

Work-Life Balance: Strategies For The Future At Work

Work-Life Balance v Work-Life Integration

Work-life balance (WLB) is a concept that has historically encouraged employees within organisations to maintain a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives. It enables them to divide their time based on priorities and maintaining healthy relationships by devoting the necessary time to both family, community and self, as well as their jobs and careers, business travel etc.

Maintaining a healthy work-life balance helps to reduce stress and prevent burnout in the workplace. Chronic stress has now become one of the most common health issues in the workplace, leading to increased absenteeism and presenteeism, having a significant impact on productivity and performance in the workplace. Apart from this, it leads to further physical and mental health issues (depression, anxiety, insomnia) with an additional burden on the individual, his/her family/community and the company.

For the organisation, optimal work-life balance of employees leads to increased motivation, higher productivity and better staff retention and ultimately reduced healthcare costs; according to HBR, the psychological and physical problems of burned-out employees cost around \$125 to \$190 billion a year in healthcare spend in the United States alone.

It is important to stress that WLB does not mean an equal balance between all aspects of life, it is something that is fluid and will vary over time for everyone.

The World of Work is Changing

It has been projected that by 2025, the millennial generation will comprise up to 75% of the workforce and the way we work no longer limits us to a 9 to 5 working day. Advances in technology and being connected 24/7 has essentially erased the separation between work and personal life away from work. Boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred with many companies now allowing flexitime and telecommuting to try and maintain overall wellbeing and productivity.

Instead of using the term work-life balance, some protagonists are now preferring the term work-life integration that brings all the aspects of one's life under one roof and thereby striving for overall fulfillment of life goals, which they believe leads to a happier workforce.

The reality today is, that whichever term we use, work will invariably overlap with your personal life, and life will interrupt work, and maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance is becoming increasingly tricky for many workers.

I deeply resent how we've infantilised the workplace. How we feel we have to apologise for having lives. That we don't trust adults to make the right decisions. How constant connectivity/availability (or even the perception of it) has become a valued skill.

Ian Sohn, CEO of Wunderman on LinkedIn

The challenge is finding a way to effectively balance or integrate the two, understanding that this is not a one-size-fits-all. The modern workforce has multiple diverse dimensions and is comprised of employees at different life and career stages and from varying cultural backgrounds. All these factors need to be taken into consideration when developing a work-life balance strategy for your organisation.

Additionally, with increased globalisation and companies working cross-border in a multitude of regions and countries, the work-life balance issues become even more challenging, both in terms of global travel and expatriation, thus further compounding the problems that may already exist in both the private and professional lives of employees. One should also recognise that, according to some studies, up to 30% of the expatriate workforce now consists of singles (not married or partnered) and an increasing number of women, whereas most of the research done on WLB has historically been on families, with the male partner being the employee. These single and childless individuals, as well as dual income families, may face significant additional challenges in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Organisations and leaders should understand and accommodate the unique needs of employees related to work-life balance. Going forward, strategies must address not only the workforce diversity but individual preferences as well, for them to be meaningful and effective. It is essential for employers to grasp what motivates their workforce and to design programmes that will meet the needs of employees.

Some Simple Strategies To Get Started

- **Get input from your workforce**
WLB strategies must be relevant and responsive to the needs of all employees in order to be successful. Surveys, focus-groups and scheduled meetings can all be used to discuss ideas and priorities to develop a framework for specific programmes. Data collection should be across the entire spectrum of the organisation to ensure that diverse groups are not overlooked.
- **Establish WLB policies**
Unless work-life balance strategies are

clearly outlined, any differences in the expectations of the employees can lead to dissatisfaction with disgruntled employees who may feel that they are receiving 'less' than others. These policies should be living documents and adapted with any changing circumstances within the organisation. Policies and their benefits should be clearly communicated to employees, along with any variations or changes.

- **Get buy-in and lead by example**

Unless one has buy-in from the C-suite, any WLB or wellbeing programmes will be set for failure, as they need to believe that this is for the benefit of all employees and that no-one is a superhero and capable of doing without a balanced life. A first step is understanding that lack of work-life balance can significantly impact performance and productivity of all employees, leading to both physical and mental illness, with increased absenteeism and presenteeism. They should also lead by example and 'walk the talk', demonstrating their commitment to finding balance in their own lives; the behaviours of the company's leaders can impact significantly on how employees view and deal with sustainable WLB and this may be exacerbated in certain cultures, such as in Japan and South Korea.

