

BPIR Management Brief : Issue 1 - Work/Life Balance

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Welcome to the first issue of the BPIR.com Management Brief that provides short, easily digestible research summaries based on specific topics or tools. Summaries include comments from experts, case examples, and survey analyses. Topics for the briefs are based on those submitted as requests through our members' Research Request Service. Read and absorb, then pass on to your staff/colleagues to do the same.

Work/Life Practices - definition

Work/life practices are those that help employees juggle their responsibilities at work with those outside of work.

The stage

It is now accepted that family preoccupations can cause stress, absenteeism from work, adversely affect staff performance, and lead to resignations. Just as worryingly, staff who stoically attend work even when suffering can impact productivity many-fold more than as if they were absent - what some call 'presenteeism'. It is a worldwide problem that employers can ill afford to ignore. The demands of work and family can be balanced however - but only if the right kind of support is firmly in place. When work and home pressures conflict, and no support is in place, both work and family can suffer. The question is: What are businesses supposed to do about it? The answer in many companies has been to use practices and/or programmes that make it easier for employees to cope with their conflicting work and home life commitments.

Expert Opinion

Within organisations and on the home front, the challenge of achieving a balance between work and life is becoming an increasingly important issue. In many organisations the need for action to be taken on work/life issues has resulted from the identification that:

- They require continuously productive, motivated, and loyal employees;
- Employees are becoming increasingly concerned with the balance between their work roles and identities, and their leisure, family and community time;
- Employees are dissatisfied with current arrangements - as identified through staff satisfaction surveys and performance appraisal meetings;
- Employee demographics are changing - more women are entering the workforce and increasingly staff are having to juggle family responsibilities with those of work e.g. single parents, those with aging or sick relatives;
- The costs of replacing staff are significant (and increasing) - e.g. the costs of recruitment, training, lower performance while a new recruit is being brought up to speed, temporary cover etc.;
- Workers are becoming more educated, mobile, and willing to change jobs if their needs are not being met;
- There are skill and knowledge shortages in many industries that are becoming increasingly difficult to replace;
- Legislation changes are requiring organisations to become more flexible in the way that employees are working.

Vancouver based Martha Frase-Blunt (2001) identifies that many employees, in their concern for their work, only take a 'busman's holiday' - doing on their days off, or in vacation time, what they would do at work. Frase-Blunt cites studies that show workers take mobile phones, laptop computers, and beepers home over the weekends and on holidays. Calling into work to check progress, and accessing voicemail and e-mail were also shown to be common practices. Jill Casner-Lotto of the Work in America Institute believes that "...while today's communications devices are a boon to flexibility, freedom and enhanced sharing of information, they also undermine the work/life balance". The Society for Human Resource Management's HR Content Expert, Nancy Lockwood (2003), also cites a recent study that "...reveals that employees are often pre-occupied with work when not working, and when in the company of family and loved ones experience an inability to be meaningfully engaged in non-work spheres".

With concern over the marked and comparatively low UK employee productivity levels, the UK government has recognised the problems connected with trends of working long hours. In March 2000 a five year programme was launched by the Department of Trade and Industry focusing on tackling the long hours culture of the country, targeting sectors with acute work/life balance problems and providing support and guidance to both employers and workers. In the UK changes to the Employment Act 2002 have also introduced as a statutory duty, that an employer must consider seriously any requests for flexible working hours made by parents of young or disabled children.

Research indicates that work/life practices enable people to:

1. Enter and remain in the labour force;
2. Be at work on time, concentrate more, and be productive
3. Be less stressed;
4. Take less time off.

Adopting work/life initiatives can enable employees to better manage their life responsibilities, and as a result, be more focused and productive at work. In many organisations such practices have been embedded through the introduction of comprehensive 'benefits' programmes or policies.

