

Work-Life Balance - Myth or Reality

Defining Work-Life Balance

As exciting and captivating as, novel business jargons may seem, having a good grasp of some of them could be a difficult task and work-life balance is without doubt one of such jargons. If having enough understanding of it is difficult, then applying it to the work and life of a regular career man or woman is even more challenging. This is probably the reason why there are so many misconceptions on the concept of work-life balance. For instance, some believe that having a good work-life balance means that you do not have to work on evenings or weekends. Being able to get the myths out of the way is the first step towards having a favorable work-life balance and finding fulfilment in your career and life.

Put simply, work-life balance means being satisfied with and functioning properly in both work and personal roles, with minimal conflict. According to the 2003 SHRM Research Quarterly, work-life balance is a state of equilibrium in which the demands of both a person's work and personal life are equal. A definition of this nature may sometimes create even more confusion about the true meaning of work-life balance because people rarely have equal demands in their jobs and personal lives. There is no generally acceptable definition for work-life balance - it means different things to different people.

The subjective nature of work-life balance means that an employee may see it from a perspective that is quite different from that of the employer. Putting all the above into consideration, work-life balance can be better defined as the extent to which an individual is engaged in and satisfied with his/her work roles and family roles. It can therefore be seen that an individual who has a good work-life balance is one that finds satisfaction in his/her working and personal life.

Work-Life Balance - A Historical Perspective

Even though work-life initiatives were introduced into the workplace in the 1930s in America, the term was coined about five decades later. The term work-life balance was first used in the United States in 1986 but was previously in use in the United Kingdom in the 1970s. Before the Second World War, the W. K. Kellogg Company in the United States introduced four six-hour shifts to replace the traditional three-day eight-hour shifts and this initiative resulted in increased employee morale and efficiency.

Most organizations (especially those outside the United States) did not introduce work-life programmes for their employees until the 1980s and 1990s and many of such programmes focused on supporting women with child-bearing and domestic responsibilities. This trend was largely prompted by the 1977 publication of a book by Rosabeth Moss Kanter titled 'Work and Family in the United States: A Critical Review and Agenda for Research and Policy.' Since then, work-life balance has broadened in scope and received a lot of attention in the fast-paced world that we live in where workers are finding it increasingly hard to put the bits and pieces of their lives together.

In our globalized world where economic activities are taking place at an incredible pace, the effects of work-life balance will not only be seen in the lives of individuals but in the society. As time goes on, work-life balance would transcend company policies and initiatives to also encompass public policies and legislations aimed at promoting the welfare and wellbeing of the economically-active section of the population.

Work-Life Balance or Work/Life Balance

There is no generally acceptable way of writing the term, some use a hyphen to separate the words 'work' and 'life' while others use a slash. As negligible as that may seem, it is significant and represents a vital relationship between both words beyond grammatical accuracy. Judging by popular usage and appropriateness, the use of a hyphen is more fitting as it connotes finding the right balance between work and personal or family responsibilities. The use of a slash might suggest that being gratified in both our jobs and personal lives is mutually exclusive. By implication, we suffer in one aspect when we are probably doing well in the other. This negates the basic principles guiding work-life balance and demonstrates that work-life balance is a mirage or an unattainable state. It is impracticable to discard either of them because both our work and personal lives are vital. Rather than try to replace one with the other, we should strive to harmonize them for our own good.

In the 2003 SHRM Research Quarterly, the study on work-life balance conducted by Stewart Friedmann and Jeffrey Greenhaus (published in their book, Work and Family - Allies or Enemies) was discussed. This pioneering study involved more than 800 business professionals and found out that work and family, the dominant life roles for working class men and women in contemporary society, can either help or hurt each other. According to them, finding work-life balance requires that people build and maintain support structures in the environments where they live and work.

