LIVING TO WORK.....OR WORKING TO LIVE?
THE ROLE OF MANAGERS IN CREATING WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN IRELAND

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Introduction

The objectives of this Briefing Paper are to:

- Identify how managers negotiate and understand work-life balance;
- Examine the role that formal and informal policies play; and
- Explore the role of managers in facilitating work-life balance within Irish organisations.

Background

The Irish economy is demanding more qualified workers which causes the interaction between the workplace and personal lives to become increasingly complex. One of the consequences of the Celtic Tiger's growth is that organisations have become more and more 'time hungry'. Despite this, existing policies still reflect a prevailing 'breadwinner' model with a working husband and dependent 'housewife'. This has resulted in conflict for working parents and caregivers who struggle to balance responsibilities in the absence of significant institutional supports.

Certain policies did emerge to enable workers to reconcile the conflict, but Drew *et al.* (2003) found that these arrangements were aimed almost exclusively at making the workplace 'family-friendly' (e.g. through facilitating part-time working). Hence the Irish uptake of flexible working arrangements has tended to be highly gendered. The fact that certain policies have been availed of almost exclusively by women has helped to solidify the belief that the relationship

between the labour market and the family is solely an issue for mothers of young children and consequently not applicable to all workers.

While it remains more common for women to make adjustments to their working patterns in response to household responsibilities, changing socio-economic conditions make it increasingly difficult to sustain one-earner households (Esping-Andersen, 2004). Consequently, men are reporting a greater imbalance than women between their work and non-work life (Fine-Davis *et al.*, 2005; Kimmel, 1993). Without full-time domestic support, dual-income couples are facing new challenges which are further complicated by the added pressure many companies face to compete in a 24-7 workplace. The limited nature of 'family-friendly' policies has often served to reinforce traditional gendered breakdowns of labour and such gendered policies do little to address the issues and pressures that newer family structures face (Leira, 1992; Walby, 1990).

Statutory regulations, such as the introduction of unpaid parental leave, have attempted to address the needs of working parents. However, in Ireland the limited nature of these policies and lack of financial compensation does little to address the labour market shortage. Uptake of leave remains highly gendered and parental leave is a luxury few can afford to utilise fully. Consequently, these limited policies have done little to help groups whose labour market participation is most vulnerable. Powerful skill sets of older workers, single parents, parents of larger family and those struggling with mental or physical disabilities, are often lost because the needed support systems are currently not available (Fine-Davis *et al.*, 2005).

To date, most work-life balance arrangements in Ireland have focused on reconciling work and family life and traditionally they have concentrated exclusively on women. The Commission on the Family criticised this focus as ignoring the changing role of men in society, stating that:

> "*Expectations are changing about what it is to be a good father. It is no longer presumed that the father is the sole breadwinner or that his role is simply to provide the weekly wage packet. There is a presumption that today's father will want to be present at the birth of their children, to be emotionally involved with them and subsequently to take interest in their schooling and to share the housework*" (Commission on the Family, 1998).

Workers in countries such as Norway, Sweden and Finland can avail of greater public supports to parents/carers, such as State funded childcare. Hence they find it significantly easier to combine their jobs with their family lives. Not coincidentally, these countries also have a much higher level of gender equality in the workplace (Fine-Davis *et al.*, 2004; Leira, 1992; 2002; Walby, 1986; 1990). Thus, workplace policies can eliminate or perpetuate poor working conditions, work-life (im)balance and gender pay gaps as well as gender segregation and stratification.

Managers and Work-life balance

Research undertaken in 2002 showed that while supervisors and line managers were generally supportive of flexible working arrangements, some felt that they had to "manage the fallout", "make up the slack" and generally "juggle" things to ensure that the work unit did not suffer. Some managers said that they felt like the "filling in the sandwich" – such arrangements were not open to them but they had to make them work for others (Drew *et al*, 2003: 120). Focus group participants in the study expressed the view that "sympathetic" managers were effectively being "dumped" on and expected to take on more than their "fair share" of staff on flexible working arrangements.

Problems also arose in relation to work colleagues. Young (1999) argues that despite the apparent positive consequences of flexible working arrangements, some workers (e.g. those who are single or childless) may be required to do extra work to compensate for working parents who rely on such policies. These workers may also be excluded from certain benefits thereby leading to a sense of injustice which, in turn, creates resentment. Additionally, where work-life balance (WLB) arrangements have become more widespread, an informal "quota" may operate whereby a maximum number of people in any section can be facilitated. As a result, others seeking WLB arrangements would have to wait for another staff member to 'come off' such arrangements before they can avail of them.

According to the 'Off the Treadmill' study (Drew *et al*, 2003) some managers also felt that staff availing of flexible working arrangements were no longer "in the loop" in terms of new developments because there were difficulties involved in keeping them up-to-date both formally, through, for example, briefings and informally, through discussions, team meetings, etc. Managers perceived that employees on flexible working arrangements tended to be seen as

"invisible". Similarly, a number of those working from home expressed feelings of isolation and there was a belief that only certain types of staff could handle such situations. Research shows that for work-life balance arrangements to work, staff needed to be highly motivated, focused on their job and highly trusted (Drew *et a*l, 2003).

