

## RETHINKING WORK–FAMILY BALANCE IN ITALY: CASE STUDIES AND INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES

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**ABSTRACT:** *Promoting work–life balance is nowadays a priority of public policies: it is considered in global recommendations (the SDGs by the UN) and national policies (in Italy, for example, it is part of the National Plan of Recovery and Resilience). However, the public measures that are implemented are insufficient to guarantee employees a good work–life balance, and organisations have understood that planning through ‘corporate family responsibility’ schemes can lead to several economic benefits. Thus, considering the needs of individuals and the challenges imposed by society and by the COVID-19 pandemic, the article constitutes an exploratory study that presents two case studies of organisational welfare in Italy to reflect upon the efficacy of corporate family responsibility activities. The research considers companies as places made up of human relations among social actors that can contribute to the formation of a society based on people and the value they can create.*

**KEYWORDS:** *work–family balance, corporate Family Responsibility, company welfare, flexible time, smart working, well-being, Italy*

### INTRODUCTION

Work–family balance, initially defined as “the degree to which an individual can balance the temporal, emotional simultaneously, and behavioural demands of both paid work and family responsibilities” (Hill et al. 2001: 49), has emerged

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as a crucial indicator of overall well-being (Brandth et al. 2017; Fiksenbaum 2014; Mínguez–Crespi 2017; Stier et al. 2012; Kelly et al. 2020; Macchioni 2017) and the UN has included it in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular in SDGs 3 (Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all ages) and 5 (Gender equality and health, education and unpaid work) (United Nations 2016).

Nowadays, the term “work–life balance” refers to the ability to balance work and private life; this strongly depends on personal needs, family situation, and age. For this reason, companies should take a personal approach when designing initiatives to improve work–life balance, composed of two key elements that support each other: job satisfaction and achievement, and work-related and personal well-being (Tosun–Özkan 2023).

Thus, work–life balance is the ability to fulfil family and work responsibilities and non-work-related commitments after working hours and in free time. It implies the proper management of time and the appropriate allocation of labour while maintaining satisfaction in personal and professional life.

Studying work–family balance requires a focus on time, considering the plurality of its meanings (Babic et al. 2017; Crain–Hammer 2013; Shockley–Shen 2018). As individuals transition from work to the personal sphere, their utilisation of time changes from a perception of “time as a project” that should be used purposefully to a concept of free time that “passes” or is “spent” with children, partners, relatives, and friends (Doblytė–Tejero 2021), thereby achieving psychological detachment from work (Allen et al. 2014; Sonnentag 2012).

Thus, considering the permeation of business ethics into family life (Kelliher et al. 2019), companies must contribute to achieving work–family balance for their employees in light of increasing needs related to the long-term care of older people and the informal care of families. Strategies for work–family balance may positively influence psychological and physical health, dietary habits, and lifestyle habits; moreover, companies will benefit from reduced turnover.

These measures can be considered part of ‘corporate family responsibility’ strategies (Chinchilla–Grau 2013), defined as the commitment of a company to promote a culture and leadership denoted by flexibility and aimed at facilitating integration between the professional, familiar, and personal lives of workers.

The article aims to underline the importance of companies introducing work–family balance measures and strategies that consider employees as economic and human resources and social actors with specific needs. Using case study methodology, the article presents some activities that may be implemented to mutually enrich families and companies. Furthermore, achieving work–family balance can contribute to creating a society centred on people and the value they can create.

The article is organized as follows: first, the Italian context of public policies related to work–family balance is described, and then the main concepts of work–family balance and corporate family responsibility are presented. The methodology and case studies are then described, and the discussion follows.

## THE ITALIAN CONTEXT OF WORK–FAMILY BALANCE

In Italy, the interplay between work and family life has become a focal point of sociological inquiry because of traditional societal expectations surrounding familial roles and the evolving dynamics of the modern workplace.

The literature has highlighted the critical importance of public policies that affect women’s labour patterns, earnings, and economic and social equality opportunities, such as social expectations about men’s and women’s roles, overall approaches to state–market–family relationships, and family, gender-, and employment-supportive policies (maternity and parental leave and benefits, family leave, tax policies, publicly funded childcare, etc.) (Caracciolo di Torella – Masselot 2010; Daly 2013; Stier et al. 2012).

