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THE BELGIAN CAREER BREAK SYSTEM

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The system of career break was introduced by the Belgian government in 1985. It allows employees to reduce working hours or to interrupt their employment for a specific period, during which a state allowance is paid. During the leave period the employee is protected against dismissal and receives the guarantee to return to the same job.

Initially, career breaks were aimed at achieving a redistribution of labour to counter the rising unemployment. Each leave-taker was to be replaced by an unemployed person. Three additional forms of career break, referred to as thematic leave, were introduced in the nineties: career break for palliative care (in 1995), parental leave (in 1997) and medical care based career break (in 1999). At the beginning of 2002, the legislation on career breaks was reviewed, and became known as 'time credit' in the private sector and kept the name 'career break' in the public sector. The replacement rule for the general scheme was withdrawn, the emphasis today being on increasing the quality of life by facilitating a better combination of work and private life. The thematic leave forms of career break remained unchanged. The general schemes of career break and time credit exist alongside parental leave and are not to be confused. An EU directive stipulates all EU member states must provide at least three months parental leave per parent, while there are no EU regulations on career break.

Career break or time credit can be taken up across the life course by all employees working at least one year for the same employer, and is not limited to specific reasons for leave. All employees in the private sector have the right to one year of this type of leave, which can be extended up to five years by collective agreement on sector or company level and can be taken up flexibly. Employment can be interrupted full-time or by half or one fifth. In the public sector career break can be taken up for a total of six years spread over the life span. Employees in the public sector can reduce their working time by one fifth, one quarter, one third and half or full-time. The state allowance is dependent on the take-up rate, age, household composition and years of employment. An employee younger than fifty with two children for example receives around €366 for a full-time break in the public sector, in the private sector up to €399. The Flemish Government offers an extra incentive premium (for employees working for Flemish organisations in Flanders and Brussels) when the leave is used to take care of dependent children or needy family members or to follow a course or study (between €110 and €160 per month for full-time leave). In case of reduced working hours due to company restructuring in the private sector the incentive premium

amounts to €345. A special ruling is in place in the social profit sector, with higher incentive premiums, to encourage employment in this sector.

Parental leave in Belgium is an individual entitlement of three months leave per child for each parent till the child reaches the age of twelve. The leave may be taken full-time, part time over six months or one day a week for fifteen months. Leave for palliative care can be taken for one month, extendable to twelve months (fulltime, half or one fifth). In case a family member gets severely ill, leave for medical reasons can be taken for one to three months, extendable to twelve months (fulltime, half or one fifth). These types of thematical leave are paid depending on age and the takeup rate (approximately €653 per month for full-time leave). The additional incentive premium from the Flemish Government is also offered for these types of leave.

Since 2002, the use of career break and time credit by employees over fifty is stimulated through more flexible conditions and larger contributions. Over-fifties are allowed to work four fifths or half until their pension age with the aim of keeping these employees longer in the labour market.

The current policy intends to enable a more relaxed career and acknowledges the need for time across the life span for other activities than employment. However, it cannot be neglected that these leave periods are also intended as a vehicle for the increase and lengthening of labour market participation. On the one hand the intention is to keep women with caring responsibilities in the labour force. On the other hand the policy aims at keeping older is employees in the labour force. This implicit employment strategy is often criticised. While parental leave is generally accepted as legitimate, the possibility for older employees to reduce their work hours is criticised by the Federation of Enterprises in Belgium. The employment rate among over-fifties is particularly low in Belgium (49.1% in 2009) compared to the EU-27 average (56.5% in 2009). The costs of the career break system are regarded as too high, and the system is not adequate in encouraging older employees to stay longer in the labour force. At every new government formation, the system of career break and time credit are under debate. The high take-up rate among younger women and older men, however, proves the felt need among employees to better balance work and private life. Career break and time credit are seen as a social right and taken in defence by the trade unions.

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