

**The Workplace of the Future: Reconciling Pregnancy,
Parenting & Employment**

Seminar

Thursday 8th November 2007.

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of Finance

Introduction...

Good morning ladies and gentlemen and thank you for inviting me to the seminar today to speak to you about the evolution of family friendly and work life balance policies in the Civil Service.

I am glad of the opportunity to speak about how we have transformed the Civil Service workplace in the last thirty years or so. When I joined the service there was a "one size fits all" approach to employment conditions. That no longer applies. Today, the Civil Service offers a variety of working patterns and arrangements that are designed to allow staff with parenting responsibilities to remain at work and to have a life. I will be focusing on the benefits to the organisation and to staff that have flowed from the availability of flexible working arrangements. I will also mention some of the challenges that we face in widening access to our schemes into the future.

Thirty plus years ago...

It might be useful for a moment to contrast the situation that women faced who joined the Service with me thirty plus years ago. As you know the Employment Equality Act was not enacted until 1977. The marriage bar in the Civil Service, that required married women to resign, was not removed until 1973. Its removal allowed women to remain at work but they faced some pretty stark choices. Paid maternity leave was only introduced in the Civil Service in 1975 and the period of paid leave was 12 weeks.

On return to work following the birth of a child, full-time work was the only option and for the majority of women, the difficulties of keeping up a job and raising a family were virtually insurmountable and, quite frankly, some just gave up. Managing a pregnancy alone was an even more challenging scenario and the Civil Service as an employer was no different from any other at the time – it offered little or no support. The workplace did not address the needs of its women employees and many women of talent and ability were lost to us.

Today...

Contrast that with women beginning their careers in the Civil service today – the experience could not be more different. Employment Equality legislation has removed any vestige of discrimination on gender grounds. Full access is guaranteed to all the statutory schemes - maternity leave (currently 26 weeks on full

pay) adoptive leave and parental leave. But that is the minimum that is now available.

Work-life balance...

In the Civil Service the work life balance schemes in place facilitate women returning to work in a way that suits their family circumstances. A mother can choose to take a break for a number of years or return on reduced hours. She will not be faced with an impossible choice between work and family but will be offered a range of options to allow her to balance her life.

Her career prospects will not be affected by her choice of working patterns. Promotion based on seniority, which was the hallmark of the civil service when I joined, is gradually disappearing. The Government is committed to opening more promotion opportunities at all levels to open competition; women who have had breaks in their career or who are working reduced hours are not prevented from going forward for promotion whenever they want.

Such a workplace would have seemed like an impossible dream to women thirty years ago but it's the reality now in the Civil Service and I'd like so say a few words about how we made this happen.

Family friendly working arrangements...

Flexible working arrangements had their origins in the job creation initiatives of the 1980s, when job-sharing and career breaks provided employment opportunities to the Civil Service, without breaching the staffing embargoes that existed at that time. Equality policies in the Civil Service were emerging and we were beginning to recognise that if women were to be encouraged to continue to work and to progress in their careers, some flexible working arrangements had to be put in place. Job sharing was joined by flexible working hours, job sharing became worksharing and we introduced term-time arrangements. All of these schemes are now firmly embedded in our working arrangements. Advancements in technology have allowed us to explore e-working arrangements on a pilot basis.

On the political side, the Government and Social Partners, in the social partnership agreement "Programme for Prosperity and Fairness" in 1999, agreed to establish a National Framework Committee for family friendly policies. The objective of the Committee was to promote, implement and assess family friendly policies. Sustaining Progress (2003 to 2005) offered further

support to work life balance policies by stating that priority should be given to “putting in place enhanced policies to support families in a changing society and in particular to ensure that policies are designed to promote family formation and family life”

There is little doubt that the existence of family-friendly working arrangements in the Service has made it an attractive employer at a time of significant labour market pressures. I am confident that not only have we been able to recruit high calibre staff but the working arrangements available have allowed the Civil Service to reduce significantly the number of skilled and experienced staff that resign for family reasons.

The end result is that by allowing our staff the opportunity to work in a more flexible way, the Civil Service benefits from a more skilled workforce that can deliver a more professional service to the public.

Specifics...

I would like to give you some specifics about the schemes we have, how they work and the benefits to staff and our organisation:

- **Flexitime**

We all recognise that traffic at rush hours is an issue for businesses and employees in general. However for employees with families, managing the daily school run or drop off to the childminder or crèche at rush hours presents particular challenges. Flexitime is a response to these challenges.

It gives staff flexibility to vary their starting and finishing times to fit in with their family demands. It is available to most staff in the Civil Service including some management grades. Each Department / Office has its own detailed flexitime arrangements but broadly speaking, a person may start work between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. and finish between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. Staff may build up hours during the four week flexi-period to take as leave in a later period.

In addition to meeting the needs of staff who must drop off and collect children to and from school or to childminding, the variation in starting times plays its part in reducing the volumes of commuting traffic at rush hours.

Organisationally flexitime requires cooperation between staff and management and sometimes this can be lost sight of. We must provide a service to the public and sufficient numbers of staff must be there to deliver the service at normal office hours.

