

**Seminar 3: Employment relations and workplace initiatives,
University of Warwick: July 10th 2014**

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In the third seminar, we considered the role of employment relations and workplace initiatives in seeking solutions to the “triple agenda”: how to enhance employees’ Work-Life Balance (WLB), organisational effectiveness and social justice. Three papers were presented, one providing an overview of new research from the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS) and two presenting more detailed sectoral research focusing on a) WLB among civil servants, and b) trade union interventions in WLB, with a specific focus on the grocery and print media sectors. Two discussants also added to the debate and stimulated a lively discussion within the breakout session at the end of the seminar. A common theme running through the day was that, with a reduction in available resources and a corresponding increase in work intensification, WLB has been adversely affected by the recession. With this in mind, what is the current role for unions in WLB discussions and debates?

1. AUSTERITY AND THE END OF THE MODEL EMPLOYER MYTH: THE CASE OF CIVIL SERVANTS AND WORK LIFE BALANCE, Dr Steve French, Keele University.

Dr. French’s paper provided an in-depth investigation of the workloads and work-life (im)balance of union members working in Government Departments and Executive Agencies and Non Departmental Governmental Bodies, against a traditional perception of the State as a “model employer”. Of direct relevance to this seminar series, it has been argued that prior to the financial crisis, and under the new Labour administrations, the workloads and WLB of civil servants were subject to contradictory trajectories: 1) the need to address productivity through the twin pillars of modernisation and restructuring employment and 2) the aspirations to secure progressive family-friendly policies in line with the ‘model employer’ concept. However, following the onset of the financial crisis and the change in government, Dr. French argues that the State has used the civil service as a test-bed for establishing new model minimal employment terms, notably through the Cabinet Office proposals to secure detrimental changes to terms and conditions in the areas of sick leave, working hours and reduced entitlements to special leave and career breaks, reinforced by the tightening up of performance management systems.

Dr. French’s research is based upon the findings of a web-based survey of members of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS), looking at control over workloads and WLB, as well as an assessment of the potential impact of the changes outlined in the Cabinet Office proposals. The research was conducted between August and September 2013, at a time when austerity measures had already been in place for several years. In total, 4,880 civil servants participated in the survey. The results

were also compared with the findings of a smaller survey of PCS members in 2006, using a number of matched questions.

The (initial) interpretation of the findings highlight:

- increased working hours and commuting time, lengthening the working day for members;
- workload intensification driven by reduced staffing, new working practices and performance management;
- significant levels of workplace stress and sick leave levels;
- limited access to and usefulness of policies designed to promote WLB.

Analysis of disaggregated data also suggests that members who are disabled, members of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities and those with caring responsibilities for adult relatives are disproportionately affected negatively by current working hours patterns, workload levels and performance management, and find it particularly difficult to maintain a WLB. Local bargaining could be a factor in explaining some of the differences found between the various bodies within the civil service. For example, those who work in non-department bodies such as the heritage sector seem to report fewer problems than others.

In a Q&A session, Dr French argued that there has been a slight increase in the use of WLB policies but that, in line with other findings from WLB researchers, availability of policies seems to be restricted and employees can be reluctant to ask for them as they do not want to be refused again (i.e., there is the paradox of policies existing, but not being accessible to some). The amount of paid overtime has fallen and also the amount of overtime being offered is being reduced, suggesting that longer hours are not being matched by higher earnings. When asked about part-time workers in particular, Dr. French pointed out that although part-time workers were under-represented in his sample, the findings indicate that life satisfaction increases but career satisfaction may be lower. Part-time workers were less affected by workload pressures.

2. DISCUSSANT, Sally Brett, Senior Equality Policy Officer at the TUC

Sally Brett considered Dr. French's work to be a welcome piece of research and a few points were particularly highlighted, drawing on other available evidence. In times of austerity it is evident that flexibility is being affected; for example, in the Police Forces in the Midlands, all working practices are currently being reviewed, with a view to introducing flexible working arrangements. As pointed out by Dr. French, the Civil Service has historically been seen as a model employer: the government (i.e., the Civil Service) should be setting an example, yet repeated governments have stated that only so much flexibility can be legislated for. With regard to bargaining, it is much harder to make progress on equality, even at a time when the government emphasizes its importance. There are certainly signals from both government and the private sector that WLB is not so important in the current climate and that the emphasis is instead on productivity and profit. For example, there had been agreement that the Civil Service would lead the way on repealing the 26 requirement but a private sector review highlighted that the CS was doing no more

than private sector standard practice, thus overturning the idea that the CS was leading the way on issues such as WLB.

