

Improving Work-Life Balance – What Are Other Countries Doing?

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The opinions expressed in this study do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada or the Labour Program.

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Executive Summary

The Government of Canada is committed to building strong social foundations by providing supports to meet the needs of families and to ensure that children receive the best possible start in life. One approach to implement this commitment is to support working parents so that they can build strong and cohesive families. The Labour Program, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), encourages the development of workplace measures that improve work-life balance and support working parents.

The Labour Program has published several research studies to assist public policy development on work-life balance issues, and to help organizations design and implement programs and policies that facilitate work-life balance. This report is part of that body of work and is intended to provide valuable information on work-life balance issues to managers, unions, employees and human resource professionals.

This report provides an overview of different types of work-life balance initiatives that have been developed by industrial countries around the world. It shows that these governments are increasingly committed to reducing the social, health and business costs of work-life conflict.

Data from the European Union, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States illustrate that work-life conflict is a growing issue in these jurisdictions. Many workers report that they are dissatisfied with their working hours, stressed from high levels of work intensity, and suffer from health problems due to work demands. To improve their work-life balance, many workers would prefer to work reduced and more flexible hours.

Some countries, such as the U.K., New Zealand and Australia, actively endorse work-life balance as an explicit policy goal. They have launched work-life balance campaigns that focus on

promotional activities and the voluntary compliance of employers to develop and implement work-life balance practices in their organizations.

These three countries have all developed websites on work-life balance that provide newsletters, case studies, publications and links to other relevant information and legislation. Work-life balance is also promoted through award programs. New Zealand and Australia, for example, both offer award programs to highlight organizations that demonstrate best practices. In addition, some governments have introduced legislation to support work-life balance. The U.K. legislation to give parents the right to request flexible working arrangements is notable in this regard.

These work-life balance campaigns include a variety of resources to support employers. The U.K. and Australia have published guides to assist employers in evaluating whether work-life balance policies are well integrated into the organization's overall business plans and whether the programs are actually being used by employees. Guides are also aimed at making the "business case" for work-life balance – helping employers to understand that work-life conflict has significant business costs associated with absenteeism and turnover rates. In addition, the U.K. has programs to provide funding and consultancy services so that employers can develop practices that support work-life balance.

Other countries, such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden, focus less on promotional activities and are more involved in developing legislative and other measures that support broad social policy goals to help workers balance paid work with unpaid responsibilities. They primarily seek to improve work-life

balance by redressing gender inequities in the labour force and in the division of unpaid work, particularly with respect to caregiving.

Paid parental leave benefits in these countries, especially the parental leave schemes in Denmark and Sweden, are designed to encourage parents to take an active role in caregiving while staying attached to the labour force. For example, Denmark and Sweden both allow parents to work part-time and prolong their leave beyond the usual benefits period. Sweden's leave program includes an information campaign to emphasize the importance of the father's involvement in caregiving.

Initiatives to give workers more control over their working time, such as the Netherlands' *Adjustment of Hours Law* and Denmark's amendments to the *Act on Part-time Work*, also assist workers in improving their work-life balance. Other initiatives, such as the Netherlands' "leave savings" and Sweden's sabbatical leave, allow workers more time to devote to caregiving and to pursue other interests outside of work.

In addition, Sweden has implemented an action plan to reduce costs associated with sick leave and to reduce the impact poor health has on work-life balance. Gender inequities are also addressed. Swedish research indicates that women are more likely to be employed in occupations with inferior working environments and to have heavier workloads than men, when both paid and unpaid work is considered.

Finally, several countries have adopted individual pieces of legislation or policies that address some aspect of work-life balance. These initiatives are not necessarily part of a comprehensive program or policy approach to

achieve work-life balance, but these measures could be seen as one way to improve an employee's balance between work and other responsibilities. Examples include France's reduction of hours in the statutory work week, Belgium's introduction of time credits, Ireland's "Work Life Balance Day" and the U.S. resolution to proclaim "Work and Family Month."

This report shows that there is not likely to be any "one size fits all" answer to work-life balance issues. A variety of approaches are available to support work-life balance, ranging from promotional programs that emphasize

the importance of balance and provide support to employers to reduce the business costs associated with work-life conflict, to legislation that supports parents with caregiving responsibilities.

It is clear that improving work-life balance is an important component of the policy agenda for many industrial countries, and the issue is likely to become even more important in the future. Canadians can learn from the initiatives of other countries and determine whether these approaches could be adopted to suit the needs of Canada's workplace partners.

1 Introduction

Research studies and media reports indicate that work-life conflict is an increasing problem for Canadians. But Canadians are not alone in facing this issue. This report provides an overview of how other industrial countries are addressing the business, health and social costs of work-life conflict, with the aim of showing how innovative initiatives can be developed to suit the work-life balance needs of employees and the business demands of employers.

What is work-life conflict? Work-life conflict occurs when the cumulative demands of work and non-work life roles are incompatible in some respect so that participation in one role is made more difficult by participation in the other role.¹ A particularly important element of work-life conflict is work-related stress. Working conditions such as heavy workloads, lack of participation in decision-making, health and safety hazards, job insecurity, and tight deadlines are associated with work-related stress.

How significant is the problem? Work-life conflict erodes the mental and physical well-being of workers, affects the quality of their personal relationships outside of work, and increases costs to businesses. Employees with high levels of work-life conflict are more likely to experience poor health. Work-life conflict has negative impacts on employees' relationships with their children and their spouse.² Work-life conflict also has consequences for an organization's bottom line. Employees experiencing high levels of work-life conflict are likely to miss more work days per year, are less committed to the organization, are less satisfied with their job, and are more likely to intend to leave their job.³

While individual coping mechanisms, such as the use of Employee Assistance Programs, may help some people feel less stressed and overwhelmed, it is increasingly recognized that work-life conflict needs to be dealt with at one of the sources of the problem – at the workplace level. Workplace programs, policies, legislation and other initiatives can provide workers with the support and security they need to balance work with other interests and life responsibilities.

Other countries are also concerned with the negative effects that work-life conflict has on productivity, employees' well-being and employees' capacity to provide care for children and others. This report first reviews survey results and other data to give an indication of the degree to which work-life conflict is a concern in the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (U.K.), Australia and the United States (U.S.). Then, the main portion of this report highlights recent initiatives of various national governments.

These initiatives reflect three different approaches, depending on whether a government: (1) actively endorses work-life balance as an explicit policy goal by generally relying on promotional activities and voluntary compliance; (2) develops a broad range of legislative and other measures to support the same goals without promoting work-life balance to the same degree; or (3) adopts individual pieces of legislation or policies that address some aspects of work-life balance.

First, this report discusses targeted promotion of work-life balance through the implementation of national programs and policies. The governments of the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia have strategically implemented promotional programs that are publicly endorsed by government leaders. These governments are promoting the business and health benefits of work-life balance and have developed programs, policies, legislation and resources to address the needs of workers, to improve productivity, and to reduce the business costs associated with work-life conflict.

Second, this report examines the approach of governments helping employees balance paid work with unpaid work through a broad range

of measures. The Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden have put in place legislation and have developed initiatives aimed at improving workers' ability to balance work with other responsibilities including caregiving. Active support for gender equality in paid and unpaid work is emphasized in many of these initiatives.

Finally, this report considers government support for work-life balance through the implementation of an individual policy or isolated piece of legislation. France's legislation to reduce working time and Belgium's system of time credits are examples of ways that governments can support work-life balance. Ireland's introduction of a "Work Life Balance Day" and the U.S. resolution to proclaim "National Work and Family Month" illustrate efforts to put work-life balance on government policy agendas and could be seen as one way to improve an employee's balance between work and other responsibilities.

This report looks at government initiatives only. In Canada and other industrial countries, employers and unions play a key role in developing policies and programs to improve work-life balance. Employers are increasingly adopting policies and practices to assist their employees in reducing work-life conflict. Through collective bargaining, unions promote provisions that support employees' work-life balance. However, the role of employers and the role of industrial relations in the support of work-life balance are beyond the scope of this paper.⁴ In addition, broader social and economic policies that affect work-life balance, such as government support for childcare and child-related tax credits are not included in this report but may be considered in future research on this issue.

2 Assessing Work-Life Conflict Beyond the Canadian Experience

Observers have identified that heavy workloads, unsupportive managers, and corporate cultures that stress hours of work are all contributors to the prevalence of work-life conflict. Recent research by Dr. Linda Duxbury and Dr. Chris Higgins, published by Health Canada, indicates that the majority of Canadian employees have difficulty balancing work and family life, and most of this difficulty stems from these kinds of workplace problems.

