

DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORKPLACES IN LATVIA: EXPLORATION OF OBSTRUCTIVE AND FACILITATIVE FACTORS

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—Abstract —

Development of family-friendly workplaces is an important aspect within the context of social inclusion and sustainability of society. Its importance is also recognized at European Union level in relation to European Union strategic aims. In order to promote development of family-friendly working environment it is important to identify and evaluate obstructive and facilitative factors. The aim of the paper is the clarification of what hinders and what facilitates formation of family-friendly workplaces in Latvia. The research is based on 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with experts and 36 semi-structured interviews with employers of different business organizations in Latvia.

The research results reveal that development of family-friendly working environment is a multidimensional process and the several participants (social agents) must get involved. During the research process acquired data discover problematic issues related to allocation of responsibility between state, local municipalities and private sector in the context of empowerment of the required infrastructure for work-family reconciliation. The research shows that at present there is a lack of information, knowledge and studies of the real benefits gained by all the parties involved, when organizations implement different initiatives, provisions, programs or strategies with the goal of promoting workers' work and family reconciliation possibilities.

Key Words: *family-friendly workplace, obstructive factors, facilitative factors*

JEL Classification: M14, M50, M52

1. INTRODUCTION

Work-family issues have become a crucial challenge to the largest part of the society. In the context of solutions, an essential role is played by what is meant by concepts of family-friendly workplace or work-family policies. It has been defined as arrangements to support employees faced with reconciling the competing demands of work and family in today's fast-paced complex environment (Newman M., Mathews K., 1999). Family-friendly provisions include a range of leave, working-time flexibility and child care arrangements, delivered through statutory entitlements and formal or informal provisions at the workplace (Whitehouse G., Haynes M., Macdonald F., Arts D., 2007). Different types of strategy can be pointed out: strategies that enable employees to take time off for a longer period, such as maternity leave; strategies that allow employees to take leave on very short notice, such emergency leave; strategies that encompass flexible work arrangements; strategies that encompass child care arrangements to enable employees to outsource care tasks (Den Dulk L., Peper B., 2009). Generally, the principles of family-friendly workplaces are universal, but each organization seeks their own configuration of family support strategy.

Within the context of sustainable development of the society, family-friendly workplaces - beyond doubt - are considered to be a very important resource. Creation and formation of family-friendly working environment would facilitate the solution of important problems and concerns on the societal level, for example, promotion of employment and lasting provision of workforce, increase of fertility-rate and the number of children in families, guarantee of gender equality and reduction of gender segregation, as well as promotion of improvement of overall quality of life. So in the foreground, there are the issues of the concept of common good. The understanding of family-friendly workplace varies from its bounding with corporate social responsibility and human resource management policy to gender equality and social inclusion issues.

In order to promote development of family-friendly workplaces it is important to identify and evaluate obstructive and facilitative factors. The aim of the paper is the clarification of what hinders and what facilitates formation of family-friendly workplaces in Latvia. For making out the particular paper the data from the research project "Creating of Family-Friendly Work Environment in Latvia: View of Business Organization" are used. The research is based on 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with experts (organizational psychologist and consultant, representatives of Latvian Association of Personnel Management, representatives

of Employers' Confederation of Latvia, representatives of Ministry of Welfare of the Republics of Latvia, representatives of trade unions, demographers etc.) and 36 semi-structured interviews with employers of different business organizations in Latvia. During the research process much attention was paid making use of the stakeholder approach, getting the vision of the situation from different perspectives.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Development of family-friendly workplaces is theoretically analyzed using two theoretical perspectives: Rational Choice Perspective and Institutional Theory. Rational Choice perspective explains implementation of family-friendly initiatives in organizations using the assessment of contributions and gain and the calculation of profit and cost. Organizations will implement and maintain the family-friendly initiatives in their workplaces if the gain is bigger than the contribution.