The flexible working agenda has clearly moved on, with more employers having increased WLB policies, but there is a concern that they have lost sight of the individual employee within this development. It is hard to address the WLB agenda when predictability and security are such key issues. There has been an increase in involuntary part-time work: people cannot make a living as they cannot get enough hours of work and are on precarious contracts. Zero hours contracts were particularly criticized.

For some, however, the reality is excessive working hours and so it is important to get back to thinking of control and regulation as key issues within this debate. There has been a big focus on women who are primary carers and single parents but at the same time, the debate has lost sight of the fact that children also have fathers. On a positive note, increasing numbers of men are taking on the role of equality rep. Anecdotally, however, there are stories of separated fathers fighting not to be on rotating shift patterns and then ending up with the wrong weekend for access to their children.

In a Q&A session, a delegate suggested that MPs tend to concentrate on the middle class as this is often linked to their own experience. It might be necessary to consider the North/South divide and also to expand research to focus on older workers or younger workers. Certainly phased retirement is a big issue although paradoxically this has been cut. Ms Brett responded that further anecdotal evidence from unions suggests that employees do not take up the option of phased retirement. Instead, people have been leaving work earlier than they may have preferred to, primarily because of work intensification and increased pressure.

There is a further debate within the unions about whether WLB is being viewed as a universal right: there is concern/fear from what the unions are observing in many workplaces that because of political messaging, employers are rolling back on the provision of FWAs. WERS data suggests that organizations are saying that work and family life are not employer issues, but are instead about individual responsibilities.

Ms Brett also argued that we need to change the way we look at work as there is not a limit on the “amount” of flexibility we can have. Employers fear the possibility of opening the floodgates but this does not seem to materialise. Certainly, collaboration and negotiation within work teams would benefit everyone.

Dr French’s presentation highlights the private/public sector divide. Also, many people get intrinsic satisfaction from their work and this should not be ignored. The issue of pushing for more information on WLB among the 18-30 age group was raised as a possible future avenue for research.

3. CHANGES IN WORK LIFE BALANCE AND OTHER ASPECTS OF JOB QUALITY: FINDINGS FROM THE 2011 WORKPLACE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS STUDY, Lucy Stokes, NIESR, UK.

WERS is an independent national survey sent to all employers with five or more employees. There are three sources of information in each organization: managers, employee representatives and employees themselves. The 2011 survey was the 6th version of the questionnaire which was first issued in 1980 and Ms Stokes presented new findings to highlight recession-led changes in WLB and job quality.

One of the first issues of note was how workplaces have been affected by recession: findings showed that there has been an adverse impact and results were broken down by industry sector. Managers were asked about actions taken as a result of the recession and there was an increased number saying that balancing work and family is up to individuals, rather than employers.

Employees reported increased workload as a direct consequence of the recession with 28% reporting an increase in work intensity. Although there was an increase in the number of employees who say they work hard, there was no change in the number being able to get the work completed. A new question was introduced in 2011 about the need to put in longer hours if individuals wish to progress in their careers and the discussion questioned if this is part of a wider phenomenon. Job control has increased in all aspects in both public and private sectors. In contrast, job security fell in 2011, and more especially in the public sector.

There has been little change in the use of part-time work in both public and private sectors. Other forms of flexible working arrangements (FWAs) present a more mixed picture, with the prevalence of some having fallen, whereas the use of others has increased. In exploring availability and usefulness, the survey highlighted a lack of clarity for employees regarding the availability of specific arrangements, e.g., paid emergency leave.

A new question on work-life conflict showed that some employees find it difficult to fulfil commitments outside of work. This finding is more likely for those with children, with qualifications in higher education, and for those in transport, education or hotel/hospitality industry sectors. Most employers took some action in this area but there were reports of declining job quality, increasing work intensity but also increased autonomy.

4. TRADE UNION INTERVENTIONS IN WLB, Dr Mike Rigby, London South Bank University.

Dr Rigby's paper focused initially upon how work-life issues have received increasing attention but successful action has sometimes been slow to develop and there has often been a failure to translate policies into take-up. Trade union intervention might be expected to help resolve these problems but evidence on their role has so far been limited. This research, based on empirical data derived from interviews with union representatives in the retail and media sectors, considered union engagement with WLB issues and their intervention strategies. It located their approach against

general discourses on work-life issues, union strategy, and agile working. In both sectors there were important limits to a mutual gains approach. The paper reported on research done in 2006/2007: although the data is pre-recession, the print media were already in recession when the work began.

