

Work-life policy: does it do exactly what it says on the tin?

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Abstract

Policies which help employees balance their work and non-work priorities have become increasingly popular among UK employers in recent years. Along with a legislative imperative for family leave-related policies, employers are being encouraged to introduce work-life policies and make them more inclusive in order to enhance their business performance. This paper looks at how four financial services organisations have approached the work-life balance agenda and examines the fit between the organisational intentions for work-life policy and actual outcomes for both organisations and employees. Culture played a large part in determining the experience of policies but so did resources. What managers were being asked to achieve in the business was often incompatible with formal work-life policies. Despite the rhetoric, work-life balance was still viewed as a tool for, and was used by female parents, limiting its potential to achieve the promoted business benefits.

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Introduction

The family leave and flexible working options which emerged in the 1990s were a voluntary response by some organisations to increased female participation in paid employment, skills shortages and intensified workloads associated with cost-cutting and down-sizing exercises (Lewis, 2001; Dex and Schiebl 1999; Scheibl and Dex, 1998; Holt and Thaulow, 1996; Lewis *et al.*, 1996). Later in this period, changes in the political environment resulted in a number of statutory measures such as equality of treatment rights for part-time workers, parental leave provisions, and enhanced maternity rights which gave legal backing to and raised the public profile of the “family-friendly” agenda.

However, the focus on employees with dependant care responsibilities proved problematic and reports emerged of a backlash. In the context of the UK’s individual responsibility approach to family care, some employees perceived that family-friendly policies, by their nature, unfairly excluded non-parents and, when parents used policies, increased the workloads of others. Although these objections were probably overstated by employers and the media, they did highlight the limitations of the family-friendly agenda. For the idea that employers benefit from helping employees to lead more “balanced” lives to gain acceptance, it had to become more inclusive.

The “work-life balance” agenda promoted by government, advocacy and employers’ groups moved family-friendly forward by focussing on the business benefits of introducing policies and making changes which improve the quality of working life for all employees, regardless of their personal circumstances (see, for example, “Employers for work-life balance”, 2002; DTI and Scotland Office 2001; DTI, 2001). The key business benefits of being more responsive to the workforce’s changing and diverse needs and tackling some of the negative effects of existing working practices (such as long

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working hours, stress and workplace inequalities) are promoted as, *inter alia*:

- Improved recruitment by opening up employment opportunities to those unable/unwilling to work “traditional hours” and becoming an employer of choice.
- Improved retention by being responsive to employees’ needs and improving the quality of working life.
- Improved morale and motivation by creating a supportive working environment.
- Creating an equitable workplace through inclusive access to policies.

This paper looks at how four financial services organisations, a sector among the first to adopt the family-friendly policies, have approached the work-life balance agenda. Following a brief outline of the research methodology, we compare the drivers for the introduction of work-life policies in each organisation. Then, by focussing on the business benefits of improved recruitment, retention, creating a supportive culture and promoting workplace equality, some of the outcomes for these employers and their employees are assessed. Explanations for these findings are sought in the cultural and operational difficulties experienced in translating policies into practice, including policy awareness, resource pressures, organisational expectations of employee input and the continuing problem of inclusiveness.

Methodology

The data are drawn from four case studies carried out as part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation-funded project. “Assure”, was a large life assurance company and “Tele”, a retail tele-bank, was one of its subsidiaries. “High Street”, was a major high street bank and “Funds”, a medium-sized investment management firm.

A total of eight senior HR managers, 33 line managers and 16 employee representatives were interviewed. Topics included the introduction, awareness and operation of work-life policies as well as attitudes to, and experience of work-life issues. Table I details the staff survey response rates. The self-completion questionnaire covered similar issues to the interviews and included policy

Table I Survey response rates for the four case study companies

| | Distributed | Returned | Response rate (%) |
|--------------------|-------------|----------|-------------------|
| High Street | 305 | 73 | 24[1] |
| Assure | 300 | 181 | 60 |
| Tele | 300 | 160 | 53 |
| Funds | 213 | 119 | 56 |
| Total | 1,118 | 533 | 48 |

Source: Staff surveys

take-up, reasons for staying with the company, work-life conflict and the perceived supportiveness of the organisational culture. Workforce statistics and staff handbooks provided by the companies were also analysed.

