



research - media - communications

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AIB Case Study

*Women in the labour market
atypical work and new organisational models*

Prepared for
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1.0 Introduction

The report presents the material in the following manner: Following an outline of methodology, the introductory section deals with the legislative framework that influences the shape of flexibility development in Ireland. The second section briefly outlines the sectoral arrangements, supplemented by contextual information concerning similar case studies in the banking and technological sectors. The third section deals specifically within the AIB – examining the origination, development, structure and experiences of flexible working. The penultimate section deals with problems and perspectives. The final section presents an overview of conclusions and represents and analytical commentary.

2.0 Methodology

Data gathering was accomplished through secondary analysis, interviews with key informants, interviews with AIB field staff and an email questionnaire delivered to AIB flexible workers (women). An Internet search was carried out for supplementary views relating to criticisms publicity statements and reviews of technological developments. All direct interviews were conducted using a semi structured interview guide audio recorded, fully transcribed and analysed utilising a key issue approach. The interview material has been merged with the remaining data.

3.0 The legislative framework

Family friendly policy derives from the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, 2000*¹ and is designated as the National Framework for the development of Family Friendly Policies at the Level of Enterprise. The development of Family Friendly Policies provides the context for recent legislative change. Family Friendly policies are regarded as those which help workers in combining employment with family life, caring responsibilities and personal and social life outside employment.

Key Coordinating Departments and agencies:

Ministry for Justice, Equality and Law Reform

Participating Government Departments and related organisations:

Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment

Department of the Taoiseach (prime minister)

Department of Finance

Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform

Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

The Equality Authority

IBEC (Employers Organisation)

ICTU (Irish Congress of Trade Unions)

The Government has adopted a Partnership approach (Partnership 2000, 1996) involving the key employer and trade union bodies. Statutory entitlements include maternity, adoptive, force majeure, parental and carer's leave. In addition, employer policies which introduce employee flexibility are encouraged especially those which

¹ "The emergence of a tightening labour market and emphasis on human resources as a competitive element underpins the importance of developing innovative ways of raising labour supply .. and the importance of .. equal opportunities .. underscores the desirability of developing policies that assist parents in reconciling work and family life. Family friendly policies ... contribute to the needs of business as well as meeting the needs of employees with family responsibilities." (PPF 2000 p42)

are designed to facilitate equality of opportunity for men and women in the workplace².

Table A: Policy recommendations generated by the family friendly framework

Overall Policy	Intended benefits	Practices	Statutory
1. Enhance the opportunity to reconcile work and family life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> § Opportunity to balance working and family life § Greeter equality between men and women § Fairer sharing of family responsibilities between men and women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> § Job sharing § Work sharing § Part time work 	Maternity leave
2. Contribute to the effective and efficient operation of the enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> § Retention of skilled and experienced staff § Reduced absenteeism § Improved productivity § More highly motivated work force § Enhanced corporate image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> § Flexitime § Flexiplace § Teleworking § Term (school) time working 	Adoptive leave Parental Leave Force Majeure Leave

Key statutes:

Changes to the *Maternity Protection Act 1994* increased maternity leave from 14 to 18 weeks and an increase of entitlement to unpaid leave from 14 to 18 weeks. A pregnant employee is entitled to 14 weeks paid and a further 8 weeks unpaid leave.

The Adoptive Leave Act, 1995 has been extended to entitle an adoptive parent to 14 weeks and a further unpaid leave of 8 weeks.

The Carer's Leave Act, 2001 permits employees to temporary leave to provide care for someone in need of full time attention, for a period of 65 weeks. There is no pay entitlement but the employer must keep the employee's job open. In that time they may be entitled to a Carers Benefit of IR £96.50.

Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 prevents employers from utilising overtime as a numerical flexibility to meet demand and provides leave entitlements for full time and part time workers.

Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act (1989) applies to all workers including those working at home and recommends risk assessment for employees who telework from a home office.

