

What is work life balance?

Our company noticed the term work life balance pop up more often after the COVID-19 pandemic, as after lockdown individual and family priorities changed – people wanted more than repetition in their daily life and work. Work life balance can mean different things to different people. To an employer, it may simply be the fact that their employees work five out of seven days, with a free weekend. On the other hand, a single parent of two children could prefer to work on those weekends, but to maintain a balance would need longer mornings to send the children to school. Work life balance refers to the convenience of work entangled with personal life. The ability to book off holidays, to come home before the standard rush hour, or to leave the work phone in the office allow for equal time between personal and professional pursuits.

One of the deliverables of the European Pillar of Social Rights is the Work-life Balance Directive, addressing the challenges faced by working parents and carers, both men and women. The directive considers the shift in demographics over the past decade as well as the future, with an aging and growing population in EU Member States. The purpose of the directive is to encourage a better sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men, supported by legal policy.

Why is work life balance important?

The Work-life Balance Directive states that “Work-life balance policies should contribute to the achievement of gender equality by promoting the participation of women in the labour market, the equal sharing of caring responsibilities between men and women, and the closing of the gender gaps in earnings and pay”. It highlights the fact of women in the labour market having difficulty in balancing work and family obligations, spending more time fulfilling unpaid caring responsibilities, with some women dropping out of the labour force entirely. Furthermore, the lack of paid paternity leave means men are less likely to fulfil their duty of care to the child, creating a disproportion in responsibility. Work life balance aims to solve these issues.

Even to individuals with no children, or additional people to care for, work life balance has a significant impact on an individual's overall well-being and therefore the economic success of organisations. Maintaining a balance between work and personal life helps reduce stress and burnout: chronic stress can to problems such as cardiovascular issues or depression. In turn, reduced stress means improved productivity, as individuals can focus and concentrate only on the work, rather than worrying on how they will juggle other responsibilities at home. They are less likely to experience fatigue and are better able to concentrate on their tasks. This can lead to enhanced job satisfaction, as employees are more likely to hit targets quicker and enjoy spending time at work, creating higher morale and a more positive work environment. This creates the bottom line of employees being less likely to take leave (due to chronic stress or burnout) and therefore keeping steady workflow, beneficial to the company, the overall economy, and health services.

How do the CSRD and Work Life Balance Directive link?

Article 2 of Regulation 2019/2088 defines “sustainability matters” as “environmental, social and human rights, and governance factors, including sustainability factors”. Work life balance can fall under all these aspects:

Environmental: Companies committed to reducing their carbon footprint may facilitate remote or hybrid work options to reducing commute times by reducing travel during peak times and to work around public transport scheduling.

Social: Includes initiatives that can promote work life balance such as flexible work hours, health and wellness programmes, internal mental health support, or stress management training. Benefits of flexible work also mean a more comfortable work environment.

Governance: Development of family-friendly policies (often better than the basic provisions set out by member state law and in line or exceeding EU directive recommendations), such as extended parental leave, on-site childcare, or monetary support for employees with caregiving responsibilities.

Groups of economically active people who may need other working arrangements

- Students
- Parents
- Carers
- Elderly
- People with disabilities

How do Ireland and Poland compare to average working hours?

In 2022, the EU average working week was 37.5 hours per week, with Ireland falling below the rate at 36.9 hours per week and Poland averaging the second highest number of hours worked, just behind Greece (41), at 40 hours per week (Notes from Poland, 2023). Poland has always been in the top four member states for working hours since Eurostat began collecting data in 2008. In 2022, most Poles, 75.3%, worked 40 or more hours weekly, which is nearly 20% more than EU average (45.8%). In addition, less than 10% of the workforce worked between 1-39 hours per week in Poland and only around 5% worked under 24 hours per week, compared to over 55% and 15% in Ireland respectively (Eurostat, 2023).

Implementation of work life balance into your company standards

In order to encourage workers who are parents, and carers to remain in the work force, such workers should be able to adapt their working schedules to their personal needs and preferences. The EU specifies “they have the right to request flexible working arrangements for the purpose of adjusting their working patterns, including, where possible, using remote working arrangements, flexible working schedules, or a reduction in working hours, for the purposes of providing care,”.

Forbes (2022) recommends of providing your employees with a definition of work life balance that is “relevant to the current business environment” to give clarity to internal policy making as well as guide employee behaviour.

Making work hours more flexible can benefit all parties by accommodating individual needs:

- **Flexible start and end times:** Allow employees to choose when they start and finish their day. For example, they might have the option to begin between 8am and 10am and end between 4pm and 6pm.
- **Compressed workweeks:** Option of working longer hours on fewer days (a 4-day workweek with 10-hour days) or even try implement a 4-day workweek with less hours. This can provide longer weekends for employees and cut down costs for office running.
- **Part-time and job-sharing arrangements:** Allow employees to work part-time hours or share a full-time role with another employee.
- **Remote work and Hybrid work:** Give the option to employees to work from home or another remote location, reducing the need for commuting and offering a more comfortable work environment.
- **Results-oriented work:** Shift the focus from having to work a set number of hours, to outcomes achieved or results. With communication, clear expectations, and guidelines it means employees can increase their own productivity and engagement as they are incentivised by the possibility of additional time off, whilst the employer can maintain benefits of clients receiving results earlier.

From EDU SMART TRAINING CENTRE LIMITED Aleksandra Marcinkowska says: “As a mother of three children, wife, and owner of two dogs I understand what it is like to be a parent and run a business. From my own experience, I decided to build an entity that is inclusive towards parents, different nations, people working in different time zones, with different personalities, skills, and talents. We follow the diversity and inclusion directives and talk to our staff on a regular basis to remain compliant with their needs and our business targets. To effectively follow CSRD, I recommend every company to implement ISO2600 and follow its guidance,”.

What is your understanding of the topic? Leave a comment below or any questions you may have.

This publication reflects solely the views of the author and the European Union is not responsible for any use of the information contained therein.

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