

The Dutch trick: flextime and shorter workweek

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AMSTERDAM — Trying to figure out a Dutch work schedule is a little like solving a Sudoku puzzle: You bog down in numbers.

Take the example of Esther Hezemans, 36, and her 39-year-old husband, Edwin Stokvis, a business consultant. The two work four days a week for a total of 32 hours each — she as a human-resources manager at a publisher, he as a business consultant.

Both take one weekday off, but never the same day. That allows them to spend a total of three days each with their 17-month-old son, weekends included. On the three weekdays when both parents work, the boy goes to day care.

The arrangement may seem brain-numbingly complicated, but the couple would probably just call it "flexible."

Sure, Hezemans, for her part, must often squeeze five days' work into four, and even attend to business calls and e-mails on her days off. But working a full-time shift of 36 hours wouldn't allow this busy woman to attend to her biggest commitment of all. As she put it: "I chose to work for 32 hours because of my child."

The couple illustrate how the Dutch have come to balance life and work. In the early 1980s, when the country was trying to



Femke De Vries, bicycling with her sons, Bink, 2, and Vosse, 5, in Haarlem, Netherlands, works a three-day, 25-hour week and spends the rest of her time at home. SETSUKO KAMIYA PHOTO

climb out of a stretch of deep unemployment, the answer it came up with was work-sharing, an employment system in which one job is done by more than one part-time worker.

This approach eased economic pain by redistributing wages, and also gave Dutch women greater access to the workplace — a welcome side benefit in a country where, despite a reputation as a haven of liberalism, women to this day are largely bound to the home. It also freed up part-timer dads to help with the kids and domestic chores.

Today, workers in this country of 16.6 million are more likely than any others in Europe to be employed on a part-time basis. That is particularly true for women, about three out of four of whom work part-time, compared with about one in five in the case of men, according to Dutch think tank SEO Economic Research.

Experts say that on the whole, Dutch citizens accept — and even cherish — their flexible labor system. However family-friendly the setup is, that acceptance may strike observers outside the Netherlands as odd, considering the low status and poor job security of part-timers in many parts of the world.

But an amendment to the Working Hours Act that went into effect in 1996 enabled Dutch workers to negotiate shifts with employers "to promote the workers' health, safety and well-being," according to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. (Managers and senior staff fall outside the purview of this law.)

Another 1996 law, the Equal Treatment Act, ensured that Dutch part-timers receive the same hourly wages as full-timers, are entitled to the same amount of time off in proportion to time worked and are as eligible for promotion.

With such privileges in place, it's little wonder that parents with small children aren't the only ones opting for part-time.

Hanne Groenendijk works 32 hours a week as a senior policy specialist at the Social and Economic Council, a government advisory body. Every week, the 50-something takes two afternoons off to serve as a community conflict-resolution volunteer. Before doing that, she took personal time to study law and get a Ph.D.

"It's very interesting to combine a rich private life with a rewarding job," she said with a serene smile. "I enjoy working as a volunteer. I feel like I'm contributing to society."

And then there's Huib Mijnaerends, 36, a nattily dressed Foreign Ministry official who upon returning last year from a five-year overseas assignment was surprised to find younger colleagues staying home to care for children on once-weekly "papa days" and "mama days."

Now Mijnaerends has joined the club. From April, he started using papa days to care for his 11-month-old daughter, thereby allowing his wife to take a full-time job with the United Nations.

Mijnaerends said that prioritizing family life or career should be a strictly personal choice.

"For me, it's important that my wife has a job and develops a career, and (that) I get to see my daughter not only when she goes to bed or wakes up," he said. "If that means my career will be slower than other people here from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., well, then, so be it."

Workers may be satisfied, but how do employers feel?

Alexander Rinnooy Kan, a former executive board member of Dutch financial giant ING Group, said managers in the Netherlands have resigned themselves to a personnel system as pliant as rubber.

"It certainly makes the lives of the employer complex, as it creates all sorts of planning issues," he explained. "But it's something you have to learn to live with."

Kan accentuated the positives, noting that although Dutch working hours are lower than in other countries, productivity is high. Dutch work on average 26.3 hours a week, compared with about 34 in Japan, when part-timers are factored in. Still, when the OECD in 2004 compared productivity across its 30 member countries, the Netherlands placed 10th — well above 19th-ranked Japan.

Kan described how during his time at ING, he had two part-time, work-sharing assistants. One woman came to the office Monday through Wednesday, while her colleague worked Wednesday through Friday. Kan said the first smoothly

passed the baton to the second on their overlapping
Wednesday.

"I always thought I had two assistants for the price of one,"
he said cheerfully. "The reward can be very high." **(S.K.)**

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