

Work / Life Balance

How to do it; and do it well

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“Most large organizations invest in developing employees’ skills, knowledge, and competence. Very few help build and sustain their capacity – their energy – which is typically taken for granted.”¹

From the employees’ perspective, work/life effectiveness is meeting and/or excelling in work commitments, personal responsibilities and personal enjoyments. Work/life from the employer perspective is creating an organizational culture where employees focus on their jobs and achieve competitive success honoring the demands and engaging in the joys of their personal life.² Over the last couple of decades, there has been a significant increase in the amount of time people are spending at work due to increase in technologies, and intense and competitive work environments. Many employees are experiencing burnout due to overwork and are accumulating great amounts of stress. In addition, employees are finding themselves multi-tasking, having no “down” time and blurred work/life boundaries. Many are also trying to juggle the demands of career and personal life and are having a hard time achieving balance.

At the core of an effective work/life balance definition are two key concepts that are relevant to each of us: daily achievement and enjoyment. Many employers are realizing the importance of offering services that help in achieving the work/life balance. Employers are now treating their employees like material assets, and are creating an environment that ensures optimal functional renewal to achieve maximum performance and productivity.

Work/Life Balance Practices

There are a variety of things that a company can implement to help employees achieve work/life balance. A company really needs to look at what their employees want. If a company implements the wrong activities employees will not use the benefits. Thus the company will have wasted resources on benefits that will not be used.

One of the benefits companies, regardless of size, can implement is a flexible work week. This can be done in a variety of ways. One way is either a 9*80 or a 4*10 work week. The 9*80 is an employee works 9 hours a day Monday through Friday and 8 hours on Friday. The next week, they work 9 hours Monday through Friday and have that Friday off, working 80 hours in 9 days. Another flexible work week option is allowing employees to establish their own schedule. So a company will not have “business hours”. This allows employees to either start earlier or later. This can help them achieve balance by enabling the

¹ Schwartz and McCarthy

² Work/Life Balance: Challenges and Solutions

employee to set their working hours. Also, companies can set standard maximum hours allowed to work in one week, thereby ensuring that employees take time off to refresh themselves.

Companies can also help employees run their errands on their breaks by offering on-site oil changes, car washes, dry cleaners, hair cuts, etc. This will reduce the amount of time their employees need to spend running errands on their off hours. This will allow employees to focus on enjoying their time off.

Companies can have a wellness program. There are a variety of ways a company can implement this. By having onsite cafeterias, at affordable prices, employees might be less inclined to drive places to eat. These cafeterias can offer a healthy alternative to eating fast food. Companies can also have onsite gym facilities with classes such as spinning, yoga, personal training, etc. If a company does not have the resources to install a gym, they can offer discounts to gyms. Onsite massages can help employees relax and de-stress during their breaks. Sometimes a 15 minute massage can do wonders to rejuvenate a person. Companies can have onsite break activities, such as a ping pong table in the break room. They can also offer quiet rooms. Sometimes an employee just needs a quick time out to regroup. Also, if they offer mothers nursing rooms, working mothers can still feel like they can continue to feed their child as they see fit. All of these things will help keep an employee healthy both in body and mind, while making it convenient for them to adopt these new activities into their lifestyles.

Companies can also offer day care or doggie day care. This can help employees by having their young children close by and they can go to the day care and have lunch with their children. By offering doggie day care, employees can help their dogs to maintain a healthy active life without feeling guilty if they can't take their dogs to the dog park to run around free.

There are so many different things a company can offer that it would be unwise for a company to not implement any work/life balance benefits. All companies regardless of size and financial standing can implement some work/life balance benefits.

Implementation

Good planning is the key to a successful implementation. There are several things to keep in mind for companies who are taking on the task of work/life balance implementation. Given limited resources to invest in work/life balance, companies should be sure to invest in programs that meet the needs of their employees and fit into the corporate culture. Companies should be sure to advertise their benefits on their intranet or on fliers around the office. It would also be wise to praise those who are participating in activities that promote work/life balance. For example, a company might highlight the company softball team in the monthly newsletter. This will encourage others to participate in these activities and will also help to advertise the various offerings.

Managers must be willing to promote the activities that the company offers. If work/life balance benefits are offered but no one takes advantage of them, they are wasted efforts. Often, work/life balance benefits are not used because employees feel that their manager does not support them in utilizing these activities. For example, ping pong tables were put into one of our companies' facilities. Even though these were meant to be a fun break, the people who use them feel as though they are being looked down upon for breaking to play ping pong. In addition, given the commitment a company must make to supporting work/life balance, appropriate selection of managers is crucial. Hiring managers must be sure to hire in people whose attitudes and values support work/life balance. It only takes one manager that does not support the culture to affect many people within the organization.

One helpful idea that we suggest is a conference for managers on work/life balance. This will allow brainstorming on what is working and not working within the organization to promote work/life balance. If a company has a 9/80 schedule and employees are working all of their off-Fridays, the company ought to look at a more feasible way to provide work/life balance. This conference will also reinforce to these managers the commitment the organization has to providing work/life balance to its employees. It will keep the issue of work/life balance at the forefront of the managers' minds in their day to day interactions with employees.

