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1
Work–Life Balance in the 21st Century

Diane M. Houston

> 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.

The tensions between the individual's desire for work–life balance and employers' need for greater flexibility are reflected in employees' attitudes and work behaviour. Employees in the United Kingdom work the longest hours of any European country (Eurostat, 1997). Long hours are particularly common amongst men who have partners and children. Dual earner couples have become the norm, but women's participation in the workforce continues to be limited by the presence and age of a dependent child. The birth of children continues to perpetuate traditional divisions of work and caring roles in most couples, despite an expressed desire to share these roles more equally (Houston and Marks, 2002, 2005; Houston and Waumsley, 2003). Most women with children move into part-time work, but part-time working and career breaks negatively impact upon women's lifetime earnings and the gender pay gap (Anderson, Forth, Metcalf and Kirby, 2001; Walby and Olsen, 2002; Manning and Petrongolo, 2004).

The WLB2 survey (Woodland *et al.*, 2003; Stevens *et al.*, 2004) reported a high level of support for the principle of work–life balance, with 94 per cent of employers and 95 per cent of employees agreeing that 'people work best when they can balance their work and other aspects of their lives'. However the employee survey revealed clear anxiety about the impact of flexible working on job security and career prospects. Men were more likely than women to agree that flexible working patterns would damage their career prospects and job security. Fifty-one percent of employees agreed that working reduced hours would negatively affect their career – and only 38 per cent disagreed. Not being able to work beyond their contracted hours was seen as having a negative effect on career by 42 per cent, as were leaving to look after a child (37%) and working from home (25%). Similar findings were reported by Houston and Waumsley (2003), whose survey of electrical and engineering workers, highlighted the tension between desire for flexible working and success at work.

The chapters

This edited book presents work from 12 projects within the ESRC's Future of Work Research Programme, launched in 1998. Across the 12 projects there are analyses of large-scale national surveys, in-depth studies of individual workers and carers, and comparative studies of organisations. The qualitative and quantitative research reflects the breadth of UK social science – economics, sociology, social policy, psychology, industrial relations and human resource management. These different methodologies, disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, are linked in their analysis of work–life balance in the UK and Europe.

Booth and Frank begin by providing a helpful analysis of how labour market flexibility can have very different outcomes for employees as well as the ways in which non-standard jobs can vary dramatically in their format.

Drawing on the results of a series of papers from their Future of Work project, Booth and Frank consider evidence about the prevalence of non-standard jobs in the British economy, their rates of pay, and the gender balance of non-standard jobs. They go on to discuss how different policies, such as equal pay rules, might result in greater equality in pay and opportunity for men and women in the workplace. They argue that their research does not support the policies of stipulating equal pay and conditions for different types of contracts (temporary vs permanent, and full-time vs part-time). Instead, they suggest extending greater flexibility (particularly with respect to career breaks) throughout the economy, for all workers. In recognition of the fact that a major factor behind non-standard work flexibility is child-rearing, Booth and Frank also suggest that, as children represent an externality for society as a whole, parents could be subsidised for raising children.

Rose's chapter examines career outlook (the readiness to state that one has a career), its growth since the 1980s, and its consequences for success at work and personal well-being. Rose demonstrates that almost two-thirds of British employees now regard themselves as having a career, compared to only half in 1985. By contrast career commitment or 'careerism' has not increased substantially, however those who show high levels of career commitment get rapid promotion and pay increases. Careerists work longer hours, but they do not appear to suffer negative consequences of this in terms of their own work–life balance and its impact on health and relationships.

Hakim examines national survey data in the context of Preference Theory (Hakim, 2000). She demonstrates that substantial sex differences persist in the propensity to adopt a primary or secondary earner identity and that these cut across levels of education, income and social class. However she argues that differences between three lifestyle preference groups (work-centred, adaptive and home-centred) are more important than sex differences in work orientations and job values. Further, that policies that are aimed at those who seek a balance between work and family life will be of little interest to those who are work-centred and therefore prioritise work over family in the pursuit of their careers. Hakim concludes that 'employers and national governments need to recognise the diversity of lifestyle preferences among women *and* men, and devise policies that are neutral between the three lifestyle preference groups' (Hakim, 2005).

