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**The Dilemma of a Child Care Provider: To be Flexible and Family-Friendly**

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With the great influx of women to the work force and the erosion of the Fordist model of working hours in favour of flexibility, achieving a balance between work and family has become a more urgent social problem. In other words, the relationship and conflict between the world of employment and family/private life are therefore becoming a major issue for many people who have to 'juggle' competing professional and personal demands. Today the 'problem' of work/life balance is increasingly recognised by institutions in Belgium. Moreover, currently, some social organisations have set out to respond to the needs of male and female employees by offering a flexible and extended service. Amongst them are those offering an extended timetable of childcare to the youngest age group.

In the Walloon region, the 'Childcare Centre of Charleroi' (CCC – fictitious name) is undoubtedly one of the leaders in this field. In order to meet the demand from parents, some of its care services are available from 5.30 until 23.00, seven days a week. While seeking to respond to the needs of the work/family balance of employees having to work extended or irregular hours (flexibilised workers), the CCC is supporting the spread of flexibility while simultaneously flexibilising its own workers, who thereby find their own family/work relationship affected. Isn't there a paradox here? Drawing on a qualitative case study we

examined, in an heuristic and exploratory perspective, what tensions and complaints arise from this situation and how they might be lessened or neutralised.

Our exploratory case study relied on multiple sources of data collected at the end of 2002 and at the beginning of 2003: in depth interviews (twelve in total) with a selection of key personnel representing different constituencies and levels (including the director, the manager of human resources, three team leaders, five employees (nursery nurses and social workers) and two trade unionists). In addition there is a documentary analysis, observational site visits and numerous informal exchanges. We have given oral presentations of the results of our analysis to two of the CCC's authorities: to the Work Council, which brings together employers' and employees' representatives, and to the General Staff Meeting.

Firstly, we shall give a brief account of the origins and aims of the CCC, in order to demonstrate subsequently to what extent it is a flexible organisation permeated by "family" values. Finally, we shall identify a certain number of tensions linked to flexibility, along with the managerial strategies used in an effort to reduce them.

## **1. THE CCC : A UNION PROJECT**

What is the CCC ?

*"We offer a high standard of child care for parents whose working hours are flexible or irregular, who are looking for work or are following a training course. [...] The CCC also offers the care of sick children in their own homes."* (www.enfance.be)

The CCC is a non-profit making organisation, mainly financed by public authorities, set up in 1996 following on the results of a think-tank led by the board of workers, technicians and executives of the socialist trade union, SETCa, the Women's Committee of the same union, and collaboration with the redeployment unit of the Arthur Gailly Hospital Centre at Charleroi (Wallonia, Belgium).

The think-tank has its origins in the trade union representatives' questioning of their bosses with regard to childcare problems confronting their members. In the wake of different

studies carried out thanks mainly to financial support from the retailing sector and from the sector of private hospitals, it emerged that the employment problems of poorly-qualified women were not due only to a lack of training but to the difficulties involved in finding reliable childcare during working hours. Different pilot projects were then initiated during the mid-90's.

At the same time, the Charleroi region was stunned by the closure, in January 1995, of the Arthur Gailly Hospital Centre, a real symbol of socialist medical care. A redeployment unit was set up with the help of SETCa. With the aim of reclassifying family assistants, nursing assistants and nursery nurses who were working within this hospital, a link was then set up at the level of SETCa between this problem of redeployment and that of the development of childcare projects involving extended hours.

In 1996, the CCC opened its first integrated care centre for children from 2½-12 years old and a nursery for infants from 0 to 3 years, employing about 30 workers. In 2002, it employed more than 230 people and was responsible for the daily care of about 1,500 children.

The organigramme marks out three distinct hierarchical levels: that of management, which is provided by a former union official; of coordinations'; and of employees. To these must be added the level of the executive board presided over by the Secretary-General of the SETCa of Charleroi.

