The quest for a work-life balance - demands, aspirations and career mobility in part-time female managers

Can managers employed on part-time and other flexible contracts operate successfully in organizations, despite the traditional long hours culture which acts as a barrier to women and part-time workers in the quest for a work-life balance? The part-time managers referred to in this article held varied careers while working full-time, but their careers stalled once a transition to part-time work was made. The majority were career focused, worked intensively and felt frustrated with their lack of mobility and career progression while working part-time. The majority worked in excess of their contracted hours and did not experience an appropriate reallocation of work when they reduced their hours.

The research

While a small amount of research has focused upon the experiences and employment profiles of female professionals working part-time, there is very little research on the experiences of female part-time managers in the UK. This is because part-time managerial jobs are incredibly rare. Of all women working part-time, just 4 per cent are employed as managers.

The employment experiences and prospects of part-time workers, and their access to managerial work, is a gender and equal opportunities issue enshrined in European Employment Law.

Alongside the European Employment Strategy of creating a more flexible and adaptable workforce, developments in the UK legislative context have formalized requests for flexible working for certain employees, potentially contributing to the further decline of full-time "standard" jobs. In 2003, the UK government introduced legislation giving working parents with children under six years (or 18 years if children are disabled) the right to request and employers the duty to consider requests for flexible working. This right to request was extended in April 2009 to those who care for a child under the age of 17 years (or under 18 years if disabled) and the carers of adults. In terms of flexible working options, survey data reveals that of all types of requests made, the first and second most popular requests were for:

1. part-time work (30 per cent of women asked for a reduction in working hours); and
2. reduced hours for a limited period of time – (19 per cent requested this).

Men were less likely to request a reduction in working hours but were more likely to seek flexitime, while retaining full-time hours. These requests by women for reduced hours could create part-time jobs at more senior levels within organizations. However, firstly, employees need to be aware of this entitlement. Secondly, employers only need to show they have considered an application and need only cite business reasons for refusing a request for flexible working. Ultimately, working parents have to negotiate a request with their line managers.
manager and are encouraged to present a business case in which they detail how they anticipate the business will not be adversely affected by the proposed reduction in hours of work or flexible working patterns.

Research to-date in the UK suggests that when women work as part-time managers they are perceived by others as “one-offs” and/or fortunate employees in strategic positions which enable them to negotiate preferential working conditions with their line managers. They have typically worked full-time before presenting a business case to their employers and negotiating a reduction in working hours.

Some research has begun to explore how women's professional careers can be maintained by working part-time though in each case this was not without significant challenges to women's working lives. Evidence suggests that part-time openings in professional occupations are more common than in management. One explanation for this is that professional careers are often more sustainable for women over the course of their lives. Part of the reason for this is the ability of women to maintain a larger degree of autonomy over their working-time patterns.

The “male model of working”

Managerial careers in UK organizations are more difficult to maintain since working hours tend to be longer and cultural expectations of time and commitment follow the "male model of working", which includes long, unpredictable working hours, geographical mobility and networking out of hours.

The way an ideal manager is viewed remains imbued with characteristics traditionally seen as male, and uncertainties about the possibility of combining a career and family are reinforced by the very small number of visible senior women with children who could act as role models.

If this notion of an “ideal manager” is sustained, it seems unlikely that women trying to reconcile both family and career aspirations could succeed while working less than full-time hours.

Whether these strategies are achievable and realistic is questionable however. For instance, while UK employees with children have the right to request flexible working, if employers can refuse a request, what happens to those employees who have less accommodating employers, do not have “champions” or cannot put together a convincing business case for a reduction in working hours? Politicians, policy makers and organizational representatives all speak of the importance of work-life balance, but whether much of it is actually seen in the business world is open to debate.

In fact, many leading academics suggest that work-life pressures are actually increasing. For example, the emergence of a global economy means working days are less fixed as markets operate over different time zones, and high commitment management practices and restructuring tendencies increase pressures for those interested in career mobility.

It's been argued that much legislation aimed at reconciling work and private life represents little more than a “quick fix” as it does not tackle the culture of organizations which still follow a male model of working. Certainly, this appears the case in the context of the UK where the "right to request flexible working” legislation appears to have had little impact on working practices and organizational culture. The legislation also does little to combat negative perceptions of part-time workers or promote the career opportunities for those who opt for flexible working patterns.

Innovations in working-time practices are more likely to be achieved if assumptions about the gendered nature of work and traditional perceptions of part-time workers
are challenged. Ensuring that full timers are not required or expected to work extensive hours will be just as important as valuing the contributions and potential of the (mostly female) part-time workforce. Breaking down the traditional long hours culture which acts as a barrier to so many women and part-time workers would actually benefit everybody in the workplace, male and female alike.

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