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**FLEXIBLE WORKING IN THE
IT INDUSTRY:**

Long-hours cultures and
work life balance at the
margins?

March 2004



The DTI drives our ambition of 'prosperity for all' by working to create the best environment for business success in the UK. We help people and companies become more productive by promoting enterprise, innovation and creativity.

We champion UK business at home and abroad. We invest heavily in world-class science and technology. We protect the rights of working people and consumers. And we stand up for fair and open markets in the UK, Europe and the world.



Flexible Working in the IT Industry: Long-hours cultures and work life balance at the margins?

A report to the Department of Trade and Industry and
the Women in IT Forum carried out by Flexexecutive.

March 2004

Foreword

Rebecca George –
Chair, Intellect Women in IT Forum



The IT industry is by its very nature dynamic and fast moving.

People who work in the industry are usually those who embrace change, enjoy the challenges that it brings, and are enthusiastic about learning new things or working in new environments. The pace of change in technology drives requirements for new skills, innovation and creativity.

Today companies are looking to reduce expense in ever more competitive markets, find more efficient ways of

working, and deliver new products and services faster. An ageing workforce in the UK, and a growing recognition of the value of relationships held by experienced and older members of the workforce, is leading to a number of initiatives looking at different working patterns.

The drivers identified above – financial, people management and skills retention - are extremely well suited to women. The endemic characteristics of the IT industry – flexibility, constant challenges, new environments and methods of working – mirror the way in which many women work successfully.

The numbers of women at the top of the profession, and the number of women remaining generally in the sector, is insufficient. Too often talented women are leaving the sector, despite its apparent attractiveness.

This report is important because it seeks to understand the attitudes and issues of those professionals, both female and male, behind the flexible processes and programmes that are being offered.

Flexible working should allow more women to remain in the sector for much of their careers. To this end, I hope that this report will help IT companies to better understand how to manage their programmes and processes in a manner which allows both women and men to develop their skills and advance their careers.

The Women in IT Forum has identified the retention of older and more experienced women as its highest priority for research and debate. We have commissioned research to identify the business case for diversity in the IT workforce, and expect to debate the results of this research in the summer.

I believe that those companies which will continue to grow and survive in the IT sector will be those which can adapt themselves, quickly and attractively, to changing environmental, business and people-related demands. These will undoubtedly include the implementation and widespread adoption of flexible working programmes.

People should be able to enjoy a full and rewarding life as well as a full and rewarding job. Academic, social and professional fulfilment benefits not just the individual or the organisation, but UK plc as a whole.

I would like to express my thanks to Flexexecutive, members of the Women in IT Forum and Intellect for their assistance and contributions.



<http://www.intellectuk.org/women>

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About this report

One of DTI's strategic priorities is to maximise potential in the workplace, helping to create organisations with high productivity, value and skills. We want to raise skill levels to produce high value jobs in high performance workplaces, where people can realise their full potential whilst maintaining a healthy work-life balance. As part of this drive, we will encourage business to make better use of innovative working practices, modern management techniques and good leadership, working in partnership with employees and their representatives. We will also promote diversity, fair treatment and work-life balance as routes to raising levels of participation and improving employee motivation and creativity, so raising productivity.

DTI has supported the preparation of this report with these goals in mind. In particular, working in partnership with employers and employees, we want to understand and address the severe under-representation of women in the IT sector. Work-life balance and flexible working benefit men and women but

the more widespread adoption by businesses of flexible working practices could particularly support women to enter and remain in IT.

We hope the dissemination of the results of this survey of IT workers stimulates greater debate about the drivers and inhibitors to flexible working in the sector and ultimately to more businesses introducing effective working practices into their organisations.

Introduction

Work life balance debates are now part of the mainstream of corporate life, tentatively buttressed by the drift of new employment regulation¹. No employer seriously committed to attracting and retaining the best talent can ignore this agenda, and good employers are increasingly keen to bang the drum in support of flexible working.² When executed successfully flexible working is seen as delivering multiple benefits – improved productivity and performance, new ways of working, enhanced employee commitment and retention, and the creation of high performance businesses built on working smarter, and not necessarily harder. The flexible work imperative is seen as being particularly strong for those sectors facing the biggest challenges in recruiting and retaining their top performing female senior staff.

This study is therefore a timely one for the IT sector – which does not have a well established reputation for progressive employment practices, nor indeed for attracting enough female professionals into IT based professions.

This study sought to examine the views of IT professionals about flexible work and work-life balance in the IT professions. The findings are both consistent with established benchmarks concerning employee attitudes and organisational practice, but also offer up some specific and unique insights that pertain more specifically to the IT sector.

Some survey benchmarks – flexible working and the performance premium

This report follows surveys previously conducted by Flexexecutive exploring the attitudes of male and female senior managers towards flexible work³. Both groups expressed a strong desire for greater flexibility at work - 93% of women and 81% of men wanted more flexible job roles and working practices. However, these senior employees felt that conducting their job on a more flexible basis would bring with it lower pay, diminished promotional opportunities and less interesting project work and activities. Their desire

¹ Recent legislation (April 2003) has given all employees (with children under the age of 6 or with a disabled child under the age of 18) the right to request flexible work.

² For example the Employers for Work Life Balance initiative has been vocal in its public support for the cause of flexible working.

