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A shift in attitudes to flexible working

Some commentators have warned that Beverley Hughes's suggestion of extending the right to request flexible working to all UK workers is further proof that old Labour will replace New Labour when Tony Blair steps down.

However, business leaders warmly welcomed this week's announcement from the children's minister.

Employers are increasingly aware that an employee will go the extra mile if he or she has a sense of autonomy in the workplace. One way of achieving this is by offering workers some level of control over the balance between their work and home lives.

Making what were once called child-friendly work policies available to all of the Britain's 29 million workers may avoid pitfalls, such as shift-swapping, that can undermine flexible working.

Uncontrolled swapping of shifts, in which workers are allowed to "work around some of the working time directives by doing too many of the wrong kind of shifts, too closely together, for example ... can be very damaging to the individual and probably damaging as far as their work contribution is concerned," says Ivan Robertson from Robertson Cooper occupational psychologists.

This certainly would not help the UK drag itself up from the bottom of the EU productivity league.

According to the CBI, employers have granted 90% of flexible working requests. But if bosses are just responding to "challenging" employees rather than having an organisation-wide policy, they risk disharmony in the workplace.

"What you are doing is creating little ghettos of flexible working, which impacts very negatively on people who are not doing it because in some ways most organisations and business are joined up to some extent," says Robertson.

There is also another danger. Introducing the right to request flexible working in the wrong jobs can cause staffing issues. "One of employers' biggest complaints about flexible working is being short-staffed," says Robertson. "If you don't think through policy or when roles require having people around at certain times of the day, you are going to have problems."

Matt Keating

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