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Restructuring workplace cultures: the ultimate work-family challenge?

Suzan Lewis

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Abstract

Work-life polices and practices have the potential to enhance opportunities for women in the workplace (and opportunities for men to be more involved in family life), but are often undermined by workplace culture. Presents a case study of an organisation which is addressing issues of workplace culture in relation to work-life policies and gender equality. Despite achieving substantial change in practice and in shared assumptions, a new set of issues have emerged which will require innovative solutions.

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One factor contributing to gender differences in occupational attainment in the UK has traditionally been thought to be women's tendency to have discontinuous careers or periods of part-time work because of domestic responsibilities. However, the focus on women's greater domestic responsibility and the construction of women with children, or indeed men with primary caring responsibilities, as problematic implies a specific construction of employing organisations.

This is based on an assumed separation between work and family domains and reflects the traditional gendered division of labour. It is a traditional male model of work (Pleck, 1977; Cook, 1992), which constructs the ideal worker as one who works continuously and full time and does not allow family to interfere with work. This persists, albeit often in modified forms, as we embark on the twenty-first century, but is increasingly inappropriate not only because of the growing numbers of women with children or other family responsibilities in the labour force, but also because the assumption of a continuous "career" based on an androcentric linear model no longer fits men's or women's experiences in the contemporary labour market (Halford *et al.*, 1997).

This paper discusses:
(1) the development of so-called family-friendly employment policies, which it is argued fail to challenge this male model;
(2) some of the factors embedded in organisational cultures which undermine these policies; and
(3) presents a case study of one organisation attempting to address these undermining factors, the further issues that arise in this case and the implications for moving towards further change.

"Family-friendly" policies

A growing number of organizations are now developing policies or practices which have been termed "family-friendly" to address work-family issues (Harker, 1996; Forth

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et al., 1996). The term family-friendly is problematic, as the nature and complexity of family is not always acknowledged, and the word friendly can be taken to imply favours rather than entitlements (Lewis, 1997), and hence the term work-life is increasingly substituted.

Formal policies subsumed under these terms include assistance with child care and elderly care, which, it can be argued, help employees to conform to normative working hours. They also include initiatives such as part-time
or reduced hours of work with pro rata employment benefits, job sharing, compressed work weeks, voluntary reduced time, flexible work schedules and working from home programmes which have the potential to challenge traditional patterns of work and career paths.

Flexible working arrangements are increasingly introduced to meet the changing structure of demand for labour, rather than with a goal of being family-friendly. Nevertheless, some organizations, particularly in the public sector, have developed these policies in response to political pressures and equal opportunities ideologies, and many more have developed them in response to a management of diversity argument and business case for change.

The business case has included concern about skills shortages, the need to recruit and retain women with family commitments and to reduce absenteeism (Lewis *et al.*, 1996). The skills shortage argument was strongest in the 1980s (e.g. Berry Lound, 1990). Recruitment concerns were largely overshadowed in the early 1990s by restructuring and downsizing. The need to avoid stress and absenteeism associated with work and family demands among a newly downsized, highly pressurised core workforce was then recognised by some organizations as a compelling argument for continuing or developing family-oriented policies for this group (Lewis *et al.*, 1996).

The business argument has tended to focus on middle class employees, particularly those with high levels of training, the implication being that others are more expendable. More recently, however, the business argument is being developed in keeping with political priorities, for example, in linking the welfare to work debates with family-friendly

employment. This represents a shift of focus to include working class women, and especially non-employed lone mothers. Employers are being urged to become more family-friendly for lone parents and this is couched in a language of partnership, i.e. *Working Together: How Lone Parents and Businesses Can Help Each Other* (DSS, 1997). This business case for employing lone parents again emphasises advantages for recruitment and retention, but also suggests that the needs of both businesses and lone parents for flexibility are complementary. It is argued that:

> Increased trading hours, customer-friendly focus and intense competition means that businesses are looking at more flexible working patterns to meet the challenges that face them (DSS, 1997).

Lone mothers, it is suggested, can provide this flexibility. Focusing on the needs of lone mothers highlights the need for child care and flexible working hours. But it also reinforces the focus on women and, hence, it can be argued encourages the marginalisation rather than mainstreaming of initiatives to support paid work and family.

Meanwhile, the proliferation of contracting out, temporary contracts and other new forms of work, which increase flexibility from the employers' perspective, transferring risk and uncertainty from employers to employees, has created a growing peripheral or contingent workforce to whom family-oriented policies often do not apply. Even statutory maternity leave becomes threatened with fixed-term contracts (Lewis *et al.*, 1999).