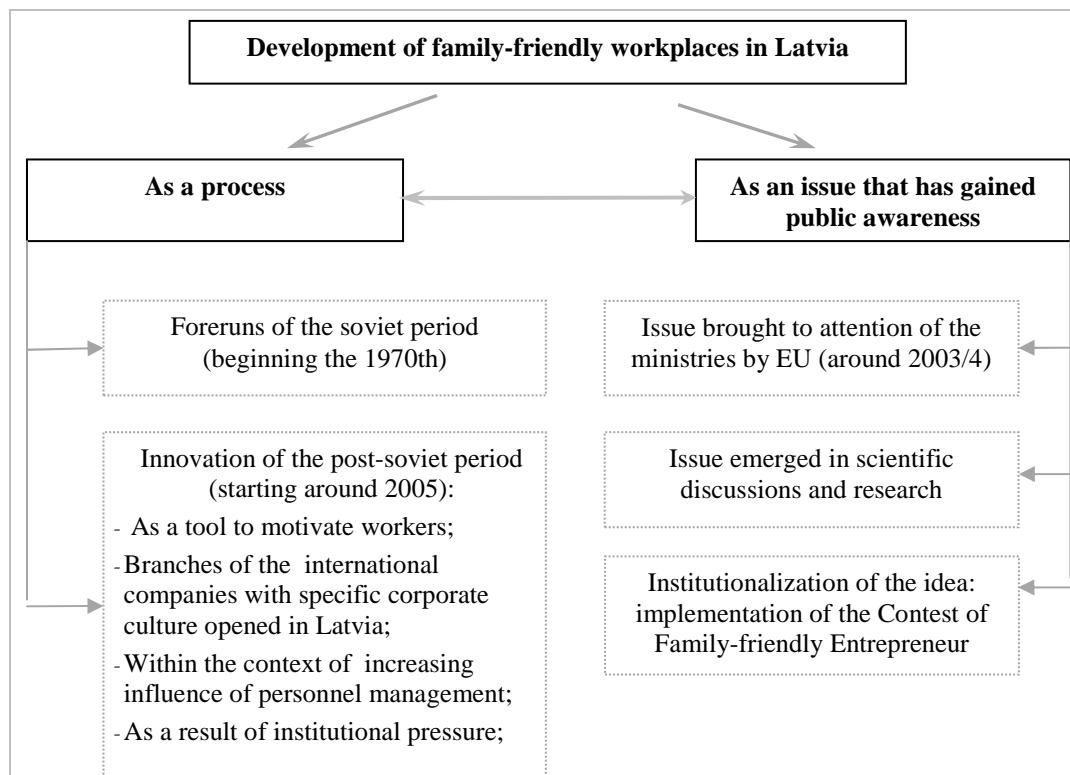
If the Rational Choice perspective focuses more on the internal environmental factors of an organization, Institutional theory accentuates the influence of the external environmental factors on the implementation and maintaining of family-friendly initiatives. Within the framework of the Institutional Theory, there are three types of factors distinguished: normative, mimetic and coercive factors. The implementation of family-friendly initiatives can take place without deep conviction of the management of their effectiveness and chances to improve the economic indicators of an organization (Wood S., de Menezes L., 2010). So, the conclusion can be made that development of family-friendly workplaces mainly depends on: (1) how much the processes inside of an organization have come to a head causing employers to implement family-friendly initiatives; (2) the influence of the external environment of an organization that moves organizations to implement family-friendly policies either forcefully or voluntarily.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORKPLACES IN LATVIA

Based on the research data, it is possible to discuss the development of family-friendly workplaces in Latvia. The time period of the development of family-friendly workplaces in Latvia is more or less disputable. We must distinguish two matters: the process of the development of family-friendly workplaces and the

aspect that has gained public awareness and is discussed nationwide. If we want to describe the development of family-friendly workplaces as a process, we must separate the soviet and the post-soviet periods. The contribution and experience of the soviet period has influenced the nowadays understanding and possibilities of the development of family-friendly work environment. During the post-soviet period, the development of family-friendly workplaces can be associated with the first five years of the new Millennia when many international companies entered Latvia with their own corporate culture and family-friendly initiatives as a part of this culture. The second one factor is linked to the aspect of economic growth and the necessity to attract and motivate workers; also it can be explained as the increase of the development and advancement of the area of personnel management and human resource policy. The figure 1 shows the time perspective of the development of family-friendly workplaces in Latvia.

