

Work-Life Balance between Theory and Practice. A Comparative Analysis

Viorela Beatrice Iacovoiu

Faculty of Economic Sciences, Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești, Bd. București 39, 100680, Ploiești, Romania

e-mail: vioiacovoiu@yahoo.com

Abstract

Starting from the theory and empirical studies in the field, this paper presents a comparative analysis among OECD Member States, based on several relevant indicators in terms of work-life balance. The results underlined that time spent on leisure and personal care was comparatively lower in most of the countries where the percentage of employees working very long hours is high, which suggests that working overtime negatively affects work-life balance. Therefore, we concluded that, in order to improve the balance between work and daily living, the key issue is to optimally combine measures aimed to reduce working hours with the one targeting flexibilisation of working time schedules, taking into consideration the sources of work-life imbalance, such as market imperfections, specifics of the job, technological change, globalization etc. In our opinion, a better work-life balance will bring benefits not only to workers and their family, but also to employers, as it could enhance the employees' performance at work.

Keywords: *work-life balance; working hours; overtime; leisure time; comparative analysis.*

JEL Classification: *J22; N30*

Introduction

In the last two decades, more and more studies showed that the numbers of employees who worked very long hours have increased with negative consequences on both, their life and performance at work. It has been found that work-life imbalance negatively affects „the employees family relationship” (Pike, 2012) to the extent that „it could cause work-family conflict” (Alam, Biswas and Hassan, 2009; Doble and Supriya, 2010). Also, working 50 hours or more per week affects the employees physical and mental health due to depression, anxiety and stress related problems (Major, Klein and Ehrhart, 2002; Kinman and Jones, 2003; Mureșan, 2015). As a consequence, the employees performance at work is also affected, jeopardising „their life as a whole” (Kumarasamy, Pangil and Isa, 2016). Therefore, the balance between work and daily living is important not only for the employees but also for the employers, which explains the increasingly number of studies that address the issue of work-life balance, as is the case with the present study.

The Literature Review

The specialists and researchers in the field agreed that there are many factors that could influence the work-life balance nowadays. Some of the factors have a negative influence, such as “job demands” (Chiang, Birtch, Kwan, 2010), and “work overload” (Virick, Lilly, Casper, 2007), while others have a positive impact, as for example telework (Felstead, Jewson, Phizaklea and Walters, 2002; Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson and Andrey, 2008; Morganson, Major, Oborn, Verine and Heelan, 2010), and “job satisfaction” (Saif, Malik and Awan, 2010).

An important factor related to work-life balance is “emotional intelligence” defined as “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thoughts, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). In this respect, empirical studies conducted in India underlined that “emotional intelligence plays an important role for women employees who are trying to achieve a good work-life balance” (Ramanithilagam and Ramanigopal, 2012; JothiSree and Jyothi, 2012). Also, the empirical study conducted by Kumarasamy, Pangil and Isa (2016) in Malaysia found that “emotional intelligence is important for employees to acquire work-life balance”.

Another factor that affects the work-life balance is “organizational support” in the form of programmes, such as “flexible work arrangements” and “family leave policies”, as well as initiatives that can help employees to successfully combine work and daily living (McCarthy, Cleveland, Hunter, Darcy and Grady, 2013). Regarding the impact of organizational support on work-life balance, the results of several empirical studies showed that organizational support has “a positive effect on work-life balance” because a supportive organization “understands the needs of its employees, inside and outside the organization”, and provides “the support that they need to succeed on the job and in life” (Amarakoon and Wickramasinghe, 2010; Nasurdin and Driscoll, 2012; Kumarasamy, Pangil and Isa, 2016).

A major factor that negatively affects the work-life balance is “work overload” defined as “the perception that one has too much to do” (Leiter and Schaufeli, 1996). Several researchers (Aryee, Srinivas and Tan, 2005; Vogel, 2012; Kumarasamy, Pangil and Isa, 2016) found that “work overload is detrimental to work-life balance” because the employees “often get frustrated that their work-life balance seems to be nonexistent” when they “are overloaded with work”.

Another factor that has a significant impact on work-life balance is advanced technology that “cannot be taken for granted and cannot be used excessively as it could be bad for work-life balance” (Kumarasamy, Pangil and Isa, 2016). On one hand, advanced technology can “enables a more flexible approach to when and where to work” but, on the other hand, it negatively affects the balance between work and daily living “by making work more accessible at all times of the day and night” (Lester, 1999). This statement is also supported by several empirical studies that found that “connectivity technology”, e-mail and tablets have a negative impact on work-life balance (Stephens, McGowan, Stoner and Robin, 2007; Waller and Ragsdell, 2012).

