



EU employers take family-friendly working seriously

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This report is available in electronic format only.

A survey investigating family-friendly working policies in companies in six European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden, UK) finds that employers take family-friendly working seriously and have put in place a range of policies to support this, especially in areas such as flexible working and parental support. The main driver for this in most countries was compliance with legislation or collective agreements. The economic crisis has had little impact on the provision of family-friendly working policies.

Introduction

The [European company survey on the reconciliation of work and family life 2010 \(1.36MB PDF\)](#), commissioned by the German [Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth](#) and [Robert Bosch Stiftung](#), was conducted by the [Cologne Institute for Economic Research](#). The survey provides a detailed description and analysis of family-friendly policies implemented by companies in six European countries – France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK. Together these countries account for around 63% of the EU27 population and 68% of its gross domestic product (GDP).

The results of this survey are timely in the context of EU attempts to encourage women to enter and remain in the labour market, and to ensure good quality employment for all. The survey is also relevant to the European debate on demographic trends, specifically an ageing workforce, which require increased labour market participation from all those of working age. Many employers report that it is difficult to recruit and retain employees who have the right kinds of skills and qualifications. Providing flexibility in terms of enabling staff to better balance their work and family life is therefore of benefit to both employers and employees.

Methodology

The survey was carried out between 26 October and 10 December 2009. Over 5,000 senior executives and human resources managers in France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK were surveyed by means of computer-aided telephone interviews.

Although respondents were chosen at random, to ensure a representative outcome the results were extrapolated using a 3 × 2 matrix consisting of three categories of company size (5–49, 50–249, 250 and over employees) and two sectoral groups (production industry and service providers).

For Germany, it was important to ensure comparability with the 2006 version of the survey. For this reason, more companies (upwards of 1,300) were approached in Germany than in the other five countries (around 750 in each).

Interviewees were asked about how important they consider the issue of work–life balance to be, and what policies they have made available. In addition, they answered questions on their main motives for, and the most significant obstacles to, the implementation of measures to improve [work-life balance](#).

Significance of topic

Family-friendly working is regarded as important in all six countries covered by this survey, with managers in Sweden and the UK most likely to say that they felt that it was ‘important’ or ‘fairly important’. In the other four countries, around eight out of 10 managers said that family-friendly working was ‘important’ or ‘fairly important’ for their company, although in Poland, the proportion of managers stating that family-friendly working was ‘important’ (as opposed to ‘fairly important’) for their company was quite low at just under 23% (Table 1).

The proportion of managers who said that this was an ‘important’ or ‘fairly important’ issue for employees was high in all countries, but particularly so in Sweden and the UK. In Poland, only

just over 32% of managers said that family-friendly working was ‘important’ (as opposed to ‘fairly important’) for employees.

The proportion of managers who felt that this was an ‘important’ or ‘fairly important’ issue for key staff was lowest in Germany (68.6%) and highest in the UK (94.2%) and Sweden (86.3%). In Poland, the proportion of managers stating that this was ‘important’ for key staff, as opposed to ‘fairly important’, was the lowest at just under 28%.

Table 1: Companies’ attitude towards family-friendly working (% of companies)

	France	Germany	Italy	Poland	Sweden	UK
For the company as a whole						
Important	48.1	58.2	43.5	22.8	62.1	52.5
Fairly important	35.2	21.5	38.4	59.5	24.1	40.9
Fairly unimportant	10.7	15.1	14.7	14.0	9.6	5.1
Unimportant	6.1	5.2	3.4	3.7	4.3	1.6
For employees						
Important	61.0	59.1	49.7	32.3	67.0	59.4
Fairly important	32.5	22.0	39.7	53.2	23.6	36.5
Fairly unimportant	3.9	13.3	9.8	12.2	6.7	3.3
Unimportant	2.5	5.7	0.8	2.2	2.7	0.8
For staff in key operational positions such as managers and technical experts						
Important	52.8	50.7	42.2	27.8	63.7	54.6
Fairly important	31.9	17.9	44.4	53.3	22.6	39.6
Fairly unimportant	10.3	21.4	10.7	16.3	11.0	4.3
Unimportant	4.9	9.9	2.7	2.6	2.7	1.4

Source: Cologne Institute for Economic Research

Attitudes and activities relating to family-friendly working

Interviewees were asked whether:

- the company ensures that the ability to reconcile work and family life can be taken for granted by their staff;
- workers with family care commitments have the same development and promotion opportunities as employees without such commitments;
- the management regularly interviews staff as to their requirements in relation to reconciling work and family life;
- employees are regularly informed by management about the work–life reconciliation policies offered by the company;
- the staff and their representative bodies are continuously involved in devising the work–life reconciliation policies offered by the company.

