

Get a life!

**The global phenomenon of workplace stress
and its impact on work / life balance**



Get a life!

The global phenomenon of workplace stress and its impact on work/life balance

Research methodology

This survey was conducted by Arbora Global Career Partners, the international consultancy of which Muehlenhoff + Partner is an affiliate. Two complimentary questionnaires were used to gauge the views of managers and, representing employing organisations, HR managers.

A total of 2,216 electronic questionnaires, which were posted on a dedicated web page, provided the basis for the report findings. 1,267 questionnaires were returned by managers from different functional areas and 949 from HR departments.

The survey incorporated organisations ranging from SMEs to those employing over 1,500 staff. Just over half of those participating were from multinationals (57 per cent) and were based in one of 24 countries around the world, including:

Australia
Austria
Belgium
Brazil
Colombia
Denmark
Finland
France
Germany
Ireland
Japan
Mexico
Netherlands
Norway
Puerto Rico
Singapore
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
United Kingdom
United States of America
Venezuela

The distribution of survey responses is 35 per cent from central European countries (including the UK); 33 per cent from southern European countries (mainly Spain) and 17 per cent came from Scandinavian countries. The remaining 15 percent of questionnaires were completed in the USA, South America and Asian and Pacific Ocean countries (Japan, Singapore and Australia).

There is a fairly even gender split (59 per cent men and 41 per cent women) and the average age of respondents is 40 years old.

Objectives

The objective of this survey was to gauge the views of managers as employees and HR managers as employers about the merits and reality of work/life balance.

In addition, the survey set out to explore the following related issues:

- How managers assess and cope with the impact of stress on their work and private lives
- How widespread flexible working policies really are
- Whether work/life balance can benefit both parties
- Managers' views on the impact of flexible work arrangements on business performance

Summary

Managers are increasingly aware that stress and pressure in the office is affecting their performance at work and, by extension, their overall sense of professional and personal satisfaction. Work-related activities dominate their lives, leaving scant time for leisure, friends or family.

According to a poll undertaken this year by the Economic and Social Research Council, only 20 per cent of men and 29 per cent of women are broadly satisfied with their working hours. Just nine years ago, the satisfaction rates were 35 per cent and 51 per cent respectively. This research sets out to find the cause and effects of career misery, and comes up with a very straightforward answer: managers are stretching time and effort spent in the office to cope with 'business as usual'.

HR managers are the link between employees and their employing organisation. Conflicting demands from both parties put HR in an awkward position and it is hardly surprising that in our survey, HR managers were among the most stressed executives. However, the research shows a shift in opinion. The majority of HR departments recognise that there are divergent interests, but are actively trying to broker a new contract between the organisation and its workforce, which looks to benefit both. Finally, the business community must recognise that the best employee is not necessarily a martyr to his or her career, but someone who wants to lead a fulfilling professional and personal life.