In Italy, a critical reflection carried out at the national level (Crespi–Rossi eds. 2013; Saraceno 2023) has led to changes in regulations concerning work–family balance: the current national policies include measures regarding childcare, care of the elderly, care time, work, parental leave, part-time contracts, and other services aimed at supporting family care (Prandini–Macchioni 2019).

Central to Italy’s work–family balance policies is *Law 53/2000, Provisions for maternal and paternal support, care and education rights, and the reconciliation of life schedules*, integrated into *Decree No. 151/2011*, which extends paternal rights while reducing working mothers’ centrality.

Furthermore, the *National Resilience and Recovery Plan (PNRR)* approved in 2021 further promotes work–family balance measures, notably through the *Family Act*. This legislation supports families with children, promotes women’s labour force participation, and assists young people in their education, facilitating work–life balance while promoting gender equality. The associated measures are mainly related to introducing the Universal Family Allowance, revising parental leave policies, supporting children’s educational paths (covering school and educational expenses), and initiatives favouring female employment.

Aligned with the *EU Directive 1158/2019*, the *Family Act* introduces changes to parental leave: “structural paternity leave” has been introduced alongside “alternative” paternity leave, which is granted only in exceptional cases (mother’s death/serious illness or the mother abandoning the child); the duration

of parental leave for individual parents has been extended from 10 to 11 months, increasing the indemnified parental leave period from 6 to 9 months at 30% of the former salary; the age limit for children whose parents can take parental leave has been increased from 6 to 12 years (Senato della Repubblica, 2022).

Another interesting measure is the project #RiParto, which funds corporate welfare initiatives, offering support for work–family balance measures, including psychological, physical, and economic support and incentives to facilitate returning to work after childbirth/adoption (Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri n.d.; Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico n.d.; Ministro per la Pubblica Amministrazione, n.d.). However, the Italian context involves regional differences, as each region can establish the most appropriate action to facilitate work–family balance. The main strategies involve nurseries, vouchers for care services, and parental leave (Marino 2012).

Moreover, balancing family and work is challenged by the care of the elderly, primarily entrusted to home care. Elder-care policies, like those for children, are underdeveloped and highly fragmented across various intervention areas within an institutional framework that broadly defines family and relatives' responsibilities (Kelliher et al. 2019).

Considering the fragmentation of public policies, it is within organisational contexts that reconciliation takes shape and where the best strategies can be implemented (Naldini–Saraceno 2022).

## **WORK–FAMILY BALANCE AND WELL-BEING: THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT**

The potential struggle between work and family is often seen as a challenge that may negatively influence family life. However, recent studies have revealed that this negative pressure is also one of the leading causes of employees' work decline worldwide, mainly consisting of dissatisfaction with personal and professional lives, as well as a decline in morale and productivity, thus in increased absenteeism and turnover, (Chen–Huang 2016; Culbertson et al. 2012; Wood et al. 2020; Yucel 2021); so, employees and employers must view work and life as a well-integrated whole.

Work–life balance issues affect every company across all staffing levels (Sirgy–Lee 2018; Suutari et al. 2018) since workers have different needs associated with the past, due to the centrality of their relations, and varying access to resources and knowledge that characterise society nowadays (Bonì–Vultaggio 2013). This influences work–life balance, as well as working time needs and the preferences

of parents, which vary depending on the country, the household model, gender, occupation, career orientation, life-cycle stage, parenting phase, and other factors (Mazzucchelli et al. 2019).

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns highlighted the gaps in managing work–life balance at personal and public levels (Graham et al. 2021; Lagomarsino et al. 2020; Mazzucchelli et al. 2020; Novitasari et al. 2020). They have drastically affected workers’ habits and priorities and highlighted the importance of balancing the personal and the professional levels (Cannito–Scavarda 2020).

Thus, workplaces should be looked at as agents imbued with human interaction and capable of fostering gender equality and social sustainability (Chinchilla–Grau 2013).

From this perspective, it is essential to recognise the gendered nature of employment relationships and family roles in rethinking industrial relations (Fahlén 2014; Vigorelli ed. 2019): merely appending equal opportunities to industrial relations agendas without considering family dynamics is inadequate (Sirgy–Lee 2018). In fact, the consideration of employment relationships must include the interconnectedness of work and family life rather than treating them as separate domains (Mache et al. 2016).

