

# Work–Life Balance

Sixth British-German Trades Union Forum

*Hamburg*

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## Summary

The 'work–life balance' is a term describing a new sphere of activity in the realm of representation of interests at the workplace. In July 2007 the British–German Trade Union Forum discussed the diverse trade union activities at the interface of 'good work' and 'good life' for two days in Hamburg. After focusing on the topics of minimum wages and industrial relations in previous years, this sixth forum centred on the question of how employees can better balance their jobs and their private lives.

The introductory speeches revealed that the British debate basically centres on the subject of time. Employees in the UK at the present time have never been further from the utopia of 'work in the morning, music in the afternoon and philosophizing in the evening'. It is no coincidence that Jo Morris and Jane Pillingier at the Hamburg conference gave their trade union report on the 'Organisation of work in the 21st century' the title 'Out of Time' and described the work–life balance as at the 'heart of social policy in Europe'.

In today's management literature, consideration of employees' personal interests is a business imperative. A study by the Work Foundation argues (like studies by the Prognos-Institut for the German Ministry for Family Affairs) that companies must be considerate of private wishes and obligations if only for economic reasons – in order to motivate their employees and retain their loyalty. However, most firms continue to adhere to the standard employment contract plus overtime – a male habit that focuses almost exclusively on work and gives other aspects of life a much lower priority.

Even when companies talk about work–life concepts, when it comes down to brass tacks in industrial conflicts priority is given to company interests. The win–win situation promised by many consultants frequently fails to materialise; the discrepancy between the differently structured areas of life – occupation and private life – worsens. Barbara Thiessen from the Deutsches Jugendinstitut referred in Hamburg to Arlie Hochschild's study 'The Time Bind', which precisely describes this quandary. The American sociologist noted that every fifth person surveyed manifested a complete turnaround from traditional attributes: well-educated employees in particular sometimes perceive their

occupation as the exciting thing in their lives – while at home only tiresome obligations await them. The Munich-based Thiessen therefore considers the work–life balance a ‘clumsy term’ that codifies ‘the old dichotomy between work and life’.

In the knowledge economy, said Stephen Bevan from the Work Foundation, only a small minority of employees are able to become ‘time lords’, exercising control over the time and place of their work. For most employees, however, work dominates their private lives: children are dropped off in the morning and picked up again in the evening, family members are fitted in between dealing with economic necessities, and in extreme cases are merely a shifting mass in a life dominated by job demands – the watchword is constant availability ‘24/7’.

In their *24/7 Survey* Julie Hurst and Wendy Richards interviewed 1,200 employees in all economic sectors in the United Kingdom. According to their report, three-quarters of those surveyed work longer hours than agreed in their contracts. Every tenth person claimed to work more than 70 hours per week. Asked about their personal life balance, 97 per cent responded critically: it is difficult to synchronise professional and personal interests. The 2003 study worded the objective ‘to end the macho culture of long hours’ (which is also adhered to by career-minded women).

The Hamburg Trade Union Forum demonstrated that the topic of the work–life balance can hardly be treated without touching upon the gender perspective. The different time needs of men and women in their biographies, the continuing income gap between the sexes, the trap mothers fall into when they settle for working part-time jobs on a sustained basis; the male ‘one-and-a-half-person job’, which naturally relies on female care in private life: these gender-policy catchwords play a role in both Germany and the United Kingdom.

Differences were apparent in family policy, which was defined in the United Kingdom following Tony Blair’s taking office in 1997 primarily as ‘child policy’. This understanding focuses primarily on the well-being of the offspring and not on ‘parent-oriented childcare’, as Jonathan Gershuny noted. The Oxford sociologist summed it up with the simple formula that ‘more time and energy for care’ simply means ‘less time and energy for paid work’. The German female speakers cheered his demand for shorter working hours for both men and women.

Jenny Huschke of the DGB federal executive board advocated a new model of ‘short full-time work for all’. In practice, this concept is currently being thwarted by the lengthening of weekly hours and delay of retirement. Christina Klenner from the Institute of Economic and Social Research of the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung presented a differentiated model of working hour accounts based on the life course approach. Barbara Thiessen from the Deutsches Jugendinstitut also advocated arrangements that can be individually planned and aligned to biographical courses. For most people, the busiest years at work are the same as those during which they raise their families: between the ages of 25 and 45.

The German federal government’s ‘Seventh Family Report’ criticises the manner in which the federal and state governments – in contrast to those in the United Kingdom and, even more so, in Scandinavia – concentrate on direct monetary payments to parents. Another characteristic of the German debate is the growing importance of demographic issues. Thiessen emphasised that the main problem is not demographics, however, but structural social inequality: it is not sufficient to improve the situation only of the highly qualified.

'Good work', 'good life' and their interrelations form a trade union field of action that has become far more than a 'women's issue' and will gain in significance in future. Since the amendment of the *Betriebsverfassungsgesetz* (Works Constitution Act) in 2001, the work–life balance and harmonisation of job and family are official tasks of interest representation in Germany. The British schemes, which were explained in Hamburg by Rowena Hayward for Bristol City Council and by Billy Hayes for the Royal Mail, are already very much oriented to the operational level.

Trade union policy criticises the male-dominated management culture characterised by virtually arbitrary availability and extremely long working hours. This leaves employees little leeway – apart from commendable examples cited at the Hamburg conference in Eva Viehoff's (Alfred-Wegener-Institut) presentation – to successfully balance their working and private lives.

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