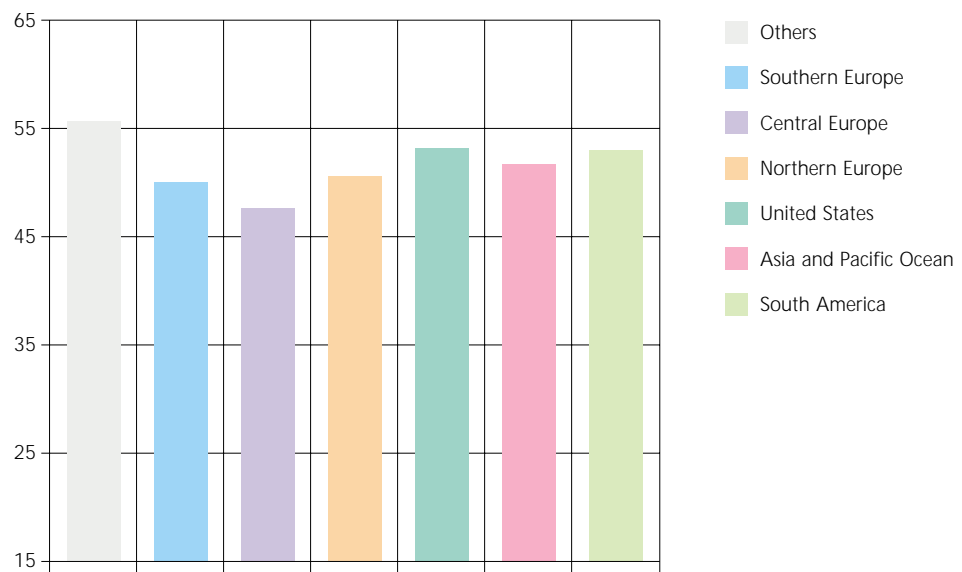
Headlines

- Stress peaks among younger managers, particularly those under 35
- Only 12 per cent of female and 17 per cent of male managers have not experienced burn-out at any time during the last year
- Most managers report that stress levels are increasing annually, because of business as usual rather than having to cope with exceptional circumstances
- The average manager spends 50 hours working, while four in ten exceed 50 hours
- One in three would prefer to have more free time than a salary increase, with 70 per cent of female managers sharing this view
- Only 15 per cent do not believe that stress is adversely affecting their quality of life
- The majority of managers have difficulties balancing personal and professional responsibilities
- Men believe that they are worse at achieving work/life balance than women
- Managers in national organisations believe they fare worse than those in multinationals
- 70 per cent report being satisfied with their job
- The majority of HR managers agree that work addiction is very common
- 90 per cent of HR managers believe that companies should help employees to achieve a good work/life balance; a similar number believe that this arrangement will benefit both worker and the organisation
- Older, male HR managers are most likely to expect that commitment to the job requires long working hours and that senior managers should be available around the clock; female HR managers are not so sure
- A third of employers do not offer part time work at any level in the organisation
- Almost half of companies do not allow employees to work from home
- 68 per cent of employers do not offer job sharing
- A minimal number of companies allow job swapping between employees
- However, most employers will be flexible over when their staff take holidays

Main findings

Cause: The drivers behind stress

Figure 1. Average number of hours working per week, by country distribution



On average, a manager works a 50 hour week and spends a further six hours commuting. The working week may depend on location: managers in central and southern Europe work less than the average, meanwhile 34 per cent worldwide estimate that they work longer than 50 hours and a few – 7 per cent – spend more than 60 hours in the office. On top of this, 40 per cent of general managers report always or almost always taking work home and 34 per cent claim they work regularly at the weekend.

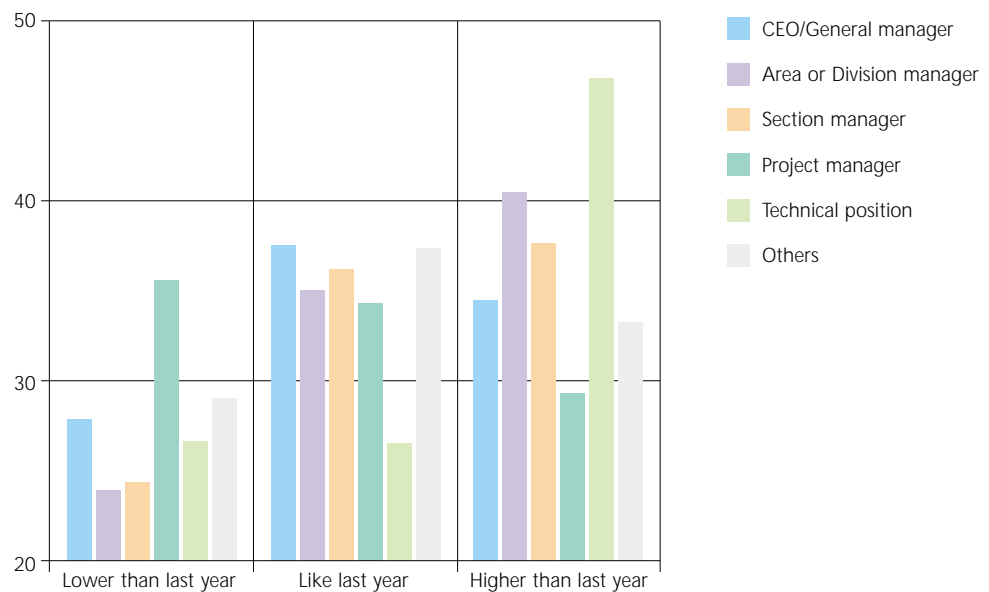
Table 1. Managers' time distribution

	Hours/week
Work	50.29
Commuting	6.07
Housekeeping & shopping	5.27
Family care	17.10
Personal care & leisure	11.12
Studying	3.77

Time spent at work is gender-dependent: the average female manager is on site 47.5 hours per week, almost four hours less than her male counterpart. Age is a factor: the 35 to 45 age group work longer than any other, while hours also increase according to status. CEOs and general, area or division managers exceed the weekly average.