According to this research, 65% of working Canadians reported that they experienced a medium or high level of work to family conflict in 2001, and 28% reported a high level of conflict.⁵ The Conference Board of Canada has made similar observations. In one of its surveys, more than two-thirds (68%) of respondents said that it was at least "somewhat" difficult to balance their work and family life in 1999.⁶ Moreover, 28% noted that they found balancing work and family life to be difficult or very difficult. Duxbury and Higgins estimate that the costs of work-life conflict with respect to absenteeism alone are very high – \$3 to \$5 billion a year in direct costs and \$4.5 to \$10 billion when direct and indirect costs are included.⁷

Concurrently, the number of employees reporting high job stress increased markedly, from 13% in 1991 to 35% by 2001, almost a threefold increase.⁸ The direct annual business cost resulting from job stress has been estimated in the range of \$16 billion.⁹

Canadians, however, are not alone in the struggle to keep up with the demands of work while balancing other responsibilities. Workers in other industrial countries are also experiencing the stress of work-life conflict.

It is important to note that research on the degree to which work-life conflict affects workers in other countries is very limited. There are few cross-national comparative surveys on work-life balance. However, the data that are available paint a similar picture about work-life balance across the world. Increases in work

intensity and stress are having an impact on workers' ability to balance work with other responsibilities.

Many employees would prefer to work fewer hours and have access to flexible work arrangements. This is particularly true for workers who have caring responsibilities, and there is clearly a gender dimension to these preferences. A lack of flexibility in the workplace is especially taxing for women, who tend to be more involved than men in unpaid work related to domestic and caring responsibilities.

This section highlights data from the European Union, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States to show that work-life balance is a growing concern for workers internationally.

The European Union

Many European workers are dissatisfied with their working hours and high levels of work intensity, which likely affects their ability to balance work and other life demands.

A survey conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (1998) found that women would prefer to work a 30-hour week and men would prefer a 37-hour week. This translates into an average reduction of four hours a week for employed women, and six hours a week for men. The survey also found that more than 80% of those working long hours (50 hours and over) would prefer to work fewer hours.¹⁰

Women prefer to work fewer hours than men, on average, because women are devoting more time to childcare and unpaid domestic work. In

couple households where both adults are employed full-time, and there is a child under five years old, mothers on average spend over twice as much time on childcare and other domestic work as fathers.¹¹ In addition:

- 16% of women are involved in caring for elderly or disabled relatives at least once or twice a week, compared with 8% of men;
- 41% of women are involved in caring and educating children for one hour or more every day, compared with 24% of men;
- 63% of women are involved in housework for one hour or more every day, compared with 12% of men; and
- 85% of women, compared with just 25% of men, take responsibility for shopping and contributing to other household duties.¹²

Clearly, women's greater involvement in unpaid work is related to their preference for a shorter work week and a desire to balance work with other life demands. This preference is illustrated in recent research that found the majority of women working part-time have chosen to work part-time in order to look after their children or other domestic commitments. Of current part-time workers in the EU, around two-thirds of the women and one-third of the men report that they do not want full-time jobs. Furthermore, 23% of full-time employed women and 19% of full-time employed men would prefer part-time work.¹³

The degree of flexibility of their working hours also plays a key role in many workers' struggle to balance work with other responsibilities. In a 2000 survey on working conditions, the European Foundation reports that working-time autonomy is limited for

many workers. Approximately one-third of those employed in the current 15 EU member countries consider that they have no influence over their working hours or even when they will take their annual leave.¹⁴

The same survey also finds that high work intensity (the need to work fast and meet tight deadlines) is strongly linked to reported health problems and absence from work due to accidents. Almost two-thirds of workers reported that they worked at a very high speed for at least a quarter of their time in 2000, and one-quarter reported that they worked at high speeds all of the time or most of the time. Similarly, almost two-thirds of workers reported that they had to meet tight deadlines for at least one-quarter of their working time in 2000, and over one-quarter reported that they needed to meet tight deadlines all of the time or all of their working time. In addition, the health of almost three-quarters of these respondents is affected by their work all of the time or most of the time. A significant number experience backaches (42%), stress (40%), muscular pain in the shoulders and neck (31%) and overall fatigue (31%).¹⁵

The United Kingdom

In a 2003 survey, 69% of respondents agreed that work-life balance was an important factor when assessing a potential new job, including 77% of parents with young children and 81% of respondents with caring responsibilities.¹⁶

Full-time U.K. employees work an average of 44 hours per week, longer than most of their European neighbours.¹⁷ Furthermore, they

work an average of six hours more per week than the average normal full-time hours set by collective agreements – a higher discrepancy than in any other EU country.¹⁸

According to other survey results, employers cite a temporary increase in workload and a backlog of work as the reasons U.K. employees are working in excess of their standard working hours. These results found that full-time employees who worked in excess of their contracted hours increased their working week on average by 9.6 hours. In many cases, overtime hours were not compensated in any way. In around two-thirds of workplaces where senior managers and professionals worked additional hours, no payment or time-off in-lieu was provided. Those most likely to work long hours were men in couple households with children – more than 14% worked 60 or more hours a week.¹⁹

Survey findings published by the U.K. Department of Trade and Industry (2003) show that workers prefer flexible working hours as a way to improve work-life balance. Many workers believe that working flexible hours is more important than earning a higher salary or receiving other job perks. Almost half (46%) of the respondents chose flexible hours as the benefit they would most look for in their next job. Over half of the female respondents preferred flexibility, as did parents with children under six years old. One in three respondents said they would rather have the opportunity to work flexible hours than receive the equivalent of over \$2,000 more in pay each year.²⁰

Australia

For 27% of Australian employees, satisfaction with work-life balance declined in the year preceding the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (1995).²¹

An increase in weekly working hours in the year prior to the 1995 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey was associated with a decline in satisfaction with work-life balance. Managers, professionals and employees with caring responsibilities were the most likely to report a drop in satisfaction. Work intensity also rose – 28% of employees experienced increased levels of work-related stress, put more effort into their job, and worked at a faster pace.²²

Like workers in other countries who are experiencing increased working hours and work intensity, a significant percentage (26%) of Australian workers would prefer to work reduced hours. This is especially true for full-time employed women, 43% of whom would prefer working fewer hours, since they assume more responsibility for unpaid domestic work and caring responsibilities.²³ Mothers in dual-income households where both spouses work full-time feel especially rushed: 70% of full-time employed mothers always or often feel rushed, compared with 56% of fathers and 52% of women with no dependent children.²⁴

While many Australian women – especially those with children under the age of 12 – would prefer to work part-time, there is evidence that managerial cultures are not supportive of part-time work and that working part-time inhibits career advancement.²⁵

Despite unsupportive corporate cultures, over half (57%) of employed mothers work part-time, compared with only 5% of employed fathers. Two-thirds of employees who took a break from work of six months or more were women. In addition, many Australian workers have difficulty balancing work with caregiving responsibilities. Of the women who took a six-month break, 62% cited "family reasons" as the main motive for the break, and more than half have a child or children under 12 years of age.²⁶

Nearly one-third of employed caregivers have claimed that caregiving commitments caused repeated work interruptions and resulted in their having to work fewer hours. Almost 25% of employees with caregiving responsibilities have taken periods of unpaid leave, 16% have taken jobs with fewer responsibilities, and 13% have refused promotions.²⁷

The United States

The percentage of employed parents with children under six who reported significant work-family conflict increased from 16% in 1992 to 34% in 1997.²⁸

Workers in the United States tend to work longer average annual actual hours than most advanced industrial economies, according to 2002 data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).²⁹ A survey by the Families and Work Institute indicates that most American workers would like to see a reduction in their working hours. In 1997 almost two-thirds (63%) expressed a preference to reduce their working hours, compared with only 46% in a similar survey of Americans in 1992. The

1997 survey reported that on average Americans would like to cut 11 hours of work per week out of their schedule.³⁰

Not only do the majority of working parents report a preference for working shorter hours, they also do not want to take on more responsibility in their jobs. In 1997 only 41% of employed mothers reported wanting greater job responsibility, compared with 50% of employed mothers in 1992. In 1997, 50% of fathers wanted greater job responsibility, compared with 63% of fathers in 1992.³¹

As a result of long working hours, decreased interest in more job responsibility and increased work-life conflict, there has also been growing demand for more flexible work arrangements. In a 2002 poll, human resource professionals ranked flexible schedules as the top way to motivate employees. Of those

surveyed, 66% indicated they had seen a rise in requests for flexible work schedules during the last 12 months. The top two reasons were general work-life balance issues (76% ranked this as the primary reason) and the wish of working mothers to spend more time with their children.³²

Employees who have no support to work flexibly are more likely to feel overworked: 45% of those who say they cannot change their work schedules to work their preferred hours experience high levels of feeling overworked, versus 33% of those who can change their work schedules. Moreover, almost half of employees experiencing high levels of feeling overworked say that they are somewhat or very likely to seek employment elsewhere in the coming year, versus only 30% who report low levels of feeling overworked.³³

Selected International Approaches to Improve Work-Life Balance

The rest of this report focuses on three types of government approaches to improve work-life balance. First, the targeted campaigns of the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia to promote work-life balance are discussed. Next, the Dutch, Danish and Swedish support for workers' ability to balance work with other responsibilities through a broad range of measures is examined. Finally, some pieces of legislation and initiatives in France, Belgium, Ireland and the United States are highlighted.