Company approaches to work-life policy

To assess the success a company has had in translating work-life policy into practice, it is important to establish why and how policies were introduced. There were both commonalities and differences in how the case study companies approached the work-life agenda.

In all four companies, a major driver for introducing work-life policies had been to recruit and retain quality staff. Competition in the labour market where the majority of the case study units were based was fierce, being dominated by the financial services industry and having only 3.2 per cent unemployment (Scottish Executive, 2001). Obviously the companies were subject to the same legislation and the recently introduced Employment Relations Act 1999 had forced some changes in all four companies. Interestingly, interviewees in all four companies also thought their company’s “paternalistic” and “caring” tradition had influenced its approach to work-life issues.

High Street had the most formal policies out of the four companies which they believed enhanced their public image and promoted their equal opportunities agenda. A large HR department based at the head offices in England developed new policies centrally working with business managers and the union which were then rolled out to the branch network. In common with other large, unionised companies these policies were codified and often above the statutory minimum (Forth *et al.*, 1997; McKee *et al.*, 2000; Bond *et al.*, 2002). Central to

High Street's approach to both work-life balance and business operations was flexible working. Non-standard working hours such as weekend, evening and other part-time hours were used to meet extended retail operating hours and to closely match labour supply with fluctuations in demand while opening up employment opportunities for people unable to work traditional office hours.

Assure and Tele had a similar level of formal policy provision to High Street, if in a less detailed format. Policies, developed centrally for the whole group, were based on a combination of benchmarking, internal research and pressure from the company staff association. HR managers expressed a desire to maintain the Assure group's position as one of the leading local employers and offer more than the statutory minimum. Although virtually identical, there were two key differences in Assure and Tele's policy provision. First, Assure had flexitime, a system deemed unsuitable for Tele's customer-facing work (see also Bond *et al.*, 2002; Dex and Smith, 2002; Neathey and Hurstfield, 1995). Second, because a previous management regime had not believed in part-time work, Tele had a lower proportion of part-time workers than Assure.

Funds had a completely different approach to the work-life agenda. There were few formal policies and where there were they relied almost exclusively on managerial discretion. In common with Casey *et al.*'s (1997) non-strategic organisations, new "policies" were usually an isolated response to a need to retain an individual with valuable skills and a professional, long working hours culture prevailed. Senior managers' views on "family-friendly" policies were strongly gendered and their personal experiences made it difficult to prioritise work-life as a strategic area:

[Senior managers] think it just applies to mums – either those returning from work, or those juggling work and family. The exec, all men, all have wives who do not work and do not really understand the juggling that goes on (personnel manager, Funds).

Outcomes of work-life policies

In this section we focus on the potential business benefits of improved recruitment, retention, creating a supportive culture and

promoting workplace equality to examine some of the outcomes for both organisations and their employees of work-life policies. These were among the key reasons given by the companies for adopting work-life policies and have important implications for future policy development.

Recruitment

All four organisations saw recruitment as one of the main drivers for adopting work-life policies. Unfortunately, we cannot accurately assess the impact of policies on absolute recruitment rates[2]. However, as Table II shows, there were notable differences in the demographics of the case study companies suggesting that they may have impacted on the type of people attracted to the organisation. Women made up 97 per cent of primary carers ($n = 31$), 62 per cent of shared carers ($n = 26$) and 6 per cent ($n = 2$) of those who said their partner was the primary carer.

High Street had the highest proportion of women and respondents with dependant children, particularly mothers. Assure had also employed a lot of parents, having the highest proportion of primary carers whereas Tele had a very low proportion of parents. Funds had the highest proportion of fathers and of those who stated that their partner was the primary carer (all were male) and the lowest proportion of primary carers (all were women).

Given the commonalities between High Street, Assure and Tele in the majority of their policy provision, type of work available and rates of pay, the differences in workforce demographics must owe at least something to the use of non-standard working hours to attract staff. Company statistics showed that 37 per cent of High Street's and 14 per cent of Assure's workforce were part-time compared to 7 per cent at Tele and 5 per cent at Funds. High Street and Assure were explicit in the use of this strategy:

There is a limited pool of people in [this city] and all the companies are fighting over them. There is not one group of workers we are targeting particularly but we need staff of reasonable quality ... what we are saying is "whatever you want to work, we will work round it" (staff relations manager, Assure)

Although neither company claimed to have targeted any particular group by offering part-time hours, nevertheless 86 per cent of survey

