Work-Life Balance: How to Foster It in Companies?

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Introduction

One of the most striking long-term trends in the current labour market is the increase in the proportion of workers with parental responsibilities. It developed because the family model of two breadwinners is gaining ground and the number of single parents participating in the labour market is growing. Thus, the proportion of employees who have significant family responsibilities in addition to professional ones is increasing. According to Eurostat data, one in three EU residents cares not only for children under the age of 15 but also for elderly family members or family member with disabilities.

However, the well-being of employees depends not only on the decreased stress of balancing work and family responsibilities. The opportunity to have a meaningful personal life (to devote time to hobbies and activities that stimulate growth, improvement, emotional satisfaction) is just as important. Therefore, how the work environment adapts in response to societal changes has a significant impact on creating an attractive organisational microclimate, attracting and retaining valuable employees, and achieving the goals of the company.

In this paper, we provide practical insights on:

• assessing the measures offered by the company to maintain a healthy work–life balance.

• developing an action plan based on the collected data.

• fostering a company culture that helps to reduce (ideally, to eliminate) the tensions between personal, family, and work responsibilities.

This case study would not have been possible without our enthusiastic team and the European Commission that co-financed the project "Everybody's Talking: Work–Life Balance Goes Mainstream". We have gathered the insights that we share here while implementing this project. We hope that this paper will encourage Lithuanian companies and organisations to take concrete actions towards an organisational environment that is conducive to a healthy work–life balance.

Office of the Equal Opportunity Ombudsperson and Center for Equality Advancement

Important to Know About the Case

The following case study reports the experience of cooperating with a large, foreign-owned company[1]. The actions described were implemented in 2020-2021.

The steps we have taken to establish sustainable work-life balance policy mechanisms for the company are shown in the diagram below. Further, the case study details each of its segments.

Assessment of Status Quo	Revision of Tools Already Available	Situation Analysis	Action Plan	Implementing the Action Plan	Assessment of Status Quo
	Collecting Administrative Data			Implementing the Action Plan	
	Focus Group			Implementing the Action Plan	
	Employee Survey				

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1   The Office of the Equal Opportunity Ombudsperson, together with the Center for Equality Advancement, worked with this company for 1,5 years, so that all the steps described in this case study would be implemented. The name of the company will not be disclosed due to sensitive data protection.

Preparation

Before Getting to Work

Developing a high-quality work-life balance policy that meets the needs of employees in the company requires thoroughness, responsibility, and creativity. Therefore, before getting to work, it is essential to bring together a team of people who believe in the power of ideas and solutions.

As you know, the best results are generated by a variety of different competencies and approaches. This case is no exception. Therefore, if possible, make sure that representatives of different departments with knowledge in personnel management, internal communication, and individual fields of work are included in the working group. There will be more insights and/or suggestions if colleagues of different ages are involved in the creative process. Gender-balanced teams also bring added value.

If the composition of the working group fails to reflect the diversity of the employees, make sure that the voices representing different demographics are heard via surveys.

Revision of Tools Already Available

There is a Lithuanian folk proverb that says, "Measure nine times, cut only the after the tenth" (in Lithuanian, "Devynis kartus pamatuok, dešimtą kirpk"), similar to the English saying, "Look before you leap". Before sitting down to consider how to help employees avoid the stress of balancing work and personal life, research potential measures applied in other companies, both Lithuanian and foreign.

The analysis of the measures adopted in other companies shows that the list is quite extensive. Depending on the sphere of activity and the organisation's size, not every company will be able to implement the suggested measures fully. However, before we start shaping the organisation's policy on work-life balance, it is important to have a clear understanding of where we are at and in which direction we want to (and can) move.

You can use the template table in Annex 1 to review the measures applied in your company.

Collection of Administrative Data

After a revision of measures implemented in the company, find out whether they are effective: to what extent they are applied, which employees have access to them and/or use them. Detailed administrative data can help to answer these questions.

Repeating the procedure every year can create an informative tool that allows you to evaluate the scope of the proposed measures. Analysis of the information collected (we will discuss this later) may reveal tendencies specific to organisational culture or employee behaviour, which may constitute an obstacle to the full use of the measures. For an example of a table for collective administrative data, see Annex 2.

Focus Group: A Deeper Look

Administrative data can show the bigger picture but does not allow to discern more subtle details. Organising focus group discussions can help fill these gaps and pinpoint the subjective motivations of employees underlying certain patterns of behaviour.