Other factors that have the potential to affect more or less the balance between work and daily living are occupation, wage, globalization and the organizational changes in firms’ structure (Cortés and Pan, 2016). Recent studies underlined that in some occupations, such as those in financial management, law and medical fields characterized by “greater temporal inflexibility”, “the incidence of overtime is common” and “the gender earnings gaps are the largest” (Goldin, 2014). Also, following the globalization that “has brought increased competition for low-skilled workers and opened global markets for high-skilled workers”, and the new technologies that “made skilled workers more productive and destroyed some low-skilled jobs”, wage rates “have become increasingly unequal, as high wage rates have increased while low wage rates have stagnated or even fallen” (Acemoglu and Autor, 2011). As a consequence, in those economies where wage rates are comparatively lower, the employees usually work more hours, as for

example in CEE countries, Chile, Greece, Israel, South Korea and Mexico compared to highly developed European states (Iacovoïu, 2020).

Therefore, empirical studies in the field underline a great diversity of factors that have a negative or positive influence on work-life balance, suggesting that it is not easy to strike a better balance between work and personal life. Given this fact, any attempts to address the imbalance between work and daily living should be focused on “the sources of the returns to working long hours” because the “desirability and effectiveness” of such measures depend on the causes of the imbalance (Cortés and Pan, 2016). For example, if working very long hours is the result of market imperfections, government intervention to reduce working hours could enhance the household welfare. Then again, if working overtime is due to the specifics of the job or to technological change and globalization, policies targeting to reduce working time could have negative impact on firm productivity. In this case, policy focused on temporal flexibility enhancing by reorganizing work could be much more effective.

Regarding the working hours practice versus policy, studies in the field emphasize that there are significant discrepancies between OECD Member States even though most of them “have adopted regulation setting the normal working time between 40 and 48 hours per week, and requiring incentive for overtime” (Lung, 2005; Lee, McCann and Messenger, 2007). For example, workers in the United States and the United Kingdom “seem to be facing an epidemic of long hours” though national law requires an overtime premium for each hour over the normal working time that is 40 hours per week in the US and 48 hours in the UK (Barnard, Dakin and Hobbs, 2004; Lung, 2005). Also, in Greece, following economic hardship, government implemented austerity measures, such as “cutting minimum wages and overtime rates” in order to “increase labour market flexibility”. As a consequence, average working hours “which were already among the highest in Europe, have increased even more over the last couple of years” (Papadimitriou, 2013; Ioannidis et.al. 2014).

At the opposite pole are some highly developed European countries, such as Denmark, Germany, Norway, France and the Netherlands. For example, in the Netherlands, “The Working Hours Act” of 1996 and its 2007 revision allowed for “internal flexibilisation of working time schedules”, while “The Act on Flexibility and Security” of 1998 allowed for “external flexibilisation, by normalising flexible forms of employment such as temporary work, on call work and successive fixed term employment contracts”. As a result, the number of flexible workers increased from 2.1 million, in 2003, to 3.2 million, in 2015 (ISHN, 2020). Also, France reduced the statutory working week from 39 hours to 35 hours in 2000, for companies with more than 20 employees and, in 2002, for companies with 20 employees or fewer, allowing and encouraging employers “to negotiate flexible working-time arrangements with unions”. The impact was positive, as France has “one of the highest percentages of companies with highly flexible working time policies in Europe” (Askenazy, 2013; Lehndorff, 2014) and the working-life balance have significantly improved (businessculture.org, 2020).

Average Annual Hours Actually Worked per Worker

This indicator, measured “in terms of hours per worker per year”, is calculated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as “the total number of hours actually worked per year divided by the average number of people in employment per year”, covering “employees and self-employed workers”. It includes “regular work hours of full-time, part-time and part-year workers, paid and unpaid overtime, hours worked in additional jobs”, and excludes “time not worked because of public holidays, annual paid leave, own illness, injury and temporary disability, maternity leave, parental leave, schooling or training, slack work for technical or economic reasons, strike or labour dispute, bad weather, compensation leave and other reasons” (OECD, 2020). The data for the year 2018 are presented in the figure below (Figure 1).