Print media findings show that there are two groups of jobs within the sector (journalists and sub-editors) who report work-life approaches differently. Sub-editors reported work-life issues with working hours, whereas the journalists focused more on a lack of autonomy and the inability to control hours. The biggest issue was the push to maintain staffing levels, especially in sub-editor roles.

In contrast, the grocery sector had a different approach, with evidence of the desire to offer and use flexibility. This is a low paid sector so work-life issues can be highlighted because of the possibility of mutual gain for employer and employee.

Dr Rigby commented that the use of the term “agile working” is significant and marks a shift in attitude by employers. This is often employer-driven, using such means as closing down office space to save money. In this way, employers are using a WLB discourse to justify employer-driven flexibility. There is some work being done at the University of Sydney exploring employer-driven initiatives and challenging assumptions. For instance, we tend to assume that working from home is good for the individual, but it is important to examine who benefits and how. These findings reflect the work reported in Seminar 1 by Professor Lewis and colleagues.

DISCUSSANT, Professor John Purcell, Deputy Chairman of the Central Arbitration Committee.

Professor Purcell raised some of the interesting changes that have emerged, particularly from WERS data. For instance, the need to work hard has increased and yet this is not because the number of those who have control over their jobs is growing. Has the content of jobs changed, or is the perception of “doing a good job” now different? What is flexibility and who benefits – is it the employer or the individual or both? The number of employees who are job-sharing has declined and this is an example of having to debate what flexibility really means.

Other questions which still need to be addressed include: What are the results of the analysis of flexibility and workload, compared with individual views of commitment, conflict, and relationships with managers? What is the extent to which employees think they can influence work? Further work could examine links between commitment and business outcomes, or address connections with stress.

A major challenge for unions is that in the past there has been one major bargaining focus, whereas now in the UK there are over 250: as a result, the unions are suffering from fragmentation in contrast with the Netherlands, France and Germany where sectoral bargaining still exists.

It is important for researchers not to get drawn into an emphasis on the business case when considering the sustainability of WLB. Greater WLB of individuals does not have to improve organizational performance; there is the potential for more work on the complexity of the discourse of WLB.

Summary of key points from the breakout session:

Group 1:

This group focused primarily on personal experiences in various workplaces where employees feel vulnerable and insecure in the current economic climate. It was noted that HR and line managers do not always fully embrace WLB policies and practices, particularly in the austerity context, and that some line managers are actively hostile to flexible working arrangements, despite growing workloads.

Ideas and discussion about what can be done about the negative effects of workloads, extended working hours and resistance to flexible working, and suggestions for capitalising on the positive messages, focused largely on the role of unions and HR in this group:

Raise awareness among employers and employees:

More needs to be done to raise employer awareness about the organizational benefits of flexible working and about the negative impacts of lack of flexibility, long hours and intense workloads on employees and workplaces. An example was given of a valued employee who had left her former job because of her manager's refusal to allow her to make slight changes to her starting and finishing times to adjust to train times. Union reps can ensure that such occurrences are highly publicised in the organization and beyond, and that the costs of such manager intransigence to the organization are recognised.

Awareness-raising should also include raising employee awareness of their rights and attempts to increase transparency. Working reduced hours without a reduction in workload should not be regarded as a "favour" as it benefits the employer. A critical discussion of questions raised in this seminar such as: 'flexibility for whom?' and 'what does agile working really mean?' can help to raise awareness.

Collective approaches and the role of unions:

It was felt that there is a need to move on from the individualistic approach embodied in the Right to Request towards a more collective approach. The group discussed the role of unions in countering negative effects on working conditions. Unions have an important role in encouraging a collective approach to these issues by negotiating working conditions and also by empowering employees to feel confident in asking to work in ways that suit their needs. Nevertheless, one view in the group was that while the unions play a vital role in supporting individuals and teams, there remains a need for "policing" the enforcement of regulations and policies.

It was felt that the growing public sector concern about the wider impacts of austerity - manifested in a public sector strike held on the day of the seminar - would raise confidence to discuss workplace issues relating to WLB and wellbeing.

Team approaches including self-managing teams:

Empowering employees involves moving the focus onto teams rather than individuals. An example was provided of an employee who was offered flexibility by her manager but was concerned about what her team would think if she reduced her hours. She was told to go back to the team and discuss it with them. A collectivist and collaborative approach would involve teams discussing working patterns with each other and with their manager to take the focus away from individuals:

- Encourage autonomy at the team level.
- Self-managing teams can build in collaboration and flexibility.
- Communicate examples of successful self-managing or self-rostering teams.

