

The Third Work-Life
Balance Employee Survey:
Executive summary

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Balance Employee
Survey: Executive
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- Conducting in-house research and analysis
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About this publication

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Glossary of abbreviations and acronyms

CATI	Computer-assisted telephone interviewing
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
FWES	Flexible Working Employee Survey
GHS	General Household Survey
IAER	Individual Awareness of Employment Rights
ICM	ICM Research
IES	Institute for Employment Studies
IFF	IFF Research Ltd
LFS	Labour Force Survey
MORI	MORI Ltd
RDD	Random Digit Dialling
SAP	Statutory Adoption Pay
SIC	Standard Industrial Classification
SMP	Statutory Maternity Pay
SOC	Standard Occupation Classification
SPP	Statutory Paternity Pay
TOIL	Time off in Lieu
TPS	Telephone Preference Service
TU	Trade Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WLB	Work Life Balance
WLB1	First Work-Life Balance Study
WLB2	Second Work-Life Balance Study
WLB3	Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey
WTR	Working Time Regulations

Glossary of terms

Annualised hours	Where the number of hours an employee has to work is calculated over a full year, eg instead of 40 hours a week, employees are contracted to work 1,900 hours per year (after allowing for leave and other entitlements).
Compressed	This means working full-time hours over a fewer number working week of days. For example, working a 40 hour week over four days, or working a nine-day fortnight. This is not the same as shift-working.
Flexitime	Where an employee can vary their start and finish times but have an agreement to work a set number of hours per week or per month. This may be informally or formally agreed.
Job-sharing	This is a type of part-time working where a full-time job is divided, usually between two people. The job sharers work at different times, although there may be a changeover period. Sharers each have their own contract of employment and share the pay and benefits of a full-time job on a pro rata basis.
Non-flexible worker	As one of the categories of 'flexible worker status', this is an employee who does not work (or has not done in the past 12 months) any of the eight flexible working arrangements.
Other	As one of the categories of 'flexible worker status', this is
flexible worker	an employee who works (or has done so in the past 12 months) one or more of the seven flexible working arrangements (excludes part-time working).
Part-time work	Defined for this survey as working less than 30 hours a week.
Part-time worker	As one of the categories of 'flexible worker status', this is an employee who works (or has done so in the past 12 months) on a part-time basis.
Reduced hours for a limited period	Where an employee has an agreement to cut their hours for a set period of time (eg a month, six months) and then return to their original working hours. This is sometimes known as V-time working.
Term-time	Where an employee works only during school term working times.
Working from hours. home	Where an employee works all, or some of, their working

Executive summary

The Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey, conducted in early 2006, found high levels of employee satisfaction and a significant increase in the availability of most flexible working arrangements since 2003. In all, 87 per cent of employees said they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their current working arrangements – up from 81 per cent in 2003.

Almost all employees (90 per cent) reported that at least one flexible working arrangement was available to them if they needed it – an increase from 85 per cent in 2003. The working arrangements most commonly available were part-time working, reduced hours for a limited period, and flexitime. The arrangements most commonly taken up by employees were flexitime, working from home, and part-time work. Unmet employee demand for all flexible working arrangements except term-time working has fallen since 2003.

Employees were very positive about their own flexible working experience, and more positive than negative about the flexible working arrangements of colleagues. Seventeen per cent of employees had made a request to change their working arrangements over the last two years.

The survey also found a high level of informal and short-term flexible working arrangements in British workplaces, with over half the workforce (56 per cent) saying that they had worked flexibly in the last 12 months.

Two-thirds of working parents with young children were aware of their right to request flexible working. More than two-fifths of employees were aware that the Government intended to extend the right to request flexible working to carers of adults.

Aims and objectives

The main objectives of this study were to:

- Establish the extent to which employees perceive the provision of work-life balance practices as inclusive.
- Ascertain the demand for work-life balance practices.
- Assess take-up of work-life balance practices including reasons for non-take-up (e.g. impact on job security and promotion).
- Ascertain employees' views on the detrimental effects of flexible working.
- Establish the extent to which work-life balance practices meet their needs, including their views on the feasibility of their employer extending these arrangements.
- Establish how, and to what extent, employees are informed of, and are involved in, the development and implementation of the various work-life balance arrangements; including whether there are procedures in place for taking their views into account.

- Ascertain employees' views on the impact of work-life balance practices, including the impact on employee commitment, and the employment relations' climate.

Background

The first Work-Life Balance Survey (WLB1) was conducted by the Department for Education and Employment in 2000 to assess the extent to which employers operated work-life balance practices; to see whether employees felt that existing practices met their needs; and to provide a baseline against which future surveys could be compared. Changes were made in the survey's methodology between the first baseline study conducted by IFF and the second survey of employees (WLB2) conducted in 2003 by MORI, and fieldwork for the second survey was conducted prior to the introduction of the right to request flexible working. This report presents the results of the Third Work-Life Balance Employees' Survey, conducted by telephone in early 2006.