Table II Workforce demographics by company

| | Percentage female respondents ^a | | Percentage respondents with dependent children | | Percentage responding "I am the primary carer" ^b | | Percentage responding "I share care equality with partner" ^b | | Percentage responding "My partner is the primary carer" ^b | |
|-------------|--|-------|--|------|---|------|---|------|--|------|
| | (N) | (N) | (N) | (N) | (N) | (N) | (N) | (N) | (N) | (N) |
| High Street | 77 | (56) | 55 | (40) | 35 | (14) | 56 | (22) | 9 | (4) |
| Assure | 65 | (117) | 31 | (56) | 45 | (25) | 30 | (17) | 25 | (14) |
| Tele | 62 | (99) | 19 | (30) | 26 | (8) | 50 | (15) | 24 | (7) |
| Funds | 55 | (65) | 27 | (32) | 12 | (4) | 28 | (9) | 60 | (19) |

Notes: ^aActual company statistics: High Street (82 per cent), Assure and Tele (57 per cent), Funds (47 per cent); ^bCompany statistics of those with dependant care responsibilities

Source: Staff surveys

respondents who worked part-time were female parents. Assure and High Street's approach had therefore helped to attract people with dependent children, particularly mothers whereas the limited opportunities for part-time working at Tele and Funds had contributed to much lower proportions of employees with dependent children, particularly primary carers.

Retention

The interviews revealed that many managers believed that flexible working and family leave policies were used by their organisation as a tool to retain employees, particularly female parents. The survey tried to measure whether employees actually regarded work-life policies as a retention factor. Table III shows selected results for the question: "What are your main reasons for staying with this company?" Respondents indicated three out of ten possible reasons[3].

"To balance work and family life" was mentioned as one of three reasons for staying with the organisation by 20 per cent of respondents at High Street, 11 per cent at Assure and only 7 per cent at both Funds and Tele. Overall, 42 per cent of female parents

compared to 12 per cent of male parents cited this reason – a statistically significant difference. These patterns would appear to support the theory that female parents are attracted to/remain in an organisation because they offer part-time hours that help them manage care responsibilities (see also Dex, 1999).

Although some employees used part-time work to combine care responsibilities with paid employment, "flexible working practices" generally were not seen as an incentive to stay except at Assure where the flexitime system was highly valued (see also Holt and Thaulow, 1996). It is perhaps not surprising that employees at Tele and Funds did not see flexible working practices as a retention factor given that this area was not well developed by either company. However, at High Street, where flexible working was central to their approach to the work-life agenda, only six respondents saw flexible working practices as a reason to stay with the company indicating potential problems in operating flexible working practices beyond the ability to work non-standard hours.

Table III Reasons for staying with the company, by company, percentage mentioning as one of three reasons

| | To balance work and family life | | Flexible working practices | | No other suitable employment | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|------|----------------------------|------|------------------------------|------|
| | Percentage | (N) | Percentage | (N) | Percentage | (N) |
| High Street | 20 | (15) | 8 | (6) | 40 | (29) |
| Assure | 11 | (20) | 28 | (51) | 18 | (32) |
| Tele | 7 | (12) | 6 | (90) | 17 | (28) |
| Funds | 7 | (8) | 2 | (3) | 7 | (8) |
| Significance (chi-square) | 0.009 | | 0.000 | | 0.00 | |

Source: Staff surveys

Supportive culture

Organisational culture is often cited as the key facilitator or barrier to work-life policies (Lewis, 1997; Thomson *et al.*, 1999) with cultural norms often over-riding formal policy intentions (Fletcher and Rappaport, 1996). According to the business case, a supportive culture can improve morale and motivation and reduce stress and absences. Interviewees mentioned that a paternalistic culture was one of the reasons that their organisation had adopted work-life policies but had this perceived paternalism and resultant policies translated into a culture that was supportive of work-life issues?

Survey respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with six statements about how the company deals with work-life matters. These statements included, for instance: "Managers here are understanding about employees having to meet family responsibility" and "This is a family-friendly place to work" (for the full list of statements, see Table AI in the Appendix). Table IV shows the average rating for each company[4].

This indicates that the majority of respondents perceived that their employer was fairly supportive about work-life issues. Respondents at Funds and Tele reported the highest levels of supportiveness followed by Assure. High Street's culture was reported to be significantly poorer than the others.