Research evidence further suggests that significant business-critical benefits can be achieved through the introduction of such practices. These include:

1. Improvements in manning levels and productivity;
2. Reduced absenteeism and taking of paid and unpaid leave;
3. Increased employee satisfaction;
4. A more open-minded organisational culture in which the interests of both the employee and the company are protected;
5. An enhanced reputation within the community that helps attract new staff, and enhances both public and community relations.

While many organisations have programmes and policies in place, many see their role as facilitating flexibility by offering options that allow employees to organise their own solutions based on their own individual needs. The options that have been introduced include:

- Flexible work arrangements that provide the opportunity for greater elasticity in determining when, where, or how work is done e.g. flexitime, job sharing, shift swapping, staggered work hours, telecommuting; compressed work weeks, and self-rostering
- Arrangements that facilitate childcare e.g. financial assistance with off-site care, child care facilities on-site, term-time working and child

- care leave during school holidays (such as reduced hours or temporarily stopping work), and phased return to work after maternity leave;
- Arrangements that facilitate care of ill or dependent family members e.g. family leave, counseling assistance and other family-support information or assistance, flexible work arrangements, career breaks, and sabbaticals;
- Employee reciprocation and buddy arrangements that allow employees to take a true full break from work while on vacation e.g. other staff volunteer or are seconded to take responsibility for answering queries, checking voice and e-mails, and handling difficulties that may arise while another staff member is on holiday.

In the UK, Maureen Moody (1999) notes that Faberge, a Leeds-based cosmetic company, has a 'child minder' scheme that has resulted in "...a more motivated, productive workforce..." and that "The company's reputation is enhanced and that helps us attract new staff". Moody also noted the UK company Eli Lilly as having gained useful spin-offs from their family-friendliness programme, which includes job-sharing, term-time working, and phased returns to work after maternity leave.

Stephen Bevan (2003), deputy director of research at The Work Foundation, says that flexible hours are a good way of keeping the best employees. In a recent survey by The Work Foundation, 400 personnel specialists were questioned, 66 per cent claimed flexible working helped to reduce absenteeism. Bevan also concludes that "During the next 10 to 15 years, it will be fundamental to employers retaining their best staff."

How to make your Work/Life Programme work

Any company that plans to implement work/life initiatives needs to do so in a tailored fashion as each has different needs, resources, and issues. However, the following guidance will assist in determining what must be considered when putting a programme together.

Parents At Work, a UK-based charity organisation, identifies three prerequisites for making a work/life programme work. These are:

1. Commitment at the Director/CEO level of a company;
2. A clear understanding of the local community within which the company operates; and
3. An existing commitment to equal opportunities.

In addition, both Moody and Frase-Blunt, identify the need to:

- Clearly determine what is needed (often through the use of staff satisfaction surveys);

- Calculate the business benefits and costs of likely work/life initiatives;
- Have a champion and role model for the programme,
- Develop a company culture that shows respect for privacy and free time, a corporate custom of leaving work at work, and policies and practices that allow this to occur

In discussing the establishment of work/life initiatives Lockwood stresses the importance of:

- Establishing if the organisation's culture is ready to support work life initiatives e.g. through surveys or focus groups;
- Obtaining senior management support;
- Reviewing and aligning human resource strategies regarding work/life initiatives with the mission of the company.
- Determining the needs of employees and the life cycle considerations that need to be taken into account e.g. care of children or elders, career aspirations;
- Ensuring equitability and fairness by determining the purpose of the programme and who it is to serve;
- Packaging and communicating clearly any new initiatives, or repackaging and re-communicating existing programmes to ensure all staff are aware of what is available;
- Measuring the return on investment of work/life initiatives using both quantitative and qualitative means.

Nancy Pekala (2001), managing editor of the Journal of Property Management, highlights in her article on retention strategies, the importance of understanding your employee base. She states "...employees must be regarded as individuals when structuring retention programmes as each employee is motivated by different factors which need to be addressed", and that "one-size-fits-all no longer applies". This theme is also highlighted by Sandra Burud, principal of Bright Horizons Family Solutions who, cited by Lockwood, states that, "Life cycles are another consideration. People need different things at different times in their lives".