³ Flexexecutive (from the Resource Connection): Work-Life Balance or Career Death? Issues & Paradoxes facing Marketing & Human Resources Professionals – September 2002

for flexibility was, therefore, being stymied by the possibility of 'career death' if they adopted it.

Research also undertaken with employers⁴ across public and private sectors shows that the benefits of employing flexible policies lead to better recruitment, increased retention, lower absenteeism, reduced costs and increased productivity. In addition recent research⁵ talking to graduates identified work-life balance and flexible work as a key differentiator when choosing a sector in which to pursue a career and an organisation to work for.

A fourth study⁶ measured the performance levels of flexible workers (across both private and public sectors) and showed that managers of flexible workers rated 96% of them as outperforming their traditional full-time colleagues. More specifically the most dramatic performance dividends were seen for jobsharers, where managers of jobshare teams rated 70% as producing 1/3 more output than their full-time colleagues.

These results provide us with an excellent reference point against which to judge our findings from the IT sector. Particularly important comparisons include:

- Whether the sector is out-performing or under-performing other sectors on the flexible work balance sheet?
- How far the problems facing the IT sector in making flexibility happen are generic challenges, which can be responded to using tried and tested remedies that have already worked elsewhere?
- Or whether the IT sector faces some very specific challenges requiring bespoke solutions built by the sector for the sector?

Let us turn to review the study and the evidence.

⁴ The Resource Connection & The Industrial Society, (2000) 'Change? What Change? – Employers views on flexibility

⁵ PriceWaterhouseCooper 2002

⁶ The Resource Connection, The Industrial Society & SHL (2001) "Desperately seeking flexibility"

1. Methodology

For the purposes of this project, the research team designed a questionnaire to explore employee attitudes towards flexible working, using a web based form which was distributed to member Companies of the Women in IT Forum. Individual company representatives sent out the questionnaire, As this work was not supplemented by a paper-based questionnaire the respondents were limited to those who have access to and an interest in using the Internet. However given the nature of the population it was not felt that this would adversely affect the sample.

1001 respondents completed the questionnaire.

The survey probed the attitudes and behaviour of the respondents on aspects around work-life balance and flexible work, using a familiar five-point scale response category. To ensure that the questionnaire accurately captured the scope and scale of flexible working in the sector, it provided the respondents with a comprehensive list of widely recognised flexible working practices (see box right).

Flexible work includes:

- *Part-time* (UK Government calls this less than 30 hours);
- *Job-share* (typically a full-time job is split between two part-time workers, often with a handover/overlap);
- *Flexitime* (contracted hours are fulfilled, but there is flexibility about when they are worked);
- *Home/remote working* (working from home, or other alternative locations away from the main office);
- *Compressed hours* (e.g. working the standard hours of a 5 day week but compressing them into 4 days);
- *Annualised hours* (a form of compressed hours, however the hours are assigned for the whole year and more hours might be worked during peak times of the year and fewer hours worked outside peak times).

2. Structure of the report

The survey findings are presented in Section 3 alongside an examination of the key themes and issues surrounding the attitude of IT professionals to flexible working, and the implications for the introduction of flexible working practices. The conclusions and recommendations for the IT sector are then considered in Section 4.

3. Survey results

We report the survey results under a number of themed headings reflecting the organisation of the questionnaire. Space precludes an exhaustive exposition of all the detailed data generated by our analysis, but all key themes and findings are reported.

3.1. Sample Characteristics and Working Patterns

Sample Characteristics

- The analyses reported here are based upon 1001 respondents;
- 65% of respondents were female and 35% male;
- 22% of respondents were under 30, 40% were 30 – 40 years old and 28% were 40-50 and 8% were over 50 years old.

Working Patterns

- 88% of respondents were employed full time and 11% part-time;
- 51% of those people working full time already work a flexible schedule;
- The majority (68%) work 8-10 hrs per day with 20% working 6-7 hrs in a day and 11% working more than 10 hrs per day.

There is no gender difference in working hours, however as might be expected 1/3 of those earning more than £60,000 pa work longer than 10 hrs per day.

Interestingly a significantly lower number of 20-30 year olds work longer than 10hrs per day;

- 85% of respondents work 5 days a week with 6% working 3 days and 4% working 4 days;
- 35% of people regularly work out of hours;
- 13% regularly stay away from home overnight;
- 30% of the female respondents and 43% of the male respondents earn over £40,000pa.

In terms of sample characteristics a number of key points stand out. Firstly, that the workforce composition as captured by our study suggests a comparatively youthful age profile for the sector. Over sixty per cent of the respondents are under forty years of age, with another thirty per cent clustered between forty and fifty. A large segment of the sample are therefore likely to have either child care or elderly care responsibilities or both.

Secondly, the sample has a higher proportion of women respondents (65%) when compared to their overall representation within the IT sector labour force which stands at approximately 20% per cent. Possible interpretations for the high response rate amongst the women respondents include:

- Their greater concern and interest in the issue of flexible working;
- Their support for initiatives led by the Women in IT forum.