In this context then, family-friendly policies are often developed for a core workforce; those whom the organization currently wishes to retain and motivate, but who are aware that no guarantees exist about the security of their jobs.

Insofar as family-friendly or work-family policies focus on women rather than becoming part of central strategic policy, are regarded as perks rather than entitlements and are accorded only to core and not peripheral workers, they remain marginalised policies with limited impact on fundamental organisational values and assumptions. Within this context, formal "family-friendly" policies which allow modifications to time schedules can assist some individual employees, mainly women, in managing their

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work and family demands, reducing the strain of multiple roles (Lewis and Taylor, 1996; Kossek and Ozeki, 1999).

For example, there is evidence that flexible schedules together with supportive supervisors can enhance employees' sense of control over work and family demands, which in turn reduces work family conflict and stress (Thomas and Ganster, 1995; Thompson et al., 1999).

What is more contentious is the question of whether such policies actually alter organizational cultures, particularly the broader values and assumptions which both determine and reflect what is the socially constructed "ideal worker", and consequently affect the take-up of initiatives as well as the ways in which those who do make use of them are perceived within the organization.

Research suggests that men are increasingly valuing their family roles and wishing to be actively involved in parenting (O'Brien, 1992; Russell et al., 1988). Although women continue to retain the majority of family caring work (Joshi et al., 1996) there are nevertheless shifts in men's family involvement and their willingness to modify work for family, particularly among younger generations (Wilkinson, 1995; Lewis et al., 1999; Warin et al., 1999).

The widely reported problem of lack of take up of family-friendly initiatives, particularly by men, but also by many women who are concerned about the impact on their careers (Haas and Hwang, 1995; Raabe and Gessner, 1988), suggests that these policies are perceived as enabling employees with family commitments to work at the margins, but seldom challenge traditional patterns of work as the norm and ideal.

Workplace cultures

The male model of work is deeply embedded in most organisational cultures, despite other aspects of culture change to reflect current realities. I use organisational culture, here, to refer to a deep level of shared beliefs and assumptions, which often operate unconsciously, are developed over time embedded in an organisation's historical experiences (Pemberton, 1995).

These assumptions are usually functional initially, but may persist inappropriately. Thus the male model may have appeared functional at a time when male breadwinners were the norm, although it would also have contributed to the perpetuation of traditional structures.

A supportive work-life culture, on the other hand, has been defined as the shared assumptions, beliefs and values regarding the extent to which organisations value and support the integration of work and family lives, for women and men (Thompson et al., 1999).

The traditional male model of work encompasses a range of assumptions and values which can be barriers to fully supportive workplace culture. At the most fundamental are gendered assumptions about the separation of work and home and the division of labour which result in the greater valuing of male workers or those without active family commitments. As Kanter (1989) noted:

> ... traditional assumptions about the separation of work life and personal life are no longer viable, but we have not yet created a coherent set of new values and beliefs to take their place.

Initial discussions on work-home issues took an explicit gender perspective which sought to redress the disadvantage of women in the employment sphere by attending to their "needs". This approach has the danger of reinforcing family obligations as a female responsibility. There have been many attempts to reframe the issue as a gender neutral one, but in practice family-friendly policies tend to be regarded by employers and employees as largely policies for women (Lewis and Cooper, 1996). In this context the impact of work-family initiatives on gender differences in occupational attainment is likely to be marginal.

These gendered assumptions underpin other norms and values which perpetuate androcentric expectations in the workplace. Prominent among these are ideologies of time. In organisations where the long hours culture is the norm, long hours spent visibly at the workplace are valued because it is assumed that they represent commitment and productivity (Bailyn 1993; Lewis and Taylor, 1996). Time is defined as a commodity to be

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managed and "given" to paid work and/or family (Lewis, 1997).

The expectations of working long hours without remuneration is largely a middle-class experience, characteristic of white-collar and professional work. However, another manifestation of assumptions about time at work as a commodity is the relative undervaluing of part-time workers across most occupations. Full-time and part-time work are of course social constructions.

As Bridges (1994) points out, jobs are artificial units created for the industrial era. The construct of a full-time job varies over time and place and is increasingly challenged by contemporary post-industrial conditions. Despite this, part-time work is usually defined as atypical or non-standard work, with the implication that it deviates from a generally accepted and relatively fixed norm. That is, part-time work is constructed as only part of a whole, which in itself is constantly being reformulated and renegotiated.