Figure 1. Development of family-friendly workplaces in Latvia in time perspective



Source: figure developed by the author

Former practises of the development of family-friendly workplaces have been facilitated by the sum of several factors: (1) coercive factors that are associated to legislative norms; (2) mimetic factors that include imitation of other companies, copying of ideas and transfer of practises from the parent companies; (3) normative factors that are connected to notion of good organizational practice and are spread through educational institutions and professional organizations. Normative factors also include the pressure of particular social groups (usually the representatives of employees) which turned out to be an essential instrument in the situation of the shortage of workforce for influencing employers' to create more favourable conditions in workplaces; (4) situational factors that do not imply the implementation of family-friendly initiatives as a strategic approach when employers are willing to assist some of their workers when it is needed. The interest of employers to show initiative to promote work-family reconciliation for their employees is situational and occasional and most the time is explained by employer's desire to attract or keep particular employee in the company; (5) rational choice factors that are linked to Y theory notion about the motivation and guidance of workers, as well as positive previous experience in employees' support. In this case an employer sees more benefits than expenses.

Presently in Latvia we can witness polarisation of perceptions in regard to the existence of family-friendly workplaces. On the one hand, there is an opinion that working environment in Latvia is actually family-unfriendly, based on the fact that there are few organizations that are defined as family-friendly, since the status of family-friendly entrepreneur has been granted to eleven companies only. On the other hand, the research shows that there are many workplaces in Latvia that are family-friendly in various ways, but they do not popularize or highlight these aspects; besides, some of the family-friendly initiatives are considered to be a norm and they are not appreciated in this aspect. It can be explained both by the work legislation norms and requirements and by the employers' attitude issues and informal practises. The experience of organizations in the aspect of family-friendly workplaces are not being advanced in Latvia; the negative issues in workplaces gain much more attention in the public level thus creating a negative perception of working environment in Latvia as being family-unfriendly.

4. OBSTRUCTIVE AND FACILITATIVE FACTORS

The development of family-friendly work environment is being acknowledged and encouraged by different stakeholders in Latvia that emphasise significant nationwide benefits. Its importance is also recognized at European Union level in

relation to European Union strategic aims. The development of family-friendly work environment is a multifaceted process that requires involvement and participation of several actors (social agents).

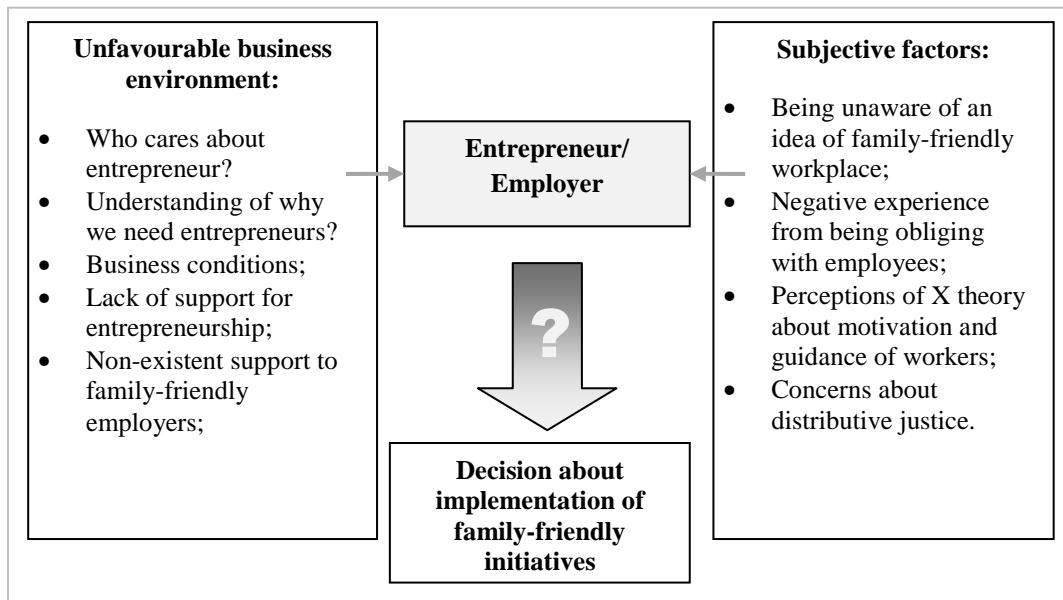
The dominating obstructive factor in the area of development of family-friendly workplaces is the lack of awareness, knowledge and understanding about work-family interface:

