

A Report On The Importance Of Work-Life Balance

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Abstract

In organizations and on the home front, the challenge of work/life balance is rising to the top of many employers' and employees' consciousness. In today's fast-paced society, human resource professionals seek options to positively impact the bottom line of their companies, improve employee morale, retain employees with valuable company knowledge, and keep pace with workplace trends. This article provides human resource professionals with an historical perspective, data and possible solutions for organizations and employees alike to work/life balance. Three factors global competition, personal lives/family values, and an aging workforce present challenges that exacerbate work/life balance. This article offers the perspective that human resource professionals can assist their companies to capitalize on these factors by using work/life initiatives to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Work-life balance has always been a concern of those interested in the quality of working life and its relation to broader quality of life.

What Is Work-Life Balance?

Work-life balance is a form of metaphor; but a metaphor of what? In the English language "balance" is a complex word with a variety of meanings. As a noun, a balance is a set of scales, a weighing apparatus; it is also the regulating gear in clocks. If we use the scales, then balance occurs when there is "an equal distribution of weight or amount" (OED); but this presents problems for work-life balance since both sides may be very heavy or very light. Furthermore, the type of work-life balance sought by many may not imply equal weight on both sides. However balance also has a physical and psychological meaning as "stability of body or mind" so that suicide is sometimes officially recorded as taking one's life "while the balance of the mind was

disturbed". However this version of the metaphor, whether it applies to body or mind is somewhat more appropriate since it implies both the possibility of external verification and human agency. Put another way we can observe when someone has lost their balance; and we know that in given circumstances some people have better balance than others and may perceive that they have better balance. This gives rise to the need to recognize that balance can have both an objective and subjective meaning and measurement, that it will vary according to circumstances and that it will also vary across individuals.

Work-life balance is about creating and maintaining supportive and healthy work environments, which will enable employees to have balance between work and personal responsibilities and thus strengthen employee loyalty and productivity.

Numerous studies have been conducted on work-life balance. According to a major Canadian study conducted by Lowe (2005), 1 in 4 employees experience high levels of conflict between work and family, based on work-to-family interference and caregiver strain. If role overload is included, then close to 60 percent of employees surveyed experience work-family conflict. Of all the job factors that influence work-life conflict, the amount of time spent at work is the strongest and most consistent predictor. The higher levels of work-to-family conflict reported by managers or professionals often are a function of their longer work hours. Other reasons include: job security, support from one's supervisor, support from co-workers, work demands or overload, work-role conflict, work-role ambiguity, job dissatisfaction, and extensive use of communication technology that blurs the boundaries between home and work.

Today's workers have many competing responsibilities such as work, children, housework, volunteering, spouse and elderly parent care and this places stress on individuals, families and the communities in which they reside. Work-life conflict is a serious problem that impacts workers, their employers and communities. It seems that this problem is increasing over time due to high female labour force participation rates, increasing numbers of single parent families, the predominance of the dual-earner family and emerging trends such as elder care. It is further exasperated with globalization, an aging population, and historically low unemployment.

Work/Life Balance in the Relief World In the "relief world," comprised of organizations with employees and volunteers that provide service and care to communities in need locally and worldwide, the demands of an aging population in the coming decade are increasing the current strong competition for qualified individuals upon which relief organizations depend. "Not only will there be fewer young, keen and free-to-travel individuals who will want to be convinced that agencies are caring, 'best-practice' employers, but more skills and experience will be possessed by older staff likely to have families and other commitments and thus different priorities for their work/life balance."²⁶ Therefore, organizations that provide relief services may experience increasing difficulty staffing and retaining employees due to the pull of family commitments at home. Furthermore, the challenges of work/life balance will no doubt impact recruitment, retention and willingness to serve in hardship locations. In view of these factors, voluntary organizations and aid agencies whose missions and services are critical in many parts

of the world may well have an even greater need for work/life programs to attract and retain staff. Total

The Negative Effects of Work Life Conflict

Long work hours and highly stressful jobs not only hamper employees' ability to harmonize work and family life but also are associated with health risks, such as increased smoking and alcohol consumption, weight gain and depression. Work life conflict has been associated with numerous physical and mental health implications.

According to a 2007 study by Duxbury and Higgins, women are more likely than men to report high levels of role overload and caregiver strain. This is because women devote more hours per week than men to non-work activities such as childcare, elder care and are more likely to have primary responsibility for unpaid labour such as domestic work. Furthermore, other studies show that women also experience less spousal support for their careers than their male counterparts. Although women report higher levels of work-family conflict than do men, the numbers of work-life conflict reported by men is increasing.