Annex 3 to this description contains a list of focus group questions. As this is an example, it should be adjusted on a case-by-case basis according to the results of the administrative data. Focus group discussions can serve as an opportunity to discuss the problem areas highlighted by the administrative data (for example, it might turn out that men use their statutory parental days off more actively than women) and understand the individual motives behind the abstract numbers.

The more carefully you select the participants in the discussion to represent the diversity of employees, the more detailed the picture of the answers received will be. Therefore, make sure that the group of 7–9 persons (the recommended number of participants) is diverse and gender-balanced, meaning that the interviewees are of different ages, family compositions, different spheres of activity are invited. In Annex 4, you can find an example of a table for selecting focus group participants.

If needed, you can also organise several focus groups. When selecting participants, ensure that they can freely share their honest opinions; inviting both managers and employees below the managerial level to the same focus group may restrict the participants and the level of openness may diminish significantly. A trusted, neutral person should moderate the focus group discussion.

Employee Survey

While the focus group discussions help to understand the trends lying beneath the abundance of administrative data, the employee opinion poll helps identify attitudes related to gender roles that influence the organisational culture in the company.

Sometimes achieving a greater work-life balance is impeded not by the lack of measures offered by the company, but by general gender stereotypes. This circumstance should not be ignored, because the likelihood of an action is determined by several main factors: personal assessment of potential action (I think that acting in such a way is good), perception of how this action will be seen by others (I think that people who are important to me will react positively to this behaviour of mine); belief that it is possible to carry out such an action (I think that I will be able to act in such a way).

Gender prejudices that are entrenched in the society and affect our collective consciousness can pose a major obstacle for creating a flexible and family-friendly work culture: for the proposed measures to be effective, these practices put in place must be supported and upheld by the heads of departments, co-workers, and the employees themselves. In other words, it must become the norm of organisational culture.

Also, pay attention to what the employees think of the work-life balance policy currently implemented. What are their attitudes on gender equality? What are their expectations for the policy of the company? For an example of the employee survey questionnaire, see Annex 5.

Situation Analysis

Now that you have collected so much valuable information (administrative data, insights from surveys, and focus groups), focus on processing it and coming up with ideas for the action plan.

The diversity of employees in the company is a significant factor that enriches the collective experience and, essentially, determines the company's success. At the same time, it is a challenge to form an inclusive organisational culture. Our lives are unique and

complex, so it is unlikely to find a universal recipe for reconciling work and life. However, a package of well-thought-out measures could facilitate resolving such problems. How can one know what the contents of this package should be? How to include exactly what is needed? To find the answer to these questions, use the analysis of the information collected. To tackle this task more effectively, we suggest paying attention to several things:

• Do not limit yourself to general data. Whenever possible, break it down by specific characteristics relevant to the analysis, such as gender, age, family composition, work functions, etc. The experiences of employees belonging to different groups may vary considerably.

• Look for links between insights gathered in different ways (administrative data, focus groups, employee survey): the data may be contradictory or complementary. In both cases, these are valuable clues as to what measures should be taken to improve the work-life balance of the employees (focusing on changing attitudes, implementing specific measures, or both).

• Remember that attitudes do not necessarily lead to behavioural changes. For example, an employee survey may show that most men in the company agree with the statement that "It is normal for men to take parental leave", while the administrative data may reveal that this attitude does not translate into action and men do not take parental or paternity leave. Thus, you will have to seek for solutions to change their behaviour.

• Consider your analysis in the broader context of the gender system (gender-related attitudes, expectations, roles, inequalities, power dynamics). People with a level of knowledge in gender equality should perform this task. Analysing other research papers, both foreign and Lithuanian, can always help to expand horizons in this field. Perhaps,

after evaluating the situation, you will decide to invite external experts to perform the analysis.

• Use the analysis as an "insight lab" to help generate ideas for possible measures to include in the action plan. Dream big.

The Action Plan

When a company has 50 or more employees, following the provisions of the Labour Code of the Republic of Lithuania, it must have an equal opportunities policy and determine concrete measures for its implementation (Labour Code, Article 26). An action plan for improving work-life balance could become an integral part of a broader equal opportunity policy.

The action plan should be specific and feasible: it shall specify the objectives, tasks, persons responsible for coordinating and/or implementing the activities, timetable of tasks to be carried out, and indicators of the results to be achieved (see Annex 6 for an example).

The team preparing the action plan should include staff that is knowledgeable in personnel management, internal communication, and administration. Also, invite other employees who want to join – diversity in the team will stimulate the creative process. However, it is important to monitor the number of team members and ensure that the team does not expand beyond the capacity of constructive work. If necessary, invite a wider circle of colleagues can when considering concrete tasks to achieve pre-determined objectives.