Contracted hours of work, overtime, paid holiday entitlement and take-up

Working hours

Employees were asked if they had a set number of contracted hours; 83 per cent reported that they had (compared to 79 per cent in WLB2). Whilst almost half (47 per cent) of employees with contracted working hours (who stated what their actual and contracted hours were) were working their contracted hours, almost as many (45 per cent) were working more than their contracted hours.

Almost seven in ten (69 per cent) of all employees said they were content with their current working hours, whilst around a quarter (26 per cent) wanted to work fewer hours, and five per cent wanted to work more hours.

Overtime

There were significant falls in the incidence of both paid and unpaid overtime compared with WLB2. Just over half (52 per cent) of all employees said that they worked overtime, down from 67 per cent in WLB2. The average number of hours of paid overtime worked was 6.38 hours, whilst the average number of hours of unpaid overtime worked was 7.03 hours per week. The majority (56 per cent) of those who worked unpaid overtime were not given time off in lieu (exactly the same as found in WLB2). The main reason employees who worked overtime gave for working overtime was because they had too much work to finish in their normal working hours (cited by 44 per cent of those who worked overtime, compared to 42 per cent in WLB2).

Paid holidays

Around three-quarters of employees (74 per cent) had taken all the paid holidays they were entitled to in the previous year (up from 71 per cent in WLB2). The most common reason given for not having taken their full entitlement was too much work/too busy (cited by 26 per cent of those who had not taken their full entitlement).

Work-life balance policies and practices

Availability of flexible working arrangements

Employees were asked whether a variety of working arrangements would be available for them personally at their workplace if they needed it. Almost all employees (90 per cent) said that at least one flexible working arrangement was available to them if they needed it (up from 85 per cent in WLB2). Two or more flexible working arrangements were available to 77 per cent of employees (compared with 68 per cent in WLB2).

The most commonly available flexible working arrangement was working part-time. Nearly seven in ten (69 per cent) of employees said that this would be available if they needed it (a small increase from 67 per cent in WLB2). Over half of employees (54 per cent) felt that they would be able to work reduced hours for a limited period if they needed to do so (a decline from 62 per cent in WLB2). Flexible working time (flexitime) was the third arrangement to be available to over half (53 per cent) of employees (an increase from 48 per cent in WLB2), whilst just under half (47 per cent) of employees felt that job sharing would be available to them if they needed it (an increase from 41 per cent in WLB2).

Over a third (37 per cent) of employees felt that they would be able to work only in school term-time if they wanted to do so (an increase from 32 per cent in WLB2), and the opportunity to work a compressed working week (working full-time hours over a fewer number of days) was available to 35 per cent of employees (an increase from 30 per cent in WLB2).

Annualised hours arrangements (where working hours are calculated on an annual basis to allow fluctuations in line with seasonal or other variations) were available in just under a quarter (24 per cent) of workplaces (an increase from 20 per cent in WLB2). Working from home on a regular basis was the arrangement employees were least likely to be available (23 per cent of employees said that it would be available to them if they needed it, an increase from 20 per cent in WLB2).

Take-up of flexible working arrangements

Those employees who said that a particular work arrangement would be available to them if they needed it were also asked if they currently worked, or had worked, in any of these ways in the last 12 months with their current employer. Nearly half (49 per cent) of employees who had flexitime available to them made use of that arrangement, and over four in ten (44 per cent) who were able to work regularly from home did so. In addition, nearly two-fifths of those who said that the arrangement was available to them worked part-time (38 per cent); and over a third of employees who were able to do so (36 per cent) worked term-time only.

Take-up of the other flexible working arrangements was lower, with around a quarter working annualised hours (27 per cent) or a compressed working week (24 per cent); under one-fifth (18 per cent) taking advantage of opportunities to work reduced hours for a limited period; and just over one in ten (12 per cent) taking up job sharing opportunities. There was little change in the proportions of all employees taking up flexible working arrangements since WLB2.

Unmet demand for flexible working arrangements

Unmet employee demand is where an employee does not have access to a particular arrangement, but would like the opportunity to work in that way. The highest level of unmet demand was for flexitime (29 per cent) and a compressed working week (27 per cent). In addition 21 per cent of all employees would have liked the opportunity to work from home on a regular basis, and the same proportion of employees were attracted to the idea of reduced hours for a limited period. One in five would have liked the chance to work an annualised hours arrangement. There was less unmet demand for working term-time only (14 per cent), for part-time working (13 per cent) and for job-sharing (11 per cent). Demand for all flexible working arrangements except term-time working had declined since WLB2.