In practice, the implication that part-time work is not whole, or complete or standard is often that it is second class or marginal to organisations. Part-time jobs remain predominantly female, although men are increasing their share of part-time work in some contexts such as in The Netherlands in response to flexible parental leave entitlements. The social construction of part-time work as secondary, less committed or inferior to full-time work is thus inextricably linked with the undervaluing of women in society.

Fagin and O'Reilly (1998, p. 48) describe part-time work as part of a gender contract:

> . . . part-time work is essentially a similar gender compromise across national boundaries: women are able to enter the labour market and meet the particular labour requirements of service sector employers without disrupting men's traditional "breadwinner" status at the workplace or at home.

To define this as atypical is therefore to fall into the trap of taking male working patterns as the norm.

Raabe (1996) discusses standard and pluralistic paradigms of working time and argues that the latter, which encompasses a variety of flexible but equally valued working-time arrangements is more suitable to post-industrial work and to the work-family needs of the contemporary workforce. She argues that there is accumulating evidence that pluralistic arrangements produce superior outcomes so that deeply embedded assumptions about the primacy of arbitrary notions of standard work are counterproductive for all concerned.

Gendered assumptions about the value of time in the workplace and beyond are also reflected in assumptions about entitlements and favours. The overvaluing of full-time continuous work is often manifested in a perception of non-standard forms of work, primarily undertaken by women, as benefits or favours rather than entitlements.

The interaction of assumptions about time and sense of entitlement can be illustrated in relation to part-time work. In the context of the social construction of part-time work as secondary and atypical, part-time workers often have a low sense of personal entitlement to or meriting rewards commensurate with those of full-time work (Lewis, 1997). Part-time work is often associated with lower rates of pay, poorer security and employment protection, fewer benefits, and even when there are pro rata benefits attached to part-time work, there tend to be fewer opportunities for career advancement than in the socially constructed ideal of full-time work. Many part-time workers, especially women, accept some or all of these conditions as the inevitable price to be paid for a deviation from the socially constructed norm of rigid long hours of work which are incompatible with family responsibilities. Under these conditions few men choose to work part time.

Case study of an organisation addressing these workplace culture issues

The remainder of this paper discusses a case study of one public sector organisation addressing work-family and associated workplace culture issues. The organisation is interesting because it has attempted to address the issues discussed above, including challenging assumptions about the ideal worker and the value of pluralistic working arrangements for men as well as women, in senior as well as other positions. The

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case study illustrates this process, and some of the new issues which emerge in this context.

The organisation was identified as part of a European Commission project on good practice in relation to working-time arrangements, equality between men and women, and job creation[1]. Case study organisations were selected for in-depth study from a larger selection of initial case studies, by a transnational team. Semi-structured interviews were developed around a common set of questions used in organisations in five EU states.

The case study of this organisation, which will be referred to as the "Council", involved participants selected by the personnel department to meet certain criteria (male and female employees working some form of part-time or reduced hours, union representatives, the principal personnel officer, and other members of the senior management team). The main purpose of the interviews was to examine the processes of change, the factors driving change and those constraining progress. Interviews were taped and transcribed and thematically analysed.

The impetus for change in the Council came from a commitment to equal opportunities, as in many local authorities. However, a strong business case had evolved because of the need to recruit and retain good staff on a restricted and declining budget. While the initial goals had been to introduce a range of formal work-family policies, the need to challenge cultural assumptions about gender, the value of time spent in the workplace and about entitlement to pluralistic forms of work had been recognised and were being actively addressed.

The Council has developed a range of flexible working practices including flexitime, reduced hours, job sharing and other forms of part-time work The flexible options at the Council are taken up by men as well as women, suggesting some success in mainstreaming the initiatives. A total of 57 per cent of all employees work part time (including job shares and reduced hours): 66 per cent of women and 21 per cent of male staff, at all levels. Approximately 600 men are in some form of part-time work. Mainstreaming is promoted by encouraging

managers to consider the possibility of all jobs, including those at senior levels, being worked in non-standard hours, to meet the needs of the organisation and the employee. There are also a range of family-oriented policies, including career breaks, paternity leave and a range of child-care provisions. More recent initiatives include a paternity information pack.

Although the original focus was on the needs of women, there is now a concern that men, who are the minority in the organisation, should not be overlooked, suggesting the emergence of a supportive work-family culture regardless of gender:

> We are in danger as an organisation of ignoring our male employees because they are quite small proportionately to women and I think it's important that men know what's on offer and feel entitled to approach us (principal personnel officer).