Long hours and the sheer volume of work are the main drivers behind stress. Respondents feel that maintaining business as usual is more stressful (53 per cent) than exceptional circumstances (41 per cent). The majority (41 per cent) also feel that that workplace stress levels are increasing year on year.

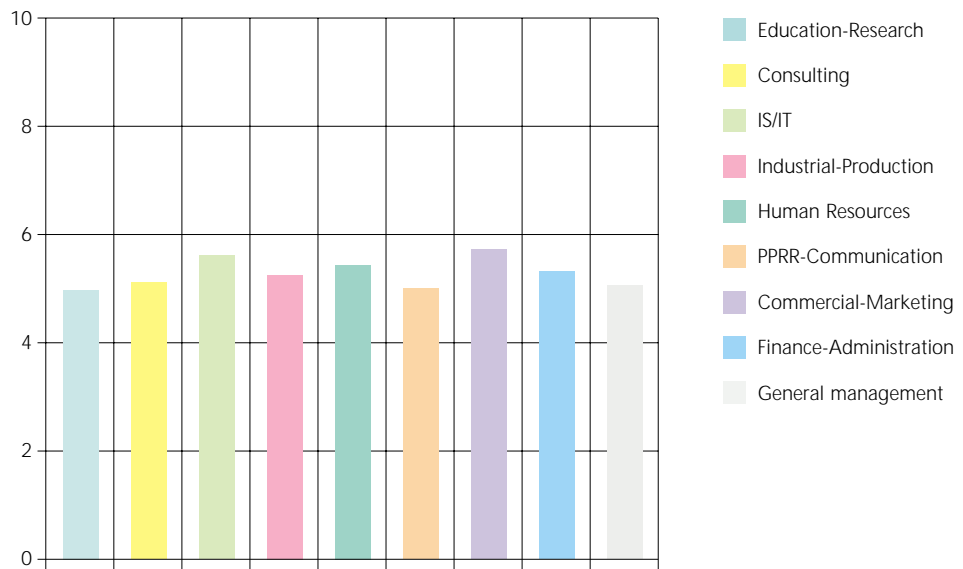
Figure 2. Current level of stress at work is, by organisational level



Effect: Stress takes its toll

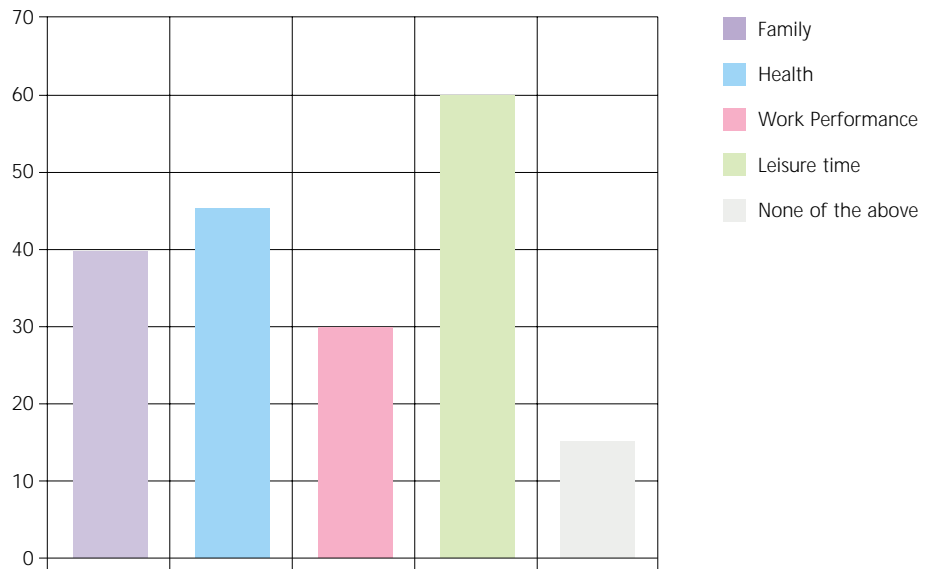
When managers were asked to assess how stressed they had been feeling over the last week, on a scale of nought to 10, the average level was just under six. While there was almost no variation between men and women, HR managers felt that their week had been slightly more stressful (averaging around six and a half). A comparison between managers from other functional areas shows that marketing, IT and finance/administration are more pressured environments than communications, research and consulting. Similarly, managers under 35 record the highest stress levels, with workplace pressure or the ability to cope with it appearing to decrease with age – dropping from 5.7 to 5.1 among the over 45 age bracket.