These findings seem contrary to the respective levels of formal policy provision in these organisations. Nor are they consistent with the line manager interviews in which Assure managers in particular demonstrated more supportive attitudes than managers at Tele or Funds (although our sample in each organisation was not large). A possible explanation is found in the demographics split in the perceptions of organisational supportiveness. Across all four companies,

female parents rated the supportiveness of the culture to be significantly poorer than both male parents and non-parents (female parents average rating of companies was 3.4 compared to between 4.1 and 4.3 for male parents and non-parents). For instance, only 52 per cent of mothers compared to 75 per cent of fathers agreed with the statement, "managers here are understanding about employees having to meet family responsibilities", and only 51 per cent of mothers compared to 81 per cent of fathers thought that the organisation was flexible in allowing employees time off at short notice for domestic or family reasons. It is therefore not surprising that in the organisations with higher proportions of female parents (Assure and High Street), the culture was perceived to be less supportive.

Workplace equality

Work-life policies are often promoted as a way of increasing workplace diversity and promoting equal opportunities by opening up employment and career opportunities to those unable to work traditional hours. High Street was the only company to explicitly make this link. Senior HR managers mentioned that their equal opportunities policy had won an award and line managers were aware of the equal opportunities angle to work-life policies:

[Work-life policies] allows women more of a career opportunity e.g. job-share, career break – can put career "on hold". We have come a long way in equal opportunities ... in recent years" (sales team manager, High Street).

But male and female employees were not equitably represented in managerial positions, nor did these proportions relate to levels of work-life policy provision. Company statistics showed that despite their equal opportunities agenda, and having an 82 per cent female staff, only 15 per cent of High Street's female staff were managers compared to 40 per cent of male employees. These figures are comparable to Funds who did not have an equal opportunities policy at all – 14 per cent of female employees were managers compared to 37 per cent of male employees. At Assure these figures were 22 per cent and 28 per cent, and Tele had the most equitable proportions at 18 per cent and 20 per cent.

Showing commitment to the organisation in the form of continuous, full-time employment was still a prerequisite for the majority of

Table IV Average ratings for the supportiveness of the organisation

| | Rating | N |
|------------------------|--------|-----|
| Funds | 4.2 | 119 |
| Assure | 3.9 | 180 |
| Tele | 4.3 | 161 |
| High Street | 3.4 | 73 |
| All | 4.0 | 533 |
| Significance (Ananova) | 0.006 | |

Source: Staff surveys

those wishing to progress their career. While the business benefits of part-time working were mentioned by many line managers, enthusiasm decreased considerably for managerial part-time working. Although High Street had a policy of promoting managerial jobshare, one jobsharing branch manager had had to take a demotion from district manager to do this. Managers also worked significantly longer hours than other employees and although most viewed this as a personal choice, clearly there were cultural and workload pressures:

I work an extra 10-15 hours a week to get the job done, it is not enforced, there is no pressure. To a certain extent it is expected at management level. It is part of the job (branch manager, High Street).

Negative attitudes towards managerial flexible working, coupled with longer working hours made for poor promotion prospects for those unable or unwilling to commit additional time to work (see also Crompton and Birkeland, 2000; Webster, 2001):

It is the attitude of directors and senior managers which makes it difficult to take advantage or press for more flexible working patterns. You will be seen as not committed to your job and may suffer in terms of potential promotion and salary ... In my case I decided to continue working full-time after maternity leave as I felt that I would sacrifice too much by working one less day a week (accountant, Funds).

The negative career consequences of having a family were more likely to be felt by female parents than other employees. A total of 61 per cent of mothers agreed that, "To get ahead here employees are expected to put their jobs before their families" compared to 41 per cent of fathers and 30 per cent of non-parents. Only 13 per cent of mothers viewed promotion prospects as a reason to stay with the company compared to 32 per cent of fathers, 27 per cent of female non-parents and 26 per cent of male non-parents. These figures could be explained by female parents being less ambitious, a notion which has been argued in the sociology literature (Hakim, 1995; Ginn *et al.*, 1996; Crompton *et al.*, 1998). However, they can also be explained by female parents making a realistic assessment of what the employment opportunities open to them can offer in terms of job development and career progression given the hours they are willing/able to work.