Managers as a group are different from the rest of the workforce in a number of important ways. They are often left picking-up the slack created in their unit by staff on WLB arrangements. This contributes to the already high levels of imbalance reported in managers' work-life balance (Drew *et al*, 2003). Subsequent research reiterated these findings, showing that managers have the lowest levels of individual work-life balance (O'Connell *et al*., 2004). Managers consistently report the longest hours (DTI, 2004) and highest stress levels (O'Connell *et al*., 2004). Despite these findings, very few researchers have specifically focused on managers in their work-life balance studies and those that do most often limit their involvement to one small element of the research. This is perhaps due to the unusual nature of managers in relation to the rest of the workforce: managers tend to have higher educational levels, higher salaries and different working conditions to their staff. In addition, they are mostly male.

International research on managers shows an intensification of working pressures and a significant lengthening of their work week. In 1993, Scase and Goffee reported that most of the managers in their studies worked an average of 50 hours a week and had experienced a general intensification of their working hours. These long hours accord with what Wajcman (1999) calls the 'macho manager' or the concept that being a manager requires total commitment and sacrifice to the organization - the job comes before anything else. Powell (1993) suggested that long hours in management positions are common due, at least partially, to the difficulty in assessing the quality and productivity of managerial work and thus commitment is measured in terms of time spent in the workplace. Similarly, Seron and Ferris (1995) found that working long hours was often a sign of higher status. This has continued to surface in recent studies which indicate that very few managers can afford to work standard hours or avail of the work-life balance accommodations available to them as that would be seen as indicating a lack of organisational commitment and potentially hamper their careers (Thesing, 1998; Drew and Murtagh, 2005).

Even when statutory policies to reduce working hours (such as the French 35-hour 'Roi Aubry 1' (1998) and 'Roi Aubry 2' (2000) that imposed a collective reduction in working hours), the

long-hours working pattern predominates among managers. In fact, the new laws only applied to eight percent of managers and supervisors. Furthermore, when the laws took affect there was an average weekly reduction of 1 hour 20 minutes for white collar workers, and 2 hours for manual workers, while the hours of top and middle managers remained practically unchanged (Fagnani and Letablier, 2004). This long-hours working pattern has also been observed in Irish organisations. For example, Drew *et al.* (2003) found a prevalence of a long-hour culture and a low take-up of work-life balance arrangements at senior management levels, particularly among men.

The pattern of women in management, on the other hand, presents an interesting issue. Along with the increase of women in the labour force as a whole, women are increasingly occupying more professional and managerial jobs (Wajcman, 1999). Despite this, men still predominate in top management jobs (Powell, 1993). In an extensive study of UK-based companies, Gregg and Machin (1993) found that 92 per cent of top executives were male. The relative share of management positions held by men rises dramatically at the top of the hierarchy. This male monopoly is even more tenacious in the United States where only five percent of women have entered higher management - a number that has not changed significantly in the last decade despite the significant increase of women in the labour force (Wajcman 1999). Several studies of gender differences in management have concluded that there is still a significant gender gap in access to decision-making authority and salary (Jacobs, 1992; Reskin and Ross, 1992; Wright and Baxter, 1995).

Feminist research has explored the factors that inhibit women from accessing top management posts. Evidence suggests that women in management are able to advance just so far in corporate hierarchies before encountering a 'glass ceiling' that prevents or reduces the likelihood of reaching top management or executive status (Dreher, 2003; Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Powell, 1993). Likewise, the very concept of a managerial career continues to be gendered. The hierarchal model of continuous service and regular promotions is designed and developed to suit the 'organisation man' (Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Kimmel, 1993; Wajcman, 1999). Yet this structure negatively impacts on women by penalizing them for having children and for their role as primary caregivers (Drew, 2007; Sinclair, 1998).

This patriarchal structure has been employed to explain the highly gendered patterns of single marital status and childlessness among female managers. In US research, Brett and Stroh

(1999) found that of the 1,000 managers interviewed, only 45 percent of the women were married compared to 86 percent of men. Nearly two-thirds of male mangers (62%) had children while only one-fifth (20%) of women did. Studies in the UK showed similar trends. According to Wajcman (1999: 143), for women, "childlessness is a precondition of a successful management career". Her study found that in the UK single marital status and childlessness patterns were similar to the US study.

Drew and Murtagh (2005) noted similar patterns among the 162 managers they surveyed in a major company in Ireland. Men were older (46 years on average) and much more likely to be married (83 percent) compared to women who averaged 43 years old, only 46 percent of whom were married. In common with previous studies, men were much more likely to have dependent children (86%) compared with only 39 per cent of their female counterparts.