Responses were categorised into four groups – ‘fully applies’, ‘applies to a reasonable degree’, ‘applies to a limited degree’ and ‘does not apply at all’. Based on the responses, the survey found

that Sweden had the highest proportion of companies (62.3%) that could be characterised as particularly family-friendly (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Share of companies with a positive attitude to work–life balance issues

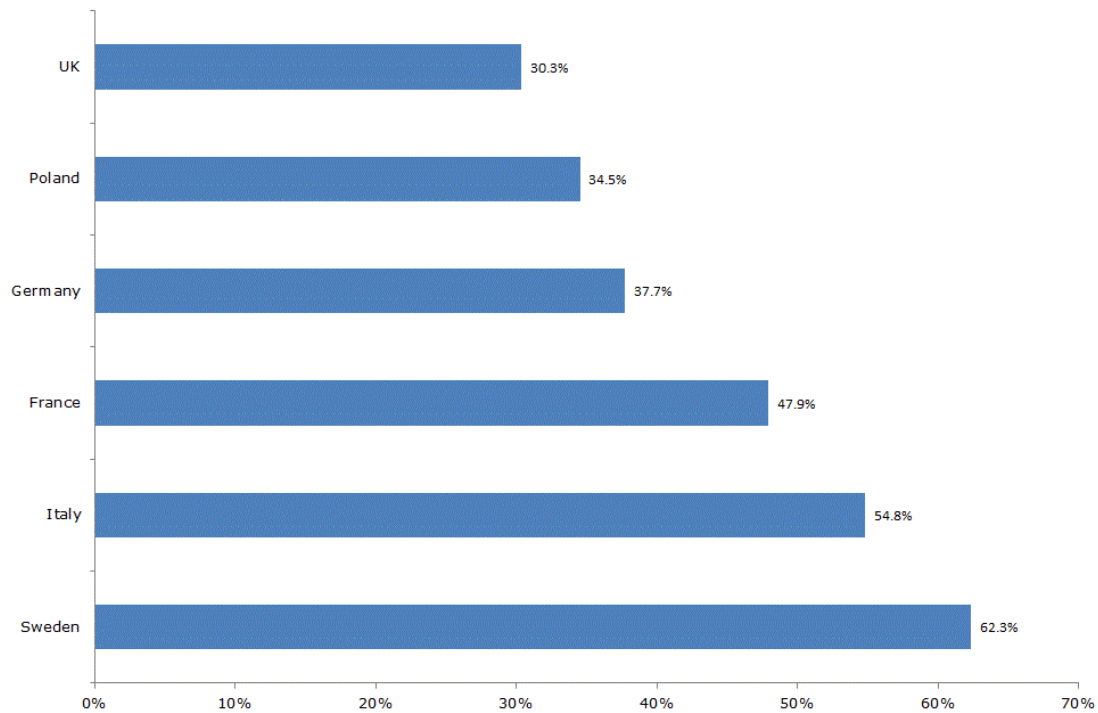


Figure 1: Share of companies with a positive attitude to work–life balance issues

Note: Figures are the results of a logit regression using the family-friendly attitude as the dependent variable and an ordered logit regression with the median value as the dependent variable with the following control variables: characteristics of the company; structure of the workforce; industries; and countries. For confidence intervals please consult the report.

Source: Cologne Institute for Economic Research

In terms of the number of policies on offer that can be characterised as family-friendly, companies in Sweden and the UK offer the most (10 as a median value) (Figure 2). Only a very small minority of companies do not offer any family-friendly measures at all (France 0.7%, Germany 0.8%, Italy 4.6%, Poland 1.2%, Sweden 0.4% and UK 0.8%).

