

Work-Life Balance

Employees have got the message. In every job there is pressure to work leaner and faster and to do so with more creativity than ever before. This is not a question of choice; it has become a prerequisite for survival.

But the continuous pressure of work and the relentless pace of change is impacting people. Hard. High-powered executives may have mapped out their careers across the global landscape, but most employees are in reactive mode: trying to keep up, trying to adjust to fierce new customer demands and service requirements. And some people have reached the point where they want their lives back, or at least are questioning how they can balance their obligations at work with the responsibilities they have in their home lives.

The three-tiered burden of tough targets, tight deadlines, and managerial pressure has implications for more than tired employees. Employers have also recognised that their organisations will suffer if they fail to keep their staff healthy and satisfied. In the war for talent a good salary and a medical plan are no longer enough; forward-looking employers are building work-life balance into their recruitment and retention strategies.

But what exactly does “work-life balance” cover?

In the recent past, “stress” was the term that best seemed to represent this general concern about too much work, too little life. Everyone understood stress; they experienced it at a personal level. Furthermore, news generating from landmark cases such as that in the UK brought by John Walker against his employer, Northumberland County Council, for occupational stress (which led to a £200,000 damages award) ensured that many other organisations knew what it was about too.

But while stress deals with individual response to pressure, work-life balance has a larger context. According to the Work Foundation, work-life balance is only achieved “when an individual’s right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is respected as the norm – to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society”.

So, for example, work-life balance takes into account the contribution that people want to make to the world in which they live. It includes the recognition that people have to manage family life as well as work success. Moreover, it considers the impact that an excessive workload has on people’s physical health. In other words, work-life balance includes more issues and concerns than stress.

Supporting evidence for the need for work-life balance initiatives is commonplace and varied. A Gallup poll in America found that 40 per cent of Americans described themselves as feeling anywhere from “somewhat angry” to “very angry” while on their job. The survey *Feeling Overworked: When Work Becomes Too Much* (conducted by the Families and Work Institute and supported by international accountancy firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers) found that over half of the 1,003 polled said that in any three-month period, there were times when they felt overworked and/or overwhelmed by work.

Then there was a study by Professor Andrew Kakabadse at the Cranfield School of Management on executive burnout said that all leaders are prone to burnout, but their organisations are often embarrassed by the phenomenon and don’t know what to do about it. There is even a phenomenon in Japan called *karoshi* – death by overwork. *Karoshi* became a social problem in Japan during the late 1980s. As the country’s economic miracle ran out of steam, the number of hours put in by workers increased. As unemployment became a growing concern, the pressures on overworked salarymen

intensified. Used to a job “for life”, the social stigma attached to redundancy means that workers are often unwilling to complain even when their workload has become unbearable. For a growing number of salaried men suicide appears the only resort.

The inspiration

“One illness, long life” is an old Chinese proverb that suggests, if you want to lead a long life, you need to face your mortality and reassess the way in which you balance your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs. But more realistically we can point to one of the 20th century gurus, Abraham Maslow, as the inspiration for the work-life balance phenomenon.

Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” model underpinned his thinking and research into human motivation and posited five ascending levels of need, each of which had to be satisfied before the individual could ascend the hierarchy. So, at the base of the triangular model, Maslow suggested that people first have to satisfy their physical survival needs such as food, shelter and warmth. Once these are satisfied, he said, then their safety needs arise which include, for example, how they can protect themselves and how they can ensure security. Satisfy this need and there are the issues of how people belong – to their family and to their workplace (and, thus, what relationships they want and need to foster).

Above all this Maslow suggests that people have a major need to satisfy their self-esteem through, for example, their achievements and through status recognition. And finally, at the apex of the triangle, is the self-actualised individual whose priorities deal with personal growth and fulfilment.

Maslow’s work fused with a trend that also affected the concerns about work-life balance: the breakdown of the psychological contract. Having a job for life (this was actually part of the bedrock values of IBM for many years) simply could not be sustained by the dynamic marketplace of the 1990s and beyond. Add this stark reality to the immense impact of the technological revolution and what resulted was a breakdown of the norms in the traditional workplace. The old certainties evaporated, and established employers quickly realised that the new imperative was to ensure that their employees become as innovative and entrepreneurial as those self-starters who were busy creating new economy start-ups.