Other legislation includes the *1999 EU Employment Guidelines* and the *EU directive on part time work*. and the *Employment Equality Act, 1998* incorporates the ECJ ruling on part-time work. Workers must be treated in a similar manner to full time unless objective criteria (*not* based on gender) can be proved. This has considerable

² Family Friendly News, issues 1 and 2, Employment Rights Information Unit, Dublin 2001

implications for the study, since it is designed to eliminate discrimination against part time workers.

4.0 The move to flexible working in Ireland.

Recent developments in the Irish economy have prompted concerns over flexibility. Although the Civil Service and banking organisations had begun to introduce flexibility policies, the upturn in the economy produced a labour shortage which cross- sectoral employers were forced to address³. Eurostat LFS 1997 indicates that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Irish married women in paid employment.⁴ From 1971 to 1996, the number of women at work grew by 212,000 compared to a growth of 23,000 in male employment. The Labour Force Survey indicates that within public administration between 1987 and 1997, male employees dropped 7% by whilst female employment rose by 37%. At the same time, Ireland has also suffered from the EU growth in “long hours culture”. There are however wide discrepancies in grading and in flexible working arrangement between genders. In public administration, women are predominantly located in clerical grades (and account for two thirds of all job sharers).

Recent *childcare legislation* and provision shows a policy level commitment to ensure both family friendly working and concerns have given rise to new initiatives on provision of resources. The National Economic and Social Council (government advisory research body) indicated that the development of accessible, quality, children infrastructure (such as childcare nurseries, crèches and so on) was critical to supporting the overall policy. Key employers (Jury’s Group, Noel Recruitment etc.) have indicated that many females are outside the workforce because of the shortage in childcare facilities. Employees organisation IBEC and the Chamber of Commerce have called for tax relief on childcare but have expressed concern over tax bias. The system is said to discourage a non-earning spouse from taking up allowances since they may be transferred to the (main wage) earning spouse. It is important to note that in EU terms, Irish males work longer hours, militating against involvement in family responsibilities and offering a barrier to female employment.

The pace of flexible working development in Ireland has been regarded by key sources as slow. A benchmark study, *Women and Work in Ireland* (1983) stressed encouragement of flexitime, job sharing and part time working as well as childcare provision. The Commission on the Family expressed important concerns, but emphasised balance between home and work as critical. It identified enhanced child care provision and the introduction of flexible and a typical work to include flexitime, part time working, job sharing, (school) term time working. Although a complete picture of flexible working is not yet available, individual enterprises have been eager to publicise the results of innovation at company level: The key enterprises that have innovated are as follows:

³ Humphrey’s et al, *Balancing work and family life*, IPA/Dept of Social, Community and Family Affairs, Dublin, 2000

⁴ O’Connor, 1998, p188

Companies and agencies known to be operating flexible work arrangements:

Aer Rianta, Akzo Nobel, Organon, Allied Irish Bank, Bank of Ireland, Electricity Supply Board, First Active Bank, Microsoft, An Post, Voluntary Health Insurance, Honeywell-Measurex, Anord, FAS, Civil Service and defence.

A survey of equal opportunities in the *state sponsored sector* indicated that flexitime was available in 52% of organisations (10% take-up), job sharing in 49% of organisations (1% take-up), career breaks in 52% of organisations (1% take-up). Only 4% of total jobs were part time. It is important to note that 98% of Irish companies are SMEs (*small to medium enterprises*). Some 60% of medium and 49% of small businesses have family-friendly policies. Overall however, certain forms of flexible working have not received active support. Teleworking and home-based work are used by only 10% of organisations with a modest increase in numbers each year⁵. It is necessary to emphasise that flexible working in Ireland appears to be incrementally introduced perhaps because of the dominance of SME structures.

