

Flexible working is still very much 'a work in progress'

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Demand for remote, hybrid and flexible working remains high, but the challenges in implementing these practices in the post-Covid workplace highlight the need for clearer structures and legislation, according to employment experts at the IRN Conference 2022.

Director of CIPD Ireland, **Mary Connaughton**, speaking at the IRN Conference in Dublin last week, emphasised the novelty of remote and flexible working for many, stating "we sometimes forget that we're only out of kind of lockdowns and Covid for just over six months, so this is still work in progress, this is still experimentation."

The competitiveness of the labour market has placed further pressure on employers to implement flexible working in order to retain and attract employees. In the joint CIPD-IRN pay and work practices survey, 80% of employers named recruitment as their biggest challenge.

Addressing the Conference, An Tánaiste **Leo Varadkar** said: "The pandemic showed us what was possible and now we need to make sure that remote and flexible and hybrid working becomes an established feature in our working lives".

He acknowledged the challenges with the planned Right to Request Remote Working legislation, in trying to "strike the right balance" but said he still hopes to publish the Bill before the end of the year. He has indicated that the original provisions of the draft scheme, which were met with opprobrium earlier this year, will be changed.

SOURCE OF FRICTION

Dr Laura Bambrick, Head of Social Policy and Employment Affairs at ICTU, said members reported that differences as to what constituted hybrid working, in terms of days in the office, were a source of friction.

She said strong legislation was needed in order to fairly resolve disputes between employers and employees. Additionally, the upcoming Work Life Balance Bill, which will give the right to request flexible working for parents of children under 12 and for carers, attracted criticism.

Ms Connaughton said that "in reality we should be moving to the right to request flexible working for everyone, because otherwise we're going to be bringing in a real divisiveness within companies."

Dr Bambrick also commented on the limitations of the Bill, stating that “unless we make remote working arrangements commonplace right along from the top down and across the organisation, we will see it mommy-tracked.”

She noted the consequences of ‘mommy-tracking’ include the closing down of career opportunities for women and presenteeism.

Dr Bambrick further noted how not all jobs are conducive to remote working and the emerging Work Life privilege gap, or what is called ‘The Zoom Divide’.

She said in order to prevent hierarchies opening up within the same organisation and team , “we need to broaden conversation, and stop talking about remote and talking more about flexible working arrangements ”

CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORKING

Renata Kohlman, lead facilitator of leading remote teams at Grow Remote, outlined some of the challenges faced by companies, including: engagement, intentionality in communication and ensuring equal opportunity for all employees (remote and in office). She said strong leadership from the top down is critical.

Ms Connaughton noted the challenges of remote working around well-being, culture, onboarding and balancing the needs of the organisation with that of the individual.

She emphasised the need to establish core days in the workplace and to have people on site together but also acknowledged the challenges of implementing a remote work model and recommended trialling pilot policies with reviews and tracking.

The projection from earlier this year was that companies are moving toward implementing two to three in-office days per week.

However some companies, such as Deloitte, have not implemented mandated in-office days. **Sinead Gogan**, Chief HR Officer at Deloitte, outlined that their programme ‘Deloitte Works’ trusts employees to choose what days to come in on.

Ms Kohlman said that “we are in the middle of writing history” in relation to the management and implementation of flexible working programmes and highlighted the importance of adopting a supportive approach during this “continuous learning journey.”