3.1 Targeted Campaigns to Improve Work-Life Balance

A better balance between work and life is an issue for everyone, not just those with caring responsibilities. Simple changes can make all the difference to all employees trying to balance their personal and working lives more successfully...

Money is saved through reduced sickness absence, stress, recruitment and training costs and productivity is raised through better morale...it makes good business sense. It's a win win situation for all concerned and we would like more organisations to take up this issue in their workplace.

– Margaret Hodge, U.K. Minister for Employment and Equal Opportunities³⁴

The United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand have, to different degrees, launched targeted campaigns to improve work-life balance. The campaigns promote work-life balance as the main policy driver to increase workers' ability to cope with the demands of work while also managing unpaid work.

These governments have all developed websites to provide information to policy analysts, employers, employees and unions on the importance of improving work-life balance. Newsletters,

publications, links to other websites, and information on policies, relevant legislation and programs endorse work-life balance as a means through which businesses will save on costs and improve productivity, while workers will enjoy a better balance between work and other life interests and responsibilities. Many of the initiatives for workers are not restricted to parents. In contrast to the situation in most countries, these work-life balance campaigns are generally intended to make flexible work arrangements and other policies available to workers regardless of their caring responsibilities.

Included are initiatives such as integrating the development of all work-life balance policies and activities; publicly promoting work-life balance through awards programs; supporting employers; and developing projects to reduce work-related stress.

The United Kingdom

In March 2000, Prime Minister Tony Blair and Education and Employment Secretary of State David Blunkett officially launched the British government's work-life balance campaign. The campaign is part of the government's agenda for employment relations policy and is led by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), which also works on employment rights policy and legislation. The focus is on tackling the long-hours culture, targeting sectors with acute work-life balance problems and providing support and guidance.

A team within the DTI is responsible for raising awareness among businesses of the benefits of work-life balance policies and practices. Case studies, guidelines on implementation, research, information on best practices and on how to apply for government support are available on the DTI's work-life

balance website. The website also links to organizations that provide information and support to caregivers, persons with disabilities, single parents, women, the self-employed, and teleworkers. Other links provide information on maternity rights and childcare, employment agencies specializing in part-time work or flexible working, employer organizations and other government departments and services.³⁵

Partnership and Challenge Funds

As part of its campaign, the United Kingdom has created two funds to provide assistance to employers. The Partnership Fund, established in 1999, provides up to \$110,335 in matched funding for projects that improve relationships between employers and employees, improving productivity and employee job satisfaction. Projects that improve work-life balance are encouraged, and projects that have identified the causes of stress to reduce their impact have been funded.³⁶

The Challenge Fund, launched in 2000, is a resource to help employers implement work-life balance strategies that benefit business, customers and employees. This fund pays consultants to provide advice to private, public and voluntary sector employers who want to introduce innovative working practices that benefit their business and improve their employees' work-life balance. The consultants help employers assess the business benefits of flexible working arrangements, identify the needs of employees, and find solutions that meet the needs of employers, customers and employees.

In addition, employers may receive a "Specific Solution" package that provides materials to support organizations in alleviating work-life conflict. These packages include information to help organizations find out what kind of

working arrangements employees would like and explore solutions that meet both individual and business needs; develop work-life balance policies; support the effective implementation of existing work-life balance policies through training of managers and staff; and support the implementation of cultural change to increase take-up of work-life balance opportunities.

Challenge Fund projects also measure financial savings, reductions in staff turnover, staff retention levels and take-up of work-life balance options by employees. For example, one company that grows, harvests and packages mushrooms and then distributes them to large supermarkets was having a major problem with staff turnover, recruitment and absenteeism. Within six months of receiving support from the Challenge Fund, productivity improved by 9%, overtime costs were reduced by 26%, absence rates fell by 46%, staff turnover decreased by 44%, sickness absences fell by 51% and unauthorized absences dropped by 70%.³⁷

Support for Employers

Work-Life Balance isn't the soft option.

It's about employers and employees working together to find out how they can both gain from a more imaginative approach to working practices...

Employers worldwide are recognising of their own accord that it makes good business sense to provide opportunities for their workforce to achieve a better balance – with a pay-back of increased morale, better effectiveness and productivity, and the ability to embrace

change. The workplace has altered dramatically over the last decade and old methods are no longer appropriate as employers accept that their most valuable asset is their workforce... if you as an employer are failing to address these issues, you are placing your business at a distinct disadvantage – and keeping one foot firmly in the 20th century while other players in your sector develop their competitive edge for the future.³⁸

A variety of supports are available to employers who are interested in improving work-life balance practices in their organization. Among these supports are an alliance of employers committed to the improvement of work-life balance, a work-life balance standard, and a range of publications.

At the official launch of the work-life balance campaign, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced the creation of Employers for Work-Life Balance, an independent alliance of leading work-life balance employers committed to working in partnership with government to promote good practice in the business community.³⁹ The alliance is run by The Work Foundation, an independent, not-for-profit think tank and consultancy.

Employers for Work-Life Balance provides resources geared to helping employers implement work-life balance practices. A website contains case studies and a "jargon buster" dictionary to define terms such as "annualized hours" and "career breaks." In addition, a "debate" link allows employers to

access press releases and research studies, obtain information on how to contact experts, and view a chronology of U.K. developments, including legislation that employers should be aware of.

The website also provides a benchmarking tool. Using this tool, employers can determine how well they understand the business case for implementing work-life balance practices; whether their work-life strategy is part of the business plan or human resource plan; whether work-life balance is implemented in the organization's policy and practice; and how well the organization monitors both the qualitative and quantitative impacts of its work-life strategy. A section on developing a business case assists employers in understanding why work-life balance is a business issue. This section presents case studies of employers who have increased productivity and decreased business costs associated with the effects of work-life conflict.⁴⁰

In addition to this support for employers, a work-life balance standard was set up in 2000. The standard provides employers with a framework within which work-life balance policies and practices can be developed; a benchmark against which organizations can be assessed; and a way to recognize good working practices. The standard contains four elements:

1. Commitment – Management and policy decisions will commit the organization to a systematic approach to work-life balance.
2. Systems/Planning – Systems will be in place to implement work-life balance arrangements, and these will be included in business plans, training plans and project plans.

3. Action/Implementation – There will be a clear and systematic approach to the implementation and deployment of work-life balance arrangements.
4. Review and Assessment – Systematic review and assessment of the impact of work-life balance arrangements will be demonstrated, and managers' performance related to the achievement of work-life balance will be regularly reviewed.

Each of these elements can be measured by key indicators, and evidence is required to show how the organization meets each indicator. For example, in order for an organization to show its commitment to work-life balance, it must be able to prove that work-life balance arrangements are available to all its people. All managers must be able to describe how work-life balance arrangements are communicated throughout the organization; information describing the organization's work-life balance arrangements has to be widely available; and employees should be able to explain how the organization's work-life balance arrangements meet their specific needs.⁴¹ If the organization complies with the evidence requirements, it obtains a license to use the work-life balance standard logo on its letterhead and in its advertising.⁴²

The Right of Parents to Request Flexible Working Arrangements

In April 2003, the U.K. government enacted legislation to help parents cope with work while caring for children. Parents with children under six years old or disabled children under 18 have the right to apply to work flexibly, and employers have a statutory duty to consider these requests seriously. To be eligible, employees must have worked with

their employer continuously for at least the last 26 weeks, not be an agency worker or a member of the armed forces, and not have made another application to work flexibly under the right during the past 12 months. Eligible employees can make an application in writing to request a change to the hours they work and/or a change to the times they work. They may also make a request to work from home. These arrangements can include working patterns such as annualized hours, compressed hours, flextime, job-sharing, shift working, unpaid leave during school holidays, and staggered hours. If the application is accepted, the employee's terms and conditions of employment are permanently changed unless otherwise agreed between both parties.