This trade union link, in membership and management, is an important characteristic of the CCC. However, even though the link with SETCa is openly displayed, the CCC is not an organ of militant union activity. As one of our interviewees said, 'The thing I really appreciate about the Centre is that there's no great political debate going on.'

The union membership emphasises the 'social' character of the Centre which is presented as a 'community project', in which moreover the Centre does not restrict itself to 'offering a high-quality service at democratic prices' (Director), but develops additional projects which deal with the integration of the long-term unemployed, with those on welfare benefits or with the struggle to eliminate discriminatory practices, etc.

## **2. A FLEXIBLE ORGANISATION**

In the child-care sector, the CCC is a special case. In fact, its self-declared central aim is to ‘guarantee a high standard of child-care for those aged 0 to 12 years, accessible and adapted to the needs of all’ (CCC, April 2002, Internal document). This objective of accessibility and adaptability has important organisational implications.

At the spatial level, faced with a section of the public which has transport problems, the directors of the CCC chose to decentralise the child-care venues in order to gain greater proximity to families with reduced mobility. At the present time the Centre has thirty such venues disseminated throughout the whole of the Charleroi region. The area of activity is subdivided into about ten districts, each with a centre, said to be permanent, to which are attached the decentralised sections, which are usually lodged in buildings which have an educational function.

There is a team leader responsible for each district. The coordination of different districts is maintained by a global coordination which provides both the management of human resources and the care of sick children within their own homes. Generally, the operational staff is attached to one district, with the exception of a flying squad which attends in different districts as the need arises.

On the temporal level, the major characteristic of the CCC is the provision of extended hours of operation. Some centres are always open from 5.30 until 23.00 according to parental demand, whether it's for provision of care in the morning, late in the day, variable or flexible, or as an emergency service. In most centres, provision of care is available from 7.00 until 20.30, Monday to Saturday. The extent of opening hours, the flexibility of response to demand and the complex nature of the coordination of personnel gives rise to the management of working hours which in itself has to be flexible because at the present time the operational staff only knows its timetable a week in advance while the management side of the CCC has control to a great extent of their own working hours. As to the provision of a service on Saturdays, a rota is organised, each worker having to work one Saturday in three. The operational personnel (nursery nurses and play leaders – who represent more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the total workforce) is therefore directly affected by an extended and flexible structure of working

hours which is to a great extent defined in a heteronomous fashion. The contract of employment, moreover, anticipates 24-hour availability.

The organisation of holidays is also affected by the nature of the CCC's activities. School holiday periods are times when there is an increase in demand for places at the centre. Consequently, employees see the possibility of taking their own holidays during these periods restricted. For example, they are only allowed two weeks' leave during July and August, and one week during other school holidays called "petits congés" (little holidays).

### **3. A 'FAMILY-FRIENDLY' ORGANISATION**

Prioritising the child and the family is not only a feature of the CCC's concept of the service they give but it also imbues working relationships and the management of personnel. For example, according to the words of one employee, 'As for that, it's a company which takes good care of women who are pregnant.'

Taking time off for family reasons is said to be encouraged: 'I took time off when I was breastfeeding my daughter. I didn't breastfeed my son. But yes, there's no problem there. They give us help in arranging that. They don't put a spoke in our wheels at all. And there's no kind of sanction at all. If you've taken the leave, it's never held against you. Far from it! Neither against us by our management, nor by me, as their supervisor, against my workers. I'd never go and say to them, "Oh, you took five months' leave, you're really pushing it." I'd never say that.' (Supervisor). Another supervisor expressed to us her amazement at having been promoted to the post following a long period of maternity leave.

In this organisation where the great majority of workers and management are women, maternity is seen as a life event which most share in and is on the whole accepted and understood in all its positive and negative aspects.<sup>1</sup> This favourable attitude to parenthood is not only demonstrated in the taking of statutory or conventional leave around the time of the birth of a baby but also in other arrangements available which go beyond legal requirements.