- **Develop a supportive culture within the organisation**

The key for success is developing a workplace culture that is based on trust and the personal responsibility of employees. It is not necessarily about the office hours and/or face-time, but rather about output. Long hours do not necessarily mean higher productivity and in fact this can be counterproductive leading to additional stress. Employees should also communicate their specific work-life needs and be held accountable for their performance, irrespective of the work environment.

- **Provide the necessary tools, technology and training**

In order to get work done effectively, especially with increases in flexitime and telecommuting, up-to-date software and technology tools are imperative to reduce working hours and to improve productivity. No matter how good the tools, if the employees are not trained to use them, it can lead to frustration and loss in performance.

- **Establish boundaries**

Whatever style of working is chosen for/by an individual, it is essential for both the employer and the employee to establish boundaries and to implement these effectively. In a world where the boundaries between work and personal life are becoming more blurred, it is becoming

increasingly important to set suitable parameters. It may not necessarily be about flexible working hours, promoting leave and regular breaks, telecommuting or innovative working and quiet spaces, but rather how the boundaries are being set to optimally implement these best practices. A recent study of German workers found that some employees, and in particular men, who telecommute, actually work longer hours than those in regular full-time office employment.

- **Disconnect to connect**

This could comprise part of establishing boundaries but warrants special mention, particularly with the current evidence related to internet addiction. Whether at work or in your personal life, get into the habit of disconnecting from work, technology and social media to be fully present in the moment - whether it is at work, during your 'me-time' or when spending time with family, friends and your community. Both the organisation and the employee should work on innovative ways to establish better WLB practices, such as turning off servers or notifications between certain hours or on weekends, mobile phone regimens in meetings and at home, etc.

- **Don't work in silos**

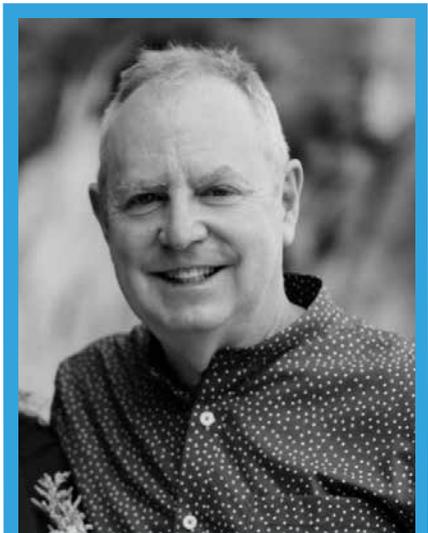
Finally, it is the responsibility of all executives in the leadership team to develop and implement the best WLB strategies and practices, together with the input of their workforce. Cross-pollination and communication between different functions makes implementation a lot easier, especially when taking other policies that may have an impact on WLB into consideration. One function is required to take ownership and the responsibility for keeping the WLB policies and implementation alive, by using a fully integrated approach – think HR, global mobility, compensation and benefits, OHS&E, medical department, finance, and IT. Each plays an essential role in providing best in class services.

Conclusion

The attitudes around work-life balance in the modern world of work will continue to evolve rapidly with cultural, generational, technological and economic changes. Therefore, it is important for leaders to be flexible and to update or revitalise their workplace culture to constantly meet the needs of their organisation and those of their employees.

Whilst maximising employee productivity and performance is the ultimate goal of most organisations, this cannot be achieved unless leaders ensure that their employees have quality time outside of work, yet are fully engaged and motivated in their careers.

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Paul is a South African trained medical practitioner with more than 30 years of international experience in occupational health and wellbeing, particularly in expatriate populations. He has a strong interest in how health and wellbeing impact productivity and performance. He has worked together with many companies on WLB and other areas related to stress and wellbeing. If you would like to discuss any points mentioned in this article or other expatriate issues related to health and wellbeing, please contact Paul at paul.vandewalle@gmail.com