Special attention should be devoted to internal communication – how to ensure communication about the work-life balance measures implemented in the company that is sufficient, timely, and not excessive? What channels of communication to choose and how to ensure that they remain systemic (e.g., creating a system to introduce the measures to new employees, sending newsletters via email, posting online, organising targeted information campaigns about the proposed measures, etc.)?

Remember that internal communication is instrumental not only in informing but also in forming employees' attitudes and the overall organisational culture. The more we hear about questions related to work-life balance, the more important they seem to be and encourage us to rethink and change our behaviours.

To prevent the plan from collecting dust, set up a monitoring committee to supervise its implementation. Decide how often meetings of the committee will take place. They can follow the timetable of planned tasks or any other agreed frequency (for example, every four to six weeks). This is an excellent opportunity to celebrate completed tasks, discuss the challenges and adjust the plans.

To avoid obstacles while implementing the carefully crafted action plan, top executives should endorse it, confirming that achieving a healthy work-life balance is an essential part of the organisation's culture, not just an announcement for public image.

Once the action plan has been discussed, drawn up, and approved, it is time to inform the employees. Spreading the message will help to shape the organisational culture and values, promote transparency, and increase motivation to achieve the goals set out in the plan.

To Conclude: What Is Important to Keep in Mind?

To sum up, we would like to emphasise several aspects of this case study. We hope that our insights will help you develop a sustainable work-life balance policy that will contribute to promoting gender equality not only at the organisational level but in society at large as well. Therefore, the following aspects are particularly noteworthy:

1 Political support. The measures to improve work-life balance are a part of a broader organisational culture. Cultivating it may require not only cosmetic but systemic changes; thus, it is impossible without the approval and endorsement of top-level management.

2 Community support. Even the most forward-thinking ideas can fail without the support of the community they are intended to. Therefore, when developing action plans for improving work-life balance, devote attention to the employees' opinions and involve their representatives in the brainstorming processes.

3 Revision. Everything changes and employees' needs related to work-life balance are no exception; therefore, work-life balance measures should be periodically reviewed. Over time, some of them may lose relevance and demand for others may arise. Such a revision should take place at least once a year.

4 Internal communication. What is the use of all the wonderful benefits offered by a company if its employees know very little about them? If strategies and channels are considered carefully, internal communication can serve as a tool to both inform and form organisational culture.

5 **Attention to diversity.** Diversity is an inevitable part of our everyday life. The success of any policy, including those of companies, depends on acknowledging this fact, not disregarding it. Accepting diversity must be based on concrete actions and understanding that positive effects of diversity are contingent on not using our differences as a pretext to discriminate, ignore, or marginalise.

6 **Attitude is not equivalent to action.** Those who think and say that smoking is harmful, do not necessarily quit smoking. This rule applies to other actions, too. Thus, make sure that declared attitudes correspond to actions: if the importance of work-life balance is widely discussed in a company, but chiefs and managers continue to show a negative example by staying at the office after hours, it is unlikely that the employees will behave otherwise and trust the declared policy instead.

7 **Holistic approach.** A holistic approach helps to ensure the sustainability of work-life balance when adopted at all levels: the company develops the general policy and suggests measure packages; heads of departments act as mediators of implementing the policy in practice; employees get to know the benefits available to them and use them to improve work-life balance.

8 **Work-life balance policy is a process.** They say that "now" lasts for three seconds before the next moment replaces it. We are in a continuous stream of feelings, experiences, thoughts, and practices. Work-life balance policy is better understood as a gradual process, rather than a document with a concrete beginning and an end.

Annexes

Annex 1. Checklist of Work-life Balance Measures

This checklist is meant for assessing what work-life balance measures are available in a given company. In the comment section, provide details about the concrete actions for implementing each of the measures.

NAME OF THE ORGANISATION ASSESSED: ....

☐ **Childcare leave**

Comments:

☐ **Working remotely**

Comments:

☐ **Pregnancy and birth leave**

Comments:

☐ **Flexible work schedule**

Comments:

☐ **Maternity and paternity leaves**

Comments:

☐ **Part-time work**

Comments:

☐ **Statutory parental days off**

Comments:

☐ **Additional paid days off**

Comments:

☐ **Availability of childcare facilities, kindergarden, baby-sitters or compensation for such services**

Comments:

☐ **Additional financial benefits to cover healthcare and residential care costs for employees' dependents**

Comments:

☐ **Career consulting before and after a career break**

Comments:

☐ **Benefits for employees on childcare leave**

Comments:

☐ **Organising and/or financing camps, extracurricular activities, day trips for employees children**

Comments:

☐ **Awareness raising and informational events for employees about work-life balance or related topics**

Comments:

☐ **Family leisure benefits**

Comments:

☐ **Employee surveys about the needs and challenges related to work-life balance**

Comments:

☐ **Other one-time extra benefit payments, premiums, or bonuses related to personal and family life**

Comments:

☐ **Other measures**

Comments:

ASSESSMENT: ....