Within 28 days of receiving the request, the employer must arrange to meet with the employee to discuss how the proposed work pattern can best be accommodated. Within 14 days of the meeting, the employer must write to the employee to either agree to the new work pattern and indicate a start date, or to provide clear business grounds why the request cannot be accepted. Business grounds include the burden of additional costs; detrimental effect on the organization's ability to meet customer demand; inability to reorganize work among existing staff; inability to recruit additional staff; detrimental impact on quality or performance; insufficiency of work during the periods the employee proposes to work; and planned structural changes.

The employee also has the right to appeal a decision within 14 days of being notified of it. An appeal can take place through an informal discussion, the employer's grievance

procedure, or third-party involvement with a union representative or an Acas (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) official. A decision based on incorrect facts would provide an employee with a basis to make a complaint to an employment tribunal or seek Acas arbitration. A tribunal does not have the power to question the employer's business reasons for declining a request, but it will want to see evidence of any facts relied upon to reject the application and evidence that the employer has provided the employee with sufficient explanation as to why the business grounds apply to the application. If an employment tribunal or Acas binding arbitration finds the appeal in favour of the employee, the employer can be ordered to reconsider the application and/or provide financial compensation to the employee.⁴³

This legislation was promoted by the U.K.'s Employment Opportunities Commission, which launched a public campaign to promote flexible working. Posters with the words *I Can't Carry On* (for employees), and *They Can't Carry On* (for employers) advertise the legal rights of parents to flexible working. The posters were distributed to health centres, and advertisements in the legal and accountancy press alerted solicitors and accountants to the changing employment legislation. The campaign has broad objectives: to give parents the confidence to go to employers when they need to change their work hours for family reasons; to remind employers that a 9 to 5 work pattern no longer fits with the needs of many employees and customers; and to let parents and employers know about the Commission and other sources of information on flexible working.

Development of Management Standards to Reduce Work-Related Stress

Work-related stress is recognized by the Government of the U.K. as a growing and costly problem. The U.K.'s Health and Safety Executive (HSE) asserts that there is a clear link between poor work organization and subsequent ill health. The HSE's key messages are that work-related stress is a serious problem for organizations; but there are things organizations can do to prevent and control it; and the law requires organizations to take action.⁴⁴

The HSE interprets the legal duty of employers to protect the health and safety of their employees (under the *Health and Safety at Work Act 1974*) and to conduct health and safety risk assessments (under the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999*) to include the duty to minimize and conduct risk assessments on the work-related stress of their employees.

In an attempt to provide employers with resources to assist them with this legal duty, the HSE is in the process of drafting management standards that may eventually form the legal basis of a "Stress Code" to regulate minimum standards regarding stress levels. At this point, pilot testing is taking place and organizations can voluntarily implement these or other standards to assess workplace stress. The current draft of these standards states that at a minimum:

- 85% of employees need to indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs; that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work; and that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and supervisor; and

- 65% of employees need to indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours (i.e. bullying) at work; that they understand their role and responsibilities; and that the organization engages them frequently when undergoing an organizational change.⁴⁵

New Zealand

Government policy has a significant influence on people's work-life balance. Among other things, it sets the ground rules for how workplaces operate, how people receive income and help with finding work, how people are educated and how childcare is structured. Government is also a major employer. The Government is not about to tell employers how to run their companies, or employees how to run their lives. Government has a major leadership role in promoting work-life balance and working in partnership with others to find win-wins, not prescriptive solutions.⁴⁶

New Zealand has promoted the importance of work-life balance at the highest levels of government. The government's position on work-life balance was set out in the 2002 Speech from the Throne, which stated that work is only one dimension of living and it should not crowd out and distort family life, recreation and personal development. The Speech also stated that work-life balance initiatives should seek to raise the profile of

activities other than work and should contribute to the government's goals of a growing economy and an innovative and inclusive society.

Resources on work-life balance are available through the New Zealand Department of Labour's Future of Work Programme. The work-life balance portion of the program includes a website that provides a wide range of information on best practices, recent research, examples of provisions in collective agreements related to work-life balance, and links to relevant government policies and legislation.⁴⁷ The program also provides information on the changing economy, the changing workplace, the changing workforce, and skills, education and training.

The overall aim is to increase understanding of future trends in work and their implications for the workplace, the workforce and employment opportunities in New Zealand. This approach situates work-life balance goals within a broad social and economic context. Trends such as an increasing number of dual-income families, an aging population, a higher incidence of non-standard work arrangements, and changing employment relationships are recognized as factors that can contribute to work-life conflict and high stress levels.⁴⁸

To take the development of work-life balance efforts even further, in August 2003, Minister of Labour Margaret Wilson announced an integrated policy development program to design family-friendly and other policies to promote work-life balance. She indicated that a number of different government agencies are carrying out research and policy development in this area, and the work needs to be better coordinated. The announced plan includes the establishment of a steering group led by the Department of Labour, with representatives

from various agencies, who will work together to develop policy options and engage in extensive public consultations, with a focus on low-income families, single parents, and precarious non-standard workers.⁴⁹

Since this announcement, a Work-Life Balance Project has been established to notify the public about the development of the steering group, provide further information about work-life balance, and announce related events. The project includes a consultation phase with organizations and an invitation to all New Zealanders to inform the government what they think are the major work-life balance issues and possible solutions to alleviate conflict. From March to May 2004, the government will gather all of these findings and consider how to support good practices leading to work-life balance.⁵⁰

Awards Program

Work-life balance awards are administered each year through New Zealand's Equal Employment Opportunities Trust. The aim of the awards is to champion and reward best practices in work and life. The awards are presented by the Prime Minister at a gala dinner. All entrants are profiled in a publication, *New Zealand's Best Employers*, which describes their work life practices and policies. There are five award categories, including a unique "Walk the Talk" category that recognizes chief executives or senior managers who act as champions and enable employees to improve their work-life balance. The organizations must provide evidence that the work-life balance policies are benefiting employees. In large organizations work-life balance initiatives must be integrated into the organizational strategy, culture, practice, senior management accountability and measures of success.⁵¹

Key Provisions in Current Legislation – Parental Leave and Work-Related Stress

As part of New Zealand's promotion of work-life balance through its Future of Work Programme the Government lists a number of key provisions in current legislation that support work-life balance. Under the *Parental Leave and Employment Protection (Paid Parental Leave) Act 2002*, pregnant women are entitled to up to 10 days of unpaid special leave to attend medical appointments; anyone whose partner or spouse has recently had a child is entitled to up to two weeks of unpaid partner/paternity leave; up to 52 weeks of extended unpaid leave can be shared between partners after the birth or adoption of a child; and up to 12 weeks of paid parental leave is provided to employees who have worked for their current employer for at least one year, working 10 hours per week or more.⁵²

In addition, the Future of Work Programme cites the *Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992*, which holds employers responsible for controlling or eliminating hazards that may cause injury or occupational illness, to implicitly include work-related stress. Although the Act does not specifically define what workplace hazards are, it places a positive obligation on the employer to have in place systems to monitor the work environment to ensure that hazards in that environment do not cause employees unnecessary physical or mental harm. The employer must also have systems in place to deal with employee stress. New Zealand's Occupational Safety and Health Service (OSH) would consider prosecuting an employer if there is clear evidence of:

- harm, supported by a reputable medical diagnosis relating to standard medical diagnostic criteria;
- the employer knowing about the employee's problem;

- some significant hazard in the workplace, without which the harm would not have occurred (e.g. inherently difficult work, an unmanaged and unrealistic workload or persistent bullying); and
- no significant voluntary employee contribution to the harm (e.g. the employee accepting more than their share of work in spite of repeated instructions from management not to do so).⁵³

To help employers comply with health and safety regulations, OSH released the guide *Healthy Work – Managing Stress and Fatigue in the Workplace in 2003*. This guide provides information to help employers to implement healthy workplaces, identify stresses that are potential workplace hazards, and proactively prevent work-related stress.⁵⁴

Australia

Within the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, a Work and Family Unit provides information and advice to employers and employees on how to improve the balance between work and life, with a focus on flexible working arrangements. The information is designed to encourage organizations and individuals to use the opportunities for agreement making in the workplace relations system and promote the adoption of best-practice work and family policies.