Houston and Marks report evidence from a longitudinal survey of first-time mother's intentions in relation to work and childcare, and their experiences during the three years after the birth of their child. The attitudes, beliefs and experiences of those who worked full-time, part-time or did no paid work were compared and examined in the context of the debate around women's work orientation (e.g. Crompton and Harris, 1998; Hakim, 2000; McRae, 2003). The findings from this study revealed a high

level of satisfaction amongst women who had given up work to care for their child, particularly in relation to the impact of this decision on their child. Women who were combining paid work with motherhood expressed concerns about the impact this was having on their child, whilst recognising that their own work participation was important for both income and their career progression. While the majority of women in the survey sought a balance between work and family, they had to overcome both psychological and practical barriers in order to work. The majority of women wanted a more equal balance of work and caring between themselves and their partner and wanted very young children to be cared for within their own families. This chapter also highlights women's frustration at not being able to find rewarding part-time work that reflected their own experience and aspirations.

Difficulties with part-time work are echoed in Sigala's chapter which describes a qualitative study of 16 mothers of preschool children who worked part-time. Sigala describes women's frustration with organisational cultures, their inability to fashion an identity for themselves as legitimate members of their organisation and the career costs of part-time employment. As part-time work is a key component of flexible working in many organisations, this and previous chapters challenge the extent to which part-time work (in its current form) is a useful stepping-stone in working life.

The importance of family support in balancing work and caring is a dominant theme in the chapter by Hyman, Scholarios and Baldry. They conducted a study of call centre workers, a fast growing area of service work, typified by shift and seven-day working and populated by high proportions of women. Despite the flexibility required to staff call centres, the researchers found little evidence of employer policies which supported families or helped employees to manage their working time. Most of the call centre workers relied upon their partner and grandparents to balance the demands of work and caring, alongside informal support by work colleagues in balancing shifts and work cover. The authors argue that organisational flexibility in reality means imposing temporal flexibility onto workers to meet service demands, rather than providing flexible but predictable working times suited to the needs of employees.

Using national survey data, Bruegel and Gray explore the ways in which work culture and family factors may influence fathers' care of their children. They found that fathers work longer hours, for higher pay, in more male dominated work environments than other men; by contrast mothers work shorter hours, for lower pay in more feminised environments than other women. The chapter examines the complex relationship between working environments, working time, maternal employment and fathers' participation in care. Bruegel and Gray conclude that the interaction between family relationships and economic pressures result in a complex

picture of the division of childcare between parents, which highlights the contradiction between the persistent dominance of the role of male breadwinner with increased salience of the role of carer in modern fatherhood.

Charles and James describe an interview study with employees in three different workplaces. They explore the gendering of work–life balance and whether or not it is affected by experiences of job insecurity, family-friendly policies and flexible working. The three different workplaces were associated with different ways of reconciling paid employment and unpaid care work. In retail work the availability of part-time hours of work enabled women to care for their children while their partners retained a provider role. In the public sector the availability of maternity leave and chilcare facilities enabled women to combine motherhood with full-time employment. In the manufacturing organisation both women and men tended to work full-time, many of them on shifts, and informal arrangements were used for reconciling paid work and childcare. In manufacturing there was a view that job insecurity was as bad for women as it was for men as women were just as likely to be their families' main providers; in the other two workplaces the view that it was worse for men because of their provider role was more widespread. The authors suggest that family-friendly policies can have the effect of reproducing a gendered work–life balance.

Tailby, Richardson, Danford, Stewart and Upchurch consider the potential for partnership between employers and trade unions for working together on work–life balance issues. Their chapter reports evidence amassed from a case study of one local authority that illustrates some of the tensions and contradictions of such partnership. Tailby *et al*. found that work–life balance was not the most salient of issues for employees. Whilst there was support amongst employees for work–life balance in principle, issues of pay were more salient and the authors argue that many of those who took part in the survey could not afford to consider alternative working patterns as they needed to work long hours or multiple contracts to gain an adequate income. In organisational terms there were clear tensions between the need to obtain cost savings and efficiency gains and the implementation of work–life policies. Tailby *et al*. highlight the contradiction between work intensification and work–life balance in the 21st century.

Bradley, Healy and Mukherjee broaden the analysis of work–life balance, beyond paid work to voluntary, political and community work. Their focus is on black and minority ethnic women and their experience of trade union activism. They found that, whilst struggling to handle the demands of family and work, black and Asian women also suffered the multiple effects of racism and sexism. This experience shaped their willingness to get involved in trade unions and struggle for social justice in the workplace and in their local communities. Thus the attachment of these women to voluntary work, especially within ethnic communities, was a key issue

emerging from the study. The authors argue that it was commitment and passion for racial harmony and justice that fuelled these women activists' ability to handle their multiple burdens.

