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The Third Work-Life Balance  
Employer Survey:  
Executive Summary

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# **The Third Work-Life Balance Employer Survey: Executive Summary**

BY

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## About this publication

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## Executive summary

*The Third Work-Life Balance Employer Survey found that the availability and take-up of work-life balance arrangements has increased since 2003, with two or more flexible working time arrangements being taken up by employees in over four in ten workplaces. The vast majority (92 per cent) of employers reported that they would consider a request to change a working pattern from any employee, despite legislation only requiring employers to do so for some employees. Amongst those employers where a request had been made in the previous 12 months, just nine per cent said they had turned down any requests. There has been an overall increase in employers who reported that managers actively promote flexible working, which is due to increases among workplaces with less than 250 employees. Employers continue to hold predominantly positive attitudes towards work-life balance and to perceive its benefits for employees and workplaces alike, although it is clear that most employers feel that the implementation of flexible working practices is not always easy, and should not be expected by employees where it would cause disruption to the business.*

### Aims of the study

This report presents a summary of the findings of a major study of work-life balance among British workplaces with five or more employees. The Third Work-Life Balance (WLB3) Employer Survey was designed with three main aims in mind:

- to monitor changes since the previous work-life balance surveys by collecting data on awareness, provision, take-up and demand in relation to work-life balance arrangements and on employers' perceptions of positive benefits and detrimental impacts arising from the provision of these arrangements;
- to provide a robust baseline for future evaluation in relation to the provisions brought in under the Work and Families Act 2006; and
- to examine other issues which relate to work-life balance, including differential provision and take-up between sub-groups of employees.

Two earlier Work-Life Balance Employer Surveys were conducted in 2000<sup>1</sup> and 2002/3<sup>2</sup>. The key findings from the WLB3 Employer Survey, and comparisons with the previous surveys, are outlined below. A full report of findings from the survey will be published later in 2007. The report of findings from a survey of employees has already been published<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Winterbotham, M. & Vivian, D. (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Woodland, S. et al (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Hooker, H. et al (2007).

## Working hours

In order to set the survey findings in context, employers were asked about the hours that employees work. Just under half (46 per cent) of workplaces were open for the standard 'five days a week'. One third (33 per cent) were open seven days a week. Opening hours had changed little since 2003. Nearly seven in ten workplaces (68 per cent), covering 87 per cent of employees, worked standard office hours. Managerial staff were less likely than non-managerial staff to be paid for overtime. Both groups were less likely to be paid for their overtime than in 2003.

Around two thirds of workplaces (64 per cent) reported that managers and professional staff had more work to do in the same hours than three years ago, while 38 per cent reported that non-managerial workloads had increased. Very few workplaces reported a decline in workloads. In spite of this, the survey found a decrease in workplaces where non-managers work 'long hours' (48 hours per week for a continuous four month period as defined in the Working Time Regulations), from 15 per cent in 2003 to 9 per cent. There was also a decrease amongst managers, from 25 per cent to 21 per cent, although this was not statistically significant.

## Awareness of changes to legislation

The survey was timed to coincide with a number of provisions which came into force in April 2007 as part of the Work and Families Act 2006. Employers were first asked to describe what changes they thought were being made to maternity leave and pay legislation, without being given any prompts as to what the changes were.

Half of workplaces (50 per cent), covering three quarters (73 per cent) of employees, were able to mention at least one of the four main changes being made to maternity rights legislation under the Work and Families Act 2006.

Employers were then told what the four main changes were and after this prompting, over three-quarters (78 per cent) of workplaces, covering 93 per cent of employees, reported being aware of at least one of the four main changes, and 29 per cent of workplaces (covering 55 per cent of employees) said they were aware of all four of the main changes.

Awareness of legislative changes in relation to maternity leave was higher among larger workplaces; those with a union presence; those that had experienced recent pregnancies; and those where the interview was conducted after the introduction of the legislative changes.

Around six in ten respondents (61 per cent) were aware (with prompting), of the new entitlement for employees with caring responsibilities for adults to request flexible working. Awareness was higher among public sector establishments, large workplaces and those with a union presence.

