

Seminar summary: Work-life balance and well being in times of austerity. 17th July 2015

Summarised by Almuth McDowall and Roshni Shah

This seminar brought together a fascinating set of speakers to debate the topic of work-life balance and well being in times of austerity. It was hosted at the British Psychological Society's headquarters in Tabernacle Street. The hosts thank the Division of Occupational Psychology for their support. Due to well being issues the co-host Professor Gail Kinman could not attend on the day, but was with the delegates in spirit. The morning had a distinctly European flavour, whereas the afternoon focused on practical issues in organisations.

Almuth McDowall briefly summarised the backdrop to the seminar to start off, highlighting how the work-home interface can be a bigger concern to well being than 'just' issues arising from work pressures alone. Employers are increasingly recognising this, but putting effective interventions into place is another matter. Flexible working only reaps benefits where this is paired with control and choice. Managers have a key role to play, an issue to which the seminar returned in the afternoon.

Thorsten Lunau from the University of Düsseldorf opened the day to investigate if work life balance issues vary between countries, categorising countries by six types of welfare regimes using data from the 2010 European working conditions survey. The relevant measure focuses on time based conflict. The data are clear in that there is great variation by country; lowest rates of time based conflict are in Denmark and Norway, and highest rates in Latvia and Lithuania, for example. One explanation for this might be the influence of part time working, so work time policies appear to have an effect. The data also showed interesting gender variations. The audience recognised that people differ in what they term 'work-life balance', and whilst the data is interesting and robust, more differentiated measures of conflict might be helpful in future research. There was also discussion about more fine tuned categories of welfare regimes.

Rea Prouska presented qualitative data on work- life balance and quality of working life in Greece in times of financial crisis. This could not have been more topical at the time of the seminar. She took great care to explain the context with the financial crisis in Greece having a long history, and the highest unemployment rate in the EU, and high noncompliance rates with relevant legislation (e.g. protecting working parents). A strong theme coming out of this presentation was that professionals are not immune to work-life balance taking a hit, working long and unsociable hours, but also feeling that they can't provide the level of service needed, an example being doctors who lack basic equipment. Uncertainty also featured highly in the second stud. Rea reported on line managers who feel powerless to manage well in times of crisis. This led to a fruitful discussion of what managers can do when budgets and resources are scarce or abundant, but noted that in particular small businesses may lack knowledge.

Fran McGinnity and Helen Russell from the ESRI in Dublin presented data on gender, recession and work-life balance evidence from the European Social Survey. This raised very interesting questions with regard to the general merits and demerits of conducting survey research in the domain. It was clear that perceived job insecurity featured highly, but is a subjective concept and may or may not be directly linked to actual job losses. Surveys are good at showing broad trends, but perhaps less effective at capturing family factors.

Julia Fernando (who held the fort for her two co-presenters), Donna Willis and Michael West, all from the King's Fund, presented internal NHS data on staff well being. The presentation highlighted that funding pressures in the UK national health system will mean at least another five years of austerity. Presenteeism is a prominent feature in the NHS where staff work whilst sick. The data

presented from the national staff survey focused on 2009-14; data from exit interviews show that 5.5% of staff have left the NHS because of issues with WLB. Soberingly, trust goes down as expectation to work flexibly goes up, in particular unpaid extra hours. This is likely to become an even bigger issue with increased focus on targets. However, Professor West's research shows that good HR practice is key, and is linked to decreased patient mortality. Julia also referred to data from the Guardian funded #clockoff project. Respondents upload their photos which show very personal perspectives on work-life balance.

Last but not least, Emma Donaldson-Feilder and Rachel Lewis discussed the importance of supporting line managers to enhance employee well-being and work-life balance, drawing on their practice based research related to well-being and employee engagement. Emma showed her passion for WLB, highlighting that supervisor relationships are absolutely core, and that line manager support is key for implementation of supportive practices in an organisation. However, she also raised caveats, as overly transformational leadership may lead to burnout. She cautioned against just focusing on engagement which can cause burnout or just having good well-being but low engagement. Practice needs to bring the two together. She argued that managers should not be blamed. They need support themselves, and this needs to be facilitated through a range of methods. There were keen comments from the audience, including the specific issues that need addressing in remote and/ or self managing teams.

To close the day, we asked all delegates to reflect on what came out of the day's sessions. These are some of the core themes highlighted:

Underemployment and unemployment: we need more research on the effects of underemployment, and also how best to support those who come back into work, given that career breaks are still seen as such a blemish on CVs.

Gender: the audience reflected on many of the invisible barriers still present for women, such as flexible working seen as a sign of lacking commitment, or the necessity to attend 'extra work' activities to advance careers, which is harder for those with caring responsibilities.

Perspectives of large organisations: it can be harder to change strong and hierarchical cultures, where strong role modelling is key, and ways of working which support both the organisation and WLB. Managers and employees need training to look after their WLB and health.

The role of the manager: assumptions need to change, as promoting WLB should be an integral part of a managerial role. Work design and structure needs to be addressed from the recruitment stage, so that WLB is embedded into all aspects of work. The long hours culture was flagged as a wider issue; assumptions need to change as managers cannot effect change on their own.