Figure 3. Average level of stress at work over the last week, by functional area



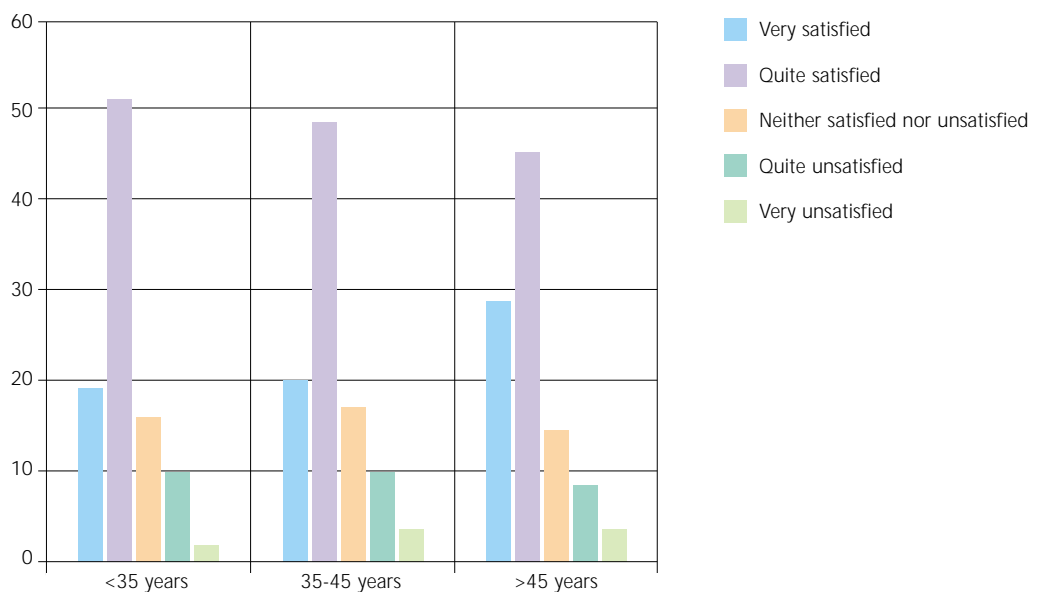
Only 15 per cent of managers do not believe that stress has damaged any aspect of their lives. The fallout from workplace stress affects leisure time (cited by 57 per cent), followed by health (43 per cent) and family (40 per cent). While 67 per cent of men - in particular managers under the age of 35 - appear concerned that work commitment is negatively affecting their family life, women are more anxious for their health. Half of all female respondents feel stress is a health risk, compared with 40 per cent of male managers.

Figure 4. Level of stress is adversely affecting



There are fewer concerns over impaired performance at work: around 30 per cent of men and women deny that stress affects their professionalism. Indeed, the majority – 70 per cent – are broadly satisfied with their jobs. While most workers, particularly those over 45 (almost 50 per cent), perceive themselves as happy at work, most have experienced burn-out at some stage during the past year. Only 12 per cent of female and 17 per cent of male managers claim they have not. Most also feel overwhelmed by work: over 50 per cent of managerial women report being frequently overloaded. This becomes a real matter of conflict for managers with children – just over 60 per cent of managers with families are under pressure from their workload.