ASSESSED BY: ....

Annex 2. Example of an Administrative Data Questionnaire

Indicator	Gender		Family composition (Does the employee have children?)				Sphere of activity*	
	Women	Men	0–6-year-old	7–12-year-old	13–18-year-old	No children	X	Y
All employees								
Persons who have been on childcare leave								
Persons who returned to work after childcare leave								
Persons who did not return to work after childcare leave								
Men who have been on paternity leave								
Women who have been on pregnancy and birth leave								
Persons who used statutory parental days off								
Persons who requested a certificate of incapacity for work ("medical certificate of absence") to care for a sick dependant								
Persons who used paid leave to take exams, tests or participate in higher education graduation ceremonies								

* Spheres of activity could be production, direct work with clients, administration, etc. Each company's working group should decide which employee groups are significant and should be considered separately in the context of their company.

Indicator	Gender		Family composition (Does the employee have children?)				Sphere of activity*	
	Women	Men	0–6-year-old	7–12-year-old	13–18-year-old	No children	X	Y
Persons who used statutory health days off								
Persons who used the additional day of the first day of school because of a child attending school								
Persons who are currently working on an individual work schedule								
Persons who are currently working remotely full-time or partially								
The number of granted requests to work on a flexible work schedule								
Persons who currently have fixed working hours and working days								
Persons who are currently working part-time								
Persons who were paid for overtime								
Persons who used career consulting service this year								

Annex 3. Example of a Focus Group Questionnaire

COMMUNICATION

How well informed do you feel about the additional benefits offered by the company, measures for maintaining a work-life balance? How would you evaluate the communication about these benefits (e.g., its accessibility, clarity, presentation)? Is this information easy to find? How can this communication be improved?

WORKING REMOTELY, FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS, HYBRID WORK

How much has the flexibility at your work increased due to the pandemic? How did it manifest? How would you evaluate the changes? How would you evaluate the formalisation of flexible working arrangements, e.g., when an individual work schedule is set officially, a flexible start and end of work is set or a formal agreement on remote working days is established? How would you evaluate situations where an employee agrees with their manager on work flexibility informally, without legitimising it?

OVERTIME POLICY AND TRACKING SYSTEM

How important do you think it is to talk about the issue of overtime in an organisation or company? Who should initiate it? Recently, was this issue discussed in your company?

CHIEFS AND MANAGERS

How important is the role of chiefs and manager when it comes to work-life balance questions (working overtime, statutory parental days-off, flexibility of work)? How much access to work-life balance measures depends on the decision of one's direct manager?

How clear are the rules defining work-life balance and the organisational attitude towards these matters? How much attention does the management of the company pay to this topic? What kind of attention is (was) it, how did it manifest?

FORMING A CULTURE FAVORABLE TO WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Who do you think should be responsible for the work-life balance of employees – managers or employees themselves? What should be their roles in ensuring this balance? What causes the most obstacles, difficulties, hindrances?

Annex 4. Example of a Table for Selecting Focus Group Participants

Name	Gender		Does the employee have children?				Sphere of activity		
	Woman	Man	0–6-year-old	7–12-year-old	13–18-year-old	No children	Customer service	Office	Production
1									
2									
3									
4									
5									
6									
7									
8									
9									

Note. This table helps choosing participants for focus group discussions and ensuring that different aspects of employees' identities are represented. Write down the names of the participants and information about aspects of their identity. Ideally, no column of the table should be left completely empty, and the list should be as gender-balanced as possible.

