

**Family-friendly working conditions
in Rhineland-Palatinate
– Present and Future –**

Executive summary

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Background to the problem

The fostering of a family-conscious working world is one of the central tasks of present and future social policy.

Although many men and women desire both to be in employment and to have children, these plans often cannot be satisfactorily reconciled. Increasing demands from the economy in terms of flexibility, mobility and availability are met with equally rising expectations and obligations with which young parents are confronted regarding the care and upbringing of their children. Increasingly large numbers of young, well-educated people therefore see themselves as being put in the undesired position of having to choose between family and professional life. If the decision is made in favour of family, many women continue to withdraw either partially or completely from working life. Due to demographic changes, however, the business world is finding it increasingly difficult to do without well-educated women.

The political arrangement of basic societal conditions is necessary but not solely sufficient to achieve a better compatibility of family and career. What is required is an active cooperation of employers who can support employees with families through a family-conscious company and personnel policy. However, an operational implementation of this can only be expected from those employers who are convinced that investments in family-friendliness pay off economically. Although investigations indicate that a family-conscious personnel policy is economically worthwhile, on the part of the employers there are still reservations that hinder the introduction or extension of corresponding offers.

Objectives of the study

Based on these considerations, the Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs, Family Affairs and Health of Rhineland-Palatinate commissioned a scientific study at the Institute of Sociology of the Johannes-Gutenberg University of Mainz under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Norbert F. Schneider. The goal of the study was to ascertain the future opportunities and development potential of a family-conscious arrangement of the working world in Rhineland-Palatinate. For this purpose, employers, employees and their representatives on both an operational and industry-wide level were questioned.

The analysis assumed that an assessment of the development potential of a working world arranged in a family-conscious manner would have to take into account the following factors:

- Attitudes of employers

If one assumes that the opinions and evaluations of employers find their way into the company personnel policy and consequently shape the family-friendliness of a workplace, this cognitive fact should be given particular attention in the evaluation of development potential.

- Family-friendliness of workplaces in Rhineland-Palatinate

The following questions need to be answered here: Are family-friendly measures actually offered? Which measures are offered and how are these offers evaluated and used by the employees?

- Misgivings and obstacles

Misgivings that exist from the point of view of the employers against an introduction or a further expansion of family-friendly measures, and other obstacles that hinder an introduction irrespective of attitudes, represent further factors that influence the development potential of family-friendliness in the workplace.

- Level of knowledge

The level of information of the employers in terms of effects and offers of family-friendly measures plays a key role for the further development of family-friendliness in workplaces in Rhineland-Palatinate. Are the various campaigns and initiatives instigated by political and economic figures for promoting family-friendliness noticed and accepted? Are solution approaches for different types of workplace known?

- The employees from the Federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate

With regard to the future of family-friendliness of the business location of Rhineland-Palatinate, the employees, and their needs, attitudes and motives for action form a central reference parameter. As it is the employees themselves who have to come to terms with the basic operational conditions and their effects on the compatibility of family and job, the evaluation of the workplaces from the point of view of the employees is decisive in judging the family-friendliness in Rhineland-Palatinate.

Methodological procedure and description of the sample

The investigation is made up of three part-studies:

- Employer survey

The employers took part in the survey via the Internet, with the help of a standardised questionnaire. The target group consisted of business owners, managing directors, office managers and personnel managers – people who have an overview both of the orientation of the personnel policy as well as key company performance indicators.

The population of the study consisted of all workplaces in Rhineland-Palatinate with at least five employees. In total, 528 persons were surveyed.

- Employee survey

The employee sample was selected randomly from the employed population in Rhineland-Palatinate. In total, 358 persons aged between 25 and 50 years who work a minimum of 19 hours per week were questioned over the telephone on the topic of family-friendliness.

- Expert interviews

The expert interviews were carried out among the employers mainly with heads of personnel departments, and among the employees with works committee or staff council members and trade union representatives. In total, 21 persons were interviewed.

Selected results of the employer survey

The prerequisites for improving the family-friendliness of gainful employment in Rhineland-Palatinate appear at first glance to be favourable: The topic is held in considerable esteem by many employers. Compared to the actual offer of family-friendly measures, however, this evaluation needs to be qualified.

- **Family-friendliness is a locational and competitive factor**

On the whole, the employers surveyed have an open-minded stance to the theme of “family and career”. Furthermore, in relation to family-friendly measures, locational and competitive advantages are also seen:

73% of employers perceive a family-friendly arrangement of the region as a locational factor. In the recruitment of workers, family-friendly measures are seen as an advantage by almost two thirds.

- **The effects of family-friendly measures are rated positively**

In “family friendliness”, employers see a relevant field of action, as they predominantly rate the economic effects of family-friendly measures as positive.

The majority of those surveyed (89%) see the strongest relationship with regard to the job satisfaction of the employees: Only 3% are unable to determine any positive effects of family-friendly measures here.