Figure 5. Job satisfaction, by age

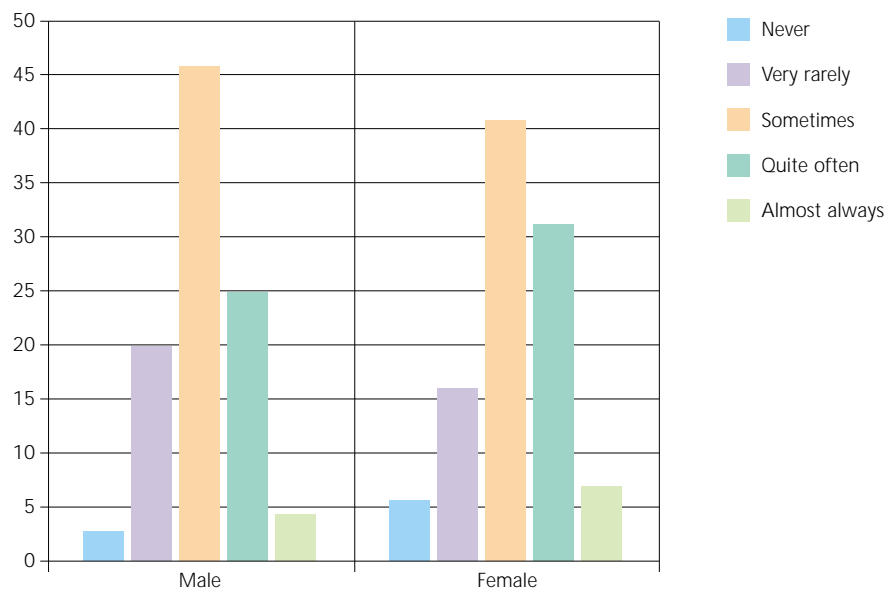


Balancing act

The Employees' View

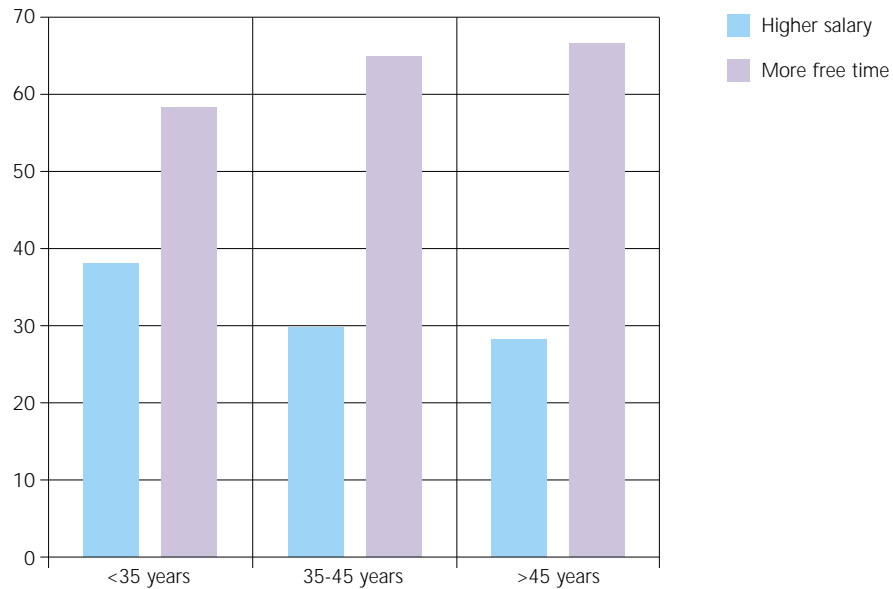
Most managers find it difficult to balance their personal and professional responsibilities. Around 75 per cent of women and a similar proportion of men state that family and career come into conflict. However, male managers believe that they achieve less of a balance between work and life than women. When asked to rate their success at the balancing act on a scale of nought to 10, men give themselves an average score of 4.8 while women rate themselves at 5.08. Managers at national organisations also believe that they fare worse than those working for multinationals – the latter has a balance rating of 5.2 compared to national managers' 4.8.

Figure 6. Do you find difficulties in balancing your job and family responsibilities? By gender



A large proportion of those surveyed, in particular the over 45s and female managers, would be prepared to sacrifice salary for more free time. Overall, 64 per cent say that they would prefer to spend more time out of the office while 36 per cent want a higher salary.

