

## An Unfashionably Common Sense Approach to Work-Life Balance

The concept of work-life balance is built around a naïve view of how companies and employees work. Much of what we read and hear on the topic is little more than well-meaning platitudes, with suggestions for improving work-life balance often revolving around such simplistic measures as giving people more time off. This only attacks the problem at a superficial level.

We all know work-life balance is important, but no one seems clear about what that means in practice for company policies and managers who are expected to facilitate it for their staff. This is a particular issue for large companies.

There is also a lot of talk about the supposed benefits to employers of supporting greater work-life balance for staff, but frankly it's hard to see the business case for what is most commonly referred to as work-life balance strategies.

Work-life balance seems to mean any or all of the following

- └ Flexibility around hours
- └ On-site counselling
- └ Minimum of 4 weeks leave
- └ Giving staff time off if they need it
- └ Social activities

The theoretical pay-back for companies is that staff will be happier and therefore more productive if they work less.

Our point of view is that this is the wrong way around. For a start, the term “work-life balance” is loaded: it suggests that work is not part of life. The assumption seems to be that work is stressful and the way to reduce that stress is to have more time not working.

Second, most prescriptions around “work-life balance” involve the company giving the employee things like more time off, regular health check-ups and social activities. From a commercial perspective, the argument is that in return, grateful employees will stay with the company longer because they're grateful and perform better because they've got more energy and less stress.

The retention proposition suggests that the current interest in work-life balance might have more to do with a tight labour market and competition for talent than a genuine interest in happier employees. We also know that “perks” get quickly impounded into peoples' expectations. Most people, having achieved a bonus in one year, have an expectation that they'll get it next year for the same (or lower) performance levels.

The argument that people who are less stressed will be more effective seems sound, but is it really a net benefit – ie, will the cost of the time off and the other measures *really* be offset by higher productivity?

Finally, there is an assumption that balance is an issue for everyone. However, many people are more than capable of compartmentalising their lives for themselves. The problem with universal measures is that the company ends up paying to meet non-existent needs.

### A different perspective

We should simply talk about balanced lives. In our ideal world, we enjoy what we do when we're at work and when we're not. Because we are getting as much satisfaction as we can from both, we feel challenged but not stressed.

What does this mean in practice? In a recent edition of the New Zealand Herald there was an article on how British couples are finding that the stress of work was depriving them of quality time at home and putting pressure on their relationships. On the next page was an article on an American study that found that as much as 40% of peoples' time at work was wasted on administration and non-productive activities.

Join the dots: much of the stress at work is caused by having a sense of too much to do, and 40% of what we have to do is either irrelevant or low value. We take that stress home. We're too tired to enjoy our time away from work, and because we don't relax properly, we go back to work with a low resistance to stress. It's a vicious circle.

To see what companies can do about this, let's reverse the scenario and create a virtuous circle.

- When we're at work we do things we are good at and that have some value.
- We finish the week with a sense of satisfaction of a job well done, that we did things that were challenging but not outside our abilities.
- At home we feel positive about ourselves and look forward to leisure activities, doing the things we like to do with the people we like to be with.
- In turn, we come to work refreshed and ready to engage in another good day's work.

It sounds idealistic, but the only question is whether it is possible to achieve this for at least some staff. If the answer is yes, then it's worth doing, and not only because of the desire to help employees achieve greater balance in their lives.

Companies which manage to create and maintain this kind of environment also create a positive and dynamic culture which forms the foundation for any specific culture the organisation may be striving for (eg innovative, customer-focused etc). The key feature of companies with great cultures is that, regardless of the specific nature of the organisation, employees are fully *engaged* when they are at work.

To achieve this virtuous circle of culture, balance and performance, companies have to

- 7 Identify peoples' strengths and assign them to roles that match their abilities (preferably with some stretch). Recent research indicates that the gain from leveraging peoples' strengths is significantly greater than trying to correct their weaknesses
- 7 Reduce the level of low value activities by either dispensing with or finding other ways to perform those activities (assuming they are necessary, which is not always the case). Doing work that is either unnecessary or unvalued is demoralising for anyone
- 7 Help them identify leisure pursuits and activities that are fulfilling and satisfying rather than simply killing the time between knocking off and clocking on. There is a "cross-training" effect: if people's personal lives are richer, they tend to have a healthier attitude in general which carries over into their work lives. Couch potatoes at home tend to carry the attitude over to work, but then so do people who have active personal lives that involve some form of personal challenge and achievement

## Making It Happen

Most of the behaviours in the vicious circle described above are habitual. Like most habits, we're seldom aware of them, and to replace them with more constructive habits we first have to be conscious of the old habits, and then deliberately replace them.

This is a greater challenge than simply giving people time off or allowing greater flexibility in working hours (and of course that may well be part of the solution). To a large degree it has to be driven from the floor. Staff are in the best position to identify their own strengths, the low value activities they have to engage in and of course their own leisure preferences.

A balance programme therefore has to create a genuine dialogue with staff. In my experience with business owners, the best way to frame this conversation is in the form of setting goals. This encourages people to step back and focus on the important areas of their life but also gives an opportunity to discuss techniques.

If the conversation stops there, however, there will be no momentum for change. The initial conversations, and the new behaviours identified, have to be followed up so that they get locked in as habits.

As responsible employers, most of us want to address the issue of work-life balance. Thought about this way, it is an opportunity to create some substantive benefit to both employee and employer. For the employee there is a greater level of active enjoyment of both work and play. The employer gains more focused, effective and productive staff.

Of course the challenge in creating the substance is the time and thought it takes to design an appropriate programme, implement it and manage the all-important follow up. That's the real investment companies need to consider – and it requires more thought than your average compliance programme. On the other hand, the benefits are potentially much greater as well.

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