5.0 The AIB

The AIB was formed from an amalgamation of three Irish banks in 1966. Its aggregate assets are now more than IR49 billion and its pre tax profits in 1998 were IR826million. During its history it extended operations to Northern Ireland (First Trust). It acquired banks in the United States (Allfirst), in Poland (Wielkopolski Bank Kredytowy and Bank Zachodni (80% holding) and a share in the Singapore KepelTatLee Bank. The AIB has 310 branches in Ireland (more than a third of all Republic of Ireland bank branches) providing a diverse range of banking, financial and related services. The AIB bank employs around 8000 employees around Ireland. Recent figures indicate that AIB Bank is performing well within the EU context. Net interest income⁶ rose 9% to EUR2.71 billion for the six months ended June 2001. The AIB has recently utilised new technology and now offers customers 24-hour banking through Internet access to accounts, an introduction which although successful with a certain sector of clientele, is subject to ongoing negotiation with the Trade Union (IBOA).

In conjunction with the relevant trade union, the Irish Bank Officials Association (IBOA), AIB introduced a flexible working programme in 1996. Although this was not the first such arrangement in the Bank Sector in Ireland (bank of Ireland introduced similar measures), the introduction was to provide the basis for the **Choices 2000** Programme which somewhat predated the current legislative change. The following are the key modes of flexibility:

- § **Job sharing** involves two (2) staff members sharing one full-time post and equally dividing the responsibilities, duties and hours of the post. A successful pilot scheme was implemented in Northern Ireland.

⁵ Cranfield-University of Limerick Survey, 1992, 1995.

⁶ Profile: Allied Irish Banks, Yahoo Finance Market Guide, 13th November 2001

- § **Personalised hours** apply where staff wish to vary their contracted work hours from the existing norm of 36.25 hours per week to any combination of between 14.5 and 31.25 hours per week.
- § **Special short-term break** offers a leave of absence from 3 months to one year. This is divided into 4 further categories of short term break for those who need to spend time with their family (illness, children starting school);
- § **Caring Leave Break** for those with caring responsibility for sick or disabled relatives; Family Short Term Break for those who want to spend extended periods of time with their families
- § **Career Break** for those wishing a continuous absence for a minimum of 6 months to a maximum of 5 years.

Type of flexible working	No of employees using facility
Part time work	400
Part time temporary (not part of “Choices”)	200
Job sharing	168
Personalised hours	490
Career Breaks	454
Short Term Breaks (up to 1 year)	31

A further offer of enhanced maternity leave provides for up to 28 weeks absence. More recent initiatives offer further flexible arrangements for employees and are at the pilot stage. These are as follows:

Telework offers the opportunity to work from a home base. The home environment is assessed using a safety audit. The employee is equipped with a laptop computer and a fast communication link is installed (known as “connectivity”) thus providing facilities for employees to log in and off from their home office space. Suitable insurance is a key criterion of this option to protect both employer and employee⁷. Employees are liable for any home expenses incurred such as heat, light and power. The experiment is currently subject to a three monthly survey.

Flexidesk offers desk “hotelling” – an extension of “hot desking” - and is open to both males and females. The office resources are sited at an outer city location (currently Project West is in the west of the city) and may be used by employees. It can perform several functions. It allows for:

- § fast achievement of certain (special, atypical or one-off) project objectives.
- § the undertaking of work that is difficult to carry out in an otherwise noisy or busy office environment. Project work is carried out at a remove from the demands of an office that may be environmentally unsuitable for certain tasks.
- § a time-saving option for those who may have to periodically commute or travel to a distant location (with managerial permission)

This limited pilot has been operating for 8 weeks at the time of this research. The success of the project has prompted an extended trial period.

Additional **Remote Options** are under consideration where staff can log in documents, mail and (internal) intranet facilities without having to come into the office.

An **employee telephone help line** is available to assist employees with all matters pertaining to service conditions. On average this receives a thousand calls per month.

⁷ AIB, Your Guide to Teleworking, internal document, AIB, Dublin, 2000

The enquiries are confidential and include enquiries concerning recruitment and applications. Nevertheless this facility has proved useful to management in smoothing the introduction of flexible policies.

