

## Equality Matters Supplement

### A FLEXIBLE WORKFORCE AT THE HEART OF A DIVERSE AND SKILLED ECONOMY

There are now more legislative reasons than ever for businesses to become smarter and more flexible in its approach to workforce planning.

For example, from April the Gender Equality Duty comes in to force; at the same time the Work and Families Act will extend flexible working rights to carers, and we could soon see changes to the benefits system following Gordon Brown's recent announcements.

Although more businesses now understand the economic benefits of smarter rather than harder working, and statutory policies inevitably drive a degree of change in approach, to produce the level of change needed to create a solidly competitive Welsh economy, a cultural shift is required whereby all employers take flexible working a step beyond compliance.

Embracing this quiet but inexorable workplace revolution will bring competitive advantage. Companies implementing a flexible working-centric culture are already companies of the future - profiting from better recruitment and retention, more motivated and diverse workforces and increased profits.

Such companies and organisations view flexible working not merely as a fringe HR policy or an exercise in compliance, but recognise the real strategic value and wider economic and business benefits flexible working can bring.

Today Chwarae Teg is holding its inaugural conference *Better Balance Better Business*, headlined by Sir Digby Jones which will set the agenda for real change in Wales. It will also discuss and illustrate how forward thinking employers are reaping positive business benefits by offering women and men opportunities to work flexibly at all levels within organisations.

We need to nurture the talent and skills we have within the whole economy and a more flexible working environment can also expand that economy to wider communities and individuals who face barriers to participation.

Inflexible working practices create barriers to participation in the labour force which adversely effects productivity. Although it is a mistake to consider flexible working as only a 'women's issue', a fact reinforced by the recent Equalities Review is that the lack of flexibility in the workplace effects mothers who predominantly take on the lion's share of caring responsibilities.

This is squandering the talent and skills of nearly half the working population which is a waste for the individual, a waste for business and a waste for the economy.

If inflexible working practices are allowed to prevail across many Welsh organisations, large and small, it will inevitably create less skilled, less diverse and unmotivated workforces. As a result we will be left with businesses in Wales less likely to succeed in the future, playing a part in keeping the UK at the bottom of the rich nations league.

Flexible working is not about bureaucracy, it's about productivity. An agile workforce is a flexible workforce, and we need a flexible workforce if we are going to have a flexible and competitive modern economy in Wales

*Marcella Maxwell is Chief Executive of Chwarae Teg, the organisation leading the way for women in Wales.*

**Ends**

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