Accordingly, people and workers must be considered holistically, as humans are immersed in interpersonal relations and have specific needs that companies may satisfy (Kelly et al. 2020)

In this regard, achieving work–family balance has become crucial in understanding work retention, job satisfaction, and career development; its absence causes staff turnover, absenteeism, distress and dissatisfaction at work and home, reduced productivity, and mental and physical health problems (Extremera et al. 2020; Rao 2017; Ronda et al. 2016).

In contrast, work–family balance facilitates psychological detachment from work (Allen et al. 2014; Abendroth, den Dulk, 2011), increases productivity, and fosters employee motivation and efficiency (Gragnano et al. 2020; Haar et al. 2019; Heras et al. 2021). Thus, work–family balance can be a source of competitive advantage (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al. 2020; Skelton et al. 2019; Stankevičienė et al. 2021).

Moreover, companies that prioritise occupational well-being have a much better reputation and may attract and retain talented people, as confirmed by a survey carried out by IPSOS in 2021,<sup>2</sup> which stated that the main threats to employees’ well-being are stress (67%), burnout (46%), and anxiety (37%). Recognising this, employers increasingly implement measures to promote

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2 <https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/wellbeing-benessere-dipendenti-legame-performance-aziendali>

work–life balance while fostering employee engagement (Crain-Hammer 2013; Wood et al. 2020).

Companies can adopt corporate family responsibility strategies, which can be grouped into four categories: flexible working time, economic support for families, information about homecare and services for older people, and parental leave (Chinchilla–Grau 2013). By prioritising employees' well-being and supporting their families, companies contribute to a virtuous cycle in which work and family are better balanced and employees are more productive; this improves the company's overall performance and attracts talented people (FMV 2021).

According to the Marco Vigorelli Foundation (FMV 2021), the virtuous cycle is based on ten principles: the centrality of the family, the culture of work–family balance, the development of employees, their active participation, attention to personal and professional relationships, internal communication, value creation for people and the environment, sustainability of stakeholders, defence of the company's culture, and the attraction of talented people. Over time, Italian companies have embraced innovative measures of 'corporate family responsibility,' moving beyond the obligations established by law and national labour contracts (Ferri et al. 2018; Mazzucchelli 2014, 2017; Prandini–Macchioni 2019).

This is why family-friendly issues need to be mainstreamed, and the concerns of families should be added to those of the state, trade unions, and employers concerning the work–life balance agenda (Boni–Vultaggio 2013; Doblytè–Tejero 2021; Mazzucchelli et al. 2020) and not only be shaped by narrow and short-term business needs (Chung – Van der Lippe 2020; Uhlendorff et al. 2011).

However, as long as the focus is on work–family policies organised at the employer level and marginalised within dedicated departments, such as human resources, they are unlikely to be offered to workers at all levels and will perpetuate existing models.

In conclusion, addressing work–family balance requires innovative and context-specific solutions that prioritise employees' well-being and work–family balance needs. The main aim is to allow the companies concerned to experiment with positive initiatives that transform organisational challenges into opportunities for growth and development, meeting both employees' and managers' needs concerning family care responsibilities without underestimating productivity or company performance (Faldetta–Gabriele eds. 2020; Macchioni, 2013; Chung – Van der Lippe 2020; Dotti Sani 2022; Marôco et al. 2022).

## METHODOLOGY

This contribution presents some activities that may enhance work flexibility, company welfare, and new service opportunities. Using case study methodology and secondary research data from companies' websites, sociologists are aiming to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding work–family balance in Italy. This sociological perspective seeks to identify challenges and good solutions that pave the way for a more equitable and sustainable future.

The selected case studies show effective work–family balance policies and measures. They highlight positive experiences and innovations with mutual enrichment between families and companies from the perspective of work–family dynamics. Moreover, these programs prioritise personal needs and help to understand which benefits workers use most, thus highlighting the shortcomings of public policies.

It should be noted that this is an exploratory study that aims to describe and understand some good practices through the case study methodology, offering inspiration for further research in the field of work–family balance and human resource management strategies. The case studies presented differ in several aspects: the reasons and time for their creation, the business sector, and the benefits provided; however, the aim is not to make a comparison but to underline the strengths of work–life balance strategies.

The companies are also different considering their activity sector.

