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## **Business News Northern Ireland**

Welcome to our round-up of the latest business news for our clients. Please contact us if you want to talk about how these updates affect your business. We are here to support you!

### **Is “996 culture” Working Culture Relevant to Your Business?**

The BBC has published an in-depth piece on “996 culture” - the practice of working 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week.

Although the examples mostly come from US tech companies, there are some useful lessons for UK business owners. Here are some points that stood out to us.

#### The Appeal of 996

The article looks at AI start-ups in the US that openly promote 70-hour working weeks, often attracting young, ambitious staff who see long hours as a badge of honour. Some businesses even advertise these expectations upfront.

996 culture is not new or unique to the US. It first gained popularity in China a decade ago when it was seen as a powerful tool in helping tech companies and start-ups gain traction. However, it led to a backlash of complaints about workers' rights that led to a legal crackdown.

However, based on the BBC's report it seems that competition in AI is pushing founders in the US to demand extreme commitment. They fear being beaten to market and believe working more hours equates to faster progress.

#### Concerns About 996

The report highlights several problems with the 996 approach.

For instance, while it is understandable and may even be expected that a founder with skin in the game would be working 70-80 hours per week, expecting the same of employees may not achieve more productivity and can exclude workers who would be vital to the business's interests.

Continual long hours lead to long-term burnout and bring other health risks. For instance, the BBC notes the conclusions reached by an analysis published in 2021 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). This showed that working 55 hours or more a week increased the risk of dying of heart disease by 17% when compared with working 35-40 hours. The risk of stroke also increased by 35%.

Besides health concerns, productivity does not increase in line with the number of hours worked. Research by Michigan State University suggests that employees are no more productive working 70 hours per week than if they worked 50 hours per week.

## Could 996 Culture Work for You?

While 996 culture is not mainstream in the UK, there are proponents. In addition, for workers at large corporate law firms and investment bankers, the idea of working 70 hour weeks may feel commonplace. Some may enjoy what has been called “work-life integration.” However, there are downsides.

The Working Time Regulations mean that working more than 48 hours a week on average is not allowed unless the employee chooses to opt out and work longer, or they are doing a job that has exceptions under the law. This means that 996 is possible; pressuring staff to conform rather than giving them a genuine choice would be risky.

Practically speaking, a 996 approach may also make recruitment trickier. Employees would need a compelling reason to work 70 hours a week against a 35-hour week in an alternative job.

Over-reliance on unpaid or excessive overtime can also harm productivity, especially in the long run. Investing in skills, automation and smarter workflows could give a better return than working longer days.

For smaller businesses in particular, culture is a competitive advantage. A reputation for balanced, sustainable working patterns can make working for you more appealing and reduce the risk of employees leaving.

### Finding a sustainable pace

If you are a business owner, the idea of 996 may feel uncomfortably familiar. Especially in the early stages of a business, there will inevitably be phases when the hours creep up. But if you feel this is becoming a permanent way of working, it's usually a sign the business needs something to change rather than you simply working harder.

Often, the pressure comes from a few predictable places – cash flow tightness, gaps in capacity, unclear business processes or work that only you can do because no one else has been shown how. These business issues are often fixable once they have been identified.

If cutting back your hours is something you are aiming for, the first step is usually to understand where the strain is coming from. Once you can see that clearly, it becomes easier to work towards a more manageable workload. Sometimes just a small change in how the business is organised can make a big difference.

Whether you are thinking about workplace culture or your own situation, if you would like to talk things through or to see how your business could be made more scalable and less reliant on your time, please get in touch. We would be happy to help you continue running and growing your business sustainably.

See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvgn2k285ypo>

## **New Detail Published on How Last Year's Budget Leak Unfolded**

The government has now published its Review into the 2025 Autumn Budget leak, explaining how the Office for Budget Responsibility's Economic and Fiscal Outlook (EFO) was accessible online an hour before the Chancellor was due to speak.

The Review sets out measures that will be taken to prevent this from happening again.

### What actually happened?

The Review incorporates findings from the National Cyber Security Centre's investigation, which found that the leak was a result of repeated attempts to access the webpage holding the EFO, rather than a hostile cyber-attack.

The fault lay in a misconfiguration in the way that the OBR's website was set up. This meant that the webpage holding the report was accessible earlier than the OBR intended. Users who guessed the webpage address correctly based on previous reports were able to access the report.

The investigation found that around 520 of the 534 early access attempts were linked to just four IP addresses from the same internet provider. Investigators believe it is reasonable to assume this was the same individual or organisation.

The one or more individuals who secured early access seem to have then used social media and messaging apps to spread word of the early access. In all, the EFO was downloaded 24,701 times before the mistake was noticed.

### What is changing?

The OBR is due to publish an EFO at the time of the Spring Forecast announcement on 3 March 2026. Historically, the OBR has published these reports on its own website rather than a government website in order to maintain its independence.

However, because of the sensitivity of the information contained in the EFO, it will be published on GOV.UK by HM Treasury. HM Treasury has commented that doing this will not give it access to any information ahead of time of which it is not already aware.

For future EFO and other market-sensitive publication releases, it is planned that OBR will move to using GOV.UK.