To measure success companies used a variety of sources, the most frequent being employee surveys at 61%, anecdotal information 56%, changes in turnover 36%, and changes in absenteeism 21%. Lockwood suggests that the best place to start measuring is to consider 5 key areas:

1. Employee time saved;
2. Employee retention;
3. Increased motivation and productivity,
4. Absenteeism; and
5. Decreased health care costs and stress-related illnesses.

Management Today's last work/life survey in 2001 indicates that UK organisations have raised their awareness of the importance of 'balance', but most still had a long way to go in moving from the theory of work/life balance to workable organisational practices. Maureen Rice (2002) notes that "The results show that there's no such thing as work/life balance, but lots of different work/life balances, with different parts of the jigsaw taking on greater importance at different touch-points in our working lives: our age, our profession, our seniority at work and our personal circumstances all affect our perceptions of what is stressful and what makes a healthy balance" As such, it seems vital, when developing a work/life programme to ask employees what their needs are, to think of creative solutions, and to balance these needs with the needs, outputs, and mission of the organisation.

Lastly, Theo Blackwell, (2003), consultant at the Work Foundation, says it is vital to get the support of the line manager in any a work/life initiative and that management resistance, especially in larger organisations, is the most common hurdle due to the perceived practical impact on this area of responsibility. He also stresses the importance of a senior leader champion, achieving a culture shift rather than target specific employee groups, and, in the early stages especially, a focus on changing attitudes to using work/life programmes rather than getting the exact range and level of benefits right. Cost shouldn't be an inhibiting factor says Blackwell, as the cost of not doing anything are substantial, and the longer-term knock-on financial benefits alone will impact a number of organisational areas such as training, recruitment because of the impact work/life initiatives have on retention.

Other research data:

Research surveys relating to work/life balance are increasing in frequency and they clearly support the benefits to both employers and employees of such programmes. The 2002 Xylo Report, a national survey on work/life issues in the USA, is conducted six times yearly and used by Fortune 500 and other leading companies to consider retention issues and retain employees. The January 2002 survey received responses from 1,003 adults over the age of 18. The data revealed that:

1. 94% felt that time away from work made them better employees;
2. 70% reported that time away from work made them feel a lot more productive - an increase from 65% in 2001;
3. Single people were more likely than married people to say that time off makes them a lot more productive (78% vs. 66%);

4. 79% of respondents under 35 years of age reported that vacation time made them a lot more productive, compared to less than 67% of respondents between ages 35 to 54;
5. Single people were 18% more likely to report that time off makes them a lot more productive (78% vs. 60% for married people);
6. 72% of women respondents reported that vacations made them a lot more productive, an 11% increase from 2001.

The 2001 survey of USA Work/Life Programme Managers by the Alliance of Work/Life Professionals and Work/Life Today revealed that Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) and flexible schedules were the most provided benefits with EAPs and childcare referrals the most used. The survey reported a rise in the use of work-life benefits with 56% of employees taking advantage of work/life benefits when offered (an increase of 9% since 1999). 45% of respondents reported an increase in financial resources applied to work/life programmes and only 8% reported a decrease in resources. Key points from this research:

Most popular programmes offered

1. EAP Services offered by 84% of organisations in 2001, up from 77% in 1999
2. Flexible working schedules 83% up from 77%
3. Tuition assistance 71% up from 70%
4. Telecommuting 64% down from 70%
5. Child care referrals 75% down from 83%
6. Elder care referrals 74% down from 76%



Benefits were stated as:

1. Attracting and retaining employees 70%;
2. Increasing employee effectiveness 56%;
3. Improving organisational effectiveness and reputation 48%;
4. Improving business results 44%.

