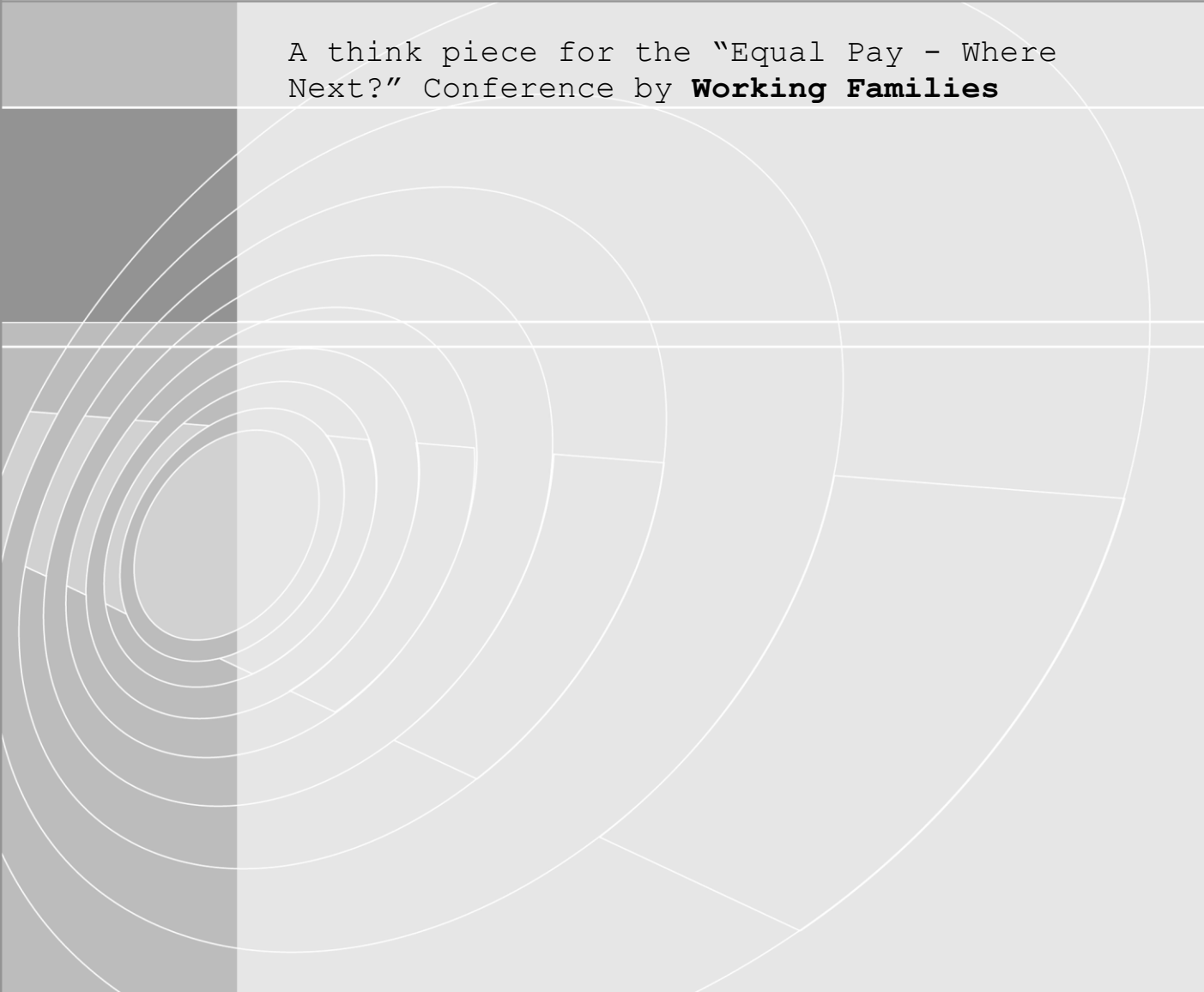


The Way Work is Organised



A think piece for the "Equal Pay - Where
Next?" Conference by **Working Families**

The way work is organised

One of four short think pieces produced for the 40th anniversary of the Equal Pay Act to inform new thinking and discussion on what should be the next steps in closing the UK's gender pay gap. This think piece on the way work is organised has been produced by Working Families for this conference. The other 3 pieces look at the area of the law, how attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes affect the gender pay gap and making the business case for equal pay. The issues and ideas raised in all four pieces will be discussed by participants at the "Equal Pay, where next?" conference on 28th May 2010 to inform a single roadmap for future progress on equal pay. This is because neither action on attitudes, or any of the other 3 areas alone, will make the difference we need, but combined we have the opportunity to consider practical action to bring historic legislation to fruition

