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## **PROM project**

### **DISCUSSION GROUP OF EXPERTS**

**HARLOW, 29/08/07**

#### **PROM Project Institutional Forum – Harlow UK**

A discussion forum was conducted with three managers working within, or closely with, a large organisation in Harlow. The forum focused on issues related to the need for work-life balance related policies, implementation of work-life balance policies, and managers' perceptions of the key work-life balance issues for their staff. The main findings are outlined below:

#### **Work-life balance as an issue for staff within the organisation**

Forum participants stated that work-life balance was a huge potential issue for staff working within their organisations. They said that if left unchecked, negative work-life balance issues, and overwork in particular, could affect a large number of staff members. However, participants described being proactive in their attempts to ensure that staff were able to adequately reconcile the demands of work and family/private life.

Participants described and defined work-life balance in a number of ways. Key to their descriptions was the sense that having a healthy work-life balance meant being able to draw appropriate barriers between work and home life, and not allowing either aspect to excessively encroach on the other. As one participant stated, when describing how they would define work-life balance for their workforce:

*“It’s [work life balance] about being able to walk away from work and stop thinking about it, that’s the work-life balance. Not be emailing yourself or ringing yourself or leaving yourself notes of what you’ve got to do when you get into work.”*

Another participant stated:

*"[Work-life balance is] About keeping work in proportion and having other things that are important to you."*

Participants felt that work-life balance could be an issue for any member of staff, regardless of gender or whether they were a parent. They agreed that particularly where work is not nine-to-five, or where the job involves fulfilling a caring role for individuals, staff may feel pressure to work far in excess of their contracted hours in order to meet clients' needs. Participants felt that this was a great potential problem for staff. Participants said that they had put policies and procedures in place in order to help staff appropriately manage their time and lessen the chances that they might overwork in order to meet the needs of clients. One participant said, for example:

*"I've had to put quite a few things in place to protect staff so that they don't get put in the situation where they're getting pushed in every direction, or feel that they ought to in order to fulfil the function of their job."*

Where workers are involved in caring roles, participants said that there is also a great deal of scope for staff to feel tremendous guilt about not meeting clients' needs completely, and this gives rise to the temptation to overwork. Forum participants also drew attention to the difficulty that staff who have a caring role can find in dealing with the emotional content of work, such as when clients disclose particularly difficult or sensitive issues. Dealing with difficult, sensitive, emotional issues can make it very difficult for staff to disengage from work, according to participants. As one participant said:

*"They may not have the [long] hours, but they go home with all the [emotional] baggage."*

## **Policies put in place by the organisation**

In order to promote a healthy work-life balance, to reduce the possibility of staff working many more than their contracted hours, and to help staff cope with the difficulties they may find in dealing with the emotional nature of their work, participants stated that a number of policies are in place within their organisations. These include policies allowing flexible working, as well as maternity and paternity leave and dependency leave.

In addition to these policies, there are a number of other formal policies and procedures in place. For example, one participant stated that she works with individual staff members to write performance plans for them that set targets, and can then be monitored by managers and help managers to keep abreast of workers' workloads and prevent overwork.

Interestingly, as well as formal policies and procedures, forum participants described having a range of informal work-life balance related procedures,

and said that they aimed to create a flexible and supportive ethos and culture. It was clear that managers cared greatly about their staff, and were keen to ensure that they were helped to have a work-life balance that they were happy with. For example, one manager stated that staff timesheets were checked to ensure that they were not working too many hours. This was done in a supportive manner and any issues that arose would be discussed and a solution negotiated. The manager stated:

*"I scrutinise everybody's timesheets, and they know that I'm not looking to check up on them, but I want to know why they're carrying 15 hours or 20 hours or 25 hours of flexitime and each time it's building up, and they're not taking any. So it's a realistic discussion about ok, 'what have we got to stop doing for a while to catch up?'"*

Another participant stated:

*"There is a kind of ethos that if you treat people well, that pays dividends...I'm quite willing to accommodate people's needs if they want to take flexitime or something...I think there's a trade-off, if you treat people decently, they have more of an investment."*

Another participant, who was keen to promote a supportive, worker-friendly environment said:

*"It's give and take...it there's childcare needs then we'll work round that."*

Forum participants did, however, stated that ensuring that staff are able to have a healthy work-life balance has had some implications for service-delivery, with one manager stating that she sometimes has to structure when and how services are delivered to ensure that staff do not work long hours on too many occasions. In particular, managers were keen to ensure that working longer hours than staff are contracted for did not become an expectation within the organisation. As one participant said;

*"The [staff] have to work a lot of evenings and most weekends...so again, it has to be very boundaried and they have to clear that if the staff are working in the evenings with [clients], they're not going to be there at nine o'clock [the next morning]."*

## **Beneficiaries of work-life balance related policies**

Participants felt that any member of staff might be a beneficiary of work-life balance related policy. For example, they drew attention to the fact that parents may need to work flexibility, but so might parents or non-parents who are carers for an elderly relative. They were keen to point out that any member of staff might require flexible working or additional leave, depending on their individual circumstances, and that policies were in place for all workers. As one participant said:

*“It’s [work-life balance] about something for everyone, because people’s needs change.”*

However, participants did state that because women tend to be the main carers in families, they are often the most likely to take advantage of most policies. In addition, they stated that they would be happy to allow some flexible working for non-parents, or other staff who wanted to work flexibly to fit in other non-work activities or interests, so long as this did not detrimentally affect service-provision. As one participant stated:

*“It’s not just about looking after children...people live to work or work to live...that to me is part of work-life balance, to have your priorities right.”*

## **The business case for work-life balance**

Managers participating in the focus group drew attention to the benefits for their organisations of a healthy staff work-life balance and of promoting flexible working. They said that ensuring that employees were not overworked and felt that they were able to balance work and family/private life, meant that they were likely to be more productive, happier in their work, take fewer days sick leave, and be less likely to leave the organisation. On a day-to-day basis, a healthy work-life balance meant that staff were better able to focus on their jobs and did better quality work, saving time and resources. As one participant said:

*“If their mind is not on the job, if they’ve got other issues, if you don’t go with the flow you might as well just send them home...it’s an upsetting influence within the team.”*

Participants also agreed that treating workers fairly and being flexible and accommodating meant that workers were more likely to feel committed to the organisation and happier in their work. Another manager said:

*“That they’re [staff] actually treated fairly will actually affect the way that they work...if I disempower them all the time and they don’t feel valued, I think that that will affect the way that they work.”*

## **Problems with implementing/encouraging flexible working**

Some participants did highlight potential difficulties in encouraging flexible working amongst their workforce. The main potential problem was the possible impact on service-provision. For instance, managers stated that some roles within their organisations were not time-flexible because of service-delivery requirements, and that in these cases it is difficult to offer certain flexible working options to staff.

Offering work during non-traditional working hours, can also create some problems for staff. For instance, one manager drew attention to the fact that

offering the opportunity to work at different, non-traditional times, such as weekends or evening can be problematic, because, for example, the childcare infrastructure may not be constructed to meet the needs of workers who work nights or late-evenings. The manager commented:

*“If suddenly you spread her hours, and she’s a lone parent, over seven days, who does childcare on Saturday, Sundays, [or for] evening shifts? It just doesn’t work...Society might be talking the words, but in practice it hasn’t caught up with its vocabulary yet.”*

Managers commented that many mainstream services are not structured to allow workers to access them out of hours, and that this can create difficulties for staff in balancing work and family/private life.