More significantly, managers have the power to either promote or discourage work-life balance policies in their sections/organisations. Current research often fails to recognise this power and lacks a specific focus on managers' role in facilitating (or otherwise) work-life balance.   There are a number of reasons why the focus on managers in this field is relevant:

1.   Managers Have Responsibility for WLB

Within the management team, besides being responsible for the overall creation of work-life balance arrangements, lower level managers are typically the gatekeepers of such arrangements and are responsible for the allocation of WLB policies within the organisation. Most studies of work-life balance arrangements have focused exclusively on the policies available at a corporate level with very little attention on how they are disseminated and distributed within the organisation (Fisher, 2000). Yet research continues to show that work-life balance levels are greatly affected by managers (Galinsky *et al.*, 1996).   In fact, having a powerful manager to buffer the employee from negative career ramifications has been seen to enable an employee's uptake of some work-life balance arrangements (Wharton and Blair-Loy, 2002; Hill, 2005).

Figure 1 shows that while WLB arrangements may be available within an organisation, most are disseminated through the gatekeeping managers before they reach workers. Therefore, the study of work-life balance realities must recognise the influence that these managers wield.
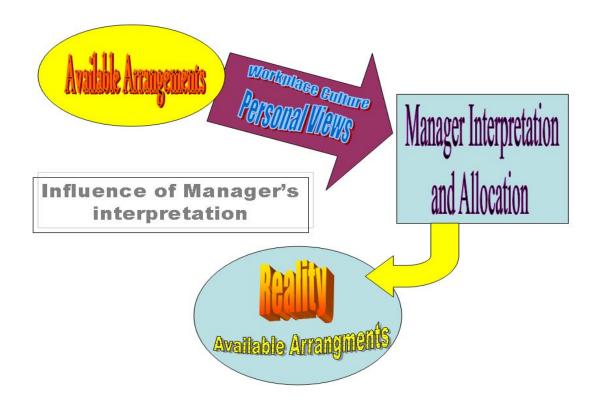
Figure 1   Flowchart of WLB Access in Organisations

2. The Role of HR Managers

Other studies have confirmed the importance of HR managers in the interpretation of work-life balance arrangements. Kossek *et al*. (1994) discovered that the probability of an organisation developing childcare facilities was directly related to the views of the HR director. Miliken *et al*. (1998) also acknowledged the importance of this role and found that HR executives' interpretation of potential strategic issues accounted for almost twenty percent of the variance in their organisations' overall responsiveness to work-life balance issues.

The views of HR managers may play a pivotal role since other managers who are/may be experiencing difficulties in putting company policies into practise rely on the advice of HR managers. In fact Kodz *et al*. (2002) emphasise the lack of guidance given to managers in implementing WLB programmes. In particular, they found that managers reported difficulty in deciding who should have access to flexible working arrangements, a lack of clarity about their roles and responsibilities and their own capacity to manage the 'people side' of implementation. Such managers may play the unwelcome role of 'gatekeepers' in deciding who (if anyone) can

avail of WLB arrangements. In an Irish context, staff believed that managers consciously kept information on the availability of flexible working arrangements "under wraps" while managers themselves spoke of their fear of "opening the floodgates" (Drew *et al.* 2003: 121).

Given the uneven, and often slow, rate of progress towards work-life balance in many Irish organisations and the well acknowledged role of mangers in facilitating, or otherwise, such arrangements, this Briefing Paper seeks to shed light on the inhibitors that block the promotion of work-life balance. The Paper focuses on the views of senior HR managers, in each of four Irish public and private sector organisations, in contributing to the development and implementation of WLB arrangements in their organisations.

Interviews with Senior Managers

The information analysed in this Briefing Paper is based on the responses by HR Directors/Managers, obtained in one-to-one taped interviews in four organisations:

- ➢ 1 private manufacturing company (Dublin and Cork) A   (two interviews)
- ➢ 1 public utility company operating throughout Ireland B   (two interviews)
- ➢ 2 regional public sector organisations in North West C and D   (four interviews)

All interviews were undertaken between January and May 2007, using a tape recorder. The analysis uses the transcripts from the interviews.

The interviews with HR managers explored the following issues:

- • **Personal attitudes towards work-life balance in the organisation**
    - o   How is WLB defined?
    - o   Dublin versus regional WLB?
    - o   Personal take up of WLB arrangements?
    - o   Managers who avail of WLB?
    - o   Who should get priority with reference to gender/family status?

- **Work-life balance and the organisation**
  - Workplace procedures: formal versus informal?
  - How are policies/procedures communicated?
  - What is the prevailing workplace culture?
  - Management's role in work-life balance?