- Employers, employees and society as a whole obscurity of the solutions in the area of work-family reconciliation.
- Ignorance and lack of knowledge about the essence and possibilities of family-friendly workplace. Lack of information, knowledge and research about the real benefits for all parties involved. Insufficient activity of social scientists in the public sphere in this area.
- The lack of good practices or insufficient popularization of such. The lack of information about the experience in the area in other countries.
- The lack of knowledge about the implementation of such initiatives, of how to abide by the law and not have problems with controlling bodies. In some cases discussions on the legitimacy of such initiatives.
- Sceptical attitude towards the expedience of such initiatives.

The developmental processes of family-friendly workplaces are influenced by stereotypes and stigmatization caused by both the lack of understanding or simplified understanding of the issues of work-family reconciliation and by perception that family-friendly initiatives can only be afforded by large companies and that the implementation of such initiatives can be carried out only in ‘good times’ and is inevitably connected with high cost. The narrow and stereotyped understanding of family-friendly workplace is dominant in contemporary Latvia and is linked to nurseries in organizations ignoring other elements. There is also a perception that family-friendly workplace is associated with mothers only, that is, affects just one category of employees.

From the perspective of employers we can distinguish two groups of factors that hold back decisions about the implementation of family-friendly initiatives in organizations: (1) unfavourable business environment as an exogenous factor; (2) the range of subjective factors that are linked to the employer’s personality. Figure 2 shows the most significant obstructive factors in the area of implementation of family-friendly initiatives from the employers’ perspective.

Figure 2. Obstructive factors in the implementation of family-friendly initiatives from employers' perspective



Source: figure developed by the author

The research shows that different social agents scarcely get involved in the development of family-friendly work environment. It would be unrealistic and unjust to require employers to solve all these problems on their own. What are the other players? What are other social agents? What are the roles of different players? It must be discovered, discussed and implemented. There are many misaligned questions about the division of responsibilities between state, municipalities and private sector in the context of the development of the necessary infrastructure to facilitate work-family reconciliation. Quotations of the interviews confirm: „*For example, the forms of childcare have been a problem on the national level. The state shoves it on municipalities; municipalities point out the lack of finances, but a businessman has to solve it because he needs the particular employee. So it turns out that both employer and employee pay double. Why do entrepreneur have to assume the functions of the state and municipality?*” also, “*employers are placed in a difficult situation; they must compensate the losses when their workers stop working during the childcare leave.*” The research reveals that on the part of the state there has not been enough support for both individuals and families and employers to facilitate work-family reconciliation.

The development of family-friendly workplaces can be attained using two approaches – compulsion or facilitation. So there are coercive instruments vs. facilitative instruments. Legislation is an essential instrument used to achieve particular goals in the society to achieve compliance with social norms. Through legislation it is possible to also create more family-friendly work environment. Using legislative tools the types of leaves, their conditions and duration is regulated, as well as work-time conditions etc. Employers are aware that coercive factors are a very effective way to influence the behaviour of organizations but they believe that Latvian work legislation is more beneficial and favourable towards employee than employer and that organizations are already experiencing difficulties due to existing legal provisions. To employers additional provisions in the law would not be the most suitable solution.

