

# Wishes and Reality Managers and Part-Time Work: A European Comparison

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Part-time work among managers is an exception – even if the idea of reducing work hours has been gaining currency in times of changing family arrangements and mounting pressure at the workplace. The fact that employees in Germany have been legally entitled to part-time work for more than ten years doesn't change anything about the situation. Only 5 percent of all male and female managers in Germany work part time, which means they work less than the 30 hours per week that have been defined as part-time work in internationally comparative studies. In the Netherlands, by contrast, that figure is at least 12 percent.

How can these differences be explained? Why is it that managers in some countries are better able to do their work part time, whereas corporate leadership and part-time employment are mutually exclusive in others? These questions were the starting point for a WZB study on part-time work among managers in 19 European countries. The data for this study were taken from the 2009 European Labor Force Survey.

The group of managers includes both wage earners and self-employed individuals in leadership roles. As a consequence, a salaried director of a large company is as much part of this group as a self-employed florist running a flower shop together with at least one other employee or the CEO of a large family-owned manufacturing business. This definition is based on the ISCO 88 classification (International Standard Classification of Occupations) and includes all persons who report working as directors or chief executives, production and operations department managers, other department managers (e.g., in R&D or in sales and public relations), and managers of small companies. Self-employed managers without employees have been excluded from our analysis.

## Part-Time Work in Leadership Positions

There are several reasons why managers rarely work part time: part-time work at the executive level involves more coordination and additional costs. The boss can only attend meetings scheduled between 9 AM and 1 PM; the supervisor will not be available until the next morning to answer an important question. Handing over responsibility between section head A and section head B eats up precious time – and sometimes vital information is lost in the process. Reducing work hours at the executive level, therefore, often seems to be impossible.

However, it seems that many businesses are now rethinking their view of part-time work. They show a noticeable interest in accommodating their high potentials' work schedule requests and alleviating their fears of damaging their career by working fewer hours. After all, managers, too, start a family, need some time off work, or have to take care of a sick family member. Providing opportunities for flexible and reduced work schedules can encourage employees to make a long-term commitment to their companies. Moreover, job sharing models help ensure that valuable information doesn't get lost if managers temporarily take time off work or leave the company altogether. Considering the shortage of skilled workers, part-time work and flexible work hour schedules will become increasingly important in the future.

Reducing the work hours of company executives may also help reduce gender segregation in the labor market. If management tasks may also be completed

**Summary:** Only 5 percent of Germany's manager work part-time. In the Netherlands, by contrast, that figure is at least 12 percent. Beside formal and legal regulations, these differences can mainly be explained by country-specific cultural customs and normative expectations. Managers are more likely to work fewer hours in countries in which part-time work is a widespread phenomenon in the labor force. In countries, in which traditional gender norms are still firmly entrenched, managers are less likely to reduce their work hours than in countries with more egalitarian gender roles.

working part time, these positions become more easily accessible for women. A larger share of “part-time managers” can help make part-time work a more acceptable option for men at all company levels as well, and it may favor a more equal distribution of leadership positions and work hours between the sexes.

## Part-Time Work among Managers: The Facts

To get there, however, we still have a long way to go. Part-time managers are the exception everywhere across Europe. The percentage of executives working fewer than 30 hours per week is insignificant compared to the overall percentage of part-time employees. Even in the “part-time wonderland” Netherlands, it is only about 12 percent of all managers who work part time. In Germany and most southern and eastern European countries, that figure is below 5 percent.

Then again, there are many managers who wish they could work fewer hours. In Greece, Luxemburg, Austria, and the Czech Republic, between 25 and 35 percent of managers say they would like to reduce their workload by at least five hours per week. In Germany, by contrast, only about 5 percent express that desire.

Due to their responsibilities and the specific work culture associated with them, the reasons why managers do or do not work part time diverge to some degree from those of the rest of the workforce. Whereas many lower-level employees are simply unable to afford working part time, financial concerns only play a subordinate role for executives. For those in management positions, unlike for those working in other segments of the labor market, part-time work is primarily an expression of autonomy and self-determination. In the rare cases of a reduction of working hours, it is done voluntarily. As the daily work of executives is generally characterized by a high level of responsibility for project planning, management tasks, and monitoring functions, a reduction of work hours is often impossible to realize. And yet: what are the factors that favor part-time work among managers?