Compared with New Zealand and the U.K., Australia's focus is couched more narrowly in terms of work-family balance. Nevertheless, a variety of resources are available on the Work and Family Unit's website to assist workers in improving their work-life balance. Fact sheets, information on relevant legislation, an awards program, and other tools have been developed and integrated into one portal.⁵⁵

Australia's National Work and Family Awards

[A]wards are very important because they are about encouraging the businesses and the enterprises of Australia to acknowledge the humanity of all the people who work there, to accept that everyone who works in a business or enterprise is a human being first and foremost and then a worker and that our working lives must accommodate everything that is going on in our ordinary human existence... We don't believe in one size fits all legislative or semi-legislative prescriptions. What we believe in is giving people freedom to come to the best arrangements they can between themselves.

- Tony Abbott, Australian Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations⁵⁶

In 1992, the Australian government implemented the National Work and Family Awards. The awards are administered by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia, and are sponsored by several federal departments. Winners are announced annually by the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations at a special presentation event. The awards aim to:

- demonstrate and promote the business benefits of flexible working arrangements;

- recognize organizations that accommodate employees' work-life needs with productive outcomes;
- provide an opportunity for companies to review and benchmark their working arrangements; and
- provide case studies and model policies and initiatives that will serve as useful tools for other employers.

These awards are focused on the achievement of work-life balance. Criteria such as employees' awareness of work-life policies and practices, whether they feel comfortable using them, and the benefits to employers and employees are key elements the judges look for when assessing a nominated organization.

Evaluation Guide for Employers

The Government of Australia developed a guide to help employers assess how well their work-life balance strategies are working. The evaluation guide helps employers:

- determine which initiatives are contributing to the organization's business objectives;
- identify the strengths and weaknesses in their current work and family strategy, or in their people management strategies more generally;
- calculate the return on investment in initiatives; and
- gather information to inform future strategies or initiatives, or to make their current strategy even more family-friendly.

The evaluation guide is also aimed at helping managers and human resource professionals convince senior management of the benefits of work-life strategies. The evaluation helps

employers determine what should be measured, how to collect data, how to identify the key issues, how to cost the issues, and how to realize goals and measure achievements.⁵⁷

Legislative Role in Enforcing Work-Life Balance Practices

The Australian government's involvement in developing national legislation to support work-life balance is limited. Australia has a complex system of industrial bargaining, which results in workers being covered by legal structures or contractual agreements under various state and federal laws, industrial awards, and collective enterprise and individual agreements.

Industrial Relations Awards: Awards are legally binding industrial relations instruments that cover multiple employers and establish minimum standards across substantial sections of an occupation or industry. They regulate terms and conditions of employment by directly covering employees, and form the basis for establishing "no disadvantage" for employees entering into agreements at the enterprise level. The 1993 *Reform Act* decreased the significance of awards by creating a workplace bargaining regime with the express purpose of encouraging unions and employers to bargain and reach agreements on an enterprise-by-enterprise basis. A bargaining stream was also created to allow non-union employers to bargain directly with their

employees. The award system was relegated to the role of a safety net (providing minimal employment standards for each industry). The 1996 *Workplace Relations Act* reduced awards to a set of 20 minimum conditions and introduced Australian Workplace Agreements, which are negotiated with individual employers, as the "new" contractual basis for labour relations.

Today, the government's role in workplace practices is largely confined to setting up legislative frameworks in which bargaining takes place. The government, therefore, primarily promotes work-life balance through the non-legislative activities previously discussed.⁵⁸

The Work and Family Unit within the Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations cites the *Workplace Relations Act 1996* (WR Act) as the overarching framework legislation to assist and encourage employees to balance their work and family life. The WR Act provides a framework for cooperative workplace relations and contains provisions to assist employees in balancing their work and family responsibilities effectively through the development of mutually beneficial work practices with employers; and to prevent and eliminate discrimination on a range of grounds, including family responsibilities.⁵⁹

Under the WR Act, employees are entitled to unpaid maternity and parental leave of 52 weeks. Except for one week at the time of birth, parents of the same child cannot take

leave simultaneously. Both parents' combined unpaid leave cannot exceed 52 weeks. In most circumstances the employee is entitled to return to the same position he or she held before the leave was taken, and the leave does not break the employee's continuity of service. This leave is also available to parents who adopt a child.⁶⁰

Besides these minimum provisions, the WR Act ensures that awards take family responsibilities into consideration by providing that the Australian Industrial Relations Commission must perform award-making functions that further the objectives of the Act. This includes "the need to prevent and eliminate discrimination because of or for reasons including... family responsibilities."⁶¹

While awards have lost some of their relevance for Australian employees due to the introduction of Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) in 1996, awards still regulate some matters related to balancing work and family life. For example, awards include a safety net of employment conditions covering sick leave and parental, maternity and adoption leave.⁶² Certified agreements (made collectively between employers and employees or unions) and AWAs (workplace agreements made with an individual employee) also provide provisions related to work-life balance beyond the WR Act.

The Work and Family Unit has information on best practices that can help employers and employees negotiate agreements that include family-friendly provisions.⁶³ In addition, a database with family-friendly agreement clauses is a helpful resource that allows the user to access a range of provisions in federal certified agreements. Its purpose is to provide access to family-friendly clauses by industry, by the size of the organization and by type of

clause. For example, the user can find examples of paid family leave clauses in the retail trade in medium-sized organizations.⁶⁴

3.2 Supporting Work-Life Balance through an Overall Caregiving Approach

The Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden have developed policies and legislation to support workers' ability to balance work with other interests and responsibilities, primarily with respect to caregiving. Even though these countries have not developed a targeted approach to work-life balance issues, they have historically been involved in implementing strategies and legislation that help alleviate work-life conflict and support workers' ability to provide care.

As members of the European Union (EU), these countries are directed to provide minimum standards to reconcile work with family life. One of the four pillars of the European Employment Strategy (2002) consists of commitments to strengthen equal opportunities policies for men and women, reduce gender gaps in the labour market, and reconcile work and family life. These commitments coincide with ambitious targets to raise labour market participation, in particular to raise female employment rates in the EU from 53% to 60% by 2010.⁶⁵ Currently, the EU promotes work-life balance through several directives such as the Pregnant Workers Directive, the Parental Leave Directive and the Equal Treatment in Employment Directive.

Compared with other countries, gender gaps in employment in the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden are relatively small. Each of these countries already has female employment

rates in excess of the 60% target. In 2002, at least 76% of women in these countries between the ages of 25 and 49, the main child-bearing years, were employed.⁶⁶ This is the case despite the fact that women still bear the responsibility for the majority of unpaid work. The high female employment rates may be due to generous policies and legislation, which allow women and men to balance paid work with unpaid responsibilities.

Recent initiatives such as extended parental leave arrangements and adjustments to working time will be highlighted in this section.

The Netherlands

Dutch policy approaches include a right to adjust working time, parental and other leave to care for family members, and a policy initiative to make it easier for people to combine work and care and to help older workers continue to work as long as possible.

Adjustment of Hours Law

The *Adjustment of Hours Law* (2000) gives Dutch workers the right to request a shortening or lengthening of their normal working hours. As a rule, employers are obliged to grant such a request unless a substantive business reason to refuse it exists. Moreover, employers are generally not allowed to demand to know the reasons behind the request.

In practice, this law enables Dutch workers to work full-time in their early career years, allows new parents to shift to a four-day schedule when raising young children, allows them to return to full-time work as children get older and need less parental supervision, and finally allows employees to shift down to part-time work in the years leading to retirement. In short, the law allows for a

voluntary reduction, or increase, in hours without affecting the quality of one's job, although pay and benefits are adjusted on a pro-rated basis to reflect the change in hours worked.

Since the implementation of this law, the rate of part-time employment has increased and the percentage of involuntary part-time workers has decreased. In 1999, 39.8% of workers worked part-time, while in 2001, 42.2% of workers worked part-time. In 1999, 4.3% of part-time workers were involuntary, while in 2001, only 2.5% of part-time workers were involuntary.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the Netherlands has by far the highest rate of part-time workers and the lowest rate of involuntary part-time workers among EU countries.

