EMPLOYER SUPPORT FOR WORK–LIFE BALANCE IN RECESSION: FINDINGS
FOR BRITAIN FROM THE WORKPLACE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS SURVEY

by

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Chapter 3 of

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Flexible working and family-friendly practices aimed at supporting employees’ work–life balance have come to the forefront of employment policies in many countries in the past two decades. As employers have voluntarily introduced such policies and practices, which we treat generically in this chapter as work–life balance (WLB) provisions, governments have both reflected this development and sought to encourage it further by passing legislation that provides rights for employees to have access to these supports. Legislation has been particularly concerned with encouraging employers to help mothers through the transition to parenthood, the return to work and subsequent child care. This was closely tied to concerns to reduce gender inequality and primarily aimed at encouraging the participation of mothers in the labour market. Subsequently, the work–family agenda has been extended, firstly to paternity leave and other ways of helping both parents become more involved with childcare, and then to the provision of help for all employees with caring responsibilities. Although the Nordic countries led the way in this respect, among the liberal market economies the UK government has been at the forefront of such trends.

Legislating in this area and encouraging family-friendly practices was in particular a major element of the Labour government’s employment agenda following its election in 1997 (Department of Trade and Industry, 1998). In general, employment legislation was seen as a means of encouraging and supporting good practice whilst providing a ‘minimum infrastructure of decency and fairness around people in the workplace’ (Department of Trade and Industry, 1998: 3). In the specific case of family-friendly policies, the aim was to
stimulate a work culture that would reflect a new relationship between work and family life, the expectations being that good employers would go beyond minimum statutory requirements and that organisations should benefit if they adopt the new culture, for example through the performance and retention of core staff.

The programme of the various successive Labour Governments included enhancing maternity provisions, introducing parental leave, a right to take time off to deal with emergencies, and a right to flexible working, initially for carers, but extended by the Coalition government to all workers in 2014. The evidence from comparing the results from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS), a nationally representative survey of British workplaces and their employees, with those from the 1998 WERS, was that the adoption of flexible working and family-friendly practices was increasing but the majority of workplaces were only using those practices that were subject to legislation (Kersley, et al., 2006), and the adoption was more prevalent in large private firms and the public sector (Wood et al., 2003). By 2004, many forms of flexible working practices, such as job-sharing, term-time only working, compressed hours, and the opportunity to work from home remained confined to less than a third of workplaces.

This chapter is concerned with what has happened to such trends following the recession that was precipitated by the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent austerity programme of the Government to address a public sector debt crisis in 2010. If the increasing availability of flexible working and family-friendly practices was largely a response to legislation or broader normative pressures, we might expect no great change in their adoption, although their use by employees might be affected by, for example, the increasing job insecurity generated by recessionary pressures. However, in so far as some of the trend, particularly in practices not
subject to legislation, reflects employers positively evaluating their utility, we might expect some reappraisal of their costs and benefits. On the one hand, employers may respond to a less favourable economic climate by cutting back on such provision where they see this as costly, for example in the case of financial help with childcare. Employers may also see less need to provide practices to retain staff in a period where employees have reduced labour market opportunities. On the other hand, some forms of flexible working, such as working from home, may have the potential to reduce costs (see also Lyonette et al. in Chapter 4), and practices which allow flexibility in hours worked may help employers to adjust the size of the workforce to cope with changes in demand for their products or services. More generally, employers may see the provision of practices as still important for staff recruitment and retention, especially if they have an eye on the post-recession period and are keen to preserve their human capital.

Existing evidence suggests that employers had tended to cut back on WLB practices in the recession in the early 1990s in the UK (Dex and Smith, 2002) and Sweet et al. (2014) showed a decline in the availability of flexible working arrangements in the USA between 2006 and 2009, i.e. immediately following the 2008 recession. Human resource managers, via a post-2008 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2012) survey, expressed some concern that the development of flexible practices might be constrained by the recession. In national political circles there was some renewed emphasis on the costs of WLB practices adding to business burdens (e.g. Beecroft, 2011). Yet, equally there were suggestions that these practices, and particularly flexible working practices, could help employers manage the impact of the recession, by, for example, encouraging some workers to reduce their hours. One commentator even went so far as to imply that the recession could be a catalyst for a qualitative change in the provision of WLB practices, as she wrote: “Traditional nine-to-five
working practices won’t dig us out of this deep recession. It is time to embrace ‘flexibilism’ in the workplace” (Hobsbawm, 2009).