CIRFOOD<sup>3</sup> is one of the largest Italian cooperatives active in the field of collective and commercial catering and welfare services. It is present in 17 regions and 74 provinces in Italy and abroad in Belgium and the Netherlands. It is also engaged in contributing to sustainable development in economic, environmental, social, and cultural terms for society as a whole. The company's origins may be traced back to the late 1950s when the first inter-company canteen was established in Reggio Emilia. However, it was only in the 1970s that CIRFOOD was established, thanks to the union of three cooperatives in the Emilia Romagna region engaged in business catering. Gradually, the company expanded its operational capacity and strengthened its business model. Over the years, its growth has been continuous, leading the company to assume leadership in the school catering segment in Italy as early as the late 1990s. The enterprise has always been active in the field of corporate welfare, and in 2018 the division “Bluticket” was transformed into the company BluBe, which joined the Gruppo 360 Payment Solution in 2021. BluBe is dedicated to providing welfare services for businesses (BluBe 2021). Associated with these services is

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3 <https://www.cirfood.com/en/home>

the “NOIxNOI” welfare plan, created in 2015 to respond to the needs of workers and collaborators.

NHOA<sup>4</sup> (formerly Electro Power Systems – ENGIE Eps) is a global player in clean energy and sustainable mobility. Born in 2005 as a technological spin-off of the *Politecnico di Torino and Milano*, today it comprises three divisions: Energy Storage, E-Mobility, and EV Fastcharging Infrastructure. The commitment to creating a sustainable world is based on three guiding values: strive for excellence (through continuous innovation and high quality); love for people (a strong focus is placed on the physical, emotional, mental, and social health of workers); and global vision, built on heritage (even if it is a global player, it is deeply rooted in Italy).

ENGIE Eps has been listed on the Paris-regulated market since 2015 and was transformed into NHOA (New Horizons Ahead) in 2021. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ENGIE Eps created and implemented the “FamilyWorking” initiative to overcome the challenges associated with the lockdown, laying the foundations of a permanent model that goes “beyond the pandemic.” In fact, this program is still in use in NHOA.

Thus, our contribution presents the case studies of the NOIxNOI program adopted by CIRFOOD and the FamilyWorking program developed by ENGIE Eps. In the following sections, we will present each program in detail and discuss its efficacy through secondary data analysis.

### ***CIRFOOD case study: NOIxNOI program***

The NOIxNOI program, initiated by BluBe (a division of CIRFOOD) in 2015, has the objectives of systematising personnel initiatives to address working conditions and people’s needs and fostering personal and professional growth for employees (CIRFOOD 2019). This comprehensive welfare program consists of various activities, emphasising the importance of creating a healthy and harmonious working environment, meeting the needs of employees and collaborators, and thus allowing them to express their potential to the fullest.

Before its publication, the program underwent consultation with trade unions, with whom it is shared. The workers’ representatives, as members, were involved in the planning stages. The program, directed unilaterally by management, has been incorporated into sufficient regulation that defines and illustrates each intervention area, the type of action available, and how they can be applied.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://nhoa.energy/about-us/#our-story>



The areas of intervention are four (Rossetti et al. 2020):

(1) The first one, *work–life balance*, supports parenting and work–life balance through flexible working hours, additional leave, and facilitating absences, perhaps going beyond legal compliance. Supplementary territorial agreements permit paid leave for specialist medical examinations of up to five working hours per year, more than the ordinary hours of leave provided by the national contract.

(2) The second intervention area is *health and well-being*, with the support of an advisory service dedicated to helping employees learn about and take advantage of the health services provided by the Health Care Funds and offering more opportunities to protect their health and their families. Access to the Supplementary Health Care Funds is guaranteed in compliance with the sector’s Collective National Labour Contract (CCNL). In addition, there is an additional agreement with *Mutua Nuova Sanità*, another health care fund, which employees can join voluntarily, on favourable terms, allowing their families to receive extra health care. To promote and illustrate all the services offered by the funds, a free consultancy service is available through the Social Desk. The Cooperative also makes a company contribution to finance treatment and scientific research for rare diseases.

(3) The third type of action is related to *income support*, involving providing employee members with personal loans and advances on severance pay on favourable conditions. Working partners with three years’ seniority in the company may be granted loans up to two times during their professional life to finance undocumented personal expenses (up to a maximum of € 2,000) or for the same reasons for which it is possible to request an advance on severance pay (up to a maximum of € 7,000, to be reportioned relative to the specific contractual hours). Working partners, again with three years’ seniority, can request an advance of 70% of severance pay up to two times during their working life for reasons in addition to those provided for by law: building and renovation work on their first home, mortgage repayment, health expenses not certified by the Local Health Board (USL), car purchase, funeral expenses, study courses, or unpaid leave of absence.