A Human Resources (HR) **Staff Communications Team** is dedicated to best practice in administration and development of family friendly policies.

An HR **Staff Support Section** provides a contact point on terms and conditions and conducts periodic staff attitude surveys. [In relation to flexible working, the 2000 survey revealed that half of the staff felt that *flexible working was important to them* and just 9% felt they were of *little or no importance.*]

Table B: AIB view of benefits of flexible work introduction

SUCCESSSES	STRATEGIC DIFFICULTIES	OPERATIONAL DIFFICULTIES
Very popular with staff	Necessity of psychological shift from time/hours to quality performance	Meeting demand of all staff who want flexible working
Increased staff morale		
Staff retention increased	Some resistance to change from management (uneven)	Matching of people and locations
Trained/qualified staff retained		
Recruitment costs less	Some problems from experienced staff in adjusting to flexible working	Smaller units have service delivery problems – barrier to flexibility for staff
Union partnership productive		
Knock-on effect for improved customer relations	Some difficulties in facilitating employees who wish to combine several flexibility options	Procedural for authorising teleworking requires additional physical and staff resources (safety audit, technological support)

Employees' experiences of flexible working

Overall, employees appear to want flexibility in their work life. Those who do telework and work personalised hours or part-time, find benefits, not only in the balance between home and work but also in their general quality of life. As the table below shows, even minimal changes can promote very concrete changes in the life of the employee with direct benefits impacting on the employer. Perhaps the issue of achieving more control over ones life is the central organising principle in change towards flexibility. The following quotation from a worker with a minimum teleworking function serves to underline the enthusiasm experienced by interviewees in this study

Just before I started flexible working the most constant phrase at home was “but you ALWAYS say we’ll talk later. WHEN is later?” Now, I say, “ Can it wait until Thursday or Friday?” - and most things can. Homework gets done before dark, school problems are sorted out as soon as they arise, friends can come home after school, dental appointments get made, dinner is ready for teenagers when they come home. There is more time to talk, walk, think, bake, make friends, join clubs, become involved in the community, write letters, read and just “be”.

Table C: Employee's experiences of flexible working

Benefits	Problems
<p>WORK Makes it possible to be employed More choice Opportunity to complete work tasks without interruption Decrease in "unserious" phone calls when at home More control over work product Sense of achievement when working at home More positive attitude Customers can see more positive attitude</p> <p>HOME Reductions in commuting Less stress. Better relationship with work as part of life. More control over family/home commitments More time for children Improved relationship with children Greater opportunity for community involvement (e.g. church)</p>	<p>WORK It can be seen as "a women's thing" Male colleagues regard it as unserious or lacking commitment. It presents a barrier to promotion It feels uncertain – it is regarded as a privilege that can be taken away</p> <p>HOME Some feel lack of social interaction at home</p>

The Trade Union, IBOA, represents around 6000 of the 8000 employees at AIB and offers an effective conduit for employee's views. The IBOA confirms both the popularity of flexible working and that the employee take-up on the Choices programme is predominantly female. There are some concerns however, particularly in the area of the business driven aspects of flexibility and teleworking innovation. An IBOA feedback survey⁸ substantiates the employee enthusiasm concerning all of the Choices Programme and an expressed demand for extension and development of flexibility.

At the macro level the IBOA detects inconsistencies and unevenness in approach. There are indications that the problem of uneven introduction stems from a rural-urban division which is also an indicator or reflection of management style. There is generally a more positive approach in urban environments. Thus although the flexibility options are welcomed, there is a dependence on the flexibility of the line manager's approach to the issue. And although equality in job prospects is emphasised very clearly by the AIB Human Resource Department, the problem of barriers to promotion and career development. A consultant interviewed in the course of the project identified this, as the key "myth" concerning flexibility innovation, yet there is enough evidence to show that it remains a main concern for employees. The concentration of flexible workers in the lower grades tends to confirm the concrete nature of the criticism. Substantial concern was expressed over rejected applications for flexible working arrangements and the Trade Union has indicated the need for a standard review method for resubmission of "failed applications".