Partnership arrangements in Departments and Offices ensure that issues around service delivery and working times can be worked out in creative ways to suit business and staff needs.

- **Worksharing**

As I said above, our job sharing scheme, whereby two people shared one job, usually week on/week off, was replaced in 2001 with worksharing. What is different about worksharing is that two people don't have to share a job. Worksharing allows staff to opt for a part-time attendance pattern. The actual pattern of attendance adopted will depend on individual requirements and the needs of the Department or Office. Very many work patterns have evolved in response to employees' circumstances.

It would be fair to say that over the years of operation of job sharing and more recently worksharing, management in Departments and Offices have exercised considerable flexibility in meeting the needs of staff. The most common arrangements involve staff working a 50% attendance pattern, after that four day weeks are most popular.

As with flexitime, these schemes rely on cooperation between management and staff; from management there has to be openness to considering what is possible. From staff there is a responsibility to ensure that their requirements do not impinge adversely on the delivery of service.

In line with employment equality legislation, the Department of Finance advises managers to thoroughly consider requests made to them in the light of the options available to meet business needs. We also ask that they consider the balance of the work within areas between full-time and worksharing staff. We have very many staff worksharing so there's no doubt that it's working!

Term Time

The final piece of the picture to support an employee staying in employment and managing a family came when we began looking at the careers of civil servants over time. Different challenges can arise for parents when their children start going to school. There is no doubt that a critical period for many parents, especially lone parents or parents without the support of extended families is the summer holidays. The long holiday period places a considerable strain on parents trying to put

arrangements in place to ensure the supervision and safety of their children.

We recognised that allowing parents to take unpaid leave for the summer holidays might be one solution and term time was put in place in 2001, following a number of pilot schemes. Term time allows staff to take 8, 10 or 13 weeks unpaid leave between the beginning of June and the end of August, in order to match their working arrangements to their children's summer holidays - until their child reaches 18. For parents who avail of this option, their pay is spread over the whole year so that no one is hit with a long period of unpaid leave to cope with.

We think it's an excellent scheme. It allows parents to be with their children for this long holiday period and to be involved with them in community and other activities. Staff may be replaced and this allows the Civil Service to provide job experience to people who might be interested in a career in the Civil Service.

To be eligible an employee must have school going children up to the age of 18, or be acting *in loco parentis* to such a child, or be the primary carer for a person with a disability who needs care on a continuing or frequent basis.

- **Career Breaks**

Career breaks are available to all staff and have been with us since the early eighties. Career breaks are periods of unpaid leave from work. Staff can avail of two of these breaks in their career and can choose to take between 6 months and 5 years for their break. Staff take career breaks for many reasons, mainly in our experience, for domestic reasons, including child care, but also for education, travel abroad or self-employment.

Other forms of leave

The Civil Service also offers a variety of other unpaid arrangements to assist staff to cope with domestic crisis including unpaid leave of up to 6 months to care for an ill spouse or child; unpaid leave of up to two months to travel abroad to visit an ill relative or to deal with other urgent domestic problems is also provided.

- **e-Working**

Finally and increasingly, working from home is becoming an option for civil servants under teleworking or e-working arrangements. At the moment staff can work from a local hub or from their own home. The schemes are mainly in the pilot stages

at the moment but it is likely that such options will become more widely available in the future as technology improves.

Let me stress that employees who take up these flexible arrangements in the Civil Service retain the right to apply for promotion at any stage when it suits their circumstances; in addition the option to revert to full-time working if their circumstances change is always available.

The Department of Finance is responsible for negotiating the details of these schemes with the Staff Unions. Implementation is a matter for local management in the light of the local business needs. Managers are encouraged to carefully consider the applications that come to them for flexible working arrangements.

However at the end of the day, the delivery of the service to the public has to be guaranteed and managers must be satisfied that the granting of such arrangements in any particular case will not adversely affect the operational requirements or the quality of the service being provided.

We recognise in the Civil Service that Family Friendly arrangements require a partnership approach between management and staff. Managers must adopt a flexible approach to the organisation of work and staff must accept responsibility for ensuring that their working arrangements take account of business needs. The challenge for the organisation is to address the increasing complexity in the workplace presented by the variety and extent of these flexible working arrangements.

Employee Assistance Service...

We are also conscious in the Service that from time to time in their careers employees may need some extra support with personal or workplace difficulties. To ignore such difficulties can place an employee under considerable stress. To provide this support a work based Employee Assistance Service has been put in place. Since its establishment in 1974, this Service has provided valuable assistance to staff in a wide range of personal or work related problems for example bereavement, addiction, financial or relationship issues and work related difficulties such as bullying, work life balance and stress.

Childcare...

In 2001 as part of a programme of childcare measures announced by the Government, the Civil Service put in place a programme for the provision of workplace crèches for the children of civil servants.

The objective of the programme was to put in place workplace crèches in locations where a need arose in and outside Dublin - at a reasonable cost to staff.

There are now crèches in six locations – two in Dublin, one in the State Laboratory campus in Kildare and one in the Department of Education campus in Athlone. There are also Civil Service crèches in Ennis and Sligo. The crèches provide places for over 200 children in or near to their parents' workplaces.