Interview Findings

Regional Differences

One of the major findings of the study that sought to identify common themes, as well as differences, between managers' perspectives on work-life balance was the quality of life divergence between managers in the Dublin region and those in other regions of Ireland. Overall, managers living outside of the Dublin region felt that they were under less pressure; experienced lass hassle (in commuting) and were less likely to be stressed at work than their counterparts in the Dublin region. Furthermore, managers from outside of Dublin were more likely to be able to have access to work-life balance opportunities, especially informal arrangements, than those within Dublin, even when they worked for the same organisations (A and B). The same applied to childcare arrangements which were often sought/obtained through family members (e.g. aunts)

One Dublin-based HR Director summed up the work/commuting double shift:

""If I'm sitting here at half past four. I know that I've missed the window, which means I'm going to end up having to do a full day, and have to spend two hours on the M50. I'm not going to be happy, I'm not going to be productive and I'm going to keep repeating the cycle and the stress…therefore, you just can't do the job right. So I certainly believe that if you can, make the workplace more flexible" A 1

In contrast to this experience, another HR Manager who relocated from Dublin to another region commented that while his commute is still one hour long, he felt it was much better than when working in Dublin:

"An hour each way, it can be shorter, it can be longer depending on the traffic, but it's an hour. But the way I look at it I used to live in Lucan to go into [names previous workplace]*, and I was an hour in the car, I never got past third gear and it drove me mad, and I said get out, get away from the city. I don't mind the drive to work, I do a lot of thinking...."* A 1

Two managers, both based outside of Dublin, had adjusted their work schedules:

"I changed my work schedule to drop my little boy to school so I leave him in school at 9.30..... [finishing her working day at] *sometimes it can be 6.30...*[with a commuting time of] *20 minutes"* C 3

"I would start work at about 8.30 and mostly I'd get home at 5.30 or 6.00 and then I'd do about 2 hours later on. I take about 50 minutes for lunch because that's all we get....[with a commuting time of] *20 minutes...."* D 2

Defining Work-life balance

Despite the current cultural focus on work-life balance, many managers reported confusion in the form of: "now what do *you* mean by that?" when asked how they would define it. Managers expressed a range of responses from highly personal (such as 'happiness') to strictly pragmatic definitions 'work does not compete with personal time':

"Happiness.....I'm happier in my work, I feel like I'm working with in my own body clock. Rather than against it.....When I'm off at five o'clock..... I know I can start winding down. Look forward to the time I'm going home, and then I go home at that time, and I beat the traffic, and I come home and I'm easily relaxed and I'm not stressed out" A 1

A small number of managers expressed feelings that work-life balance is an abstract feeling or personal goal, something more akin to a state of mind than a set of policies:

".....by and large, I would like to think that people should enjoy their work and really enjoy themselves and ..... feel rewarded and feel self-satisfied and happy.....I think life and work shouldn't be classically defined as two separate things that you can only start enjoying yourself ..... when 5 o'clock comes, in the evening or when Saturday comes. So in an overall sense, I

would like to make work as rewarding as possible for people so that they enjoy that's what I would like to have the life and work balance to me as HR Director here if I was to look back on my time when I'm finished" B 1

Other managers saw WLB as a more pragmatic balancing of needs verses desires: while getting the job done, work-life balance would represent a personal attempt to still carve out personal time. This view did not necessarily imply any adjustment to working life at all. In common with this sentiment was the general sense that work automatically came first and that an individual should fight the feeling that they were simply too tired after work and make time for themselves.

"I think it's to find time for everything that we would like to do on a personal basis and that we don't have time to do and the other thing is maybe to go home in the evening and not to have to worry about something at work, or not to have to take work home, in other words that your work doesn't eat into your personal time, which it does quite a lot" D 1

The majority of managers saw workplace policies aimed at WLB as firmly linked to parenting and family, and this view was not incompatible with holding personal beliefs stated above. Often managers would feel, for example, that in their own (almost exclusively male) lives, WLB meant not working on a Saturday! For others, WLB at work was a set of polices to allow women to pick up their children from the crèche or stay home when they are sick as exemplified by: *"It's balancing family life with work life"* believing that, for non-parents/carers, money (e.g. as overtime) is more important to them than time.

Communication of WLB Policies/Procedures to Employees

When asked about how WLB policies/procedures are communicated to employees, even Group HR Directors were vague and somewhat perplexed about responding, often delegating the question to a HR Manager who reports to them:

"That's a good question. You have to ask the people who deal with most of that. I don't deal with it on a day-to-day basis, but there should be a formal policy in relation to it" A 1

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When pressed about a serious need to access information his response was more detailed and thoughtful:

"The induction manual. The induction manual will tell you what your hours of working are ....,there's always flexibility in relation to it, but we're just talking about time. And I think in relation to work-life balance you and I both know it's more than that. It's about a way of living....a way of thinking...." A 1

This Director went on to expand on what WLB really meant acknowledging that making WLB a reality is difficult for managers:

"The higher you go up, the harder it is because there are demands on you, particularly very ferocious demands on executives. But even more, there's more reasons for you to make time for yourself or you get into this never ending cycle. You never take exercise, you never go home to see anyone…" A 1

Other senior mangers/Directors felt that their subordinate managers should be able to provide the information on WLB Policies and Procedures:

"The HR manager will do it better, I would say from time to time we have something to communicate, but it's not a regular feature it's not high on agenda....." A 2

"God it's a good question, and there's probably other people you'll interview that will know that better I would expect that your line manager should know. I expect your HR manager should/would know. I would expect that you'd be able to find the HR policies on the Internet." B 1

Given the remit of the HR brief, these responses suggest that there is a WLB communication/information deficit evident in their organisations.

