilities. The field of work-family balance has therefore evolved to work-life integration. Today, it is still unclear whether men are achieving the full benefit of work life integration within their organisation and it is recognised that men still perceive work-life programs as primarily serving the needs of women. This study showed a contrast in the stereotypical view mentioned. The following table identifies the top work-life challenges and solutions and demonstrates that the needs of men and women in the modern workplace have very similar work-life needs:

	Challenges			Solutions	
	Men	Women		Men	Women
Financial stress	23%	24%	Flexible start/end times	34%	35%
Finding time to spend with family	25%	19%	Take time off on short notice for personal/family matter	22%	22%
Finding time for personal hobbies, self-development	23%	19%	Health and wellness	16%	17%
Finding time for exercise	19%	21%	Compressed workweek	15%	14%
Finding time for chores, errands	11%	17%	Telework	14%	15%
Finding time to socialize with friends	16%	12%	Paid time off to care for a sick family member	13%	15%

Fig.2 Top Work-Life Challenges and Solutions by Gender

(14)

The study also showed that leadership played a big role in the perception and use of work-life balance initiatives.

3.4 Leadership

Vermeulen (19) suggests that the most consistent challenges throughout work-life literature is the change necessary in management culture. The Author adds that traditional management styles, such as control, micro-managing and authoritarian leadership; individual control over all decisions and little input from group members, will stand in the

way of developing effective work-life strategies (19). The CIPD (22) argue that trust becomes more important than control when their employees are 'invisible' and work non standard hours and some managers have difficulty in adjusting to this. A primary barrier to this type of change is managers not knowing how to manage these workers

A 2007 survey by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory reform found that 95 percent of workplaces offer some form of flexible working. It doesn't mean, however, that the requests to work flexibly were agreed (4). Moreover, the study by Linkow *et al* (14) revealed that a quarter or more of employees directly experienced or believed they would experience repercussions for using work-life programs. A breakdown of the questions asked to support this finding is shown below:

Table 1 Employee perceptions and experiences for using work-life programs

Overtly or subtly discouraged from using policies and programs	Have Experienced	11%
	Believe I would Experience	23%
Receive unfavourable job assignment	Have Experienced	14%
	Believe I would Experience	21%
Receive negative performance reviews	Have Experienced	12%
	Believe I would Experience	20%
Receive negative comments from co-workers	Have Experienced	18%
	Believe I would Experience	23%
Receive negative comments from supervisor	Have Experienced	18%
	Believe I would Experience	20%
Be excluded from social or business networks	Have Experienced	8%
	Believe I would Experience	17%
Be excluded from consideration for career-advancing assignments	Have Experienced	10%
	Believe I would Experience	29%
Be denied a promotion	Have Experienced	12%
	Believe I would Experience	24%
Have my commitment to my job questioned	Have Experienced	14%
	Believe I would Experience	23%

Adapted from Findings from Linkow et al 'Men and work-life integration'. (14)

In the same study, more than 80% of leaders questioned felt that work-life programs were important (14). Despite this, 40% of leaders valued workers who were "*work dominant*" and have few personal/family responsibilities. To further understand what leaders view as important, leaders were asked about their concerns when evaluating a request for a flexible working arrangement. The results support the work dominant paradigm of the "*ideal worker*", with 50% of leaders agreeing that the ideal employee is available to meet the needs of the business, regardless of hours (14). More specific findings are shown below:

	Developed Countries
Men who are highly committed to their personal/family lives cannot be highly committed to their work	25%
Women who are highly committed to their personal/family lives cannot be highly committed to their work	26%
The ideal employee is available to meet business needs regardless of business hours	54%
Employees who use flexible work arrangements will not advance very far in this organization	28%
The most productive employees in this organization are those without a lot of personal commitments	40%

Fig.3 Leaders Attitudes About Workers Personal/Family Commitments

(14)

Further concerns from Managers are shown here:

	Total	Execs	Mgrs	Sprvsrs
Employee won't be accessible to meet an immediate need	35%	40%	33%	38%
Work will fall on others in the group	34%	37%	32%	38%
Service to customers will be negatively affected	28%	23%	31%	25%
I will not know whether the person is getting his/her job done	16%	23%	14%	17%
Additional time will be required of me	19%	12%	19%	21%
Work will fall on me	24%	42%	25%	20%
Other employees will resent it	25%	21%	24%	29%
Other employees will expect it	17%	6%	17%	18%
No concerns	25%	20%	26%	24%

Fig.4 Leaders' Concerns When Evaluating a Request for a Flexible Work Arrangement

(14)

To overcome these concerns, many organisations will undergo extensive leadership training to develop more outcome-based leadership styles (19).