Barriers to effective policy implementation

The case study organisations had varying degrees of success with their work-life policies. Recruitment strategies did seem to attract people to meet operational needs but beyond being able to work atypical hours, employees did not report flexible working practices as a powerful retention factor (except at Assure). On the less tangible measures of encouraging a supportive culture and promoting workplace equality, the results were mixed. Overall, employees perceived the culture at their workplace to be supportive of work-life issues yet female parents rated this supportiveness to be significantly poorer than did other groups. On workplace equality, the male model of career progression persisted regardless of the level of policy provision or presence of an equal opportunities agenda. This section looks for explanations of these results in four potential barriers to effective policy implementation – policy awareness, resource pressures, "give and take" and inclusive access to policies.

Policy awareness

A prerequisite for the effective translation of policy intentions into desired practice and outcomes is that employees and managers have an awareness and understanding of what those policies are. In all four organisations policy awareness among both staff and managers was very patchy. While managers were almost entirely responsible for decision making regarding employee access to work-life policies only a few had received any training in how to deal with work-life issues or statutory rights to leave (see also Perrons, 2000; Dex and Scheibl, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Bond and Wise, forthcoming). E-mail bulletins and occasional updates to handbooks were relied upon for communicating these sometimes complex policies. The HR manager at Tele was aware of this problem, she wanted to ensure that managers properly understood the new provisions:

I put it to the senior managers that I personally should go out and train managers on the family-friendly suite of policies but they did not go for that because it would take up too much of my time. Instead I had to train a couple of people who would then go out into the departments and train one person there and they would communicate it to the whole department but I

am not convinced that it was done thoroughly because I have not had feedback from all the departments (HR manager, Tele).

While it is not realistic, nor necessary, for managers and staff to have a detailed knowledge of every company work-life policy, if efforts are not made to effectively communicate the policy message to those implementing and using policies the considerable time and resources invested in the strategic development of work-life policies staff will be wasted[5]. By leaving the accurate implementation of policies to chance, the important business development goals discussed earlier are unlikely to be fully realised.

Resource pressures

Another crucial component of effective work-life policies is the relinquishing of some control over working time by managers to give employees the flexibility to better manage their work and non-work commitments. This relies on the ability of work to be reorganised and/or the employee being substitutable with another employee if they have to be away from the workplace (Bond *et al.*, 2002). Policies designed to cut costs by closely matching labour supply with demand in the context of time-critical, customer-facing tasks are therefore unlikely to fulfil employee needs for control and flexibility (Neathey and Hurstfield, 1995; Purcell *et al.*, 1999; Perrons, 2000).

These issues were cited fairly infrequently by managers in three of the four organisations. Funds and Assure had few customer-facing staff and neither were critically understaffed. Funds felt that the specialist nature of their professional staff's skills and customer expectations made it difficult to work part-time or have long periods of time off work. This was their main justification for not allowing more flexible working practices although there had been no objective analysis of this position. In contrast, Assure was a large organisation whose employees were highly substitutable in terms of their skills which made it easy to accommodate requests for changes to contracted hours and to operate a flexitime system. Being a retail bank, much of the work at Tele was customer-facing which made flexitime too difficult to operate. However, having a low proportion of employees with dependant care responsibilities and being a

large, single site organisation which was sometimes overstaffed (due to the old policy of not allowing part-time work) this meant other work-life policies were relatively easy to manage:

With a call centre our size and the small amount of people involved the means that it is only a minor itch, we tend to be able to cover (head of call centre, Tele).

In contrast, the resource pressures at the other retail bank, High Street, were significant and appeared to affect line managers' ability to effectively translate work-life policies into supportive work-life practices. Managers reported they had to staff extended opening hours with fewer contracted hours, as well as trying to get staff to work weekends and meet aggressive sales targets. These pressures were more acutely felt by smaller branches where there were fewer employers to "substitute":

In a bigger unit you have more staff so you are able to start cashing up early and open up quicker but it is impossible to do everything within a small branch. I pretty much have to be here all the time. They make these decisions to introduce [work-life policies] for the right reasons but I feel that it conflicts with what we're asked to achieve in the business (branch manager, High Street).

The inability to create a flexible working environment because of resource pressure is the most obvious explanation of why, despite the strategic focus taken by central HR, employees at High Street did not view "flexible working practices" as a reason for staying with the company. When managers are put under intense resource and sales pressure, the successful implementation of work-life policies is unlikely to be high on the agenda. Yet it is for the very reasons of work intensification and stress that work-life policies are needed.

