

REINHOLD WEIß

Professor Dr., Deputy President and Head of the Research at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB), Bonn

Time to work and to learn

Dear readers,

in the face of the looming shortage of skilled workers, models for the extension of our working lives are very much in fashion. However, this is also connected to the question of how to use working hours more efficiently and make them more flexible. Working hours are already much more flexible than in former times. Uniform working hours for everybody have been replaced by flexitime schemes in many enterprises. Time accounts, part-time work and teleworking are becoming widespread.

This flexibility, in connection with the use of laptops, smartphones and the Internet, has blurred the boundaries between work and private life, occupation and family. Work increasingly extends into the hours that were previously reserved for family and leisure time. This holds true not only for the longer opening hours in the retail trade sector but also for employees who must be contactable well outside the usual working hours. The flexibility has its price: Employees often feel burnt out, the family is neglected and social relations suffer as well.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE AS PART OF CORPORATE CULTURE

The topic of work-life balance has already become an integral part of personnel policy in many enterprises. It is expressed primarily in working hours regulations which meet the needs of the staff but still allow the enterprises to use the human resources more efficiently. The development of schemes for better compatibility of work and private life is not just a question of money. What is needed is creativity and the courage to try out new ideas. This makes it first and foremost a question of corporate culture.

However, personnel, time and money resources must also be allocated if measures and programmes are to be implemented. Experience has shown that such investments pay off in the end. They contribute not only to recruiting skilled labour but also to retaining them as employees for the long term. Targeted personnel marketing and retention management are becoming more and more important, since retaining qualified employees in the enterprise is always more cost-efficient than recruiting and breaking in new personnel.

MAKING LEARNING TIMES MORE FLEXIBLE

When trying to balance the times for work and private life, however, we must not forget the time employees spend on learning. Granting staff leave from work to take part in continuing education and training measures has traditionally been a problem for the enterprises, on the one hand due to the costs of continuing wage payments, on the other hand due to their absence from work. It is not without reason that the duration of most in-company continuing training measures is relatively short. Furthermore, there are indications, for example in the continuing education and training survey conducted by the Cologne Institute for Business Research, that in-company continuing training is increasingly shifted from working hours to leisure time. Learning thus takes place in the evening and over the weekend or by using up and accrediting holidays. For the enterprises this serves to cut costs. However, it requires employees to be willing to spend part of their leisure time on vocational and in-company learning.

Another option would be to collect time credits on learning-time accounts and then use them, for example, for learning or even for caring for family members. Such models have so far only been tested as pilot projects in a few larger enterprises. More widespread application would be a good thing.

The organisation of seminars can become a problem in the case of employed persons who not only work flexible hours but also have flexible places of work. Distance learning and e-learning offer a type of learning tailored to the needs of the participants. The compatibility of the desired education opportunity with the living conditions of the individual is a central motivation for taking part in distance learning, as BIBB studies have shown. For a long time these schemes only occupied a fringe position in the continuing training market, but this is starting to change. They are unmistakably spreading.

Translation: Paul David Doherty, Global Sprachteam Berlin