In the countries surveyed, women in management positions work part time much more frequently than their male counterparts. In Germany, for example, 14.6 percent of female managers work part time, compared to only 1.2 percent of male managers. Moreover, the likelihood of working part-time in an executive position increases with the number of children – and with age. Part-time work is especially rare at the management levels of large companies with 50 or more employees and among self-employed individuals. Industry-specific differences are remarkable as well: in the service and health care sectors, as well as in public administration, part-time managers are more prevalent than in the financial services, trade, transport, and industrial sectors. Whereas part-time managers in Germany are most frequently found in the fields of education, health care, and public administration (9.3%), they are an absolute exception (1.2%) in the manufacturing trades.

## Explaining the Differences between Countries

Besides a number of characteristics involving individual reasons and the organization of work, it is the country-specific context that plays a key role here. Besides formal and legal regulations, this primarily includes informal expectations and cultural customs. Our analyses show that managers are more likely to work fewer hours in countries in which part-time work is a widespread phenomenon in the labor force anyways. A growing overall proportion of part-time workers goes hand in hand with a growing proportion of part-time managers. The Netherlands, for example, not only boasts the highest share of part-time workers in Europe (40%, not including managerial staff) but also the continent’s highest share of part-time managers (12%). Ireland is a similar case, with 30 percent of the non-managerial work force and 11 percent of the managers working part time. Regardless of job position, therefore, there seems to be a general favorable attitude towards the part-time model in these two countries.



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On the other hand, normative expectations play a critical role as well. In countries in which traditional gender norms are still firmly entrenched, managers are less likely to reduce their work hours than they are in countries with more open public attitudes towards working mothers and homemaker fathers doing family work. Lithuania and Greece – countries with highly traditional gender role expectations for men and women – only 2 percent of all managers work part time even though the total part-time employment rates are far from being the lowest in Europe. In Belgium, by contrast, gender roles are more egalitarian. Accordingly, the share of part-time managers here is somewhere near 7 percent.

Furthermore, the likelihood of managers working part time is lower in countries in which company executives are expected to work extremely long hours each week. There are remarkable differences between the countries in this regard as well. Whereas the share of managers who regularly work very long hours is below 10 percent in Latvia, that figure reaches almost 50 percent in France. These differences also help explain the varying degrees of part-time employment among managers across Europe.

A legal entitlement to part-time work, such as the one that exists in Germany, cannot explain the prevalence of part-time work among managers. In some cases, this may be due to the fact that legal provisions are often disconnected from the daily reality at the workplace. While the legal framework may include a right to part-time work, managers must actually claim that right and enforce it by legal action, if necessary. Unless they do so, legal arrangements are useless in practice.

## What Lawmakers and Employers Can Do

If we want more leaders in politics and business to temporarily reduce their working hours and use that reduction as an instrument of staffing policy, a number of recommendations can be derived from the findings presented here. First, if part-time work becomes more appealing and accepted generally, then more managers will be willing and able to slow down on their jobs – at least temporarily. Introducing a right to return to a full-time position, as currently discussed in Germany, might therefore be a step in the right direction. Second, organizations could promote part-time work among their managers by creating more decentralized and clear organizational procedures, thereby making it no longer necessary for senior staff to be constantly present and available. Not constant presence at work but the quality of one's work output should be the criterion for receiving a promotion – a criterion, however, that employees would have to be aware of.

Explicitly offering managers to work part-time for a certain period can help change the company culture. The same applies to positive role models: a boss reducing his work hours and successfully sharing his responsibilities with a male or female colleague transports a positive idea of part-time work, inviting others to do the same. If such role models become the accepted standard, part-time work can evolve into an opportunity for everyone to appropriately adapt certain life periods to the given circumstances. In that case, part-time work will no longer be the “second best” solution but will enable individuals in certain periods of life to maintain a good balance between family and career.

### References

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