

NATIONAL AND KAPODISTRIAN UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS  
SCHOOL OF LETTERS

MSC PROGRAMME IN COUNSELLING AND CAREER GUIDANCE

LABORATORY OF EXPERIMENTAL PEDAGOGY

CENTERS FOR VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 1<sup>ST</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

ATHENS (23-25-1-04)

**PROMOTING NEW FORMS OF WORK ORGANIZATION AND OTHER  
COOPERATIVE ARRANGEMENTS FOR COMPETITIVENESS AND  
EMPLOYABILITY**

With the Support of the European Committee

ATHENS 2004

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## **PUBLIC SECTOR WORKING TIME ORGANIZATION IN THE UK**

**Jo Morris**, Senior Equality and Employment Rights Officer, Trades Union (UK)

In this presentation, I am going to be talking very much about flexibility, temporal flexibility, in other words, time. I am going to outline some of the social, economic and political trends which are forcing both public sector employers and the employees to look how work is organized in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

And at the heart of that is something that surprisingly has not been mentioned yet. And that is the feminization of the labor market. We cannot ignore the changes, the social changes that have resulted from the new composition of the labor market. In the UK, over half of the work force are now women.

This has implications not just for the women workers but for their families, their partners who are increasingly participating more in family life and are not receiving domestic services that they may have received a couple of generations ago from their wives, with a few exceptions. And also, of course, their families, the children. So, it has implications for social policy.

So, I am going to argue that Unions play a central role in developing innovative new forms of work organization which benefit both the employees and their work - life balance as well as the business. And I am going to concentrate on a couple of examples in the public sector because I think that is particularly interesting because at the heart of the modernization of services – public services – is greater access for the public to those services at times which are convenient to them. And of course, if we are all working, both men and women, there is less time to access those services in standard working hours.

So, providing public services out of standard working hours has become increasingly prevalent and the pressures of the 24/7 at global economy has increasingly made an impact at local level on public services.

And there is an inherent tension. If we provide services at times which are convenient to the public, which is increasingly outside of standard working hours, somebody has to work those hours which are un social hours.

So, how should Unions respond to this inherent tension between meeting customer need on the one hand and representing workers and respecting their need for a good balance between work and life?

Employers have worked in the UK with the TUC to develop some innovative approaches. a model which comes in a publication from the TUC called “Changing times”, about reorganizing working time. And it underlines the need for partnership and innovative approaches.

I think it opens up the possibility for new forms of work organization which allow both women and men to participate in work in a new way, not necessarily being ghettoized into a negative flexibility by working part-time but by being able to work flexibly, a positive flexible way in a range of different forms.

So, I am going to concentrate on a couple of examples. First of all, the drivers for change in the UK has come very largely from the changing face of public services and the government agenda to open up access. But also, an increasing need for the public services to be seen as an employer of choice and to recruit and retain workers.

Our public services, like, I guess, every public service around the world, are not able to compete on being high payers. Certainly not at some of the more basic service levels but they can compete in terms of retaining staff by conditions of service.

And another driver for change is the meeting of new customer and business needs. Increasingly, there is an awareness that in order to avoid the negative effects of the long... as culture, there is a need to take onboard work – life balance and to match that on the Unions' part with the implications for jobs' security. And I will come on to that a bit more in my second example.

So, the social partners are looking for a “win-win” and I am going to look at an example in a medium sized city council in Bristol, in the west of England, and another rather more ambitious example in the Inland Revenue, the tax service which is a government department.

We are also doing work with the health service and private sector initiatives but I am not going to talk about those in any detail. So, what we are going for is a win for business, a win for staff and satisfied customers.

In Bristol City Council, the Council did a survey of library users and they said that they wanted to be able to use the library on a Sunday. However, the Council had undergone two recent reorganizations and the library staff said no way are we going to work on a Sunday. That is one step too far in flexibility. So, there was an impasse.

But, to cut a very long story short, as a result of a partnership project which was EU funded and I would just stress what good value this small piece of EU funding has been because this project five years on, is still sustaining itself.

We got together to talk with the Unions and it was agreed by the Union membership at ground level that this might be a possibility to look and see how there could be a creative solution to this impasse. And as a result of this, the most significant result, I think, was that it made a very happy and unhappy and disenfranchised Union membership in the library service, very proactive, to say a little bit about that in a minute. And it helped both management and the Union come up with creative solutions to all problems.

The process that we used was first of all, to match staff preference with business need. We had a survey which our staff, the hours that they were working, the hours that they would like to work and their suggestions of how that could be accommodated without any negative impact in the service.



In other words, we used the unique knowledge of frontline staff about how work was organized to try and find better ways to deliver services. And we set up a joint steering group with managers and not just Union reps but people who were working in the services and we involved staff in not only identifying what the problems were to creating this more extended service but how to find solutions.

And as a result, for example, one of the solutions that the Union came up with to the question in the library was to have self-managed shifts. So, it was the Union who had I think being perceived by management as a break on change, it was the Union rather than the management who became champions for change.

We were able, as a result of this process of discussion groups with staff and questionnaires about the times that they would like to work to identify that there were a lot of part-time workers who wanted to increase the number of hours that they worked in a week, but were not able to do it because, first of all, there weren't those hours currently available on contract, but secondly, that they did not want to incur greater childcare costs.

