

Contest for family-friendly firms

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The most family and employee friendly company competition (Pere- ja Töötajasõbralike firmade konkurss)

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In brief

Since 2001, two Estonian publications have organised a competition to find the family-friendliest firm in the country, and since 2009 the government has given financial support under its action plan to improve the reconciliation of work and family life (2011-2015).

The competition raises awareness of family-friendly corporate culture, and gives welcome publicity to the winners. Companies are evaluated both by their management and their employees through a company employee survey and a report from the company. Three awards are made each year, to the overall winner, the family-friendliest company and the employee-friendliest company. The initiative has had an impact by promoting good practices in companies and in public places like museums, events and cafés. With 90 companies competing in 2013, the initiative has grown in popularity and the government is planning to take a further step by introducing a family-friendly company certificate in 2014. The competition appears to be more attractive to large companies which have resources and human resources policies in this area.

The measure is transferable to any country – competitions can help to raise the profile and visibility of corporate culture. It is innovative in that it was initiated and funded by two media outlets and later funded by the ministry. The development of a new certificate could become one of the ways of extending the initiative to smaller companies.

A private initiative changes national policy

Since 2001 the Bonnier Group daily business newspaper *Äripäev* (Business Daily) and the magazine *Pere ja Kodu* (Family and Home) have organised the *Pere- ja Töötajasõbralike firmade konkurss*, a contest to select the most family- and employee-friendly companies in Estonia. Until 2008, the two publications financed the competition, but since 2009, the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs has taken this over, with a budget of approximately €4,000 per year. The aim of the contest has been to raise the profile of companies that value a family-friendly corporate culture. The companies are evaluated both by their management and by their employees. The winner of the competition is the company that achieves the highest score in three broad areas: family-friendliness, working environment and support for employee development. The winners of the competition gain media attention in *Pere ja Kodu* and *Äripäev*, but also via other channels. The media attention promotes the company's public image, and the winners are honoured at a public ceremony. "I can't say that Estonian society was child- or family-friendly in 2000. Ten years ago the issue of family-friendly companies was very rarely, if ever, raised in Estonia," says Tiia Kõnnussaar, *Pere ja Kodu's* editor-in-chief.

The initiative was developed in a wider policy context for gender equality under the government's Action Programme 2011-2015, which aims to improve the opportunities for reconciling family and working life as well as to promote family-friendliness in society, and the Strategy for Children and Families (2012-2020) which also has the objective of providing equal opportunities for men and women by reconciling working and family life.

Three annual awards

In order to assess the family-friendliness of companies taking part, two separate surveys are carried out among their management and employees. They cover family-friendliness, the working environment and support for employees' development. The final result is compiled from the weighted assessments of the employees and managers, with employees' opinions being given 60% of the weight. The employees assess their satisfaction in five domains: aspects of working life, working arrangements, wages, training options and family and work reconciliation options. They can also assess how well a company deals with conflict, if there is bullying and harassment, overtime, the option of part-time work, and support for people with caring responsibilities. The surveys include questions about promoting men's involvement in reconciling work and family life: for example there is a question whether the company promotes fathers' use of parental leave. The company also gets a chance to report on their policies, whether they provide time off, organise family events, pay benefits and bonuses in case of birth etc.

Each year three companies are presented with awards for the overall winner, the family-friendliest and the employee-friendliest company. Additionally in recent years awards have been made to a family-friendly museum, family-friendly events and a family-friendly cafeteria. The contest has gained popularity and more companies have been taking part: in 2013, 90 companies participated, about 1% of all companies in the country).

In 2001 when the contest was initiated the topic of family friendliness among companies was very new and the initiative was really innovative in the Estonian context. In recent years the winning companies have gained a lot of media attention, and are often welcomed at conferences and seminars on human resources development. The contest has increased the awareness of employers as to their responsibility and role in supporting family and work reconciliation. This has proved to be a good way to increase awareness of the role of employer in the family and work reconciliation process, especially in countries like Estonia where the social responsibility and awareness of the role of employers is low.

Certification to be introduced

One of the actions in the government action programme stipulates that family-friendly companies will be nationally recognised and in order to do this a certification scheme is to be introduced. The government is currently developing the methodology and certification will be introduced during 2014. Thus the contest may have led to the acknowledgement of the significance of this kind of award.

The contest motivates companies to provide and develop family-friendly measures. However, due to the fact that it follows the “beauty contest” model (i.e. only a few of the best contenders get the title), it may not motivate small companies with limited resources. These do not have the resources to develop official reconciliation policies or provide services to make the working environment family-friendly. This is illustrated by the fact that the winners are relatively large companies (in 2013 the winner was Microsoft Estonia). In Estonia, however, the majority of companies are very small (94% of companies have 10 employees or fewer). Therefore the forthcoming certification system is significant in that it will open up the possibility for all companies to qualify and will and promote a wider interest in the reconciliation of work and family life.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is currently developing the certificate for family-friendly companies, drawing on examples of the content and implementation of certification systems in France, Germany, Austria and Slovenia. The success of certification will, however, depend on the conditions companies will have to meet, and whether it will be open to small companies, which often have different needs and possibilities from large companies. In 2013, the certificate was piloted to assess the readiness and capacity of Estonian companies to analyse their family and employee-friendliness. Six companies took part in the pilot project, which discussed the criteria and methodology of the certificate with employers and employees.

The success of the contest demonstrates that a small-scale initiative of a private company (a newspaper in this case) can draw attention to the need to reward companies for their efforts to being family-friendly, and can lead to the development of nationwide policy. It clearly suggests that small and regular awareness raising activities can have a wider influence.

Contacts/Further Information

Contacts

Rivo Sarapik

Head of Editorial

Äripäev AS

Pärnu mnt 105

19094 Tallinn

Estonia

+ 372 667 0181

rivo@aripaev.ee

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