Module 2: Work – Life Balance: National Framework and Workplace Adaptation

Module 2 Introduction

The EU Work–Life Balance Directive (2019/1158) is a landmark in European social policy, designed to promote gender equality, improve work–care reconciliation, and support both formal and informal caregivers. It introduces minimum standards for paternity, parental, and carers' leave, as well as flexible working arrangements, with the aim of reducing persistent inequalities in the labour market and enabling a fairer distribution of care responsibilities between women and men.

This module explores the Directive from two complementary perspectives. The first part (Unit 2.1) examines its transposition into national legislation, with particular focus on Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, and Romania, highlighting strengths, shortcomings, and the challenges of translating rights on paper into workplace realities. The second part (Unit 2.2) broadens the scope by looking at good practices and innovative approaches across other EU Member States, identifying strategies for effective implementation and evaluation. Together, these units provide participants with a critical understanding of how EU-level standards interact with diverse national contexts and workplace cultures.

By combining legal, institutional, and cultural perspectives, the module highlights both the progress achieved and the gaps that remain, such as financial barriers, weak enforcement, limited awareness of rights, and cultural resistance to men taking leave. It also connects the Directive's provisions to their potential impact not only on workers and families, but also on organisations, through improved employee satisfaction, reduced turnover, and sustainable workforce development.

In summary, the module explores how the intersection of legal, institutional, and cultural dimensions shapes the implementation of work–life balance policies across Europe. It also links EU policy goals with their practical effects on organisational sustainability and employee well-being.

The learning objectives of this module are:

- *To understand the purpose, scope, and key provisions of the Work–Life Balance Directive*
- *To analyse how different Member States have transposed the Directive and identify gaps in implementation.*
- *To reflect on the Directive's limitations, particularly for informal carers and precarious workers.*
- *To evaluate the Directive's impact on gender equality, labour market participation, and the redistribution of care.*
- *To explore benefits and challenges for organisations, including compliance, retention, and workplace culture.*
- *To identify good practices and strategies for more inclusive and effective policy implementation.*
- *To link legal frameworks to real-life experiences and organisational practices, recognising the importance of cultural change alongside formal rights.*
- *To identify the structural, cultural, and policy-related factors that shape work–life balance, with particular attention to informal caregiving and gender equity in the workplace.*
- *To design and implement inclusive support mechanisms, such as flexible work policies, HR protocols, and care-sensitive leadership practices, that enable equitable participation of all employees.*

Unit 2.1: Work-Life Balance Directive and National Transposition

Theoretical Content

Work–Life Balance Directive and National Application

Over the past decade, the question of how to reconcile employment with family and care responsibilities has become increasingly urgent in Europe. Rising women participation in the labour market, the ageing of the population, and the persistent imbalance in the division of care work between women and men have drawn attention to the structural barriers that prevent genuine gender equality. Women continue to bear the greatest share of unpaid care, whether for children, older relatives or family members with disabilities. This imbalance is one of the main reasons for women's lower employment rates, their interrupted careers, and the resulting gender pay and pension gaps. Against this background, the European Union adopted the **Work–Life Balance Directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158)** in June 2019, marking a significant step forward in recognising the right to care as a dimension of both social and gender justice.

The Directive entered into force in August 2019, with a deadline for transposition into national law set for 2 August 2022. It belongs to a broader EU agenda aimed at strengthening equality and social rights, alongside the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, the European Care Strategy (2022), and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030. By establishing new rights and strengthening existing ones and introducing minimum standards applicable to all Member States, the Directive aims to:

- Foster a better balance between professional and personal life;
- Increase women's participation in the labour market;
- Promote a more equal distribution of care responsibilities between men and women;
- Support unpaid caregivers and improve their economic security.

Key Provisions of the Work–Life Balance Directive

At its core, the Directive establishes four main rights.

1. **Paternity leave** (Art. 4) – The directive introduces a minimum of 10 working days of paid paternity leave, to be taken around the time of a child's birth. This provision is symbolically and practically crucial, as it signals men's role in early childcare and sets a precedent for shared responsibility from the beginning of a child's life.
2. **Parental leave** (Art. 5) – The directive strengthens parental leave, granting each parent an individual right to at least four months of leave, of which two are non-transferable between parents. This measure prevents the concentration of leave solely in the hands of mothers, encouraging fathers to take their share
3. **Carers' leave** (Art. 6) – For the first time at EU level, the directive creates a right to carers' leave (article 6), consisting of five working days per year for workers to provide personal care or support to a relative or household member with serious health needs. Payment is not mandated at EU level but encouraged.
4. **Flexible working arrangements** (Art. 9) – Article 9 expands the possibility to request flexible working arrangements, such as telework, flexible schedules, or reduced hours, for parents of children up to the age of eight and for informal carers.

Table 1. Minimum rights under Directive (EU) 2019/1158: scope, eligibility, duration, payment., flexibility and purpose

Type of Right	Who is Eligible	Minimum Duration / Standard	Payment	Flexibility	Purpose
Paternity Leave	Fathers or equivalent second parents	At least 10 working days around the birth of a child	Paid at a level at least equivalent to sick pay	Taken at/around time of birth	To support bonding with the child and share care from the start
Parental Leave	All working parents	At least 4 months per parent, 2 months non-transferable	Payment not harmonised (up to Member State), but should be adequate to encourage uptake by both parents	Can be taken full-time, part-time, or in blocks until child is at least 8 years old	To promote equal sharing of childcare responsibilities
Carers' Leave	Workers providing personal care or support to a relative or person in the same household	At least 5 working days per year	Not required to be paid (left to Member State)	Leave may be taken in full- or part-days, according to employer/employee agreement	To enable workers to respond to serious health needs of relatives

Flexible Working Arrangements	Parents of children up to 8 years & all carers	Right to request flexibility (e.g. remote work, reduced hours, flexible schedules)	Not directly about payment, but protects against dismissal or discrimination	Employers must consider and respond, can refuse with justification	To allow workers to reconcile care responsibilities with employment

The novelty of the Directive lies not only in the enumeration of these rights but also in its insistence on the **principles of adequacy, accessibility, and non-discrimination.** Workers must not suffer retaliation for using care-related leave or flexible arrangements, and Member States are encouraged to provide remuneration sufficient to make leave economically viable for both men and women. Research shows that without adequate payment, leave tends to be taken predominantly by women, thereby reproducing rather than reducing gender inequalities (Alessi et al., 2023).

From EU law to national practice

While the Directive sets minimum standards, its practical effect depends on how each Member State chooses to transpose and implement it. The deadline of August 2022 revealed the uneven pace of reform across Europe. Countries with pre-existing robust family leave policies, such as Sweden or Denmark, had little difficulty aligning their systems with EU requirements. By contrast, several Southern and Eastern European countries lagged behind, either because of fiscal constraints, lack of political consensus, or deeply embedded cultural attitudes toward care. In April 2023, the European Commission even issued reasoned opinions to a number of Member States, including Spain, Cyprus and Greece, urging them to complete or correct their transposition of the Directive (European Commission, 2023)

The experience of the partner countries considered here illustrates both progress and persisting gaps.

- In **Romania**, the Directive was transposed through Law No. 283/2022, which established paid paternity leave of ten to fifteen days, five days of paid carers' leave, and the right to request flexible work. While on paper this appears comprehensive, the system remains rigid: parental leave, although relatively generous in length, must often be taken as a continuous block, limiting parents' ability to combine part-time work with care responsibilities.

- In **Cyprus**, the Work-Life Balance Law (216(I)/2022) introduced ten fully paid days of paternity leave and provided for carers' and parental leave. However, both parental leave and carers' leave remain largely unpaid, which significantly reduces their accessibility in practice. Uptake remains low, reflecting both cultural norms and limited institutional capacity to monitor compliance.

- **Greece** aligned its system through Law 4808/21, which for the first time formally acknowledged the role of informal caregivers. The law grants five days of unpaid carers' leave, provides for parental leave rights, and allows workers to request telework or flexible schedules. Yet, most leave remains unpaid, and the burden of caregiving still falls disproportionately on women. Nevertheless, the law's symbolic recognition of informal carers marks an important shift in Greek labour and social policy.

- Reforms in **Spain** preceded the Directive and, in some respects, went beyond its requirements. Since 2021, fathers and second parents are entitled to sixteen weeks of fully paid paternity leave, placing Spain among the most progressive EU countries in this regard. Carers' leave of

five paid days was introduced under Royal Decree-Law 5/2023. While parental leave exists for all working parents, payment levels and practical accessibility remain uneven, which can limit uptake and equitable use. These gaps have led the European Commission to initiate infringement procedures. Alongside legal entitlements, Spain has promoted a cultural shift through initiatives such as the Co-Responsible Plan, which certifies informal care as work experience and actively encourages men's participation in family care.

- Finally, **Italy** transposed the Directive via Legislative Decree 105/2022, introducing ten days of fully paid paternity leave, extending parental leave until the child reaches twelve years of age (with partial payment), and formalising flexible working rights. Italy also grants carers of family members with severe disabilities three days of paid leave per month. A particularly noteworthy aspect of the Italian approach is the strengthening of anti-discrimination protections for workers who make use of family-related leave or flexible work, signalling a broader commitment to changing workplace culture.