Figure 2: Median number of family-friendly policies

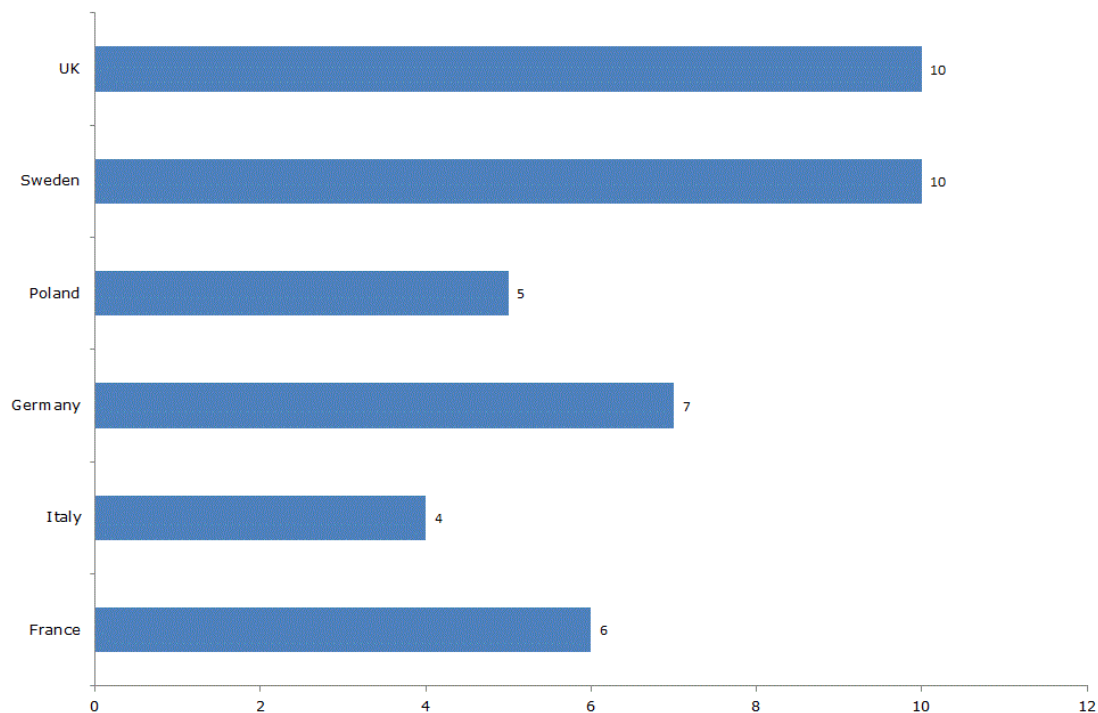


Figure 2: Median number of family-friendly policies

Source: Cologne Institute for Economic Research

Specific family-friendly measures

Flexible working

Flexible working time arrangements are an important element of family-friendly working. Offering flexibility in working time enables staff to align their work and their private life more effectively and enables the organisation to react more flexibly to fluctuations in demand for its products or services.

The survey found that flexible daily or weekly working hours, individually agreed working hours and the opportunity to work part-time were the most common flexible working measures in all six countries, although there were significant national differences (Table 2).

For example, the proportion of companies in the UK that offer individually agreed working hours was significantly larger than in most of the other countries in the survey with the exception of Germany. Italy had the lowest share of companies offering flexible working arrangements in all areas covered by the survey, with the exception of job sharing. Poland also had a lower share of companies offering flexible working than most of the other countries, although over 75% of companies offered part-time working. Individually agreed working hours were most common in Germany and the UK.

A significant proportion of companies reported there was no monitoring of working hours. Job sharing and sabbaticals were the least common flexible working time arrangements, although a significant proportion of companies offered both these options in Sweden and the UK.

Table 2: Companies offering flexible time working (%)

Type of policy	France	Germany	Italy	Poland	Sweden	UK
Flexible daily or weekly working hours	57.0	70.2	45.8	49.1	64.5	72.7
Flexible annual or lifetime working hours	45.7	28.3	23.0	26.1	58.5	47.5
No monitoring of working hours	40.7	46.2	32.2	32.3	52.7	40.4
Sabbaticals	27.0	16.1	9.6	25.5	30.5	35.0
Individually agreed working hours	52.6	72.8	45.1	53.8	58.5	78.2
Telework	14.0	21.9	5.3	6.6	41.2	38.2
Part-time work	68.7	79.2	64.7	75.2	71.9	85.7
Job sharing	15.0	20.4	19.3	9.4	39.7	33.9

Source: Cologne Institute for Economic Research

The survey found a correlation between a family-friendly company attitude and the actual implementation of family-friendly policies by companies. However, when respondents were asked whether the organisation of working time actually corresponded to workers' preferences, the answer varied between countries. The survey found that two-thirds of German companies scheduled their working hours mainly in line with operational requirements and one-third predominantly in line with employee wishes. However, in Italy and the UK, employee preferences exerted significantly more influence on the organisation of working time (64.6% in Italy and 48.7% in the UK). Working time was organised in line with employee preferences in 29.3% of French companies, 26.5% of Polish companies and 26.3% of Swedish companies.