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<sup>1</sup> Prophylactic leave (time before the maternity leave); maternity leave; paternity leave; time off while breastfeeding; parental leave

For example, within the remit of a law on the 'balance between work and quality of life', a reduction in working hours is a right for employees who fulfil certain contractual conditions, or conditions of seniority. However, by law the threshold beyond which this is no longer an automatic right to those wishing to avail themselves of it at the same time, is fixed at 5% of the total number of employees of the company. In the case of the CCC, a collective working agreement was signed with the aim of extending this threshold. In fact everyone, with the exception of the managers, who asked for a reduction in their working hours was granted it. For one union member, 'Management did a great job because we don't have any threshold of limitation. In theory, the threshold could be restricted to 5% and here, there's no restriction. So anyone wishing to take a part-time job can do so.'

The structures of the care service given by the CCC are equally available to its workers. 'During all the school holidays, he's here with me at my work. I think that's a great opportunity for a mum. A mum who has to leave her child in the house all day and doesn't see him at all, that's the worst situation.' (Team Leader) This availability of places for workers' children is made explicit and is recognised by management.

Even more basically, the prioritisation of private life (going beyond just family life) is shown in the many special arrangements involved in the organisation of working hours. 'We have a meeting every Thursday to discuss hours of work. So every Thursday, all the coordinations are to be found with the planning service where you can see all the holiday dates for all the workers, as well as all the meetings that are to take place and in my case, for example, I regularly see my workers every Wednesday, and often there'll be some who will say to me, "If you don't mind, I'd rather not come to work at such and such a time because I have to take my son to the doctor's, because I have to go for a medical examination..." And I arrange their working hours accordingly. I say that so long as it's possible and provided they let me know in good time, I'm happy to do that.' (Team Leader) All the employees we met are unanimous on this point: the organisation generally allows them to make arrangements between themselves and their line-managers or directly between themselves. Here are some extracts which bear witness to this:

'I can only speak from my own experience but where my line manager's concerned, when we need to rearrange my working hours because of some training I'm attending, because of a course which involves going somewhere or other, there's always been a way of arranging things. Personally, I find that while they ask us to be flexible where working hours

are concerned, they are equally flexible with us. I find that they are just as flexible when it comes to arranging working hours. There's always a way of sorting it out.' (Employee)

'It's true that it often happen that when someone has a problem, she has to go to the doctor with her child and she asks if she can be replaced. First they ask our colleague if it would be inconvenient for her and if she says yes, we go to see the team leader and if she doesn't want to, well, it has to be done. But on the whole, it works very well. Where that's concerned, it's true... I have to say that when they know that you have children, they're very obliging and generally at works well.' (Employee)

'Generally we try to arrange it between ourselves but when we have to...we have to, we have to. Here, I have a colleague who should be working this afternoon and this evening and she's ill, she phoned us at 11.00, we made arrangements to cover her.' (Employee)

#### **4. TENSIONS ENGENDERED BY FLEXIBILITY**

Due to its union origins and its social project, there is a higher level of expectation that hopes of achieving a sort of harmony in the work place might be realised; this gives rise to a certain frustration when faced with the reality of the workings of the CCC. 'I would say that we're supposed to be a pilot experiment, everything is supposed to be well considered, thought-out, structured towards an ideal working situation. But an ideal laboratory situation we're not. We're not in that situation, that's what's crazy.'(Employee) Communication problems between management and staff are mentioned as well as misunderstandings between members of a team, feelings of inequality, of dissatisfaction as to the organisation of the work or to its intensification due to the rapid growth of the CCC and the proliferation of projects...