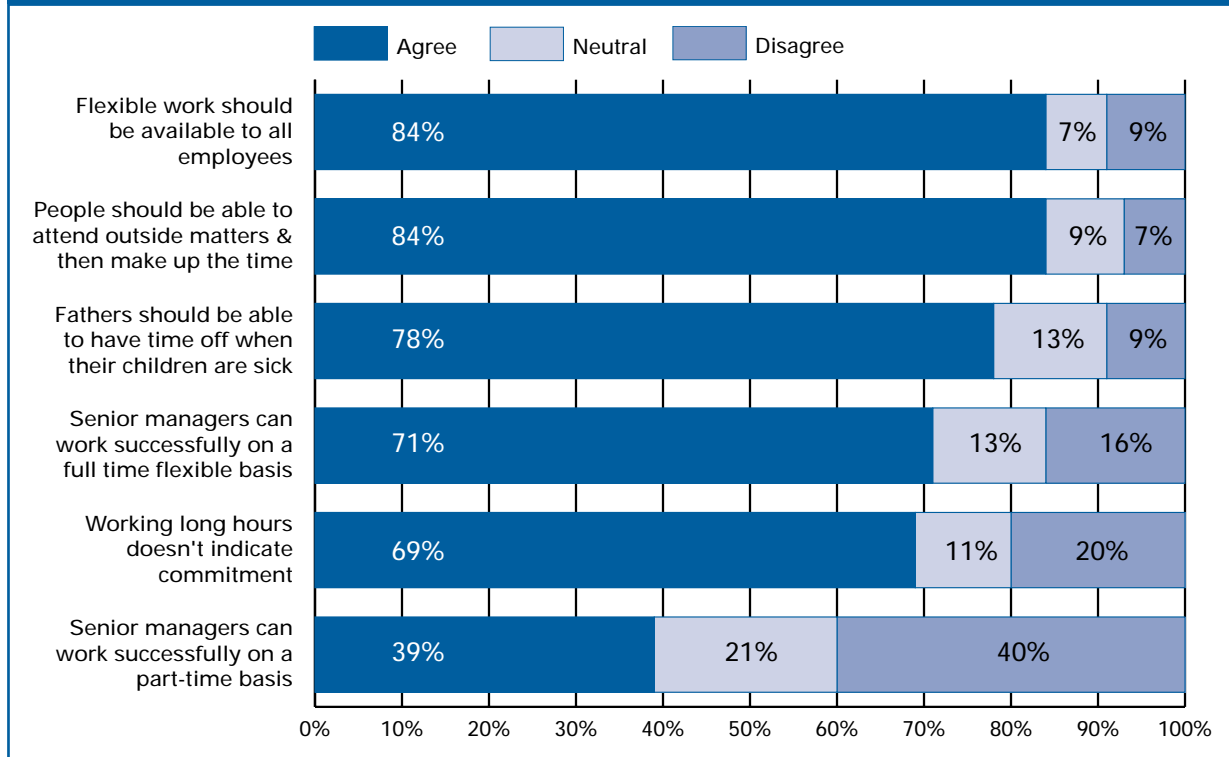
In terms of working patterns the top line findings are extremely interesting. Firstly, the sector as captured by our study is dominated by full-time employees, and the number of part-time employees is relatively small compared to the balance of full and part-time working in large parts of the service sector.

Secondly, in terms of flexible working patterns the glass is already half full - with fifty one per cent of those working full-time taking advantage of a flexible working schedule. The IT sector has

therefore already passed an important benchmark. However, this figure is slightly under-cut, and partly explained, by evidence of an established long hours culture. The vast majority of staff (sixty eight per cent) work up to ten hours a day, placing them right on or over the margins of the working time directive. A significant minority (eleven per cent) work more than ten hours a day with some evidence that this is related to seniority and levels of reward. Finally more than a third regularly work out of hours. Equally important the genders are sharing the load equally, with no notable difference between male and female employees and their working hours.

Given these long working hours, to what degree are those respondents already adopting a flexible working schedule (51%) deriving benefits, and how far is this shaping their attitudes to flexible working, their personal effectiveness, their employer, and the working practices of their colleagues? Let us explore some of these issues in more detail.

Attitudes to flexible working (Agree = +ve)



3.2. Who's afraid of flexible working? Work attitudes and behaviours

Key attitudes to flexible working

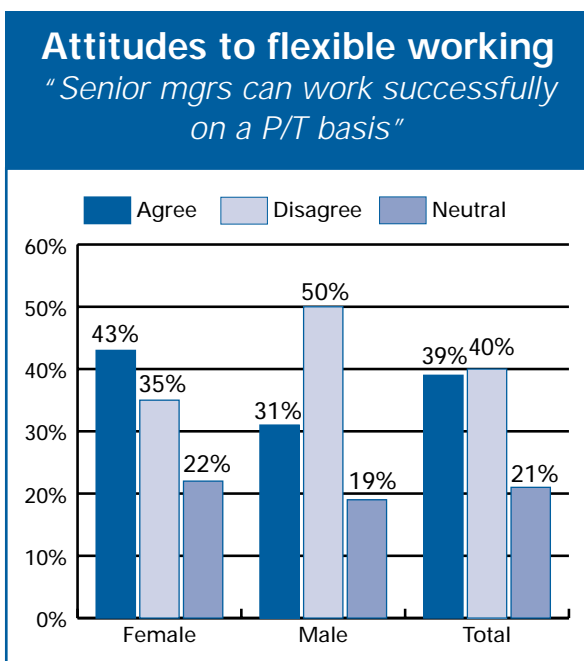
- 84% believe flexible work should be available to all employees;
- 71% believe senior managers can work successfully on a full-time flexible basis;
- Only 39% believe senior managers can work successfully on a part-time basis;
- Only one-third of all respondents (72% of females and 28% of males) agreed that all roles can be carried out on a flexible basis. Nearly half of all respondents disagreed.

