

Life Work Balance

Why we need more worker friendly flexibility

The problem when employers impose a change in working time

The right to request flexible work

In my work as an occupational health advice worker based in GP surgeries, I have been asked to help a number of patients renegotiate their working hours, both members of a Trade Union, and workers from unorganised workplaces.

The main **reasons** I have come across for needing to negotiate a change in working hours are:

1. The employer has imposed a change in working hours.

The employer may have 'consulted', but for individuals agreed changes that they may not have understood, or any changes at all, can totally upset all their complicated family arrangements for child care, or care for sick or elderly relatives.

- ❖ Shift start times being changed by as little as half an hour, from 7am to 6.30 am in a foundry, or an old people's home.
- ❖ Evening 5pm to 9pm shifts at a supermarket being lengthened to 5-6 hours, making travel home very difficult.
- ❖ Day shifts being changed to a three shift system. This meant that a lot of women with families left the factory.
- ❖ The homecare service now provides a service between 7am and 11pm, instead of till 7pm. This provides a better service for the clients, but a longer working day.

2. The employer has imposed a change of workplace

- ❖ Making travel to work difficult.

3. Family circumstances have changed

- ❖ A school aged child has been found to have a serious chronic illness. The parents have asked for reduced hours and been refused.
- ❖ A pregnant woman finds working early in the morning or on night shift very tiring.

- ❖ A new mother wants to return to work after maternity leave. She may have her request for a reduction in hours, or a change in working hours refused.
- ❖ The new father wants to fit at least some of his shifts around looking after the new baby, and has his request for a change in shift start times refused.
- ❖ A carer who has had their hours reduced to care for a dying relative now wants to return to their previous working hours, as their relative has died.

4. Returning to work after an illness

- ❖ After being off with stress.
- ❖ After an accident, with hopefully total recovery, or some permanent injury.
- ❖ After diagnosis with a chronic condition like arthritis, diabetes, or asthma.
- ❖ After a heart attack.
- ❖ Or after a family death.

5. A long hours culture at work

This is more common among men, especially men with young families, in jobs with low wages. Debt problems can often make the situation far worse. The TGWU bus drivers' Branch in South Yorkshire run a very helpful credit union.

A number of men fall ill with exhaustion because of the long hours they spend at work, or with anxiety because their family life becomes troubled.

For example workers in

- ❖ Transport and distribution: lorry drivers, warehouse workers, bus drivers.
- ❖ Bakeries
- ❖ Workers who work away from home in the week in civil engineering construction, or maintenance.

6. Shift work

In 24 hour processes, like steel making or glassmaking, it is traditional for men to work double shifts when staff levels are low.

Naomi Brent 19/11/2005

Negotiating for workers' *Work Life Balance*

A. Consulting your members

Plan a questionnaire, and its distribution, to your members, to find out what hours they would prefer to work, and why. Eg would some people currently working part time want more hours, or do they have problems with child care? What are their worries if working times were changed.

B Negotiating

Plan a campaign or negotiation in your Branch or at a particular workplace on one of the following topics:

- ❖ Representing people who want to reduce their hours, either because they are parents, or for other reasons (eg health, other caring responsibilities, nearing retirement).
- ❖ The employer is encouraging working from home, either as peripatetic workers, or as teleworkers. How do you ensure good conditions of work for your members.
- ❖ Negotiating rotas which work out fairly, to cover a twenty four hours a day, seven days a week service. Would self rostering work?
- ❖ Representing people who would like to increase their hours from part time work.