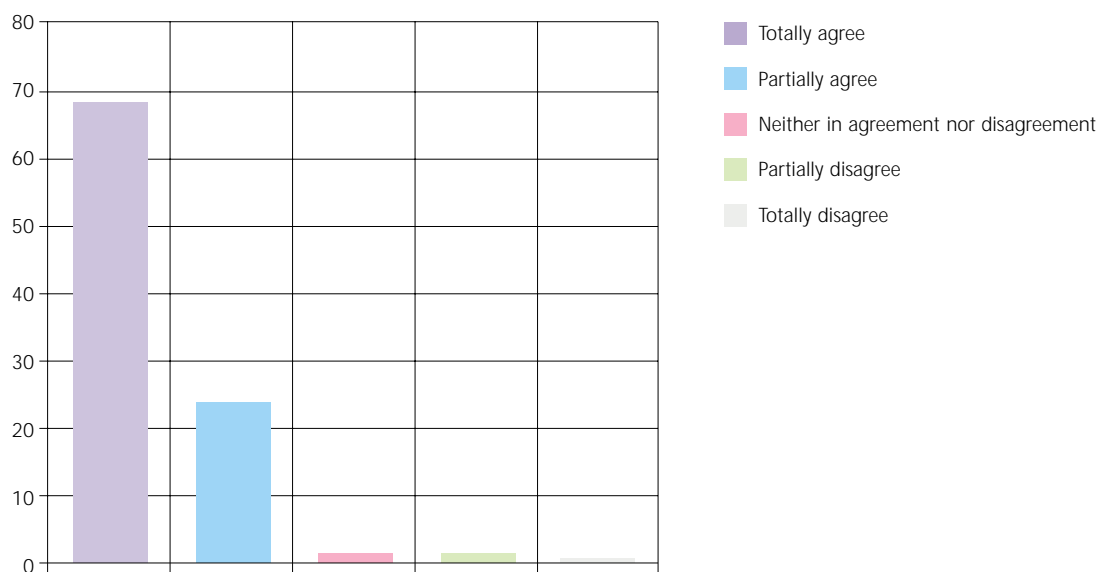
Figure 7. If you were able to choose, what would you prefer? By age



The Employers' Perspective

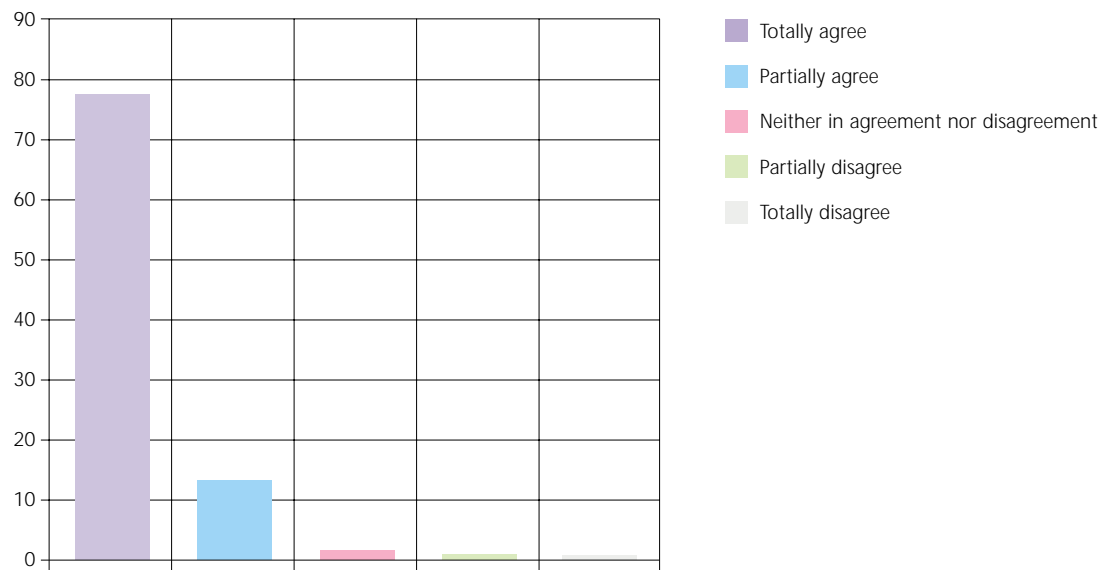
The vast majority of HR managers (94 per cent) totally or partially agree with the statement that the best employees are those able to keep a good balance between work responsibilities and personal life.

Figure 8. Employees that are able to keep a good balance between work and personal responsibilities have better performance



Equally, a similar number believe that work/life balance is a two-way street rather than a compromise – and that work/life balance benefits both the company and the employee.

