

Improving employees' work-life balance gives competitive advantage

December 8 2017

Providing working arrangements that meaningfully improve the work-life balance of employees can give firms a competitive advantage, research by Newcastle University has found.

In his new book "Work-life Advantage," Dr Al James, Reader in Economic Geography, argues that the societal and moral significance of successfully integrating paid [work](#) with other meaningful parts of life is profound. However, many employers remain sceptical, and view work-life balance provision as merely an extra cost to the firm, and the luxury of a booming economy.

Based on 10 years of research with more than 300 IT workers at 150 high-tech companies in the UK and Ireland, Dr James found that progress in employers providing comprehensive suites of work-life arrangements remains uneven, resulting in continuing hardship for many employees and ongoing gender inequalities in the labour market.

In particular, Dr James' research revealed that half of women working in IT in Dublin and a third of those in Cambridge are unsatisfied with their work-life balance.

However, the research also found that employer interventions that meaningfully improve the work-life balance of employees can simultaneously enhance firms' learning and innovation capacities. They can also promote workforce diversity and gender inclusive growth, for example by reducing the number of women who choose not to return to

work after maternity leave.

Greater flexibility

Providing greater flexibility in scheduling when work is done, such as flexitime, annualised hours or compressed work weeks, is the most common offer from employers. But this doesn't decrease the total number of work hours and one size does not fit all.

Dr James said: "While flexitime allows workers to rejig the temporal pattern of hours worked, this merely addresses what for many workers is a symptom of work-life conflict rather than its underlying causes: including, total hours worked and lengthy commutes.

"Offering a comprehensive suite of options including greater flexibility in where work is done, a reduction in total hours worked, and assistance with childcare alongside flexible hours generates mutual gains for employer and employee."

Improved productivity

When able to make use of their preferred employer-provided work-life balance arrangements, 94 percent of the workers surveyed felt less stressed at work. In addition, 79 percent reported greater engagement with their work and 78 percent said they were able to think more creatively at work. And the figures are even higher for working parents with young families, with 82 percent reporting greater engagement and 84 percent able to think more creatively.

Dr James shows that this improved employee engagement and creativity translates into improved productivity, with 61 percent of managers reporting a positive impact as a result of providing a range of [work-life](#)

[balance](#) options.

Managers also reported benefits in terms of workforce diversity and female skills retention, consistent with measured improvements in company performance.

Dr James added: "The results highlight the irony of employers rolling back work-life provision in pursuit of short-term savings. There is an urgent need for more comprehensive [employer](#)-provided work-life [balance](#) packages that respond to the variations in employees' requirements according to their role, household situation, caring responsibilities and personal life interests. These are not merely costs to the firm, but also offer major advantages for firms' competitive performance - or in other words, it pays employers to care."

"Work-life Advantage," Dr Al James is published by Wiley-Blackwell as part of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) International Book Series.

Provided by Newcastle University

Citation: Improving employees' work-life balance gives competitive advantage (2017, December 8) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-12-employees-work-life-competitive-advantage.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.