Experimentation

Work-life balance is in fashion now, but it has evolved over time. In the UK, for example, there has been a long tradition of government-based initiatives that were the forerunners of this innovation. Family-friendly policies by some organisations encouraged women to consider work outside the home, and Fairness at Work legislation (which extended the rights for maternity and paternity) started a reconsideration of the work-life balance in many companies.

However, work-life balance as it exists today is not driven by government. The influence of some corporate role models has had the most impact. Some companies have become very successful by treating their people in very non-traditional ways. Consider Ben & Jerry’s, the ice cream people based in Vermont. Since the 1980s, this company has recognised that people wanted a different sort of work experience. A business well-known for its hippie roots and anti-corporate philosophy, Ben and Jerry’s made a virtue out of donating 7.5 per cent of its pre-tax profits to philanthropy – an employee-led initiative. Engaging employees in such a value-driven culture has made Ben & Jerry’s into an extremely lucrative brand.

But no one company, nor a few bullet points, can truly define work-life balance today. A recent Towers Perrin survey identified more than 100 varieties of work/life programmes. Companies are utilising time-based initiatives (such as flexitime, telecommuting, job sharing and part-time work), leave-based schemes (including paid and unpaid leave for childbirth, for the care of young or sick children or for other family/personal matters), unique benefits programmes (including cafeteria-style plans, non-taxed flexible spending accounts or insurance to pay for the long-term care of oneself, elderly parents or a spouse), and dependent care programmes (including resource and referral services to help employees find childcare or elder care, childcare programs that are on-site or nearby, and employee discounts or vouchers to help pay for the cost of care). The

complete list also includes programmes that include counselling and wellness initiatives as well as personal convenience initiatives (such as concierge services, lactation rooms, nap rooms, and food shopping and dinner preparation services).

More than this, it should never be forgotten that the most important variable in work/life balance is the nature of the job itself. People want jobs with autonomy, flexibility, meaning, managerial support as well as a chance for advancement. All the perks and schemes in the world won't enhance job satisfaction or motivate people to perform if the jobs themselves are lacking these characteristics.

Validation

So does work-life balance work – or is it rather a sop to those employees who want the world to stop going so fast? In the UK there has been little doubt that work-life balance policies have had a positive impact. British Telecom (BT), for instance, used work-life balance both to draw more women into the workforce and to address mid-career breaks and dropouts among women. According to BT's statistics, a staggering 98 per cent of women returned to work after maternity leave following the introduction of work-life balance policies, saving the organisation an estimated £3 million in recruitment and induction.

Work-life balance strategies have also been successfully recorded at Eli Lilly, one of the UK's top pharmaceutical companies. The company's inclusive work-life programme was launched in May 1996 and focuses on flexible working practices and breaks from work. Flexible working patterns included job shares, home working, part-time working, reduced hours, staggered hours (different start and finish times) and term-time working. Leave options include V-time (voluntary time off for a short period), phased return to work after sickness or maternity leave, career breaks, sabbaticals, paternity leave, maternity leave, and adoption leave. According to the company, all of this has helped it to attract and retain high calibre recruits, reduce recruitment costs, improve employee morale and maintain a competitive edge.

The global giant Unilever is another organisation that provides flexible working options, leave options and employee support. And it, too, points to a higher retention of skilled staff, greater employee satisfaction, enhanced customer satisfaction and improved productivity as benefits from this strategy.

Dissemination

More than likely, work-life balance will grow in importance in the years to come. Unlike some other innovations, work-life balance isn't owned by one corporation or even by one guru. It is already a catch-all term for many different initiatives and is still growing. New offshoots such as wellness programmes and vitality initiatives prove that this is a dynamic field – and it is spreading fast.

Employees seem to instinctively know from direct experience that the world of work is changing. In a 24/7 society, they know their customers expect service round-the-clock. And they also know that they have to juggle their home responsibilities while meeting customer expectations. Work-life balance programmes help people to deal with the resulting pressures.

Employers know this too. Indeed, there is a raft of legal provisions governing work-life balance being driven by the European Union. These provisions include annual leave, working time, time off for dependent care, the right to flexible working, maternity and paternity leave and a range of others. And what the individual employee wants and the employer is set to deliver need not be in opposition. Nobody would argue against the aim of having a highly motivated workforce and productive organisations – the only issue is what work-life balance programmes best deliver on this objective.

Further reading

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