



Work-life balance in the SME

Small to medium-sized companies shouldn't be afraid of flexible working for employees striving for a better work-life balance. In fact, with a little bit of planning, it can mean enhanced productivity for your company

THESE days, ensuring a good work-life balance for each employee is crucial if you want to keep the best people. Allowing e-working and flexible working arrangements can boost morale as well as loyalty — employees are happier when it's understood their priorities take in home life as well as the office. A little give and take in terms of hours can make employees more likely to accommodate the boss when a big deal means extra work for everyone.

For the employer, there are difficulties associated with allowing this kind of flexible working. The costs of providing flexible arrangements are difficult to assess. The employer has to consider insurance cover, as well as health and safety issues for an employee working off the premises. It may be necessary to invest in communications technology for a dispersed workforce. Administration costs may vary since reconciling several different schedules may prove complicated.

But the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. Denis McCarthy is chief executive of the MBA Association of Ireland, the 2,000-strong representative body for MBA-holders living in Ireland. "It might be onerous on SMEs at present to implement flexible working practices — they don't have the same resources or flexibility as large organisations — but it is one area where they can compete against the corporates in the battle for talent," he says. And it's proven that work-life balance initiatives can act as a valuable retention tool, maybe even more so than cash. A recent UK poll revealed that 33pc of employees would prefer to work flexible hours than get an extra £1,000 a year into their wage packet. For Irish workers, there are particular advantages to avoiding the daily commute, McCarthy adds. "It makes sense in the context of our overloaded transport infrastructure, where many executives and managers find themselves spending the equivalent of one day a week sitting in traffic."

Employees themselves sometimes experience problems associated with work-life balance programmes: flexi-time and working from home can have adverse effects on your

career. There are plenty of businesses that offer flexitime, yet the employee who comes in at 10am is often viewed with suspicion by those who have been at their desk since 9. Some face time is obviously necessary in most businesses in order for employees to bond and work more effectively together — but in the age of 'always-on' communications, is it really necessary to sit behind a desk for eight hours a day?

The US consumer electronics retailer Best Buy thinks not. By the end of 2007, all of its 4,000 corporate employees will have switched to a mode of work known as ROWE: Results-Only Work Environment. The idea is that employees can work when they want, where they want, so long as they get the job done. Workers arrive in the office when they need to, leave when they want, and so long as the deadlines are met, nobody bats an eye. After a few months of running the programme, Best Buy has found that productivity in departments trying out ROWE is up by 35pc. The company will be able to improve its customer service programmes using the money saved by needing less office space. And, significantly, voluntary turnover has fallen massively.

Best Buy's programme has worked so well for them that it has even formed a subsidiary — Culture Rx — to bring ROWE to other companies. Their philosophy? 'Work is not a place you go, it's something you do'. But for those who fear that leaving staff unsupervised is a recipe for time-wasting, they add: "ROWE is all about results. No results, no job. It's that simple."

The Best Buy solution may be a little drastic for most Irish SMEs. Human resources consultant Denise Gavin says that ROWE "will certainly require a change in mindset by some small Irish businesses. There needs to be an environment of trust and employers need to set very clear expectations and goals for this to succeed." She believes, however, that such a programme can have a very positive effect on a workforce. "If implemented correctly it is a very powerful and effective retention strategy."

Whether they throw the clock out the window or not, in the face of competition from multinationals that are increasingly investing in radical workplace strategies, SMEs need to think about using work-life balance policies to their own advantage. The National Framework Committee for Work-Life Balance Policies was set up by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to help employers and employees get the most out of flexible work practices. For information and advice on implementing work-life balance policies in your business, go to www.worklifebalance.ie.

Ease to e-working in Ireland

- Some 39pc of the Irish population thinks that working from home is a good thing, compared to 36pc in the UK, 39pc in France and 31pc in Germany
- Half of Irish people are in favour of splitting their time between the office and their home. Just 6pc are in favour of working from home all the time
- Over 115,000 people in Ireland work from home all or some of the time
- Around a third of the working population would like to be able to take up e-working. Over half of younger workers would like to work from home one or two days a week.

**Source: Ease to e-working Pilot Project, National Framework Committee for Work-Life Balance Policies*



Denis McCarthy, chief executive of the MBA Association of Ireland