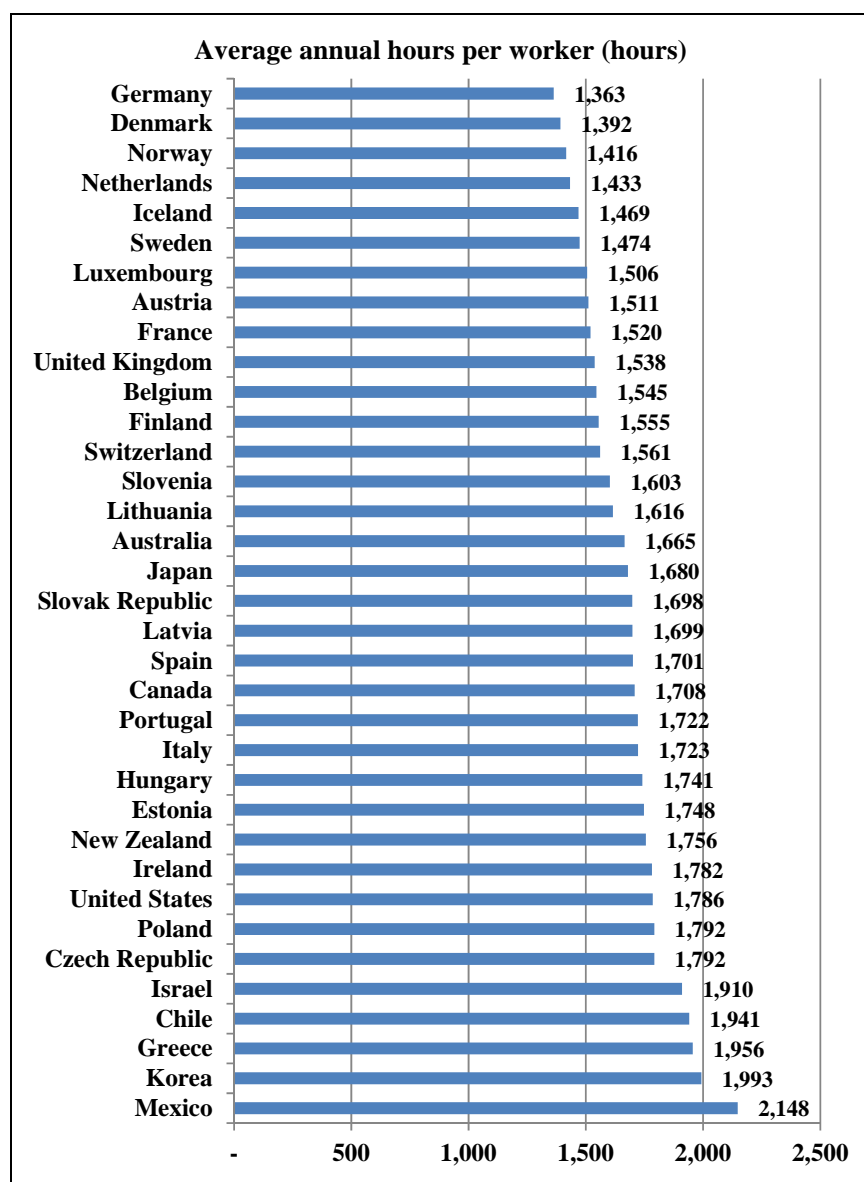


Fig. 1. Average annual hours actually worked per worker, 2018

Source: OECD, Statistics, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=10162>

There are significant differences between European states as well as between countries worldwide. Employees in the European countries work an average of 1,610 hours a year, respectively between 1,363 hours a year in Germany and 1,956 hours in Greece. Generally, workers in highly developed European countries work no more than 1,561 hours a year (Switzerland), while employees in Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Portugal and CEE countries, with the exception of Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia, work more than 1,700 hours a year. Compared to the European average, in other countries around the world, employees work more hours a year, respectively with: 55 hours more in Australia; 70 hours more in Japan; 100 hours more in Canada; 146 hours more in New Zealand; 176 hours more in the United States; 300 hours more in Israel; 331 hours more in Chile; 383 hours more in South Korea, and 538 hours more in Mexico.

Average Usual Weekly Hours

This indicator reflects the number of hours worked per week on the main job, full-time and part-time, including “the overtime that occurs systematically every day or week”, and excluding “time not worked on a usual basis” (OECD, 2020).

