

Work-life balance in the ICT sector

Toolbox for planning work-life balance measures in ICT companies

Improvements in work-life balance for all can be achieved in a variety of ways. The initiatives that companies can offer can range from one-off events to ongoing programmes. Some require minimal time and resources, while others need significant investment.

A key recommendation for organisations is to start with an area of least resistance: identify easily attained objectives.. This can take the form of regular office breakfasts where colleagues come together to discuss parenting challenges, supported by an external expert. Regular ‘home-on-time’ days also require minimal investment and can unite employees. In both cases the full participation of senior leadership is a critical.

The following section outlines key questions that organisations need to ask throughout the introduction of work-life balance measures.

Important aspects to consider before setting up measures

Have employees been included in the design of the measures?

Asking employees about their preferred work-life balance initiatives can provide key information for the company. The work-life balance domain is vast and constantly growing. It is therefore important to stay as close to the expectations of employees as possible.

Employers can gain insight into the needs of their employees in a number of ways:

- online surveys (anonymous or otherwise)
- focus groups
- strategic workshops
- ongoing pulse surveys
- feedback opportunities following the introduction of specific measures.

Companies can also include the Works Council and trade unions in the design of the measure.

Is the initiative intended for both women and men?

Encouraging men's participation in care responsibilities requires conscious effort and the breaking down of harmful stereotypes and unconscious bias. A representation of both genders needs to be used throughout parent-related communication materials for this approach to be successful.

Not all employees are parents or carers and all staff members need to feel that some initiatives acknowledge their work-life balance struggles. Flexible working, self-scheduling, team-rostering and home-based working should be made accessible to all employees.

Are the initiatives intended for the long term?

Work-life balance programmes rely heavily on employees and management adopting a new working culture and set of behaviours. This takes time. If an initiative is intended only as a one-off or, even worse, if initiatives change repeatedly, the effect will be deleterious: employees may become cynical and fear repercussions. They may put in excessive working hours, potentially resulting in absenteeism, burnout, and ultimately end of tenure. All initiatives need to be integrated into the long-term strategy of the organisation. Senior leadership and relevant departments should also maintain realistic expectations about the organisation's capacity for change to avoid disillusionment.

Is there something for everyone?

Any successful work-life balance initiative needs to take into account individual differences and preferences. Not all measures will appeal to all employees, even if they have a similar profile. Family circumstances, available resources, personal preferences, and career stage will determine the extent to which an employee takes up the support on offer. The good practices show that organisations offer a variety of measures, from smaller initiatives to long-term programmes. This allows employees to choose how they wish to respond to their specific needs, which also change over time. A programme to support employees on parental leave may not immediately appeal to some younger employees, but may send a strong signal that parenthood is welcomed by the company. This can increase their long-term commitment to the company.

Are the initiatives undertaken because of strategic long-term equality and diversity objectives?

The implementation of work-life balance measures is not an automatic guarantee of increased women's representation, especially in ICT – a profession where women are currently under-represented. Companies in the ICT sector need the cooperation of NGOs and research centres to motivate more girls to enter the ICT profession. Organisations need to recognise the important role they have to play in boosting the number of women in ICT.

The company needs to measure the women of employed, as well as the number of women candidates for open positions. The number of women employed must be broken down into the number of women in middle- and senior-management positions, as well as the number of women in technical positions, as opposed to administrative and support functions. In order to attract more women, companies can launch women's mentoring programmes, networking opportunities, learning and development activities, and transparent career development pathways.

In order to attract more women, companies must also remove gender stereotypes and unconscious bias from their communication materials. Business need to ask themselves about the language they are using and how women are portrayed in internal and public communication materials. (Please see EIGE's publication 'Gender-sensitive communication' for guidance on how to make communication material gender-sensitive and inclusive.

Example: Showing women they are wanted in tech

Kapsch Group

In order to attract and retain women in their organisation, Kapsch Group (Austria) created women's networking groups under the [Women@Kapsch](#) initiative (2011-2012). These groups cooperated with schools and universities to increase the number of women employed. The Kapsch Group also takes part in mentoring programmes for girls and young women with an interest in tech. TechNIKE, for example, was a programme at the Vienna University of Technology, targeting girls aged 10- 14. The programme introduced girls to different aspects of science and technology, and IT in particular. The company provides financial support and cooperates with the online mentoring programme for women students at the University of Technology.

Is working and caring framed as a burden or an opportunity?

Often, the discourse around work-life balance is linked to the limitations placed on working parents and carers. However the most successful practices reframe parenthood not as an obstacle to career development, but as a benefit and opportunity for the company. Healthy and happy employees who are able to combine a fulfilling life outside work with a meaningful career are a benefit to the organisation. When companies think in sustainable terms about their employees' careers, taking time out for caring can be perceived as a natural part of life. Ensuring a smooth return to work is an important element of this narrative.

How do you know what works without trying it first?

The world of tech is one of the most flexible sectors in which to experiment with new tools and methods. Many companies, particularly in the start-up environment embrace agility and innovation as part of their company philosophy. This encourages experimentation and rapid trial and error. Such experimentation has not however always permeated the sphere of HR management. Pilot projects and short-term initiatives enable companies to assess impact through evaluation. Once a pilot is successful, it can be rolled out throughout the organisation and accompanied by a carefully developed communications campaign.