Although it is not possible to make a direct link between these changes and the *Adjustment of Hours Law*, the numbers suggest that this law and other legislative and policy approaches are empowering workers to choose how they balance their overall working time with other responsibilities. Another Dutch law, the *Equal Treatment of Working Hours Act* (1996), protects part-time workers from discrimination relating to equal access to training and promotion opportunities.⁶⁸ It would be interesting to investigate longer-term trends to try to assess the impact of these laws and other initiatives on the incidence of voluntary part-time work.

If the *Adjustment of Hours Law* is successful, progress could be made toward achieving official Dutch government objectives for a more equitable distribution of time devoted to paid work and unpaid domestic and caregiving work. However, rather than an increase in dual-earner households where the two partners work similar hours and contribute equally to unpaid work, the norm for many households in

the Netherlands is a "one and a half dual-earner model." This means that women, for the most part, are working part-time to leave room for caregiving and other domestic responsibilities. While this may be a voluntary choice for many women, it does not do anything to facilitate greater participation of fathers in caregiving.

Also, part-time employment for long periods of time does not facilitate career progress into senior management positions.⁶⁹ Therefore, gender equity within the workforce will not necessarily rise if the law increases women's participation in part-time work and reinforces the dependence on women for caregiving and domestic responsibilities. The effects of this law will need to be monitored over time to determine whether it improves work-life balance for both men and women.

Work and Care Act

The *Work and Care Act*, introduced in December 2001, encompasses provisions for different types of leave to care for children and other relatives, spouses and partners. The Act includes the right to paid maternity leave (16 weeks with wage payments from the government at a maximum rate slightly higher than the average national wage rate), paid paternity leave (two days paid in full by the employer), unpaid parental leave over a six-month period, and provisions for adoption and multiple births.

In addition to child-related leave benefits, other provisions include emergency leave for a short duration to cover unforeseen emergency situations, and short-term carers' leave (to a maximum of 10 days per year) to care for sick family members. Workers taking this type of leave receive the minimum wage or 70% of their wages, whichever is greater, for which the employer receives compensation. Career break leave (for a maximum of six months) at

70% of the minimum wage, paid from public funding, is also available if the employer replaces the person on leave with someone who is unemployed or otherwise excluded from the labour market. There is limited use of the career break leave because of the low rate of pay and relative lack of awareness of this benefit.⁷⁰

Long-term Care Leave

Amendments to another law, the *Paid Employment and Care Act*, are being considered in order to make a long-term care leave possible. Long-term care leave could be used in situations of terminal illness of a child, partner or parent or a life-threatening illness of a child. Its maximum duration would be six times the weekly working hours, in principle spread out over 12 weeks.

Alternatively, the employee could ask the employer to grant six weeks of full-time leave. During the leave, the employee would receive 70% of the minimum wage. It would be at the discretion of the employer to grant this leave, but the employer would need good reasons for refusal.⁷¹

Flexible Use of Holiday Entitlements and "Leave Saving"

Some employers offer "saved-up leave" to their employees. Under this arrangement, employees can accrue money or time to a maximum of 10% of their annual salary or 10% of their annual working hours. For example, the working week in the Netherlands is now 36 hours. Employees who work 40 hours per week can be paid for 36 and save up the extra hours. A maximum of 12 months of leave can be saved up in this way. When the leave is taken, the employee is paid with the saved-up earnings.⁷² If the employer does not offer this "leave saving," employees can save up unused holiday entitlements for a period of five years to build up extended paid leave.⁷³

The Life-Course as a Central Policy Focus

Dutch policy directions include a commitment to develop a so called life-course savings scheme. The government announced in the 2003 Speech from the Throne that such a scheme will help make it easier for people to combine work and care and will help older workers continue to work as long as possible.⁷⁴

Among the policy options that could be considered in the creation of this life-course savings scheme are:

- replacing the various time-off entitlements with a "time-off umbrella" to grant a maximum number of general leave days that individuals may use for different purposes;
- using a proportion of pension entitlements to finance leave arrangements at an earlier phase of life, allowing new combinations of work and leave during the working life and encouraging older workers to prolong their working life; and
- providing financial incentives to hire workers over 57 to reduce the number of early exits from the workplace by older workers.⁷⁵

Denmark

Denmark's policy approaches have supported women's and men's participation in the labour force through measures that accommodate parents' need to care for their children and workers' desire to take leave from work to pursue educational goals and other interests. An OECD study (2002) points out that as Danish women entered the labour force and faced increasing demands on their time, they

demanded support. Universal childcare coverage, extensive leave rights and generous individual benefits were implemented in response.⁷⁶ As a result, today there is a high degree of equity in employment – Denmark ranks third of all EU countries, with almost equal participation rates between men and women.⁷⁷

The recent implementation of longer maternity leave, legislation to make it easier to work part-time, the development of flexible work arrangements, and discussions about reconciling work and family life are some of the main ways the Danish government supports work-life balance.

Longer and More Flexible Paid Maternity/Parental Leave

In 2002 paid maternity and parental leave following childbirth was extended from 32 weeks to a total of 52 weeks. Four weeks of leave before childbirth and 14 weeks of leave after childbirth are available to the mother. Two weeks of paternity leave after the birth are available to the father. In addition, 32 weeks of parental leave are available to either parent.⁷⁸

The flexibility of this leave makes it a unique means through which parents' work-life balance can be improved. The 32 weeks may be divided between the mother and father and may be taken at the same time, as alternating periods or as consecutive periods. A parent may work part-time and prolong the leave from 32 to 64 weeks. The benefits are prorated during this entire period of leave.

The aim of this leave is to allow families to combine a working life with a well-functioning family life.⁷⁹ The flexible structure of the leave gives fathers the opportunity to take a more active role in caregiving and allows

parents to stay connected to the labour market by working part-time.

Amendments to the Act on Part-time Work

In June 2002, legislation was enacted to make access to part-time work easier. The new provisions abolished restrictions on the use of part-time work in collective agreements. The right to part-time work now applies irrespective of any provisions to the contrary laid out in collective agreements, custom or practice unless the collective agreement includes a clause to the effect that the employee is allowed to work for 15 hours or less per week. Employees are also protected against dismissal for refusing to agree to work part-time or for making a request to work part-time. The Danish government amended this legislation in order to promote a more family-friendly and inclusive labour market.⁸⁰

Recent Discussions about Work-Life Balance

The reconciliation of work and family life has recently been on the agenda for the Ministry of Gender Equality. In 2001, the Ministry invited organizations to a hearing to discuss how organizations can promote a culture where fathers can spend as much time as mothers caring for their children, and how working time can be adapted to different life phases. Participants at this hearing pointed out that "family-friendliness" should not be restricted to parents with small children. Older employees and employees with no children or with older children may also need flexibility. The hearing also raised the question of how to address the potential negative effects of implementing family-friendly measures, including how to avoid possible consequences for women when flexible working arrangements are introduced.⁸¹

There have also been recent discussions about flexible working. A public sector committee is drawing up proposals for more flexible working time rules for employees in the state sector and is expected to report by 2005.⁸² In addition, the Minister for Gender Equality and the Minister for Employment have announced that they will lead a joint initiative to examine the options for introducing flexible working time arrangements based on a person's entire working life. For example, they will consider the creation of a time bank that would make it possible for individual employees to adapt working time to their needs at different points in their lives.⁸³

Sweden

The Swedish government recently developed proposals and legislation that may help to reduce work-life conflict, especially for women. Swedish research indicates that women experience conflict to a greater degree than men, and the government is trying to correct the problem through a number of initiatives to increase men's participation in housework and in the health and social care of children.⁸⁴ Sweden has a highly developed and flexible parental leave scheme, which has been extended so parents can have more time to care for their children. In addition, measures to reduce the high incidence of sick leave, proposals to provide employees with more annual leave and more flexible use of leave, and a trial measure to allow employees to take sabbatical leave, have been introduced or are under consideration.

Flexible and Extended Parental Leave Benefits

The universality and flexibility of Sweden's parental leave benefits promote fathers' participation in caregiving and mothers' labour market attachment. Over 90% of mothers return

to employment once their parental leave has expired. Parental leave for fathers, in effect since 1974, is used today by about 70% of fathers.⁸⁵ Swedish family policy has developed these benefits based on the principle of encouraging work and making work possible even when workers choose to have children. Parental leave includes pregnancy benefits, parental benefits in connection to childbirth and temporary parental benefits.