Both experts and employers agree that the most effective facilitative factor would be some economic mechanisms, for example, granting family-friendly entrepreneurs some privileges, like tax allowances. There must be some material incentive; employer must see the benefit of being family-friendly. Employers draw attention to, first, more favourable entrepreneurship environment on a state level. It would be logical to support the companies that have childcare facilities granting them tax advantages. But even though this type of suggestion seems very rational, the interviewees were sceptical about it being carried out. The second possible economic instrument is granting one-time financial support for implementation of particular family-friendly initiatives, similar to what the State Employment Agency did to promote the integration of people with disabilities into the labour market. Such suggestion has not been discussed on political level.

Considering the previous experience, it must be concluded that different employers' assessment systems like contests, tops, and awards are rather ineffective instrument in facilitation of family-friendly workplace in Latvia. Despite the fact that it is the way to for an organization to gain popularity, to promote good practice, organizations do not seek to participate in these contests and not always consider the status and the sign of recognition gained as a result of some assessment system as being useful and preferable. The employers' assessment systems could become an effective instrument in facilitating the development of family-friendly workplaces if the valuation obtained or the certificate could serve as *a ticket*, for example, to attain tax allowances. Respectively, it would give some instrumental benefit along the current benefit of an affective nature.

Another necessary instrument in the area of the development of family-friendly work environment is to boost public awareness and knowledge of the problems and solutions of work-family reconciliation, as well as the role and possibilities of family-friendly workplaces. Work-family reconciliation refers to the society as a whole, so an information support is necessary both concerning the broader society and particular social groups. This information support can take a whole variety of forms: (1) publications and programs in mass media; (2) development of informative and educational websites (or sections in websites); (3) social advertisements; (4) thematic campaigns; (5) seminars; (6) consultations. The way must be found to raise the awareness and knowledge level for different groups of social agents – employers, representatives of local municipalities, policy-makers and decision-makers. If the society would receive information about these issues on a consistent basis, some part of it would reflect upon how work and family life are reconciled and they would define problems and seek more effective solutions to facilitate the process. We must raise the awareness of the necessity to facilitate the balance between individual interests and sustainability of the society as a whole.

Prerequisites for employers to willingly implement family-friendly initiatives are not unequivocal since employers are not a homogeneous group. One category of employers that tend to show support employees will do it if they are informed about different initiatives and the ways to practically implement them. We should take into account the influence of subjective experience, when an employer is motivated to support employees based on his own experience and understanding. Another category of employers will implement family-friendly initiatives when their business has reached financial stability and have found relatively ‘free’ finances that can be invested into the improvement of work conditions and well-being of workers. The knowledge about these issues and/or the attitude and suggestions of personnel manager can play a crucial role in these processes. The financial success of a company is the main motivational force for the majority of employers. The third category of employers will do it guided by rational considerations: if the gain from family-friendly initiatives will outweigh the expenses and if these initiatives will agree with their subjective perception of personnel management. So one of the facilitative factors of the development of family-friendly workplaces is/would be contribution and benefit identification and information of the results. If the awareness of benefits could be raised for all parties involved, there is a reason to believe that we would see more family-friendly workplaces.

5. CONCLUSION

During the research process acquired data discover problematic issues related to allocation of responsibility between state, local municipalities and private sector in the context of empowerment of the required infrastructure for work-family reconciliation. There is a need for structural changes and visionary, long-term development. The research shows that at present there is a lack of information, knowledge and studies of the real benefits gained by all the parties involved, when organizations implement different initiatives, provisions, programs or strategies with the goal of promoting workers' work and family reconciliation possibilities. The research results demonstrate the role of social and exogenous factors in the processes of the development of family-friendly work environment. The obstructive factors and the prevention possibilities lay both in the micro and meso, as well as macro levels.

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