Employees in the IT sector display attitudes to flexible working which finds strong echoes in other studies. Put simply, they display overwhelming support for the idea that all employees should have the chance to access flexible working patterns, and they are largely

convinced about the case for full-time flexibility. What this means in practice is that employees desire a relationship with their employer that judges them on their output and ability to deliver what is expected of them - whilst allowing the individual employee the freedom to best determine where and how they get their work done. For example, a large majority of respondents (84%) believe that employees should be able to "attend to their outside commitments and to make up time elsewhere".

These are important benchmarks and suggest that employers in the sector have already made some progress in building strong support for flexible working practices. However, there are limits to how far the case for flexibility has been accepted, in so far as part-time and reduced hours working are seen as being inconsistent with the demands of senior roles. Only 39% of respondents believe that senior managers can work

successfully on a part-time basis, with 66% of respondents saying senior positions require more than a 9-5 commitment. Levels of support for the viability of part-time senior roles was stronger amongst the women respondents (43% agree 35% disagree) than the male respondents (31% agree vs. 50% disagree). Those working the longest hours (more than 10 hours a day), and therefore the most likely to be in senior positions, displayed the strongest levels of dissent (54% disagree).



Overall 33% agree (44% disagree) that part time work is more appropriate for roles at lower levels in the organisation. The majority of those in agreement are male (43%) or those that work 10+ per day (41%). More women are of the view that flexible working is appropriate throughout the organisation.

These figures and sentiments are also consistent with benchmark studies in other sectors. But they represent powerful barriers to further progress within the sector on flexible working. In particular they suggest the following issues:

- An emerging gap between senior staff and those working the longest hours (who are often one and the same), and the rest of employees in the sector, on the applicability of reduced hours working to senior roles;
- A worrying gender gap on the same issue which could explain 'female flight' and their unwillingness to adopt senior positions;
- This makes the leadership challenge particularly pointed. Unless senior staff, of both genders, are encouraged to adopt flexible working options, both in terms of full-time flexibility and reduced hours schedules, and are seen to have been supported by their organisation and made a success of those roles, one outcome is predetermined. Namely that further movements towards adopting full-fledged flexibility and challenging entrenched long hours attitudes in the sector are likely to be tentative and insignificant.

3.3 Looking over their shoulder? – The shadow cast by colleagues' views about flexible working?

One of the major barriers to the wider uptake of flexible working is people's perception of the attitudes and views of others – and how they reflect this perception on themselves. The study explored what respondents felt colleagues thought about flexible workers, and our findings offer up some telling insights:

- Nearly 40% of respondents stated that they thought their peers believed that when people were not in the office they were not working;
- 48% of all respondents agreed (22% disagreed) that flexible work is unfairly distributed because it is not freely available to all roles/ individuals;

- 54% of all respondents agreed (63% of those working 7hrs per day or less) that flexible work is fair because salary and benefits are reduced if hours are lower;
- 74% of all respondents agreed (11% disagreed) that key roles are given to people working full-time;
- 74% of all respondents (and 90% of those working 10+ hours per day), agree with the belief that “moving to a part-time or flexible career will harm your promotional prospects”;
- 72% agree that there are fewer promotional opportunities available to part-time workers, despite the fact that the majority of respondents believe that part-time workers are as committed as their full-time colleagues;
- 81% of all respondents, (87% of female and 71% of male) agreed that flexible or part-time work is usually taken up by women. And three-quarters of respondents state that this negatively impacts on promotional opportunities for women.

These findings, whilst in line with other benchmark studies, reveal attitudes damaging to the cause of flexible working in the sector. The shadow of presenteeism, the perceived inequities that can result when flexible working is not available to all staff, and the association of career success with full time working, offer employees powerful incentives to stick with the status quo of long working hours. They are likely to be a key factor in slowing the encouraging buy-in to full-time flexibility across the sector. They also offer little comfort to female or male employees in the sector who aspire to continued career progression whilst adopting reduced hours schedules.

In addition our findings suggest that some employees do not even believe that reduced hours roles necessarily offer respite from the pressures associated with full time hours. Some 62% of all respondents (and 70% of those earning £50k +) agree that part time roles result in senior managers trying to cram 5 days work into fewer days.

Some real grounds for optimism can be found in other attitudes expressed. Importantly, 68% all respondents (72% of female and 60% of male) disagree that it is less acceptable for a man to be working on a flexible basis. And there is an acceptance that flexibility can be facilitated in all roles by scheduling work differently. For example, 82% of all respondents agreed that most jobs can be structured to avoid obligatory “out of hours” meetings.