Table 2. National application of the Work–Life Balance Directive (2019/1158): comparative overview – Italy, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania (2021–2024)

Country	Paternity leave	Parental leave	Carer's leave	Flexible working & protections	Notable strengths / gaps
Italy	10 working days, 100% pay; "structural" paternity leave; alternative paternity leave where the mother cannot care (Legislative Decree 105/2022).	Extended framework: parental leave payable for longer (e.g., 9 months at 30% across parents); usable until child is 12 (Family Act; Lgs. D. 105/2022).	3 paid days/month for care of relatives with severe disability (Law 104/1992 as updated; integrated by 105/2022).	Right to request telework, reduced hours, or modified shifts for parents <12 and carers; anti-discrimination safeguards strengthened; employer may assess compatibility with business needs (Lgs. D. 105/2022).	Strong pay for fathers; robust anti-discrimination. Gap: parental pay is still partial, employer discretion on flexibility (Erboli, 2022; Crespi & Palermo, 2024).
Spain	16 weeks, 100% pay since 2021 (exceeds EU minimum).	8 weeks, currently unpaid; subject to EU infringement (Royal Decree-Law 5/2023).	5 days/year, paid; force majeure leave also paid; strong protection against dismissal when exercising	Statutory right to adapt working day (negotiation window cut to 15 days), telework uptake growing but uneven by	Best-in-class paternity leave; strong dismissal protections. Gap: parental leave unpaid (Moore, 2025; INE, 2024a).

			rights (RDL 5/2023).	sector (RDL 5/2023)	
Greece	At least 10 working days, paid, aligned with the EU minimum (Law 4808/2021).	Right to parental leave (up to 4 months; mixed/partial pay depending on scheme).	5 days/year, unpaid; plus paid force majeure absences (2 single days) (Law 4808/2021).	Right to request telework/flexible hours/part-time; employer must reply within 1 month and justify refusals; protection against retaliation (Law 4808/2021).	First formal recognition of informal carers; clear procedure for requests. Gap: many supports unpaid; social care capacity uneven (Arnogiannaki & Terzakis, 2021).
Cyprus	10 working days, fully paid (Law 216(I)/2022).	18 weeks' entitlement, mostly unpaid.	5 days/year, unpaid; force majeure leave provided (216(I)/2022).	Remote Working Law 120(I)/2023 regulates telework; broader flexible work rights exist but uptake is limited; penalties for unjust dismissal linked to WLB rights (CYLAW, 2022; 2023).	Clear legal architecture, strong paid paternity. Gaps: unpaid parental & carer's leave; practical uptake/awareness low (Eurostat, 2025).
Romania	10 working days paid and +5 days if father completes childcare course (OUG 117/2022).	Up to 2 years paid (3 years if the child has a disability), generally taken as a continuous block.	5 days/year, paid.	Right to request flexible schedules; telework/part-time; parents of children <11 may request 4 remote-work days/month; paid force-majeure leave up to 10 days/year	Generous parental duration and concrete telework entitlement. Gap: parental leave inflexible (continuous block) (Government of Romania, 2022a; 2022b; 2023).

				(Law 283/2022).	

A fragmented European landscape

Taken together, these examples reveal both convergence and divergence. Spain and Italy stand out for the generosity of their paternity leave policies, while Cyprus and Greece provide only the EU minimum and rarely ensure adequate payment. Romania's system offers security but less flexibility, while Spain's main shortcoming remains the lack of paid parental leave. Across all countries, **cultural and institutional barriers** remain as significant as **legal** ones. Rights that exist on paper may remain underused if employers resist them, if workers fear retaliation, or if social norms continue to stigmatise men who take time off for care.

In this sense, the Directive represents an important milestone, but also a reminder that legislation is only the first step. The recognition of carers and parents as legitimate rights-holders in the workplace challenges long-standing hierarchies between productive and reproductive work. Its effectiveness will depend on sustained political commitment, cultural change, and adequate financial support to ensure that these rights are not merely theoretical but genuinely transformative for European families.

Challenges and obstacles in adherence to relevant provisions

The implementation of the EU Work–Life Balance Directive (2019/1158) has been a critical step in promoting gender equality and supporting workers in reconciling professional and caregiving responsibilities. Yet, the actual adherence to its provisions across Member States shows important gaps and inconsistencies. These challenges emerge at 2 levels: (a) the national transposition and enforcement of the Directive and (b) the practical application in workplaces.

A. National Transposition and Enforcement

Uneven Transposition and Delayed Compliance

Although the deadline for transposing the Directive into national law was set for August 2022, by September of the same year, the European Commission had to issue formal notices to **19 Member States** for **incomplete transposition**, and by April 2023 reasoned opinions were sent to 11 countries, including Greece, Cyprus, and Spain (European Commission, 2023).
In countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Germany, pre-existing family-friendly policies facilitated a relatively smooth implementation. By contrast, in Southern and Eastern Europe, **financial constraints, weaker welfare systems, and cultural resistance** delayed harmonisation. For instance, Italy and Spain struggled particularly with the remuneration of parental leave and rights to flexible work arrangements, while Romania requires parental leave to be taken in a single block rather than flexibly, which reduces its effectiveness.

Challenges in Measuring Implementation and Impact

One of the main obstacles is the scarcity of reliable data on implementation. While leaves and flexible arrangements are now formally available in most Member States, it remains difficult to assess how widely they are used, especially by informal carers and women. Eurostat and national labour surveys provide only partial figures, and **systematic monitoring mechanisms remain weak** (European Commission, 2023).

Evidence suggests that compliance is higher for carers' leave and flexible working arrangements than for paternity or parental leave (Zumbyte & Szelewa, 2024). However, the actual impact on gender equality in caregiving and the labour market participation of women remains largely **undocumented**.

B. Practical Application in Workplaces

Obstacles in Workplace Application

Even where legal frameworks exist, several barriers hinder real uptake:

- **Lack of awareness:** Co-creation workshops conducted under the CareDivide project revealed that many employees, and even HR specialists, were unaware of their entitlements to carer's leave and flexible arrangements.
- **Cultural norms and gender stereotypes**: In many contexts, caregiving is still seen as a woman's responsibility. Men are less likely to request leave due to social expectations that caregiving is 'women's work', while women may face subtle penalties for doing so (Lyon, 2006; Papastavrou et al., 2009; Zygouri et al., 2024).
- **Employer resistance:** Especially in Small- to Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), formal HR processes are weak, and flexible arrangements often depend on the goodwill of managers rather than formalised policies. Some employers fear productivity loss or administrative burden (Alessi et al., 2023).
- **Limited financial support:** Research shows that uptake of carers' and parental leave depends heavily on whether such leave is well compensated. Where remuneration is low or absent, employees, mostly women, often resort to informal solutions (De Stefanis, 2023).
- **Weak monitoring and enforcement**: Labour inspectorates and equality bodies exist in most countries but face resource limitations. Compliance in the informal economy and smaller enterprises remains particularly low (Eurofound, 2024a).

Disconnect Between Policy and Practice

The challenges outlined above highlight a gap between legislative ambition and daily reality. While the Directive has succeeded in establishing minimum EU-wide standards, the **provisions often remain insufficient** for those providing long-term or intensive daily care, such as for older relatives or family members with disabilities. Many caregivers report that the limited number of days available do not correspond to their real needs, leaving them to rely on personal arrangements, flexible managers, or the private care market (Care Divide - Mapping the Gap Report; 2025).
This disconnect also underlines the **gendered impact**: despite formal progress, women continue to bear the disproportionate burden of unpaid care, with long-term consequences for their employment and career trajectories.

Potential Shortcomings of the Work-Life Balance Directive

The Work-Life Balance Directive represents a significant step towards supporting caregivers and promoting gender equality in the distribution of unpaid care responsibilities across the European Union. However, despite its general positive impact, the Directive presents several notable shortcomings that limit its effectiveness.

First, it does not extend protections to **domestic workers** or **atypical workers**, including those on precarious contracts or self-employed, who frequently carry substantial caregiving responsibilities. These groups remain particularly vulnerable, with limited access to formalised leave, flexible working arrangements, and social protections, leaving a significant segment of caregivers outside the scope of the Directive (Eurofund, 2025).

Moreover, the Directive applies a **narrow scope of eligibility**. While it established entitlements for parents through paternity and parental leave, carer's leave is limited to workers providing personal care to a relative or household member with a serious medical condition. This excludes many real-life caregiving arrangements, such as eldest daughters, siblings, or other family members who assume daily childcare responsibilities when parents are unable and unavailable to provide care - a common scenario in parentified families. In addition, carers in partnerships not legally recognised in certain Member States, as well as friends, neighbours, or informal support networks increasingly involved in unpaid care, also fall outside its coverage. These omissions are particularly relevant in societies where caregiving networks extend beyond the nuclear family or in cases where traditional family structures are not the norm. Informal or *de facto* carers, such as those providing care without legal guardianship, remain unrecognised, despite often performing essential caregiving tasks, and are left without support mechanisms or social protection (Eurofund, 2025).

The Directive also lacks provisions addressing **cross-border** caregiving, where care is provided in a Member State different from the caregiver's country of residence or employment. Frontier workers face legal and administrative barriers due to fragmented national regulations and limited coordination

of social security systems, constraining their access to carers' leave and associated benefits (European Commission, 2017).