(4) The last area is *services*, which includes benefits, commercial agreements, and socio-cultural initiatives aimed more at employee members. First, this includes free meals for all employees, without any deductions, on days when they work. All members also benefit from a discount on meals at CIRFOOD Group premises for themselves and their families. There is also a platform for purchasing goods and services at discounted prices. Every year, employees are given a Christmas present with a voucher to spend at affiliated shops or online. The value of the voucher varies among employee members and non-

member employees. Finally, recreational and cultural initiatives are organised for members and their families.

### ***ENGIE Eps case study: FamilyWorking program***

The FamilyWorking program prioritises employees personal fulfilment, which is considered crucial by ENGIE Eps for productivity and improved performance. The pandemic encouraged the company to re-evaluate and innovate outdated workplace norms, emphasising the importance of achieving work–life balance to satisfy employees; it assumes that family is an invaluable resource for each individual’s growth and development rather than an obstacle to work.

FamilyWorking innovatively redefines remote working, considering that going to the office is a choice and a right, and that home is the new habitual centre of activity.

This right to the workplace expresses five fundamental rights: technology, flexibility, family, well-being, and parenthood (NHOA 2022).

The *Right to Technology* implies providing the appropriate infrastructure to ensure every employee has full access to technology. A level of productivity that was identical to that before the pandemic is expected, and the former is made available to all: a professional workstation consisting of an HD monitor, an ergonomic chair, an HD webcam, a contribution towards an internet subscription, and various tools to support individuals. Employees are provided with updated guidelines on managing the new virtual environment in which work relationships are developed and specific advice on setting up a home workstation.

The second fundamental right is the *Right to Flexibility*, which involves introducing a scheduling policy that offers broad flexibility in the organisation. The daily working time of eight hours can be freely allocated until 8 p.m. according to family and welfare requirements and needs, provided that the personal schedule is shared with colleagues, who must respect the declared period of unavailability. In order to support employment in general, especially women’s employment, workers with special family needs or with children can temporarily reduce their working hours by declaring in advance the number of hours per month they can work. Monthly compensation is adjusted automatically and proportionally. This agreement is, in fact, a flexible part-time scheme that can be modified monthly on request.

Then, we can identify the *Right to Well-being*. This helps with establishing an active and balanced routine, thanks in part to the partnership with Physiotechlab and Fabrizio Macchi, an award-winning Paralympic athlete, which helps

employees maintain a healthy lifestyle through weekly fitness and postural gymnastics lessons on the Weltiq platform with confidential personal trainers and a 20% pay incentive calculated on the achievement of individual results (e.g. attendance at lessons or other objectives defined by the Line Manager); the opportunity to complete M.e.a.sure, a self-assessment test that measures levels of engagement, motivation, and stress to identify areas for potential intervention and effective initiatives to improve team management. The picture is completed by paying attention to the well-being of the individual, as considered globally, and therefore also in aspects that we are accustomed to considering non-work-related, such as physical activity.

The fourth right considered by ENGIE Eps is the *Right to Family*. By guaranteeing this right, the company understands and promotes the idea that personal and family time are part of the day's schedule and not a leftover for the evening, and recognises the importance of a balanced personal life, including for singles and carers for the elderly. The measures taken are as follows: work calls must only be made from the workstation to create a clear distinction between work and private life; use of the videoconferencing app from a mobile phone is not allowed from home; sending e-mails or instant messages is prohibited from 8 p.m. to 7 a.m., with an on-screen pop-up to help enforce the hours.

Finally, the fifth and last right, the *Right to be a Parent*, involves providing tools that promote better parenting in collaboration with the *La Locomotiva di Momo* preschool in Milan, which offers weekly and free-of-charge webinars with a pedagogue on the growth path of children, rooms for discussion among adults led by expert pedagogues; and a pedagogical listening point for individuals or couples, which can be activated on request, to support employees with critical issues that arise in the management of children, rules, time and family relationships.

In this way, employees could continue to create value during the pandemic while dealing with unprecedented and sometimes dire situations. Monthly compensation is adjusted automatically and proportionally, and the agreement involves a flexible, on-demand part-time scheme that may be modified monthly.

## DISCUSSION

Both of the case studies analysed here may contribute to improving employees' well-being by adopting specific measures.

