



Striking a better balance for a healthier business

By Marcella Maxwell

Welsh businesses, both public and private are under increasing pressure to raise efficiency and become more responsive to their customers and stakeholders.

But with resources already stretched in many organisations, finding ways to help staff to work smarter rather than harder is the only realistic and sustainable way to achieve this added productivity.

In many contexts it has been shown that flexibility is the key to this smarter working as it allows employees to find creative ways to maintain their output while at the same time enabling them to balance the demands of their private lives.

It is no co-incidence that many of our most successful and prominent companies - such as BT and Admiral Insurance - are also long-time champions of flexible working practices. For example 10 per cent of BTs workforce are home based, 70 per cent work flexibly and 99 per cent of women in the organisation return to work following maternity leave. Companies such as these have long since realised the business benefits of flexible working practices.

Chwarae Teg works with employers all over Wales to help them implement flexibility in ways that are most advantageous to their businesses.

We have found that not only does flexible working help employers to attract and keep the most talented staff, but it also increases staff efficiency through better motivation, reduced stress and absenteeism through sickness.

We are all under increasing pressures - both within and outside the workplace. The Welsh Assembly Government is keen that employers and employees are given opportunities to learn about, and introduce Work-Life Balance schemes in order to respond to changing circumstances which increase demands.

Chwarae Teg worked with the Assembly Government to launch www.wlbinwales.org.uk, a special resource for business in Wales to use to help get the balance right.

Work Life Balance principles affect every employee and employer no matter how big or small the organisation is. Excessive working hours are indeed becoming the norm but longer hours don't necessarily equate to increased productivity. Focussing more on results than hours spent behind a desk increases productivity whilst reducing stress.

Traditionally the working week is 37.5 hours long, yet we frequently read how Welsh workers are actually working on average somewhere in the region of 42.9 hours per week- making it one of the longest in Europe.

While we can all appreciate the financial rewards, these shouldn't affect our lives outside work, or our health. We need to work smarter, not longer; put full effort into work but not neglect our lives outside.

It's important to understand that achieving a balance between work and life doesn't suggest a lack of motivation or commitment to business development. On the contrary it is designed to build stronger and more sustainable businesses.

In fact sustainable work patterns should be built into business plans and targets should be calculated on the basis of good time management and realistic expectations at all levels in an organisation.

There isn't a 'one size fits all' answer to the flexible working question. Different organisations have different needs and Chwarae Teg is able to work with them individually to tailor bespoke solutions that reflect issues such as their size, areas of activity and their customer service needs.

For some time now there's been a gradual, yet unstoppable, change taking place in the pattern of people's work, right across the Welsh economy - a quiet workplace revolution. Innovative companies are building flexible working policies into their workforce planning strategies to help them gain an edge in an increasingly diverse and competitive employment market.

To help businesses join in and benefit from this revolution Chwarae Teg is inaugurating its 'Better Balance, Better Business' conference on 29th March 2007 at the Hilton Hotel in Cardiff.

Among a panel of respected speakers is former CBI boss Sir Digby Jones, who will be joined by other 'thought leaders' in the fields of business, organisational change, flexible working and work-life balance. It will be a fantastic opportunity to find out more about this workplace revolution and how both employers and employees can gain significant benefits from introducing a flexible approach to working practices.

For further information and advice contact Chwarae Teg on 029 2047 8900 or visit www.chwaraeteg.com. For more information on the conference contact betterbalance@cazbah.biz or telephone 07795097632.

"Taking a collaborative approach to work life balance, at Government level and on an individual business basis, will deliver many and far reaching benefits for Wales, helping us realise our vision of becoming a better country", said Jane Davidson, Minister for Education Lifelong Learning and Skills.

"It's an all-workforce strategy that can help address the glass ceiling effect still experienced by many women, better promote social inclusion, address our long hours culture, and create equality of opportunity and economic development for everyone.

"Chwarae Teg's activities complement our own core values delivering a win/win situation for everyone. The business case for individual organisations has been made, and by collectively promoting work life balance values on a country-wide basis we can, in the long term, assist in raising economic activity, reducing economic inactivity and making Wales a much more competitive and prosperous place to live and work.

"As such I am urging all employers to play their part in making work-life balance a reality. All sectors must make a commitment to driving the work life balance agenda forward, and I hope our continuing support of Chwarae Teg will help provide the tools to achieve this. "