

Creating a Family-Friendly Workplace (Culture Change)

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Introduction

Peoples' lives are getting busier all the time. Employees today are often juggling work and family responsibilities, demands on their time for education, exercise, community service and/or leisure and may, at times, feel dissatisfied with the quality of both their work and personal lives. Faced with the constant struggle to balance work responsibilities with personal commitments, they are looking to their workplace to provide some relief, support and practical solutions to their busy and stressful lives. Organisations who work with their employees to find and implement solutions to this dilemma will find that providing a workplace that fosters work-life balance is not without clear business benefits. (See the [business case](#) for work-life balance).

Issues

The main issues for people who report high levels of work-life conflict are:

- lack of time
- low energy levels
- stress, anxiety and guilt about not being able "to do it all"
- lack of control over their work and work arrangements
- a need for greater work and life satisfaction

When employees are "out of balance", they experience more stress and fatigue and tend to be absent from work more often due to these reasons. They have less focus while at work because they are worried about issues at home and they are also more distracted at home because work matters weigh on their minds.

The end result is that neither situation is healthy or productive; in short, it's a lose/lose situation for the employees, their families and their employer.

Solutions

As a result of a growing awareness of work-life balance issues and the impact on employees, many companies are addressing the issue by offering [programs, policies and benefits](#). These may include:

- [Flexible work arrangements](#)
 - [Telework](#) (*working from home or a remote office*)
 - [Flextime](#) (*changing the start and end times of the work day*)
 - [Job Sharing](#) (*sharing a full-time position with another employee*)
 - [Compressed Work Week](#) (*working full-time hours in fewer than five days*)
 - [Part-time](#) (*reducing the number of hours worked each day or week*)

- [Employee Assistance Programs](#)

Counseling support on a range of issues from financial to legal to personal.

- [Child and Eldercare Services](#)

Options range from on-site child-care centres to emergency or back-up child care to resource materials for new parents.

- [Health and Wellness Initiatives](#)

Programs range from health club facilities to smoking cessation initiatives to stress management workshops.

- [Leaves of Absence](#)

Regulatory leaves like maternity and jury duty as well as additional options for time away from work such as educational leave, community service leave and sabbaticals.

Challenges

The main challenge for companies offering these solutions is to put the policy into practice and to get programs utilized. Workplaces have cultures that define the value of work. For some it is long hours, for others it is being visible to their manager when working, and for others the emphasis is on output, adding value and meeting objectives.

Organizations are creating supportive workplace [cultures](#) that are family-friendly by:

1. Acknowledging and dispelling myths about work-life balance through regular communication.
2. Addressing fears and apprehension expressed by employees and managers by offering tools, training and providing communication materials and access to networks.

3. Providing a safety net; starting with pilots and test sites to gather data to build the business case and to secure buy-in from managers and executives.
4. Evaluating initiatives, communicating the results and acting upon recommendations for modifications and further enhancements.

Dispelling Myths About Work-Life Balance

As with many new policies and procedures, there are myths or assumptions about what the family-friendly workplace really means. Some of the commonly held myths and the corresponding reality checks are as follows:

- ***Family-Friendly policies are soft HR issues, mainly for women.***

Policies that increase employee health and well-being, foster employee commitment and support families, positively impact everyone (employees; men and women, customers and clients, families and communities.) In some organizations, it is women who have pushed for family-friendly policies since they are usually the primary caregivers, responsible for child care, eldercare and health care as well as primarily responsible for household management (shopping, meals, laundry, cleaning etc.) and are either major contributors to family income or the primary family breadwinner. Men and women at all levels of companies, in all stages of their career development and all stages of their life cycle are seeking flexibility to achieve a better work-life balance.

- ***Management will lose control.***

Some managers may have concerns about giving up control over their workforce by implementing supportive policies and practices, however they actually gain more control over outputs and results by giving control of time management to employees. By providing more control to their employees, managers can help establish a better working relationship. These employees, now more satisfied with their work-life balance, are more inclined to show loyalty to their manager and company. As a result, these managers will likely see a lower turnover rate in their departments.