Also in terms of employee turnover (76%) and absenteeism (70%), family-friendly measures are predominantly attributed with positive effects.

Approximately two thirds of those surveyed are of the opinion that the efficiency of the employees is increased through family-friendly offers.

The evaluation of the possibility of cost savings through family-friendly measures, by contrast, turns out to differ considerably: Almost a third of employers are of the opinion that family-friendly measures are financially worthwhile, but for 37%, a clear negative cost-benefit balance emerges. A further 32% believe that the savings realised are offset by investments of the same level.

It is apparent that persons from private industry rate the effects of family-friendly measures with somewhat greater reserve than public employers: While 10% of employers from the public sphere have a rather sceptical view of the effects, in private industry this figure lies at 18%.

In spite of the predominantly positive evaluation, and although almost 70% assume that family-friendly measures are important for staff, only 48% agree with the statement that corresponding measures are important or very important for their own workplace. For a third of employers, family-friendly measures play a rather secondary role, and for 18% little or no role at all.

- **The offer of measures is limited, safeguarding of business location takes priority**

This qualification of the importance for one’s own operational context is also reflected in the actual offer of measures: From eight fields of action¹ in which family-friendly measures are possible, 27% of the employers only offer measures in one field, 25% in two fields, and 11% do not offer any standard measures at all.

Most offers exist in the area of working hours: 83% provide measures in this area. Advantages from this area of application should arise from the fact that measures for making working hours more flexible are not exclusively called upon by employees with families, and consequently also have positive effects for the rest of the employees. In terms of emergency help – such as the organisation of care when a child is ill – 30% of those surveyed find a way to accommodate their workers. Further education and return to work programmes for employed persons during parental leave are part of the offer from 29% of employers. The possibility to work from home if necessary is provided by 28% of the employers. Measures from other fields of action, e.g. consultancy in family-related matters, are, by contrast, less widespread.

It is apparent that questions of compatibility of family and career are frequently only geared towards parents with small children. This focus becomes clear when one considers the number of workplaces that support employees with family members in need of care: Only 13% of employers possess such offers. It is precisely in this field of action, however, that demographic changes will

¹ Making working hours more flexible, working from home if necessary, further education and return to work programmes for employees on parental leave, provision of childcare, support of employees with family members in need of care, financial support services, emergency help, consultancy provision.

presumably contribute to the theme of “care” gaining in importance in future considerations on “family-friendliness”.

The study has made it clear that in spite of a generally positive evaluation with regard to the effects of family-friendly measures, few (new) measures are introduced or extended. A possible explanation for this observation can be found in the fact that family-friendly measures take on a secondary role when economic problems occur or are foreseeable. Thus for approximately half of the employers, there are currently more important problems, such as safeguarding the business location or job cuts.

- **The level of knowledge of employers regarding national or state initiatives is limited**

Although information about national or state initiatives for improving the compatibility of family and career has been communicated more strongly in recent times, managers show very little awareness of this information. Of four initiatives designed to increase the openness of employers to the problems and to support concrete action, 78% of those questioned knew of none and 15% of only one of the campaigns enquired about. The level of knowledge of employers can therefore be described as deficient. At the same time, however, over half of the persons questioned desire both more information about existing possibilities and more support from associations and politics in the implementation of measures.

This finding leads to the assumption that a successful information policy cannot be ensured solely through general campaigns such as newspaper advertisements or publication on Internet pages, as these are often not observed by the managers.

For this reason, it appears to be necessary to sensitise employers to the issue through personal information, conferences, presentations etc. and thus make them aware of existing offers.

- **The compatibility of family and career is of great importance for the economy**

Employers are of two minds when it comes to the question of whether family-friendliness has already become an important theme in Germany: although 54% agree with the statement, a noteworthy 46% reject it. The response behaviour is clearer regarding the evaluation of the theme in an economic context. 88% of employers are of the opinion that the compatibility of family and career is of great importance for the economy.

None of the actors (Federal government, states, local authority districts, employers, employees) are acknowledged to a considerable degree as showing sufficient commitment. In particular, 63% of those questioned see the Federal government as having an obligation to increase its commitment. On the part of the Federal states, 59% of respondents expect more commitment.

48% of respondents emphasise that employers should commit themselves more strongly to bringing about a better compatibility of career and family. Asked about the operational implementation, even 87% are of the opinion that a family-friendly personnel policy is an important task for employers and 69% state that in view of demographic changes, employers have to make increased investments in family-friendly measures.

Selected results from the employee survey

The employee survey looked at the need for measures and the actual use of measures. To this end, the aim was to establish how important family-friendliness of workplaces is for employees and what effect the employees are able to determine in terms of work performance, satisfaction, and company loyalty.

- **Family-friendly measures are used intensively**

Most employees, even those without children, have already made use of family-friendly measures of their employer in their working life: Almost 60% of respondents have used flexible working hour regulations, 46% have received financial support from their employer and 17% have taken advantage of further education and return to work programmes for employees on parental leave. Although parents used more offers significantly more frequently, also 78% of those without children have already used one or two measures.

