

EU can serve as a forum on work-life balance

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Opinion

The common perception that MEPs do very little work is far from the truth and striking a balance between work and life can be challenging, writes Julie Girling.



The ability to strike a good work-life balance is essential for a healthy lifestyle. Finding this balance is not easy; we all have different priorities and different lives. We know that in Europe alone, more than one in five workers, is dissatisfied with their work-life balance.

So what does work life balance mean to an MEP? A common public perception is that MEPs do not do a great deal. Once a month, we travel to Strasbourg to vote and then with the remainder of our time, we network or jet off on other, all-expenses paid trips. The balance seemingly favours 'life' over 'work'. But of course this is a fantasy.

Significant hours are put into research, consultations and negotiations. During the working week, 12 hour days quickly become the norm, only to be extended further if you are appointed to a position of responsibility, such as committee Chair or lead on a major legislative file.

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Hosting events, and attending debates and roundtables are other important aspects of an MEP's job, as is keeping stakeholders informed through giving interviews, writing press releases or actively engaging with social media.

We all deal with our own particular geographical challenges. For some, the time spent traveling to and within their constituency means weekends are easily lost and the weeks often roll into one.

As an MEP for the south west of England and Gibraltar, it would be quicker for me to get to the Scottish borders than the most southerly point of my constituency, let alone Gibraltar. I can only imagine how much harder this is for MEPs with even further to travel, like those covering the French overseas territories.

When serving constituents, time and distance are not the only challenges. Deciding where to live also has an important impact. For those MEPs with children, commuting to Brussels reduces family time and increases dependency on others for childcare.

During the time spent in Brussels, the lack of a true home environment provides little incentive to rein in the working hours and simply adds further to the work-life imbalance.

For those who do relocate to Brussels, while family time is more consistent, how does this distance affect an MEP's relationship with their constituents?

Even if this is not the intention, these MEPs become less accessible and perceived as less committed. You risk being viewed as a faceless bureaucrat, seen as increasingly out of touch with your constituents. You may possibly undermine the opportunity to advance your political career in your home country, simply by not being present.

This is why, for an MEP, work-life balance is not the only problem. Making tough decisions affecting the whole family and maintaining a strong relationship with constituents must be factored into the equation.

Of course, this situation is not unique to the job of an MEP. Significant work-life imbalances can be found across all sectors and at all stages of life. However, while being an increasingly common experience, it is sadly the case that women suffer disproportionately more than men.

In addition to the demands brought about by a more demanding work culture, women are faced with additional stress due to traditional stereotypes and societal expectations that pressure women to be more present at home.

The challenge to balance work and life intensifies and for some, due to restrictions to certain career paths, sees 'life' or 'family' - albeit it not necessarily by choice - take priority. Striking a work-life balance is clearly a challenge that requires much skill.

This should not, however, discourage action. In addition to the economic benefits of a less stressed and therefore more productive workforce, a better work-life balance can also bring notable progress in areas such as youth development and gender equality. Indeed, more flexible, family-orientated policies open up employment opportunities to women that were previously unattainable due to family obligations.

While I am cautious about greater EU interference, the EU can provide a forum, allowing member states to exchange best practice on raising awareness and encouraging change at the national level. This will address, or at least reduce, the current work-life imbalance.

About the author

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