

Work-life balance in the ICT sector

Work-life balance in the ICT sector: The argument for work-life balance measures

This business case advocates for organisational change and outlines how organisations in the ICT sector can boost equal opportunities and gender-equality through human-resource management to attract and retain female talent. Making workplaces inclusive for women is in the best interest of the ICT sector. It enables them to tap into a larger talent pool and reduces costs resulting from an inability to combine work and care responsibilities, for example high staff turnover and absenteeism.

The idea that gender diversity spurs innovation, enhances performance and gives companies a competitive edge is not new. However it is a difficult concept to quantify and measure. Only when organisations commit to monitoring key metrics does it become possible to measure the impact of gender diversity (among other types of diversity) on the industry's ability to generate new revenue. Any beneficial impact will depend on an organisation's culture, its leadership and employees, and country context (legislative environment, for example). A recent study by the Boston Consulting Group in cooperation with the Technical University of Munich shows that increasing [diversity can enhance an organisation's capacity to innovate](#) by some 2.5%.

Concern among managers relating to work-life balance and how it affects employees is a relatively recent development. But as more and more evidence is published showing that workers are more effective when they are able to fulfil their caring responsibilities, managers are paying increasing attention to work-life balance measures.

Some ICT companies have already demonstrated a keen interest in setting up and implementing work-life balance policies. They aim to tackle a range of challenges related to personnel management (including shortage of talent, lack of diversity, employment engagement and satisfaction, and retention of valued employees) and enable working parents and carers to better balance caregiving with their other responsibilities. A number of companies also recognise that for any work-life balance measures to be effective and sustainable, these must be linked to the organisation's corporate objectives and strategic goals.

It is important to point out that employers are applying a mix of work-life balance policies, some of which are available to all staff (flexible working hours, working from home, reduced hours, wellbeing initiatives), and some (termed “family-friendly”) that target working parents and carers. These measures include maternity, paternity and parental leave, breastfeeding initiatives, childcare support or on-site childcare, employee assistance programmes. Some companies are also rolling out programmes specifically to boost gender equality in their organisation (mentoring, women’s networks, information sessions). Each organisation needs to find an ideal mix of these measures.

Policy- and decision-makers in a number of countries are exploring ways through which access to work-life balance measures could be improved through legislation, policies, funding, public–private partnerships and information networks. Accurate data about the business and societal benefit of work-life balance measures must inform all public policy initiatives from the planning stage.

An effective business case should always be adapted to corporate objectives of an organisation and be tailored to the specific needs of employees within a given legislative, cultural, and social context. Understanding the needs of employees and management, as well as those of ICT companies, is crucial in order to build the business case for work-life balance policies.

Example: Diversity as core corporate value – small-scale experimental initiatives to encourage women’s employment in a tech company

Prezi, Hungary

Conceived as a start-up project supported by Kitchen Budapest and Hungarian Telekom in 2008, Prezi is now one of Hungary’s most successful tech companies. Its main product is a cloud-based presentation software that was designed to replace traditional linear presentation methods with a new, free-software storytelling tool. Prezi has maintained a very strong commitment to diversity since its foundation. The company views diversity as a driver of creativity, an inspirational working atmosphere, and ultimately the company’s success. Prezi is probably just as well-known for its high-quality services as for its inclusive, motivating, and progressive working environment.

Prezi has numerous parallel initiatives underway that support work-life balance. The company's success in creating a truly employer-friendly, inspiring work environment lies in multiple small and medium-sized initiatives. Flexible working hours, an unlimited holiday policy, a nursery and programmes that help girls acquire ICT-related skills are just a few examples of the policies that make up Prezi's inclusive culture. Another important lesson is that cooperation with other businesses in the sector can also help drive gender-equality and work-life balance initiatives. Gradual implementation of different practices and constant openness and responsiveness to new needs are also key to success. Prezi's case shows that once a company has implemented a series of diversity initiatives, the system can function relatively independently with minimal effort on the part of the business.

Focusing on the fact that all employees are more effective when they are able to fulfil their caring responsibilities should help the sector, as well as policy- and decision-makers, to overcome the false perception that work-life balance issues concern only women with small children, that they are too expensive, or that they are not the responsibility of the employer. Encouraging organisations to set up data collection and use findings to highlight financial benefits can further reinforce measures. Data can also inform benchmarking and evaluation of programmes.

Organisational measures must be in line with national policy and legislation. However, national gender-equality legislation does not always adequately inform company policy. This can happen when legislation outlines broad objectives without demanding specific action from businesses, for example in terms of equal pay for equal work, and equal representation of women and men in leadership positions.

In the absence of a standard approach, organisations are aligning work-life balance measures with their own specific objectives, choosing to apply their own mix of initiatives and programmes.

When trying to identify the drivers behind company decisions to focus on improving the work-life balance of employees, a number of overarching objectives were mentioned by businesses:

Click to see the objectives

- Diversity and inclusion – ICT companies have begun to recognise the need for a more diverse workforce reflecting an increasingly diverse client base in order to better cater to client needs. Some companies have embraced diversity and inclusion initiatives as core organisational values or in order to gain a competitive advantage.

- Employee wellbeing – Work-life balance programmes are often perceived as being closely linked to employee health. This saves money for companies, through the reduced cost of absenteeism, for example.
- Employer brand – Organisations often link work-life balance initiatives with human-resource management goals, such as the attraction and retention of talent and improved public image of the company in social media and a desire to attract millennials has made the company’s image paramount in the eyes of business.
- Family-friendly workplaces – Some ICT companies place a strong emphasis on providing employees with childcare, part-time work, flexible working time, and child-friendly offices in order to ensure staff retention. Companies also throw holiday parties for families, hold ‘bring your child to work’ days, and join public–private partnerships for care services. Companies seek certification for these initiatives, which in turn can serve improve the employer brand.
- CSR and community impact – ICT Companies often encourage employees to volunteer for not-for-profit initiatives inside working hours, through forging partnerships with specific organisations for example. This in turn can serve to improve employer brand.

Example: Equality and diversity as strategic objectives

Netlight, Finland

Netlight is a medium-sized IT company which operates in seven countries. In Finland the company employs about 40 people providing a variety of services from software development to strategy consulting. The share of women is 25-30%. Netlight considers equality as its cornerstone. All partners of Netlight have signed the Declaration of Equality and an equality clause is included in all agreements made by the company. The company has an anti-harassment policy and an Equality Group, which is tasked with continuously developing initiatives to enhance equality. In order to strengthen equality, Vostok was launched in 2012. Vostok is an initiative that builds networks between women in ICT. Netlight considers the recruitment of women as critical for the company’s future and it makes sure to invest in the recruitment process to ensure the number of women hired is maximised. Netlight also provides benefits for parents of small children, in line with national legislation. It provides compensation for family leave, reduces working hours for parents, and provides playrooms for kids in all its offices.