In the UK in 2003, The Work foundation, a non-profit organisation committed to excellence in the managing of people, carried out a survey on Work/Life Balance across over 5,000 HR specialists. Respondents indicated that Work/Life Balance policies are more likely to be found in the service and IT industries, and least likely in manufacturing. Key points from this research:

Most popular programmes offered:

1. Provision of part-time working (90%)
2. Family/emergency leave (85%)
3. General unpaid leave (78%)



Benefits were stated as:

1. Improved employee commitment/motivation (46%)
2. Higher retention rates (40%)
3. Improved employee relations (37%)

Example cases:

Learn valuable lessons from these organisations:



- Family-friendly programme improves workplace satisfaction

In 1995, this healthcare company conducted an employee satisfaction survey and polled 30,000 employees worldwide. Their findings indicated that only 30 per cent of respondents felt able to balance work and personal commitments. The company's work/life programme was launched in 1996 and offers part-time and reduced hours, job-sharing, term-time working, home-working, phased return to work after maternity leave, voluntary reduced working hours, staggered hours and career breaks. The number of employees who said they could balance work and home life after the first year of the programme had risen to 48 per cent.

Midland Bank



- Family friendly approach improves employee rate of return from maternity leave

As a result of the UK's Midland Bank taking a wide approach to family friendliness in 1999 almost 85% of women returned to work after maternity leave compared with 30% in 1988. The approach included nursery facilities and a free confidential helpline for staff who cared for elderly or disabled relatives or those coping with parenting difficulties. Family leave to care for sick disabled dependants and job-sharing was also made available.

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The University of California -



Work/life programmes and benefits in a tertiary education institute

The University has a reputation as being a 'diamond among the gems' in the University of California system - a progressive workplace with a myriad of work/life benefits available to all employees. Work/life initiatives were developed by staff and consequently addressed issues that mattered to them. Managers acknowledged that the work/life initiatives were costly, but had made a difference and produced immeasurable payoffs. The university has low turnover, high morale, happy and loyal employees, and increased levels of people being attracted to work there. The work/life programmes had helped recruitment and retention, especially among those looking for things other than just salary. The benefits introduced included onsite childcare and a kindergarten, breastfeeding support, flextime, alternative work schedules, catastrophic leave assistance, broad family leave policies, onsite athletic facilities, onsite housing for faculty and staff, and job placement assistance for domestic partners.

Fel-Pro Inc



- Work/life benefits improve employee retention

In a 1998 survey at Fel-Pro, a US manufacturer and supplier of automotive gaskets and lubricants, 70% of surveyed employees stated they remained with the company because of its work/life benefits.



- Flexible working hours reduce absentee rates

In 1997 UK supermarket chainstore Asda introduced family-friendly policies such as childcare leave in the summer holidays and shift-swapping in an effort to help improve manning levels. At the time the company's absence rate was 7% and staff turnover 35%. By 1999, the rates were 4.4% and 27% respectively. Other activities that produced positive results were: school-holiday play schemes; job-sharing; teleworking; nursery facilities; family leave to care for sick disabled dependants.

Summary

Work/Life benefits are becoming a necessity as both employers and employees recognise the need to achieve a greater balance between work life and home life. For employers this has arisen from the need to maintain or improve employee retention, satisfaction, and productivity whilst ensuring employees are able to balance family commitments and responsibilities that may have an effect on work. Implementation of strategies such as flexible work arrangements, child care, and elder care assistance, and employee reciprocation programmes have business-critical results and are a pragmatic solution to work/life issues. Implementing a successful work/life programme needs solid commitment at an organisation's highest level, linkage to business strategy, an understanding of the issues employees face, and an approach capable of meeting the needs of both employers and employees. Companies that have successfully implemented such initiatives include Eli Lilly, Midland Bank, The University of California and supermarket chainstore ASDA.

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The full txt of these articles and reports can be found at www.BPIR.com.

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