From the employees’ perspective, WLB policies may become more important in recessions. Flexible working practices may, for example, enable them to work longer hours to offset the effects of wage freezes. If such practices help to improve the integration of employees’ work and personal lives (for example, by reducing commuting times), they may also provide more time to recover from the demands of work and perhaps even offset any increased energy depletion associated with intensified demands. Allied to this, whether managers are supportive, particularly of employees’ WLB needs, may become increasingly important as organisational changes affect employees’ lives, finances and job security. Such supportive management may be especially important where the WLB practices do not exist as it can act as a substitute for these by facilitating informal practices that aid the integration of work and personal life (Bagger and Li, 2004), or where formal practices do exist, it may encourage their use. However, faced with recessionary pressures there is a risk that managers may become less supportive. For more on managers and the pressures faced during austerity in the public sector, see Lyonette et al. (Chapter 4).

Against this background, this chapter will address four issues:

1. The extent of change in the provision of WLB practices following the recession.
2. Changes in management’s attitudes towards the WLB of their employees through recession.
3. The extent to which use of WLB practices was affected by employees’ recessionary experience.
4. The extent to which employees’ work–life conflict was affected by their experience of
We tackle these issues through an analysis of the data from the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey, conducted when the economy was coming out of recession (although the government’s austerity programme was still being implemented), combined with data from the 2004 WERS, which provides the benchmark for assessing any change. The recession and austerity programme had adverse effects in both private and public sector workplaces, but the effects were more pronounced in the public sector (van Wanrooy et al., 2013). We therefore explore differences between the sectors throughout the chapter. We first introduce the surveys before reporting the results of our analysis and their implications for how, if at all, the recession has affected WLB practice. The remainder of the paper is organised in four sections, mirroring our four issues.

The Workplace Employment Relations Survey

The Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) comprises a series of six surveys which aim to provide a nationally representative account of the state of employment relations and working life inside British workplaces. The survey collects data from managers, employees and employee representatives in workplaces with five or more employees across the economy, with the exception of mining, agriculture and domestic service.

We use data from the 2011 and 2004 surveys, both from the management survey (which involves interviewing the most senior manager with responsibility for employment relations, human resources or staff in participating workplaces), and a self-completion questionnaire survey of employees, which was completed in workplaces included in the management survey (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013; Department of Trade and Industry, 2004).
In the 2011 survey, interviews were conducted with managers in 2,680 workplaces, compared with 2,295 workplaces in 2004, with a response rate of 46 per cent in 2011 and 64 per cent in 2004.

The employee-level data for the 2011 WERS were collected through a self-completion questionnaire distributed to up to 25 randomly selected employees at the majority of workplaces where the management interviews were undertaken (81 per cent in 2011 and 86 per cent in 2004). The response rate stood at 50 per cent among all sampled employees in 2011 and 54 per cent in 2004. Weights to correct for the sample design and any observable non-response biases are applied throughout the analysis reported in this chapter.

We examine change over time by comparing results from the 2004 and 2011 surveys, but in addition we use the panel component of the survey which includes all workplaces that were surveyed in both years. Using the panel means, we can isolate change within workplaces over time, and hence overcome the problem that changes observed through the cross-sectional comparison may reflect changes both within workplaces and in the composition of the workplace population.

Our analysis of WLB practices considers both flexible working arrangements as well as family-friendly practices. Our measures of flexible working arrangements are provided by the management survey, which asked managers, “Do you have any of the following working time arrangements for any employees at this workplace?” Six arrangements were included in both the 2004 and 2011 surveys: the option to reduce working hours, flexi-time, working from home, compressed hours, job-sharing and term-time working. To capture family-
friendly provision, managers were asked whether any employees at their workplace were entitled to each of the following practices: provision of a workplace nursery, financial help with childcare, financial help with care of older adults, a specific period of leave for carers of older adults, or a specific period of paid parental leave.

Employees were also asked about practices in their workplace and whether they had used them, as they were asked: “In the last 12 months, have you made use of any of the following arrangements, and if not, are they available to you if you needed them?” The practices are paid emergency leave, flexi-time, the chance to reduce working hours, compressed hours, working from home, job sharing and term-time working. This measure is only available for 2011.