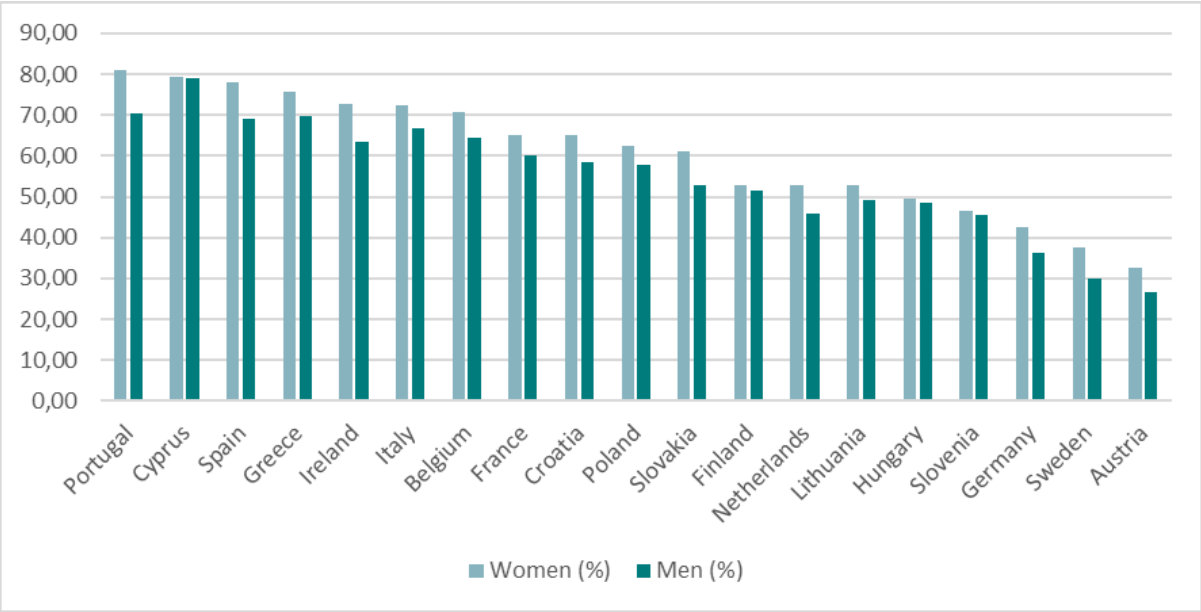
Groups facing **compounded care responsibilities**, such as the "sandwich generation" caring simultaneously for children and elderly relatives, are similarly underserved. These caregivers experience heightened stress and time constraints, and available leave provisions often fail to accommodate dual caregiving responsibilities.

Geographical disparities further exacerbate these challenges. Workers in rural or peripheral areas encounter limited formal care services, fewer flexible working opportunities, and a heavier reliance on informal caregiving networks. They may also face higher financial burdens due to travel, logistics, or necessary adaptations for the care recipient (Eurofound, 2025). These disparities highlight the uneven practical implementation of work–life balance policies across the EU.

Single parents represent another group insufficiently covered in some Member States. Traditionally, they may have access only to maternity or paternity leave, without the ability to combine entitlements. Spain provides a positive example, allowing single mothers to accumulate maternity and paternity leave, thereby broadening their support and illustrating the potential benefits of more harmonised policies across the EU.

Finally, deeply ingrained **cultural and economic norms** continue to hinder genuine progress toward gender-equitable caregiving. Traditional gender expectations discourage men from taking parental or carers' leave, placing the bulk of unpaid care on women. Data from the European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC, 2025 - ESS11) indicate persistent disparities in support for mandatory equal parental leave: in Portugal, 81% of women support it compared to 70% of men; in Cyprus, the gender gap is negligible (0.5%), while in Austria, support is low among both women (32.6%) and men (26.7%). These figures underscore that legal entitlements alone are insufficient to shift social norms or achieve equal uptake of caregiving responsibilities.

Graph 1 –Percentage of women and men who agree that parental leave should be equally mandatory for both parents (ESS11, 2025)



Beyond these gaps, as we have discussed in the section "Work–Life Balance Directive and National Application" and "Challenges and obstacles in adherence to relevant provisions", **variations in national implementation** further constrain the Directive's impact. Differences in national legal frameworks, monitoring mechanisms, and compensation levels affect caregivers' real access to leave and flexible working arrangements. In countries with limited financial compensation, women in particular may continue to rely on informal care arrangements, undermining the Directive's objective of equitable workforce participation and support for carers.

In conclusion, while the **Work-Life Balance Directive has contributed to advancing care support and promoting gender equality in the EU**, its **limited coverage, uneven national implementation, and persistence of cultural and geographic barriers suggest that further policy innovation is required.** Expanding the Directive to include informal and atypical workers, carers in partnerships not legally recognised, cross-border caregivers, and those in rural areas, as well as ensuring equitable leave for single parents, are essential steps toward a more inclusive approach. Furthermore, highlighting these shortcomings makes it clear that addressing unpaid care effectively requires not only legislation but also cultural transformation, financial incentives, and formal recognition of informal caregiving networks, including parentified children and sibling carers, who remain largely invisible in policy frameworks. Such measures would help ensure that all caregivers, regardless of employment status, family structure, or geographic location, can balance work and care responsibilities more effectively, ultimately promoting sustainable and equitable caregiving across the EU.
[The Interactive Activity 2 goes here]

Interactive Activities

Activity 1: What do you know about the Work-Life Balance Directive?

Aim of Activity:
To activate prior knowledge, engage participants at the start of the session, and introduce the topic by highlighting awareness gaps.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):
Step 1: Individually, participants take 2 minutes to reflect on two prompt questions:

1. *Do you know what the Work-Like Balance Directive is?*
2. *Do you know if your country has implemented all parts of it?*

Step 2: Participants share their answers with a partner (in pairs).
Step 3: Volunteers share in plenary what they discovered (e.g., if they had heard of it, what they were unsure about).
Step 4: The Facilitator briefly explains the Directive and links the discussion to the training content, emphasising the importance of awareness.

Links/Resources:
Prompt questions slide

Activity 2: If I were a policy maker…

Aim of Activity:
To encourage participants to reflect on obstacles to the implementation of the Directive and creatively propose improvements.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):
Step 1: Divide participants into small groups (3–5 people).
Step 2: Each group imagines they are part of a policy team revising the EU Work–Life Balance Directive.
Step 3: They discuss and answer prompt questions such as:

- *What obstacles do you see in practice?*
- *What policy changes or measures would you introduce to improve carers' work–life balance?*
- *Which improvement would you prioritise first?*
- *Who should be included? (e.g. informal carers, domestic workers, friends, neighbours, etc.)*
- *What kind of additional support should be provided? (e.g. income support, access to training, legal recognition, etc.)*

Step 4: Each group agrees on one or two changes they would propose to make the directive more inclusive and effective and presents one key proposal to the plenary.
Step 5: Facilitator clusters the proposals on a flipchart/board, identifying themes and linking back to training content. Output: Write a short paragraph starting with: "If we could change the directive, we would…
Links/Resources:
Flipchart or online whiteboard (e.g., Miro, Jamboard)

Unit 2.2 - Learning from Others. Good Practices, Policies and Recommendations

The EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158) exemplifies a **forward-thinking, rights-based approach to reconciling professional, family and personal life** across Europe. In this Unit, we identify and analyse some good practices, providing a comparative insight into what makes certain policies particularly effective in fostering work-life balance and supporting caregivers. We will delve into how these models are implemented, how their success can be measured, and what strategic recommendations can be derived for effective policy design and evaluation in various organisational contexts.

Good practices and policies in achieving work-life balance

Achieving a sustainable work–life balance is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of employee well-being, gender equality and organisational resilience. Across Europe, governments and companies have assembled a diverse toolkit—from leave entitlements and financial supports to flexible scheduling, hybrid work models, and “right-to-disconnect” rules—that helps employees combine paid work with family and caregiving responsibilities. This variety shows there is no single path to success; rather, countries adapt to their legal traditions, labour-market structures and cultural norms while converging on the same objective: enabling people to care and to work without sacrificing either.

At the national level, several jurisdictions offer instructive examples. **France**, for instance, has transposed the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158) through Law No. 2023-171. This legislation, which came into effect on March 11, 2023, has successfully strengthened the country's existing legal framework and has either introduced or reinforced new rights for employees, particularly for parents and caregivers (Law No. 2023-171, 2023).

Currently, employees who are parents or caregivers have the right to request **flexible working arrangements**, such as full-time or part-time teleworking. They can also request a modification to their working hours to adapt to their caregiving needs, for example, by starting or finishing earlier or later. Prior to the transposition of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158), requests for flexible working arrangements were largely at the employer's discretion. However, with the new law, employers are now obligated to seriously consider the request and, if they decide to deny it, they must justify their decision in writing. This justification must be based on objective reasons and demonstrate that the requested flexibility would negatively impact production, work organisation, or safety (Law No. 2023-171, 2023).

Furthermore, Law No. 2023-171 reinforces the **protection of employees** who request or use these arrangements. An employer cannot dismiss an employee simply for having requested or used a flexible

working agreement. In addition, any form of unfavourable treatment, such as a salary reduction or denial of promotion, is prohibited as a result of this request. In the case of paternity or caregiving leave, the employee retains all benefits acquired before the leave began (Law No. 2023-171, 2023).

Portugal is also one of the most notable countries in this area, as it has transposed the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158) through an approach that goes beyond merely meeting the minimums required by the European Union. It has introduced a particularly robust and proactive legal framework, especially with regard to the **right to telework** and the reconciliation of work and family life.

The transposition of EU Directive 2019/1158 was carried out through Law No. 13/2023 of April 3, which reformed the Portuguese Labor Code and related legislation, coming into effect on May 1, 2023. Unlike many other countries, which only regulate telework as an agreement between the parties, Portuguese legislation has made it a right for employees who are parents or caregivers. Employees with children up to 3 years of age have the legal right to request and perform their work remotely. The employer, for their part, cannot deny the request unless they can provide written justification of an "imperative need" for physical presence or that the nature of the position is intrinsically incompatible with telework. This justification must be objective and well-founded, which significantly limits the employer's discretion (Art. 166, Law No. 13/2023, 2023).

The transposition of the Directive has also granted specific **rights to employees who hold the status of "non-primary informal caregiver,**" as recognised in the distinguished "Informal Caregiver Statute," which was approved by Law No. 100/2019 of September 6. In Portugal, to achieve a balance between work and the care of dependent persons, the non-primary informal caregiver has the right to request and benefit from telework for a maximum period of 4 years, which can be continuous or intermittent, as long as the nature of the professional activity allows it. Additionally, they have the right to request a flexible schedule or a reduction of their working hours to part-time for a specific period, which allows them to further adapt their professional life to the demands of the person they are caring for. However, the most notable aspect is that the non-primary informal caregiver has the right to a leave of 5 consecutive or interpolated working days per year for the assistance of the person being cared for in case of illness or accident (Art. 101, Law No. 13/2023, 2023).