3.4.1 Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) – Addressing Leader Concerns

Hertfordshire County Council has also recognised the concerns of Managers as early as the 1990's (18). Typical concerns expressed by managers were that workers would not turn up for work or put in the hours set out in their contracts. The council recognised that offering all employees the opportunity to work flexibly would have an impact on many people in the organisation, not least line managers responsible for putting the new policy into practice. It

was deemed essential that managers' personal views and prejudices did not influence their consideration for an employee's request for flexible working arrangements. Additionally, managers have to make a business case for turning a request down – HCC feel this is important to safeguard against reasonable decision-making (18). To eliminate these concerns, the council's HR team ran a series of focus groups aimed at line managers (18). These events were run before the policy was implemented, to give managers a chance to air their concerns about issues such as managing the performance of employees they did not see on a daily basis.

Bird (8) states that Human Resource Managers who implement successful work-life training programs throughout their management ranks accomplish two major bottom-line goals. First, they increase the retention, commitment, and productivity of the firm's most valuable people asset, its managers and supervisors. Second, the managers and supervisors reflect a new tool set and language that produces a more positive view of the organisation at all levels. This more positive view has a cascading impact on the attitude, morale, productivity, and customer-service levels of all employees.

A further barrier to implementation is the organisation's lack of understanding on how to successfully implement sustainable policies and procedures to meet the needs of the business and its employees.

4.0 Investors in People

Investors in People (IOP) is the UK's leading people management standard, specialising in transforming business performance through people. They provide an outcome-focused framework of best practice that can be adapted to meet the needs of any business. Currently 26% of the UK workforce is employed by organisation's that are investors in People or are working towards it.

4.1 University of Sunderland – Using a Best Practice Framework

The University of Sunderland has been providing higher education in the city since 1901, becoming a Polytechnic in 1969 and achieving University status in 1992. It currently has a reputation for being able to adapt to change and for taking opportunities to continually improve the organisation to benefit its 17,000 students and 1,600 staff, as well as the city and the region.

The IOP report that:

“The University acknowledges that its people – both staff and students – are its greatest asset and that is why the University places such importance on them. We are committed to providing an environment where staff are highly valued and feel motivated, where there are personal development opportunities and where colleagues understand and support the strategic aims of the University”.

To demonstrate its commitment to equality of opportunity in employment to all staff, the University of Sunderland has implemented a whole range of flexible working options, in line with the work-life balance best practice framework from IOP. These include:

- Enhanced maternity
- Adoption and paternity leave.

More recently they have implemented a special leave policy to recognise that there may be occasions when employees need the flexibility and support to balance work commitments and personal circumstances (23).

Absence management activities have reduced sickness year on year. They have made significant reductions in the average number of days lost to sickness absence per employee, reducing the average length of absence from 8.7 days (2004/05) to 5.5 days (2007/08).

By implementing a rolling review, managers utilise the IOP feedback report to truly understand what is affecting their staff and the focused feedback enables them to take ownership for making future improvements. Effective management and monitoring of staff recruitment has shown that the university is recruiting equitably and their use of the IOP frameworks has also resulted in a 3% reduction in resignations. The University has recognised that working with the IOP has improved communication at all levels helps to ensure staff and managers feel valued.

All the case studies quoted in this paper; Abbey (now Santander) and Hertfordshire County Council, are organisation’s that are Investors in People or are working towards it.

5.0 Conclusion

The findings in this paper suggest that improving communication and educating employees, both workers and managers, will improve the chances for the successful implementation of work-life balance initiatives.

The case studies provided, identify the many benefits flexible working can have on an employee’s work-life balance and therefore improve their well-being at work; resulting in less stress, improved productivity, reduced absenteeism and low staff turnover. Employees

who feel supported by their employers are recognised as more productive and committed. This supports the win-win beliefs of organisations identified in (5); by helping employees to balance the demands of work and home will improve staff engagement and retention, and ultimately business performance.

Traditionally, flexibility is an issue that has become negatively associated with women. The findings of Linkow *et al* (14) show that the gender stereotype that men derive their identities from work and women largely from family life was not supported. This shows a change in trends which many companies are acting upon. The CIPD (22) suggest that the modern HR manager is in a position to make a strong case for using flexibility as a strategic tool to support improved individual and business performance – through greater diversity and increased levels of engagement and commitment from workers at all levels. The CIPD (22) are therefore backing the Government's implementation timetable of 2015, to extend the right to request flexible working to all employees within an organisation.

As Bird (8) states:

"Whether you are just introducing a work-life program or making an already great one better, you will be substantially improving your organisation's bottom line results and changing individuals' lives for the better".

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Appendix A

The Department for International Development – July 2008

The Department for International Development has a three-pronged approach to balancing the work and life demands of its employees. Its 'Better Balance' initiative aims to give staff the tools to deal with all aspects of managing pressure and stress at work. The department also offers employees a wide range of flexible working options and it operates special leave and childcare policies.