## Flexible working arrangements

Employers were asked about the availability and take-up of a number of flexible working arrangements, as well as requests to work flexibly. The specific arrangements covered were part time working, job sharing, flexitime, working a compressed working week, working reduced hours for a limited period and working from home on a regular basis. The first five are defined as *flexible working time arrangements*, as they relate to the times at which an employee works. The inclusion of working from home – relating to

place of work rather than time of work – expands the definition to *flexible working arrangements* and these terms will be used throughout the summary.

### *Availability*

Ninety-five per cent of workplaces said that at least one of the six flexible working arrangements covered by the survey was available to employees – an increase since 2003 (88 per cent). Eighty-five per cent of workplaces said that at least one of these arrangements had been used in the previous 12 months. This proportion had not increased significantly since 2003 (83 per cent).

Reported availability of all of the six arrangements has increased since 2003, although the scale of the increase varies considerably depending on the arrangement concerned. Part-time working has become near universal, available in 92 per cent of workplaces (compared to 81 per cent in 2003). There have been particularly large increases in the availability of reduced hours working for a limited period (74 per cent up, from 40 per cent) and compressed hours working (41 per cent, up from 19 per cent). Job sharing and flexitime have also increased substantially (59 per cent, up from 39 per cent; and 55 per cent, up from 38 per cent, respectively). There has also been an increase in working from home (26 per cent, up from 22 per cent) although this change is not statistically significant.

Of the four per cent of workplaces that had no flexible working arrangements, a considerable majority (71 per cent) said that this was because flexible working was incompatible with the nature of their business.

### *Take-up*

Reported take-up of flexible working time arrangements has also increased, although not at the same pace as reported availability. Part time working is the most widely used arrangement (in 79 per cent of workplaces), broadly stable since 2000. Job sharing and flexitime showed large increases in take-up from relatively low levels between 2000 and 2003, but reported take-up appears to have flattened out at 15 and 25 per cent respectively between 2003 and 2007. Take-up of compressed hours working and working reduced hours for a limited period have shown steady and continuous growth, now used in 11 per cent and 22 per cent of workplaces respectively. Working from home on a regular basis bucks the trend, showing a decline in workplaces where this is taken-up from 22 per cent of workplaces in 2000 to 15 per cent in both 2003 and 2007.

Forty-two per cent of workplaces reported take-up of two or more flexible working time arrangements that the survey covered, an increase from 36 per cent in 2003. The proportion of employees covered by multiple forms of flexible working time arrangements increased from 63 per cent at 2003 to 75 per cent at 2007. Large workplaces and those in the public sector were particularly likely to report take-up of multiple forms of flexible working time arrangement.

Reported take-up is also higher in workplaces with more female than male employees for all flexible working time arrangements. For example, part time work is reported to be used in 65 per cent of workplaces with more male employees than female compared to 90 per cent of workplaces with more female employees than male.

### *Eligibility and requests*

Where flexible working arrangements were provided, employers were asked whether they placed any restrictions of the types of employees who were eligible to use them. For each of the five flexible *working time* arrangements covered, over six in ten employers who provided these arrangements said that *all* employees were eligible.

Employers were also asked whether they would consider a request to change a working pattern from *any* employee. The vast majority of employers (92 per cent) said that they

would, covering 96 per cent of all employees. Forty per cent of workplaces reported receiving a request from an employee within the previous 12 months to adopt one of the six flexible working arrangements covered by the survey. Amongst these workplaces, nine per cent said they had turned down at least one request during this time. The reasons that respondents gave for turning down requests to work flexibly tended to be associated with demands on the business.

Employers at workplaces where there had been a request for flexible working in the previous 12 months were asked whether the proportion of requests they were able to accept had increased, decreased or stayed the same. Three quarters (75 per cent) said there had been no change, 18 per cent reported an increase and three per cent reported a decrease.

