

Contractors should welcome 'flexicurity'

Rarely do UK contractors get good news from the European Commission, but there was a surprise recently. The European Confederation of Private Employment Agencies last month came out in favour of the new concept that the commission has come up with to promote flexible employment: it's called 'flexicurity.'

What is Flexicurity?

The concept is explained in a [statement](#) by none less than EU Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso: "While, too often, policy measures increase either flexibility for companies or security for workers, flexicurity stresses the importance of both. It can be broken down into four main components: flexible contracts, comprehensive lifelong learning strategies, measures to help the unemployed back to work, modern social security systems."

The approach has been pioneered in certain Scandinavian countries, notably Denmark, where governments have sought to ensure high levels of employment and skills and have provided extensive support for training and income between jobs. The results have been impressive. And obviously, workers in flexicurity conditions are contractors, or a lot more like contractors, than anything we've seen in the past.

Contractors should immediately welcome that combination of flexible contracts and modern social security systems. Imagine if Europe could do that!

Protect People, Not Jobs

Barroso insists that this approach works for all types of labour status. "It is an approach geared less towards protecting jobs and more towards protecting people. For workers, flexibility can help them reconcile work with their private lives; for companies, it allows them to anticipate and respond to change."

All of this sounds nice in theory, but it is good to have some theory from the European Commission that isn't about regulating and restricting contractors ability to work. Most of the approach by the Commission, including the current draft directive on temporary employment, runs more to limiting contractors to certain ways of doing business, as they are regulated in Germany and France.

So it is good to hear that there is now a positive policy approach, and Eurociett, which represents 7 million contractors across Europe, feels the same way.

What Contracting and Temporary Work Do

"Temporary agency work provides a comprehensively regulated, flexible form of contractual arrangement, which reconciles the flexibility and security needs for both employers and employees. By putting more people in work, by offering opportunities to gain professional experience and by facilitating access to training (e.g. in France, 250,000 agency workers are trained on a yearly basis), temporary agency work substantially contributes to growth and jobs in Europe," says Eurociett in a statement.

The organisation goes on to show how creating good conditions for contractors will help companies and employees as well. "Facilitating entry and upward transitions in the labour market are an essential characteristic of the temporary agency work industry in Europe. By doing so, temporary agency work substantially supports the insiders – as people in employment that want to progress in the labour market – as well as the 'outsiders'. Indeed, for several target groups, as first-time entrants, disabled, ethnic minorities and older people, temporary agency work offers an essential access channel to enter and remain within the labour market. For example, in Belgium, 10% of the temporary agency workers are from ethnic minorities, compared to 6.6% in the overall labour population."

Barroso has made flexicurity part of the Lisbon Agenda, the programme that is supposed to make Europe the most innovative and competitive place on earth by 2010 (actually they've extended the deadline to 2012). But one should not sneer: it is a genuine effort to improve all our lives, and making contracting part of the programme is a major change of outlook for Europe. We are so used to regarding anything from Brussels with suspicion that it would be easy to dismiss flexicurity. Instead, we should make an effort to encourage it.

“ Flexicurity is geared less towards protecting jobs and more towards protecting people ”

Jose Manuel Barroso-President of the European Commission

“ Temporary work provides the flexibility and security needed by employer and employees ”

Eurociett

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