



Less is more in the world of work

EU research shows that cutting hours makes for happier staff while productivity is unaffected, Geraldine Abrahams reports

A recent *Financial Times*/Harris poll in which almost 10,000 people over 16 in Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain were interviewed has confirmed that UK employees continue to work the longest hours in Europe.

That suggests that either Britons are more hard-working than their mainland European counterparts or they are less effective.

It would appear, though, that there is a north-south divide in the European mainland itself – 65 per cent of Germans and 52 per cent of French oppose government controls on working hours while the more laid-back Spanish and Italians appear more contented with their current work-life balance.

According to evidence built up over the past 100 or more years, the Southern Europeans have it right.

More than a century ago, Ernst Abbe, director of the Zeiss Optical works in

comment about employees who leave early," suggests Elaine Peacock, a consultant, at Joslin Rowe recruitment consultants in Glasgow.

Alan Crozier, HR specialist and director of Q4 Consulting, agrees, and considers "presenteeism" – being seen to be at work outside normal hours, believing it to be culturally expected and/or rewarded – to be a factor in some corporate cultures.

"If you're not there early, or not staying late you may be considered uncommitted," he says. "That's a hard one to break because it may involve implicit peer pressure and an implied obligation. It forms part of the psychological rather than the actual contract."

If the contract is psychological, actual workplace structural change affects people's attitudes to work.

"Companies have stripped out so many layers, particularly of management, that

Elaine Peacock. "After all, contracted to work for 10 hours a day, most people will simply make their work stretch out over that time period."

Culture is clearly a major factor in determining working hours. That being the case, Gordon Thomson, operations director, Scotland and Ireland, for Cisco Systems believes: "We definitely face a serious cultural challenge here in the UK, which must be overcome if we are going to reach our full productive potential."

"At its root is an obsession with working hours," he says. "When faced with increased competition, within companies and across markets, our instinct is simply to work longer."

"This approach is calamitous for our non-working lives and, in terms of tangible results, inevitably delivers diminishing returns."

Such practices seem even more outmoded when the effect of technology on production is brought into the equation.

"Technology has drastically improved productivity over recent years, but it has also raised expectations, in terms of response times, availability and service levels," says Thomson. "The belief that ever longer hours are always the answer has left many UK companies unable to adapt to this changing environment."

"We need to make better use of the technology available, to underpin a more modern, results-focused working culture. This may mean fewer of us in nine-to-five, desk-bound office jobs."

"Our daily routine will be driven by specific goals and supported by advanced mobility and communication solutions. Commuting will become an opportunity to catch up on emails, while a worker taking an afternoon off for a child's sports-day will be perfectly acceptable – because the work will get done."

Geraldine Abrahams is a freelance business journalist.

'LONG HOURS BECOME PART OF THE SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE, THE WAY THINGS ARE DONE'

Germany, examined and recorded the effect of reducing the working day from nine hours to eight. He discovered that a moderate reduction in working time increased output.

Similar experiments by Henry Ford in the 1920s showed that car workers could produce more in five days than in six days.

Almost 90 years later, after countless exercises echoing those findings, UK employees appear to be addicted to the concept of long working hours.

British workers, it seems, while waxing lyrical about the benefits of a balance between work and life, have little or no desire to apply the rhetoric to real life.

"We still can't shake the idea that being last in the office impresses the boss, whilst employers are often guilty of passing

people have had to take on a greater," says Crozier. "This obviously impacts the time required to achieve the desired results and before you know it, people are working excessive hours, attending meetings to plan for meetings."

"They become part of the social architecture of the way things are done and their overarching purpose is often lost. People have to work longer to get the real job done."

When faced with Europe's model of short hours and higher productivity, a clichéd view tends to come into play.

"There is a lingering stereotype that workers in European countries have a more relaxed approach to work, when in fact everyone probably still achieves the same amount but in different time frames." notes