## Maternity leave and benefits

Employers were asked a series of questions about maternity leave and benefits. Around a third of workplaces (34 per cent) had had a female staff member become pregnant within the last two years, with nearly all of the female employees involved taking maternity leave. The majority of these women (80 per cent) were paid Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP). Employers were asked whether they had claimed the costs of paying SMP back and seven per cent reported they had not, though over a quarter of the survey respondents (26 per cent) did not know.

All employers were asked whether they had provisions for employees taking maternity leave which went beyond the statutory minimum. Fifty-three per cent of workplaces reported allowing *all* mothers 12 months' leave, before this right was extended to all mothers in April 2007. And fifteen per cent of workplaces paid mothers (whose baby was due before 1 April 2007) maternity pay at a rate greater than the statutory minimum. Whilst relatively low, larger workplaces were more likely to do so, with 41 per cent of all employees covered.

All employers were asked whether they had experienced any problems with maternity rights and benefits in the previous two years. Only two per cent of employers reported experiencing any such problems. When asked specifically about difficulties holding jobs open for employees on maternity leave, 20 per cent of workplaces where a woman had taken maternity leave in the previous two years reported that they had had difficulties holding jobs open. Just one per cent of employers reported receiving complaints from employees in relation to maternity rights legislation.

## Paternity leave

Employers were also asked about provisions for fathers taking time off around the time of the birth of a child. Around three in ten workplaces (29 per cent) had experienced fathers taking such time off in the previous two years. In most cases this involved just one employee. In 88 per cent of cases, fathers took Statutory Paternity Pay (SPP), however around one in ten fathers who took time off did not receive SPP.

Of workplaces where fathers had taken paternity leave, a third (32 per cent) reported that fathers sometimes took time off as annual leave or holiday *instead* of taking their statutory paternity leave. This was more likely to occur at private sector workplaces (35 per cent) than at public sector workplaces (13 per cent). In addition to this, more than half of workplaces (56 per cent) where fathers had taken paternity leave reported that fathers sometimes chose to '*top-up*' their paternity leave by taking annual leave or holiday.

Around one in five workplaces (18 per cent) offered extra-statutory paternity leave to their employees and a similar proportion (19 per cent) offered extra-statutory paternity pay. Public sector workplaces with 25 or more employees were more likely than their private sector equivalents to provide extra-statutory pay.

Few workplaces had experienced any problems with fathers taking paternity leave. Among workplaces where fathers had taken time off around the time of a birth in the previous two years, six per cent reported problems relating to being given adequate notice, and five per cent said there had been other types of problems.

## Parental Leave and other special leave

Employers were asked about other types of leave they provide for their employees, including Parental Leave and time off at short notice. Around one in seven employers (14 per cent) had at least one employee who had taken Parental Leave in the 12 months prior to taking part in the survey, the same proportion as in 2003.

Employers tend to be flexible about offering leave at short notice for employees to deal with emergencies. Almost all (99 per cent) employers would almost always or sometimes grant time off to care for a family member (69 per cent said they would almost always grant this and 30 per cent said sometimes); or to deal with a household emergency (85 per cent said they would almost always grant this and 14 per cent said sometimes).

Thirty-seven per cent of workplaces had flexible working and leave arrangements that made special provisions for employees with specific cultural and religious needs. This compared with 43 per cent of workplaces in 2003. However, workplaces were often vague or unsure about their provision in this area, so this apparent decline should be treated with caution.

## Employer support for working parents

The proportion of workplaces providing childcare facilities, or other arrangements to help parents combine work with family commitments, has more than doubled since 2003 from eight per cent to 18 per cent. Amongst these workplaces, the most common provisions were financial help with childcare (62 per cent), and childcare (18 per cent). The overall increase since 2003 has been driven by an increase in the provision of financial help for parents, with five times as many employers providing this in 2007 compared to 2003. This increase is almost certainly explained by the proliferation of childcare vouchers. Provision of childcare was much more common in larger establishments and in the public sector.

## Attitudes towards work-life balance

Employers were asked to report their attitudes on work-life balance issues and the impact that flexible working arrangements have on employees and the workplace.