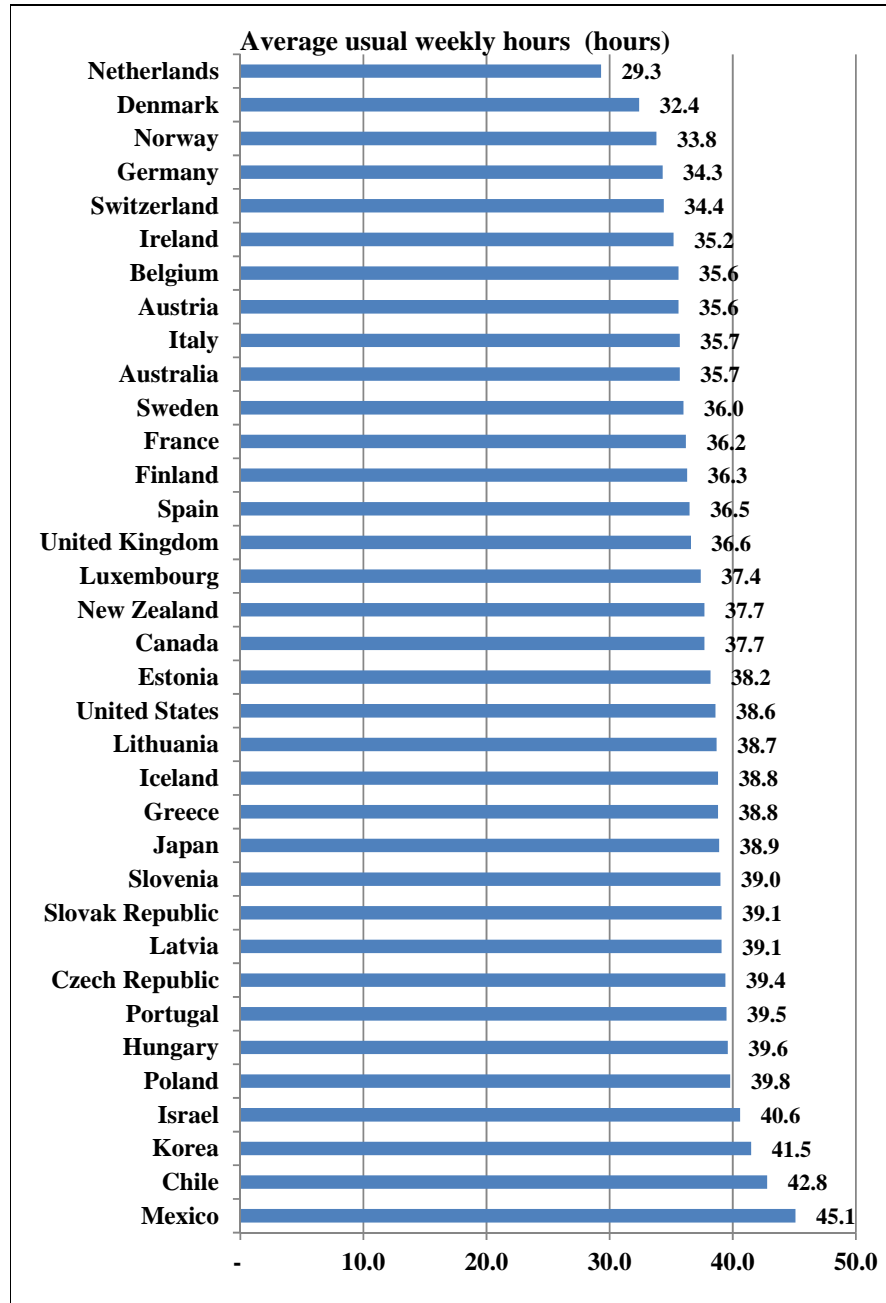


Fig. 2. Average usual weekly hours, 2018

Source: OECD, Statistics, https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=AVE_HRS; Canada - Statistics Canada, 2020; Japan – CEIC, Data, 2020; South Korea - The Korea Bizwire, S. Koreans’ Weekly Working Hours Decline in 2018.

At European level, compared to the average of 36.2 hours a week, employees work more with one to 3.5 hours per week in CEE countries as well as in Greece and Iceland (38.8 hours), Luxembourg (37.4 hours), and Portugal (39.5 hours), as presented in the figure above (Figure 2). It is also relevant the fact that in some highly developed European countries employees work less than 35 hours a week, such as Denmark (32.4 hours), Germany (34.3 hours), the Netherlands (29.3 hours), Norway (33.8 hours) and Switzerland (34.4 hours). Comparatively, in Israel, Chile, South Korea and Mexico, employees work more than 40 hours a week, and in Canada, New Zealand, Japan and the United States between 37.7 and 38.9 hours a week.