The survey also found that only in Germany did a positive company attitude towards work-life balance exert a significant impact on the likelihood that the wishes of the staff were the main factor in organising working hours. Even if operational reasons are the main determinant of working hours, a specific allocation of working hours can benefit both the company and its employees. This may be, for example, specific working patterns to cope with fluctuations in demand that also allow employees to be at home during parts of the day in order to care for children or relatives.

Parental leave and parental support

Supporting working parents, both mothers and fathers, is an important element of family-friendly policy. Each country in this survey have national regulations in place that, in accordance with the EU's parental leave directive, give employees a right to take parental leave. Nevertheless, national regulations differ considerably in areas such as the extent of the leave entitlement and the level of pay received while on leave. In some countries, such as Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, employees have the right to take a relatively long period of up to three years of parental leave if they wish.

In all the countries in the survey, employees had the right to return after parental leave to their previous job or a comparable job.

The survey found that consideration was given to the needs of parents when organising work processes in a very high proportion of German companies (80.1%), but also in the majority of companies in the other countries apart from Italy and Poland (Table 3). Nonetheless, even in

Italian and Polish companies, paying particular attention to parents' family obligations was still the most common form of support for working parents (37.3% and 33.2%, respectively).

The majority of companies in Germany, Sweden and the UK reported having a policy permitting employees to work part-time during parental leave, while this was the case in only 28.6% of Italian companies and 24.1% of Polish companies. Encouraging ongoing contact with the workplace during parental leave, either by working on a part-time basis or through some form of contact programme, prevents knowledge and skills from being lost or becoming outdated.

In terms of encouraging fathers to take leave or to work part-time, 61.4% of UK companies had a policy on this, as did 55.1% of Swedish companies. Only 29.9% of French, 6.4% of Italian and 10.6% of Polish companies had a policy in this area.

Table 3: Support given to parents before, during and after parental leave (% of companies offering a policy)

Policy	France	Germany	Italy	Poland	Sweden	UK
Contact programmes	21.0	27.3	23.0	15.4	51.8	66.6
Further training	6.4	19.8	16.2	8.9	16.6	28.0
Part-time work during parental leave	30.3	60.5	28.6	24.1	80.5	65.3
Reintegration programmes	21.7	35.6	20.9	16.0	47.2	44.3
Particular consideration given to parents	54.3	80.1	37.3	33.2	61.4	66.3
Encouraging fathers to take leave or work part-time	29.9	16.2	6.4	10.6	55.1	61.4
Financial benefits	6.2	12.6	3.7	7.2	21.5	39.9

Source: Cologne Institute for Economic Research.

Child care and dependant care

The provision of facilities for caring for children or support with childcare is another important element of family-friendly working policies, as this enables individuals to remain in work. This is particularly the case if public childcare infrastructure is not comprehensive.

Only very few companies in the survey (1.1–3.8%) offered company-specific childcare places (Table 4), although this is not surprising given that this type of facility would only normally be offered by large companies, which represent just a small minority of companies.

The survey found that German (15.1%) and UK (18.3%) enterprises support their employees in finding, organising or financing child care more often than the enterprises in the other four countries. Support was most commonly found in providing extra leave to employees. However, this type of support was less prevalent than flexible working provision and provision of parental leave and support in all countries surveyed. Additional support can cover offers such as admission of workers' children to company canteens, the provision of professional help for household duties, offers of leisure activities for workers and legal advice.

Financial and organisational support for employees to enable them to care for elderly people (for example, short-term nursing) was not widespread in any country, although 14% of Swedish companies reported that they provided this.

However, a majority of companies in France, Germany, Sweden and the UK provided leave of absence or special leave in the case of a sick child, and a relatively high number of companies also provided this leave to care for a sick relative (for example, 61.0% in the UK, 49.7% in France and 46.8% in Sweden). Overall, companies help their workers in this area mainly by providing special leave when sick children or relatives need care.