As the director, moreover, asks herself, 'Is it possible for a trade union to be a boss?' And it is true that several of our interviewees let it be known that this double role, union and boss, gives rise to misunderstandings. The following extract from an interview is explicit on this matter: 'Our boss *is the regional officer of SETCa*, he is defending cases elsewhere but where we and our problems are concerned, he's the boss, he's no longer our union representative. So I'm telling you that something has to give. He's off to demonstrate somewhere else, to join in with picketing strikers on behalf of people who are demanding the

same conditions as we are, and when it's us, they're not in agreement with our demands. Of necessity, because with us, they have the responsibility of being the bosses. So it's true that that gives rise to some paradoxical situations.' (Employee)

The CCC's union membership and its claim to be engaged in a 'social project' favours a projection towards a better world and, ipso facto, a reflexive look at the actual contribution made by the CCC to progress towards the ideal. It is as a consequence particularly sensitive to criticism: 'I know that the CCC project was set up in response to a demand that existed in certain sectors. But I think that the more we respond to this demand, the more we risk dismantling other structures. I know that in the commercial sector, we struggled to keep Sunday a day of rest and if we, if Sunday is targeted, it's clear that in those sectors we'll go along too... As for me, I tell myself that the struggle by the trade union is made meaningless since we, we joined in the struggle to keep Sunday as a day of rest, that we should keep national holidays, if we open on those days, that means that it's the thin end of the wedge for the other sectors. At the end of the day, you reap what you sow. So that means that if the limits of working hours are pushed further and further, there are going to be demands.'(Employee)

Helping flexibilised workers and their families without contributing to the development of flexibility represents the first dilemma facing the CCC.

Moreover, in making its aim 'to allow parents to balance their professional responsibilities (work, training, looking for employment) and their parental responsibilities' by offering a flexible care facility with long opening hours, the CCC personnel is confronted by an atypical temporal working structure. As a result, the social mission of this organisation gives rise to a demand for availability and a personal commitment that makes the work/family balance even more difficult for its employees.

Among the executives of the CCC, the restrictive aspects of flexibility are lessened by the fact that they have the right to set, to some extent, their own working hours. They see this as one of the privileges of their position. On the other hand, the activity leaders and nursery nurses are subjected to a working hours' structure which is simultaneously atypical and flexible.

Even though some of our interviewees professed themselves satisfied with their working hours, all, without exception, noted that the extended and flexible hours of operation create potential or actual difficulties in managing their lives outside work and could have repercussions on the well-being of their children. For example, 'Today I started work at 6 a.m., well, I don't know how to drive, it's my wife who drives him to school. I finished at 3.30 p.m. I went to pick him up, sometimes it's even the case that he has to stay at the place he's looked after or if my wife ever has to work 9 a.m. until 6.30 p.m. for example, it does happen quite regularly that our working day is 9-6.30, if we're both having to start at that time in the morning, we drive him to school and he has to stay at school all day, then at the child-care centre. That means he's got a day that goes from 9 a.m. until 6.30, at school all the time. That's too much for a little three-year-old.' (Employee)

In an organisation where 'the child's interests come first', the tension is all the more acutely felt and the criticism basic: 'We, as employees here, are told that we've to look after the well-being of the parents, while we are parents ourselves but our interests come second.' (Employee)

It can be seen that the situation the CCC finds itself in remains a difficult one, not because it's in danger of disappearing from one day to the next, but because it will always be subjected to tensions and complaints to which no definitive response can be found.

How, in spite of these tensions and complaints, is the CCC faring?

## **5. ALLEVIATING THE TENSIONS ARISING FROM FLEXIBILITY**

We have concentrated on the point of view of those at managerial level in the CCC. Four salient strategies emerged: 1) action with regard to cultural cohesion, 2) action with regard to wage structuring, 3) action with regard to the social composition of the work force, 4) action with regard to the human resources management and the adopting of policies favourable to a work/family balance.