Assumptions about who is entitled to alternative work arrangements are also challenged to some extent. There is a recognition that the organisation, as well as the employee benefits from flexible work, and so both male and female staff appear to have some sense of entitlement to accommodate work for family or other personal reasons:

> I appreciate the fact that you know they've been positive and supportive of my job share ... I believe that everyone automatically should have the right to job share if there are sufficient people to fill them. I think everyone should be entitled to it (male job sharer).

Active measures are taken to encourage the dissemination of flexible practices so that these appear to be feasible and normative and hence employees feel entitled to request changes in working arrangements. Employees requesting less than full-time work have been able to draw on experience of part-time work in their department:

> I approached my boss and asked if I could apply for a job share. Initially she wasn't too keen because she felt that it might be a bit awkward with the kind of job that it is. However, I felt that it wasn't impossible, I mean after all we had been employing someone on half time anyway up until then (male job sharer).

Line management is a crucial layer that has to be convinced of the value to the organisation or their department of flexible working arrangements. The process of change in the

organisation has been to place considerable emphasis on encouragement of line managers to be flexible:

> Rewarding flexibility, so other managers say this is obviously something I'm supposed to do, rather than something I'm supposed to ignore (principal personnel officer).

There has also been a strategic use of examples of good practice aimed at changing perceptions of norms and feasibility:

> I think it makes more of an impact on line managers who make less of these kind of decisions, if you point them in the direction of a different department who are already doing something, rather than saying well I'm the personnel officer and this is the policy. So a number of times if I have come across a senior manager who is having doubts about introducing something, I think its more powerful to say go and talk to "so and so" because they have had this running in their department for ages and they seem to know how it works ... because it's a big organisation, it is perfectly possible for people to be unaware of the practices going on in other parts of the organisation.
>
>   I think the most powerful thing is to have good examples that you can use (principal personnel officer).

Once the policies were established, some individuals in key positions were empowered to request part-time or reduced hours work. This highlighted the importance for the organisation of retaining valued skills, and provided role models and examples of good practice to disseminate to other departments:

> I think on reduced hours specifically, the main impetus probably came from individuals who were in a position where they could have some clout. So it started with some fairly key people who wanted to return from maternity leave (reduced hours) and at that point, apart from any considerations of equal opportunities, I was anxious that we should do that because it seemed to me to that it was absolutely crazy to lose these skills, I mean they were coming up with cases of some extremely experienced and valued individuals who'd maybe worked for us for what ten years ... (prinicpal personnel officer).

Some of these were men in senior positions or with scarce skills, who began to legitimise fathers accommodating work for family:

> Mainly through individuals requesting that, in jobs which – not necessarily, but probably – have been thought of at least notionally as

9 to 5 jobs, but they are being worked less than 9 to 5 because people have asked to do it ... There were some men involved in the early days who were in a professional job which was really ... almost unheard of ... to ask for a reduction in their hours (principal personnel officer).

There has therefore been some success in promoting non-standard working arrangements as more than marginal policies for low level workers. Nevertheless, some of the senior staff felt they had to work extra hard to justify reduced hours, which creates new issues which have to be confronted.

Emerging issues

Time and equity

The long hours culture is present in pockets throughout the organisation but it is treated as a problem, to be managed by stress management and not as normative or desirable, nor as essential to demonstrate commitment or productivity. The most senior managers at the Council do not usually associate long hour with commitment. The flexitime system tends to obscure the actual number of hours people work, as some will always be working earlier or later in the day.

This has created a greater emphasis on outcomes rather than inputs. But it can also mean that when staff do work reduced hours management expectations are not always reduced accordingly:

> I mean I've got a number of people at a senior level who work less than a 37 hour week, some of them are just, you know, a few short of 37, and the reality is the organisation tends to ignore the fact that they are working on a part-time basis. Because we work flexible hours ... I don't consciously think that Joe's only doing 34 hours, so they probably end up working harder to be honest. My basic management philosophy is I'm interested in what people produce, what their outcome is, what their outputs are rather than how many hours they're putting in. I'm not a great watcher of flexitime issues, etc., but periodically one does have to take stock of what your expectations are of people in the context of what hours you pay them for (senior manager).

As found in other research (e.g. Lewis and Taylor, 1996) those working reduced hours reported that they tend to accomplish as much as they had in full-time work, often through an intensification of work.

For example, the chief accountant at the Council works seven hours less than the standard week. She explained:

> There's things like not talking, not going off and making several cups of coffee. I can go through a whole day without having a cup of coffee if I don't have the time to think about getting up. I tend to steam through meetings, I organise meetings carefully. There's an agenda, we go through it and I also tend to wind it up a bit faster, so I think that's where the seven hours has gone in the organisation aspect of it (chief accountant)

Some of the senior staff working less than full-time hours accept that their cut in salary is the price they must pay to legitimise shorter hours:

> Many people who are doing "just less than full-time" patterns will say to me, or say to each other in private, what you are really buying in that element of salary is the right to go home on time with nothing on their conscience (principal personnel officer).