"Give and take"

Flexibility of working hours can also be seen as part of the "give and take" of the relationship between employer and employee (Dex and Scheibl, 2001; Perrons, 2000). Dex and Scheibl (2002, p. 14) refer to this as the "individual balance sheet". The idea is that employees can build up a credit of good will through improved productivity, working overtime or being flexible about their working hours when business needs demand. The employee can cash in this credit in the form of flexible working hours when they need it.

A “give and take” rhetoric was not found at Assure, perhaps because the flexitime system was a formalised version of this. Employees frequently relied on their flexitime to manage their non-work priorities and tended not to ask for leave or shift changes. Funds’ managers were the most explicit about how they thought flexibility of working hours was earned. Informal flexibility of working hours, for example taking a long lunch or varying start or finishing times, was available at the discretion of the line manager but few allowed employees to step outside the rigid full-time norm. However, senior managers who had demonstrated their commitment to the organisation through long working hours had an exceptional amount of control over when and where they worked. As one manager put it, “I feel like I am self-employed”.

At High Street and Tele, the calculation of whether or not the employee had enough “credit” only became an issue when managers were using their discretion to decide whether leave taken for non-work reasons would be paid, unpaid or worked up later. As a result of the resource pressure outlined above, time was a valuable commodity at High Street. For example, employees could “earn” a morning tea break by coming in 15 minutes before the start of their shift to help the manager count the floats and open the branch (such activity was not budgeted for). This branch manager explained how she decided who would and would not get paid when bad weather made lateness and non-attendance necessary for many staff:

Some people work extra hours without any extra pay anyway so we would not ask for the time back. It is not about treating everybody the same. Not everyone gives the same level of commitment, some people will stay and help you out, you have to recognise that (branch manager, High Street)

Although not under the same resource pressures, at Tele some managers still used “give and take” as a justification for their decision making:

If someone contributes well to the business, if they put the hours in for no extra pay, then that shows commitment and we will go outside the policy for them. If someone just comes in from 9-5 and is not bothered about being here then they are not going to get the benefits of the manager’s discretion (team manager, Tele).

These examples highlight some of the difficulties which arise from relying on “give and take” to determine access to work-life

policies. First, as Lewis (1997) noted, when work-life or family-friendly policies are construed as a reward to be earned, employees feel a low sense of entitlement to use them. This lack of perceived legitimacy to challenge traditional ways of working entrenches these patterns further and marginalises those using work-life policies. Second, in our organisations the reward of flexibility was earned primarily through the additional input of time. This created a paradoxical situation where people less able to give their time freely to work, were disadvantaged in benefiting from the policies which were designed to help them. This offers some insight into the findings that female parents found their organisation’s culture to be less supportive about work-life issues. The ability to accrue credit which made it easier to take time off or adjust the working day when needed may explain why 50 per cent of mothers compared to 81 per cent of fathers agreed that, “This organisation was flexible when it comes to employees having to take time off for domestic or family reasons”.

Inclusive access to work-life policies

Further explanations for the differing perceptions of organisational supportiveness and poor equal opportunities performance are found in the pattern of uptake of work-life policies. As well as making up the majority of part-timers, female parents used more work-life policies than fathers and non-parents (although overall, take-up was low). Female parents also experienced the most problems in accessing policies. Of female parents, 35 per cent wanted to take time off or use a flexible working practice but had not (either because it was refused or they had not asked) compared to 20 per cent of male parents, 10 per cent of female non-parents and 16.5 per cent of male non-parents. These figures show that female parents had more experience of testing the organisation’s supportiveness and were more likely to be let down in trying to manage their work and non-work priorities. In using policies which took them away from the workplace more often, female parents were further damaging their career prospects as this did not allow them to demonstrate their commitment in the expected way (see above).

Most line managers did not show prejudice against men using work-life policies, although at Funds an explicitly gendered

understanding family-friendly and work-life policy and a high proportion of fathers who's partners took primary care of their children made it more difficult for men to access policies:

If someone wanted to take [parental leave] then the company would have to allow it because they are the regulations but I think the man who did ask for it would have to be a brave man, he would take quite a lot of ribbing (IT manager, Funds).

Managers did give examples of employees taking time off for care responsibilities but these often involved extraordinary circumstances. Time off or flexibility for routine sickness or the breakdown of child care arrangements was usually taken by women:

More women have time off for their kids. The men in my department are either happily married or do not have any children so they do not need it (technical support manager, Assure).

