

abz*austria paternal leave company workshops

Austria

2011-2012

Encouraging SMEs to give fathers time off for their kids

Summary

The Austrian paternal leave company workshops were designed and carried out by the non-profit organisation abz*austria and funded by the Federal Ministry for Women and Civil Service, the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, the social partners and the Federation of Austrian Industries. They provide an interesting example of a concerted initiative to raise awareness and change company culture about parental leave as a goal of gender equality. They are also a good example of cooperation with employers and trade unions.

The workshops were held in 2011 and 2012 in the context of wider efforts by the Austrian government to promote men's take-up of parental leave and through this to support the careers of working mothers. They aimed to develop a new company culture that enables and encourages men to take parental leave. Targeted at human resources managers, staff and works councils in SMEs, the workshops were conducted in all nine Austrian provinces and were free of charge for the companies taking part. The workshops included inputs from abz*austria on tools to manage paternal leave as well as contributions from external experts on legal frameworks. This opened up opportunities for networking, group work, making links, working on company strategies, presenting case studies and discussing solutions.

Changing the culture of SMEs

Although Austria's legal framework allows and encourages fathers to take parental leave, the share of men taking up this option and claiming the childcare allowance is low, and is only growing slowly. Therefore, the Federal Minister for Women and

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Civil Service made an effort to promote men's use of parental leave. In cooperation with the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection as well as all social partners and the Federation of Austrian Industries, it launched awareness-raising campaigns and introduced a new, income-based childcare allowance scheme.

Austria's economic landscape is characterised by a majority of SMEs, so in 2011 and 2012 it also commissioned the non-profit organisation abz*austria to design and implement paternal leave company workshops for SME representatives. Their objective was to make SMEs aware of the importance of encouraging men to take up paternal leave, which would also support the careers of working mothers. The aim was to develop a new company culture that enables and encourages men to take parental leave – and as abz*austria concluded, to do this it is vital to involve men more actively in the process of creating gender equality. Twelve workshops were conducted, each attended by between seven and 18 participants (on average 12.5). The workshops were conducted in all nine Austrian provinces and were free of charge for the companies that took part.

Tools to manage parental leave

abz*austria used concrete management tools such as RoadMap*KarenzManagement® (an internal information and communication platform for companies and their employees on leave) and ToolBox*KarenzManagement (an instrument for strategic activities in the preparation and design of the leave). It also brought in external experts to give information on parental leave and legal frameworks. This opened up opportunities for networking, group work, making links, presenting case studies and discussing solutions.

The main target groups were small and medium sized companies across the different Austrian provinces. Management staff were regarded as important stakeholders, since once they are aware of the facts they can spread the message. At the same time, male participants were involved in the workshops, particularly those who were interested in finding out about the possibilities for paternal leave and in fostering positive attitudes towards fatherhood. Participants included managers and employees in human resources divisions, works council representatives, accountants, managers, project managers, and others.

According to the feedback forms, the main reasons participants attended the workshops were to be prepared for the issue, because there had already been requests for paternal leave in the company, and to improve their image as employer.

The participants said that the main benefits of the workshops were that they gained important information about legal frameworks, the fields in which companies could act and where to turn for further information. More generally they were given food for thought, new knowledge, perspectives and ideas, examples how other companies deal with the topic, external and expert perspectives, networking and exchange opportunities, encouragement and higher awareness. They ended with a more positive view of paternal leave and a greater awareness of the importance of a supportive management.



The workshops provided targeted information, awareness-raising and a discussion platform. It was not a general campaign but was tailored to the needs of one specific group, namely SME decision-makers and employees, who were enabled to address the topic in a focussed way. Overall, the evaluation and feedback forms reported a high degree of satisfaction by participants and confirm the usefulness of the measure for SME employees in

management, human resources and other positions. The way the workshops were organised, namely through working in small groups, providing in-depth information and involving well-informed experts, was also appreciated.

Analysing the feedback forms, it can furthermore be concluded that there have been two main outcomes on gender equality twofold. Firstly the workshops provided the participants with helpful practical and legal information enabling them to be better prepared for implementing paternal leave.



Secondly, they appear to have managed to change some participants' perspectives on paternal leave in that they gave positive feedback about raised awareness.

The focus on SMEs was certainly appropriate in the Austrian context with its large share of SMEs. Moreover, in SMEs, company culture and personal commitment are particularly relevant, which is why the focus on these aspects appears particularly fruitful. It can furthermore be assumed that the distribution of the workshops across Austria allowed for increased participation and dissemination. This was also relevant as the workshops were embedded in the concurrent wider campaigns and activities that took place.

Changes are needed on all sides

Overall, participants saw the workshops and the information provided as very helpful. Their feedback revealed many that in the eyes of SMEs many changes need to be made if paternity leave is to be taken up more enthusiastically.

Within companies, managers need to create a company culture which is open to this issue, and send out clear signals by giving their proactive support. Taking parental leave should not only be feasible but also economically attractive. On the practical level, they should introduce flexible working hours and part-time schemes, and ensure that staff on leave are replaced. Parents should be allowed to work part-time during parental leave. Companies must realise that they have to devote resources to this issue, for instance by boosting the number of staff in human resources departments. These changes need support from experts, promotion through public relations work, and the creation of checklists for SMEs.

Social partners need to be more sensitive to the issue, and co-workers need to show flexibility. Fathers themselves have to have the courage to take leave.

More broadly there are society-wide issues. The economic situation of women needs to be improved, and social acceptance needs to be built by giving publicity to role models. In addition legal frameworks need to be less strict – for instance parents who work part-time should not suffer reduced protection from dismissal.

An important lesson the organisers learnt was that the political focus on the topic, accompanied by more coverage in the media, led to an increased interest in the issue and participation in the programme by companies. The organisers therefore conclude that PR and role models (companies and fathers who provide positive examples) are particularly important.

The good practice is relevant for all countries that see a low or only slowly increasing number of men taking parental leave – a situation that applies, albeit to different extents, to all countries of the EU.

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Further information:

Leave management tool: <http://www.abzaustria.at/angebote-projekte/auszeiten-und-karenzmanagement>

Government parental leave campaign: <http://www.maennerinkarenz.at/kampagne.html>