This raises issues of equity. If those working reduced hours receive reduced pay but have no fall in productivity this suggests that full-time workers are now being paid more to work less efficiently. Arguably, then, the real challenge to persistent assumptions about the value of time in the workplace may be to pay people according to what they achieve rather than how long it takes them to accomplish it.

The notion of reduced or part-time hours with reductions in pay also presupposes a particular model of family which may be problematic in some cases:

> I do have reservations about it, which is something to do with the erosion of the concept of the family wage and what you should do if you are a single parent. I think we tend to make assumptions about the sort of people who are involved in these types of initiative, and it's true that they are normally in a two-parent family with children. If you ever get to the stage where part-time work was all that was on offer, that's going to harm people who have only got one income, so there is a down-side (principal personnel officer).

Policy as a barrier to culture change

There is a recognition now that in some cases policy can actually hold back progress towards culture change. The principal personnel officer suggested, for example, that job share policies may actually constrain progress towards challenging standard working time:

> I'm not a great fan of job-share, I think its a bit over-hyped and in fact philosophically I think I have a problem, because I think it perpetuates the notion of the standard working week. Most job sharers are expected to cover the hours of the post, in that case 37 hours, and to me there's something about the contract that perpetuates this straight-jacket of the 37 hour week or whatever. Its actually more interesting to challenge, well why is the job 37 hours in the first place rather than to keep finding people to fit in this jigsaw. It's different if it's a public service which is only open at specific times, like libraries and so on, where you have got to have people there when the library is open (principal personnel officer).

Impact of gender inequity in the home

Although some men are taking advantage of policies such as family leave, the Council is female dominated and therefore it is mostly women who take up any initiative. A further issue to emerge from the success of the work-family policies relates to the inequitable domestic division of labour in the home which can have repercussions in the workplace for organisations with a largely female workforce. Although the flexible work practices provide the Council with a competitive edge for recruitment, they may also have disadvantages to the organisation in terms of staff absences if family care is not shared with employees' partners (mostly male) working in other organisations.

Some attempts have been made to ensure that family partners do take some responsibility. The principal personal officer explained:

> I did say to a personnel officer at another organisation, "how would you feel if you found out that a large percentage of your workforce had a second job, that kept them up quite late at night and they were late coming into work in the morning". He said, "I wouldn't be too pleased", and I said, "well that's what its like really for us, because most of our workforce, who are women, go home and do another job, still do more at home. It does have an impact on us".
>
> So our position on leave for sick children is that we say you can have this time off if someone in the family needs your attention and you are sure that no other provision can be reasonably made. People come to me and say well what does that mean, "no other provision can be made"? I say it means if its the fourth time this year that the child has been ill and there's another adult in the household whether it be the father or whatever, and they are not actually doing their share, at some point we have to say, "well

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enough is enough" and say to the employee concerned, "look, you know we would like to be sympathetic here, but really have you asked your husband to stay home?" (principal personnel officer).

To some extent, then, the very success of family-friendly policies and a culture which accepts that family responsibilities can impinge on working time can disadvantage organisations unless more fundamental and private issues are taken on board. Organisational change does not take place in a vacuum, and wider social norms can and do impact on workplace cultures. At some stage more private work-family issues may have to be addressed.

In conclusion, it has been argued that equitably valued pluralistic forms of work which both men and women feel entitled (and motivated) to take up may contribute to a reduction in gender differences in occupational attainment in the long term. This will, however, require changes in deeply ingrained values and assumptions which underpin workplace culture.

The case study of the Council illustrates that it is possible to challenge assumptions about work-family separation and the value of non-standard workers and to progress towards the valuing of pluralistic and equitably valued working arrangements. However, it also demonstrates that in addressing some issues others may be generated and need resolving. It will be necessary to consider the inequity of paying some workers less to do the same amount of work as others receiving full pay and to develop new reward schemes based on output rather than input. The limitation of policies such as job sharing, once considered to be in the vanguard of family friendliness, will also have to be considered insofar as this perpetuates standard models of working time. Finally, it raises the thorny question of how far radical workplace change can be achieved without comparable change within the family.

Note

1 "L'aménagement du temps de travail en Europe: égalité des chances entre les femmes et les hommes et création d'emplois", Junter, A. and Malpass, N., Engender Brussels: European Commission, DGV.

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