3.4 Full-time flexibility – delivering manageability but not control

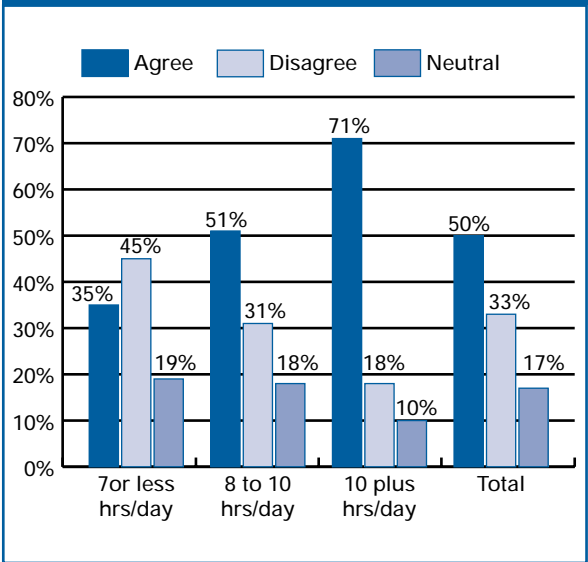
Given that the majority of staff in our sample work full-time, and only half of them take advantage of full-time flexibility options (in other words time shifting when and where work gets done rather than reducing their workloads or their output commitments) key questions become:

- How far our respondents feel happy with the work life balance they have struck;
- Whether they feel more or less in control over their work.

While 50% of respondents work flexibly, 50% of all respondents (and 71% of those working over 10 hours per day) feel that they don't have control over their work.

Control over hours worked

"I don't have full control over the hours I work"

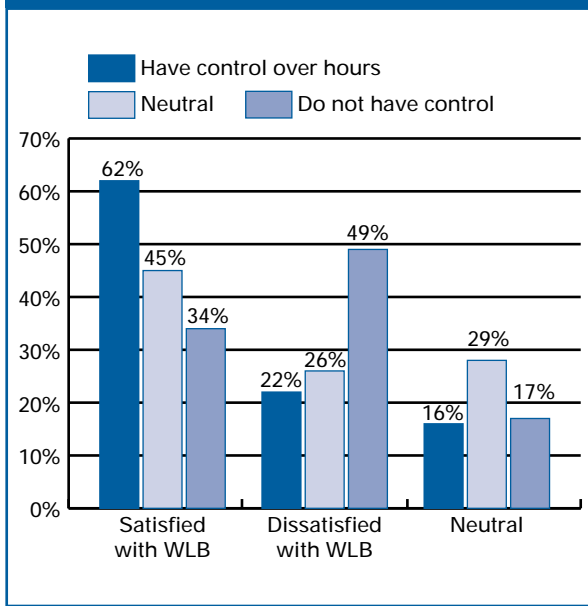


Those working longer hours tend to feel less in control of the hours they work

Similarly only 44% of the sample indicated that they are happy with the balance they have between work and personal life (with 36% expressing dissatisfaction with their work life balance).

Perhaps unsurprisingly those that work flexibly and those with more control over their working hours tend to feel more satisfied with their work-life balance.

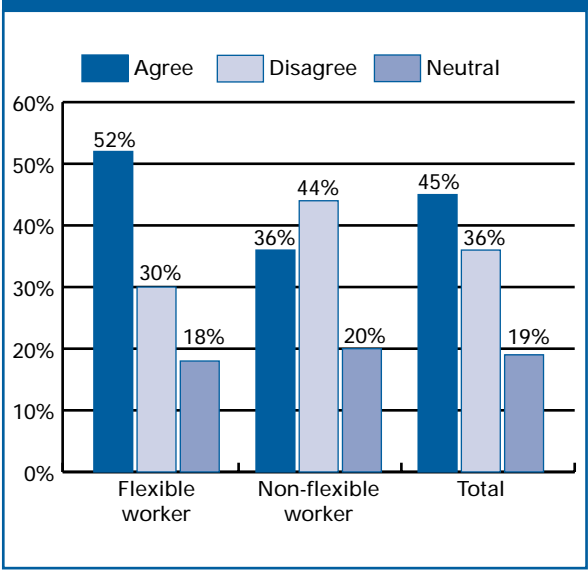
WLB vs. Control over hours worked



The more control an employee feels they have the more satisfied with WLB

Satisfaction with WLB

"I am satisfied with my WLB"



These findings are significant. A large body of research evidence has established that the degree to which an individual feels in control of their work and their working hours is a strong predictor of employee satisfaction and employee well being⁷. It therefore needs little emphasis that we should be concerned about the 50% of all respondents who do not feel they have control over their work. If the working patterns of this group are too demanding to allow them a sense of control, how far are these patterns negatively shaping their experiences outside of work? It is to this issue we now turn.

⁷ Working in Britain Survey, (2000), London School of Economics and the Policy Studies Institute.

3.5. Fully engaged at work means under-involved elsewhere – the uneasy truce between work and home

The study sought to explore some of the tangible dimensions of work life balance, in terms of the attitudes of respondents to their lives outside work, and how far work was stopping them leading their lives in the way they wished. Some of the key findings are listed below:

- 50% of all respondents (vs. 75% of people working more than 10 hours per week) agree that they don't get involved with their family as much as they would like;
- 53% of all respondents (56% female and 49% male – 73% of those working longer than 10 hrs) feel that it is difficult to get involved in school activities;
- 49% of respondents, (55% of female and 40% of male), with children feel that they miss out on their children's development;
- 43% of all respondents (vs. 51% of people aged 20-24) believe that they don't have enough holiday time;
- 56% feel that it is difficult to leave the office on time (with 83% of those working 10 hours per day agreeing). Those who work fewer hours tend to disagree (77%) that "late or weekend meetings are an integral part of their job". Whereas 52% of those working long hours state that they believe "late or weekend meetings are an integral part of their job". There is no gender split here.