Figure 9. Helping employees to achieve a good work/life balance benefits both the company and the employee



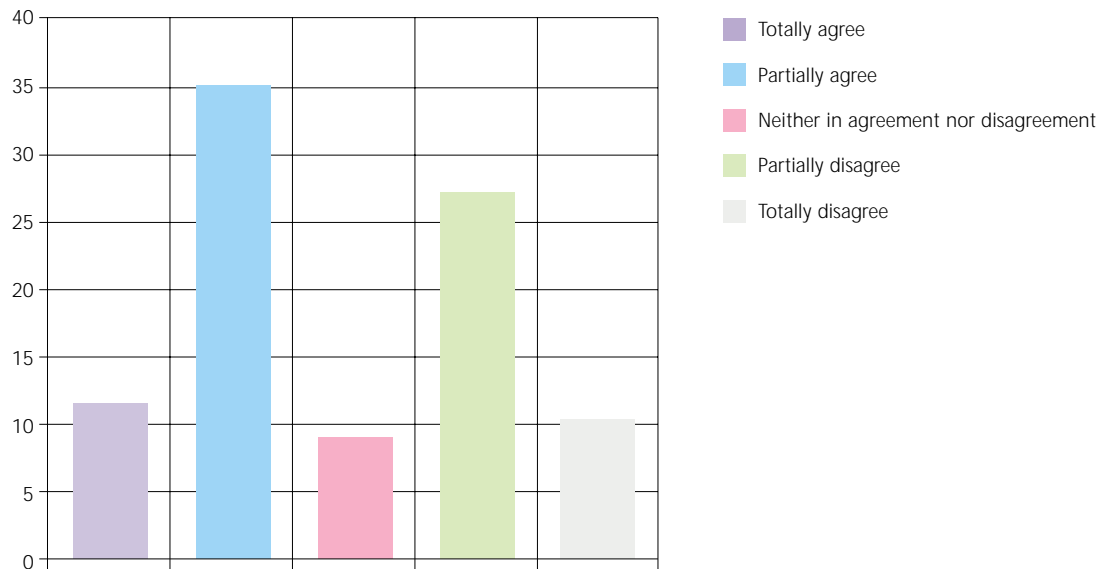
Just over 90 per cent believe that it is possible to offer flexible work arrangements without losing efficiency, with 46 per cent of HR managers recognising that most employees would prefer to earn less but have more free time. However, 28 per cent disagree with this idea, and HR managers show varying opinions over the issue of motivating managers or understanding their needs and professional responsibilities. Half agree that offering high economic incentives is the best retention strategy, while over 30 per cent disagree.

In direct contrast to the general view that work/life balance benefits both parties, almost 50 per cent of male HR managers believe that a high level of commitment requires long working hours. Female HR managers are less inclined to agree, with nearly one in six rejecting the idea. Similarly, with regard to whether or not senior managers should be on call 24 hours a day, around 50 per cent of women totally disagree compared with fewer than 30 per cent of men.

Male and Female HR managers are united in stating that flexible working arrangements should not be limited to mothers or people with caring responsibilities (64 per cent of women and 56 per cent of men feel strongly that this is not the case). However, job sharing provokes a gender divide: women are more open to the idea that two heads perform as well as one, with half in favour compared to one in three men.

