

*'The time of our lives working project': a case study on changes in working time and positive flexibility*

*by Peter Cressey, University of Bath*

*This UK Work Organisation Network member report describes a project, sponsored by the EU Fourth Action Programme on Women and Equal Opportunities, which has been led by social partners in the form of the national Trades Union Congress and the Local Government Management Board. The project has a comparative dimension in that it has British, Dutch and Italian partners.*

In the first year there were a number of exchanges between the union partners on the issue of working time, there was a conference held in London and the commissioning of a Mori poll on the issue of working time. The project is now in its second year and the UK element is developing a work and working time reorganisation project in Bristol City Council. This is strongly supported by the senior management team in the Council and the trade unions. The trade union side includes all of the major unions within the Council - the GMB (including Apex) T&G and UNISON and Apex. The project has three different sites where pilot projects are developing.

It is this overall project that is the subject of the case study. Preparation of the case study has entailed a close connection with the project from the outset, attendance at the steering group meetings, attendance at sub-group meetings, the interviewing of key personnel involved at the different sites and the agreement of forms of evaluation of the overall project. As the project is an action-based one the author has also offered assistance with the process of agreement of aims and objective, aid with the setting of project procedures and assistance with the creation and analysis of survey data. This will also extend to monitoring the other main national partners' progress in their pilot projects of a similar nature. The author will also take part in an exchange visit to Modena - an advanced example of positive work reorganisation and time use. Overall the project is benefiting from the experiences of the other national partners and the exchange of information on the experiences, problems and possibilities within their practice has already proved invaluable.

In this interim report the detailed objective of the project will be itemised along with the desired outcomes. There will then be a review of the proposed evaluatory forms to be employed in looking at the project and its criteria for success. The interim results of the initial surveys will be presented that illustrate the benchmark level of interest in the issues under investigation. Finally there is a concluding section looking at the future work schedule and the timetable agreed for the conclusion of the pilot projects within the council.

**Objectives**

The project aims to explore the inter-relationship between flexibility and the organisation of social and work time. It wants to study how *positive* flexibility can be achieved with specific reference to equal opportunities and its enhancement. This entails the project in looking at a number of research sites in Europe to seek out innovative projects. The main project partners in the UK (Bristol City Council) and in the Netherlands are particular looking for:

- improvements in the quality of working time use and a greater choice and control over employees' working lives
- enhancement and improvement in access to work for women and men
- aiding the development of equal opportunity and family friendly policies. Key in this is the issue of an improved work-life balance for both women and men
- the creation of forms of partnership between the social partners that can lead to better and more sustainable forms of working relationships
- an indication of how better, more inclusive and responsive forms of service can result from such a reorganisation
- the development of trans-national exchanges for the documentation and the transfer of good practice across Europe.

In the UK case the project is particularly timely as it is concurrent with a Best Value Review process that is looking at all aspects of service provision and its enhancement. This offers an opportunity to see how mainstreaming is rooted and embedded in real processes of change. It also allows the research to indicate how and if an emphasis upon quality can also produce positive equality outcomes.

**Outcomes**

There are four main areas where the social partners are looking for positive outcomes from the project. The four areas are:

- Policies where the result will be changes in the written, formal and informal agreements

around work reorganisation, work-time use and equal opportunities.

- Practices in that there will be actual and substantive changes to the formats and work practices of the pilot groups that have volunteered for the project. In this sense the Council is looking to extend the agenda of change and engage the different areas of the council in a fruitful learning exchange regarding work time and work reorganisation.
- Processes. Vital to this development of change are the methods and formats for reaching agreement. One of the key elements will be monitoring the ways that partnership developed, how the various joint working groups proceeded and how the overall social dialogue became embedded.
- Perceptions, this will be another vital area to research - how key players and employees changed in terms of their attitudes to the cardinal issues and their preparedness to experiment in terms of the practices and strategies employed.

One aspect that had to be defined early in the piece was the ground rules that governed the working of the partnership. The author was instrumental in suggesting these and they were subsequently defined and amended by the social partners. The agreed ground rules are set out in the box.

### **Flexible working ground rules**

Trades Unions and management at Bristol City Council have agreed that pilot projects will be run regarding flexible working. This will be a partnership with the TUC and Local Government Management Board.

The following ground rules will be used to guide all departments in each project involved in the pilot.

