



WLB policies, practices and discourse in the
context of public sector cuts

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How has the financial crisis affected the WLB agenda in the public sector ?

Austerity measures in the UK public sector may

- Pose threats to employer support for WLB, or
- Be a lever for change in WLB practices to help manage budget cuts

- Institutional pressures
(societal norms and values, public visibility,
female dominated workforce, legislation)
- Economic pressures

WLB policies, practices and discourses

What organizations say and do in relation to WLB
in organizations and how they say it

(Focus on benefits to employees and/or employers?)

Research questions

- Are WLB policies, practices and discourses considered to be sufficiently entrenched in the UK public sector to withstand austerity cuts?
- Can established WLB practices and discourses help organizations to manage economic pressures arising from the public sector cuts and if so, how how?

Method

- 26 telephone interviews with senior HR professionals in public sector organizations
- 12 local councils, 5 universities, 3 NHS trusts, 3 police forces, 1 fire service, 1 regional government office, and 1 research council

Semi structured interview protocol

- when and why actual WLB policies were adopted
- how WLB is discussed in their organization
- how the policies are implemented in practice and any perceived constraints on this
- recent changes in policies and practices
- present budgetary cuts within the organisation and further plans for the future
- impacts of the budgetary cuts

Is the WLB agenda embedded and resilient?

- WLB policies stable at this point but practices and discourses changing
- Conflicting views on embeddedness of the WLB agenda

- *I wouldn't say that there's any current dialogue going on about work-life balance because I think flexible working and work life-balance is very much embedded in our culture here so we have all the policies to support it.it's just an ongoing part of our culture. (University 4)*
- *my concern is the extent to which managers who are under pressure to make cost reductions, but... sustain services, may start to see some of these things as 'nice to have' and therefore, possibly, can no longer afford, rather than at the core of what we offer as an employer.. (Council 3)*

Is WLB used to manage budget cuts?

- Active promotion of traditional WLB policies
- Evolved practices- strategic, employer led (combinations of remote working, hot-desking, and use of technology, alongside job analysis and redesign -“agile”, “lean” or “smart” ways of working). Saving on estates and utility costs.
- Shift from policies available if employees **requesting** them, to employers **encouraging** or even **requiring** new ways of working.

Evolving WLB discourses- how changes in practice are discussed.

- Evolution from focus on employee needs and compliance with legislation to more proactive, strategic approach
- WLB discourses of mutual flexibility and benefit
- But discussions increasingly focuses on employer benefits

HR professionals discuss *how* evolving practices help manage budget cuts

- Efficiency focus
- *we've now got a big agenda ,,extending flexible working looking at our buildings, how can we work more efficiently, effectively, reducing travelling time, faster ways of working, providing more IT so that people can work flexibly and having all that technology and things available. ... it is about ..making sure that we work better and faster, you know more cost-effective, and flexible working certainly does play a part in that. (Council 2)*
- Sustainability of jobs focus

Participants also had critical reflections

- **Critical reflections on financial benefits**

we are still seeing hesitation in staff at times feeling open to be able to request modifications to their working patternsI do think staff in the current climate are concerned about protecting their jobs and concerned about making themselves more vulnerable than they already are. (University 1)

The only thing [that helps with the cuts] is the mobile working....one of the benefits to us was enabling people to work more flexibly and improve their work-life balance. (Council 9)

Evolved WLB practices: mutual benefit or a step too far?

- All participants agreed that changes in working patterns needed to happen, and that the WLB agenda and the cuts had provided an impetus for change
- But there was some concern that the evolution of WLB practices may have gone too far for some employees, their families and for service provision.

(We are) seeking to squeeze more out of a smaller resource base, and whilst I'm sure managers have considered the implications for the staff who remain and the impact of trying to spread work across a smaller number of people, I think they've been under quite a lot of pressure themselves to achieve savings targets, and to continue to deliver services of the same number and the same quality but with fewer staff. (Council 3)

- A familiar dilemma but what is the role of WLB practices and discourses in this?

Conclusion and some issues

- Experience of and investment in infrastructure to support flexibility/WLB proves useful in difficult economic times

But

- The meaning of the term WLB has been “shrunk”, to include less focus on individual needs and notions of choice, “extended” to incorporate sustaining jobs by encouraging more people to work less, and redefined so as to meet the new goals of employer financial benefits during economic crisis.
- There can be mutual benefits, but at what point do practices designed to address austerity/economic crisis cease to be about WLB?