Pregnancy benefits are payable to expectant mothers who are unable to work because of the physically demanding nature of their jobs. These benefits are paid for a maximum of 50 days at 80% of the mother's qualifying income.⁸⁶

In 2002, parental leave was extended by 30 days to a total of 480 days. The majority of these days (390) are paid at 80% of the parent's qualifying income, and the other 90 days are paid at a universally applicable flat rate. Parents are entitled to 240 days of leave each, which encourages both parents to be active in caregiving. A parent may transfer up to 180 days of leave to the other parent. In addition, the father of a newborn is entitled to 10 days of temporary parental benefit upon the birth of the child. Parents with a low income or no income at all are guaranteed a minimum benefit per day. All potential parents are invited to information meetings about parental leave before having children.

Parental leave can be taken flexibly. The leave can be used until children reach eight years of age or complete their first year of school; however, job protection expires when the child is 18 months. Parental leave can also be used part-time if a parent wishes to work while caring for the child.

Parental benefits are also paid to parents who are caring for a sick child up to the age of 12, and in some cases up to 16 years old. Each eligible employee is entitled to 120 benefit days per year, and on average seven days per child are taken every year. This benefit is used widely by both parents. In 2001 fathers accounted for around 41% of all days claimed, enabling both parents to combine family commitments with work outside the home.

Sweden's family policy actively promotes the positive impact of fathers' involvement in caring for their children. Over the years, special advertising and information campaigns have emphasized the importance of both parents claiming the parental benefit. Written materials are distributed to all fathers highlighting the importance of early and close contact between father and child.⁸⁷

Work-Life Balance and Sick Leave – Action Plan for Better Health in Working Life

The Swedish government recognizes that work-life conflict, in addition to the quality of the working environment, is contributing to the rise in ill-health. In 2002, the number of people on sick leave was more than twice that of five years earlier. Findings show that a considerably higher proportion of female than male employees are on long-term sick leave.⁸⁸ Swedish research indicates that women, more than men, are employed in occupations with inferior working environments, bear double workloads combining paid employment with unpaid housework, and are less able to participate in leisure and recreational activities.

In response to these findings, the Swedish government presented a comprehensive action plan for promoting better health in working life in its Budget Bill for 2002. The primary

objective of the Bill is to reduce the dramatic rise in costs for sick leave. The cost of sickness benefits more than doubled between 1998 and 2002, from \$3.6 billion to \$9 billion.⁸⁹ The action plan also seeks to reduce the impact poor health has on work-life balance. Given women's high levels of sick leave, the focus of the action plan is on women's workplaces, working environments and working conditions.

The action plan calls for cutting sick leave by 50% between 2002 and 2008, decreasing the number of cases and reducing the amount spent on sickness allowances. The measures are aimed at improving working conditions and good health in working life. The focus is on the individual and on the employer's responsibility for employee good health.

Measures that are being developed to improve health in the workplace include:

- stronger economic incentives for preventive action by employers;⁹⁰
- compulsory reporting of sickness absence rates in annual reports;
- partial sick leave to reduce an employee's risk of losing contact with working life;
- compulsory reporting of workers' rehabilitation by the employer; and
- a stronger supervisory function for the Swedish Work Environment Authority to prevent ill health in working life, particularly regarding the workplaces that represent the greatest risks.⁹¹

While these measures may help to reduce sick leave and facilitate better rehabilitation, it will take time before it is known whether this plan will help to improve work-life balance.⁹²

Flexible Working Time

Flexible working time arrangements have been considered by the Swedish government over the past few years. In 2000, a committee was set up to examine the entire system of legislation on working time and make proposals for reform. In 2002, the committee issued its report, which included proposals to strengthen employees' influence over their own working time by scheduling hours to suit their individual needs. For example, one of the proposals recommends that workers could use one week of the current statutory five weeks of annual leave flexibly, in units of one or more hours or days. The committee also recommended that workers receive an additional five days of leave per year. This leave plus the five days of flexible leave would be taken as time off rather than be converted into cash, strengthening employees' influence over their working time and unpaid time.

These proposals have yet to be developed and implemented by the government. Private sector employers have argued that the proposals would be very costly in practice. The committee chair has acknowledged that flexible leave proposals will have a cost, but pointed out that a choice needs to be made between a cut in working time or continued increases in sick leave, which will lead to demands for improvements in sickness insurance.⁹³

Sabbatical Leave

Sabbatical leave was introduced by the government on a trial basis from 2002 to 2004. Although not a proposal to help workers balance working time with other responsibilities on an ongoing basis, sabbatical leave allows workers to take a period of time off work to pursue other interests. An employee is entitled to take up to a year off

work to study or look after children. Compensation is a state benefit equivalent to 85% of the unemployment benefit. In order to grant a sabbatical leave, the employer must be able to find an unemployed person who can fill the employee's position while he or she is on leave. The labour market effects and the health effects of this trial will be evaluated during this period.⁹⁴

3.3 Other Work-Life Balance Initiatives

This section focuses on initiatives that have been implemented in countries that have a less comprehensive approach to work-life balance issues. These initiatives are either measures to reduce or develop more flexible working time (in the case of France and Belgium), or are a recent development in a country where work-life balance has not historically figured as a major item on the policy agenda (in the case of Ireland and the United States).

France: *Reduction in Working Time*

A law to reduce the statutory work week in France from 39 hours to 35 hours was introduced in 2000 for companies with more than 20 employees, and in 2002 for companies with 20 employees or fewer. Since this law came into effect, a number of amendments have been made. One amendment increases the amount of overtime that can be worked without special authorization from a labour inspector from 130 to 180 hours per year.

Overtime rates were adjusted to unify and simplify the system of overtime. Weekly overtime starts to accrue with the 36th hour worked. At this point, a supplementary rate is paid by the employer. The supplementary rate, set by agreement among the social partners in the various sectors (representatives from business, government and civil society

including labour), shall be not less than 10% above basic pay. Failing agreement, the first eight hours of overtime will be paid at time-and-a-quarter and subsequent hours at time-and-a-half. For businesses with 20 employees or fewer, overtime pay will remain at 10% above basic until December 31, 2005, at the latest, to allow small businesses time to adapt. Furthermore, employers can now decide to pay for overtime instead of granting employees time-off in-lieu, unless an agreement with employees states otherwise.

In addition, a time savings account allows employees who wish to accrue leave not only to use the time accrued for leave but also to switch to part-time work if desired. The time savings account can be used to finance training or education outside working hours. A new option also allows employees to set up a time savings account in cash.⁹⁵

With respect to a reduction in working time, one of the recommendations from France's National Economic Planning Agency was that working time should be in line with other demands on time generated by people's social and private lives.⁹⁶ In this regard, the 35-hour work week appears to be having an impact. An evaluation report submitted by the government shows that the reduction in working time has generally affected employees positively in terms of their work and their home lives. Around 60% of those surveyed report that they feel the change in working time has led to an overall improvement in their lives.⁹⁷

Belgium: *Introduction of Time Credits*

Belgium's Minister of Labour has been working on modernizing the organization of work for the past few years. One of the Minister's two objectives for developing more

flexible working time is to better coordinate paid work with private and family life. In order to improve work-life balance and increase employment, especially amongst women and workers over the age of 50, the Minister introduced a system of "time credits" for private sector employees in 2002. The time credit allows employees:

- to interrupt their work for a maximum of one year or reduce their hours of work to part-time without breaking the contract of employment and without loss of social security rights. Depending on the collective agreement, the time credit can be extended to a maximum of five years;
- to reduce their hours of work by one-fifth of working time for a maximum of five years. In practice, this generally means changing from a five-day to a four-day work week; and
- if they are at least 50 years old, to reduce their working hours, over an unlimited period of time, by one-fifth to one-half.

In the public sector, an unemployed person must take the place of the employee who has taken a break.⁹⁸

Ireland: *From Family-Friendly Work Arrangements to Work-Life Balance for All*

The Irish government has recently been promoting family-friendly policies to employers. In March 2000, the Irish social partners endorsed a new tripartite national agreement, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness. One of its five objectives is the development of equality and family-friendly policies that "support childcare and family life [as] a cornerstone of future social and economic progress."⁹⁹ A National Framework

Committee composed of representatives from government, businesses and unions has since been created to devise and promote the practice of family-friendly policies that meet the needs of employers and employees.