These findings are rather sobering in that despite progress on the flexible working agenda inside the sector, in the minds of employees the casualty of long working hours is the family. Those

respondents working long hours are inclined to feel more strongly that they don't get involved with their family, that they have little flexibility in their hours, have difficulty leaving the office on time and regard "late and weekend meetings as an integral part of their job".

Significant proportions of both male and female respondents report that they don't get involved with their families as much as they would like to; feel that it is difficult to get involved in school activities; and that they miss out on their kid's development. Whilst the female respondents feel more strongly about these issues, it is notable that the differences between the genders on this issue averages out about 25%. This suggests that these issues are no longer the sole preserve of women in the labour market and that a significant proportion of the male labour force in the sector are becoming uncomfortable with some of the costs of working long hours and without fully fledged flexibility.

These findings partly explain the commitment of the respondents to full-time flexibility and as we have seen why a large majority of respondents (84%) believe that employees should be able to "attend to their outside commitments and to make up time elsewhere". One way to interpret these findings is that there is a strong suppressed desire amongst the respondents to strike a better balance between their work and home lives. This desire will only find fuller expression if some of the barriers to flexible working that the study has identified can be tackled – for example in terms of making senior roles work on full-time flexibility and reduced hours schedules, and changing working cultures based on presenteeism. This begs the question – to what degree do our respondents believe that their

organisations are beginning to get some of these issues right by creating a culture supportive of flexible working.

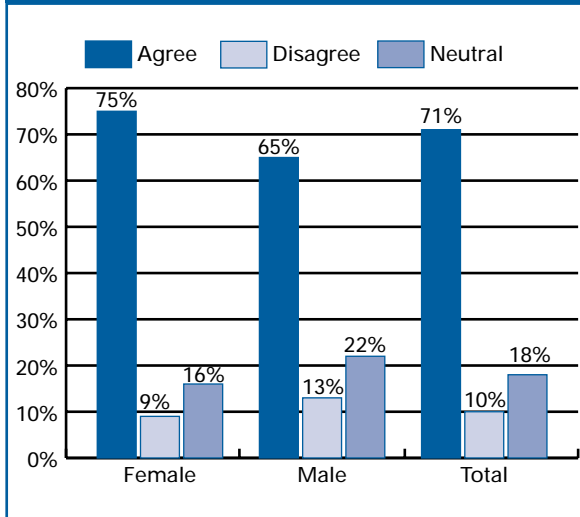
3.6 Organisational Context

In terms of whether organisations in the IT sector are creating environments supportive of flexible working and better work life balance, the picture is mixed – with the glass resolutely half full and half empty. On the positive side of the balance sheet, employees who currently work flexibly are more likely to agree that “My manager is generally supportive of flexible working” (63% of total versus 75% of those working flexibly). More broadly nearly half the respondents (45%) are satisfied with their work-life balance and believe that their organisation is supportive of flexible work (58%). Similarly, nearly half of the respondents (49%) state that there is “a high degree of flexibility in my organisation” and that their organisation does provide support to work remotely.

However when respondents state that their organisation is supportive of flexible work, this does not necessarily mean that they believe that their organisation is supportive of greater work-life balance. Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of respondents believe that “people tend to work long hours in my organisation”. Flexibility is often seen as allowing people to work longer or setting them up to work from home for constant availability. Some 67% of respondents state that “very high workloads make it difficult to reduce working hours” and again that is higher for those working long hours (84%).

Organisational context

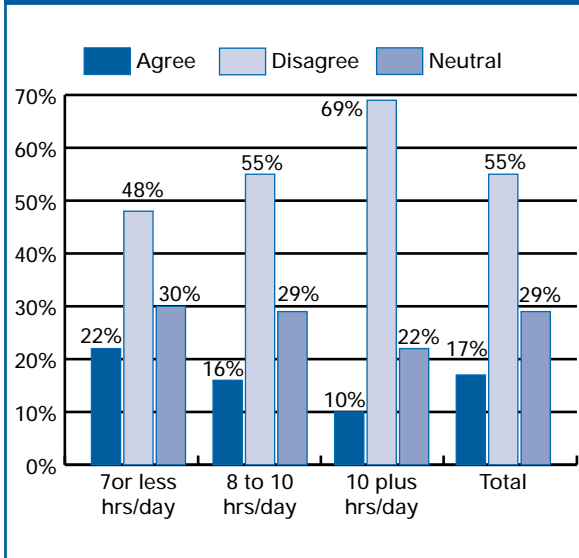
“People tend to work very long hours in my organisation”



Significantly, 1/3 of respondents disagreed with the statement that “their organisation is committed to help me achieve a reasonable work-life balance”. Given these findings, perhaps unsurprisingly respondents also point to the absence of role models and champions for the cause of work life balance in their businesses. Some 55% of respondents (and 69% of those working longer than 10 hrs) disagree that senior managers are good role models. And one-third of individuals (45% of people working 10 hrs per day) do not know of individuals within their organisation who are successful in their roles and work flexibly.