Work-life conflict has negative implications on family life. According to the 2007 study by Duxbury and Higgins, 1 in 4 Canadians report that their work responsibilities interfere with their ability to fulfill their responsibilities at home. Employees, especially the younger generation who are faced with long hours, the expectations of 24/7 connection and increasing pressure of globalization are beginning to demand changes from their employers. Also, people in the elderly employee segment are working longer now than in the past and are demanding different work arrangements to accommodate their life style needs.

Current Practices

Employers are becoming increasingly aware of the cost implications associated with over-worked employees such as: operating and productivity costs, absenteeism, punctuality, commitment and performance.

There are five main reasons why companies participate in work life balance programs:

High return on investment, recruitment and retention of employees, legislation, costs and union regulations.

There are a wide variety of practices currently being used to help employees achieve work-life balance. It is important to note that some work-life balance programs help employees handle stress and otherwise cope more effectively while other programs help to reduce the absolute stress levels by rebalancing work life.

A growing number of employers have implemented wellness programs or pay for their employees' gym membership as part of a benefits package. Some companies invite fitness trainers or yoga instructors into the office to hold lunchtime sessions. Some companies undertake initiatives to improve employees' healthy eating habits. Others offer stress management programs which include stretching, yoga, counseling, as well as bringing in Registered Massage Therapists to work.

Many employers are offering longer vacation times than the mandatory 2 weeks per year imposed by Canadian legislation. Additionally, some companies will offer “flex” days. Interestingly, sick days tend to go down once some is “entitled” to three weeks or more a year of holidays.

Human resources policies that can be used to increase work-life balance include implementing time off in lieu of overtime pay arrangements, providing a limited number of days of paid leave per year for child care, elder care or personal problems, or having policies around weekend and evening use of laptops and Blackberrys.

There are some issues that arise when employees have flexible work hours such as lack of face-time with other staff and not being as available to clients; these issues can be solved by ensuring employees discuss scheduling with supervisor and let clients and other employees know their hours of availability.

Sometimes in order to accommodate workers need for work life balance, firms may need to reduce the amount of work given to each employee. To accomplish this, employers can hire new people, reduce time spent in job-related travel, allow for job sharing, or reevaluate the work itself and how it is structured and organized with work process improvements and/or reengineering of work. According to a study by Messmer in 2006, flexible scheduling is the benefit valued most by employees. However, increased flexibility, if implemented without conditions and used to facilitate business ends without provision for worker consent, could compromise instead of enhance work life balance.

Tips to develop a better work-life balance

To ensure you make the best of your time at work and home, good ideas include:

- Analyzing the use of your time and deciding what's really important. Set up a new daily regime ensuring the main things remain the main things.
- Leaving work at work. Turn off your cell phone, shut down your laptop and set a clear boundary between work and home. Ask your family to make you accountable to ensure you don't slip back into old habits.
- Saying "no" to stressful things that will only cause conflict later on. This will allow you to focus on the parts of your life you really care about and give them 100 per cent attention.
- Managing your time effectively by putting family events in a shared calendar and keeping a daily to-do list. Make sure you complete the important things and don't worry about the rest.

Ways employers can assist

Employers need to understand a mentally and physically healthy person is a good employee. Making team members work extra hours only builds resentment over the long term. My wife left her specialized role as a quality controller because her employer wouldn't let her have two weeks' holiday to go to a wedding in the UK. This

was despite working for the company for four years, giving it six months' notice of the trip and having three weeks' holiday owing.

The ways an employer can improve work/life balance for employees include flexi-hours, compressed work weeks, job-sharing, telecommuting and child-care support. These options allow employees to have more control over their lives, enabling them to be more productive.

Finding a quality work/life balance that suits you is important over your long-term career.

Put good plans in place now to ensure you will still be enjoying your career for many years to come.

Conclusion

Evidence suggests that improvements in people management practices, especially work time and work location flexibility, and the development of supportive managers, contribute to increased work-life balance. Work-life balance programs have been demonstrated to have an impact on employees in terms of recruitment, retention/turnover, commitment and satisfaction, absenteeism, productivity and accident rates. Companies that have implemented work-life balance programs recognize that employee welfare affects the “bottom line” of the business. Parameters are required to ensure that programs are having the desired effect on both employees and the company. Six parameters that can be used to evaluate work life balance programs are: extent of management buy-in and training, how programs are communicated to employees, corporate culture, management controls, human resources policies and employee control. Finally, self-management is important; people need to control their own behaviour and expectations regarding work-life balance.

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