### *General attitudes*

Table 1 presents employers' attitudes on a range of work-life balance issues. Employers' attitudes to work life balance were positive overall with most employers acknowledging the importance of employees being able to balance work and life outside work. Ninety-two per cent of employers agree that people work best when they can balance their work and the other aspects of their lives, and two-thirds (67 per cent) agreed that everyone should be able to balance their work and home lives in the way

that they want. However, a majority of employers (73 per cent) also agreed with the statement that employees should not expect to be able to change their working pattern if it would disrupt the business and two-thirds (67 per cent) agreed that it is not easy trying to accommodate employees with different patterns of working. Employers held the same or very similar attitudes about work-life balance in 2007 as they had in 2003. Positive attitudes towards work-life balance were strongly associated with having a wide range of work-life balance practice arrangements already in place.

**Table 1: Attitudes towards work-life balance – levels of agreement with ten statements**

	AGREE (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	DISAGREE (%)
...people work best when they can balance their work and the other aspects of their lives	92	3	4
...employers should make a special effort to accommodate the particular difficulties parents of young and disabled children face in balancing work and family life	87	6	6
...people who work flexibly are just as likely to be promoted as those who don't	78	6	13
...employees should not expect to be able to change their working pattern if it would disrupt the business	73	8	18
...it is not easy trying to accommodate employees with different patterns of working	67	8	23
...everyone should be able to balance their work and home lives in the way that they want	67	9	24
...providing flexible working practices improves customer service	50	13	34
...when some employees take-up flexible working practices, it causes resentment among other employees	45	12	39
...policies that help employees balance work and other interests are often unfair to some employees	41	12	43
...it's not the employer's responsibility to help people balance their work with other aspects of their life	35	10	53

Base: All workplaces with five or more employees (exc. Don't know and Refusal responses)  
Source: Third Work-Life Balance Employer Survey, 2007. Great Britain.  
Note: Figures are weighted and based on responses from 1,455 managers

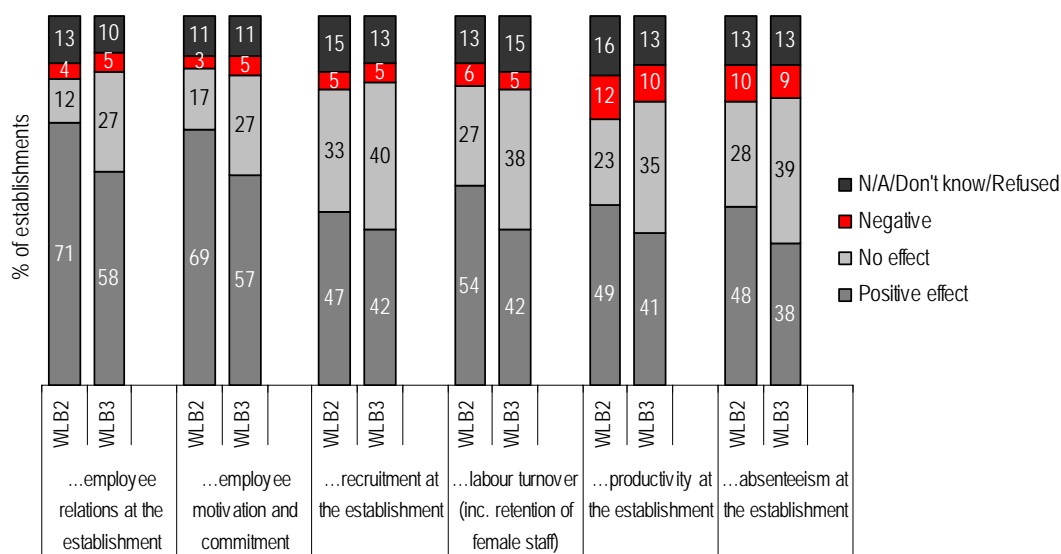
### *Effects of flexible working arrangements*

Employers were asked about the effect these practices had on employees and human resource management at their establishment. For each of six criteria, employers were asked whether they thought flexible working and leave arrangements had a positive, negative or no effect. Figure 1 presents their responses. Compared to reported effects in 2003, it is apparent that whilst similar proportions of employers report negative effects, there have been decreases in the proportions of employers reporting positive effects, and increases in those reporting no effect. A possible explanation may be that as flexible working and leave arrangements become an integral part of the way an organisation is run, the positive effects are less apparent, compared to when they are first introduced.