Our primary measure of management’s attitudes to helping employees with their work–life balance is based on an employee's assessment, as respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed (on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) that managers at their workplace “understand about employees having to meet responsibilities outside work”. We define management to be understanding of employees’ WLB needs if the employee strongly agrees or agrees with the above statement.

In addition, there is a measure of managers’ attitudes in the management survey, which asks managers the extent to which they agreed, again on a five-point scale, with the statement, “It is up to individual employees to balance their work and family responsibilities”. This measure should be taken to be the manager’s view of the employees’ responsibilities and not necessarily that of the employer: it may well be that as employers provide WLB practices, which are indicative of taking some responsibility for the employee’s WLB, they consider
that employees now have the ultimate responsibility for achieving WLB.

WERS provides through the employee survey measures of the two dimensions of work–nonwork conflict which can be used as proxies for WLB. The first, work-to-nonwork conflict, is measured based on asking employees the extent to which they agree with the statement, “I often find it difficult to fulfil my commitments outside of work because of the amount of time I spend on my job”. The second is nonwork-to-work conflict, measured by employees’ responses to a similar question: “I often find it difficult to do my job properly because of my commitments outside of work”. Our analysis focuses on distinguishing between those with high levels of each form of conflict, identified as those who strongly agree or agree that they experience difficulties, from those reporting limited or no conflict. The questions on conflict were not included in the 2004 WERS and thus we cannot assess change over time.

The 2011 WERS allows us to explore the impact of the recession in three ways. First, examining change between the 2004 and 2011 surveys provides some insight into changes that have taken place during that period. However, because the recession began in the middle of the period between the 2004 and 2011 surveys, we cannot directly evaluate the recession’s effect through observing changes from 2004 to 2011, as any changes might be due to factors before the recession in 2008. Nonetheless, any changes in this period may be suggestive of recessional effects, given that the economic crisis was probably the most telling event in this period as employment relations legislation and institutions were relatively stable (van Wanrooy, et al., 2013: 2–5). Conversely, if observations are stable between the two surveys, this would suggest that there has been no generalised effect of a national recession.
Second, the 2011 WERS included specific questions on the impact of the recession on the workplace (in the management survey) and on actions taken to combat it that directly affected employees, such as wage freezes or work reorganisations. These allow us to explore variation across workplaces and employees. The impact of the recession was measured by asking managers, “...can you tell me to what extent your workplace has been adversely affected by the recent recession”. In our analysis we concentrate on differentiating workplaces that were most affected by the recession, defined as those where the respondent gauged that it affected their workplaces a great deal or quite a lot, from those who were affected moderately, just a little or not at all.

Third, the employee survey includes a question about the actions taken in the light of the recession that affected the individual respondent. It asked employees, “Did any of the following happen to you as a result of the most recent recession, whilst working at this workplace?” Employees were asked to tick all that applied to them from the following list: “My workload increased”, “My work was reorganised”, “I was moved to another job”, “My wages were frozen or cut”, “My non-wage benefits (e.g. vehicles or meals) were reduced”, “My contracted working hours were reduced”, “Access to paid overtime was restricted”, “I was required to take unpaid leave”, “Access to training was restricted”. A response of “I was not working at this workplace during the recession” was also included to allow for recent recruits. An index of the extent to which the employee experienced recessionary action was created, based on the total number of the above actions applied to the employee. We term this the employees’ recessionary experience.

The extent of change in the provision of WLB practices following the recession
Flexible working practices

The extent to which the prevalence of flexible working practices changed between 2004 and 2011 varied between practices. Based on the proportion of workplaces offering these arrangements for any employees at their workplace, the most commonly available arrangement in both years was the option to reduce working hours, available in over half of workplaces, followed by flexi-time, available in around one third of workplaces (Table 3.1). There was an increase in the availability of working from home and compressed hours between 2004 and 2011, but the option to reduce working hours and job-sharing became less common, and there was no significant change in the availability of flexi-time or term-time working. Similar trends are found in the panel of workplaces surveyed in both 2004 and 2011, although the increase in workplaces offering home working was insignificant.