### 5.1. Action with regard to cultural cohesion

Management is seeking to unite the personnel around the Centre's social and educational project: 'I'm saying, "Hold on" because if we don't respond to the demand, we're good for nothing, because in our case we can't really accept all the 0-3-year-olds, we don't take in children who come in normal hours all the time because that's not what we're here for. If it's to take up places in the type of child care centre that operates according to a normal temporal structure, that's not what we're here for; we aim to provide a service with extended opening hours.' (Director) The efforts with regard to improving communication and training, the involvement of the personnel in organisational reflexivity, the formalisation of a social and educational project... are just as much devices aimed at creating a degree of commitment to the Centre's project. And it is true that most of our interviewees expressed their attachment to this project.

At the same time, they didn't become involved with the Centre because of any militant trade unionism and their work there is first and foremost a job, in a region in which the unemployment rate is over 25%. According to the director, 'If there were no unemployment problems, we'd have even more difficulties because the hours put people off, there's no question about it. People don't work for us from choice, except the executives, who come because the project interests them but then the executives aren't subjected to these working hours...'

### 5.2. Action on the wage structure

The wage structure rests on a contract of employment, that is to say, "**the contract by which a worker takes on the job in return for financial remuneration to provide work under the authority, the direction, and the supervision of an employer**" (CCC, Internal document).

This definition is the only one in bold type in the social and educational Project, the underlining of the terms showing the importance of the message which it wishes to communicate. The CCC managers are therefore reaffirming the existence of a subordination which has been agreed to, with the message to the effect that 'if you sign the contract, you

have to abide by its terms.’ The contract of work does not stipulate limits to the demands on the workers (from 0 to 24 hours). Any objection to the hours of work is answered by the signing of the contract and the personal responsibility which that entails.

It nevertheless remains the case that it is recognised that flexibility implies working hours that are “uncomfortable”. These hours are therefore the subject of financial compensation: ‘There is a supplement of 11% for working irregular hours. [...] We have increased the monthly salary by 11%.’

A third device is itself in step with the system of flexibility; it consists of the executives of the CCC favouring part-time contracts of work and a reduction in working hours. The CCC operates with about 2/3 of the staff working on a part-time basis: ‘We don’t have many full-time workers; we have a lot of part-timers. That is significant because when they’re working part-time they cope with that much better and manage to organise themselves much better than if they were working full-time. [...] So I have a lot of part-timers, it’s easier for me and it’s easier for them too. For everyone, I think.’ (Manager of human resources) Part-time work is seen as a means of making the tensions caused by flexibility more bearable, both at an individual and at an organisational level.

### **5.3. Action on the social composition**

To ensure that the tensions arising from flexibility do not become too acute, the CCC management has also changed its recruitment criteria. To begin with, it had actually mainly recruited people who had qualifications in teaching: ‘At the outset I took on a lot of teachers, both primary and nursery teachers.’ (Director) It became apparent that this choice increased the tensions arising from working hours: ‘They came to us because they couldn’t find work and it was the kind of work that was closest to what they were trained to do. But it wasn’t what they’d had in mind as their career for life. They were coming to work at hours that were not at all what they’d had in mind [...] It was a fundamental mistake, to have taken on teachers. I realised that afterwards. It was a basic mistake.’ (Director)

It is in fact true, according to one of our interviewees, a teacher by training, that ‘When you embark on a programme of study like that in order to become a secondary or

primary school teacher like me, you're counting on being able to say to yourself, "oh, it's good, when I have a post I'll be starting at 8.30, usually by 3.20 or 4.00 I'll have finished, and then there's the holidays." But here, it's quite different.' (Employee)

The management is therefore reassessing the recruitment criteria. 'After that, I didn't take on any teachers at all. As soon as they said they were teachers, I didn't take them on because there wouldn't have been any point. It was obvious that, even if they were interested in the job, after a short while they'd feel it wasn't the way they wanted to spend their lives. In the first 2 or 3 years, a lot of people left.' (Director)

She is going to opt for those with a diploma in social work because, she says, 'All the people with such diplomas are prepared to work at night, at weekends, as part of the job they've trained for, so it's much easier. For them, the working hours don't present them with any difficulties because in their profession, when they were studying for the diploma, they were always told it would be like that. They've made the choice, in their choice of studies, to work this kind of timetable, so there are far fewer problems. All the same, we shouldn't deceive ourselves. They're not satisfied with their working hours but they're not as dissatisfied as the teachers were.' (Director)