So, weekend working actually offered them the possibility to increase the number of hours that they were working and therefore, their pay, without having to resort to institutional childcare arrangements because they very often had family members who were not able to look after their children.

When the library, as a result of this experiment, opened on a Sunday, what was interesting was that it not only brought in users but they were new users, different people started using the library on a Sunday. Typically, families were coming in after doing shopping, they were coming in with their children, they were using the computers much more rather than taking books out. So, we were extending not only the time but also the quality of library use.

One of the products of this successful experiment in the libraries was that other workers in the City Council –the City Council employed about 20,000 employees– wanted to work in the same way. Previously, the male job areas had been quite resistant to the idea of flexible working. They had seen it as something that was encroaching on their normal way of working. And typically, these manual male workers in the refuel service, in pest control, people who go out and deal with cockroaches or rat infestations, they work from eight o' clock in the morning till four o' clock in the afternoon and they did not want change. They made that very clear.

But when they saw how the library experiment had worked, they saw that this might also be a solution to the issues that affected them around traffic congestion. Bristol has huge problems about the rush hour and traffic congestion. So, they wanted to come in to work earlier or go away from work later, to choose their working time, they wanted to self-manage their shifts.

So, they organized self-managed shifts and the result of those self-managed shifts was in fact that not only they met their needs but the service itself was extended at the longer opening times. So, there were sustained new relationships created between managers and Unions in terms of how to solve problems.

Moving on to the second public service example that I want to briefly tell you about, in the Inland Revenue offices, there was at national level an agreement signed between the Union and the government that public services would extend access to the public at times that were convenient.

Now, that had an implication on the very particular working time culture in the tax offices who really worked traditional bank hours. They were working 8 till 4 essentially. And the staff in the tax offices were very set in working those hours, they did not want to change.

However, at national level, the national Union understood that if they did not deliver change in the tax enquiry offices on one evening a week, until 8 o'clock and one Saturday morning, if that was not delivered, it was likely that there would be implications for job security. The government would take a number of options. Maybe there would be an increased reliance on electronic means of answering inquiries or call centers would be set up or perhaps the service would be contracted out.

So, there was an issue there for the national Union had to convince local membership. So, we were looking at how we could review the way that work was organized and how we could ensure that it became in the pilot area of the employer of first choice.

And one of the things that we integrated into this project which I think it would be good if we had some discussion about it sometime, was the concept of lifelong learning because the Union was quite resistant initially to the idea of this project but they were very committed to extending learning in the workplace and the Union concerned had a very good distance learning program.

So, as part of this project, part of the deal was that the National Union would deliver what we call "learn direct", its distance learning courses in the workplace, on computers supplied by the employer and all workers could access those computers before work, during the lunch hour, after work and during their flexi time arrangements.

And our aim was to deliver a model process. Using much the same approach as in Bristol, we had a star survey. Our only problem was that there was absolutely no interest by staff in changing their times of work. And yet, we knew that it had to change. It was going to change one way or the other and from a Trade Unionist's point of view, we wanted to change, we did not want it to be changed on the employer's terms, we wanted to be part of that change.

But staff did not see the point of longer working hours. So, we used a lot of staff discussion groups which actually helped staff see there were other ways of organizing their personal working time that delivered them personal benefits. And we moved this away from just family-friendly because there is a real problem, I think, when work – life balance measures are seen as something that apply only to parents of young children or even worse, only to mothers of young children. You have to have a balanced approach.

And there were many staff who had all sorts of reasons why they wanted to change their working times. Go on to compress working weeks, a four-day working week. Many of the men opted for that. They worked late on one evening and then they only worked four days. Typically, quite a lot of them were doing that so they could take part in their family life and help care for children on that one day. Everything was voluntary. No one was coerced into changing their working time.

Now, I will not go into this but there were a number of new ways and our previous session covered some of the ways that flexible working can be introduced in a positive way. But as a result, part of the staff, they voluntarily opted to work so that the offices were extended, the inquiry offices had extended working times, opening times, but also staff began to volunteer to do things like run sessions for newly self-employed people on how to do their tax returns on a Saturday morning because they saw it enhancing their own personal development. And then, they had time off at other times of the week.

So, the challenges. It is a challenge to introduce new working time arrangements and to convince staff that the status quo is not necessarily the best way of organizing working time. The biggest challenge was perhaps middle managers who perceived that they were losing control and autonomy. And perhaps unexpected challenge was the different perspectives between the national and the local Union perspectives.

So, my conclusions from these two projects and the other work that I have done is that the quality of the process that you adopt determines the result. As Peter said, there is no blueprint but there is a blueprint for a process. It has to be partnership. You cannot make effective change at this level in terms of time arrangements without consulting staff. It can be imposed but it will be resisted actively or passively.

The process is as important as the outcomes and indeed, in both the projects that I managed, it was during the process that some of the outcomes were identified and were indeed the most important outcomes. And at the heart of it, there is a need to match individual preference and need with business need. All of us have different needs at different times of our lives, whether we have young children, whether we want to undergo some kind of lifelong learning or we have aged parents or we want to take part in civil society. We have different needs in terms of our time at different times of our lives.

So, this requires us to be creative, to think outside the box and be open to new ideas. And on that I leave. Thank you very much and I hope that you will perhaps sign up to the TUC e-newsletter that comes out once a fortnight, that has a lot of very useful links to what is happening in terms of research and news both in the UK and around the world on work – life balance and the organization of working time. Thanks very much indeed.