**Transparency** Aims will be clear with no hidden agendas.

**Voluntary** Any group or individual will participate on a voluntary basis and will not be coerced to be involved.

**Communication** This will be open with regular two-way feedback between staff and management.

**Services** These will be enhanced and bring benefits to staff regarding their working time arrangements.

**Ownership** Responsibility for the pilots will be taken on by both trades unions and management.

**Experimental** The pilot projects are experimental and open to change by agreement of those involved after a reasonable time has elapsed.

**Approach** The pilot projects will address working time flexibility from a positive standpoint and in ways that confront existing equality issues.

### **Forms of evaluation**

The author and the major actors in the project have discussed how it should be evaluated and the kinds of methods needed to track the positive and negative elements involved. The primary ways of evaluating the project from the beginning have been the use of interviews and minutes of meetings. However, the evaluation calls for more methods than these and seeks to get to more fine tuned indicators that can measure the success of the project and the order of the changes that were brought about.

This poses real methodological problems, firstly in determining precise criteria for success, as some will be qualitative as well as quantitative, and secondly, in agreeing what criteria should be used. The process adopted has been one of gaining the agreement of the social partners on the methods to be adopted and asking them for their suggestions as to the criteria already in place that could be used for evaluation. At a special steering group meeting there was agreement on a range of evaluatory methods including:

- minutes of meetings, already existing and might be extended to include periodic evaluation of progress
- interviews, with key actors spaced out over the life of the project and done to gauge changes over the period
- surveys – already there are two detailed surveys of attitudes completed in the Leisure and Health & Environmental Services. In addition a third one will be undertaken in Corporate services. These can act as a benchmark of employee attitudes. There is the possibility of a repeat survey at end of project in order to contrast the changes
- smaller targeted surveys to follow up specific areas of interest, e.g. reasons why homework is so popular with certain staff
- steering group reviews – more reflective checking of progress achieved against work plan, how the process has worked out, etc
- diaries filled in by volunteers/selected people involved in the project. Enables a more fine-grained appreciation of the process
- structured self-evaluation (by questionnaire) of those involved in the whole project and their identification of best practice
- reaction sheets for those undergoing training allied to the project to assess satisfaction, attitude change and outcomes in terms of the application of what was learned
- record of dissemination, media coverage, products and reports.

• use of criteria/measures to track changes, these may fall into a number of categories some of which are more useful than others:

- employee satisfaction measures
- measures that indicate service improvements
- measures that indicate improvements in quality of service, and/or work-life.

Cumulatively the mix of methods and criteria should allow for both an extensive and an in-depth evaluation of the overall project. This will then enable the lessons learned to be clearly displayed, provide a framework for comparison with overseas countries and enable publications to be produced with an analysis of the qualitative and quantitative outcomes.

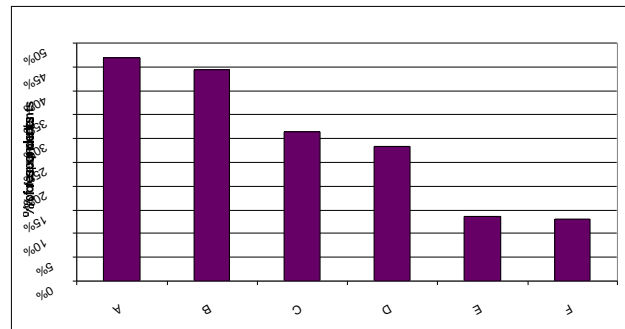
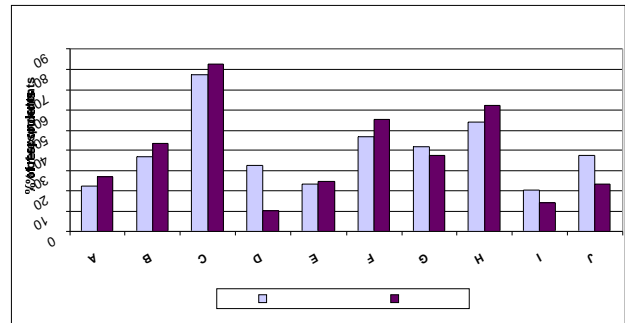
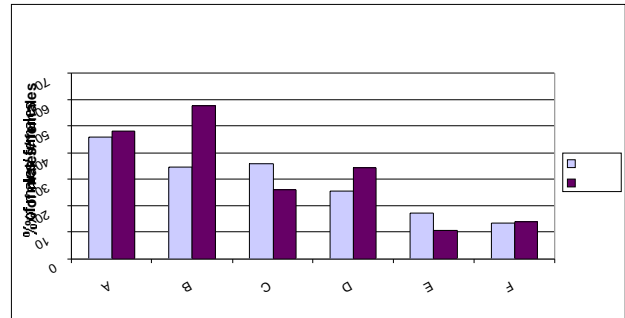
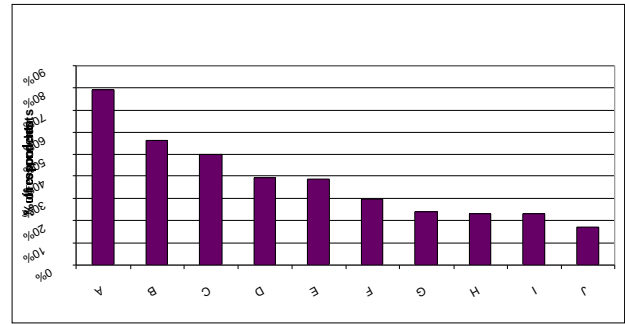
**Flexible working survey**