Work is organised, at the moment, in a way which does not do enough to close the pay gap; in some ways it exacerbates it because the focus is on providing choices within the current systems, but not on changing these systems. Work has changed surprisingly little over the last 50 years or so. Of course, there have been significant changes in the nature of the work we do, who does it, and to a lesser extent, when and where we do it. But when considered against a background of profound social and demographic change, the way work is *perceived and designed* has hardly altered. Traditional working arrangements, and beliefs about those arrangements, prevail, often coupled with equally firm ideas about what constitutes the ideal worker.

But what about the advance of flexible working? Flexible working is now in the mainstream of employment practice, with attendant legislation. Surely flexible working has changed how work is organised? Hardly. In most organisations it has simply allowed *some* people to change the way they do their jobs. Fundamentally, flexible working remains an accommodation, a mechanism by which workers may deviate from the 'standard' working pattern to suit their individual circumstances. Most workplaces are still structured around a cultural picture of the ideal worker who has no family or personal obligations beyond work; flexible workers may not adhere to this pattern, but they don't change the reality that most work is organised round this vision of a good employee (however outdated and unrealistic it is.)

External pressure from changes in the composition of the labour force, demographics and social attitudes mean that old ways of thinking about the way work is done are increasingly anachronistic. Add to this the intensification and globalisation of work, with many organisations operating 24 hours or across time zones, and the idea that any worker

can match their time to that of organisational operation look fanciful. In some sense, most of us are part-time now: few people work all their company's opening hours.

Such factors highlight the need for a different way of organising work, but an imaginative approach to change has been lacking. Consider, for example, that in 1981, only 24% of mothers returned to work within a year of childbirth, while 20 years later the figure was 67%. Although generous maternity incentives have increased the number of women returners, their performance on return has not been maximised. What has evolved is a workplace where less well-paid, less well-trained part-time jobs is the lot of mothers; employers get a great deal out of employing part-time thousands of women who will trade better pay and career prospects for flexibility, even though they are qualified to work way above this level. Meanwhile, most of the serious jobs go to people who are prepared to work long hours. Work organisation has failed to keep pace with this change, at a real cost to not only women but to men as well. Women lose out in terms of significant income over their employment lifetime, and families are denied real choices about working and caring. When the loss of talent is also considered, with its subsequent costs to the economy, the case for better work organisation that matches the way people need to combine working and living is strong.

Research that Working Families carried out with Cranfield University¹ found a gender split in the way men and women organised work in terms of individual arrangements. Men favoured compressed working weeks and remote working. Women tended to make more use of reduced hours arrangements. Culture militated against an organisational approach to flexibility, and the acceptable face of work-life integration was often one that appeared to broadly reinforce traditional gender roles. In fact, in the absence of a macro approach to organisation, individuals were often found to have made 'deals' where they worked flexibly under the radar with the organisation unaware of these arrangements.

It is not, of course, just parents and carers who would benefit from a different approach. Young workers, who perhaps most closely match the ideal of the 'always available/no outside commitments' employee described above, are, ominously for employers, not content with the old models of work organisation. Research² shows that they are much more relaxed about the borders between work and non-work, willingly using technology to navigate these boundaries. But this doesn't mean that they will happily absorb huge quantities of work; what they expect is to work much more flexibly in terms of time and place, and to be able to reconcile the work and non-work parts of their lives more easily. What does this mean for employers? It means, fundamentally, that traditional work organisation methods will not get the best performance out of these employees. Employers will have to think about work organisation much more in terms of outputs and standards rather than bodies in seats during core hours.

Older workers, too, have different expectations of work, certainly from those they probably had when they started working. Scaling down into retirement, combining working and caring (for relatives or grandchildren) or simply working for longer past traditional retirement are all trends that are increasing. Caring predictions make sobering reading for anyone thinking that only a minority of employees will want to deviate from 'standard' hours. Carers UK estimate that every day another 6,000 people take on a caring responsibility - that equals over two million people each year. What we see emerging rapidly is an understanding that employees need different types of working arrangements over their lifecourse. Work redesign is going to be crucial if organisations want to retain and recruit good employees.