Because of this pattern and having a high proportion of women with dependant care responsibilities, High Street had to deal with many more requests for time off for dependants than the other organisations, a fact which managers felt unfairly penalised their business (see also Lewis, 2001):

For a child's illness I think you can reasonably expect the child care arrangements to be split between the partners. If one partner takes the first day off and we pay it and the other takes a paid day off from his/her company and then if more time is required we would look at them taking holidays, lieu days or making the time up. You have to look at the other partner, whether male or female because you cannot expect one company to carry all the weight (assistant branch manager, High Street).

This forward-thinking view of the gendered division of child care was not motivated by altruism, rather it was a symptom of the resources pressures and the demographic profile they had created for themselves through their business strategy. Putting themselves in the questionable position of interfering in private care decisions and placing strict limits on time off in an emergency must have had a negative effect on the perceived supportiveness and flexibility felt by employees.

None of the companies appeared to have made any moves to make the work-life agenda more inclusive. Although the research was primarily a focus on family-related policies, company policy and practice on

accommodating non-work priorities other than child care were sought. Most company policies were designed under the family-friendly banner but informally many managers allowed short-term leave and flexibility for a range of non-work priorities or emergencies – although access to this depended on the “give and take” relationship between manager and employee. For a more permanent change to working hours most managers tended to need a “good reason” for the change and it was clear that care responsibilities were a better reason than any other.

Conclusions and discussion

So do work-life policies do exactly what they say on the tin? First, the people responsible for implementing policies and bringing about business benefits (the line managers) more often than not were not adequately informed of the contents of the tin, what they are for or how they are to be used. In these circumstances it is hard to see how organisations can realise the potential of policies or get an adequate return on the considerable investment made in developing, benchmarking and negotiating new work-life policies.

In terms of recruitment and retention, there appeared to be a strong relationship between the availability of part-time contracts needed to fulfil operational requirements and the number female parents employed, for whom such contracts offered the opportunity to combine care responsibilities with paid employment. However, this relationship was not entirely symbiotic. Female parents were, overall, much less impressed by the supportiveness of their organisation's culture, experienced more problems in accessing work-life policies and saw little prospect for career development. The line between flexible working for operational needs and flexible working which enhances work-life balance and promotes equal opportunities has become blurred. Policies, such as those found at the high street bank, which take a short-term view of staff costs by closely matching labour supply with customer demand make it difficult for managers to accommodate employee-focussed flexibility because this relies on there being at least a little “slack” in the system. Recruiting a high proportion of

individuals with care responsibilities into such an environment is a dangerous strategy as managers are put under more pressure to meet large numbers of similar demands for workplace flexibility. A workforce which is diverse at all levels is therefore more likely to be able to manage work-life policies effectively than a segregated one.

Our findings also show that the problem of inclusiveness continues to plague this area of employment policy. Moves towards mainstream acceptance of facilitating employees to lead fulfilling work and non-work lives have so far not been substantial. While the inclusive work-life agenda is promoted in much of the government and advocacy material, a couple of factors point to the fact that the main justification for adopting and using working-life policies is still to help employees meet care responsibilities. First, legislation has focussed on helping employees meet child care responsibilities (e.g. time off for dependants, parental leave) and new legislative measures continue in this direction (e.g. paternity leave, the right to request flexible working limited to parents of children under six years old). Second, much of the persuasion in the work-life balance material still focuses heavily on the changes to workforce demographics, i.e. more women in paid employment, more dual earner and lone parent households and increasing eldercare responsibilities. Voluntary company initiatives reflect this focus calling into question whether inclusiveness can be promoted without legal backing. How far employers will voluntarily embrace flexible working and leave to facilitate other priorities such as lifelong learning, sports or artistic pursuits is questionable. This has important implications for work-life balance as a tool to promote equality of opportunity. As long as the focus on family care remains, female parents will continue to be the main users of work-life policies. As experience has shown, this type of usage is unlikely to produce sufficient impetus to challenge traditional working patterns and career structures.