Annex 5. Example of an Employee Survey Questionnaire

1. KHOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BALANCING YOUR PERSONAL LIFE AND WORK?

1) Great

2) Good, some challenges arise but I manage to deal with them

3) Average

4) I am not satisfied with it; it could be bette

5) Bad, I have a lot of challenges to overcome every day

6) I don't know

2. PLEASE ANSWER WHETHER YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS:

	Completely agree	Partially agree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Partially disagree	Completely disagree
Fathers can take care of young children just as well as mothers					
It seems normal to me if a woman returns to work without being on parental leave for a year					
It seems normal to me when a man takes parental leave					
It seems normal to me when a man presents a medical certificate of absence to take care of a sick child or another family member					
The need to balance work and private life is only relevant for a small number of workers					

	Completely agree	Partially agree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Partially disagree	Completely disagree
In my workplace, it is normal to work overtime if necessary					
Work-related issues often have to be dealt with outside of working hours					
It is normal when, due to heavy workload, a person chooses to not go on vacation					
I feel like commitments at work interfere with my personal life					
I know what work-life balance benefits I can use in my workplace					
I can take advantage of flexible work models (e.g., working remotely, flexible work schedule) in my workplace without any problems					
I feel stressed when it comes to reconciling work and personal issues					
To pursue my career, I would be prepared to work longer hours and abandon personal plans (cancel training sessions, weekend plans, etc.)					
Taking parental leave would negatively affect my career					
Repeatedly using the certificate of temporary incapacity for due to family obligations (e.g., due to illness or disability of a child or other family member) would negatively affect my career					
I have kept secret the real reasons for leaving work early or during day from my colleagues or employer to take care of personal matters					
I would like my working conditions to be more flexible					
My employer/manager views balancing work and life positively					

3. WHEN ACCEPTING A JOB OFFER, I WOULD GIVE PRIORITY TO A WORKPLACE WHICH:

☐ offers lower salary and the possibility of conveniently balancing family and work responsibilities

☐ offers higher salary but without the possibility of conveniently balancing family and work responsibilities

☐ I have no opinion

4. CHOOSE ANSWERS (UP TO 5) THAT SUIT YOU BEST:

If I was to choose a workplace, the most important thing for me would be:

☐ salary

☐ friendly team

☐ possibility to balance work and family responsibilities

☐ career opportunities

☐ opportunities to learn and improve

☐ opportunity to have an interesting job

☐ notoriety and reputation of the organisation

☐ bonuses offered by the organisation

5. CHOOSE ANSWERS THAT SUIT YOU BEST:

The success of a woman's career in my workplace can be hindered by:

☐ having children

☐ not having children

☐ young age

☐ older age

☐ appearance

☐ taking care of a family member with disability

☐ looking after an ill or elderly family member

☐ none of the above

☐ other (write down)..

The success of a man's career in my workplace can be hindered by:

☐ having children

☐ not having children

☐ young age

☐ older age

☐ appearance

☐ taking care of a family member with disability

☐ looking after an ill or elderly family member

☐ none of the above

☐ other (write down)..

6. YOUR GENDER:

☐ Woman

☐ Man

7. DO YOU HAVE UNDERAGED CHILDREN?

☐ Yes

☐ No

8. ARE YOU TAKING CARE OF ELDERLY, ILL OR FAMILY MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Annex 6. Example of a Company's Work-Life Balance Action Plan

"COMPANY'S" WORK-LIFE BALANCE ACTION PLAN								
Objectives and actions	**Person in charge**	**2022/01**	**2022/02**	**...**	**...**	**2023/12**	**Result indicators**	
							2022	**2023**
Objective No.1. Reducing the negative effects of childcare leave on employees' career prospects								
1.1. To analyse the attitudes, needs, and expectations of employees with children under 2 years of age; to set conditions that may facilitate or encourage the return to work from childcare leave	Personnel department						Employees' opinions about the statement: „Taking parental leave would negatively affect my career"	
							45%	**35%**
1.2. To prepare a "Keeping in touch" info-pack describing principles and activities for employees on childcare leave	Personnel department						Proportion of men who had a child that went on childcare leave	
							2.2%	**A positive tendency, growing proportion**
1.3. To inform employees about the measures related to childcare leave	Communications department							
1.4. ...								
Objective No.2. To create and maintain an organisational culture that favours and ensures a healthy work-life balance								

"COMPANY'S" WORK-LIFE BALANCE ACTION PLAN								
Objectives and actions	**Person in charge**	**2022/01**	**2022/02**	**...**	**...**	**2023/12**	**Result indicators**	
							2022	**2023**
2.1. To develop guidelines and set general principles for the promotion the work-life balance in the organisation							Proportion of employees who formally requested to work on flexible working hours	
							3%	**A positive tendency, growing proportion**
2.2. To develop a communication plan for staff and managers on the guidelines, principles, and specific measures	Communications department						Proportion of employees who used their statutory parental days off	
							41% of men, 31% of women	**A positive tendency, a fester growth of the proportion of women**
2.3. ...								
2.4. ...								
Objective No.3.								
3.1. ...								
3.2. ...								