Thus, with the legal recognition of the non-primary informal caregiver and the transposition of the EU Directive, Portugal has laid the groundwork for a more inclusive work-life balance policy that goes beyond parenthood to encompass the needs of an aging population that requires care.

Belgium has implemented a comprehensive set of measures aligned with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive, focusing on caregiving, flexibility, employment protection, and transparency. Since November 2022, employees are entitled to take up to **5 days of unpaid leave per year to care** for a seriously ill family member. These days are drawn from the 10 days of unpaid leave already available for compelling reasons and incur no cost to the employer. Employees making use of this entitlement are legally protected against dismissal (Alliant, 2022).

Workers with at least 6 months of seniority are further granted the **right to request adjustments to their working arrangements**—including changes in schedule, hours, or workplace—to provide care for children under 12 or dependent family members. Such requests can be made for renewable periods of up to 12 months, provided they are submitted in writing 3 months in advance. Employers are required to respond within one month and, if declining or postponing the request, must provide written justification (Lexgo, 2022; PwC Legal, 2022).

Protection against dismissal has also been reinforced for those taking thematic leave, such as parental, maternity, paternity, or carers' leave. This includes an "upstream" protection mechanism,

which safeguards employees from the time of application until one month after the requested effective date. Dismissal is only permissible for reasons unrelated to the leave, and the burden of proof rests with the employer. Should a dismissal be deemed unlawful, compensation may amount to as much as six months' gross salary (L&E Global, 2022).

In the **Netherlands**, recent reforms have significantly strengthened the framework for reconciling professional and family life, particularly with regard to parental leave. Since August 2, 2022, parents are entitled to **26 weeks of parental leave**, of which 9 weeks are now remunerated at 70% of salary during the child's first year. Complementing this, the *WIEG law*, effective July 1, 2020, grants the partner or spouse of the birth parent 6 weeks of paid leave at 70% of salary, to be taken within the first 6 months after birth. In addition, parents may take up to 26 weeks of unpaid leave until the child reaches the age of eight.

These measures represent the Netherlands' transposition of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive, reinforcing opportunities for parents to balance work and family responsibilities while receiving financial support during the critical period of early parenthood (Voûte & De Boer, 2021; Fruytier Lawyers in Business, 2023; Loyens & Loeff, 2021).

As of July 1, 2024, **Sweden** introduced a significant reform to its parental leave system, allowing parents to **transfer a portion of their paid parental leave to individuals who are not the child's legal guardian**s, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, or other chosen caregivers. This policy enables a parent couple to transfer up to 45 days of leave, while a single parent may transfer up to 90 days. The recipient must be insured for parental allowance, which most residents in Sweden are, and the compensation for the transferred leave is based on the recipient's income or, if retired, at a basic benefit level. These transferred leave days can be used during the child's first year (Government of Sweden, 2024)

This reform is directly linked to the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (EU 2019/1158), which requires EU member states to enhance work-life balance through measures such as non-transferable parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and opportunities to combine professional and family responsibilities. Sweden's new law aligns with these objectives by **broadening the scope of eligible caregivers**, promoting gender equality, and providing families with greater flexibility in managing childcare.

The legislative basis for this reform is the Swedish Parental Leave Act (Föräldraledighetslagen, 1995: 584), which has been amended to permit the transfer of parental leave days to individuals other than the parents, thereby **supporting diverse family structures** and strengthening intergenerational bonds. This reform also allows parents to return to work earlier with support from trusted family members, fosters closer relationships between extended family and children, and provides additional assistance for single parents who can transfer a larger portion of their leave (Government Offices of Sweden, 2022).

Meanwhile, **Germany** has transposed the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158) not through a single new law, but by adapting its robust pre-existing labor and social security legislation. This approach has allowed it to integrate the directive's requirements into an already well-developed legal framework. Germany's focus has consolidated caregivers' rights by offering various types of leave, some with financial compensation. The granted leaves are:

- Short-Term Care Leave (*Kurzzeitige Arbeitsverhinderung*): Employees are entitled to **up to 10 days of leave** to organise or provide urgent care for a family member in need. This leave may be compensated by the employer if a collective bargaining agreement stipulates it.

- Care Leave (*Pflegezeit*): To care for a sick or dependent family member, an employee can request a leave of absence for **up to 6 months**, with a guarantee of re-employment to their position. This leave is generally unpaid, but the employee can apply for an interest-free loan from the federal government to compensate for the loss of income.

- Leave for the Care of Seriously Ill Minors: Parents of children with serious illnesses are entitled to **up to 9 months** of leave, with the possibility of receiving financial compensation.

German law also grants employees with caregiving responsibilities the legal **right to request a reduction in their working hours**, provided they have been employed at the company for more than 6 months. Employers are required to justify any denial in writing. Furthermore, German law offers one of the strongest protections in Europe against dismissal. An employer cannot dismiss an employee who is taking care leave and, if they do, the burden of proof lies with the company to demonstrate that the dismissal was unrelated to the leave (Law on Care Leave, 2024).

However, beyond government regulations, **companies** are proactively implementing a variety of practices, resources, tools, and programs to foster a work environment that not only maximises productivity but also prioritises employee well-being. This approach is not merely a trend but a direct response to the growing demand for flexibility, the recognition of family caregiving challenges, and the understanding that a balanced workforce is an indispensable asset for talent retention, burnout reduction, and the promotion of a sustainable organisational culture.

Siemens has taken a proactive stance in implementing the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158), going beyond the minimum legal requirements to foster a supportive and family-friendly workplace. The company grants employees up to **3 years of individual, non-transferable parental leave**, accompanied by financial support to safeguard economic stability during this period. Complementary measures include flexible working arrangements—such as remote work, flexible hours, and part-time schedules—as well as family-focused services, including assistance with childcare, household support, and family-oriented events that encourage inclusivity (Siemens Deutschland, 2025).

By August 2022, the deadline for transposition of the Directive into national law, Siemens had already established a set of policies exceeding the Directive's obligations. This proactive implementation underscores the company's commitment not only to regulatory compliance but also to employee well-being, positioning Siemens as a benchmark in advancing work-life balance across Europe (Siemens Deutschland, 2025).

Safran, a French multinational leader in aerospace, defense, and space, employs approximately 92,000 people across more than fifty countries. The company combines technological innovation with social responsibility, aiming to make air transport safer, more efficient, and sustainable while ensuring accessibility and comfort.

In February 2025, Safran signed a European framework agreement with IndustriAll Europe to strengthen work-life balance, particularly for employees with caregiving responsibilities. A central measure of this agreement is the development of **specialised training for caregivers,** designed in collaboration with a monitoring committee and available within 12 months of signing. Employees are entitled to up to 2 days of leave every 3 years to attend such courses, retain their salary during training hours, and receive a financial contribution covering 30% of course costs, thereby reducing economic barriers to participation (SAFRAN & IndustriAll Europe, 2024).

Complementing this initiative, Safran has introduced a range of supportive policies, including flexible working arrangements, remote work options, compressed workweeks, and additional leave for urgent caregiving or medical needs. The company further guarantees protection against discrimination related to caregiving duties and fosters inclusivity through awareness campaigns, leadership training, and resource dissemination (SAFRAN & IndustriAll Europe, 2024).

These measures not only facilitate employees' ability to balance professional and family responsibilities but also contribute to reducing stress, enhancing well-being, and supporting talent retention. By integrating training, flexibility, financial support, and organisational awareness, Safran positions itself as a benchmark among European employers in the field of work-life reconciliation, exemplifying a holistic approach that aligns innovation with social responsibility and employee care (SAFRAN & IndustriAll Europe, 2024).

While the design and implementation of initiatives such as flexible scheduling, carer's leave, and family-friendly practices constitute essential steps, their ultimate success is contingent upon a **quantifiable impact** on the socio-professional landscape. For this reason, we need tangible data and key indicators to transcend a mere analysis of policy frameworks and evaluate their real-world consequences, particularly for individuals with caregiving responsibilities.

The **OECD Better Life Index** provides a comprehensive and interactive look at work-life balance using data from member countries. The index focuses on 2 main indicators, providing both **quantitative data and qualitative insights** into how people manage their professional and personal lives (OECD, 2024).

Indicator 1: Time allocated to leisure and personal care

- Measures time spent on sleep, meals, socialising, and hobbies.
- Daily time ranges widely: around 16+ hours in countries like Italy, France, and Spain, compared to 13.6 hours in Mexico and Colombia.
- OECD average: 15.0 hours per day.

Indicator 2: Percentage of employees with very long working hours

- Shows the share of workers putting in 50+ hours per week (lower = better work–life balance).
- Lowest rates: Denmark (2.0%), Germany (4.1%), Netherlands (4.3%).
- Highest rates: Turkey (29.9%), Mexico (28.7%), Colombia (24.7%).

The user data also shows that work-life balance is a top priority for people in many countries. This input highlights that people value time for themselves and their families just as much as income or job security. By combining hard data on working hours and leisure time with direct input from citizens, the OECD's approach offers a comprehensive look at work-life balance, revealing both the statistical reality and the subjective importance of this issue to people around the world (OECD, 2024).

Recommendations

Work-life balance policies are a reality supported by empirical evidence that consistently demonstrate their **positive impact on productivity, employee well-being, and social equity**. However, this understanding transcends the theoretical realm and poses a new and important challenge: the need to go further, ensuring effective implementation of existing policies, conducting effective evaluations, and advancing the formulation of new policies. This requires a specific methodological framework to

guide the entire policy lifecycle—from initial design and strategic implementation to ongoing evaluation and proactive reform—ensuring that all future initiatives are not only well-intentioned but also functionally effective and sustainable.