Properly targeted communication of policies and training for line managers in work-life issues is essential for turning centrally developed policy strategy into effective practice but the challenge for organisations does not end there. Having formal policies which practically can not be used is counterproductive. Not only are

organisations not going to get a decent return on the investment made in developing policies but we may see a cynicism towards the work-life balance agenda develop. Current working practices have failed to keep up with the changing demands of work and the workforce evidenced by the UK workplace being characterised by stress, long working hours, inequality and low job attachment. Work-life balance offers an opportunity to turn these demands into a positive and sustainable way to do business but to realise this potential, government and advocacy groups, policy makers and organisations need to focus on the root causes of work-life conflict or work-life policies will only ever be a varnish.

Notes

- 1 The lower response rate at High Street can be attributed to a less effective distribution strategy. At the other organisations, researchers were able to personally hand out questionnaires to individuals who then returned their sealed responses via the internal mail. At North Bank, because of the branch network and security issues, line managers were relied on for distribution and employees were asked to post returns.
- 2 This was a cross-sectional study therefore the longer term impact on recruitment rates can not be assessed. Further, the survey did not ask respondents whether work-life policies had influenced their decision to join the company.
- 3 The possible reasons were: pay, promotion prospects, type of work, company location, the company's reputation, the range of company benefits, flexible working arrangements, to balance work and family commitments, there is no other suitable employment, and friendships I have built up with my work-mates.
- 4 Responses were then counted across all six statements to give a score for each respondent of between 0 and 6. A score of 0 indicates respondents did not rate their company favourably on any of the measures, whereas a score of 6 indicates they rated their company favourably on all of the measures. Where respondents agreed with the statements, "Managers here are understanding about employees having to meet family responsibilities", "This organisation is flexible when it comes to employees having to take time off at short notice for domestic or family reasons" or "This is a family-friendly place to work" a score of 1 was allocated. If respondents agreed with the statements, "It is difficult to get time off during work to take care of personal or family matters", "To get ahead employees are expected to put their jobs before their families" or "The pressure of my workload makes it difficult to take the time off that I am entitled to", this indicated a negative response to how the company deals with work-life issues,

therefore, a score of 1 was allocated when respondents disagreed with any of these. The scores were then counted across all the statements to give an indication of how supportive respondents considered companies to be across all the statements.

- 5 Following the research, the HR manager at Assure said that the findings on poor policy awareness were being used to inform a new programme to train managers and make policies more accessible.

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Appendix

Table A1 Percentage (n) of respondents who agree with statements about how the company deals with work-life matters

| | Percentage agreeing | | | | | | N | Significance (chi-squared) |
|--|---------------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------------------------------|
| | Male | | Female | | Total | | | |
| | (%) | No. | (%) | No. | (%) | No. | | |
| <i>Managers here are understanding about employees having to meet family responsibilities</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Parents | 74.6 | (44) | 51.6 | (48) | 60.5 | (92) | 152 | 0.004 |
| Non-parents | 65.9 | (87) | 63.5 | (155) | 64.4 | (242) | 376 | 0.365 |
| <i>This organisation is flexible when it comes to employees having to take time off at short notice for domestic or family reasons</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Parents | 81.4 | (48) | 49.5 | (56) | 61.8 | (940) | 152 | 0.000 |
| Non-parents | 76.5 | (101) | 66.9 | (164) | 70.3 | (265) | 377 | 0.033 |
| <i>It is difficult to get time off during work to take care of personal or family matters</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Parents | 16.9 | (10) | 30.1 | (28) | 25.0 | (38) | 152 | 0.068 |
| Non-parents | 11.4 | (15) | 14.3 | (35) | 13.3 | (50) | 377 | 0.425 |
| <i>To get ahead employees expected to put their jobs before their families</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Parents | 40.7 | (24) | 60.9 | (56) | 53.0 | (80) | 151 | 0.015 |
| Non-parents | 30.3 | (40) | 32.2 | (79) | 31.6 | (119) | 377 | 0.699 |
| <i>The pressure of my workload makes it difficult to take the time off that I am entitled to</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Parents | 27.1 | (16) | 24.7 | (23) | 25.7 | (39) | 152 | 0.743 |
| Non-parents | 24.2 | (32) | 19.2 | (47) | 21.0 | (79) | 377 | 0.250 |
| <i>This is a family friendly place to work</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Parents | 52.5 | (31) | 36.6 | (34) | 42.8 | (65) | 152 | 0.038 |
| Non-parents | 53.0 | (70) | 54.7 | (134) | 54.1 | (204) | 377 | 0.420 |

Source: Staff surveys