The Department for International Development (DFID) manages Britain's aid to poor countries and works to get rid of the extreme poverty that affects more than a billion people – one in five of the world's population.

In the UK, DFID employs 730 people in Victoria, central London, working in policy design, communications, overseas regional departments, conflict and security. The top management group is also based in London and provides support to ministers and the management board. DFID has a further 500 employees, mostly working in corporate services and other policy areas in East Kilbride, Scotland. Some 1,660 people – a mix of local people known as 'staff appointed in country' and UK employees posted abroad – are employed at DFID's offices throughout the developing world.

Balancing work and life

DFID emphasises that its people are its most important resource. It believes it is a popular employer with few recruitment and retention problems, primarily because people are attracted by the opportunity of helping to fight poverty. According to the department, it is one of the most popular choices for graduates on the civil service fast stream entry route, which is reflected in a low turnover rate of just three per cent. Staff surveys consistently reveal that employees believe that DFID is committed to its staff and in turn the commitment from staff to the organisation is also high.

None the less, DFID is confident that it can improve the **work-life balance** of its employees while, at the same, benefiting the business. It believes that boosting employee motivation and reducing stress should enable staff to work more productively and help it hold on to valued employees. By creating a work culture that does not dominate lives to an unhealthy degree, it hopes to attract recruits from all sections of society and increase the diversity of its workforce.

Finding a better balance

A stress audit in 2004 revealed pockets of stress in the department, particularly among the professional and specialist groups working on anti-poverty programmes. In response, DFID launched the 'Better **Balance**'

campaign in July 2007. This brought the department's existing employee assistance policies under one roof, as well as introducing new initiatives to deal with 'all aspects of managing pressure at work, stress and **work - life balance** ' (see the box [DFID's BetterBalance initiatives](#)).

Tackling stress

DFID distinguishes between pressure, which it believes can be positive if it is managed correctly, and stress, which it judges harmful. For example, staff who work closely with government ministers carry out their jobs in an extremely pressurised environment. But such placements only last for a year and are seen as a career opportunity, rather than a significant cause of stress.

E-mail is judged to be one of the major contributors to stress. The department has produced an e-mail etiquette guide with a list of 'dos and don'ts'. Among the latter are: don't send e-mails when a conversation would be more effective and don't send blanket e-mails.

The department is treating stress as a health and safety issue, pledging to carry out regular risk assessments to identify, eliminate or control the risks from stress. It promises training for all managers and supervisors in good management practices, and confidential counselling for staff affected by work-related stress.

DFID recognises that its staff are passionate about the work they do and are often willing to put in extra effort, which can have a big impact on their stress levels. Its Better **Balance** campaign aims to encourage people to see where they can make small changes in their working practices that will reduce their stress and improve their **work -life balance** .

Discouraging long working hours

DFID has identified long working hours as another important **work -life balance** issue, noting that long hours should be seen as 'a sign of failure rather than commitment'. While it recognises that emergencies can lead to long working hours in the short term, regular long hours are judged to be a result of either too great a workload or inefficiency. DFID believes that long-hours working may sometimes be an indication of problems in an individual's domestic life for which overwork is an 'avoidance' measure.

The department has set out a clear policy on long-hours working to discourage employees from overwork. This states that:

- 'anything approaching' the limit specified in the Working Time Regulations – an average of 48 hours over a 17-week period – is a 'potentially serious matter'
- long hours may not be used as an indicator of the commitment of staff in performance appraisals or to decide promotion or postings
- annual leave must be taken.

To publicise Better **Balance** , DFID's Intranet, *Insight*, carried a feature on the campaign and an information pack and leaflets were sent to employees. A dedicated Better **Balance** website was set up containing all the information and advice staff need.

Evaluating the initiative

DFID is currently evaluating the effect of its Better **Balance** initiatives with a stress audit carried out by Robertson Cooper. This survey, which will allow the department to assess its progress since the 2004 audit, covers workplace pressure and stress, health and feelings of wellbeing, and lifestyle issues. Staff in the UK and those working in DFID offices around the world completed confidential questionnaires in April.

DFID hopes that the Better **Balance** programme will have alleviated the stress identified four years earlier, but it also expects that new outbreaks will be identified. Like all Whitehall departments it is currently having to make savings in its administration costs – which inevitably means less jobs – while at the same time expanding its aid programmes. It believes these two developments can be expected to have an effect on employee well-being.

The senior management team at DFID has introduced a new change programme, which commits it to use resources in the most effective way to reduce poverty by concentrating on the actions that will have the greatest impact. This will in turn lessen, it says, the impact that the reduction in resources will have on the workload of staff.

Accommodating flexible working

DFID has a long-established flexible working policy that applies to all employees and accommodates a wide range of different arrangements (see the box [Flexible working at DFID](#)). It makes every effort to accommodate the wishes of its staff to work flexibly.