In readiness for the 2026 Budget, likely to be held in the autumn, there are plans to bring in other internal measures that will enhance security and limit data access.

To read the Budget Information Security Review in full, see:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/budget-information-security-review>

## **CMA Moves to Secure Fairer App Store Rules for UK Businesses**

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has announced a set of proposed commitments from Apple and Google that could make it easier for UK businesses that rely on app stores to reach their customers.

The CMA is inviting views on these commitments until 3 March 2026, with plans for them to take effect from 1 April 2026.

### What's happening?

The CMA has been working with Apple and Google since both companies were given “strategic market status” (SMS) in late 2025.

Almost all UK mobile devices run either Apple’s iOS or Google’s Android system, an effective duopoly, and the status gives the CMA powers to require changes where it sees problems for competition or fairness.

Rather than going straight to imposing conduct requirements, which can take time to implement, voluntary commitments have been agreed with Apple and Google to deliver immediate improvements.

### What the commitments mean in practice

The UK app economy is big business, valued at £28 billion as of 2025 and supporting around 400,000 jobs. Many UK companies now depend on mobile apps as a core part of how they serve customers.

For UK businesses and developers, the proposed measures focus on four practical areas:

- App review: Apple and Google are committing to distribute apps on their app stores in a fair, objective and transparent way. They will not discriminate against apps that compete with their own, nor will they give preferential treatment to their own apps.
- App ranking: The new commitments mean Apple and Google should not favour their own apps, nor push down apps that compete with them.
- Data collection: Apple and Google have committed not to use data they gather from developers during an app review unfairly; for example, not using insights from your app to develop competing features.
- Interoperability: Apple has agreed to make it easier for developers to more easily request interoperable access to features and functionality within their mobile operating systems. They have also committed to considering requests fairly and objectively.

## Monitoring

To ensure the commitments are met, the CMA will publish reports using data from Apple and Google. This will include:

- Percentage of apps submitted for review that are approved, rejected or appealed.
- Time taken for app reviews.
- The number and outcome of complaints.
- Interoperability requests made to Apple, outcomes and how quickly the requests are handled.

## What next?

Chief Executive of the CMA Sarah Cardell said that the proposed measures are “important first steps while we continue to work on a broad range of additional measures to improve Apple and Google’s app store services in the UK, for example, by enabling more choice and innovation in digital wallets”.

The CMA is looking for views on the proposed commitments by 3 March 2026, with implementation planned from 1 April 2026.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cma-secures-commitments-from-apple-and-google-to-improve-fairness-in-app-store-processes-and-enhance-ios-interoperability>

## **HMRC Moves to GOV.UK One Login for New Users**

HM Revenue & Customs has started using GOV.UK One Login for taxpayers signing up to its digital services for the first time.

This means that if you do not already have a Government Gateway account, you will now register using an email-and-password login rather than needing to obtain a 10-12 digit Government Gateway ID.

For now, this only affects new HMRC users. Existing Government Gateway users do not need to switch yet.

Even if you already have a GOV.UK One Login that you use for another government service, you will still need to use your government gateway to access HMRC’s services for the time being.

HMRC plans to roll out GOV.UK One Logins gradually and will contact existing users when it is ready for them to move over.

Eventually, GOV.UK One Logins will become the single login for everything from filing a tax return to renewing a passport.

If you need help registering for or accessing HMRC services, please contact us. We will be happy to help you! See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hmrc-introducesgovukonelogin-for-new-customers>

## **DBS Launches New Safeguarding Podcast for Employers**

The Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) has launched a new weekly podcast series, 'DBS discussions: Safeguarding in Focus,' aimed at employers, HR teams and anyone working in safeguarding.

Each episode of the podcast features a DBS specialist explaining how key DBS processes work in practice. Topics will include:

- How DBS checks fit into recruitment.
- Common questions from employers.
- Clarity on eligibility and regulated activity.
- How barring decisions are made.
- The role DBS plays in wider safeguarding.

The first episode was released on 9 February 2026, and introduced the function of DBS and the impact of checks in recruitment.

New episodes will be available each week on [Spotify, Amazon and YouTube](#).

## **HSENI Launches New Advertising Initiative**

The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) has launched a new workplace health advertising initiative.

The advertising initiative will include TV, radio, newspapers and social media channels, as well as outdoor advertising, including buses. It will promote awareness of how health can be damaged in the workplace, the impact that can have and the need for appropriate controls.

Figures estimate that over 300 people die each year in Northern Ireland from work-related health issues, and HSENI is encouraging employers to manage risks to health in the same way as other safety risks. The TV adverts focus on preventing three priority occupational health risks - occupational lung diseases, occupational cancers and musculoskeletal disorders.

Chief Executive of HSENI Robert Kidd said that, "Too often, serious ill health develops because risks are not identified or adequately controlled - yet prevention is always better than cure, and simple, practical changes at work can prevent lifelong harm and dramatically improve quality of life".

Employers are being urged to make good use of the [guidance and support](#) provided by HSENI.

See: <https://www.hseni.gov.uk/news/hseni-new-advertising-initiative-aimed-reducing-over-300-work-related-deaths-estimated-occur>