The effective design of practices and policies supporting work-life balance needs a comprehensive and data-driven approach. Therefore, the foundational phase involves a thorough assessment of the target population to identify existing needs and challenges, ensuring that proposed interventions are both relevant and impactful. This diagnostic process should leverage quantitative and qualitative data, including but not limited to analysis of existing leave usage, workforce participation rates, and absenteeism patterns. Propositions should be framed not merely as compliance with directives like the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158), but as strategic investments in the workforce, directly linking policy outcomes to enhanced well-being, productivity, and retention. The design must be adaptable, acknowledging the diverse needs of the population, and should offer a range of flexible work arrangements, from remote work and compressed workweeks to staggered hours and part-time options, thereby empowering individuals with greater autonomy over their schedules (Eurofound, 2020; Eurofound, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2023a).

Implementation of these policies requires a robust and multifaceted strategy that goes beyond the simple publication of new rules. A critical component is the development of comprehensive communication plans to ensure all members of the public and relevant stakeholders are fully aware of their entitlements and responsibilities. Moreover, training programs are essential to equip managers and public officials with the skills to lead diverse teams under flexible arrangements, fostering a culture of trust and support rather than one of presenteeism (Eurofound, 2021).

The final, and perhaps most crucial, stage involves the continuous evaluation of these practices and policies. This is not a one-time audit but an ongoing feedback loop designed to measure efficacy and inform future adjustments. Evaluation methodologies should be both quantitative and qualitative. Regular surveys of citizens or employees, specifically including dedicated work-life balance surveys, are instrumental for gathering direct feedback on the perceived effectiveness and usage of policies. Key performance indicators (KPIs) should be established to measure tangible outcomes, such as

changes in overall life satisfaction scores, reduction in burnout indicators, and improvements in economic productivity metrics. The results of ongoing evaluation are essential for ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of work-life balance strategies, but especially for implementing policy reforms, developing future initiatives, and driving fundamental changes in society's mindset (Eurofound, 2022).

To achieve a pivotal shift in the public and corporate mindset, it is also necessary to move beyond the traditional paradigm of work to **embrace flexibility as a standard** rather than an exception. This necessitates scientifically-grounded awareness-raising initiatives, targeted at both employers and the public, to disseminate the long-term economic and social benefits of a flexible work environment (World Economic Forum, 2023b).

The policy reforms must also be **coupled with strategic, concrete investments in public infrastructure and services.** Notably, a significant investment in formal Long-Term Care (LTC) services is critical to alleviate the substantial burden on informal caregivers, impacted by work-life imbalances. By formalising and expanding these services, policymakers can not only improve the quality of care but also enable greater participation of caregivers in the formal workforce (European Parliament, 2023). Complementary to this is the provision of structured psychological support for employees and informal carers, which is paramount given the mental health challenges associated with navigating dual professional and caregiving responsibilities. This support can be implemented through Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), as they are recognised as an effective workplace intervention to address employee mental health and well-being (Attridge, 2012).

On the other hand, **practical workplace adaptations,** such as the establishment of dedicated quiet spaces for focused work, onsite or subsidised childcare facilities, and ergonomic adjustments for remote setups, represent tangible, micro-level changes that can significantly support employees (Eurofound, 2020; Eurofound, 2022).

Additionally, to ensure that policies are not just aspirational but functionally effective, there must be a strong focus on **improved enforcement and monitoring mechanisms.** This includes the establishment of dedicated regulatory bodies or oversight committees with the mandate to conduct data-driven audits and respond to compliance issues (Eurofound, 2021).

All these efforts must contribute to the development of fundamental cultural change initiatives, where organisations and governments foster work-life balance, integrate it into their values, and embrace it across all stakeholders.

Interactive Activities

Activity 1 :Myths & Facts about Flexible Working

Aim of Activity:
The aim of this activity is to challenge common assumptions about remote work and flexible schedules, encouraging participants to distinguish between myths and evidence-based facts. By comparing their perceptions with real data, participants become more aware of how beliefs influence workplace decisions and are motivated to adopt small, practical changes that improve productivity, well-being, and collaboration.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):
Step 1: The trainer presents three short slides showing that well-structured telework can raise productivity and that a four-day workweek improves well-being without reducing performance. Participants react quickly and share examples from their own experience.
Step 2: Groups receive several cards, each with a statement. They decide if it is a Myth or a Fact and write a short reason for their choice.
Step 3: The trainer gives out the answer cards with the correct Myth/Fact label and a short explanation. Groups compare their answers, see which ones they got right or wrong, and discuss what surprised them.
Step 4: Each group shares one insight from the game. The trainer summarizes the key takeaways and asks everyone to choose one small action to apply in their workplace.

Links / Resources (for trainers and participants)

Myths cards:

Myths	***Facts***
Caregiving for babies and older adults is mainly a private family duty.	*Without public services and workplace support, the caregiving burden—especially on women—grows and often forces them out of the labour market.*
Employees who care for older relatives are less affected than parents of young children.	*Elder care can generate severe stress and absenteeism. Many workers belong to the "sandwich generation," providing care to both children and elderly parents simultaneously.*
Working from home makes it easy to balance care and work without additional support.	*While telework offers flexibility, without adequate childcare or eldercare services it can increase stress, exhaustion, and reduce productivity.*
Carer's leave is too costly for companies.	*Providing formal support for carers lowers turnover, presenteeism, and absenteeism, producing long-term financial savings.*
Flexible working arrangements only benefit parents with young children.	*Flexibility also supports employees caring for elderly relatives, people with disabilities, or those with long commutes.*
Telework always reduces productivity because employees split focus between work and family.	*OECD and Eurofound research shows that, under clear objectives and outcome-based management, telework maintains or even increases productivity.*
Employees will abuse personal leave if too many days are allowed.	*Evidence indicates that when policies are clear and trust-based, abuse is minimal, and most*

	employees use leave responsibly (Eurofound, 2020: 25).

**The information (facts) has been extracted from Eurofound (2020, 2021, 2022) and from the World Economic Forum (2023a, 2023b)*

Activity 2: Case studies: Good practices or policies used in countries

Aim of Activity:
This activity is designed to transition our analysis from a theoretical framework to a practical application. Through a collaborative debate based on specific questions, each group will critically evaluate some good practices. The main purpose is to move beyond conceptual understanding and articulate the tangible and quantifiable benefits of these models, thereby fostering a shared understanding of their effectiveness and true value. In this way, participants will acquire key skills for measuring the effectiveness of work-life balance policies in real-world settings.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):
Step 1: Small groups of 3 to 5 participants will be formed. Each group receives a card describing a good practice or work-life balance policy and writes a short essay analysing its objectives, impact, and relevance.
Step 2: Groups discuss the assigned policy and plan their essay, reflecting on how it affects employees and caregivers, its benefits, and how its implementation could be evaluated.
Step 3: Each group writes a structured essay addressing questions such as: What are the benefits for employees and caregivers? How can its impact be measured? Include evidence and examples from at least two countries.
Step 4: Groups present their essays to the others. Peers ask questions, give comments, and discuss insights. The trainer highlights strong points and provides feedback on clarity, evidence, and practical relevance.

Specific policies and good practices chosen for discussion:

- *FRANCE: employees who are parents or caregivers have the right to request flexible working arrangements, such as full-time or part-time teleworking. They can also request a modification to their working hours to adapt to their caregiving needs, for example, by starting or finishing earlier or later.*

- *PORTUGAL: the non-primary informal caregiver has the right to request and benefit from telework for a maximum period of four years, which can be continuous or intermittent, as long as the nature of the professional activity allows it. Additionally, they have the right to request a flexible schedule or a reduction of their working hours to part-time for a specific period.*

- *BELGIUM: employees are entitled to take up to five days of unpaid leave per year in order to care for a seriously ill family member.*

- *NETHERLANDS: In addition to paid leave, parents may take up to 26 weeks of additional unpaid leave until the child reaches the age of eight.*

- *SWEDEN: parents have the right to transfer a portion of their paid parental leave to individuals who are not the child's legal guardians, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, or other chosen caregivers. This policy enables a parent couple to transfer up to 45 days of leave, while a single parent may transfer up to 90 days.*

- *GERMANY: To care for a sick or dependent family member, an employee can request a leave of absence for up to six months, with a guarantee of re-employment to their position.*

<u>Links / Resources (for trainers and participants)</u>

Possible Answers for Key Questions (Step 3)

Good practice/Policy	*FRANCE: employees who are parents or caregivers have the right to request flexible working arrangements, such as full-time or part-time teleworking. They can also request a modification to their working hours to adapt to their caregiving needs, for example, by starting or finishing earlier or later.*
What are the specific benefits of the policy or practice for employees in general and, specifically, for informal caregivers?	*For employees in general: This policy promotes a better work-life balance, reducing stress and burnout. Working from home or adjusting schedules reduces commuting time and costs and gives employees greater autonomy over their time. This increases job satisfaction and commitment to the company.* *For informal caregivers: This policy is critical for their inclusion and retention in the workforce. It allows them to balance caregiving responsibilities (such as medical appointments or emergencies) without having to leave their jobs or reduce their hours. It also reduces psychological pressure and uncertainty, allowing them to maintain their careers while fulfilling their caregiving roles.*
How can you measure its implications?	*Request and Approval Rates: Record the number of teleworking or flexible working hours requests and the percentage of those approved. A low approval rate could indicate obstacles to implementation.* *Satisfaction Surveys: Conduct anonymous surveys to gather employee feedback on the policy and its impact on their well-being and productivity.* *Focus groups: Organise discussions with employees and managers to identify challenges, successes, and areas for improvement in implementation.*