Since 2001 the Committee has organized an annual "Family-Friendly Workplace Day," during which promotional activities help raise awareness of work-life balance issues within organizations, and priorities for the future are discussed. In 2004, the name of this annual day of promotion was changed to "Work Life Balance Day." This change in name is significant because it marks the government's public recognition that even workers without children need to balance work with other life demands. A leaflet and website describe the importance of work-life balance practices and provide suggestions for how organizations can celebrate this special day.¹⁰⁰

The United States: *Resolution to Proclaim "National Work and Family Month"*

The U.S. labour market tends to be characterized by long work hours, short vacations, limited availability of parental leave, and restricted state or employer support for childcare.¹⁰¹ Besides the *Family and Medical Leave Act* (1993), which gives working families the right to take unpaid leave to meet essential caregiving responsibilities without the risk of losing their jobs or imposing undue burdens on employers, the U.S. generally leaves the implementation of work-life balance practices up to the discretion of individual employers.¹⁰²

However, the movement to recognize the importance of work-life balance and family-friendly issues seems to have gained some momentum recently, most notably through

Resolution 210. In September 2003, the Senate resolved that supporting a balance between work and personal life is in the best interest of national worker productivity, that the President should issue a proclamation designating October of 2003 as "National Work and Family Month," and that reducing the conflict between work and family life should be a national priority.

Some of the key statements included in Resolution 210 were:

- Work-family policies are linked to lower absenteeism.
- Employees who feel overworked tend to feel less successful in their relationships, feel less healthy, and be more stressed.
- Children's health is affected negatively when working parents lack job flexibility.

- The more overworked employees feel, the more likely they are to report making mistakes, feel anger and resentment toward employers and co-workers, and look for a new job.
- More Americans are faced with the challenge of caring for aging parents.¹⁰³

This submission was the result of a bipartisan alliance, which suggests that work-life balance is becoming an increasingly important issue across the political spectrum in the United States. The resolution was passed unanimously in September 2003, and the first National Work and Family Month was celebrated in October 2003. The National Work-Life Initiative, created in the fall of 2003, has developed tools and resources to help employers commemorate this annual event.¹⁰⁴

4 Conclusion

This report shows that work-life balance is an increasing concern in several industrialized countries. Many workers in the European Union, Australia and the United States are dissatisfied with their working hours, experience high levels of work intensity, and suffer health problems due to work demands. Many employees would prefer to work reduced hours and to work flexible hours to improve their work-life balance.

Governments around the world are beginning to recognize the negative impacts of work-life conflict on workers' physical and mental well-being, their ability to care for their children and others, and their ability to carry out other unpaid responsibilities and pursue personal interests outside of work. Governments are also recognizing that work-life conflict increases business costs for employers. These costs are associated with reduced productivity levels, higher absenteeism rates and increased expenditures related to sickness benefits and employee turnover.

This report reveals that governments are responding to the issue of work-life conflict through a variety of policies and programs. However, there is no "one size fits all" approach to improving work-life balance. Societal values and the degree of the state's involvement in policy of this nature will influence the types of initiatives that are developed to improve work-life balance.

For example, in the United Kingdom there is a strong emphasis on market forces, with relatively little intervention by the state in matters related to family arrangements. The Government of the U.K. primarily seeks to improve work-life balance through promotional activities and workers' voluntary involvement in programs. In contrast, Denmark and Sweden both have a strong history of social and family policy focused on the well-being of citizens, particularly children's welfare. They have well-developed public systems, including relatively generous parental leave and family leave benefits and laws that allow workers to change their

working time to accommodate their involvement in caregiving.¹⁰⁵

The governments of the U.K., New Zealand and Australia have developed promotional programs with the explicit policy goal of improving work-life balance. Award programs, funding and consultancy services for employers, and websites with newsletters, other publications, case studies and links to other relevant information and legislation, showcase the importance of work-life balance and assist workers and employers in making work-life balance practices a reality. Albeit on a smaller scale, Ireland's proclamation of a "Work Life Balance Day" and the U.S. resolution to create a "Work and Family Month" are also ways governments are raising the importance of work-life balance at the national level.

Legislation has been passed to improve the work-life balance of employees. Leave legislation, for example, is helpful for workers with caregiving responsibilities. Noteworthy examples include the *Work and Care Act* in the Netherlands, which combines different leave benefits so that workers can care for children and other relatives. Denmark has extended the application of parental leave and the mother or the father can work part-time and prolong the leave period. Sweden's parental leave includes information campaigns to encourage fathers to take parental leave and increase their involvement in caregiving.

Legislation has also been enacted to enable workers to have more control over their working time. This is especially helpful for those who prefer to work fewer hours and to work more flexibly. For example, U.K. legislation gives parents the right to request flexible working arrangements, and Belgium's system of time credits gives workers access to

more flexible working time. The Netherlands' *Adjustment of Hours Law*, Denmark's amendments to make it easier for employees to request part-time work, and France's statutory 35-hour work week all assist workers in reducing their working time.

In addition, the health and safety legislation of the U.K. and New Zealand contains broad employer obligations. Both governments have publicized the fact that they interpret health and safety regulations to implicitly include employers' legal duty to minimize work-related stress. The U.K.'s "management standards" and New Zealand's guide on "healthy work" are aimed at assisting employers with this legal duty.

Possibilities for Future Research

New policies, programs and legislation that have an impact on work-life balance continue to be developed around the world. As a result, research on this issue needs to be updated frequently. Furthermore, work-life balance is a relatively new research subject and there remain many rich areas of inquiry to explore.

An examination of work-life balance initiatives in industrialized countries not included in this report would provide a more comprehensive examination of international work-life balance developments. In Finland, for example, the reconciliation of work and family life has been one of the main focuses of family and equality policies for quite some time.¹⁰⁶

For countries that have a federal system, an examination of work-life balance initiatives should extend beyond the national level. For example, in the United States, a state's role in labour legislation can exceed the minimum unpaid leave requirements of the *Family and Medical Leave Act*. California is the first U.S.

state to enact paid family and medical leave, which is considered a ground-breaking legislative development.¹⁰⁷

A comparative analysis could also be conducted to understand to what extent, and why, Canadian policies, legislation and programs resemble, or differ from, work-life balance initiatives elsewhere.

Further research could include an examination of policies developed by unions and employers. Industrial relations play a significant role in many countries, as noted in the section on Australia, and there are probably many collective agreement provisions that support work-life balance. In addition, there is evidence that some firms have developed work-life balance policies that go beyond legal minimum requirements.¹⁰⁸

Another interesting issue is the impact that work-life balance initiatives are having on employees, employers and the workplace in general. For example, this report noted that work-life balance is often related to the division of paid and unpaid work by gender. In Denmark there is some concern among unions

that more women than men will use extended parental leave and that women in their childbearing years will be recruited less by private sector employers.¹⁰⁹ The concern is that this could put even more responsibility on women as the main caregivers and could decrease their attachment to the labour force. However, international comparative studies show that women appear to increase their attachment to the labour force when given the opportunity to take paid leave.¹¹⁰ It is important to assess this and other impacts of work-life balance initiatives in order to further develop or modify existing programs, policies and legislation.

It is clear that work-life balance is an increasingly important issue for many industrialized countries. The recent initiatives reviewed in this report demonstrate that various governments are committed to reducing work-life conflict and the effects of this conflict on employees, employers and families, and on social, economic and health systems. Canadians can learn from these initiatives and assess whether they are useful strategies to develop in a Canadian context.

Endnotes

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 99. European Industrial Relations Observatory On-line, "Irish Social Partners Endorse a New National Agreement," March 28, 2000. <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/2000/03/feature/ie0003149f.html>

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100. National Framework Committee for Work Life Balance Policies, "Work Life Balance Day 2004" (<http://www.familyfriendly.ie/wlbd.shtml>); and "Work Life Balance Homepage" (<http://www.familyfriendly.ie/index.shtml>). Links also provide guidelines, a newsletter, information about events and case studies related to the importance of work-life balance.
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 103. 108th Congress, 1st Session.
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 104. The National Work-Life Initiative (NWLI) is a partnership of the Alliance for Work-Life Progress (AWLP) and *Fortune* magazine. The initiative has an annual Corporate Chair, which this year is occupied by the nine companies that make up the American Business Collaboration for Quality Dependent Care (ABC). For more information on the tools and resources the NWLI has developed to help employers celebrate National Work and Family Month, see National Work Life Initiative, "The Speedy National Work and Family Month Celebration Kit."
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