Requesting flexible working

Employees seeking to work more flexibly should approach their line managers, who are expected to 'give requests genuine consideration'. If a request for flexible working cannot be met and no alternative can be agreed, line managers clearly outline the business reasons for this in writing. New arrangements can be tested on a trial basis for a period of up to six months. Take-up of flexible wo

Homeworking

Among workers in London, partly because of the tiring and lengthy commutes faced by many staff, there are opportunities to work from home for a day or so a week, provided the work is appropriate and there is agreement with managers.

Working overseas

DFID believes there are 'huge positives' for staff working overseas. Most employees embrace the experience of living in a non-Western culture and at work they get hands-on project experience.

However, most overseas staff live in poor countries where medical facilities are well below NHS standards. And they are far from their friends and support networks at home. Maintaining a healthy **work-life balance** can be more difficult for its overseas employees. The department recognises that life for these employees and those living with them can sometimes revolve entirely around work and that, in some cases, the job can take over.

Most overseas postings are to poorer parts of the world, where living and working can be stressful and at times dangerous. For example, the department maintains a presence in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Local staff

DFID offices overseas employ both UK-based employees and locally recruited staff. Flexible working arrangements for local staff are managed by the country office and vary according to local arrangements and practice.

The **work-life balance** issues faced by local staff can differ markedly from those of their UK colleagues. This is particularly the case in poorer parts of the world where a job with a local DFID office is usually highly sought after and may allow one person to support a large, extended family. According to DFID, the pressures on such workers are very different from those faced by UK-based employees.

Special leave and childcare

The third prong of DFID's **work-life balance** policies covers special leave and childcare. Sometimes, working flexibly is not enough; employees may need time off work to care for members of their family, and parents may require assistance to cope with the stresses and strains of childcare.

Employees can apply for unpaid career breaks of up to five years, primarily for family-related reasons. Such leave could be to extend the standard periods of maternity leave or to care for children or elderly dependants. Eligibility rests on a good record of performance, attendance and conduct.

Childcare vouchers

DFID has signed up to the government's childcare voucher system. This enables employees to purchase vouchers via a salary sacrifice arrangement, under which they agree to accept a certain amount of their salary in the form of childcare vouchers. Because this exchange takes place before tax and National Insurance is deducted, it can make purchasing childcare vouchers more tax efficient.

The department also provides help for parents during school holidays when it can be most difficult juggling the responsibilities of work and home, including a playscheme at its Victoria offices for the use of DFID employees and other Westminster-based parents.

Benefits and future plans

DFID is awaiting the results of its 2008 stress audit before it can fully evaluate the effectiveness of its **work-life balance** initiatives. However, the department believes that the initiatives that are now in place under the Better **Balance** campaign will be reflected in these results. Raising the profile of stress management and acknowledging its existence has lessened the stigma and allowed staff and managers to seek help when required.

A shift to eldercare

The department believes that times have changed and there are increasing numbers of staff who have to care for elderly parents, placing a strain on their **work-life balance**. Career breaks can be requested to care for an elderly relative but they are not common. DFID is currently looking at ways of addressing this emerging issue.

DFID's Better Balance initiatives

The Department for International Development's Better **Balance** initiatives include:

- coaching and mentoring for senior staff with work and organisational psychology consultants Robertson Cooper
- workshops – called ‘Managing **work -life balance** under pressure’ – which are run by the department’s employee health and wellbeing team (EHW) and open to all staff; these workshops, which typically last two to three hours and can be tailored to meet the needs of specific teams within the department, typically cover the causes of stress, how to identify it, coping strategies, **work -life balance**, assertive behaviour, relaxation and exercise
- a confidential, one-to-one stress management advice and coaching service from the EHW team for UK-based staff
- a counselling service for all overseas staff provided by the department’s long-established supplier of employee assistance advice, Personal Performance Consultants; PPC is also currently providing debriefing and counselling services for staff working in hostile environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan
- ‘Leadership impact’ – a form of profiling to help managers understand the likely impact of their leadership styles on the levels of engagement, well-being and performance of their staff; managers complete an online questionnaire and receive a report that helps them to find the right **balance** between challenging and supporting employees
- a new individual stress assessment tool – a managers’ toolkit containing a number of information sheets and checklists, which can help managers assist a member of staff who may be showing signs of stress. The assessment is normally completed jointly by the individual and his or her line manager
- discouraging long working hours.

Flexible working at DFID

DFID accommodates a wide range of flexible working arrangements, including:

- part-time working
- flexitime, with core hours of 10am to 3.30pm
- compressed hours – employees can fit five days’ work into four or work a nine-day fortnight
- job-sharing – the department operates a job-share register
- time off in lieu
- term-time working – a more recent addition to the department’s policies
- homeworking – employees are equipped with a broadband connection, a docking station and computer screen, as well as other equipment such as an appropriate office chair.