Comparative Analysis – Working Time

Compared to the European average, employees in Australia, Japan, the Slovak Republic, Latvia, Spain, Canada, Portugal, Italy, Hungary, Estonia, and New Zealand work more hours a year with 3.42% to 9.7%, while those from Ireland, the United States, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Israel work more with 10.68% to 18.63%. We note the case of Chile, Greece, South Korea and Mexico, where employees work more hours a year with 20.56% to 33.42% (Table 1).

Table 1. Countries with working hours over the European average (2018)

Countries	Average annual hours actually worked per worker			Average usual weekly hours	
	hours	rank	%	hours	%
Europe (26)	1,610	-	100.00	36.2	100.00
Lithuania	1,616	1	100.37	38.7	106.91
Australia	1,665	2	103.42	35.7	98.62
Japan	1,680	3	104.35	38.9	107.46
Slovak Republic	1,698	4	105.46	39.1	108.01
Latvia	1,699	5	105.53	39.1	108.01
Spain	1,701	6	105.65	36.5	100.83
Canada	1,708	7	106.09	37.7	104.14
Portugal	1,722	8	106.96	39.5	109.12
Italy	1,723	9	107.02	35.7	104.14
Hungary	1,741	10	108.14	39.6	109.39
Estonia	1,748	11	108.57	38.2	105.52
New Zealand	1,756	12	109.07	37.7	104.14
Ireland	1,782	13	110.68	35.2	97.24
United States	1,786	14	110.93	38.6	106.63
Poland	1,792	15	111.30	39.8	109.94
Czech Republic	1,792	16	111.30	39.4	108.84
Israel	1,910	17	118.63	40.6	112.15
Chile	1,941	18	120.56	42.8	118.23
Greece	1,956	19	121.49	38.8	107.18
South Korea	1,993	20	123.79	41.5	114.64
Mexico	2,148	21	133.42	45.1	124.59

Source: Own calculation based on data presented in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.

Regarding the usual weekly hours, it stand out four countries where employees work more with over 12% compared to the European average, respectively Israel (12.15%), South Korea (14.64%), Chile (18.23%), and Mexico (24.59%). Also, employees in Spain, Canada, Italy, Estonia, the United States, Greece, Australia, Japan, the Slovak Republic, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Hungary and Poland work more hours a week with 0.83% to 9.94%.

Work-Life Balance

The balance between working time and daily living is best reflected by two indicators calculated by OECD, respectively *Employees working very long hours* and *Time devoted to leisure and personal care*. The first indicator shows the “percentage of employees working fifty hours or more a week, on average” and the second one emphasizes the “average number of hours per day spent on leisure and personal care, including sleeping and eating” (OECD, 2020). The values of these indicators for the latest available year are presented in Appendix.

In Europe, the percentage of employees working very long hours is between 0.4% in the Netherlands and Switzerland, and 15.1% in Iceland. Generally, the percentage of employees working very long hours in highly developed European countries is below European average of 4.8%, excepted Ireland (5.3%), Austria (6.7%), France (7.7%), the United Kingdom (12.2%) and Iceland (15.1%). Also, the percentage is above European average in the Czech Republic, Poland, Greece and Portugal. We note that in most of the countries were the percentage of employees working very long hours is above European average, the number of hours devoted to daily living (leisure and personal care) is below European average of 15.2 hours, with the exception of France and Ireland (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative analysis regarding Work-Life Balance (latest available year)

Countries	Employees working very long hours			Time devoted to leisure and personal care (hours)
	%	rank	%*	
Europa (25)*	4.8	-	100.00	15.2
Ireland	5.3	1	110.42	15.3
Czech Republic	5.6	2	116.67	15.1
Poland	6.0	3	125.00	14.4
Greece	6.4	4	133.33	14.7
Austria	6.7	5	139.58	14.6
France	7.7	6	160.42	16.4
Portugal	8.3	7	172.92	14.9
Chile	9.7	8	202.08	13.3
United States	11.1	9	231.25	14.4
United Kingdom	12.2	10	254.17	14.9
Australia	13.0	11	270.83	14.4
Iceland	15.1	12	314.58	14.1
New Zealand	15.1	13	314.58	14.9
Israel	15.4	14	320.83	13.7
Japan	17.9	15	372.92	14.1
South Korea	25.2	16	525.00	14.7
Mexico	28.7	17	597.92	12.4

Source: OECD, Statistics, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance/>;

* - Own calculations.

