

**Short Report**



# **Work/life balance and trade unions**

**Evidence from The Workplace Employment Relations  
Survey 2011**

## Work/life balance – summary of findings

This study updates and extends research on the links between unionisation and work life balance (WLB) in Britain. There are five major findings:

- 1) Unionisation is positively associated with the number of WLB practices at the workplace and with more progressive employer views regarding WLB.
- 2) Union strength is associated with a lower likelihood of all employees, including those with caring responsibilities, working long hours and perceiving a long-hours culture.
- 3) The probability of long hours working falls with the number of WLB practices at the workplace.
- 4) Employers were more likely to believe they have some responsibility for their employees' work life balance when there was a strong union presence.
- 5) Union recognition is a big influence on whether employees express job-related anxiety. Women in the private sector report less anxiety in unionised workplaces, whether or not they have caring responsibilities. And caring for the ill, disabled or aged is much more strongly linked to higher job-related anxiety in the non-union sector than the union sector – in the union sector the association disappears in the case of women.

## Introduction

In 2016 we commissioned Professor Alex Bryson (UCL) and John Forth (NIESR) to conduct three research projects examining the impact of unions in the workplace. The first study covered previous research on the impact of trade unionism and relations at work. The second study was a new analysis of the impact of a union in the workplace on a range of measures (productivity, voluntary quits etc.). This, the third study, focuses specifically on links between trade unionism and employees' work-life balance.

Previous studies have only looked at the difference between workplaces that have a union presence and those that do not. However, these new studies take account of the type of workplace. This means they do not compare a large public sector workplace with a small private sector one. By doing this, the findings are more robust in terms of analysing the union effect than they would be otherwise. But the size of effects can be reduced, though all the effects discussed below are statistically significant.

## Methodology

This research examined workplaces that were included in the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS). It ranks workplaces according to how many work life balance (WLB) measures they provide, and compares this to what (if any) union presence they have.

The WLB measures include working from home, flexi-time, job sharing etc (full list of WLB practices in Appendix 1). When conducting this analysis, Bryson and Forth take account of the characteristics of the workplace, for instance size, age of establishment, where the workplace is located or the region (list of workplace characteristics in appendix 2). Finally, they take account of employee characteristics (Appendix 3).

## Research findings

### Work Life Balance practices in the workplace

Bryson and Forth's study found that most workplaces have some WLB practices in place. But they don't have many. The median number for workplaces across the whole economy was four, and the modal (most common) number was only three. Workplaces with a union presence tended to have more WLB measures in place. Controlling for workplace characteristics, workplaces with a recognised trades union have an average of one more WLB practice across the whole economy.

### Union effects on long hours working

The study looked the likelihood that employees reported working more than 48 hours in a week. Bryson and Forth found that all employees and specifically those with caring responsibilities were less likely to work long hours in places where the union presence was stronger. This held true for men and women, but the effect was stronger for men.

In addition, the research found that workplaces where there were more WLB practices in place, employees were less likely to work long hours. This was true in both the public and private sectors.

In order to find out if employees felt working long hours was essential to get ahead, Bryson and Forth looked at responses to the question "People in this workplace who want to progress usually have to put in long hours". They found that union strength is associated with a lower likelihood of being exposed to a long-hours culture. This is the case in the whole economy, and in the private sector, among all employees and specifically those with caring responsibilities, whether they are men or women.

### Job-related anxiety and work/life balance

Difficulties balancing work and family life can create stress and anxiety. WLB practices and effective trade unionism may be able to alleviate this. Employees experience less job-related anxiety in workplaces where they have more WLB practices. However, this effect was only statistically significant where there was a strong union presence. This was particularly true for women.

### Employer attitudes to work/life balance

In both the whole economy and the private sector managers in unionised workplaces were significantly less likely to think it was up to individual employees to balance their work and family responsibilities than managers in non-unionised workplaces

### Appendix 1: WLB practices

- working at or from home in normal working hours
- flexi-time (where an employee has no set start or finish time but an agreement to work a set number of hours per week or per month)
- job sharing schemes (sharing a full-time job with another employee)
- the ability to reduce working hours (e.g. switching from full-time to part-time employment)
- compressed hours (i.e. working standard hours across fewer days)

- ability to change set working hours (including changing shift pattern)
- working only during school term times
- workplace nursery or nursery linked with workplace
- financial help with child care (e.g. childcare vouchers, loans,, subsidised childcare places not located at the workplace)
- financial help with the care of older adults
- a specific period of leave for carers of older adults (in addition to time off for emergencies)
- a specific period of paid parental leave (in addition to maternity or paternity leave, and time off for emergencies)
- maternity pay above statutory minimum
- paternity pay above statutory minimum
- paid emergency care leave

### **Appendix 2: Workplace characteristics**

- number of employees (six categories)
- single-establishment organisation
- total size of organization (four categories)
- industry classification (12 categories)
- age of establishment six categories)
- region (11 categories)
- largest non-managerial occupation at the workplaces (eight categories)
- UK/foreign owned

### **Appendix 3: Employee characteristics**

- sex
- age (seven categories)
- marital status (five categories)
- dependent children
- disability
- ethnicity
- highest academic qualification (9 categories)
- highest vocational qualification (10 categories)
- occupation (nine categories)
- usual hours worked (six categories)
- workplace tenure (six categories)
- type of employment contract (four categories)
- individual union membership