- ***Flexibility is unfair and inequitable.***

Some managers consider that there needs to be a "one size fits all" solution to flexibility. The reality is that everyone has different needs and so the solutions will be very personal. Different people need different forms of flexibility at different points in their lives (i.e., when they have a baby or when they want to continue their education). Other people are content to work a more traditional workweek and prefer the stability and predictability of a standard work schedule. Solutions to employee needs for flexibility should be custom fits.

- ***Hours at work = results (notion of "face time")***

In a traditional workplace, managers could always see their employees and so considered them to be working and productive. With employees exploring alternate ways

to work such as telecommuting, managers may no longer see them. Some may have concerns about what employees are doing during the day if working from home. The keys to success are good trust, regular communication and clear performance targets.

- ***Only for non-managerial positions.***

This was the case when flexible work options were first introduced in the 1990's. However, as more women have moved into senior management positions and more men are juggling their careers with fatherhood, this has changed. Many companies offer their work-life balance policies to employees at all levels.

- ***Participation in family-friendly policies is a career-limiting move.***

Research studies have shown that for most people, working a flexible work arrangement does not limit their careers, although it may slow down the career path, or reduce some options. For example, if an employee reduces their work hours, they may not be willing or interested in taking a position or promotion that requires extended travel. Employees need to assess the pros, cons and career impact when deciding whether a flexible work arrangement is for them.

If however, the career impact is the result of unsupported assumptions (e.g., those who use flexible work arrangements are less committed to the company or unable to take on increased responsibility), you may need to take measures to dispel these perceptions. It is also one of the reasons, it is recommended to conduct follow-up assessments of your programs and policies. You could, for example, assess over time, the impact on promotions of those who use work-life options such as flexible work arrangements versus those in traditional work situations.

- ***Hard to measure impact on bottom line.***

Many companies now have access to solid statistics about how family-friendly policies positively impact the bottom-line. Through employee attitude surveys, focus groups and pilot tests, senior management know that employees with lower work-family conflict have less stress and anxiety about "doing it all" and are better able to focus on their jobs and their customers.

- ***It won't work for jobs with direct customer contact.***

With more companies moving towards 24/7 operations, telephone call-centres and service provided at customer's homes and offices, the need for flexibility has grown. Customers are looking for good quality service, and prefer to deal with a happy employee who is satisfied with their work.

Keys to Success

For companies looking to implement family-friendly policies, there are some steps they should take in order to ensure success.

1. Think big, but start small. [Assess your current situation](#) and set objectives. Have a big vision with realistic milestones.
2. Plan quick hits to debunk the myths and show people flexibility can work.
3. Collect stories and statistics.
4. Determine employee needs through formal and informal discussions such as surveys, focus groups and briefings.
5. Get executive attention and buy-in.
6. Ensure managers are on side and have the training and tools they need.
7. Get as many advocates and role models as possible, from all levels and areas of the organization.
8. Build networks and communities within the company so employees have a sense they are not the only ones trying to achieve a work-life balance.
9. Focus on on-going regular communication where the successes, issues and challenges are raised and addressed.
10. Monitor progress of policies and programs and evaluate regularly.
11. Keep work-life issues on the business agenda to ensure sustained interest, awareness and accountability.

Conclusion

More and more employees are looking for companies that will be supportive of their need for a healthy work-life balance. They are attracted to the companies that offer flexibility in an environment where they can have an interesting career. Companies that promote family-friendly workplaces have an edge when it comes to recruitment and retention of skilled employees.

Family-friendly policies need to "live" and not just exist on paper. Senior management need to be role models through their words and actions, and regularly evaluate whether these policies continue to meet employee needs.

Family-friendly policies are a way to support and recognize the changing needs of employees at different points in their lives and careers. They are good for business. They are good for employees. And they are good for families.

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