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Building the future of work together

Flexibility: The Heartbeat of Modern Work

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In the evolving landscape of the European labour market, the desire for flexibility has emerged as a central theme. Our research, "The Work We Want", surveying more than 700 business leaders from around the world, testifies of a clear call for flexibility, autonomy, and freedom in the workplace. 83% of those executives say that following the Covid pandemic, employees place as much value on flexibility around where and when they work as they do on compensation and 82% consider that the idea of a person following one career path in their lifetime has gone for good.

This shift in values signifies a profound change in the structure of the workforce and the nature of work itself. Work remains an essential part of people's lives, yet there is an opportunity—and an imperative—to redefine what work means.

The evolution of part-time work serves as a vivid illustration of this shift of the employment paradigm. The latest figures from Eurostat reveal a telling story: in 2023, 17% of employed individuals in the EU were engaged in part-time work. The stability of part-time work participation over the past decade, with a slight decrease from 19% in 2014 to 17% in 2023, coincides with a significant drop in unemployment rates across the EU, from 11% to 6%. This juxtaposition raises a question: Is the labour market shifting towards full-time positions, or is part-time work becoming a more recognized and integral aspect of employment?

The disparity in part-time employment rates across European countries is stark. The Netherlands and the DACH region—Germany, Austria, and Switzerland—see over 30% of their employment in part-time roles despite their robust economies. This phenomenon is intricately linked to women's participation in the labour market, particularly in Switzerland and the Netherlands, where high wages and costly childcare drive many women to choose part-time work.

The shift in employment preferences

This choice reflects a complex interplay of societal norms and economic necessities, challenging the assumption that full-time, permanent employment is the sole path to prosperity. The European data suggests a more nuanced reality, where part-time work is not merely a compromise but a strategic choice that offers flexibility and balance.

Part-time employment allows individuals to juggle work with other commitments, such as education, caregiving, or personal pursuits. Inclusivity is another cornerstone of part-time employment. It can serve as a gateway for those re-entering the workforce, providing valuable experience and skill development.

Moreover, it challenges the conventional metrics of productivity and efficiency. Studies suggest that reduced working hours can lead to increased productivity per hour, as employees maximise their limited time, especially when supported by technological advancements that facilitate remote work and flexible schedules.

A framework for sustainable flexibility

Adapting labour regulation to these new expectations is vital. Our research shows that 83% of business leaders believe that there is a need to build awareness of the diverse types of labour contracts available to workers today and enable individuals to choose what suits them best. Only 38% of employers feel fully empowered to get the optimal mix between diverse forms of work, and only 37% say they can recruit agency workers at the scale they would like.

Recognising diverse forms of work is essential. Policymakers should not view them as a lesser alternative to full-time, permanent employment but as a potential catalyst for enhancing workforce participation, productivity, and well-being. As the global voice for the HR services industry, our mission at the World Employment Confederation is to advocate for such regulatory frameworks. We see several good practices in place across the globe, and we relentlessly share those in various global fora to enable better labour market outcomes for all.

As we consider "The Work We Want," it becomes clear that diverse forms of work are essential to enable the work-life integration that is becoming the hallmark of labour markets moving forward. The narrative is no longer about the binary choice between one or another form of work; it's about crafting a spectrum of opportunities and offer a work environment that is adaptable, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of a diverse workforce.

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