Perspectives on Work-Life Balance

In their 2003 study on the relation between work-family balance and quality of life, Jeffrey Greenhaus, Karen Collins and Jason Shaw have identified the three key features of work-life balance and they also represents the various perspectives from which the concept can be examined –

- **Time balance** - this requires that an equal amount of time is devoted to both work and family duties. Finding a time balance might not be realistic for many people especially those who work 9-to-5 jobs and must spend many hours commuting almost daily. Also, investing the same amount of time in both areas might not necessarily guarantee fulfilment.
- **Involvement balance** - this requires that an individual is equally involved in both work and family roles on a psychological level. This is a better view of work-life balance even though some may argue that they would prefer to prioritize their personal wellbeing and families over their jobs.
- **Satisfaction balance** - this requires that an individual derives the same amount of satisfaction from both work and family or personal life. This is the closest view to what an ideal work-life balance should be like because in the final analysis, people seek satisfaction and fulfilment in all areas of their lives.

These perspectives also vary from one individual to another. An employee who prioritizes family over work will most likely spend huge chunks of time with his family or be content with getting more satisfaction from family and less from work. What represents an ideal work-life balance for an individual could be a horrible situation for another. Aside from personality traits and physiological features, an individual's uniqueness is also expressed in what he/she prioritizes or places value on. Regardless of your viewpoint on work-life balance, the fact remains that we all want to achieve it irrespective of what we do, who we work for and how we work. Being satisfied is the goal of work-life balance and as subjective as this may seem, an individual knows when he/she has gotten there.

Work-Life Balance or Work-Life Integration

Modern technology has radically revolutionized the way we live and work. It is not uncommon these days to find people replying emails on mobile devices at night or using social media during work hours. Some forward-looking firms in the western world now offer unconventional benefits to their employees including paternity leave, nursery or daycare facilities (within company premises) and company-paid family vacations. An attempt by a modern-day worker to clearly demarcate his/her

work and personal life could be an exercise in futility due to the intricate nature of today's work environment. This is the rationale behind the push for the term 'work-life balance' to be replaced by 'work-life integration.' Proponents of this change opine that work-life balance is a misleading idea and does not conform with reality. They hold the position that we should find effective ways to delicately blend our work and personal roles in our search for fulfilment.

The 2017 Employee Outlook highlights this issue with clarity - 15% of respondents say they rarely or never switch from work mode to personal or family mode and 42% say they can make the switch sometimes, indicating that many people find it quite difficult to leave work behind in the office and they take it along everywhere they go. It is common these days to see people dealing with phone calls and email messages (for work purposes) during a night out or a religious service. The study revealed that about 23% of respondents check their email at least five times outside their working hours each day. In essence, they keep working even outside of the physical workplace.

Some decades ago, work was done on machines and computers which people left in their offices at the close of work. Now, things are very different with our heavy dependence on mobile technologies which makes work go with us everywhere and sometimes, even share our beds with us. On the backdrop of recent legislation in France limiting work to 35 hours per week, 77% of respondents in this study either agreed or strongly agreed that there is a need for employees to disconnect from work by not responding to work emails outside of office hours. 51% of them say telecommuting would enable them to work flexibly while 37% of them say telecommuting would boost their productivity levels.

When work interferes with an employee's personal life, it results in a work-life interface and the lines between both becomes increasingly blurred. Work-life interface often results in one of the following outcomes –

- **Work-life conflict** - where an individual's work seriously impairs the normal functioning of his or her personal or family life or vice versa. This may lead to depression, anxiety and worry.
- **Work-life enrichment** - where an individual's work significantly improves the functioning of his or her personal or family life or vice versa. When this happens, such an individual tends to be lively, productive and energetic.

Work-Life Imbalance

The sad reality today is that fewer people are finding the right work-life balance and this fact is further corroborated by research across various sectors and countries around the world. The 2017 CIPD Employee Outlook shows that about 38% of employees are under excessive pressure at work at least once a week and 31% of employees say they usually come home from work exhausted. Without an iota of doubt, the way and manner people work has a huge impact on other areas of their lives. Every person has got limited time and energy and when one aspect of his or her life takes up a disproportionate amount of these resources, other aspects are bound to suffer the consequences.

