Conciliation in Catalonia: Most have policies but rarely apply them

October 1, 2009

Every day, big and small businesses alike, face the challenge of balancing profits for the business with benefits for the people involved.

The ability to reconcile work and personal life is one of the key factors for retaining talent, say employees. Moreover, it has been shown that the presence of a responsible culture of work/personal conciliation is closely connected to business development.

The study, "Experiències en organització del temps de treball a les empreses de Catalunya" ("Experiences of Catalonian Businesses in Organizing Work Schedules"), analyzes the situation of workplace conciliation in Catalonia and proposes how companies can best implement conciliation measures.

According to the EFR© model, developed by IESE's International Center of Work and Family (ICWF), businesses can be grouped according to four different levels of commitment to conciliation, with group A representing those with a well-rooted conciliation culture at one end, and group D lacking conciliation policies at the other.

Most Catalonian businesses fall somewhere in between, partly due to the fact that they are predominantly small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This sometimes makes them less willing to apply measures such as reduced timetables, but by the same token, they are often able to implement highly valued measures such as flexible work and vacation schedules due to their size and structure.

Most of these companies (47 percent) fall within group C: they say they have policies but

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rarely apply them. A slightly smaller proportion (38 percent) fall in group B, meaning they have some policies that have translated into good practice, but they are still not quite there in terms of actually having a conciliation program or a flexible and responsible culture in place. That honor belongs to group A, which represents just 8 percent of Catalonian SMEs.

The situation improves among large firms, with a greater percentage classified in groups A (16 percent) and B (54 percent).

Difficulties to overcome

Work conciliation in Catalonia faces significant challenges, such as a corporate culture that still regards a person who takes a leave of absence for family reasons to be less committed.

The study shows that the percentage of women in enterprise is directly related to the number of conciliation policies, which demonstrates that women, especially mothers, can become agents of change in achieving more flexible work schedules, which benefits other employees.

According to the authors, conciliation is not a one-off, catchall measure. For it to be effective, it is necessary to implement realistic, individualized measures that are adapted to the volume, sector and structure of the company in question.

Another conclusion is that temporary employment is not beneficial for conciliation policies but can actually impede the application of certain measures such as flextime, extended maternity or leave on compassionate grounds.

The study also shows that conciliation does not constitute a cost, but rather an investment, and that the true cost comes with non-conciliation. Having a well-designed conciliation plan considerably reduces turnover and absenteeism, and contributes to greater productivity.

To showcase best practice, the study also profiles 30 Catalonian businesses that have good practices in place to facilitate conciliation for their employees.

The 6 "c"s of conciliation

To get over these hurdles, the Labor Department of the Generalitat of Catalonia has designed a conciliation plan that is adaptable to the needs of each company, according to such factors as size, structure, sector, etc. The plan is based on six "C"s:

1. Commitment of the company to reconciliation measures.

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2. Capacity for implementing policies. Each company shall determine these according to its structure, business activities and type of personnel.
3. Concretization of the policies to be carried out.
4. Confidence between the company and its employees, bolstered by clear and open channels of communication.
5. Coordination of the objectives and action agenda.
6. Continuity of the plan by means of continuous analysis and evaluation.

This plan is designed to help businesses respond to the challenge of simultaneously making improvements in both competitiveness and the quality of life of their employees, which is the key to retaining personnel.

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