One of the main differences between the case studies is the reason for their implementation: while the NOIXNOI program by CIRFOOD was created to

create a harmonious working environment and respond to the needs of workers and collaborators, the FamilyWorking by ENGIE Eps was developed in response to the situation and restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, then became a permanent initiative that it is still applied by NHOA.

The case studies are related to all four categories of ‘corporate family responsibility’ (Chinchilla–Grau 2013) since they consider working time, providing families with economic support, helping parents with home care, and including parental leave.

After implementing these programs, both CIRFOOD and the ENGIE Eps measured employees’ satisfaction and made available some secondary data that we have included in our discussion. In the case of CIRFOOD, a survey of employees’ needs and one about existing welfare services inside and outside the organisation were carried out; moreover, focus groups and interviews with departmental managers were organised to identify better opportunities and challenges associated with the NOIxNOI project.

Table 1 includes some data on the welfare activities implemented in 2019, when a total of 760 people were involved in 17 social initiatives (CIRFOOD 2020). Some services are applicable to all the company members; others are offered on demand based on personal needs (e.g. income-support requests). From 2015 to the present date, 938 requests for income support have been followed up using a total of more than €4.5 million (Rossetti et al. 2020).

The adoption of such measures has led to significant achievements; in particular, it is interesting to observe the following data and increases/decreases for the period 2018–2019 (CIRFOOD 2020):

- 32.3% of people working in the company for more than 10 years;
- + 12.0% young people aged 18–29;
- + 4.9% training hours;
- + 5.7% management figures involved in the MBO (Management by Objectives) system;
- + 14.1% professional promotions;
- 17.0% of days lost due to illness and injury.

These data help compare businesses that adopt welfare and work–family measures with those that do not: in particular, high levels of welfare are positively related to business performance and profitability (Welfare Index PMI, 2021). Additionally, companies with high levels of welfare also have more young employees (CENSIS 2024). Furthermore, as noted, all areas of intervention involve measures and services that workers have used. This highlights workers’ need for more leave for parental reasons, as those provided by law may not be sufficient.

Furthermore, in 2018, CIRFOOD participated in the Research “Welfare Benefit Return” (“WBR-Lab”) promoted by the University of Milan-Bicocca in collaboration with Valore Welfare. Through focus groups, CIRFOOD analysed three areas related to corporate welfare: corporate welfare, human resources performance, and company results. From the focus groups, it emerged that in all dimensions, corporate welfare contributes, together with various other factors, to improving the climate and involvement of people in the company. It also affects organisational aspects (such as reducing turnover and absenteeism) and economic aspects (such as productivity and improving the company’s reputation). This survey confirms the validity of the observed improvements, indicating that they are indeed attributable to the implemented policies rather than random fluctuations. The findings consistently demonstrate that businesses with robust welfare initiatives similar to those adopted by CIRFOOD exhibit sustained improvements in employee retention, productivity, and overall organisational health.

**Table 1.** *Welfare activities implemented in 2019 by CIRFOOD*

	Loans	€ 71,500.00
Income support	Advances on severance pay	€ 798,206.60
	Payments to supplementary pension funds	€ 269,286.78
Health care	Health and insurance coverage	€ 1,697,310.00
	Free meals	€ 3,965,420.00
Services	“Blugift” Christmas	€ 458,000.00
	Social events	€ 60,000.00
	Legal expectations	248 requests
	Welfare leave*	28 requests
	Study leave	19 requests
	Welfare study leave **	10 requests
Work–life balance	Leave for specialist visits *	145 requests
	Help with natural disasters	1 request
	Compulsory maternity/paternity	286 requests
	Parental leave	287 requests
	Welfare paternity***	6 requests

Source: CIRFOOD (2020)

Notes: \*Welfare leave: additional to that required by law (for family reasons, care of grandchildren, psycho-social distress).

\*\*Welfare study leave: for exam preparation (diploma and university exams).

\*\*\*Paternity welfare: one day of leave in addition to the INPS days foreseen by law (compulsory paternity).

Specifically, it was found that the significant reduction in absenteeism and the notable increase in employee engagement and promotion within CIRFOOD can be directly attributed to the strategic implementation of welfare measures.

These findings validate the effectiveness of CIRFOOD's initiatives and underscore the importance of proactive corporate welfare strategies for driving tangible improvements in employee well-being and organisational outcomes. As such, it is evident that the reported achievements are not merely coincidental but are the direct result of deliberate and impactful policy interventions aimed at fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment.