Table 4: Companies offering policies on childcare and care for dependants (%)

Policy	France	Germany	Italy	Poland	Sweden	UK
Employer-provided childcare facilities	1.7	2.4	1.1	3.8	1.1	3.6
Additional support for childcare	2.6	15.1	3.5	9.5	2.0	18.3
Support for short-term nursing	1.9	8.9	3.2	6.6	14.0	5.5
Leave of absence or special leave (child's sickness)*	69.7	52.2	46.9	29.9	50.2	71.3
Leave of absence or special leave (relative's sickness)*	49.7	34.6	40.6	22.5	46.8	61.0

*Note: *Over and above statutory leave*

Source: Cologne Institute for Economic Research

The survey also found there was scant provision of services to support employees in their household and leisure activities, and to inform and advise them on legal matters. Nevertheless, in Sweden a fifth of companies offered at least two forms of family support service such as additional support with household or leisure activities.

Reasons for providing family-friendly working

The survey also asked interviewees what motivated their company to provide family-friendly working to its employees. The most common reason cited in all countries, with the exception of Germany, was a need to comply with legislation or collectively agreed provisions. This was cited by 97% of companies in Sweden, 90.3% in the UK, 86.8% in Italy and 83.3% in France (Table 5).

Increasing the job satisfaction of employees was also a major motivator, particularly in Germany and Sweden, where it was cited by 93.1% and 93.7% of respondents, respectively.

Increasing productivity was also cited by a large number of respondents, but particularly in Sweden (84.5%), the UK (78.8%) and Italy (78.9%).

Companies also reported responding to the wishes of staff when implementing family-friendly policies. This was the case among 90.3% of respondents in Sweden, 80.1% in Germany and 76.3% in the UK.

Recruitment and retention of qualified staff was also a key motivator in some countries, such as Germany, where 93.2% of respondents cited this reason, Sweden (84.2%) and the UK (79.7%).

Reintegration of staff after taking parental or maternity/paternity leave was cited as a motivator by 87.2% of respondents in Sweden and 77.6% in the UK.

Table 5: Motives for implementing or continuing family-friendly policies (% of companies)

Policy	France	Germany	Italy	Poland	Sweden	UK
Increase job satisfaction	79.8	93.1	80.0	66.5	93.7	87.9
Statutory or collective agreement requirements	83.3	75.3	86.8	68.1	97.0	90.3
Increase productivity	70.3	46.8	78.9	67.0	84.5	78.8
Wishes of staff	59.8	80.1	71.6	59.7	90.3	76.3
Retain/recruit qualified staff	72.6	93.2	67.2	47.6	84.2	79.7
Reintegrate parents more rapidly	48.3	72.1	49.1	26.4	87.2	77.6
Reduce the amount of sick leave and staff turnover	46.3	77.4	45.2	21.1	58.8	64.1
Reduce the amount of time off needed for dependant care	26.5	45.2	41.9	16.1	48.6	56.0
Give staff more control over time allocation	44.7	66.4	55.4	43.8	74.3	68.6
Reduce paid overtime or increase flexibility in response to the order situation	43.8	62.9	42.9	33.7	76.0	49.4
Integral part of strategic personnel development	52.9	58.4	60.9	22.2	75.7	71.5

Note: Multiple answers were allowed.

Source: Cologne Institute for Economic Research.

The report notes that almost all the motivators for providing family-friendly policies reflect a positive attitude towards the reconciliation of work and family life – the main exception being a need to comply with legislation or collective agreements.

Family-friendly objectives can be categorised into two groups:

- those that primarily address efficiency issues, such as reducing transaction costs, increasing production or fostering innovation:
 - reducing time off required by employees in order to deal with care issues;
 - retention and recruitment of staff;
 - increasing employee productivity;
 - reducing sick leave and staff turnover;
 - reducing paid overtime and increasing flexibility in order to react to fluctuations in demand;
- those that focus primarily on the preferences and needs of workers, such as:
 - increasing job satisfaction;
 - reintegrating employees returning to work;
 - giving staff more control over the allocation of their time;

- complying with staff wishes;
- implementing policies that are an integral part of the company's strategic personnel development.

Barriers to providing family-friendly working

When asked about the obstacles and barriers that hindered or prevented them from offering family-friendly working measures, respondents cited the most common barriers as being (Table 6):

- insufficient support from the state, particularly in terms of financial support;
- the adequacy of legal or collectively agreed regulation, thus rendering company-level provisions unnecessary.

From a country perspective, lack of state support appeared to be particularly prevalent in Italy (cited by 61.8% of respondents) and Poland (cited by 76.1%). In Poland, Sweden and the UK, respondents were more likely to cite the existence of legal and agreed provisions as the main reason why they did not offer family-friendly measures. In Poland, a high number of respondents cited as barriers an unfavourable business climate and the fact that management considered family-friendly working policies to be unnecessary.