In many organisations large scale work organisation for better work-life integration is not high on the agenda. Although employers recognise the changing nature of the needs and wants of their employees in relation to working time, they think they've got it covered through the deployment of flexible working policies. This often means work organisation is delegated to managers, who deal with individual requests for flexible working and try to fit these into the context of their immediate team or area of responsibility. The inherent weakness in this localised response is that it often depends on an individual manager's attitude and beliefs whether or not individual or team work re-organisation happens. This is often why you find islands of good work practice in large organisations. But even if the manager is, for example, willing to reorganise work within their own team, they rarely affect practice at an organisational level. A higher-level approach is required which looks at areas of operation as a whole when considering work design. An example of this might be where a company decides that in recruiting for posts the tasks of the job are broken down and reorganised to allow the best people to fill them, fitting in with the employees' working preferences from the start. This doesn't often happen.

During the BA check-in desk strikes of 2003, Kevin Curran, the general secretary of the GMB union declared that "time was the new money". This is an important idea. Organisations should be thinking about *sustainability* and the potential impact of work intensification and long hours on the long term viability of an organisation. If, for example, the response to changes in workflow and demand are simply to throw more hours at it, then there's a problem with the way work is fundamentally thought about. Long hours should not be the solution to badly designed working practice. Add to this work intensification. Over the last 20 years or so researchers have noted that work has got 'bigger' – we have more of it to do, in less time. Partly driven by technology, partly by globalisation, people often report feeling that they don't have enough time to do all the work they have got. This is now so commonplace that it is unremarkable. But surely, if this is the case, then the way we have work organised is wrong. Good work organisation is ensuring that people have manageable workloads. If you drive employees to the ragged edge with unrealistic demands, then the sustainability of the organisation is at risk. Performance and wellbeing drop off, engagement plummets and productivity goes down.

What can employers do? Leadership commitment is vital, especially to bring along the layers of middle managers who need to be won over. HR policies need reviewing,

especially when they have been, as they usually are, designed around full-time employees. Similarly, the way people are rewarded needs review. For example, employees who use flexitime to come in to work very early and leave early, often to collect children from school, report that they are often undervalued or regarded as part-timers, while those who come in later but work late are considered to be highly committed. Organisations need to examine why some kinds of time are more highly valued than others.

There is a key role for Trades Unions in changing the thinking about how work is organised, and also driving the adoption and take-up of flexible working which will help to achieve this. In *Family Friendly Rights: Transforming Britain's Workplaces*³, Brendan Barber observes that when considering the needs and responsibilities of employees today, many workplaces are not fit for purpose in the way they approach the organisation of working time. Partnership between unions and employers, he says, can work to increase the choices that workers have by encouraging a different approach to work to accommodate these needs.

Employers need to consider work organisation in the context of time; the time they have available for work, and the time employees are able to give. These two things will rarely fit into a standard, one-size-fits-all pattern. The way work is organised needs to be an ongoing process. Within set parameters there must be an openness to review what work actually entails, and how it can best be done taking into account business needs and employees' needs. This is beyond flexible working at the individual level, one-off Rights to Request, and the proliferation of individual flexible working solutions until no more can be accommodated. It is about *organisational flexibility* to enable better working.

There are four issues that will be key in the process of better work organisation:

- Work organisation must be understood to be more than flexible working. A crucial step is to recognise that beyond flexible working, the fitting of individual work demands into a system, lies changing that system itself. Work must work *with* the grain of employee's lives, not against it;
- Employers need to understand (and the case be made to them) that maintaining unsustainable work organisation structures, that are increasingly out of kilter with the way people live today, will cause tangible, demonstrable harm to the organisation in terms of lost productivity, lower morale, evaporating discretionary effort and higher employee churn;
- The way we value and reward working time, prizing some types of working time, and undervaluing others, must be examined and changed. Assumptions about the value of part-time workers need challenging, and understanding managing by output and quality must be encouraged; and
- Ensuring that changes to work organisation structures improve the lives of employees, extend opportunities for well paid, high quality work and tackle inequalities within the workplace will need trade unions to negotiate and bargain for members on these issues.

¹ Flexible Working and Performance: Summary of Research. Cranfield University School of Management and Working Families. 2008

² Generation Y and their impact on the Workplace. Cilla Snowball in Tomorrow's Worlds: Perspectives on work and family life in the future. Working Families 2009.

³ Family Friendly Rights: Transforming Britain's Workplaces. Working Families for TUC. 2010