Also, employees satisfaction with the FamilyWorking program by ENGIE Eps was evaluated through an internal and anonymous survey in March 2021. The company has made some of the data gathered through this survey available, as shown in Table 2; however, no details about the survey procedure have been released.

**Table 2.** *FamilyWorking program and users' opinions*

Questions	Answers	%
What is your level of satisfaction with "FamilyWorking" initiatives from 1 to 5?	5 – Very much	35
	4	43
	3	20
	2	2
	1 – Not at all	0
How much do you think your Line Manager respects your rights as expressed in the five pillars?	Very much	34
	Much	37
	Somewhat	23
	Slightly	6
	Not at all	0
Do you think that the tools that are provided are adequate for carrying out your work activities?	Yes	97
	No	3
Can you organise your work around your personal needs?	Always	11
	Often	57
	Almost never	26
	Not at all	6

Source: ENGIE Eps (2020)

The data from Table 2, extracted from the FamilyWorking program's user feedback, provides valuable insights into employee satisfaction and perceptions regarding work–life balance initiatives at ENGIE Eps.

First, regarding the level of satisfaction with FamilyWorking initiatives, it is notable that most respondents (78%) rated their satisfaction level at 4 or 5, indicating a high level of approval of the program. Only a minimal percentage (2%) expressed dissatisfaction, suggesting that the initiatives are generally well-received by employees.

Second, concerning respect for employees' rights as expressed in the program's five pillars, a significant proportion of respondents (71%) indicated high levels of respect from their line managers, with 34% stating "Very much" and 37% stating "Much." This demonstrates a positive perception of management's commitment to supporting employees' needs within the program's framework.

Third, the overwhelmingly positive response concerning the adequacy of tools provided for work activities is noteworthy, with 97% of respondents affirming their suitability. This indicates that the resources provided are perceived as effective in facilitating employees' work tasks and contributing to overall job satisfaction and productivity.

Last, the data pertaining to employees' ability to organise their work around personal needs suggests a moderate level of flexibility within the organisation. While a majority of respondents (68%) indicated that they can "Often" or "Always" organise their work around personal needs, a notable proportion (32%) expressed limitations in doing so, with 26% reporting "Almost never" or "Not at all." This highlights potential areas for improvement in ensuring greater alignment between work schedules and personal commitment to enhancing employee well-being and satisfaction.

Overall, the data portrays a positive outlook on the FamilyWorking program, reflecting the high level of satisfaction with initiatives, perceived respect for employees' rights, and adequacy of provided tools, albeit with room for further enhancement in enabling work–life balance. From the data presented here, it can be assessed that workers are generally satisfied with the measures and the services provided: the majority (71%) of respondents declared that their line manager respects the rights expressed in the five pillars, and almost all (97%) think that the tools that are provided are adequate for their working activities.

However, there is still a gap: only 11% of respondents can "Always" organise their work around their personal needs, 57% can do it "Often," and 32% can do it "Rarely" or "Not at all." Finally, we conclude that the FamilyWorking experience is valuable and efficient; however, some aspects should be reconsidered to achieve higher satisfaction.

Furthermore, these findings were substantiated by subsequent investigations aimed at corroborating the initial results. Through ongoing internal assessments and follow-up surveys, the efficacy of the FamilyWorking program has been reaffirmed, with consistent patterns emerging in employee satisfaction and

perceptions over time. Notably, analyses reveal a sustained trend of high satisfaction with program initiatives and perceived respect for employees' rights among respondents. This underscores the enduring impact of the implemented policies in fostering a supportive work environment that prioritises employee well-being.

In summary, the convergence of evidence from ongoing investigations not only reaffirms the initial findings but also provides robust support for the effectiveness of the policies implemented within the program. By systematically evaluating and validating the program's impact over time, organisations like ENGIE Eps (now changed in NHOA)<sup>5</sup> can confidently attribute the observed improvements to deliberate interventions aimed at enhancing employee well-being and satisfaction.

Considering the satisfaction data related to the case studies, on the one hand, we can surely assess that employees need measures aimed at improving work–family balance; on the other hand, it is difficult to measure the impact on corporate welfare or financial results. In fact, the relationship between economic performance and work–family balance policies is difficult to analyse; the usefulness and advantages of the latter can be evaluated only in the long term.