Organisational context

"The senior managers in my organisation are good role models for work-life balance"



So on the negative side of the balance sheet the entrenchment of a long-hours culture weakens any claim the sector can make that they are creating working environments genuinely supportive of better work life balance. As we have already seen, the attitudes of other colleagues shape individual employee's sense of what is possible and acceptable in terms of working hours. Long hours cultures only allow flexible work to operate conditionally - in the form of full-time flexibility, low levels of adoption of reduced hours schedules, particularly by staff in senior positions, and no championing of these issues from the top of the organisation. As this study has shown, if your manager is working long hours and not adopting a flexible work schedule (and 58% of respondents believe that their manager is working long hours), the individual employee will be experiencing mixed messages and facing tough choices. Despite some of the positive evidence about flexible working in the sector, in the face of these factors some

employees are likely to resolve any tensions in their work life balance by leaving and finding an employer more genuinely sympathetic to the cause of flexible working. The alternative, staying to become a lonely pioneer for flexible working with no guarantee of career success or a good work life balance, will for many be the less rational option.

4. Flexible Work and the IT sector – a case of ambiguous expectations? Conclusions and Recommendations

The study has painted a vivid picture of the state of flexible working inside the IT sector. In common with other sectors, the case for full time flexibility has been won in terms of the strong levels of support from respondents for all employees to be able to work more flexibly. As we have seen roughly half of the respondents already work a flexible work schedule. This represents a significant platform upon which the sector can build further progress. It would therefore be harsh to categorise work life balance as being on the margins inside IT driven organisations. Equally, to fully realise the benefits of flexible working, and the autonomous work styles that flow from it, the IT sector needs to address more directly the issue of long working hours.

The real progress towards flexible working made by the sector has been hewn out of the unforgiving rock face of entrenched long hours. Full-time flexibility makes these long hours more manageable for employees, but it is not giving our respondents a real sense of control over their work and working hours. As a consequence it leaves many

employees feeling unhappy about their work life balance and unconvinced that their employers are committed to placing work life balance considerations at the heart of how they run their business, design jobs, and recruit and retain talent.

These findings do not place the IT sector out on a limb – they are similar to benchmark findings from other sectors, and they suggest that the IT sector is facing a number of familiar and common challenges, which include:

- Weak evidence that the leadership community of IT businesses are committed to things being different;
- The absence of senior role models whose success in the business has not been hampered by their commitment to work life balance and / or a reduced hours schedule;
- The need to move from a narrow commitment to flexible working to a more profound commitment to work life balance;
- The need to tackle the causes, attitudes and behaviours that underpin long hours cultures;

- Aligning progression and reward with performance, irrespective of whether the job is done on a full-time basis or not.

The costs of failing to meet these challenges will be severe – higher burn out rates, increased labour turnover and an inability to attract and retain the best talent will infect the sector. In particular, the current cocktail of obstacles to better work life balance in the sector are likely to exacerbate the recruitment and retention difficulties the sector faces with regard to female staff. Given that by 2010 only 25% of the workforce will be made up of able bodied white men under 45 years of age⁹, the unsustainability of the working practices captured by this study needs little emphasis. It is therefore a blunt competitive imperative that IT employers tackle the challenges outlined above.

Doing so will require concerted attempts to engage senior leaders, change management styles, transform working cultures, and rethink and redesign the way work is structured and jobs designed. All of which presupposes of course that the company has built an honest and open culture, with high levels of trust - which are vital prerequisites to facilitate these types of deep-seated changes and transformations. It is precisely because these activities are difficult that a whole range of employers, not just in the IT sector, are struggling to make dramatic progress.

The flexible working paradox for the IT sector – ‘turning on’ or ‘burning out’ the ‘always on’ workforce

In closing this report, we believe that there is a paradox for the IT sector suggested by our analysis. In theory at

least, no sector should be better equipped to reap the performance benefits of new ICT, which in turn require the adoption of new ways of working and in particular flexible working practices. Benchmark employers in the sector, make great play of their ongoing commitment to flexible working. Perhaps more importantly, they are honest about the difficulties involved in handling staff expectations and fears, and in creating clear guidelines that ensure flexible working generates widespread support inside their business.

In a recent interview with a director of a leading global IT company, he acknowledged that staff felt stressed by the ambiguous expectations about how available they should be given that new technology enabled them to work twenty four hours a day. In response this organisation have issued new guidelines covering the use of smart phones and tablet PCs making it clear to staff that they remain in charge when it comes to how ‘available’ they are at home.

This example is telling in the sense that the findings of this study suggest that our respondents from the IT sector are plagued by similarly ambiguous expectations. They both embrace flexible working, yet remain conditional and confused about what they believe to be the implications of new ways of working both for them individually and for their organisations. They want to strike a better work life balance, and in some respects believe that their organisations and line managers are broadly supportive of their aspirations. But equally the demands of their job, of long-hours cultures, and the need to be seen to be performing in the eyes of others, all limit the extent to which they

are acting as agents for real change. They are less pioneers for new ways of working, built on the transformative possibilities of ICT to free work from time and place, and rather more the time tethered, office bound, and over-worked labour force with which we are all grimly familiar.

The paradox for the IT sector and IT driven companies is that they have a unique opportunity, given their ICT capabilities, to take the lead in creating workplaces which make full use of new technologies in order to create genuinely flexible, high performance work environments. If IT driven companies, given their competitive imperatives and organisational capabilities, cannot forge ahead in terms of new ways of working, then they will erode their ability to attract and retain the best talent, particularly female professionals. Ultimately, they are also likely to damage their brand, as the challenge of delivering sustainable levels of high consumer service and quality runs aground on the rock of burn out and a weakening talent pool.