Good practice/Policy	*PORTUGAL: the non-primary informal caregiver has the right to request and benefit from telework for a maximum period of four years, which can be continuous or intermittent, as long as the nature of the professional activity allows it. Additionally, they have the right to request a flexible schedule or a reduction of their working hours to part-time for a specific period.*
What are the specific benefits of the policy or practice for employees in general and, specifically, for informal caregivers?	*For employees in general: The policy sets a powerful precedent for a flexible and inclusive work culture. By embedding the right to telework and adaptable hours for a specific group, the company signals its commitment to modern work models, which can eventually benefit all employees.* *For informal caregivers: This provides legal certainty and protection. It allows caregivers to sustain their careers by legally securing flexible*

	working conditions for up to four years. This directly addresses the main reason many caregivers leave the workforce: the inability to balance work with their responsibilities. The policy reduces financial hardship and career stagnation, while also significantly lowering the stress and emotional burden.
How can you measure its implications?	*Adoption Rate: Track the number of employees who formally request the status of "non-primary informal caregiver" and those who then apply for telework or flexible hours. A high adoption rate suggests the policy is well-known and utilised.* *Retention Rate: Measure the retention of employees with this status. A higher retention rate would indicate the policy is a key factor.* *Targeted Surveys: Conduct surveys specifically for informal caregivers to gauge their satisfaction with the policy and its impact on their well-being.* *Employee Feedback: Gather anecdotal evidence and feedback from both caregivers and their managers to understand the real-world experiences and identify any friction points.*

Good practice/Policy	*BELGIUM: employees are entitled to take up to five days of unpaid leave per year in order to care for a seriously ill family member.*
What are the specific benefits of the policy or practice for employees in general and, specifically, for informal caregivers?	*For employees in general: Provides reassurance that urgent family care is a legitimate reason for leave, protects job security during crises, reduces stress, and allows employees to manage emergencies without fear of employment loss.* *For informal caregivers: Grants dedicated time to care for seriously ill relatives, including attending appointments or offering emotional support. The policy recognises the social importance of caregiving while safeguarding employment, even though the leave is unpaid.*
How can you measure its implications?	*Uptake Rates: Track annual usage of the five-day leave and identify patterns by gender, age, or role.* *Employee Satisfaction Surveys: Assess whether employees feel supported and less stressed during family emergencies.* *HR Data Analysis: Compare absenteeism, turnover, and retention between users and non-users.* *Wellbeing Indicators: Monitor stress, burnout, or health outcomes through occupational health reports.* *Qualitative Feedback: Gather interviews or written reflections on the quality of care employees can provide.*

Good practice/Policy	*NETHERLANDS: parents have the right to transfer a portion of their paid parental leave to individuals who are not the child's legal guardians, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, or other chosen*

	caregivers. This policy enables a parent couple to transfer up to 45 days of leave, while a single parent may transfer up to 90 days.
What are the specific benefits of the policy or practice for employees in general and, specifically, for informal caregivers?	*For employees in general: Provides flexibility in childcare arrangements, reduces stress around balancing work and family duties, and supports a smoother return to work. Clear rules and supportive managers encourage uptake and reduce hesitation.* *For informal caregivers: Recognises and formalises their role in childcare, offering structured opportunities to support families. Clear coordination with parents ensures manageable schedules and effective caregiving.*
How can you measure its implications?	*Leave Transfer Rates: Track the number of days transferred, recipient caregivers, and usage trends.* *Parent Satisfaction Surveys: Evaluate stress reduction, childcare relief, and smoother work reintegration.* *Caregiver Feedback: Gather insights from relatives on benefits and challenges of participation.* *Childcare Gap Metrics: Assess reduction in reliance on external childcare and improved care continuity.* *Qualitative Reflections: Use interviews or written accounts from parents and caregivers to capture family-level impact.*

Good practice/Policy	*SWEDEN: beyond this, parents may take up to 26 weeks of additional unpaid leave until the child reaches the age of eight.*
What are the specific benefits of the policy or practice for employees in general and, specifically, for informal caregivers?	*For employees in general:* *For informal caregivers: Enables shared childcare arrangements, strengthens family bonds, and formally recognises the role of extended family members in caregiving.*
How can you measure its implications?	*Leave Uptake Rates: Monitor usage patterns and identify barriers to access.* *Parent Satisfaction Surveys: Evaluate impact on stress reduction and work–life balance.* *Caregiver Feedback: Collect insights on benefits and challenges for supporting relatives.* *Work–Life Balance Indicators: Track wellbeing and burnout reduction.* *Qualitative Reflections: Use interviews or testimonials to capture family-level impacts.*

Good practice/Policy	*GERMANY: to care for a sick or dependent family member, an employee can request a leave of absence for up to six months, with a guarantee of re-employment to their position.*
What are the specific benefits of the policy or practice for employees in general and, specifically, for informal caregivers?	*For employees in general: This policy acts as a robust social safety net. Knowing that a company-supported, legally protected framework exists for managing a family crisis fosters a sense of security and loyalty among all employees. This, in turn, can contribute to higher morale and engagement across the organisation.* *For informal caregivers: The primary benefit is the guarantee of re-employment to their position after the leave. This provides job security, removing the stress and financial risk associated with taking extended time off for caregiving. The policy allows individuals to fully focus on their family's needs during a period without sacrificing their long-term career.*
How can you measure its implications?	*Adoption Rate: Number and percentage of employees who use the policy. A high adoption rate suggests the policy is well-known and valued.* *Return-to-work Rate: Monitor the number of employees who successfully return to their original position after the leave.* *Employee Surveys: Confidential surveys to gauge employee satisfaction with the policy, particularly regarding the perceived support from management and HR.*

Unit 2.3: Development of relevant support practices and mechanism that promote work-life balance and flexible work arrangements

Identified Gaps in Work–Life Balance Support

Across Europe, the value of work–life balance has gained increasing recognition, particularly in response to demographic shifts, ageing populations, and the growing visibility of informal caregiving. Yet despite this awareness, many workplaces continue to operate within rigid structures that fail to accommodate the realities of care—especially in sectors where caregiving demands are most acute.

According to Eurofound, demographic changes and the rise in informal care responsibilities are reshaping labour market dynamics, highlighting the urgent need for flexible work arrangements and care-sensitive policies to support workers—particularly women—in balancing employment and caregiving roles (Eurofound, 2020).

A central and persistent challenge is the absence of formalised support structures. In many organisations, flexible work arrangements are offered informally, often at the discretion of individual managers rather than through codified policy. This results in inconsistent access and unequal treatment, disproportionately affecting women, who are statistically more likely to request flexibility due to caregiving responsibilities. Without clear protocols, flexibility remains a privilege rather than a right (Eurostat, 2023; EIGE, 2022). Beyond structural limitations, cultural stigma surrounding caregiving continues to act as a powerful barrier. In many professional settings, caregiving is still perceived as a private issue rather than a legitimate workplace concern. Employees may fear being

seen as less committed or productive, discouraging them from seeking accommodations—even when legal protections are in place. This reluctance is especially pronounced in male-dominated sectors, where traditional norms around work and care persist (Tsipursky, 2023).

This stigma is further reinforced by gendered expectations. The burden of care continues to fall disproportionately on women—not only due to societal norms, but also because workplaces often fail to challenge these roles. Flexible arrangements are frequently framed as "women's issues," which reinforces stereotypes and limits uptake among men. According to Eurostat, over 80% of informal caregivers in the EU are women, yet men remain significantly less likely to request flexibility—even when eligible (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020).

Another critical gap is the limited awareness of legal rights. Many employees—and even employers—are unaware of the entitlements provided under Directive (EU) 2019/1158, which guarantees carers' leave and the right to request flexible working arrangements. This knowledge gap undermines implementation and leaves workers vulnerable to informal denial of rights. In Greece, for example, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, and awareness among HR professionals is low.

Finally, there is the issue of fragmented implementation across sectors. Even when policies exist, their application varies significantly depending on company size, industry, and available resources. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often struggle to formalise flexibility due to limited capacity, creating a patchwork of access that deepens inequality—particularly for caregivers in low-wage or precarious employment (Brega et al., 2023).

Together, these gaps reveal a systemic failure to integrate caregiving into the design of modern work. Addressing them requires not only technical solutions, but a fundamental reimagining of workplace culture, leadership, and policy.

Policy Landscape & Institutional Mechanisms

Creating inclusive workplaces that genuinely support informal caregivers requires more than goodwill—it demands a robust policy framework and sustained institutional commitment. While the European Union has laid essential groundwork through legislation such as the *Work-Life Balance Directive (EU) 2019/1158* and the *European Care Strategy*, many organisations still struggle to translate these legal mandates into meaningful, everyday practices (European Commission, 2019, 2022a, 2022b). According to the European Economic and Social Committee, informal carers often face marginalisation and lack access to structured support, highlighting the need for Member States to implement policies that go beyond minimum legal compliance (European Economic and Social Committee, 2024). Eurocarers also emphasise that despite growing recognition of informal caregiving, the translation of EU-level ambitions into national and organisational action remains uneven and insufficient (Eurocarers, 2022).

At the heart of the EU's approach is Directive (EU) 2019/1158, adopted on 20 June 2019. This directive sets minimum standards to improve gender equality and support the reconciliation of professional and private life. It guarantees:

- Carers' leave: Five working days per year to provide personal care or support.
- Flexible working arrangements: The right to request reduced hours, adjusted schedules, or remote work.
- Protection from dismissal and discrimination: Safeguards for those exercising these rights.

Creating inclusive workplaces that genuinely support informal caregivers requires more than goodwill—it demands a robust policy framework and sustained institutional commitment. While the European Union has laid essential groundwork through legislation such as the *Work-Life Balance Directive (EU) 2019/1158* and the *European Care Strategy*, many organisations still struggle to translate these legal mandates into meaningful, everyday practices (European Commission, 2019, 2022a, 2022b).

