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European top managers' support for work-life arrangements

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by **Wike Been, Tanja van der Lippe and Maria das Dores Horta Guerreiro**

When Marissa Mayer of Yahoo! took over from her predecessor, she reduced the flexible working options of employees. After he became a father, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook extended parental leave options.

These examples show that top managers of organizations are of vital importance for work-life arrangements: policies within organizations that help employees combine work and private life.

There are different kinds of work-life policies. For example, the possibility to have flexible starting and ending times of a working day (flexitime), the possibility to work from home (telecommuting), the reduction of working time (part-time work hours), the extension of statutory leave options and the provision of on-site childcare.

There are important organizational differences in the extent of work-life arrange provided to employees. For example, organizations in the public sector tend to provide more options as do larger organizations. Also, the number of work-life arrangements provided by work organizations to employees varies between countries.

When do top managers support the provision of work-life arrangements to employees in their organizations? And how does the context of the organization and country affect the conditions under which top managers are supporting the provision of work-life arrangements?

A recent study looks into these questions in the context of five European countries: Finland, Portugal, UK, Slovenia and the Netherlands.

Business case arguments and social legitimacy

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Top managers support work-life arrangements when they see in their provision a good business case for the organization. However, this is not the whole story.

In the context of Europe, top managers have a preference for providing work-life arrangements that, in principle, target *all* employees rather than custom work-life arrangements for high performing employees only. This finding can be explained by top managers' concern about the social legitimacy of the organization and thus the public viewing it as a good employer.

Providing custom work-life arrangements might jeopardize the public's view of the organization in the European context where equal treatment of employees is highly valued, a principle that is reinforced by the European Union.

Compared to top managers of private sector organizations, top managers of public sector organizations have a much stronger preference for work-life arrangements that target all employees. After all, gaining social legitimacy by showing morally acceptable organizational behavior is much more important for them.

Nevertheless, in the countries we studied, top managers of private sector organization prefer work-life arrangements aimed at all employees. Apparently, in the European context of this study, work-life arrangements are seen as general terms of employment rather than as personal remunerations.

Flexibility arrangements preferred

Flextime and telecommuting are generally more supported by top managers than extending statutory leave policies or offering part-time options. The rapid technological developments of the last decades have made it increasingly easy to adopt these arrangements within organizations. Moreover, they have fewest consequences for employee output because they do not alter employees work hours.

More state policies means more top managers' support for flexibility arrangements

When the government provides more work-life policies, for example extensive leave options and child-care arrangements, top managers tend to be more supportive of providing flextime and telecommuting for employees. Apparently the supportive climate for the combination of work and private life that is created by extensive state support results in top managers' willingness to support employees even more by providing them with work flexibility.

National differences in the support of part-time work

Top managers in Finland, Portugal, and Slovenia are less supportive of the provision of part-time options for employees than their counterparts in the Netherlands and the UK. This can be understood in the context that a "full-time work hours" culture is highly prevalent in the first group of countries whereas part-time work is more accepted in the UK and the Netherlands.

Personal experiences and characteristics of top managers do not matter?

Male and female top managers are equally supportive of work-life arrangements and so are top managers with and without children. The personal experiences a manager has had with a work-life conflict or personal use of work-life arrangements also did not shape their support of the provision of these arrangements within their organization.

Top managers' motivation to support work-life arrangements seems driven by business case arguments and social norms rather than personal experiences. This can possibly be understood by the fact that the idea of work-life arrangements is already well-spread within the societies we studied and top managers that support them are no longer "pioneers." In fact, employers that do not support them to some extent can increasingly be seen as somewhat "old fashioned". However, it can also be the case that more nuanced personal characteristics play a role in top managers' decision making than taken into account in this study.

What is to be done?

Of all different types of work-life arrangements, top managers are most likely to introduce flexible working options (flextime, telecommuting) in their organizations, even when they are not legally required to do so. They are most likely to do so when they see a clear business case for flexwork. Top managers were less inclined to provide leave provisions beyond the statutory required and part-time options in their organizations. These types of work-life arrangements might need legal reinforcement or need to be provided (paid) by the government in order to make them available for employees.



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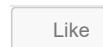
There is no need for the government to worry that organizations will provide fewer work-life arrangements when the state provides more work-life policies. National differences seem to indicate that if the government is more involved in the provision of a certain type of work-life policies (leave policies, day care facilities), organizations will do more in the provision of other types of work-life arrangements (flextime, telecommuting).

In the European context, there is a strong preference for providing work-life arrangements targeting all employees. Policies intending to stimulate the provision of work-life arrangements within organizations are most likely to be well received by managers and workers when they emphasize what the organization can gain by their implementation and how they contribute to the organization's overall approach to work.

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