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Formal flexible working practices are more common in the public sector and in larger organisations (cf Lewis, 2003; Wood et al., 2003), although informal methods may be used in smaller organisations. The trends over time in the prevalence of flexible working practices were similar in both sectors, with the exception that the decline in the option to reduce working hours was only found in the private sector. The percentage of private sector workplaces offering this arrangement fell from 60 per cent in 2004 to 54 per cent in 2011, and in comparison remained available in around 75 per cent of public sector workplaces.

Trends over time varied with workplace size. Whereas there was no change in the availability
of flexi-time in aggregate, among larger workplaces there had been a rise in the percentage offering this arrangement from 43 per cent to 59 per cent among workplaces with 100 or more employees. Furthermore, the declining prevalence of both the option to reduce working hours and job-sharing was concentrated among smaller workplaces and had not changed to a statistically significant extent among larger workplaces.

Overall, it does not appear that a significant proportion of workplaces cut back their provision of flexible working arrangements in response to recession. If the declining prevalence of the option to reduce working hours and job-sharing were a response to recession, it could be expected that any reductions in their availability would be concentrated in those workplaces hit hardest by recession. There is some support for this conjecture as within the panel of workplaces the decline in the proportion of workplaces allowing employees to reduce their working hours only occurred in those workplaces which were adversely affected by recession (falling from 69 per cent in 2004 to 55 per cent in 2011). In contrast, this remained unchanged (at 61 per cent) in those workplaces less affected by the recession. For job-sharing, however, there were no clear differences in the trend over time by the extent to which the workplace was affected by recession. Similarly, for those practices that had become more common between 2004 and 2011, no identifiable differences in the trend were apparent according to the extent to which the workplace was affected by recession. There is therefore little evidence to suggest that employers increased or reduced their provision of these flexible working arrangements as a response to recession.

To add to our confidence in this conclusion, costs were not cited as a major constraint on providing flexible working arrangements. If they were, we might have expected that employers would have reduced their provision of these in the recession. When asked, “what
are the constraints in providing flexible working arrangements for employees at this workplace?”, cost was cited by only one in ten workplaces. Other constraints were more commonly reported: flexible working was considered to be incompatible with the nature of the work or operating hours by 53 per cent of managers, sizeable proportions cited pressure on other employees and managers (30 per cent) and lack of demand from employees (19 per cent).

Family-friendly provision

Very few workplaces offer a workplace nursery (three per cent in 2011), but there had been a significant increase in the proportion of workplaces providing financial help with childcare, rising from 5 per cent in 2004 to 31 per cent in 2011 (Table 3.2). This financial help could consist of childcare vouchers or loans, subsidised childcare places not located at the workplace, as well as repayable contributions to fees for childcare. There may have been a substantial increase in the use of childcare voucher schemes, where typically employees sacrifice part of their salary in exchange for childcare vouchers, reducing the tax and national insurance contributions payable, as this was stimulated by legislative changes in 2005 (Seely, 2014). However, childcare vouchers were not specifically mentioned in the question asked in 2004 and it is possible that the observed increase partly reflects this change in question wording.

There was a rise in the percentage of workplaces offering a specific period of leave for carers of older adults, in addition to time off for emergencies, rising from six per cent in 2004 to eight per cent in 2011. However, there was no increase in the provision of financial help with the care of older adults, which is in fact extremely rare as it is available in less than one per cent of workplaces. Similar trends were observed through the panel of workplaces as there
was a rise in the percentage of workplaces offering financial help with childcare (rising from 8 per cent to 35 per cent) and the provision of a specific period of leave for carers of older adults also became more common (rising from 6 per cent to 12 per cent).

The increase in the proportion of workplaces offering financial help with childcare occurred across workplaces of all sizes, but was particularly strong amongst larger workplaces. It may be the case that larger workplaces find it easier or less costly to administer childcare voucher schemes. It may also be the case that larger firms are more concerned with maintaining a reputation as a good employer. The increase occurred in both the private and public sector.