According to the employees, the most important offers include flexible working hours, which approximately 98% describe as important. However, emergency help and working from home are also seen as important by a majority of employees.

- **The effects of family-friendly measures are rated even more positively by employees**

The employees questioned rate the effects of family-friendly measures on motivation and operationally relevant matters even more positively than the employers.

This becomes particularly clear in terms of the assessment of the effect of family-friendly measures on efficiency at work: 89% are of the opinion that their work performance increases under family-friendly conditions. Practically all employees (99.5%) report that family-friendly measures have a positive effect on their job satisfaction.

- **Extension and improvement of the municipal offer is important**

In the eyes of the respondents, the municipal offer should be better adapted to the needs of the employees: 94% deem a more flexible arrangement of opening hours of care institutions to be necessary. 87% see a deficiency in the quality of the care. In addition, the respondents report a lack of whole-day care placements for children: approximately 90% rate an extension of the existing offer as important.

Family-friendliness of workplaces in Rhineland-Palatinate

Both employees (55%) and employers (63%) appraise their workplaces generally as family-friendly, although the evaluation by the employers is somewhat more positive.

This assessment is made on the part of the employers independently of the scope of standard measures, as they frequently describe their own workplace as family-friendly even when the offer of measures is on the whole rather low. Indeed, a lack of standard measures is counterbalanced by individual arrangements or else an existing offer is expanded through this possibility: 82% of employers resolve coordination problems through individual arrangements.

However, on the part of the employees, it is apparent that the evaluation of the workplace is influenced by the scope of the offers - the greater the number of measures offered, the more family-friendly the workplace is seen to be. In addition, the work climate exerts a strong influence on the evaluation. If both fellow staff and the company management show understanding for compatibility problems and are prepared to actively support those affected, for instance in the form of individual agreements, the employees are more likely to be of the opinion that their workplace is family-friendly.

The expert interviews support this result: If managers are aware of the fact that employees also have family obligations, and show willingness to find individual solutions for problems that arise from this, then the workplaces tend to be described as family-friendly.

- **In spite of the positive basic attitudes: Career and children are still difficult to reconcile**

A cause for concern in spite of the overall high esteem of the theme “Compatibility of family and career” is the fact that many employees fear professional disadvantages if they make use of family-friendly measures. Approximately 50% of employees rate the use of, for example, part-time work or parental leave as a career obstacle.

This evaluation by the employees is in accordance with the evaluations of the employers, who see the use of existing offers by managers through critical eyes: 64% of employers agree with the statement that managers have to put family matters after the demands of their work.

In spite of all of the positive commitments to family-friendliness, a family-friendly company culture, which enables a family and children in addition to a career, still appears to be lacking.

- **The compatibility of family and career as a “women’s problem”?**

Is the compatibility of family and career framed as a specific “women’s problem” or are the concerns of men and women considered to an equal extent?

Although barely 5% of employees are of the view that family-friendly measures are only of interest to women, 57% have the impression that family obligations of women are taken into account more strongly by the employer than those of men. The results of the employer survey confirm this: 44% of the employers see family-friendly measures as mainly of interest to women. The framing of the theme as a “women’s problem” became particularly clear in the individual dialogues with experts.

Conclusion

- The compatibility of family and career is a field of action that is rated as important and forward-looking by the majority of employers in Rhineland-Palatinate.
- Although the effects of family-friendly measures on key operational dimensions and employees are rated very positively, only a minority of employers are planning an extension of the current offer or the introduction of new measures.
- Cost considerations and locational problems are barriers that cause employers to still desist from implementing measures. Here, there is a lack of information and clarification about the fact that family-friendly measures are not company-based social contributions, but rather investments that are also worthwhile from a business perspective.
- Although a broad scope of information is offered, the employers have very little awareness of projects designed to foster and support family-friendliness from the Federal government and the Federal states. An increased sensitisation of the employers to the advantages of a family-conscious personnel policy therefore appears to be a fundamental prerequisite for them to be able to actively deal with the available information and support offers.
- In addition, the employee survey showed that many employees do not wish for “big, expensive” solutions from their employers, but rather more flexible offers that meet their individual needs, such as emergency help or possibilities of individual arrangements.
- Although the problem of compatibility is still often represented in everyday operational life as a female-specific theme, in the view of those questioned, a change has taken place, meaning that family obligations are not seen as being the sole responsibility of women.

- On the whole, family-friendly workplaces are characterised by a good offer of standardised measures as well as a work climate in which colleagues support one another and superiors show understanding for the problems of reconciling family and career.
- Family-friendliness means “cultural work”: Only when family-friendliness represents an integral component of a company culture, which is lived out by company management, superiors and staff, can a win-win situation develop from which employers and employees alike can benefit.