Outside of Dublin and operating in the public sector, HR Managers also referred to the internet and the role of line managers:

"All the policies are on the intranet site so they are readily accessible and then the service managers carry the primary duty of care to the employees. So if an employee doesn't have access to the intranet and wants to know about whatever it is, we work it that they approach the manager and the manager gets the policy for them and gives it to them so it should be accessible directly through the intranet or through the managers who are notified about the policies and our managers all have access to the intranet" C 1

This reliance on individual word of mouth communication was echoed in another response:

"I think probably that most people would know about ... your typical parental leave, maybe some compassionate leaves, but they wouldn't be advertised.... so no, we don't advertise it, but staff know what they need". C 2

When pressed as to whom staff might direct their enquiries about WLB options, if they had the need, the response was:

"*They would ask either myself or* [named managers]*, the domestic supervisor, he covers* [staff categories named]*, but then they would come to me as well. If I don't know, I ring Personnel. There's nothing there flagging up encouraging leaves, but staff know, even from their husbands, their wives, working in other areas...."* C 2

Each of these organisations demonstrated that they were operating in 'reactive' mode, responding, as required, to requests and/or relying on individuals to find details of what options are available mainly through the intranet. Only one respondent among the four organisations recognised the need to go beyond ensuring that people are aware of their entitlements. This organisation is currently compiling a web based electronic handbook to address the information deficit and encourage staff to avail.

Organisational Attitudes Towards WLB

A general question was posed to interviewees about their organisations' views on WLB. This evoked some lukewarm to negative responses or, at best, a reactive mindset:

"If it works for the business it's fine, and for me the business comes first, because otherwise if it doesn't work for the business then what's the sense of that?" A 2

"....I would think we have a fairly positive attitude to WLB, we tend to facilitate people, we may not be all that formal in terms of our structures, although we are getting a bit more formal, but I think we tend to be facilitative" D 1

A HR Group Director believed that theirs was the 'best company' based on a very progressive suite of policies and procedures now in place. However, he did acknowledge that more needed to be done:

"....However, I still probably feel that there is a reticence on behalf of people to come forward and look for lifework balance initiatives out of some concern that maybe it will impact on their careers. So we are trying to address that as best we can to try and encourage people that it's okay....People lower down in the organization look up and they see this culture of presenteeism. People right up to Director and Chief Executive spending all hours here..." B 1

A more pessimistic response about WLB came from the manufacturing company:

"Paternalistic, I think that's probably the best way to sum it up. It comes from a traditional background of manufacturing, which would be about presenteeism, about attending the job, between fixed hours. You're not perceived to be doing the job, unless you attend those hours but if you attend those hours you're perceived as being a loyal and good employees.....So unfortunately it's not possible, in a factory situation, to be that flexible in relation to things. But I think that there's always opportunities to look at flexible systems" A 1

The most negative answer came from a HR Manager in a public sector body indicating the lack of positive role model behaviour from a senior manager:

"They're very bad..... Well, the manager you just met [names manager] *I don't think he has any WLB, he just works and that's it. Lives to work. He's incredible, I don't know how he does it"* D 1

Practice and Take-Up of WLB

Interviewees were asked to describe the workplace response to work-life balance take up (e.g. of parental leave or job sharing) and, more specifically, whether there was any kind of penalty for those who avail. Opinions varied on this, some were very positive:

"*I think it's very open and positive in terms of supporting staff who wish to apply for the different options around WLB*" C 1

While others reflected their views that WLB was a personal affair that it had no real relevance to their HR role since what staff did outside of the workplace was their own personal business:

"*I wouldn't believe the* [organisation] *would have any attitude I don't think that what I do outside of these four walls or outside of my 9 to 5 makes much of a difference to the majority of the people*..." A 2

One HR Manager acknowledged that attitudes could vary depending upon the staff seeking a WLB arrangement:

"*... I would think we have a fairly positive attitude to WLB, we tend to facilitate people, we may not be all that formal in terms of our structures, although we are getting a bit more formal, but I think we tend to be facilitative... I think it probably depends on who's going to avail of it*". D 1

Another interviewee was more conscious of the negative impact of WLB not only on those who availed but also on their colleagues who take responsibility for their workload:

"*Types of penalty? I would say for those who take up the scheme, I suspect that they put career progression, or a lot of people put career progression, on hold or defer it for a couple of years, although that's not always the case but that's an impression I have, but there may also be a reported penalty, if you like, for those who remain on full-time working saying, or reporting to us, that they find themselves carrying a heavier work load and a heavier level of responsibility if it is a case that a lot of their colleagues are on reduced working hours arrangements*". C 1

One HR Director demonstrated how he combined a more responsive/proactive approach to WLB, from the top-down, citing his own need for flexibility along with that of a member of staff:

"..... even if you do [have to work fixed hours]*, not everyone has to work their fixed hours at the same time. So you can have somebody on duty. This is your day to work from nine to five. My day is Tuesday. Otherwise, I can work 8 to 4. We have one girl who just came in on a contract from eight to four and it didn't work for her because from wherever she was leaving she was spending two hours in traffic, but she found that if she left at half nine she got here in 20 minutes, so she's now on half nine to half five. There's no problem changing it"* A 1

Informal versus Formal Arrangements

Aware that organisations have traditionally relied on informal flexibility, such as 'time off in lieu', HR Mangers were asked about their preference for formal versus informal WLB arrangements. In a manufacturing environment, it was recognised that shift/cycle time is important for production:

"Well depends on where we are in the organization. On the operational side, I would say production and logistics have very formal arrangements. Now there may be exceptions to that, some informal, where an individual might need some time for something and the boss will say 'It's okay'. But there would be very clear start and finish times. It's very very formal.... Elsewhere when you get into the professional business side of things it's less formal" A 2

Recognising the important and spontaneous nature of informal arrangements, one HR Director believed that they could only work in limited circumstances, after which formal procedures would have to apply:

"My view would be that you can have a one-off informal arrangements. But you can't let it get out of hand.....If you are going to have a continuous arrangement, I'd want it formalized" A 1

At a pragmatic level, this manager gave an example of responding appropriately to a clearly critical need, by a member of staff:

"I see them [formal versus informal] *as a continuum. I don't really prefer one or the other..... I had a situation there where one of my managers...*[had] *issues about minding elderly people last summer, and we came to a proper arrangement with her, where we didn't take any money off her at all, but we were extremely flexible throughout the summer with her as to how she managed her summer. Even though she was looking for a formal arrangement, I felt that her contribution over the years had been such that it would have been mean to put her on a formal arrangement where an informal arrangement wasn't going to cost the company any money and from a selfish point of view I would get it back in spades through loyalty and goodwill and all that"* A 1

The main characteristic of this approach is that it does not establish any precedent. So, for the individual manager, there is no risk of other people seeking a similar accommodation. However, it also means that obtaining flexible working can be at the whim/grace and favour of an individual manager.

Senior Management Leading by (Lack of) Example

Managers were asked to describe the level of work-life balance by themselves and managers above/below them. The general feeling was that work-life balance has more to do with private lives than working lives. As such, other people's work-life balance was for the most part none of their business. *"I think that they keep to themselves when it comes to their personal lives."* C1

When asked if there was a general push to have work-life balance by their peers, the manager went on to say: "I *would say that they subscribe to it, but not necessarily practice it – some do*." C 1

One Group HR Director felt that senior management have been constrained to conform to 'presenteeism':

"I think certainly three or four years ago there would of been a feeling that as a senior management you had to be here. And you had to be working all hours and had to be working right through your career on a continuous basis in order to make your way up the ladder. And if you showed any weakness in that regard then you are off the rails they would say" B 1

However, this was not the case in all organsiations. Another Group HR Director had been able to demonstrate that an alternative model is possible:

".....Wednesday I work from home so that means I have a study with an office in the house and actually use it. And I log into the office for my e-mail and all my papers… [which are] *kept on the network so there are pieces of work that I do on that day. And because of the level that I'm at, a bit confidential stuff, I feel that bit more comfortable working on them* [at home]*, and the huge advantage is I don't get a knock on the door"* A 1

Not all managers had such role models and there was an implicit assumption that senior management behaviour could not be ignored:

"We have a new boss, about eight months now, and his style is very much eight to six. You can see that he's very much here as well.....I would say now that people are very conscious of his presence" A 2

Working outside the traditional 'presenteeism' system remains the exception among senior managers and was more common among women located in the female dominated sectors of the business. The exception to this was tele-working, a few senior male managers would work from home on a limited bases. Referring to this gendered take-up of WLB options, one HR Director commented:

"..... We haven't really got any high profile men yet say working half-time or three days a week or that kind of thing. That hasn't come forward yet, which is probably as much a societal thing as anything else, as of yet, but it would be great if we had" B 1

One HR Manager noted that take-up tended to be at the administrative or lower grades:

"*My impression is that there is a significant uptake or a substantial uptake on the reduced working hours for* [refers to specific posts] *levels and in the admin stream as well, less so in the lower professional occupational group] stream and* [higher level professional group] *that we employ....Managers, no, probably a lot of managers have made the choice and have opted for their career progression, so they by and large don't*" C 1

WLB as a Divisive Issue

Managers' views were sought on whether they thought that having staff availing of work-life balance arrangements made it unfair to others who did not. This issue arose in the 'Off the Treadmill' report confirming the pattern noted in the international literature (Drew *et al.*, 2003). The interviewees referred to problems of availability and the negative impact that take-up or lack of availability could have on other staff. The main issue was around the level and position held by the applicant:

"*I think it probably depends on who's going to avail of it, I mean it's that simple, because, say it's a key employee and somebody who's very difficult to replace, because remember we're a service based organisation, say* [refers to professional grade] *decides to take work-share, that's going to be a major problem, but say your caretaker or general operative might take work-share, that might not be as big a problem for you, it just depends I think. Managers sometimes tend to see it as a bit of a headache"* D 1

When asked if such polices could lead to resentment, one manager reported: "*It must do, it must do to some extent, some individuals who might want something but are being refused because of where they are ..... If somebody really wanted something bad enough and really needed it I'd be surprised if we didn't find a way of either transferring them to somewhere where they could avail of it or do it over time, or something. The place tends to be quite paternalistic, quite good that way. I would say."* B 1

"It might be perceived as unfair, when I have a request, when a Director comes to me and asks what should we do with this individual they're looking for something. I'd say let's look at that particular case, we must look at these case-by-case...." A 2

Managers across all sectors report that, in most cases, when a person is granted some type of accommodation, no replacement or adjustment is made. This results in a shift of work onto the staff remaining in the department. Managers often report that this increased workload more often than not falls to them. This is a reported cause for resentment to WLB accommodations within a department.

"Yes, they can be so absolutely, especially if they're constructed without consultation, without everybody that is involved concerned, it can be seen as very unfair. One of the key areas that comes out as unfair is maternity leave. Even though it's not considered work-life balance, because it's statutory.....The costs now are too high and so what's left is three or four people in the department to pick up. So if you have three people pregnant one after another in a department where they can't be replaced..... People can get very resentful, very unhappy about it" A 1

"*I think there is a perceived unfairness on those who aren't accessing the reduced working hours and they feel they carry a heavier burden of responsibility…..That perception is out there, in some cases it has been reported to us*" C 1

WLB Needs Across Different Categories of Employees

Each of the managers interviewed were asked if there were differences among employees in terms of their work-life balance needs.

<u>Managers versus staff</u>

Managers stated that there was a recognised difference:
"*I think so. Yes, I agree there are. It's to do with the choice the managers have made in terms of commitment to career progression, so I think their need is less because in a lot of instances they have organised their lives such that the commitments is to their work, more so than other people do.....and it's a question of staying on top of the job, and I suppose it's the control element of management of being in control of the particular job and what's going on in their job, so they tend to commit more time to it*" C 1

Responses to a specific question about the take up of parental leave also illustrated how managers regarded themselves as 'different' despite the fact that they are the role models for staff. While most managers acknowledged that parental leave was now a normal practice: "*Oh, there's good take up on parental leave*" C 1 when asked whether managers also availed the response was quite different:

"*Amongst managers? Some, but there's…in my mind and I can't say that I've seen a lot of managers looking for parental leave, no*" C 1

<u>Carers versus Non- Carers</u>

In order to ascertain whether work-life balance measures are associated specifically with the needs of carers (and by implication for women rather than men) managers were asked if there would be differences between the needs of parents and non-parents, or carers and non-carers. The responses confirmed the expectation that WLB is for parents and employees who are caring for others:

"*Yes. I think the non-carers and the non-parents don't draw down on WLB policies the same way as the parents and the carers do. I suppose it's just a need, their needs may not be the same, so yes, I do see them as seeing themselves as having a different need*" C 1

"*I know individuals, two males, one in sales, one in marketing, seeking their parental leave rights. We will deliver on it but before you never saw it and I think what's driving it a lot is our economy. When we don't need every penny that we earn, it's not money it's time that's the bigger factor now, so guys are prepared to give up a days work*" A 2

"*...without doubt I'd be very loathe to not implement family-friendly policies. So my own personal leaning would probably be towards if a man or a woman needed time because of children or childrearing. I'd probably be more inclined toward them*" B 1

<u>Men versus Women</u>

Managers' views were sought on whether WLB was equally appropriate for men and women. The responses indicate deeply held beliefs about gender roles in society that spill over into their workplace and suggest that women need to be treated differently from men when it comes to WLB.

"*Yes, I think there are different needs....I think they* [women] *wear their hearts on their sleeves in relation to their personal circumstances and so on*" A 2

"I know that there's a particular pocket in the organization, where there's quite a few more females in their childbearing age and it is causing difficulty....I don't think the recruiter could make himself ignore the point. I think it would influence them. It would have to be the back of his head" A 2

"Yes, I do, biologically they're different. So, women have children, without doubt. There are times in women's lives, where inevitably they must be missing. So I suppose then, recognising that we should, the company should try and make it as easy as possible for women to continue and work, if that's what they want to do, in as seamless a way as possible and in whatever time they feel is appropriate to them. So we have things here like breast-feeding room, and you know, if a woman wants to work right up to the time of her [baby's] *birth and wants to get back to work quickly, that can be done. We facilitate more time, if that's needed, in the crèche"* B 1

Key Issues

Despite the diversity of organisations selected (public/private, manufacturing/utility/service) there are some consistent views and attitudes that arose in interviews across all sectors/managers. Perhaps the greatest issue to arise was the existence of a culture that runs counter to attempts to achieve WLB in the form of: 'long hours' and, its corollary, presenteeism. The study shows that these work patterns are not conducive to WLB – not just for parents of young children but for all employees. In such a climate seeking WLB arrangements e.g. working from home/reduced hours/flexitime are not seen as compatible with holding management posts.