The provision of a specific period of leave for carers of older adults was also more common among larger workplaces and the increase in the availability of this was only significant for larger workplaces, with no change among smaller workplaces. Such leave remained more common in the public sector than in the private sector. However, it was only in the private sector where a significant increase was observed. Leave for elder care was also more commonly offered in workplaces where more than half of the workforce were female, but there was no significant relationship between gender composition and the availability of financial help with childcare. This may well reflect the fact that women are more likely than men to be caring for an older adult, and thus employers in workplaces with high proportions of female employees may be responding to the needs of their workforce. In contrast, financial help with childcare is likely to be of relevance to male and female parents.
Analysis of the panel data showed that the increase in the provision of financial help with childcare was greater in those workplaces least affected by the recession. The proportion of workplaces with such a practice rose from nine per cent to 40 per cent among workplaces less affected by the recession, which compares with an increase from seven per cent to 30 per cent in workplaces most adversely affected by the recession. The recession may thus have had a dragging effect on the uptake of financial help for childcare.

**Changes in management’s attitudes towards the WLB of their employees**

Between 2004 and 2011, there was a small rise in the percentage of employees who felt that managers at their workplace were understanding of employees’ WLB needs, increasing from 60 per cent in 2004 to 62 per cent in 2011. This represented a continuation of the trend observed between 1998 and 2004; among workplaces with 10 or more employees (workplaces with fewer than 10 employees were not included in the 1998 WERS), the percentage of employees who perceived managers to be understanding of their responsibilities outside work stood at 55 per cent in 1998, rising to 58 per cent in 2004 and to 61 per cent in 2011.

However, these global figures mask important differences between sectors and by gender. The increase in the percentage of employees thinking that their managers were understanding of WLB needs only occurred in the private sector (Table 3.3) whereas the percentage fell slightly in the public sector. This fall was, nonetheless, concentrated amongst female employees (declining from 65 per cent in 2004 to 61 per cent in 2011, compared with a constant 53 per cent for men). The increase in the private sector in the proportion seeing managers as understanding was across both genders (rising from 57 per cent to 61 per cent
among men and from 63 per cent to 66 per cent among women).

Employees in small- and medium-sized workplaces (and in smaller organisations) were more likely to perceive managers as understanding of their WLB needs, reflecting perhaps the way that small employers are more likely to favour informal methods either to help WLB (Lewis et al., 2015) or more generally (Forth et al., 2006). This remained the case in 2011: around two-thirds (68 per cent) of employees in workplaces with fewer than 50 employees thought that managers understood their responsibilities outside work, compared with 58 per cent of employees in workplaces with 100 or more employees (Table 3.3). Nonetheless, an increase in the proportion feeling that managers understood their needs between 2004 and 2011 was only apparent in larger workplaces, and then only within the private sector.

The extent to which managerial attitudes were perceived to be favourable to WLB needs was lower in public sector workplaces most adversely affected by the recession than those less affected, but this was not so in private sector workplaces. In the public sector, such management attitudes were perceived in 54 per cent of workplaces adversely affected, compared with 62 per cent in other workplaces; in the private sector the figures were not significantly different: 62 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively. In contrast, in both sectors but in a similar vein, employees who had experienced some change as a result of recession were less likely to view managers as understanding of their responsibilities outside work; furthermore, the percentage of employees agreeing that managers were understanding
decreased with the number of recessionary actions the employee had experienced (Figure 1). More than two-thirds (69 per cent) of employees who experienced no recessionary action agreed that managers were understanding about their WLB needs, compared with just over half (55 per cent) of employees who experienced at least one recession-related change.

The proportion of managers agreeing that WLB was the individual’s responsibility rose from 66 per cent in 2004 to 77 per cent by 2011, with this increase also apparent within the panel of workplaces. This increase reversed the trend observed in WERS between 1998 and 2004 among workplaces with 10 or more employees, as the proportion declined from 84 per cent in 1998 to 66 per cent in 2004, before rising to 75 per cent in 2011. It may be, as suggested earlier, that the increase in the individualistic perspective reflects an increased perception among managers that with greater provision of flexible working arrangements, employees now have greater responsibility for achieving WLB. There is some evidence to support this, as within panel workplaces, the percentage of managers perceiving WLB to be the responsibility of the individual showed a statistically significant increase in workplaces where provision of flexible working arrangements had increased, but showed no statistically significant rise where such provision had remained stable or declined (van Wanrooy et al., 2013). Alternatively, it could reflect declining support for WLB practices, perhaps as managers see them increasingly as a luxury in the light of the recession and public sector debt. There was, however, no relationship between whether managers view the responsibility for WLB as resting with themselves and our measure of how employees view the
supportiveness of managers.

