

5 Flexibility and inflexibility

A



Ways of working

Nordland is an advanced industrialized country. In addition to outsourcing some functions to freelancers (see Unit 4), many organizations there are looking for ways of having more **flexible working**, for example:

- **temporary workers** who only work for short periods when they are needed, either on a **temporary contract** with a company, or through a **temp agency**
- **part-time workers** who work less than a full working week
- **job sharing**, where two people share a particular job, each of them working part-time.

B

Job flexibility

The government of Nordland is trying to encourage this kind of **job flexibility**, and it has passed laws that allow companies to hire and fire employees easily. When letting people go, companies only have to give them two weeks' **notice** and relatively small **redundancy payments**; one week's salary for every year worked is the norm.

The government has also reduced **unemployment benefits**, the money paid to people without jobs. They say that all these measures make for a **flexible job market** and encourage **job creation**. Critics say that this approach leads to **job insecurity**, with employers able to get rid of employees too easily.

C

Job protection

Sudonia is an advanced industrialized country with a very different approach. Companies in trouble are only allowed to **make employees redundant** after a long period of **consultation**. If employees are made redundant, they receive generous redundancy payments and then unemployment benefits. The government says people need this sort of **job protection**, and trade unions are fighting hard to keep it.

Payments to employees such as sick pay, and **parental leave** when they have time off following the birth of children, are also very generous.

Mothers get 18 months' paid **maternity leave** and fathers get six months' **paternity leave**. But the social charges which employers and employees have to pay the government are very high.

Critics say that this contributes to a **rigid labour market**, one with too much job protection. They say that this sort of **inflexibility** discourages job creation and leads in the long run to higher **unemployment** and slower **economic growth**. As a consequence, companies may look abroad for cheaper bases and workforces.

BrE: trade unions;
AmE: labor unions

5.1 Look at A opposite. Which type of work is each of these people referring to?

1 I work at the local council for two days a week, and my friend works in the same job on the other three days.

2 I work in a petrol station 20 hours a week.

3 I'm on a job at Clarkson's until the end of next week. Then I'll try and find something else.

5.2 Melinda and Nigel, two managers from Sudonia, are talking about the issues in B and C opposite. Replace the underlined phrases with expressions with items from those sections. Pay attention to the grammatical context. (The first one has been done for you.)

Melinda: It's ridiculous! We can't get rid of employees without a lot of meetings and discussion with employee organizations, government officials and so on. We have to keep even the laziest, most incompetent people.

We can't make employees redundant without a lot of consultation with trade unions, government officials and so on. We have to keep even the laziest, most incompetent people.

Nigel: I know what you mean. I don't have the opportunity to recruit and get rid of people as I want! This sort of rigidity must be bad for the job market. The number of people without jobs in this country is very high.

Melinda: It's a nightmare! If you do want to get rid of people, you have to tell them three months in advance.

Nigel: Yes, and you should see the amount of tax I have to pay for each of my employees just so they can get money when they fall ill, and so on.

Melinda: We should move to Nordland, where they have a job market that gives employers a lot of freedom. The level of new jobs being created there is incredible. Sudonia should copy Nordland.

Nigel: I agree, but it never will, until it's too late!

5.3 Look at the expressions in B and C opposite and say if these statements are true or false.

- 1 When companies let employees go, they make them redundant.
- 2 One person's job flexibility might be another's job insecurity.
- 3 In flexible job markets, hiring and firing is complex.
- 4 Employee benefits are paid for through social charges.
- 5 'Rigidity' is another word for 'inflexibility'.
- 6 When fathers take parental leave, this is called 'fatherly leave'.
- 7 The cost of job protection might be higher unemployment.

Over to you



Is your country more like Nordland or Sudonia? What are the advantages and disadvantages of flexible working?