During the first months of the project a questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire had three main purposes, to assess staff interest in the issues of working time and work reorganisation, to identify divisions within the Council where this interest was particularly strong and hence could provide project sites, and to provide benchmark attitudinal data for the project.

The survey was first administered to the Leisure Services group that had volunteered to be part of the project. This was then refined further and also sent to the Health and Environmental Services division. In all, 700 questionnaires seeking opinions on alternative working patterns were distributed to staff in the two sections at Bristol City Council. The average response rate was 29%. Of the respondents 78 were people working in Leisure Services and 120 were from Health & Environmental Services. This gave an overall sample size of 198.

The following is a thumbnail sketch of the results and give the early aggregate data produced. There will be another section to be added to this and the further analysis of the data using cross tabulations. The main area that was of interest to the Council and trade unions was the degree of enthusiasm shown by the staff for change and the preferences they displayed over which methods might best be used.

The following tables give the aggregate results of a question on this topic, it is followed by a breakdown according to gender and then tables by gender that offer reasons why the respondents indicated such interest



**KEY:**  
**A: More personal leisure time**  
**B: Tailor work time to work demands**  
**C: Opportunities to undertake a course of study**  
**D: Balance childcare responsibilities with work**  
**E: Balance other care responsibilities**  
**F: Opportunity to take on other paid work**

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In general terms the survey showed that:

- almost four fifths of all respondents would like to work flexitime
- over a half were interested in homeworking and the inclusion of early mornings and evenings in a flexitime scheme.
- more than one third would like the opportunity to work from/at a different site
- one third of all respondents liked the idea of compressed weeks/fortnights.

However, some working patterns may be more understood compared to others. This needs to be considered in terms of whether increased understanding would have an effect on the results.

Analysing the survey by gender showed that:

- there were few gender differences in terms of preferred working pattern. The main difference was that 1 in 3 women were interested in doing a job-share compared to 1 in 10 men
- women also preferred the idea of different ways of agreeing rotas compared to men.

The survey then asked why staff would prefer different working patterns:

- in general, the most stated reason was an increase in personal leisure time (47%) whilst having the ability to tailor work-time to work demands was also seen as important (44%). Having the opportunity to study (31%) and balancing childcare responsibilities (28%) were also popular reasons
- there was a difference in the number of women (35%) wanting the opportunity to study compared to men (25%)
- 60% of men felt that tailoring work time to work demands was important compared to 35% of women
- notably, more men (34%) than women (26%) felt that more flexible working patterns would allow them to balance childcare responsibilities.

The survey has revealed many interestingly features and will, following a repeat survey, go on to provide a valuable element within a time series frame of analysis.

### **Conclusion.**

This on-going project represents an action-based and innovative approach to work reorganisation and the flexibilisation of working time. The concentration upon areas where equal opportunities can be foregrounded is also important and chimes in with much of the recent EU interest in terms of mainstreaming. The project as a whole has many points of interest in terms of current EU policy especially the new social action

programme and the recent Commission communication on Modernising the Organisation of Work where the theme of developing working time flexibility and social dialogue is explicitly mentioned. The project also represents an opportunity for the UKWON to hone its evaluation procedures and devise methodological tools that can be usefully applied to other research and action based projects.