

European top managers would rather offer flexibility than part-time work

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Credit: Gustavo Fring from Pexels

In the area of work-life policy, European top managers place the interest of the organisation above that of their employees. Schemes intended to make it easier for employees to combine their work and private life

should preferably benefit the company as well, according to employers in Europe. Flexible working times and possibilities to work from home can count on the most support at the top level. This is what Wike Been concludes in her PhD thesis 'European top managers' support for work-life arrangements' that was realised with funding from NWO Social Sciences. She will defend her PhD thesis on Friday 18 December at Utrecht University.

Schemes should benefit the company

Employers play a central role in all of the strategies – working less, working flexibly, working at home, leave schemes, and more – that are part of the ongoing discussion about a good work-life balance. Ultimately, it is the managers at the top of organisations who decide which schemes employees are offered in addition to the statutory schemes. Wike Been wanted to find out on what basis they determine the organisation's strategy.

Wike Been interviewed top managers at the level of CEO, CFO and members of the Board of Directors in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, Finland and Portugal. The five countries were chosen as they are relatively diverse with respect to the government approach and national culture, and therefore all extremes are considered. The organisations and companies investigated also strongly differed in size: from ten employees to several thousand. Been held 78 interviews and performed a 'vignette experiment' – questions in the form of hypothetical 'stories' – among more than 200 top managers, about how they assessed national regulations and how they set out [policy](#). With a few exceptions, managers had the nationality of the country in which the company was located.

According to employers in Europe, schemes such as variable working times and possibilities to work from home should benefit the company.

Such schemes yield flexible employees ('quid pro quo', therefore, in exchange for the flexibility, employees need to be adaptable as well), potentially longer opening hours, fewer overhead costs, et cetera. The employment potential of employees also remains unharmed by these schemes – after all, they can still work a full working week.

Wike Been: 'Top managers match their policy with that of the national government. They do what is legally required, but are generally less enthusiastic about supplementing the statutory requirements with additional leave schemes, childcare or part-time work. In their view, the win-win situation is then lost. For example: a lawyer who works part-time must keep his or her knowledge just as up-to-date as a full-time colleague and participate in just as many meetings. However, the number of billable hours is lower, so he or she is relatively expensive.'

In the countries studied where the government offers generous leave schemes or extensive childcare, Finland and Slovenia, employers did not see it as their task to supplement these. They considered that to be the government's responsibility. However, in these countries top managers are more likely to consider it their social responsibility to offer a work-life policy and such a policy is therefore much less of an operational consideration only.

Previous research has shown that American companies often use work-life policy on an individual basis as a way of retaining excellent [employees](#) for the organisation. These schemes are not available to everybody. Wike Been's research reveals that European top managers prefer to include work-life policy in the general employment conditions.

Wike Been's research into decisions at this level of organisations is unique. It is the first time that this subject has been examined at such a large-scale among top [managers](#).

More information: The research project is available online:
[www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-res ... jects/i/42/1442.html](http://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-res...jects/i/42/1442.html)

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