The European Care Strategy, launched by the European Commission in September 2022, aims to ensure access to quality, affordable, and accessible care services across the EU. It addresses both professional and informal care, promotes gender equality, and strengthens work–life balance by encouraging Member States to invest in long-term care and improve conditions for carers (European Commission, 2022a).

However, the directive's effectiveness depends on how it is transposed into national law and implemented at the organisational level. While most Member States have adopted it, the depth and clarity of implementation vary. In some cases, carers' leave is unpaid, or flexibility requests are subject to vague criteria. In Greece, for example, although the directive is formally transposed, awareness among employers and HR professionals remains low, and enforcement mechanisms are limited—undermining its potential impact (European Economic and Social Committee, 2024).

Beyond legal compliance, organisations must develop internal mechanisms that make caregiving support tangible. This includes:

- Clear HR protocols for requesting and approving flexibility
- Visibility of policies through onboarding materials and internal communications
- Monitoring systems to track uptake across gender, age, and caregiving status

Without these mechanisms, legal rights risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

An additional layer of support comes through social dialogue and collective bargaining. Trade unions and employee representatives play a vital role in embedding work–life balance into collective agreements. In sectors with strong union presence, flexible arrangements are more likely to be formalised, protected, and equitably distributed. Employers can collaborate with unions to co-design policies that reflect the lived realities of caregivers, ensuring support mechanisms are not only available but truly accessible.

This policy landscape sets the foundation for developing inclusive support practices—ones that move beyond compliance and toward meaningful cultural and structural change. The next section explores how these mechanisms can be designed and implemented to close the gender care gap and promote sustainable work–life balance.

Designing Inclusive Support Practices

Hard skills—such as digital literacy, time management, and remote collaboration—are increasingly recognised as essential for navigating modern work environments. Yet their effectiveness depends not only on individual proficiency or access to technology, but on the organisational context in which they are applied. For informal caregivers, particularly women, technical competencies alone are insufficient. Without inclusive structures and cultural reinforcement, even the most advanced tools risk becoming inaccessible or irrelevant (Eurofound, 2020; European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2022).

This section explores how organisations can move beyond technical training to develop support mechanisms that enable all employees—especially those with caregiving responsibilities—to apply their skills in sustainable, equitable, and empowering ways. Building on the previous unit's focus on digital tools, it examines the organisational conditions that make flexibility truly functional.

To maximise impact, support mechanisms must be integrated with hard skills training. For example, time management skills taught in workshops should be reinforced through flexible scheduling policies, while digital collaboration tools must be embedded into remote work protocols. This alignment ensures that training outcomes are not isolated but embedded into daily practice, allowing employees to apply their skills in environments that support—not hinder—their caregiving responsibilities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021; Eurocarers, 2022).

Digital infrastructure plays a key role. Platforms such as Trello, Asana, and Slack can enhance collaboration and scheduling, but only when paired with inclusive practices and adequate training (ActiveCollab Team, 2025; Lark Editorial Team, 2024). AI-powered tools offer new opportunities for task automation and workload management—particularly valuable for caregivers balancing multiple roles (Coursera Staff, 2025b; Microsoft & LinkedIn, 2024). Remote access solutions, including VPNs and cloud-based systems, have also been shown to improve work–life balance and productivity, especially when integrated into broader organisational support frameworks (Pleasant, 2025; Butler, 2024).

Importantly, the effectiveness of these tools depends on how they are embedded within workplace culture. Flexibility must be understood through a capability lens—focusing on what employees are actually able to do, not just what they are formally allowed to request. Without structural enablers and cultural acceptance, digital tools risk reinforcing exclusion rather than promoting inclusion (Brega et al., 2023). The integration of technical competencies with inclusive policies and leadership support creates a workplace culture where flexibility is not a privilege but a standard. It also helps prevent the marginalisation of caregivers, who might otherwise be excluded from opportunities to develop and apply new skills.

i. **Formalising Flexibility Through Policy**

A foundational step is the formalisation of flexibility. In many workplaces, remote work and adjusted schedules are offered informally, relying on individual negotiations with supervisors. This often leads to inconsistent access, unequal treatment, and the reinforcement of bias—particularly against caregivers who may be perceived as less committed (Eurofound, 2020; EIGE, 2022).

To ensure transparency and legitimacy, employers must establish clear, written policies that guarantee access to flexible scheduling options. These may include core hours, staggered shifts, compressed workweeks, and remote work protocols that define expectations around availability, deliverables, and communication. Care leave provisions—whether paid or unpaid—should align with Directive (EU) 2019/1158 and be integrated into employment contracts, onboarding materials, and

internal communications. Policies should be accessible, consistently applied, and regularly reviewed to remain responsive to evolving needs (European Commission, 2019).

Research shows that in countries where flexibility is conditional—such as Spain and Slovenia—access is often tied to caregiving status, reinforcing gender imbalances. In contrast, universal access models, like those in the Netherlands, broaden inclusion but still face cultural barriers to uptake (Eurofound, 2022). This underscores the need for support mechanisms that are universal in design but responsive in application.

ii. Co-Creating Support Mechanisms

Inclusive practices are most effective when co-created with employees. Participatory approaches foster ownership, increase relevance, and help surface hidden barriers (Eurofound, 2020; OECD, 2021). Employers can facilitate HR-led workshops where staff shape flexibility policies, support the formation of caregiver resource groups, and implement feedback loops—such as anonymous surveys and open forums—to gather insights and monitor impact.

This bottom-up engagement complements top-down training initiatives, creating a holistic and responsive support system. It also ensures that mechanisms reflect the diverse realities of caregiving, including elder care, disability support, and multi-generational responsibilities (Eurocarers, 2022).

iii. Integrating Support Mechanisms with Hard Skills Training

To maximise impact, support mechanisms must be integrated with hard skills training. For example, time management skills taught in training sessions should be reinforced through flexible scheduling policies, while digital collaboration tools should be embedded into remote work protocols. This alignment ensures that training outcomes are embedded into daily practice, allowing employees to apply their skills in environments that support—not hinder—their caregiving responsibilities (OECD, 2021; Eurofound, 2020).

The integration of technical competencies with structural enablers creates a workplace culture where flexibility is not a privilege but a standard. It also helps prevent the marginalisation of caregivers, who may otherwise be excluded from opportunities to develop and apply new skills (Eurocarers, 2022; EIGE, 2022).

Tools like Trello, Asana, and Slack can enhance collaboration and scheduling, but only when paired with inclusive practices and adequate training (ActiveCollab Team, 2025; Lark Editorial Team, 2024). AI-powered platforms also offer new opportunities for task automation and workload management, especially for caregivers balancing multiple roles (Coursera Staff, 2025b; Microsoft & LinkedIn, 2024).

iv. Illustrative Example: CareFlex at NovaTech

To illustrate these principles, consider the example of NovaTech, a fictional mid-sized tech company. While not based on a single real organisation, NovaTech represents a composite of challenges and solutions observed across European workplaces.

NovaTech had been experiencing high turnover among employees with caregiving responsibilities, particularly women in mid-management roles. Although remote work options were available, uptake was low. Employees feared that requesting flexibility would be perceived as a lack of commitment, and the absence of formal policies or leadership modelling reinforced this concern.

In response, NovaTech launched CareFlex, a comprehensive initiative aimed at embedding care-sensitive practices into its organisational culture. The programme included:

- A formal flexible hours policy with protected time blocks
- Manager training on inclusive scheduling and bias awareness
- A peer mentoring network to connect caregivers across departments

- Integration of digital project management tools to support asynchronous collaboration

Within six months, NovaTech recorded a 40% increase in the use of flexible arrangements and a 25% drop in caregiver-related resignations. Internal surveys revealed improved perceptions of work–life balance and enhanced team cohesion. The CareFlex initiative demonstrated that support mechanisms must be visible, formalised, and culturally reinforced to be effective—even when digital tools are available (OECD, 2021; Eurocarers, 2022).

v. **Monitoring and Accountability**

To sustain progress and ensure equity, organisations must commit to **ongoing monitoring and accountability**. Evaluating the effectiveness of caregiver support practices is essential not only for compliance but for meaningful inclusion. Employers should track uptake and impact using key metrics such as:

- **Utilisation rates**: Who is accessing flexible arrangements, and under what conditions? Monitoring usage helps identify disparities in access and normalize caregiving-related accommodations across roles and departments (Williams et al., 2016).
- **Retention and progression data**: Are caregivers advancing professionally, or are support policies inadvertently reinforcing career stagnation? Tracking promotion rates, tenure, and exit interviews among caregiving employees can reveal structural barriers and inform targeted interventions (Kossek & Hammer, 2008).
- **Feedback quality**: Are support mechanisms perceived as effective, inclusive, and responsive to caregivers' needs? Collecting qualitative feedback through surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews ensures that policies are not only available but meaningful in practice (Bourbonnais et al., 2024).

These metrics align with best practices outlined in the *Caregiver-Friendly Workplace Toolkit* and recent evaluations of participatory workplace interventions in Europe.

According to CIPD (2023), work–life balance improves employee well-being not just by reducing job demands, but by increasing job autonomy and perceptions of managerial support. However, as Zhou (2020) cautions, autonomy must be balanced with structure to avoid overburdening employees—especially caregivers who may already face time constraints and emotional stress. This calls for regular audits, feedback loops, and disaggregated data collection across gender, age, and caregiving status.

Monitoring also provides evidence for the effectiveness of interventions, supporting broader implementation and policy advocacy (Kossek et al., 2011; Bourbonnais et al., 2024). Without these mechanisms, legal rights risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Williams et al., 2016). While inclusive support practices can be designed and formalised through policy, their success ultimately depends on the cultural environment in which they are implemented. Organisational culture and leadership play a critical role in shaping the everyday realities of flexibility and care—underscoring the need for structural change to be accompanied by cultural transformation (Lewis et al., 2009; Hammer et al., 2016).