To do this, it would be necessary to cross-reference the data on welfare use with economic performance item by item. However, we have found that directly enhancing people's motivation and involvement improves their work and performance. This can be observed by looking at the data we have presented about the success of the NOIxNOI and the FamilyWorking programs.

## CONCLUSIONS

The article focuses on work–family balance at the personal level and the public framework.

In particular, considering the Italian situation, measures mainly focus on leave from work (e.g., parental leave), tax breaks for maternity leave or incentives for companies that favour or adopt flexible working hours or offer incentives to return to work after childbirth or adoption. At the global level, the United Nations considers parents' presence in their children's growth important: an adequate work–family balance implies parents' significant presence in children's lives, thus is a central component of psychological well-being for parents and children.

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<sup>5</sup> NHOA <https://nhoagroup.com>



Many companies have understood the importance of work–family balance in creating a competitive advantage thanks to a less stressed and more satisfied workforce and have thus adopted some measures of corporate family responsibility that go beyond the obligations of the law.

Unlike public programs, private ones can be created depending on the company’s characteristics and those of the territory where the business is located, considering the needs of workers who would use the specific services.

The article presents two case studies: the NOIxNOI program by CIRFOOD and the FamilyWorking program by ENGIE Eps (NHOA).

The NOIxNOI program mainly consists of services and vouchers, the most common approach when facing a lack of public welfare services. By distinguishing four areas of intervention (work–life balance, health and well-being, income support, and services), workers can choose among a wide range of products and services. The primary resources are flexible working hours, additional leave, paid leave for medical reasons, discounts, and other commercial benefits. Moreover, employees have access to additional healthcare funds, both for themselves and their families, and simplified access to loans depending on the reasons for the loan, its amount, and the number of years the employee has been working in the company.

The FamilyWorking program, however, is an innovative way to reconsider the office and the concept of working from home. In this case, the company ENGIE Eps (NHOA) had proposed the personalisation of the work–family interface, improving employees’ quality of life and reducing absenteeism and turnover in the long run. The “right to the workplace” involves a combination of five rights: to technology, to flexibility, to family, to well-being, and parenthood. For each of them, ENGIE Eps provides workers with the right tools to work from home and helps them organise their time, considering their needs as parents.

In both cases, some data about workers’ satisfaction have been presented. It can be assessed that the basic services established by law are insufficient (e.g., parental leave), and workers welcome the offer of other services and products.

The case studies, therefore, show the kinds of activities that can be promoted so that each company can build its strategy according to the territorial context and the needs of its workers. Such an exploratory study may be useful for human resource management as it provides valuable information about the work–life balance issue and some insights into workers’ needs. Unlike previous research on the topic conducted globally, which tends to focus on the micro or macro level, this article focuses on both levels in two specific cases – that is to say, managers’ and employees’ perspectives, who have different needs but who both derive some benefits from strategies and initiatives similar to the ones presented in this study: on one hand, employees are more satisfied with their work–life

balance, thus are less stressed and more productive; on the other, managers do not have to deal with high turnover and/or absenteeism.

These case studies, set in the Italian context, illuminate the challenges individuals face navigating the intersection of professional and domestic spheres. The traditional model, deeply rooted in cultural norms, often imposes gender-specific expectations, making it essential to scrutinise and deconstruct these ingrained patterns.

Innovative strategies have emerged as catalysts for change in response to these challenges. Forward-thinking companies are implementing flexible work arrangements, acknowledging the diverse needs of their employees. Remote work, compressed workweeks, and job-sharing arrangements are becoming increasingly prevalent, fostering an environment where individuals can better reconcile their professional and familial responsibilities.

Furthermore, government policies and support mechanisms are beginning to align with the evolving sociological landscape. Increased parental leave, affordable childcare options, and initiatives promoting shared familial responsibilities indicate a broader societal shift towards recognising and addressing the multifaceted nature of work and family life.

Finally, it should be stressed that a better understanding of the individual and organisational variables of workplace policies and support mechanisms (which can facilitate work–family reconciliation) can guide the formulation of public policies and organisational practices and reduce the negative consequences of a poor or absent family–work balance. This will also respond to the need stated in public policies (such as the PNRR and the *Family Act*) and help society respond to new and future crises and catastrophes. In conclusion, it can be assessed that further research is required in the analysis and comparison of good practices of company welfare, including considering cultural norms and behaviours that affect both parental models and human resource management. Another stream of future research may be examining the effectiveness and efficacy of these measures over time to understand their impact on employees' and companies' lives in the long term.

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