

Elizabeth Bowen, Small Firms Association, Questions

Promotion of Gender Equality

- **What are the SFA doing to encourage and promote gender equality, especially to promote women in senior roles and also protections for women in toxic employment on conditions and pay?**

While not specifically running a gender equality campaign, in 2019 SFA launched a campaign called “Grow, Scale, Succeed” that assisted small firms to recruit and retain the right people. It was a mix of resources that gave small business owners tips on recruitment, how to keep their staff engaged and how smart working (remote and flexible working) benefitted their business. Through our membership communications we update members on changing legislation and promote reports and new guidance to them. Through our provision of HR advice, we encourage and support a fair and equal workplace for all.

- **Do you think an awareness campaign will work [to address the gender pay gap] for small businesses if we don't recommend any legislation changes- the aim of a business is to make money especially small businesses? What can we do to incentivise them to not have a gender pay gap and employ and give women an equal chance in the workplace- posters and ads seem unlikely to work**

Campaigns such as these benefit society and business, especially small business owners who may not have the resources or time to seek out this information or guidance themselves. Knowledge and understanding is key if we are to bring about gender equality in work.

- **Do you think - that with small firms not having unions affects the Gender Pay Gap?**

No, to address the gender pay gap we must focus on the cultural and structural problems that undermine female progression in the workplace

Wage

- **What's the difference between a fair wage and a living wage?**
- **How is a fair wage determined?**
- **Expand on the point that by introducing a living wage it will add to the cost of labour and undermine the capacity to retain employees and deliver new jobs for the SFA please?**
- **What are the alternatives to a living wage so?**

There are lots of factors to consider in determining the rate of pay such as education and skills, location, competition, taxation, market trends and overall business costs.

No matter the salary a person is on, the decision to increase wages depends on productivity, the company's performance in the market and if they can afford the salary increases. If a Living Wage rate is introduced that is above current wage rates this will increase the cost of labour for small employers. If the company cannot afford this increase the business owner may reduce staff hours and undertake the work themselves, not replace staff that leave and postpone expanding their workforce.

Small business owner-managers are close to their businesses and their employees. They recognise the value of employee contribution and generally display much lower employee turnover when compared to large business. Small businesses will respond to market trends in wages, but they cannot generate employment where unjustified business cost increases are imposed upon them by government.

Flexible Working

- **Why do small firms resist legislation around flexible working practices? How have small firms managed during the pandemic when more flexible working arrangements were a necessity?**

Many small firms across the country have employees engaging in flexible and remote working. To support members and meet employee's needs, the SFA developed sample policies to manage requests for flexible and remote working arrangements. To further assist the small business community, we issued a remote working checklist that encompasses current employment law, data protection and health and safety requirements to help small firms balance their legal obligations with the introduction of smart working for their business.

The SFA believes that further legislation to press for additional flexibility is not appropriate at this time, following several recently extended family leave entitlements, the impact of which has yet to be fully assessed.

However, the SFA recommends the introduction of the following non-legislative actions by government:

- **Updated guidance from the Health and Safety Authority on home working, which includes information on employer liability and on balancing the privacy rights of the individual's work and home space;**
- **Introduction of a government grant scheme designed to assist small businesses. It should offer financial assistance to fund office set up and technology for home use such as laptops and security software;**
- **Accelerate broadband and mobile coverage roll-out; and**
- **Investment in better public transport with more frequent services to accommodate those working outside the traditional peak hours of 8 – 9am and 4 – 6pm.**

Over the past nine months, small firms have followed government guidance and facilitated their staff to work from home where possible. For many small firms this was the first time they facilitated remote working. Unfortunately, due to a lack of IT equipment and cloud computing not all companies were able to facilitate workers. In response to the unprecedented number of people working from home as a result of COVID-19, SFA has continued to promote our sample policy and checklist to Ireland's small business community, assist members with queries on working from home, raised awareness of cyber security and data protection risks and provided training on managing employees remotely.

Pay

- **Why does the Small Firms Association who represent a substantial proportion of our workforce not see itself as having any real responsibility towards addressing the real issues e.g. pay, promotion and managerial equality etc, and instead push responsibility towards others.**

As an economy we clearly have further to go on gender equality in work and the SFA acknowledges the role that small business owners have in bringing this about. Through our membership communications we update members on changing legislation and promote reports and new guidance to them. Through our provision of HR advice, we encourage and support a fair and equal workplace for all. However, to achieve gender equality in the workforce, we cannot place unrealistic costs or regulation on our smallest employers. Instead, society and our business community would all benefit if issues such as occupational segregation, stereotypes and gender norms were better researched, and actions taken to address them.

SME's Funding

- **SMEs would need maximum funding to cover all the Gender Equality agenda and living wage. The smaller SMEs may not be that willing to cover these costs and attend to all the demands of the Gender Equality working conditions and living wage. Would this be correct and would they be checked out for this, especially if they are getting Government funding?**
- **Should SFAs not have 3rd party mandatory HR Depts which would separate management from staff, to help implement any new legislation?**

If legislation or obligatory reporting were introduced small firms would have to comply with it and meet the cost of this. Small commercial firms would not be receiving government funding.

No small firms should not have 3rd party mandatory HR Departments.

SFA research

- **Can you give us some more details of the research you mentioned in the presentation?**

SME and Entrepreneurship Policy: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/SME-and-Entrepreneurship-Policy-in-Ireland.pdf>

EU Work Life Balance Directive:

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=9438&langId=en>

CSO Business in Ireland: Small and Medium Enterprises:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-bii/businessinireland2018/smallandmediumenterprises/>