⁸ IBOA. Choices Review – feedback survey, internal document, 1999

6.0 Conclusion

The report shows that although the introduction of flexible working in the AIB now takes place within the context of a government-led approach to family friendly policies, its introduction in the Irish banking system predates current policy and legislation. Data indicates that the AIB was traditionally regarded as good (high status) employer with long-term job prospects and opportunities. But the economic shift and job market changes through the nineties rendered recruitment and staff retention difficult and thus flexibility as a business necessity. Research indicates that many AIB part-time workers (females) would be lost to the job market without flexible arrangements – especially personalised hours. We must add here, that in Ireland there is a cultural focus on home, children and family on which the current social and economic change has placed extra stress. The business led AIB innovation thus neatly engaged with the concerns and aspirations of the family.

Whilst it is unsurprising that the commercial pressures upon the AIB places a greater necessity on flexible working, its introduction is acknowledged by employees as a very positive benefit. Those availing of flexibility options perceive an increased in the quality of their home lives. The tone of the responses in this project indicate high levels of enthusiasm. But those who want flexibility - and who for some reason are not granted arrangements - are unhappy and their complaints tend to surface through the trade union feedback mechanism. The non take-up by males is perhaps a worrying aspect of the case study. There is evidence, however, that this is the product of an existing psychological position. Traditional attitudes tend to shape the male employee's opportunity profile and thus the male worker sees the flexibility option as a device to promote career options – an opportunity to undertake education and training for example. Although male AIB employees can and do take the opportunity to experience a more rounded family life, especially through the medium of *term breaks*, the overall inclination is based on career development.

There is some evidence that flexible working is not applied across the full range of staff positions, in what is traditionally a hierarchical company structure. It is felt that flexible working is more suitably applied to certain grades where the nature of work duties lend themselves to flexible work. Where clear-cut jobs with very specific functions exist (e.g. counter service in the bank branch), then flexible working such as personalised hours are thought to be easier to arrange. Where duties are more complex (e.g. bank manager in branch), flexible working is felt to be more difficult to organise. Yet several contributors who were teleworking for *part* of the week expressed consistently positive views on benefits in terms of family, home and life quality. A female assistant manager described in a dramatic manner, the changes to many aspects of her life. The Trade Union maintains that there is much to be achieved in ensuring that equal opportunities are applied; that it is possible for more females to be in higher grades⁹ and that flexibility should be equally applied for male and female. Research indicates that AIB HR department would agree this position but is somewhat constrained by prevailing attitudes outside the control of the company.

⁹ The AIB recently changed the structure of branch employment. In addition to branch managers and assistant branch managers, the designation of Officer was introduced, to be included within senior management. According to the IBOA, this altered the gender balance (towards females) in the category of senior management, whilst having only a limited impact on equality.

Table C: Key attitudes of interest groups

INTEREST GROUP	ATTITUDE CONCERNING INNOVATION	PERCEIVED BENEFITS	PERCEIVED PROBLEMS
Employer (AIB)	Enthusiastic with some anxieties High commitment Resource led	Has provided solution to structural (market)problems Employers more competitive in recruitment Employers benefit from positive staff attitude	Requires cultural shift from employees Requires psychological shift from employees Some level of unsatisfied employee demand for flexibility
Employers' association (Bank Employers' Forum)	Enthusiastic High commitment Competition led	Positive European perspective "Inevitability" of change in EU work directives leading to further.	Anxiety concerning fairness in (economic) competition Some concerns for social well being of participating teleworkers
Trade Union (IBOA)	Enthusiastic but cautious High commitment Equality led	Expressed high satisfaction Large expressed need for flexible working. Perceived lasting benefits from the employer-union approach and action on flexibility	Concerns about male female access Flexibility options need larger spread across organisational grades Concerns about equal rights concerning access to flexibility. Flexibility should be applied to managerial grades. Teleworking expenses not fully met
Employees	Very enthusiastic High commitment High expressed satisfaction Life-quality led	Many improvements in quality of life. Employees feel more in control, positive attitude. Employees less stressed. Cultural attitudes towards children are "validated" Children feel more secure/happier. More time for non-work activities. Engages with "life cycle" for older employees (part-time options)	Differing attitudes- aims for male and female employees. Feeling that promotion barred Feeling that employers regard it as a <i>privilege</i> . Reservations concerning time taken to grant approval. Some level of unsatisfied employee demand for flexibility and concerns about speed of agreements for flexible working. Perception that management unsupportive of job sharing