Take-up of the right to request flexible working

Employees were asked if they were aware of the right for some employees to request flexible working introduced in April 2003; two-thirds (65 per cent) of working parents with dependent children under 6 and over half (56 per cent) of all employees said that they were aware of the new right.

Employees were also asked whether over the last two years they had approached their current employer to make a request to change how they regularly work for a sustained period of time. In all, 17 per cent of employees had made such a request (the same proportion as in WLB2). Female employees (22 per cent) were more likely than male employees (14 per cent) to have requested to work flexibly over the last two years.

When asked about the nature of their requests, 30 per cent of employees who had asked to change their working arrangements did so to reduce their hours of work or to work part-time (compared to 29 per cent in WLB2). A quarter (25 per cent) had asked to change 'when I work including the number of days that I work' (compared to 23 per cent in WLB2). In contrast, 12 per cent wanted to increase their working hours (compared to nine per cent in WLB2). Eleven per cent of employees making a request had asked to work flexitime (13 per cent in WLB2) and ten per cent had requested some time off or additional leave arrangement (eight per cent in WLB2).

In addition, the survey found a high level of informal and short-term flexible working arrangements in British workplaces. Just over one quarter (26 per cent) of employees said that they were either currently working part-time, or had done so in the last 12 months with their current employer. Another 30 per cent were not working part-time but said they were either currently using other flexible working practices, or had worked in this way in the last 12 months. Hence only two-fifths (44 per cent) said they were not currently working flexibly, and had not done so in the last 12 months with their current employer. This indicates a higher incidence of flexible working than the number of formal requests made by employees would suggest.

Making a request to change the way they worked

Those who had made a request to change the way they regularly worked were then asked what the outcome of that request had been. In most cases requests were either fully (60 per cent) or partially (18 per cent) agreed to. Seventeen per cent said their request had been declined – down from 20 per cent of employees

in WLB2. Five per cent of requests were pending or awaiting decision. Employers declined 23 per cent of requests by men and 13 per cent by women.

All employees who had not made a request to change their working arrangement were asked why they had not made such a request. In most cases it was seen as personal choice: 58 per cent of those who had not made a request said that they were content with their current work arrangements and 14 per cent said that they were happy with their current work-life balance. However, in other cases something in the nature of their job or their employer had prevented the individual from making a request. For example, ten per cent thought that it would not suit their job or the job does not allow it.

Employee attitudes to work-life balance

Reasons for current working arrangements

Employees who worked one or more of the flexible working arrangements discussed above were asked to give the main reason they worked their current working arrangements. Just over one in five (21 per cent) said working the way they did made their life easier or more efficient (18 per cent in WLB2); 19 per cent said their reason was to do with the nature of their jobs or type of work (11 per cent in WLB2); 18 per cent gave childcare needs as the main reason (17 per cent in WLB2); 15 per cent said they had more free time; 14 per cent said they could spend more time with their family; and 11 per cent mentioned demands of their job as their main reason (15 per cent in WLB2).

Employees who had these arrangements available to them but who had not worked in any of these flexible ways were asked why. Almost two-fifth of these employees (38 per cent) said they had not made a request because they were happy with their current work arrangements (compared with 34 per cent in WLB2). Just over one-fifth (21 per cent) said that their job or employer would not allow it (down from 33 per cent in WLB2), and 10 per cent mentioned financial reasons (13 per cent in WLB2).

Consequences of flexible working for the individual

Employees who said they had taken up one or more of the flexible working arrangements in the last 12 months were asked to state what had been the positive and negative consequences of them being able to work in these ways.

In total, almost nine in ten employees (89 per cent) working flexibly believed there were positive consequences of working this way, while just 6 per cent said there were none. Amongst the most frequently cited positive consequences of taking up flexible working were having free time in general (34 per cent) and having more time to spend with family (33 per cent).

The majority (52 per cent) of employees who had worked flexibly cited no negative consequences. However, 44 per cent said that there were negative consequences. For example, 19 per cent said that they would receive less pay.

Consequences for employees of colleagues' working flexibly

Employees whose colleagues had worked one or more of the flexible arrangements were asked what the positive and negative consequences had been to them of their colleagues' arrangements.

In total, almost two-thirds (54 per cent) of employees whose colleagues had worked flexibly cited one or more positive consequences, while only fifteen per cent said that there had been none. Ten per cent said their colleagues working flexibly did not affect them; and 21 per cent said they did not know.

Less than two-fifths (38 per cent) said there were negative consequences from colleagues working flexibly. Forty-one per cent of those whose colleagues had worked one or more arrangement said that there had been no negative consequences for them of their colleagues working flexibly; and 21 per cent said they did not know. Six per cent said that they had to cover colleagues work and six per cent said that colleagues were not available.