The same study also reveals that only about 29% of employees say that their work makes them feel cheerful and a lower percentage (19%) say their work makes them feel optimistic. The handwriting is clearly written on the wall for all to see; more employees are finding themselves in difficult situations where their jobs are interfering with their personal lives in unfavorable ways. This affects the employee in ways that the employer may not realize - mentally, physically and emotionally. This study shows that only 29% of employees consider their mental health to be very good. When this Imbalance is sustained for long periods, it is very likely that the health of those involved will begin to deteriorate thereby resulting in sick leave, absenteeism, exhaustion, presenteeism, stress and their associated costs to the organisation.

Firms in Africa, Europe and America need to imitate the work-life philosophy of the Asian countries where work-life balance is increasingly becoming an issue of national importance. In Japan, the term *karoshi* literally means 'death from overwork.' The term was coined in 1978 to refer to an increasing number of people suffering from fatal strokes and heart attacks attributed to overwork but did not receive much public attention until the mid-1980s when several high-ranking business executives who were still in their prime suddenly died without any previous signs of illness. In an International Labor Organisation article on *karoshi*, a man was said to have worked at a snack food processing company for as long as 110 hours a week (an average of over 15 hours per day) and died from a heart attack at the age of 34. In the same article, another lady (a 22-year old nurse) died from a heart attack after 34 hours of continuous duty five times a month.

Some Japanese companies like Toyota and Nissan are taking the lead in helping their workers to find the right work-life balance. Toyota now limits overtime to 30 hours each month and encourages workers to either rest or go home after 7pm. Nissan offers telecommuting options that will enable their workers to care for their kids and elderly parents.

What's the Way Out?

The fact that work-life balance not only affects the employee but also the employer is not debatable. Therefore, the leaders of organizations must put in place relevant initiatives and programmes that will enhance the general wellbeing of their staff. There are both short term and long-term benefits for doing this, for all the parties involved. There are a variety of options for enhancing the work-life balance of employees –

- **Work flexibility** - employees get to work part-time or at a more convenient time during the day or week. Staggering work hours gives room for flexibility and creativity on the part of employees. People can also adopt compressed work weeks where they get to do all their tasks for the month within a week or two.
- **Telecommuting** - employees get to work from home or any other remote location for convenience and efficiency. Telecommuting also helps to save time and energy that would have been spent commuting to and from the physical workplace. The adoption of modern information technologies plays a key role in the effectiveness of telecommuting.
- **Paid leave** - this will be provided either on a monthly, quarterly or annual basis. Vacations help employees to relax and refresh themselves before resuming their daily hustle and bustle. It may also take the form of a sick leave, parental leave (both maternity and paternity leave), emergency leave or leave for other cogent reasons.
- **Unpaid leave** - this is usually in the form of a career break. This is useful for a variety of reasons - child bearing and nursing, further education, entrepreneurial pursuits etc. Unlike paid leave, a career break may not have a specified duration.
- **Chief Happiness Officer** - establishing a unique position for an individual(s) whose main responsibility is to ensure that the wellbeing of every staff is maintained at a satisfactory level. This position should also be given a pride of place in the organisation.
- **Dependence initiatives** - this involves making certain provisions available for an employee's dependents. These provisions may include school fees, paid family vacations, child counselling, family get-togethers or parties etc.
- **Job sharing or splitting** - the job responsibilities (and the accompanying remuneration and benefits) initially intended for a single person is shared between two persons. This eases the work pressure on the individuals involved and gives them more time for other non-work commitments.

- **Employee Assistance Programmes** - employees are provided with counselling and relevant forms of support for overcoming specific challenges, including but not limited to marital issues, mid-life crises, educational issues, retirement, financial difficulties, health issues etc.

Enabling your staff to find a favorable work-life balance is a matter of enlightened self-interest; the organisation has a lot to benefit from such actions and initiatives. Also, finding work-life balance is not an option for the employee, it is a necessity.

Have questions, suggestions, opinions on the topic? Jump in by writing in the comments box below.

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