APPENDIX "A"**FLEXIBLE WORKING QUESTIONNAIRE****SECTION A: YOUR WORK WITH AIB**

This section deals with your present and past work with AIB

1. How long have you worked with AIB?
2. Could you please tell us briefly about your present job with the AIB? Include the name of your job, your duties and responsibilities, etc.
3. Did you have any other jobs in the AIB before this one? What was that?

SECTION B: FLEXIBLE WORK

Flexible work refers to all the different ways of working that depart from the traditional "9 till 5" office hours and work. It can refer to working part time, working at home (teleworking), job sharing (with another person), job rotation (doing jobs other than your original work), short or long term career breaks and so on.

1. When did you first begin to work flexibly?
2. Did that differ from your original job with AIB? In what way?
3. What kind of flexible working applies to your current job? (This could be teleworking from home, part time work, job sharing, job rotation, "flexidesk" and "desk hotelling" etc.)
4. How does the experience of flexible working affect the way you do your job? Is there an affect on travelling time, a change in commuting, a reduction or an increase in stress?
5. Does flexible working change the way you relate to people in your job (line managers, colleagues. In what way?
6. Does flexible working change the way you relate to customers? In what way?

SECTION C: HOME AND WORK

These questions are about the balance between home and work and how flexible working affects the quality of life of the individual and his or her family.

1. Do you find that flexible work affects the balance between home and work? In what way? (a number of ways are detailed below).
 - a. Time with the children
 - b. Ability to deal with the demands of children's education?
 - c. Ability to cope with domestic emergencies?
 - d. Time with your family in general
 - e. Leisure and recreation opportunities
 - f. Time for your own education (outside of your employment)

2. Could you give any examples of how flexible working has helped or hindered in your life?
3. Are there any features of flexible working that give you worry or anxiety? Can you describe the affects?
 - a. Promotion prospects
 - b. Staff benefits
 - c. Number of hours
 - d. Work continuity with other colleagues

SECTION D: WORKING FROM HOME

This section deals with those people who work from home as part of their job (teleworking).

1. Do you find that there are any advantages or difficulties in having your workstation at home? Could you briefly describe them?
2. Are there any advantage or difficulties in working remotely from colleagues in the office? Could you briefly describe them?
3. Drawing on your experience, could you describe the difference in working from home, compared to the office. How does it make you feel?

SECTION E: GENERAL COMMENTS

This section gives you the opportunity to give further information on work flexibility as it affects you and your family. Have a brief look at your previous answers. If there is anything that you feel the questionnaire does not deal with adequately, please feel free to make any comments that you think might be useful.

1. Is there any difference between what you *thought* flexible working would be like - and how it *actually* turned out? What differences?
2. Are there any improvements that could be made that would help your work? What improvements can you think of?
3. Are there any other improvements that could help you balance work and home activities. What changes would make things better?
4. Is there anything else that you feel you have not mentioned that could have some bearing on the research project? Please feel free to make any comment you wish write your comments.

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Thank you for your help in answering these questions. Your time and your valuable experience are much appreciated. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact Coinneach Shanks at Virtual Image Social Research Consultants on 01 6600923 or on mobile number 087 8395914. If out of hours, please leave a message and we will return your call as soon as we can.