The increase in the proportion of managers viewing WLB as the responsibility of the individual occurred in both the private and public sectors, but the rise was greater in the public sector. Among panel workplaces, the increase was, however, only statistically significant for public sector workplaces. The recession or austerity programme may then have affected both the perceptions of public sector employees about how managers treat them, and the views of managers on the degree to which employees are responsible for their WLB.

**The extent to which the use of WLB practices was affected by employee’s recessionary experience**

WLB practices may not be available to all employees within a workplace, and even where available, employees may not always be aware of their existence or make use of them, even when they are relevant to them. Flexi-time and home working were the most widely used flexible working practices, with 30 per cent of all employees using flexi-time and 17 per cent using working from home (at least for part of their time) (Table 3.4). The least used was job sharing (five per cent). Half (50 per cent) of all employees used at least one practice.

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Men were less likely than women to use all the particular practices, with the exception of working from home, as 19 per cent of male employees reported use of working from home compared with 16 per cent of female employees, a statistically significant difference. All
arrangements were more commonly used by employees with dependent children. Few differences in usage were apparent by age, with the exception of reducing working hours, which was more commonly used by employees aged 60 or more, and use of job-sharing was lower among employees aged under 20. Reduced working hours and compressed hours were both more commonly used by private sector employees, whereas term-time working and paid emergency leave were more commonly used in the public sector. There were no differences in usage of flexi-time, home working or job-sharing by sector.

Some differences in usage were apparent, according to whether employees had experienced recessionary action, but not relative to the intensity of the recessionary effect on the workplace. Employees in the public sector who had experienced recessionary action were less likely to have made use of job-sharing, the chance to reduce working hours and term-time working than employees who had not experienced such action (Table 3.4). It may be that employees were less willing to make use of such flexible working practices where they had been affected by recession. In contrast, flexi-time and home working were more commonly used by public sector employees who had experienced recessionary action. Among private sector employees, those employees who reported experiencing recessionary action were also more likely to have used the option to work from home, but no differences in usage were apparent for any of the other flexible working arrangements. The adoption of practices such as flexi-time and home working might, in some cases at least, be part of the recessionary action.

The extent to which employees’ work–life conflict was affected by their experience of recession

Just over one quarter (27 per cent) of employees had high work-to-nonwork conflict, with
almost half (48 per cent) reporting little or no conflict. A much smaller proportion (4 per cent) of employees reported high nonwork-to-work conflict. The majority of employees (79 per cent) had little or no such conflict. Controlling for hours worked and other job, employee and workplace characteristics, both forms of conflict were higher among employees in the private sector and among those with caring responsibilities.

There was no significant difference in the proportion of employees with high levels of both forms of work–life conflict, according to the extent to which their workplace was adversely affected by recession. However, the level of both types of conflict is related to the number of recessionary actions an employee experienced. Among employees who had experienced at least one action, one third had a high level of work-to-nonwork conflict, compared to 19 per cent of employees who experienced no recessionary action. Furthermore, the percentage of employees reporting work-to-nonwork conflict increased with the number of recessionary actions they experienced (Figure 2, left-hand panel). The prevalence of nonwork-to-work conflict also showed some increase according to the number of actions experienced, although this was smaller in magnitude; five per cent of employees who experienced at least one recessionary action had high nonwork-to-work conflict compared to three per cent of employees who experienced no such action, a statistically significant difference (Figure 2, right-hand panel).

Among employees experiencing recessionary action, work-to-nonwork conflict was lower
where employees used flexible working arrangements. More generally, the use of flexible working practices was associated with lower work-to-nonwork conflict, but this is insignificant when the autonomy that employees had in their job is controlled for. Further multivariate analysis has shown this reflects the way such practices increase job autonomy which in turn reduces conflict (Wood et al., 2015). In the case of nonwork-to-work conflict, such conflict was higher among those who used flexible working arrangements. This may reflect employees making use of such practices in order to manage the demands they face outside of work.

Both public and private sector employees were less likely to report work-to-nonwork conflict where management was considered supportive, regardless of whether they had experienced recessionary action. Nonwork-to-work conflict was also lower among employees who perceived their managers to be understanding of WLB. These findings provide further support for the importance of managers’ attitudes, and not just the provision of formal practices, in supporting employees to balance their work and outside commitments.