Employers were also asked about the overall effect of the legislative changes brought in as part of the Employment Act 2002, which were to extend maternity leave and pay, and to introduce paternity leave and pay and the right to request flexible working for parents of young or disabled children. Two-thirds (67 per cent) of establishments felt that

regulations had made no difference to their business. Around one in eight respondents (12 per cent) said that the changes had been beneficial to their workplace and one in five (18 per cent) that they had been detrimental. In relation to costs, around two-thirds (65 per cent) of employers thought that these changes had made no difference to operating costs at their workplace. However, around three in ten workplaces (28 per cent) said that the changes had increased their costs. Workplaces with 100 or more employees were more likely than average to say the regulations had increased their costs *but* also that the overall effect of the regulations had been beneficial.

**Figure 1: Perceived effects of flexible working and leave arrangements**



Base: All workplaces with five or more employees  
 Source: Second Work-Life Balance Employer Survey, 2003. Great Britain. Third Work-Life Balance Employer Survey, 2007. Great Britain.  
 Note: Figures are weighted and based on responses from 1,505 and 1,456 managers respectively, except Employee Motivation and Commitment in WL B2: 1,504

## Implementing flexible working and leave

Employers were asked about the use of formal written policies and procedures in the workplace, how line managers are involved in implementing these policies and procedures in the workplace, and how policies are communicated between management and employees.

Half (49 per cent) of all the workplaces with at least one flexible working arrangement available had a written policy which provided for flexible working, no significant change from 52 per cent in 2003.

As in 2003, there was a roughly equal split between workplaces which reported that managers generally had discretion over decisions (51 per cent of workplaces) and those where they were required to follow a set procedure (47 per cent). However, when employers were then asked about whether managers have authority to make decisions on specific issues (start and finish times, working from home, time-off at short notice to deal with an emergency and working some other working pattern), the extent to which decisions are left to managers' discretion appears to have decreased since 2003.

Workplaces used a wide range of written and verbal channels to inform their employees about work-life balance arrangements, such as staff meetings or briefings (20 per cent of

workplaces), circulars (18 per cent) and email or intranet (15 per cent). However, the most commonly cited method was word-of-mouth, unchanged from 2003 (mentioned by 34 per cent of establishments). One in five (21 per cent) of workplaces relied *solely* on word-of-mouth communication.

Almost half of employers (45 per cent) said that managers did actively promote flexible working, an increase of seven percentage points since 2003 (38 per cent). However this masks a decline in the proportion of large workplaces (250 employees or more) that actively promote flexible working, from 56 per cent in 2003 to 49 per cent; and an increase amongst smaller workplaces (with less than 250 employees) promoting flexible working, from 37 per cent to 44 per cent.

## About this survey

The survey was conducted with a random sample of 1,462 workplaces in Great Britain with five or more employees. The response rate was 39 per cent. The survey was carried out between March and August 2007 by the BMRB Social Research on behalf of the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. A companion survey among employees was conducted in February to March 2006<sup>4</sup>.

Workplaces were randomly selected from the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR). The survey over-sampled larger workplaces and certain industry sectors. The figures reported in this summary are weighted to produce nationally representative estimates.

The survey was conducted over the telephone using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). Interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes and were conducted with a manager at the workplace who had day-to-day responsibilities for personnel and employment relations issues. This research represents a follow-up of two earlier studies conducted in 2000<sup>5</sup> and 2002/3<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Hooker, H. et al (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Winterbotham, M. & Vivian, D. (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Woodland, S. et al (2003).

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