

Sir Digby Jones: 1st person comment for Western Mail / Daily Post

Synopsis: **Make it a strategic choice not soft choice, says Sir Digby Jones.**

Businesses operating in Wales today could be considered to be at a cross roads – to flex or not to flex - smarter working methods that is.

As the Gender Equality Duty takes hold across public sector from April 2007 to ensure all public authorities in Wales demonstrate the promotion of equality for women and men, the choice to provide flexible working and gender-friendly initiatives will no longer be an option.

Although the Work & Families Act 2006 goes someway to addressing and acknowledging the needs of parents and carers, for thousands of privately owned businesses in Wales mandatory family friendly policies are a long way off, despite recent calls from government to extend rights to flexible working to all 29 million workers, and separately from the Chair of the new Commission for Equality & Human Rights, Trevor Phillips who is proposing sweeping family friendly policies.

In one sense the government's intentions are honourable when considered in the context of trying to rebalance working cultures and gender inequity in the workplace, but compliance for compliance sake is limiting and it is far better for companies to adopt a balanced position in adopting flexible working as an increasingly important tool in workforce and business planning. for competitive advantage.

Forward thinking employers are reaping positive business results by offering women and men opportunities to work flexibly at all levels within organisations, which enables them to attract and retain a diverse and top quality workforce. This has got to be good for the individual, good for business and ultimately good for the UK. Thinking smarter working rather than harder working can ultimately transform bottom line profits, boost the economy and address social issues.

Smarter working can take many forms from flexible hours, compressed hours, home/tele/remote working and encouraging better work/life balance opportunities which have fewer cost implications, through to full organisation workflow reviews which embrace change management, business planning and workforce planning.

So what is it about smarter working that can create such great results for business, in other words, what is driving this workplace revolution?

- Linking to organisational strategy – making smarter working essential rather than a fringe policy makes good business senses in a global economy where 9-5 working is often no longer appropriate.
- Making it a cultural shift across all levels of the organisation and not only for less senior positions, or risk losing out to competition for skilled and experienced staff.

- Making sure that businesses and organisations do not waste talent and skills across the workforce as a whole – link with Leitch report and skills agenda and global competitiveness and the proven link with recruitment and retention of skilled and diverse workforces
- About building on the work in education to prepare young people for the world of work and ensuring Wales and the UK remain competitive in the global market place. And not wasting talents and skills gained on the way up.
- About reducing absenteeism and saving on costs of recruitment – lost skills means more time on recruitment and training. It all boils down to being able to have the pick of the bunch and improving labour supply rather than closing the door on what could be the best person due to inflexibility.
- About making the company more forward thinking and stable to plan for the future – no one has a crystal ball, but workforce planning can help companies become more strategic and focused on development.
- About helping to address wider economic and societal issues such as economic inactivity by reducing some of the barriers to working which inflexible hours can create. Other drivers for change include an ageing workforces, sustainable / environmental issues, and child poverty – the recent shocking UNICEF report which placed the UK at the bottom of its league table on children's well-being – smarter working will help with childcare planning and addressing long hours cultures.
- About making sure that the family institution is in a position to support the development of children. The EOC reported that in 10 years time, it will be harder to balance work and life suggesting that the social fabric of society will suffer. Businesses must adapt to ensure that men and women are able to enjoy successful careers that afford enough money and time to participate fully in family life which in turn will have a positive impact on family and community life ensuring that there is the investment in the children who will be the future of the economy.

Businesses standing still are running the risk of being left with a workforce which is less skilled, less diverse, less motivated and less likely to help the business succeed. Business who do not move with the times will be playing their part in keeping the UK at the bottom of the rich nations league by adding to the problem of long hours cultures and rising childcare costs.

This is why I'm urging everyone involved in the running of a business or organisation to come along and see for themselves what a positive workplace revolution could look like.

Sir Digby Jones will be in Cardiff speaking at the Better Balance Better Business Conference on 29 March 2007.