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women have tended to have much lower levels of labour force participation by comparison with other ethnic groups, but those with higher educational qualifications are much more likely to be economically active than those without such qualifications. Angela Dale's chapter explores how family formation influences labour market participation amongst women with different levels of qualifications and what changes we can expect amongst younger Pakistani and Bangladeshi women who have grown up in the UK. Dale finds very clear evidence of change across generations. By contrast with their mothers' generation, where family took priority and there were few opportunities for paid work outside the home, younger women who had been educated in the UK saw paid work as a means to independence and self-esteem. Despite this, all the women interviewed expected to get married and have children, and accepted that this would require some adjustments to their working lives. Women with higher-level qualifications also showed considerable determination in wanting to combine paid work and childcare. Dale argues that, by comparison with their white counterparts, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women face many more difficulties in reconciling work and family.

The final chapter in this volume, by Ungerson and Yeandle, presents a unique perspective on care of the elderly and work–life balance. They use empirical data generated by a cross-national study, conducted in five European countries, of elderly care users and their care workers who were employed directly by them. The care users were enabled to employ their own care workers through the operation of cash supplements paid to them by their respective welfare states. The chapter outlines the way in which the dichotomous concept of 'work–life balance' can be divided into three types of time: work time, care time and personal time. This threefold distinction is then used as the underpinning concept for an analysis of the way in which the payment of care workers and caregivers impacts on their ability to maintain a balance between these various types of time. Ungerson and Yeandle suggest that different schemes, and the way they are regulated, determine the way in which the care workers can balance their work time, care time and personal time, and finds that while some schemes are organised in such a way that the workers gain in self-esteem and in personal time, others, in the less regulated schemes, lose autonomy altogether.

Implications for employment practice and policy

The chapters in this book demonstrate that work–life balance is very much a theme for the 21st century. However, the research described paints a picture of imbalance, rather than balance, in terms of the interplay

between work and the rest of life. Changes in social attitudes and increases in material aspirations and consumer debt (Schor, 1991) have resulted in the growth of the dual earner family. However the impact of childbirth and care responsibilities across the lifespan continues to perpetuate traditional divisions of labour between the majority of men and women. Flexible working may provide an opportunity for women who have children to participate in the labour market, but their participation is constrained by the poor opportunities offered by part-time and non-standard work. Work intensification and the growth of a 24/7 economy have also provided even greater opportunities for men to engage in more work, particularly in order to compensate for reductions in their partner's employment. Across this book there is a great deal of evidence that men are seeking to have greater input into family life, and that both men and women want to share work and care more equally. However this desire is constrained by the need for reliable income and/or aspirations for careers which, currently require long hours, either to make ends meet in low paid work, or to demonstrate 'commitment' in career positions. Family-friendly or flexible working has the potential to either deepen, or eliminate, the gender differences in work participation. Unless flexible working and other work–life balance policies become synonymous with high levels of performance and ethical work practices they will not be used by those who perceive themselves to be either breadwinners or careerists. Unless rights to flexible working become universal, for all employees, there may be division within workforces and discrimination against those groups who have the right to periods of leave or flexibility. Moreover, for those working for low pay, where long hours are the only means of reaching a basic standard of living, work–life balance will only be achieved by further improvements in the minimum wage and in contractual conditions for non-standard and part-time workers.

For both employees and employers, there are already strong reasons for organisations to challenge the long hours culture and create working environments that facilitate work–life balance across the life-course: the impending pensions crisis (Ginn, 2003) and the prospect of longer, healthier lives means that it is likely that people will work longer, and thus seek more flexibility at different periods in their working lives. A great deal of research has shown that working long hours has wide ranging negative effects on family life (e.g. Dex, 2003; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills and Smeaton, 2003). More generally, there are established physical and psychological costs of work-related stress (e.g. Michie and Williams, 2003). Psychological research has also investigated the causes of errors in a wide variety of jobs and demonstrated that error-proneness is increased by continuous long periods of task performance, as well as by time pressure (e.g. Reason, 1990). Despite a considerable body of research that examines the impact of work on outcomes for the individual, there is a need for more research which specifically measures the relationship between pro-

ductivity and hours of work. Kodz (2003) conducted a comprehensive review of long hours working for the Department of Trade and Industry. Whilst this highlights methodological difficulties with the research base, the evidence reviewed gives absolutely no indication that long hours are beneficial in terms of productivity. This review, combined with the very substantial evidence of the impact of long hours on individual's health, well-being and performance, indicates that there can be no good business case for the perpetuation of a long hours culture. Working more flexibly, daily or across the life-course, will require radical assessment of the individual's role within organisations as well as the way in which work tasks are allocated and performance managed. However, this may create entirely new possibilities for productivity and innovation, as well as gender equity and work–life balance.

Note

1. From April 2003 a statutory right to maternity leave of 26 weeks was introduced, 6 weeks at 90 per cent of pay and 20 weeks at £100 per week. For fathers the right to two weeks leave, paid at £100 a week was introduced.

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