There is a paucity of role models willing to display any contrary behaviour and a fear of alternative working patterns. The research points to a genuine concern about the transition to a WLB culture in terms of: demonstrating, by example, how it might work; overcoming the fear of the abyss; and providing assistance for managers (and their staff) who seek to avail of alternative working patterns. There is abundant evidence that policies supporting WLB are not enough *in themselves* to ensure take-up and acceptance. It will require trust and courage to champion work-life balance, not just at management level.

This is summed up neatly by one HR Director:

"I think the magic word is control. If you can give as much control as you can to the individual, particularly in management positions, the more they respond to that. A very small number of people will abuse that, but you quickly find out who they are, because not only do they abuse time, but they abuse work and they don't do it, but a good worker always produces the goods" hence:

"I think that you should always give trust first. There's no reason, I never found any situation where people let me down. They never let you down, they let themselves down, and again it becomes really obvious. If you're an incompetent manager, if you're not doing it, it doesn't get done " A 1

Furthermore, WLB has tended to be highly gendered and this needs to be addressed. As one HR Director noted:

"If anything was to be done it could be in the area of promoting the policies more to men and maybe setting up, as you talked about it, champions or good examples, role models, but I'm not convinced that that would overcome the influence of the cultural norms which you see as being part and parcel of societal norms" C 1

The final section sets out some of the recommended strategies that might be adopted by organizations.

Strategies to Promote Life Work Balance in Irish Organisations

🞣 Establish and Disseminate Good Practice

A clear message that emerges from the interviews with managers is the need for leadership from the top HR Directors/Manager demonstrating the acceptance of WLB, without penalty, for all employees *including senior managers*. Campaigns promoting WLB are needed to remove the prevailing negative perceptions.

Review WLB Policies and Practice

It is evident from this research that organisations have a range of WLB working practices available to staff. However it is clear that staff not only need to be aware of *what* is available but also *how to avail* of these accommodations This may require a more aggressive marketing of current WLB arrangements accompanied by a review and extension of existing options e.g. to cover term-time working and a form of flexitime at higher levels. In particular WLB needs to be marketed in a gender neutral way that will appeal to men as well as women.

It might also be useful to provide *confidential* one-to-one advice to prospective WLB participants to explore, for example, pension implications, after-tax earnings and similar issues relating to existing, and proposed, WLB options. A good practice example is the 'Tipping the Scales' booklet produced by the EQUAL Project which includes a staff questionnaire and worked/costed examples of take home pay after availing of flexible options. Organisations should be encouraged to conduct surveys of their employees to ascertain their actual and/or potential demand for WLB arrangements.

Challenge the Prevalence of Long Hours

There is evidence that the working hours of many managers are in excess of those permitted under the *EU Working Hours Directive* that. Even if not all managers are covered by this legal instrument, it is desirable to secure compliance on grounds of: role model behaviour; productivity; health and safety; and for societal/ethical reasons.

Mechanisms to address this would include:

- Reduce the number of, and time allotted to, meetings;

- Schedule meetings to be conducted within core hours (e.g. 9.00 to 12.30 and 2.00 to 5.00);

- Make some days meeting-free days to facilitate managers/staff who work from home/or part-time;

- Pilot working from home/compressed hours;

- Make time off in lieu available to employees including managers.

🞣 Ensure Appropriate Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

Information and Communication Technologies can facilitate working from home but they can also add to managers' workloads and stress levels. Hence the need for a Code of Conduct/Guidelines to try to eliminate intrusive and excessive use of ICT through:

- Compressed emailing lists – for only those who need to be consulted

- Limits on contacting staff outside office hours on land line and mobile phones.

More positively organisations could pilot flexiplace/teleworking by providing Broadband/work stations for employees to use in their homes, with the clear message that this should not be used to lengthen the working day.

🞣 Provide Training Programmes to Support WLB

Assistance and support is needed to guide staff and management, within organisations, in the direction of WLB. This needs to be organisation wide rather than targeted at specific grades. The kinds of training envisaged are:

- Conducting Meetings – chairing, time keeping, setting and keeping to a tight agenda;

- Management of WLB (building upon the EQUAL Project Model);

- Time Management;

- Parenting (including fathering) skills/child development;

- Stress Management.

🞣 Create a Organisational and National Culture of WLB

Most of the managers who participated in this study supported the need for a culture change that departs from the prevailing reliance on 'presenteeism' to one which places an emphasis on performance results/outcomes. This has to be pursued at a strategic level and permeate within and across organisations. The message has to encompass social/family and quality of life considerations for men and women employees.

The role of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions is vital to promoting and endorsing WLB through Partnership at an institutional and national level.

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