



Austerity challenge

Managing fairness and flexibility in a time of austerity will raise a number of challenges for HR Managers, writes Jacqueline O'Reilly, as organisations batten down the hatches to ride the storm.

Compliance, excellence and efficiency, that's what I tell my staff we have to achieve; but it's not that easy covering for maternity leave and making sure you deliver a good service with excellent well qualified staff. The problem is we don't speak to our staff enough, or they don't feel they can tell us what they really want to do". A CEO confided in me at a meeting of the Family and Parenting Institute held at the House of Commons. Sarah Teather, Minister for Children and Families proudly spoke about the new legislation the Coalition Government were keen on introducing, to help fathers spend more time with their children. Some employers were less than convinced. Over the past decade there has been a flood of legislation around equality issues. Ensuring correct policies and procedures are in place to enable flexible working that matches the needs of firms and employees, is not always an easy balancing act, as some very large organisations have discovered to their financial peril.



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Small firms and HR teams are understandably a little concerned about the administrative burden of the introduction of Additional Paternity Leave legislation in April. But I doubt if this will open the floodgates of dads sporadically taking time off to rush home and care for the kids. The recently announced legislation to enable families to have more choice in sharing and caring is to be seriously welcomed by organisations that claim they are committed to equal opportunities and flexible working. If anything, the new legislation should mark a way to start simplifying a range of leave policies so they are the same for both men and women, over the lifecycle. But if employers are going to be able to manage this effectively they need an organisation with a culture of trust, where employees are able to communicate their preferred working times, to enable employers to manage these efficiently.

This issue was also explored at the recent second ESRC Fairness at Work Seminar held at Brighton University in December. Speakers from across Europe came together to look at the wider issue of fairness at work. Looking at European funded research, some countries such as Belgium have introduced 'time credit' systems to allow staff to take periods of leave for a

range of family, personal and professional reasons. Forward looking organisations will be interested in developing flexible working policies: they allow them to retain valuable staff who may not be able to work full-time, long hours at particular phases during their lives; it may give them access to other new workers; and it may also allow staff to upgrade their skills by following other professional learning opportunities.

Where dads do take up this leave in other countries is where they 'use it or lose it'. Norway has one of the highest rates of fathers taking up parental leave. In Germany, where these policies were introduced in 2007, there have been two effects: first, mothers return to work earlier; two, there has been an increase of fathers taking two months leave, but even here the numbers of dads doing it are relatively small. This is because either organisations are not supportive of them having time off, or because women still earn so much less than men that it doesn't make economic sense for the family.

A storm in a British tea cup? Possibly. British firms have some of the most innovative and flexible working arrangements in Europe. They are likely to already have the skills and procedures to be able to manage these effectively. Parental leave policies are much more generous in Europe than in the UK, so I doubt very much that this is going to be the cause for job losses.

Where the real problems may be in the future is with employees wanting to transfer from part-time back to full-time employment. EU funded research suggests that when firms are going to be cutting back on staff, these return options are less likely to be available. Staff who are ignorant of the policies or reluctant to use it, because they foresee obstacles or penalties, such as line manager resistance or being sidelined for promotion, are not going to be taking it up. Austerity may mean a freezing up of flexibility on both sides.



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