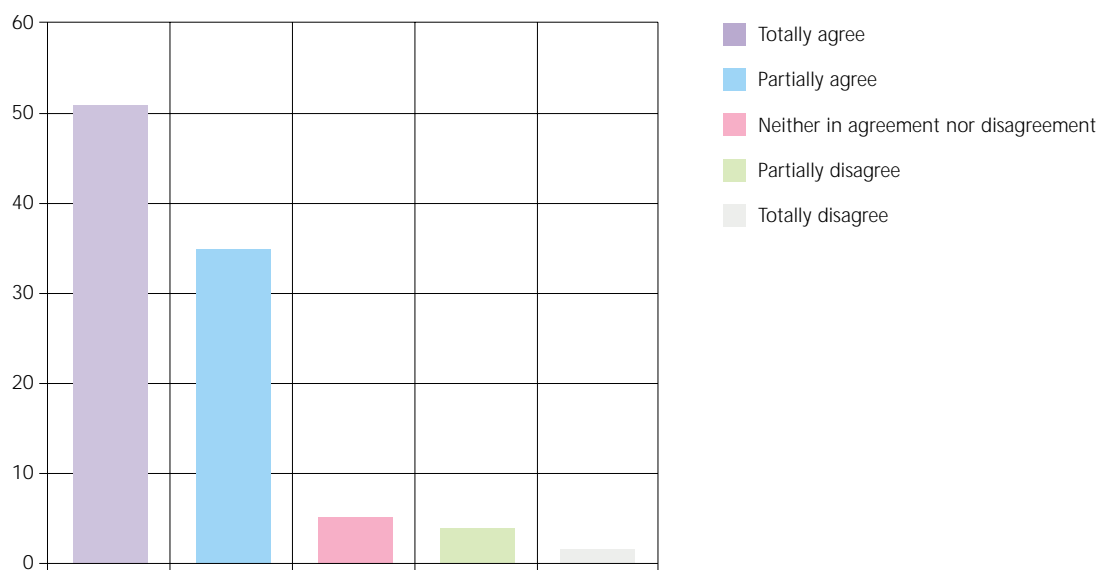
Most revealing is the fact that under half of the HR function believe that personal life is now regarded as more important than work life by managers. In fact, HR managers believe that work addiction is endemic, with one in nine respondents from both national and multinational companies sharing this opinion.

Figure 10. More and more, people seem to be valuing their work life above their personal life



In total, 90 per cent of HR managers think companies have a duty to help employees achieve good work/life balance – but how much influence do these individuals bring to bear on company policy?

Figure 11. Companies should help to get their work/life balance right



Life support

We asked employees to state whether their company policies included flexible options. Findings show that nearly half of the organisations offer **part time work** to at least some of their staff, although 32 per cent do not allow employees to work any less than a full five-day week. National companies appear more open than multinational companies, with 27 per cent allowing part time working at all levels. **Flexitime** is more widespread, with three out of four of all companies offering moveable hours, while almost half of all companies (48 per cent) do not allow employees to work from home.

Again, multinationals are less flexible than national companies over **sabbatical breaks** or **maternity and paternity leave**. Among multinationals, 24 per cent offer unpaid leave beyond the period regulated by law, compared with 34 per cent of nationals. The ability to choose when **holidays** are taken, however, is fairly common practice – under 10 per cent dictate to their employees when they can go on annual leave.

Job sharing is rarely found in organisations across the board – 68 per cent of companies have not considered it as an option, with 24 per cent offering it to some employees and only 3 per cent letting all workers take advantage of the scheme. Similarly, **job swapping** is not policy in over 60 per cent of organisations worldwide.

The global picture

The report identifies three distinct types of company according to their HR policy on work/life balance - people centred, power orientated and results driven organisations. While it is impossible to apply a blanket rule, the three cultural profiles mainly correspond to three geographical zones.

People centred organisations tend to be located in the USA and Scandinavia (Finland, Norway and Sweden). Mostly national organisations, they best represent their employees' work/life needs.

People centred companies typically:

- Offer maximum opportunity for work flexibility to employees (flexitime, teleworking, sabbatical breaks, part time hours, etc)
- Are least likely to have employees suffering from stress and report that stress levels this year are lower than last year's
- Have a very low burn-out rate
- Do not expect a senior manager to work around the clock
- Do not believe that commitment to the company automatically means working long hours
- Disagree that most employees would prefer to sacrifice salary for more free time

Results driven businesses are likely to be those in central or northern European countries (Germany, the UK, Holland, Switzerland, France, Denmark, Belgium, Ireland) as well as Japan, Singapore and Australia. These companies tend to be large multinationals, offering some of the more obvious flexible packages such as job sharing but would not if doing so would disadvantage the business.

Results driven cultures are characterised by:

- Offering their workers options such as flexible holidays and part time work
- Holding the view that personal life takes precedence over work
- Support for managers job sharing
- A belief that economic incentives aid employee retention

Power orientated organisations are mainly based in southern Europe, specifically Spain, and are national. They are characterised by inflexible work policies and consequently do not foster a good work/life balance culture.

The research findings show that HR within power orientated organisations typically:

- Do not offer flexible working conditions to employees at all levels
- Express the view that senior managers should be available around the clock
- Accept that work addiction is common
- Believe that a high level of commitment to the company requires long working hours
- Agree with the idea that most employees would prefer to earn less but have more free time