

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Research Aims and Approach

Given the growing diversity of the Irish labour force, policies to promote equality and work-life balance are of increasing importance. 'Equality at Work' examines the extent of formal workplace policies to promote equality in the workplace and of flexible working arrangements, specifically part-time working, flexible hours, job-sharing and working from home.

It examines the impact of equality policies on employees' perceptions of fairness and equality of treatment and practice in their employing organisations. It also examines the impact of equality policies and flexible working arrangements on aspects of workers well being (work pressure and stress), on their attitudes to their jobs and employers (job satisfaction and organisational commitment) and on job quality (earnings and autonomy).

The study addresses these issues using the data collected in a recent nationally representative survey of over 5000 employees in Ireland conducted by the ESRI for the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCPPI).

## Equality Policies: Key Findings

About three quarters of all employees work in organisations where there is a formal explicit policy on equal opportunities. Equality policies are much more common in the public sector than in the private sector. They are also more common in larger organisations and in organisations that recognise a trade union or staff association.

Equality policies and flexible working arrangements are related: in workplaces where an equality policy has been implemented there is a greater likelihood that flexible working arrangements are also available at that workplace.

This study finds that the presence of a formal equality policy in a workplace impacts positively on employees' perceptions of workplace fairness, on workers' well being and on their attitudes to their jobs and employers but finds no discernable impact on job quality.

- Employees who work in organisations that have implemented formal equality policies are much more likely to consider that opportunities for recruitment, pay and conditions and opportunities for advancement and career development are fair and equal in their organisations, even when other factors that could influence such perceptions are controlled for.

- The presence of a formal policy on equality in the workplace is strongly and unambiguously associated with lower levels of work stress even when a wide range of personal, job and organisational characteristics are controlled.
- This study found no discernable impact of equality policies on work pressure. This is not surprising as there is no a priori reason why the presence of an equality policy would influence the pace and intensity of work.
- The presence of a formal policy on equality in the workplace is strongly associated with higher levels of both job satisfaction and organisational commitment, even when all other relevant variables are taken into account.
- One important mechanism by which the implementation of equality policies leads to increased job satisfaction and organisational commitment is through their positive impact on employees' perceptions of fairness and equality in their employing organisations.
- There is no discernable impact of the presence of a formal equality policy in the workplace on individual earnings, and no evidence to suggest that the male-female wage gap differs between workplaces with and without formal equality policies.
- It also appears that equality policies have no significant impact on autonomy at work.

## **Flexible Working Arrangements: Key Findings**

The study examines personal involvement in flexible working arrangements and patterns of their use by organisations. Almost one in four employees is involved in flexible working and one in five works part-time. However just 8.4% of employees are involved in home working and 6.5% job-share.

Involvement in flexible working arrangements is highly gendered. Women are much more likely to use part-time hours and job sharing and somewhat more likely to use flexitime, while men are much more likely to report working from home.

The organisational use of flexible working arrangements varies widely across economic sectors and types of workplace. Home working is more common in business and financial services and in small organisations. Other forms of flexibility are more likely to be found in larger organisations and in organisations that recognise trade unions.

In this study none of the flexible working arrangements examined was found to have any impact on employees' job satisfaction or organisational commitment, when other relevant factors are taken into account. Flexible working arrangements do impact on employees' wellbeing and on job quality but their effects are not all in the same direction and differ with the type of flexibility.

### **Part-time Working**

- Involvement in part-time working significantly reduces both work stress and work pressure levels.
- There also appears to be a wider benefit on levels of stress and pressure for employees not involved personally but working in an organisation which uses part-time working.
- However those involved in part-time working have lower hourly earnings and report lower levels of autonomy at work even when compared with other employees with similar personal and human capital characteristics.
- These negative effects on work quality do not persist when job and organisational controls are added. This means that the lower earnings and autonomy observed among part-timers are due to the nature of the occupations, organisations and sectors in which part-time working occurs.

### **Flexible Hours**

- Involvement in flexible hours significantly reduces work pressure but does not affect work stress when other factors are controlled.
- While employees using flexitime have above average earnings, this is simply due to factors such as the higher educational levels and longer job tenures of those involved in this practice.
- Employees involved in flexible hours report higher levels of autonomy even when a range of personal, occupational and organisational factors are controlled.

### **Job Sharing**

- Involvement in job sharing is associated with greater levels of work stress for men while no effect was found for women.
- Personal involvement in job sharing does not impact on work pressure but there appears to be some increase in pressure for other employees in organisations which use job-sharing.
- Involvement in job sharing has no discernable effect on earnings but the employees involved report lower autonomy at work compared to other workers with similar personal and human capital characteristics.
- These negative effects on work quality do not persist when job and organisational controls are added.

### **Home Working**

- Employees personally involved in home working experience significantly higher levels of stress and greater work pressure compared to workers with similar jobs and working conditions who do not work at home.

- While employees involved in home working have higher earnings, this is due to factors such as the higher educational levels and longer job tenures of those involved rather than due to working from home per se.
- Home working allows employees greater personal control over their working hours, and is associated with greater levels of autonomy even when a range of personal, occupational and organisational factors are controlled.

## Conclusion

The proactive pursuit of equality in the workplace and the implementation of flexible working arrangements are valuable in themselves in promoting equality objectives and in accommodating diversity as well as in facilitating the achievement of work-life balance.

This study shows that not only do equality policies entail direct benefits for employees, such as reduced work-related stress; they can also lead to increased job satisfaction and greater organisational commitment. To the extent that they do have these effects then equality policies are likely to also have a positive impact on organisational performance and hence be of benefit to employers.

The effects of flexible working arrangements are more complex. Use of flexitime has generally positive outcomes as it reduces work pressure while increasing autonomy. However in most other cases there appear to be trade-offs involved.

Part-time work reduces work pressure and stress but those involved experience lower earnings and autonomy than comparable full-timers. Job sharers also experience lower autonomy than other comparable employees, while men involved in job sharing experience increased stress. Employees involved in home working have greater autonomy but experience much greater work pressure and stress.

The negative effects on work quality of part-time work and job sharing indicate an underlying process of segregation in the types of jobs and organisations where these workers are located. The negative effects on worker well being of home working and, to a lesser extent job sharing, suggest that attempts to integrate work and family commitments may lead to the erosion of boundaries between work and home to the detriment of family life. From a gender equality perspective it is interesting to note that the only form of flexible work in which men predominate is more likely to undermine than to promote work-life balance.

Overall, these findings serve to remind us that flexible working arrangements are often implemented in response to organisational imperatives rather than to accommodate the needs of individual workers and that they are not always to the advantage of the employee. They also serve to underline the need for further research into the organisation of work and its impact on both individual employees and their families.