The role of employers in providing flexibility

Employees were asked what the one main arrangement, if any, would be that employers could provide to support working parents. Responses were grouped into four categories. One-third (32 per cent) of employees whose responses fell into one of these categories said that they did not know; 23 per cent cited flexibility in working arrangements; 18 per cent cited help with childcare; and nine per cent said that there was nothing their employer could do. Employees were also asked whether their employer had ever consulted employees or their representatives about adjusting working arrangements so they could strike a better work-life balance. Forty-nine per cent of all employees said yes (47 per cent in WLB2); 41 per cent said no; and nine per cent said that they did not know.

Attitudes to work-life balance

All employees were asked how far they agreed or disagreed with 12 attitude statements on work-life balance. The highest levels of agreement (in terms of employees who said they strongly agreed or agreed) were with the statements: 'people work best when they can balance their work and other aspects of their lives' (94 per cent, compared to 95 per cent in WLB2), 'employers should give all employees the same priority when considering requests to work flexibly' (90 per cent), and 'having more choice in working arrangements improves workplace morale' (89 per cent). The highest levels of disagreement were for 'people who work flexibly need closer supervision' (56 per cent disagreed) and 'people who work flexibly create more work for others' (47 per cent disagreed).

Employee satisfaction

Respondents were asked to indicate how satisfied they were with the following aspects of their work: the work itself, the hours they work, their job security, and the amount of pay they received. Being satisfied with one aspect of work meant that respondents were more likely to be satisfied with the other aspects of work.

On the whole, employees were happy with their working arrangements and with other aspects of their work, although satisfaction with pay was lower. In WLB3, 87 per cent of all employees said they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their current working arrangements, up from 81 per cent in WLB2.

Women were more likely than men to say that they were very satisfied with their current working arrangements: 34 per cent of women compared to 23 per cent of men. Likewise, flexible workers (33 per cent) were significantly more likely than non-flexible workers (22 per cent) to be very satisfied with their current working arrangements.

Time-off in an emergency

Thirty-eight per cent of all employees had experienced an emergency that they had to deal with at short notice involving a dependant during the working week (this was exactly the same in WLB2). Thirty-four per cent of all employees had taken time off to deal with such an emergency. Employees who had taken time off had taken an average (mean) of 5.07 days, whilst the median number of days taken was 2.13. Parents with dependant children (56 per cent) and carers (54 per cent) were more likely to have experienced an emergency than other employees.

Over half (52 per cent) of those who had taken time off said that they had taken it as fully paid leave. Almost one-quarter (23 per cent) took it as holiday or sick leave. Employees who had experienced an emergency but had not taken time off were asked why that was. Almost two-thirds of this small number of employees (76 in all) said that there had been no need for them to take time off. Seventy-one per cent of all employees said that their employer would almost always agree to them taking time off at short notice to care for a dependant.

Employees with caring responsibilities for adults

Employees were asked whether they had caring responsibilities. Nine per cent did have such responsibilities. Women employees were almost twice as likely to be carers as men (12 per cent compared to seven per cent). Older employees and public sector employees were also more likely to have caring responsibilities.

Four per cent of employees said they cared for someone in their household and four per cent cared for someone in another household only. In terms of the nature of their caring responsibilities, seven per cent of all employees cared for one adult only, with a further one per cent caring for two adults.

Over half of carers (55 per cent) who cared for adults in their own or other households looked after a parent; 19 per cent looked after a spouse or partner; the remainder looking after other relatives or friends. Twenty-three per cent of all carers spent one to five hours per week caring, whilst 16 per cent spent six to ten hours, 14 per cent spent 11 to 20 hours and 20 per cent spent more than 20 hours per week caring.

More than two-fifths of employees (42 per cent) said that they were aware the Government intended to extend the right to request flexible working to carers of adults.

About this survey

This research was carried out as part of the Department of Trade and Industry's (DTI's) employment relations research programme. The report presents findings from the Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey, conducted in early 2006 amongst employees of working age living in Great Britain working in organisations with five or more employees at the time of the survey. The research was undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), in partnership with ICM Research. Using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), 2,081 telephone interviews were conducted in February and March 2006.

The main report, *The Third Work-Life Balance Employee Survey: Main findings*, was published in March 2007 (URN 07/714) and can be ordered from DTI, or downloaded from the website (see inside cover for details).

A separate technical report (ICM 2007) will be published shortly (URN 07/716), and the dataset lodged with the UK Data Archive at the University of Sussex:

<http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>

Some comparisons are made in this report between findings from this survey and the previous two Work-Life Balance Studies. However, these should be treated with caution due to changes in methodology and question wording.

DTI published the employee survey from the Second Work-Life Balance Study (WLB2), conducted by MORI in early 2003, as Employment Relations Research Series No 27. There were two volumes: a main report (URN 04/740) and appendices (URN 04/740a).

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