Aim for systemic change: “shaking not stirring:”

Policies and practices should be shaken and not just stirred. That is, there is a need for a more radical approach which would look beyond tweaking WLB policies to rethinking all policies and working practices and particularly workplace cultures that underpin the negative outcomes of austerity for employees and organizations.

Challenge assumptions by encouraging effective practices and communicating the positives:

Systemic change will involve challenging counter-productive assumptions wherever possible; for example, the assumption that employees who work from home are not really working or committed or that requests to work from home are “favours”. Unions and HR, as well as policy makers, can help to challenge these notions by identifying and communicating examples of effective practices and outcomes. This might include, for example, evidence of enhanced or at least sustained productivity, commitment and satisfaction among home-based workers. Attention can also be drawn to the fact that some organisations are actively promoting remote work in order to manage austerity by saving money on estates and running costs. Learning from experience of the positives as well as the negatives (e.g., employee stress associated with over-work) is important.

Encourage and empower men to make WLB needs visible:

Policies that challenge assumptions that WLB is a women’s issue and that, for example, fathers do not or should not need flexibility or time for family are crucial for changing norms on working patterns and workloads. Men at all levels taking leaves and making time for family can be powerful role models and contribute to gradual changes in norms.

Group 2:

Kitemarking to recognise good practice:

This group had a wide ranging discussion which began with a suggestion to introduce a kitemark/standard along the lines of Investors in People to encourage best practice in WLB. There is a new gender equality kitemark for arts and social sciences (within

Warwick University) and this may also be a way to move organizations towards a greater focus on WLB. Could a kitemark also be a condition for public sector contracts? However, there may be “kitemark fatigue” and there was also concern that it may conflict with the business case. How can we move away from the business case?

Union interventions and support for WLB:

In the recession, unions have reported that people have “kept their heads down”. What can be done to better understand the negative effects of increasing workloads, as there is a direct and adverse impact on employers when people leave? There could be more emphasis on the importance of open and transparent exit interviews to gain a better understanding of why people leave, in relation to missed WLB opportunities. The group noted that the increase in legal fees for employment tribunals has resulted in fewer cases being brought, meaning that people are leaving organizations and not protesting. Recruitment and retention arguments need to be made in the context of talent management costs.

It is more difficult for unions to get involved as WLB is currently seen as an individual rather than a collective issue. How can unions support individuals in their quest for WLB? It might be useful to get unions more involved in drafting policy in this area.

Employer-driven focus during recession – WLB less important:

Typically, company decisions are made at departmental level and so depend on the skill levels of individual managers, thus being almost completely devolved from overall organizational view. Work is constantly changing for many people so WLB has become more salient for individuals; however, this is not recognized by many employers.

Concerns were raised about employer-driven flexibility when changes may be imposed on individuals, with the discourse packaging employer interests as flexibility. Boundaries between home and work have become increasingly blurred and this may be unsustainable. Do we need a more paternalistic approach from employers who control time? How do client needs and demands fit in to this debate?

The male breadwinner model is still strong and should not be underestimated as it sustains traditional cultures within many workplaces. However, it was noted that this sits within the ‘ideal worker’ model, acknowledging increasing numbers of senior women who have stay-at-home husbands – both are exacerbated by long hours cultures (it was noted that the UK opt out of the European Working Time Directive persists).

A discussion arose about the need for organizations to have a better grasp of the benefits of improved WLB for their employees. How can this be portrayed in a way that does not directly address the business case? The well-being agenda has largely displaced WLB, with the risk that it has therefore become entirely individuals’ responsibility, rather than a work-related quality of life issue. This shift to well-being

has been accompanied by a greater focus on corporate responsibility and sustainability. The value-driven third sector provides a good example of the paradox or disconnect between practice and policy. It is important that this improves because the private sector is increasingly replacing the public sector in service provision.

Group 3:

This group picked up on the public sector strike being held that day and political lobbying around the topic. As a major employer, the UK government should demonstrate adherence to high standards.

Managerial competencies and responsibilities are key aspects of this discussion. How can you recruit, train and make managers good at doing their jobs? How can targets be used to encourage better practice and to include the topic in appraisals of line managers? Managers often push the business impact back to the individual by suggesting that it is an individual responsibility to assess the effects on the team. Perhaps managers should take back that responsibility.

In sum, the group discussions picked up on some of the key issues raised by the seminar speakers and provided examples of HR and union interventions which could provide a support system for individual employees, at a time when WLB has been slipping down the agenda for employers and is being seen more and more as an issue to be addressed by the individual, rather than by the organisation.