Differences to Keep in Mind

There are many companies that exist in the world today and each one differs by industry, size, business structure, company culture and many more elements. There are times when companies seemingly similar may require dramatically different implementations when it comes to incorporating the work/life balance practices. Even before the implementation phase, it becomes exceedingly important to dig deep into the company's internal processes, unwritten culture and management styles. This learning phase will play a key role in determining a customized approach for each client. There are, however, general principles that can be applied to organizations.

Smaller companies on average tend to be flatter, larger companies tend to be more hierarchical but can fit into both of the size categories.

- **In bigger companies** it may be harder to implement change because more people are affected by the changes. In general, drastic changes may be easier to implement in smaller companies. It becomes very important to have buy-in from upper management before communicating changes to the employees. This will be easier in a flatter organization where little red tape exists.
- **Smaller companies:** while it may be easier to have buy-in from management and employees (smaller group to work with), sometimes financial resources can be scarcer than those in a bigger company.

Implementation and practices may have to do more with flexible work weeks/hours, rather than costly onsite benefits such as a gym or cafeteria.

In addition to the elements mentioned above, we need to keep in mind the following differences:

- **Start ups:** while these companies tend to be more modern in the way that employee work (working remotely is more common than in traditional companies) it could be difficult to incorporate work/life balance practice in the start-up environment. Knowing that time is a even more of a precious resource at these types of companies , management needs to identify what aspects of work/life balance they can work with, such as: Learning organization, onsite facilities, assistance such as day care, travel accommodations, events for employees and their families, new and cutting edge technology to allow employees work remotely and on their own time
- **Traditional companies:** while time is easier to manage at these types of companies, other elements such as working remotely, flexible work week hours are more difficult to manage. Identify what aspects of work/life balance fit better here (also keep in mind that more likely to be a larger company)

Risks

With any change that companies face, no matter how small or large and no matter how positive or negative, there are issues that can arise if the implementation is not thought-out or relevant to the individual company. Some of the risks include:

- **Managers not buying-in from the start or buying-in but not implementing:** in all companies it is crucial to have upper management buy-in for an implementation. Even after management has signed-off on a change towards a more work/life balanced environment, they must be the number one executors and advocates of this change. If the practice of flexible work hours, shorter work weeks and more vacation time is promoted on paper only but executives are working 16-hour day, it is likely that other employees will do the same.
- **Employees not buying in:** for majority of us, it is our human tendency to be fearful and to the best of our efforts to avoid change. Even when changes are seemingly beneficial, employees might be fearful, a very important issue that needs to be addressed.
- **Poorly implemented or irrelevant program:** no matter how great an idea can be on paper, it must be relevant to each specific organization. An initial step for management will be to research what is important to employees at each company – their values, preferences, needs, likes, dislikes.
- **What not to do:** unfortunately, many companies that have commendable work/life balance programs in place also have a company culture that supports undesirable behavior. These companies have a tendency to schedule meetings over lunch, last-minute business trips, and have

the expectation of employees working excessive hours and/or weekends. Of course there are times when there is a legitimate business need to partake in such practices but they should be the exception rather than the rule.

Metrics

Having good metrics is important to measuring success as without them it is difficult to determine how well or how poorly a change has been implemented. Some of the metrics can include:

- **Reduction in absenteeism:** if employees are given sufficient down-time, they will likely benefit from the reduction of stress. This can be through spending time outside of work with family, friends or just having time alone. It is estimated that U.S. industry loses an estimated 280 million workdays a year through absenteeism due solely to stress.
- **Greater job satisfaction:** similarly, if an employee feels like they are not spending all of their energy at work, they will likely appreciate their job more as a part of their life rather than all of their life. If they feel their high demanding job is requiring that they continually make personal sacrifices, they may come to resent their employer. Having sufficient time 'off-duty' will allow employees more time to appreciate and enjoy the opportunities their salaries provide them – whether that is now having the time to take a vacation with their family or spending quality time in the home they pay the monthly mortgage for. Job satisfaction can be measured by a simple employee survey that can be conducted pre- and post-implementation of the work/life balance program.
- **Increased productivity:** two common ways people measure office “productivity” and job dedication is how much gets done in a particular day and how many hours a person puts in every day. Some companies value employees who put in 12- to 16- hour work days, regardless of how much they actually do during that long day. Employers who positively reinforce long hours are doing themselves a disservice. If an employee feels guilty leaving the office at a reasonable time, they will not have any sense of urgency to get things done because they know they will be there all night. On the contrary, if an employee knows all day that they will likely be out the door at 5:00, they will carefully manage their time during the day and perhaps spend less time chatting at the water cooler, surfing the internet, making personal phone calls or sending personal e-mails. One way to measure this is to understand how many initiatives had to be postponed after the implementation of the work/life balance program. This number will likely be much lower than employers think because allowing employees to have adequate down-time will result in them being much more refreshed and able to focus during their working hours.