Organisational Culture and Leadership

Organisational culture shapes how employees interpret and engage with workplace policies. It operates through shared assumptions, behavioural norms, and symbolic gestures—often unspoken but deeply influential (Schein, 2010; Williams et al., 2016). Even the most progressive flexibility policies can falter if undermined by stigma, silence, or managerial resistance (Lewis et al., 2009; Kossek & Distelberg, 2009).

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping these dynamics—not through policy enforcement, but through norm-setting and symbolic modelling. Inclusive leaders normalise the use of support mechanisms, challenge caregiving stereotypes, and foster environments where flexibility is encouraged. Their actions signal organisational priorities and influence team behaviour (Hammer et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2016).

Human Resources also drives cultural transformation by embedding care-sensitive values into recruitment, evaluation, and development. This includes promoting open dialogue, addressing unconscious bias, and ensuring equitable access to support across diverse employee groups (Kossek et al., 2011; Bourbonnais et al., 2024).

Cultural change must be intersectional. Caregiving intersects with age, migration status, socioeconomic background, and disability. Organisations must move beyond generic inclusion statements to targeted, responsive interventions (Crenshaw, 1991; Williams et al., 2016).

While structural mechanisms support caregivers, it is within organisational culture that these mechanisms are either activated or eroded. Monitoring and accountability must be reinforced through cultural practices that value transparency and continuous learning (Kossek et al., 2011; Bourbonnais et al., 2024).

Ultimately, embedding care into organisational life means reimagining workplace values. It requires sustained commitment, reflective leadership, and a willingness to challenge the status quo. When culture and structure align, workplaces become more flexible, inclusive, and just—spaces where all employees, regardless of caregiving responsibilities, can thrive.

Recommendations for Employers & Policymakers

Closing the gender care gap and promoting sustainable work–life balance requires more than ticking boxes for compliance—it demands a cultural and structural shift in how caregiving is understood and supported across workplaces and institutions (Lewis et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2016).

For employers, the journey begins with embedding flexibility into the core of organisational policy. It is no longer sufficient to offer remote work or adjusted schedules informally. These arrangements must be codified—written into contracts, onboarding materials, and internal protocols—so that flexibility becomes a right, not a favour (Kossek & Distelberg, 2009). When policies are clear and universally accessible, they empower rather than isolate (Hammer et al., 2016).

However, policy alone does not shift culture. Leadership modelling is essential. When managers and executives visibly use flexible arrangements, they send a powerful message: caregiving is compatible with professional success. Including caregiving scenarios in leadership training and internal communications helps dismantle stigma and fosters empathy across teams (Kossek et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2016).

Equally important is the role of Human Resources. HR must be equipped to handle caregiving disclosures with discretion and care. Transparent procedures for accommodation requests build trust and ensure consistency, especially in organisations where informal practices have long dominated (Bourbonnais et al., 2024).

Employers must also commit to monitoring equity. Tracking who uses flexibility measures—and who doesn't—can reveal hidden gaps across gender, age, and caregiving status. These insights are vital for refining policies and addressing unconscious bias (Kossek et al., 2011; Hammer et al., 2016).

Fostering a culture of openness is key. Regular feedback sessions, culture audits, and peer support networks create space for dialogue and advocacy. When employees feel safe to speak about care, workplaces begin to reflect the realities of life beyond the office (Schein, 2010; Lewis et al., 2009).

For policymakers, the task is to create conditions where inclusive workplaces can thrive. Strengthening enforcement of Directive (EU) 2019/1158 is a starting point. National legislation must offer clear, enforceable rights to carers' leave and flexible work, with guidance and oversight—especially for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (European Commission, 2019).

Public awareness campaigns are equally crucial. Many workers and employers remain unaware of their rights. Targeted outreach can bridge this gap, particularly in sectors with high caregiving burdens (Williams et al., 2016).

Governments can also support capacity building by offering toolkits, training, and incentives for inclusive practices. By framing flexibility as a universal benefit—not a gendered accommodation—they help challenge stereotypes and promote shared responsibility (Crenshaw, 1991; Kossek & Distelberg, 2009).

Ultimately, social dialogue—involving unions, employee representatives, and civil society—is essential for embedding flexibility into workplace norms. Together, these actions form the backbone of a model that doesn't just accommodate caregiving—it actively enables it.

Interactive Activities

The development of support practices and mechanisms for work–life balance must be reinforced through experiential learning. Within the CareDivide training programme, interactive activities serve as a vital bridge between knowledge and application—helping employers, HR professionals, and managers internalize inclusive practices and implement them effectively in their own organisational contexts.

This unit introduces two core activities designed to complement the hard skills explored in the previous unit. These activities are adapted for both face-to-face training delivery and online self-paced study, ensuring accessibility and impact across formats.

Activity 1: Tool Mapping for Inclusion

Critically assess the digital tools used in your workplace and explore how these tools can support work-life balance, by answering the following questions

Aim of Activity:
The aim of this activity is to help participants critically assess the digital tools used in their workplace and explore how these tools can support work–life balance, particularly for employees with caregiving responsibilities.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):
Step 1: Each participant or group receives a worksheet listing common workplace tools (e.g. Trello, Zoom, Outlook) and space to add their own. Based on the prompt: What tools do you use daily or weekly in your role?
Step 2: Participants assess each tool across three dimensions: Hard Skill Alignment (What skill does this tool support?), Contribution to Inclusion (How does it enable flexibility or support caregivers?) and Barriers to Use (What limits its effectiveness?). Based on the prompt: Which tools are most widely used, and why? Are any tools underutilized despite their potential?
Step 3: Groups discuss their findings and share personal experiences with tools that helped—or hindered—their caregiving responsibilities. Based on the prompt: How do these tools intersect with caregiving needs?
Step 4: Each group creates a visual tool map categorizing tools by their impact on inclusion and presents one recommendation for improving digital infrastructure to support caregivers

Links/Resources:

- *Tool Mapping Worksheet*
- *Sample Tool Map*
- *Suggested platforms for mapping: Miro, Jamboard, Padlet*
- *Optional: Flipchart or whiteboard for in-person sessions*

Aim of Activity:
The aim of this activity is to empower participants to apply hard skills in designing a workplace support mechanism tailored to a caregiving scenario.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):
Step 1: Each group receives a caregiving scenario card (e.g. elder care, postnatal return, chronic illness support). Based on the prompt: What are the key challenges this employee faces in balancing care and work?

Step 2: Groups design a support mechanism using relevant hard skills and digital tools. Some examples: A remote work protocol using VPN access and asynchronous platforms and a flexible scheduling system using shared calendars and task boards. Based on the prompt: What tools and skills are most appropriate for this scenario?

Step 3: Teams assess their design for: Technical feasibility, cultural acceptance, managerial support and long-term sustainability. Based on the prompt: What barriers might arise, and how can they be addressed?

Step 4: Each group presents their proposed mechanism. Based on the following feedback prompts: How adaptable is the mechanism to different workplace contexts? What additional supports would strengthen its impact? Does it reflect both care and productivity needs?

Links/Resources:

- *Scenario Cards*
- *Design Canvas or Template*
- *Hard Skills Checklist*
- *Flipchart or digital presentation space*

Key Takeaways of Module 2

- Work–Life Balance Directive represents a milestone in EU policy, a landmark in promoting gender equality, improving reconciliation of work and care, and recognising the right to care as both a social and labour right.
- The Directive sets minimum standards for paternity, parental, and carers' leave, as well as flexible working, but leaves wide discretion to Member States on duration, pay, and enforcement. This results in significant disparities across Europe.
- The national approaches are divergent: Spain and Italy have gone beyond the minimum (e.g. generous paternity leave), while countries like Cyprus and Greece provide only minimal or unpaid entitlements, limiting their real use.
- Implementation gaps persist. In 2023, the European Commission launched infringement procedures against several Member States for incomplete or incorrect transposition. Weak enforcement continues to hinder effectiveness.
- There is often a disconnect between law and practice. Even when legal entitlements exist, cultural norms, financial barriers, and employer resistance discourage workers – particularly men – from making use of their rights. Yet men's participation is essential: they are not only affected by stigma but also have the potential to be allies and drivers of change. By actively taking up care leave, requesting flexible work, and challenging stereotypes, men can share responsibilities more equally and support a cultural shift. Work-life balance is not only a women's struggle; it is a societal responsibility in which men have both a role and a moral duty to engage.
- Informal carers remain overlooked. Despite providing essential care, informal carers and workers in precarious or non-standard employment (e.g. domestic workers, self-employed) are largely excluded from the Directive's scope. Their recognition is essential for a truly inclusive framework.
- There exists a low awareness of rights. Employees and even HR professionals often lack knowledge of carers' leave and flexible working arrangements, as confirmed by co-creation workshops.
- The gender gap is persistent. The Directive has fostered progress, but women still perform the majority of unpaid care, facing negative effects on career progression, income, and pensions. Without adequate pay and cultural change, new rights risk reinforcing inequalities.
- There is significant progress on good practices. Countries that go beyond the minimum and exceed Directive requirements offer examples of how stronger entitlements and supportive policies can promote genuine work–life balance and higher uptake of leave.
- The organizational dimension is key. Effective work–life balance policies require more than compliance; they depend on organizational cultures that value caregiving and leadership that supports uptake.
- Measuring effectiveness matters. Evaluation through data-driven metrics, such as retention rates, employee satisfaction, and gender equality indicators, is critical to assess whether policies deliver tangible benefits.

- An important but partial step: Overall, the Directive constitutes a vital but limited advancement. Its long-term effectiveness depends on stronger enforcement, expanded inclusion of diverse caregivers, and the integration of supportive cultural and organizational practices across the EU.
- Work–life balance is not a personal issue—it is a systemic challenge that requires intentional workplace design and institutional commitment.

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