

Flexible work arrangements help both employers and employees, says new European Commission study

Reference: IP/10/1377 Date: 26/10/2010

HTML: EN FR DE DA ES NL IT SW PT FI EL CS ET HU LT LV MT PL
 SK SL BG RO

PDF: EN FR DE DA ES NL IT SW PT FI EL CS ET HU LT LV MT PL
 SK SL BG RO

DOC: EN FR DE DA ES NL IT SW PT FI EL CS ET HU LT LV MT PL
 SK SL BG RO

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Brussels, 26 October 2010

Flexible work arrangements help both employers and employees, says new European Commission study

A European Commission study released today found that employers and workers benefit from flexible working time arrangements. The expert group report comes as ministers for gender equality gather in Brussels for an informal meeting to discuss the new strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015 ([IP/10/1149](#), [MEMO/10/430](#)).

"Flexible working time arrangements, care facilities for children and other dependents, and leave entitlements tend to lead to higher employment rates for both women and men as well as more sustainable birth rates," said Vice-President Viviane Reding, EU Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship. "In times of economic slowdown, flexible working arrangements can help people stay in their jobs. We need to continue the progress made in family-friendly labour market structures: both flexibility in working time arrangements and gender equality are important preconditions of economic recovery."

The expert report on "Flexible working time arrangements and gender equality" provides a comprehensive overview of current practices in the 27 EU and the EEA-EFTA countries (Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein and Switzerland). It focuses on internal flexibility (within companies and organisations), both in terms of length of working time (for instance part-time) and organisation of working time (for instance flexitime arrangements or staggered hours and flexibility in starting and ending the work day). The report's main conclusions are:

1. There are still very large differences between the Member States regarding flexibility of working time:

- Flexibility in length of working time is more widespread in northern and western Europe, whereas in Hungary, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Estonia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania the traditional 40 hour working dominates.
- Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Finland and Norway score relatively highly in flexible organisation with a little more than half of all employees using some kind of flexibility in their working hours.

2. Increased flexibility in working time is not always good for gender equality:

- More individualised working hours have a positive effect on female employment rates and can help employees to balance work and personal life, but part-time work (dominated by women) is still concentrated in low-paid sectors with low career and training opportunities in most countries.
- Organisational culture also plays an important role. As long as flexibility is considered a "female" way of organising work-time, flexible working time schedules are more likely to confirm gender differences than to change them.

3. Recent policy developments show that working time flexibility is on the political agenda in several countries, though the specific topics may vary:

- Some countries (such as the Czech Republic and Lithuania) focus on flexibility as an instrument to increase the employment rate (both in individuals and in hours).
- Part-time working is increasingly used to promote active ageing. Especially in the Nordic countries, involuntary part-time work is an important issue, leading to policy measures that try to create a new balance between flexibility and security.
- Time banking and annualised hours are also part of the current policy agenda (in Finland, Germany and Luxembourg). Flexible working time schedules are linked in some countries (such as Poland and Portugal) to the debate on reducing the extent of overtime.
- The current financial and economic crisis has had a clear effect and flexibility is now seen as an important policy instrument to help employers adjust to changing economic circumstances. In the current debate, however, the gender dimension does not figure prominently.

Background

On 3 March 2010, the European Commission launched the first step towards a review of existing EU rules on working time, with a first stage consultation of European social partners ([IP/10/345](#)). The Commission will shortly publish an expert report on the social and economic impact of working time rules in the context of this review.

Today's report is the third in a series of comparative review reports on work-life balance issues, which also included "reconciliation of work and private life" (2005); "the provision of childcare services" (2009).

Further information

Report: "Flexible working time arrangements and gender equality – A comparative review of 30 European countries"

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=418&langId=en&furtherPubs=yes>

Informal meeting of ministers responsible for gender equality:

<http://www.eutrio.be/informal-meeting-ministers-gender-equality>

ANNEX

Summary of countries regarding flexibility in the length of working hours

	Below EU27 average	Around EU27 average	Above EU27 average
Part-time work	Portugal, Poland, Slovenia, Greece, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Cyprus, Latvia, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania	Luxembourg, Denmark, Iceland, France, Italy, Ireland, Malta, Spain, Finland, Estonia	Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Belgium, Austria United Kingdom, Sweden
Working overtime	Luxembourg, Cyprus, Malta, Portugal, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Norway, Spain, Romania, Denmark, Greece, Bulgaria	Sweden, Latvia, Slovenia, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Finland. Slovakia, Estonia	Iceland, United Kingdom, Austria, Netherlands, Czech Republic
Working long hours	Italy, Denmark, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta, Hungary, Germany, Ireland, Belgium, Finland, Norway,	Slovakia, Spain, France, Slovenia, Estonia	Iceland, United Kingdom, Greece, Poland, Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Czech Republic

	Lithuania, Sweden, Netherlands, Luxembourg		
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This table summarises the countries in regard to the three indicators of flexibility in the length of working hours. There does not appear to be a clear pattern regarding the flexibility in the length of working hours in terms of these indicators. The most flexible countries seem to be Austria and the United Kingdom, which have a high ranking on all three indicators. At the other end, four countries appear to be the least flexible and score low on all three indicators: Portugal, Lithuania, Cyprus and Hungary.

Share of part-time workers in total employment (persons aged 15 and over) in EU Member States - 2009

Figures and graphics available in PDF and WORD PROCESSED

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (LFS), annual averages.

Involuntary part-time work and total part-time employment rate, 2007

Figures and graphics available in PDF and WORD PROCESSED

Source: Eurostat, EU Labour force survey 2007

Share of employees working overtime, by gender 2004

Figures and graphics available in PDF and WORD PROCESSED

Source: Eurostat, EU Labour force survey, ad hoc module 2004 (no data available for France and Liechtenstein)

Share of employees working long hours (48 or more), by gender, 2007

Figures and graphics available in PDF and WORD PROCESSED

Source: Eurostat, EU Labour force survey 2007 (no data available for Liechtenstein)

Working time schedules of men and women employees, 2004

Figures and graphics available in PDF and WORD PROCESSED

Left bar: male employees, right bar: female employees - Source: Eurostat, EU Labour force survey, ad hoc module 2004 (no data available for Liechtenstein)