

WORK-FAMILY BALANCE IN AN EUROPEAN COMPARISON

A new study on reconciliation of work and family life conducted by the Cologne Institute for Economic Research by order of the Federal German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and the Robert Bosch Stiftung ranks family-friendliness as important in most companies in Europe. Furthermore it is observable that a flexibilisation of working hours and of working organisation (e.g., child care or home care schemes) gives parents more time to attend to family commitments. Especially in a period of demographic change associated with an observable decrease in the number of available skilled workforce it is important for young parents and for those who care for the elderly to have the possibility to participate as much as possible in working life.

From the end of October 2009 until December 2009, more than 5,000 executives and personnel managers were surveyed via computer-based interviews in six European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom). It was a randomised sample. For representative indications, the results were projected by a 3x2 matrix. The sample was divided into three classes of company size (5–49, 50–249, 250 and more employees) and two sectoral groups (manufacturing companies and service sector). More than 1300 firms were surveyed in Germany, while in the other countries the number of surveyed companies was about 750 each. This was necessary to ensure comparability with the 2006 Company Survey on Reconciliation of Work and Family Life in Germany.

The key findings of the study are:

- Family-friendliness is important.
- Many companies show a positive attitude towards reconciliation of work and family life.
- Family-friendly companies are highly dedicated to work-life balance.
- Flexible working time arrangements, support for employees on parental leave and caring for children and other dependants are used to reconcile work and family life.
- Family-focused services are more the exception than the rule.
- Stimuli for companies to introduce family-friendly measures are similar.

- Regulatory basis for human resources policy measures differs from country to country.
- Family-friendliness in spite of the economic crises.

In more detail, family-friendliness is an important issue in the reconciliation of work and family life. In Sweden 86 percent and in the United Kingdom more than 93 percent of the companies regarded family friendliness as important or rather important (Table). In comparison with the other four European countries, in Sweden and the United Kingdom the importance of family friendliness is significantly higher. Regarding other control variables, such as the importance of family friendliness for both employees and executives, again Sweden and the United Kingdom generate the highest values. For France, Germany, Italy and Poland the significance of family friendliness is lower.

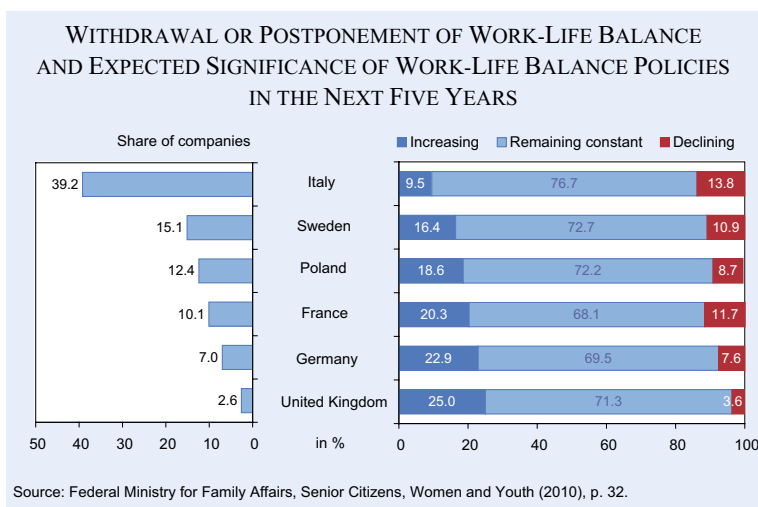
Table

The importance of family-friendly policies for the respondent companies
Share of companies, in %

	For the company			
	Important	Rather important	Rather unimportant	Unimportant
France	48.1	35.2	10.7	6.1
Germany	58.2	21.5	15.1	5.2
Italy	43.5	38.4	14.7	3.4
Poland	22.8	59.5	14.0	3.7
Sweden	62.1	24.1	9.6	4.3
United Kingdom	52.5	40.9	5.1	1.6
	For employees			
	Important	Rather important	Rather unimportant	Unimportant
France	61.0	32.5	3.9	2.5
Germany	59.1	22.0	13.3	5.7
Italy	49.7	39.7	9.8	0.8
Poland	32.3	53.2	12.2	2.2
Sweden	67.0	23.6	6.7	2.7
United Kingdom	59.4	36.5	3.3	0.8
	For executives/experts			
	Important	Rather important	Rather unimportant	Unimportant
France	52.8	31.9	10.3	4.9
Germany	50.7	17.9	21.4	9.9
Italy	42.2	44.4	10.7	2.7
Poland	27.8	53.3	16.3	2.6
Sweden	63.7	22.6	11.0	2.7
United Kingdom	54.6	39.6	4.3	1.4

Source: Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2010, 11).

Figure



The survey was conducted during the economic crises. Hence, it was assumed that companies lost their willingness to introduce or continue human resources policies for a better work-life balance. But according to the Figure it was only in Italy that the companies (around 40 percent) withdrew or postponed policies affecting work-life balances. In Germany just 7 percent and in the United Kingdom less than 3 percent of the companies reacted similarly. This low proportion of companies indicates that the reconcilability of work and family life has a high significant weight for companies. The companies were also asked about their expected significance of work-life balance policies in the next five years. Apart from Poland, in all countries the expectation of an increase in the significance of reconciling work and family life is higher than the expectation of a decrease.

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Reference

Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2010), *Final Report: European Company Survey on Reconciliation of Work and Family Life*, in collaboration with the Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Cologne Institute for Economic Research.