A team leader we interviewed, a social worker by training, tends to confirm the director's analysis: 'Most of my jobs have been done at night. So I've always, for a very long time, I've had this evening or night time work. I sometimes hear the people around me complaining about the rhythm of life we have here, and it's true that for me, this rhythm of life it's, not only that for me it's more conventional than what I've experienced before, but in addition it's really a rhythm that suits me'

#### **5.4. Action on the Management of Human Resources and the Work/Family Balance.**

A fourth strategy embarked on by those in charge of the CCC concerns the method of managing personnel. It aims at 'a very high standard of management of human resources' (the director's words) while offering 'quality positions of employment' (CCC, Internal document) which correspond to the most advanced working conditions and wages in the sector.

The arrangements proposed by the CCC to allow for greater harmony between work and family (or, more generally, life outside work) undoubtedly serve to affirm the direction to be taken in an organisation affiliated to a trade union and emphasising the importance of the family but it is also a strategy which does counterbalance somewhat the tensions arising from flexibility. It's not just a matter of conventional, legal arrangements but also the whole dynamic of particular arrangements. As the manager of human resources explains, 'In my case, I always really try to listen properly ... I think I really do listen properly. [...] We've had different cases, people who've had family problems, with parents or difficulties with children who are ill. We manage to find a solution.' Flexibility calls for flexibility in return, the director implies. 'She (i.e. the manager of human resources) is also very flexible in her response to the workers' needs, whether it's in responding to their requests, encouraging them to gain qualifications and increase their freedom of choice, at the same time taking into account reduced costs of child care, etc.'

The drive to find flexible responses to the problems posed by flexibility generates a whole chain of flexibility which gives rise to the increasing difficulties in the organisation of the work. 'The danger for us lies in the fact of being very flexible. It's also because of that, that we're trying to create a more stable situation too and to have something that's a lot more predictable. [...] That will help the workers because they'll be able to get themselves organised a long time in advance, and as for us, we won't have to juggle things around from one day to the next. We won't have to chop and change, we'll just have to do it once. For a period of six weeks.' (Manager of Human resources) The reflection currently taking place at the CCC with the aim of producing a six-week schedule, later reduced to four weeks, is an indication of one way to counter both the dissatisfaction with flexibility, and its destabilising effects on the organisation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Family needs and their correlatives make up one of the major obstacles to an all-out extension of the system of flexibility (e.g. flexible working hours). In fact, even if the ideal model at the core of this system is the worker with no outside ties, fully committed to his work, it remains the case that social reality is imbued with other values and types of social

ties, among them being values and strong ties which are deeply rooted in and around the family.

With the disappearance of the 'breadwinner model', following on the access of women to the labour market, the consequent increase in families where both parents are going out to work and the increase of the number of monoparental families, the setting up of flexible child care services appears as a relevant response to the pressures of flexibility on working parents.

This case study of the CCC shows, however, to what extent the tensions arising from flexibility are thrown back both on the organisation providing the service, and on the workers who are primarily responsible for delivering it. It is ironic that in its concern to help working parents, the CCC has been drawn into setting up a structure of work, itself flexible, which affects the family/work balance of its own workers while at the same time favouring the project of finding a balance between working and family life.

We can learn a great deal from this social organisation, innovative as it is in the child care sector, and the ways in which it attempts to lessen the tensions of flexibility. The seeking for cultural cohesion, the recourse to part-time working, the recruitment of staff with a profile of social worker which would render them more prepared to work atypical hours, and the advance into a chain of flexibility are examples of the way management has responded to the problems flexibility poses for its workers. Nevertheless, they do not provide a definitive solution to the work/family balance, which remains a burgeoning issue within this organisation.