Table 6: Obstacles to the implementation of work–family reconciliation policies (% of companies)

	France	Germany	Italy	Poland	Sweden	UK
Collective agreements and/or statutory provisions are sufficient	60.2	58.7	65.1	73.4	67.8	75.8
State support is insufficient	48.9	49.8	61.8	76.1	41.9	49.7
Employees have no need	48.8	59.8	38.9	62.5	49.3	45.8
Cost would be too high	49.5	36.5	57.8	56.4	35.5	54.2
Not a basic corporate responsibility	26.8	39.9	27.7	25.4	18.8	27.7
Management considers them to be unnecessary	36.7	17.3	32.8	75.1	37.8	31.7
Unfavourable business situation	43.7	32.0	33.8	75.9	36.4	39.8
Potential tensions between staff with and without family commitments	36.0	18.8	17.7	18.0	18.5	32.8
No benefits seen	31.7	31.6	32.2	41.4	20.5	22.5

Note: Multiple answers were allowed to top four obstacles.

Source: Cologne Institute for Economic Research.

Rules governing family-friendly working

Family-friendly working is governed by a wide range of regulation, both statutory and collectively agreed. The way that these two types of regulation interact can also differ; in some cases, they can complement each other, whereas in others one type may substitute another.

In Poland, 91.8% of respondents said that one or more policies on family-friendly working had been implemented to comply with statutory requirements. In the UK, the figure was also high, at 88.7%, while in Germany it was 57.8%.

Collective agreements are particularly relevant in this area in France, Italy and Sweden, where 79.2%, 70.3% and 56.9% of participants respectively stated that there were collective agreements on this subject at national or sectoral level.

Company level and establishment agreements may be subordinated to statutory regulation or collective agreements at a sectoral or national level, although these lower level agreements often serve to implement policies in a detailed way at company level. According to the survey, company-level agreements were the most prevalent in France (46.8% of respondents citing these) and Germany (42.3%). Only 8.4% of respondents from Italy said that company-level agreements were in place.

In the UK, a majority of respondents (81.3%) stated that family-friendly measures were implemented as a result of the company's own initiative. This figure was also relatively high in Germany (68.6%) and Sweden (58.9%), but relatively low in Italy (12.3%).

Effects of the crisis

According to the survey, the economic crisis appears to have had relatively little impact on family-friendly working. Italy was the only country in which a significant proportion (around 40%) of the companies had been forced to withdraw or postpone reconciliation policies. In contrast, a similar response was found in only 7% of the enterprises in Germany and fewer than 3% in the UK.

The survey results suggest this may be because family-friendly human resources management is particularly influenced by long-term planning goals for companies such as avoiding skills shortages or improving employee relations and industrial relations. The survey report also notes that policies that allow workers to work according to their preferences and which are not detrimental to the company's requirements are seen as positive and therefore unlikely to be altered or withdrawn. Furthermore, in five of the six countries (the exception was Poland), the number of respondents who believed that family-friendly working would gain significance over the next five years was greater than the number who expected it to decline.

Conclusions and implications for EU policy

The survey results indicate that no single national model provides the overall best policy recommendations for promoting work-life balance among employees. However, there are two important conclusions to be drawn.

The first is that the implementation of family-friendly human resources policies in a company does not necessarily require a positive attitude towards work-life balance on the part of management, although an overall family-friendly attitude can increase the willingness of companies to provide work-life balance policies. Governments should therefore be aware that encouraging companies to implement policies voluntarily might be more effective than putting into place regulations that might run contrary to companies' requirements.

Secondly, family-friendly policies are only sustainable if they have advantages for both the company and its employees. Therefore, there must be a balance between the wishes and preferences of the workforce and the operational requirements of businesses.

In an EU context, the promotion of work–life balance as a central part of EU employment policy helps to fulfil the EU’s aims to provide more and better jobs and increase the employment rate of women. This is particularly important in times of demographic change and an ageing population.

Work–life balance can also help both men and women to participate in a more balanced and equal way in all areas of life including work, family life, private life and society in general. If all workers could combine their working life with family caring responsibilities (both for children and ageing dependants), this would help more people to remain in the labour market.

In the current difficult economic times, many employers feel they want to retain their skilled and experienced staff rather than having to spend time and money competing for the right kind of talent and skills once the economy grows once more. If employers can offer flexible working which helps employees to balance their life and work, and at the same time gives some flexibility to employers to react to changes in the economic environment, this can be beneficial to both employers and employees.

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