A further crèche in Cork is under construction and it is expected to open in 2008. Through this initiative, the Civil Service provides additional support to employees in balancing the needs of family and work.

Experience and Benefits...

What has been the experience of the operation of these schemes in the Civil Service since they have become widely available?

Without a doubt the most widely availed of Work Life Balance scheme in the Civil Service is flexitime. As I said above without reducing working hours the scheme allows staff flexibility around time of starting and finishing work. Parents have found that availing of this scheme alone takes a huge amount of pressure off - for both parents and children.

We collected figures in 2005 of uptake of the schemes – they showed that approximately 16 % of Civil Service staff availed of Worksharing. It probably won't come as a surprise to most people that 94% of worksharers are women, with men forming about 6% of this group. Again not surprisingly the majority of those availing of family-friendly schemes do so for reasons of child care. As a consequence, these officers tend to be in the early to mid stages of their career and in general occupy positions in the clerical and junior management grades, e.g. Clerical Officer, Executive Officer or Higher Executive Officer. Term time reflects a similar profile with a take up of 1212 in 2005 with 92% female, mainly at Clerical Officer and Executive Officer level.

As I said earlier, I am confident that these schemes present an attractive package for job seekers and the Civil Service has no difficulty attracting talented and qualified staff for all positions. That is not just my view; the Public Appointments Service Research Advisory Panel recently conducted research into people's views of the Civil Service as a career. The report entitled "*Perceptions and Attitudes towards Careers in the Public Service*" was published in October 2006.

The research showed that the availability of family-friendly arrangements in the Service is a very significant factor in recruitment. It found for example that flexitime is very attractive to younger people and that other family friendly working arrangements are more attractive to women and to people coming back to the Civil Service in their mid life.

The Department of Finance which is responsible for reviewing and updating the Civil Service equality policies, recently conducted its own research into how the schemes were operating. The review entitled "*Work Life Balance Review 2006*" produced some interesting findings:

- Most Departments and Offices agreed that work life balance schemes helped them to retain good staff that might otherwise have to resign, particularly those rearing families and those with caring responsibilities
- There was general agreement that the schemes increased the sense of wellbeing of staff and helped to create a positive working environment
- The better work/life balance allowed staff to make a bigger contribution to their communities and to society generally by allowing families to care for family members, children or relatives and to become actively involved in voluntary community work that might otherwise fall on the State to provide
- Many Departments/Offices also noted the improvement in the quality of the life of those who availed of Work Life Balance arrangements which also benefited the organisation
- It was the general experience that employees whose working arrangements allowed them to manage the often competing commitments of work, life and family life effectively, can contribute more productively when at work
- Management agreed that access to career breaks has facilitated the return of experienced high calibre staff to Departments/Offices
- Management considered that career breaks are an excellent opportunity for personal development and allow Departments/Offices to benefit from the enhanced skills and experience of employees who return

The overall conclusion was that facilitating staff to work in a balanced way reduced the incidence of stress and lowered casual sick leave and staff turnover. In addition it improved staff morale and effectiveness on the job. In other words Work life balance in the workplace benefits both employees and employers alike.

Challenges to implementing and improving Work Life balance initiatives...

As the structures and schemes are already in place, the challenge is now to maintain and improve the access to the schemes for all Civil Servants. An Equality subcommittee of the General Council of the Civil Service Conciliation and Arbitration Scheme is in place. It meets regularly to review the operation of the schemes and to discuss issues of concern or initiatives to be introduced.

The Equality Unit in the Department of Finance produced a report on Equality Initiatives in the Civil Service, which among other things examined the operation of the Work Life Balance Schemes. The Report was approved by Government and published in May of this year. The Report recommended a number of changes to improve the operation of our schemes:

- the training of both HR managers and line managers in relation to the operation of family friendly policies, including approaches to managing the work and dealing with applications
- Departments and Offices were asked to review access to flexible working arrangements from time to time to address issues of access. Where obstacles are identified, management are advised to adopt innovative solutions to overcome the obstacles
- that officers returning to work from career breaks, protective leave or other special leave should be given the opportunity to express their views on suitable assignments. Departments were advised to use return-to-work interviews or pre-placement questionnaires.

The Report recommended greater consultation between Departments and Offices on the operation of schemes. As a result, a Work Life Balance Network of HR staff has been formed. Its main aim is to systematically examine the operation of all the schemes

with a view to identifying and adopting best practice across the Service.

Concluding remarks

As you have heard, the Civil Service has moved a long way in a relatively short time. It is generally recognised as a leader in the provision of work life balance working arrangements. Our staff have adopted the schemes in large numbers as a result of which we are benefiting from the retention of skilled staff. We also, on an ongoing basis, have a committed work force whose needs both inside and outside of work are being addressed.

The popularity of the schemes creates challenges in operation but we are tackling them and finding ways of working that meet our customers' needs and the needs of staff. The workplace is changing – one size does not fit all - and we recognise that. I am convinced that in meeting these challenges, the Civil Service is in a position to deliver a better service to the public and a better service to its employees.

Many thanks for listening ...