This study suggests that IT driven companies have taken the first tentative steps in creating the necessary organisational revolution in flexible working, but that they lag a worrying distance behind the leading edge, and where they need to be ensure their future competitive success. The challenges outlined by our analysis suggest some clear priorities for action if they are to close the gap – all that is required is vision and leadership to capitalise on the sector's unique opportunities.

4.1. Priorities for action

Making the case for change in a way that engages everyone

The key to success is creating compelling arguments that change is essential. Whilst many of the business case drivers are well known (global competition, customer expectations, the rise of 24/7 service cultures) these are often too abstract to engage a workforce. Therefore the case for change inside an individual business must be directly tailored to the pressures and imperatives shaping their business units and teams.

Similarly, in selling the benefits of flexible working, it must not be presented as a one size fits all option – but rather as a route to allow individuals the chance to think afresh about their role and about how they currently work now and may wish to work in the future. In particular organisations need to encourage managers to explore and negotiate the working patterns that best support the needs of the business and the needs of the individual. This is not just about introducing flexible packages, but about rethinking the ways tasks are organised and measured, and about swapping standard rules for tailor made solutions.

Putting Flexibility on the Balance Sheet

As we have outlined, flexible working is associated with a whole range of desirable business outcomes, including improved diversity, retention, commitment, productivity and customer service. But securing these outcomes requires companies to place flexibility firmly on the balance sheet, which involves three clear actions:

- Granting the permission to try different ways of working;
- Measuring and evaluating the impact of flexible work using objective key performance indicators (KPIs);
- Developing more sophisticated methodologies to cost the benefits and resource implications of flexible work systems.

The natural extension of these types of approach is to ensure that flexible working practices feature more prominently within the balanced scorecard approach being adopted by many organisations, so that progress against aspirations can be effectively measured.

Designing Suitable Flexible Work Options

Flexible working initiatives often flounder on two common difficulties – firstly that expectations have been raised too high, and secondly that resentment has been created by some roles being fashioned on a flexible basis and others being left untouched. The effective implementation of flexible working therefore requires organisations to rediscover the neglected skills of job design and workforce planning. Organisations need to clearly understand what is (and what is not) suitable in terms of the flexibility that can be afforded to individual roles. This necessitates analysing the core components of the role, its relationship to other roles and activities, and patterns of workflow and interaction. Unless such assessments are made comprehensively and objectively, both resentment and dashed expectations will be the result.

Supporting managers to execute flexible work options

One of the biggest obstacles to change can be the attitudes and perceptions of middle managers and line managers. Organisations frequently under-estimate the extent to which these groups may feel undermined and threatened by the need to change working practices. In particular, successful managers, who have built strong high-performing teams on the basis of traditional full-time, face to face collaboration in the office, are likely to regard new forms of flexible work, particularly remote working, as both undermining the foundations of their team's success, but also as eroding their skills base as they have to adopt new challenges (managing remote workers, job-sharers etc) for which they may feel under prepared.

As a consequence it is vital that organisations:

- Provide these managers with the opportunity to voice their concerns around working differently and address their concerns;
- Support and train them as they begin to focus on managing people by output and results, and on getting the best out of individuals and teams who are adopting more diverse working schedules.

Provide challenging careers with promotion opportunities for those wishing to work flexibly

The shadow of 'career death' is probably one of the biggest single barriers to the wider adoption of flexible working practices. Employees working flexibly need to be granted full citizenship rights at work, in terms of access to training, promotion and progression opportunities. This shift in attitudes and practices is the glue that holds work life

balance cultures together. Without such glue, flexible working practices have a much more limited impact on the recruitment and retention of key talent.

Role Models

If an organisation has a lack of role models, particularly senior executives who work flexibly, either full-time or reduced hours, the case for flexible working is severely undermined. Working cultures are actively shaped by what senior managers approve and disapprove of. If they all work very long hours, on a non-flexible schedule, it is unlikely that those who report to them will take away the view that they approve of flexible working. Our findings suggest that this is particularly pertinent to the IT sector, in that currently senior employees in the sector are working extremely long hours and reinforcing the cultural barriers to flexible working.

Creating a culture that is truly supportive of flexible working

Organisations cannot dabble half-heartedly in implementing workplace flexibility in so far as piece-meal interventions will not transform the cultural norms and organisational barriers hindering the pursuit of flexible working practices. Making real progress on the flexible work agenda requires the integration of work life balance concerns into all aspects of people and reward policies, and their ownership by senior staff and line managers as well as the HR department. Organisations in the IT sector therefore need to audit more comprehensively how far their commitments to flexible working are producing the required changes in recruitment, retention, and reward policies, vital to making them a success. If the impacts are only being felt in silos, progress will remain slow and uneven.

Flexexecutive specialise in flexible work

The survey of IT professionals and this report were managed and produced by Flexexecutive, at the request of the Women in IT Forum and DTI.

Flexexecutive specialises in flexible work consultancy and recruitment. It helps organisations meet changing employee needs and maximise benefits arising from better recruitment and retention, lower costs and greater diversity and improved employer of choice profile. It helps individuals to meet their aspirations for increased flexibility through more varied employment opportunities.

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