**Conclusions**

Using a representative sample of British workplaces, we have shown that the availability of many WLB practices remains limited. The most commonly available practices are those that enable employees to adjust their working hours. In contrast, help with caring responsibilities for older adults remains relatively rare. Nevertheless, the majority of employees view their managers as understanding that they have needs outside of the workplace, although this does not necessarily coincide with managers seeing employers as having prime responsibility for employees’ WLB. Only a minority of employees experienced high levels of work-to-nonwork conflict and even fewer had high levels of nonwork-to-work conflict.
The proportion of workplaces offering home working and compressed hours increased between 2004 and 2011, whereas there was a decrease in arrangements for reducing working hours and job-sharing. Any changes did not appear to be related to the intensity of the recession, with the exception of the decline in arrangements for reducing working hours which was the only practice where change was related to the extent to which the workplace was adversely affected by the recession. There were some differences in employees’ use of practices according to whether they had experienced recessionary action; home working was more commonly used by such employees and may have played a role in managing the recession, not least as it may help reduce estate costs (see also Lyonette et al. in Chapter 4).

In common with existing evidence showing that any increase between 2004 and 2011 in the proportion of employees perceiving management to be supportive was largely confined to private sector employees (van Wanrooy et al., 2013), the proportion of private sector employees who perceived their managers to be understanding of WLB increased. It remained stable among male public sector employees and fell among female public sector employees. This may in part reflect the effects of austerity within public sector workplaces as some managers altered their attitudes or employees had direct experience of changes in managerial behaviour. Yet in both the public and private sectors, employees who experienced recessionary action were less likely to consider managers supportive of their WLB needs.

Overall, the recession does not appear to have had a significant effect on the practices offered by employers, or the attitudes of managers in the private sector. Matching the latter differentiation between sectors, lower take up of job-sharing and reduced working hours by employees experiencing recessionary action was confined to the public sector. This is
consistent with the idea that employees may be less willing to make use of such arrangements in a harsher economic climate, particularly perhaps for practices that make employees less visible to the employer. Flexi-time was more commonly used by public sector employees experiencing recessionary action; this could potentially be used to better match working hours to the demands of the job and so its use may not be as likely to generate concerns over job security among employees.

Employees experiencing recessionary action were more likely to report high work–nonwork conflict. This applied for both private and public sector employees but because the extent of recessionary action was greater in the public sector, public sector employees were disproportionately affected. Nevertheless, levels of work-nonwork conflict remained higher among private sector employees.

The research has two main limitations. First, no 2004 benchmark is available for the use of practices or work–nonwork conflict. We are thus unable to know if employees have reduced their usage of WLB practices and we have no direct means of testing if work-to-nonwork conflict is higher or lower post-recession. Second, managers were only asked whether practices were available to any employee within their workplace, and so it is not possible to ascertain whether employers may have changed the proportion of employees within the workplace for whom the practices were provided. Nor are we able to identify in detail the way the practices were being used and the rationale behind their use.

The overall conclusion of the study is that in the private sector the recession has had little effect on management practice, but actions taken by managers in the light of recessionary pressures have had some effect on employees’ work-to-nonwork conflict. Such conflict
remained higher among private sector employees. The public sector has also seen relatively little change in formal provision, but managers’ attitudes towards WLB have become less supportive over this period (both as reported by managers and as perceived by employees). Reduced employee use of certain flexible working arrangements was also confined to the public sector. Differences in trends between sectors, particularly in management attitudes, may reflect some impact of the austerity programme in the public sector. Given the importance of supportive management to employees, it is important to monitor and understand more fully any trend towards less favourable attitudes on the part of managers towards employees’ WLB. It may reflect a more instrumental attitude to WLB, a theme which is taken up by Lyonette et al. in Chapter 4.

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References


Figure 3.1

Employees perceiving managers to be supportive of their WLB needs, cell per cent

Base: all employees in workplaces with 5 or more employees, excluding employees not at the workplace during recession. Figures are based on responses from 18,594 employees.
Figure 3.2

Work–life conflict, according to number of changes employee experienced in recession, cell per cent

Base: all employees in workplaces with 5 or more employees, excluding employees not at the workplace during recession. Figures are based on responses from 19,017 employees.