Compared to the European average, the percentage of employees working very long hours in other countries around the world is much higher, respectively with: 102.08% in Chile; 131.25% in the United States; 170.83% in Australia; 214.58% in New Zealand; 220.83% in Israel; 272.92% in Japan; 425% in South Korea and 497.92% in Mexico (tab.2). Also, it has to be notice that workers in these countries devote to leisure and personal care fewer hours than the European ones, especially in Mexico (12.4 hours), Chile (13.3 hours), Israel (13.7 hours) and Japan (14.1 hours).

Consequently, data presented above shows that working very long hours affects the balance between working time and daily living, reducing the time spent on leisure and personal care.

Conclusion

There are significant differences between European states as well as between countries worldwide in terms of average weekly and annual working hours. At European level, workers in highly developed European countries, such as Germany, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland and France work less than 36.2 hours per week and 1,520 hours a year, while employees in Greece, Estonia, the Slovak Republic, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Portugal and Poland work more than 38.7 hours per week and 1,700 hours a year. Compared to the European employees that work on average of 36.2 hours per week and 1,610 hours a year, employees in other OECD Member States work more hours per week with 4.14% (Canada and New Zealand) to 24.59% (Mexico), and respectively per year with 3.42% (Australia) to 33.42% (Mexico). Thus, among OECD Member States, it stand out four economies where average weekly and annual working hours is much higher than European average, namely Chile, Israel, South Korea and Mexico.

Significant differences were also found in terms of work-life balance reflected by the percentage of employees working very long hours and time devoted to leisure and personal care. Thus, in Europe, the percentage of employees working very long hours is below European average of 4.8% in highly developed European countries, excepted Ireland, Austria, France and the United Kingdom, while in the Czech Republic, Poland, Greece and Portugal is above European average. Compared to the European average, the percentage of employees working very long hours around the world is much higher, particularly in New Zealand, Israel, Japan, South Korea and Mexico. We noted that time spent on leisure and personal care was comparatively lower in most of the countries where the percentage of employees working very long hours is high, which suggests that working overtime negatively affects work-life balance.

Given these findings and taking into account the results of other empirical studies as well as the good practices in several European countries that have managed to improve the balance between work and daily living, as for example the Netherlands, we appreciate that the key issue is to optimally combine measures aimed to reduce working hours with the one targeting flexibilisation of working time schedules, taking into consideration the sources of work-life imbalance, such as market imperfections, specifics of the job, technological change, globalization etc. In our opinion, this type of policy will allow employees to reconcile their work with their personal life, positively influencing the well-being of all members in a household. It can also enable parents to balance working time and family time, allowing women, in particular, to participate in the labour market. Moreover, as researchers in the field pointed out, a better balance between work and daily living will bring benefits not only to workers but also to employers, as it could enhance the employees' performance at work.

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APPENDIX

Table 3. Work-life balance, latest available year

Countries	Employees working very long hours (%)	Time devoted to leisure and personal care (hours)
Australia	13.0	14.4
Austria	6.7	14.6
Belgium	4.8	15.7
Canada	3.7	14.6
Chile	9.7	13.3
Czech Republic	5.6	15.1
Denmark	2.3	15.9
Estonia	2.4	14.9
Finland	3.8	15.2
France	7.7	16.4
Germany	4.3	15.6

Table 3(cont.)

Greece	6.4	14.7
Hungary	3.0	15.1
Iceland	15.1	14.1
Ireland	5.3	15.3
Israel	15.4	13.7
Italy	4.1	16.5
Japan	17.9	14.1
South Korea	25.2	14.7
Latvia	1.3	13.8
Luxembourg	3.8	15.2
Mexico	28.7	12.4
Netherlands	0.4	16.1
New Zealand	15.1	14.9
Norway	2.9	15.6
Poland	6.0	14.4
Portugal	8.3	14.9
Slovak Republic	4.1	15.1
Slovenia	4.4	14.8
Spain	4.0	15.9
Sweden	1.1	15.2
Switzerland	0.4	15.1
United Kingdom	12.2	14.9
United States	11.1	14.4

Source: OECD, Statistics, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance/>