



WORK LIFE BALANCE: A WORK FAMILY CONFLICT OF 24X7 WORK CULTURE

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Abstract

Work life balance has emerged as one of the biggest challenges for HR all time. The increasing trend of long working hours resulted in less time left for family, health and leisure life of individuals thus affecting the work family balance. Yes this 24X7 work culture raises the issue: working to live or living to work? Or is all about the need for individuals having complete control over their work, deciding when, why, where and how to work? Finding these pressures encroaching into their private life and time, they are unable to do anything about it and are finally squeezed out. Thus the research article throws light on the issues, causes, implications and remedies to overcome.

Key Words: Professional front, Personal front, Organization, Technology, Downsizing, Outsourcing, Conflict, Job sharing, and Wellness programmes.

A Brief History and Indian Scenario of Work Life Balance

The phrase work life balance reportedly owes its origin to Working Women's Association in the UK dating back to 1970s but it got popularized from mid-1980's in the US. Work related pressures and demands have been consuming for too much of the employees leaving them with no time for family or leisure. Inability to say thus far and no more, poor time management and delegating skills, and last but not the least, the diehard attitude towards work are cited as the reasons for employees getting into stressful situations. The growing competition due to globalization is adding fuel to the fire. The consequences are rise in attrition rates, strained domestic relations leading to divorces, and worst of all, exposure to life threatening ailments, etc., to say the least. In a study carried out globally among the executives of various companies, 81% reportedly agreed that their jobs are affecting their health.

If this is the state with the executive cadre, blue collar workers under stress respond with workplace violence, alcoholism, absenteeism, etc. The question arises whether one works to live or lives to work only. Women employees suffer the most, trying to strike a balance between official and domestic pressures.

The Indian scenario is typically different from the western world. Indians value family the most and once this family life is happy the person is at his cool and this reflects at the workplace. On the contrary disturbed family issues creep into the workplace and it becomes hot and this in turn moves to family and the story continues as vicious circle. Indians respect their parents, takes care of the children till they are appropriately settled in the life. The typical Indian housewife takes the responsibility of the family and manages it. If this is the case, the way of life should be taken into consideration while planning the work and in fact the employer must facilitate the employee to work. Gone are the days of the authoritative management, where the work was extracted from the employee, by hook or crook, now the Indian organizations have become more technology oriented and mature and they have recognized the importance of advanced skilled, well educated workforce without which their very survival is at stake. If this is the scenario then how can organizations cope up with these situations?

What is WLB?

Work life balance is an art of balancing both professional and personal front and means stress free, enjoyable private life. Popular words that are in every one mouth specially employers all work no play instead, work while you work and play while you play is the better slogan at work. The impact of work family conflict is significant, with outcomes including lower satisfaction both in the family and in the career, lower organizational attachment and commitment, increased hostility at home, and assorted negative physiological and psychological health outcomes (Illies, Schwind & Wagner, 2007).

The Real Problem/Issues?

Some of the real problem/issues which most of the employees face at some point or the other and the organizations should be able to respond to them are:

- Who is going to take care of my child when I am at the office? A typical housewife's concern.
- I have to take my parents for medical checkup - a concerned son.
- Its summer holidays and how to keep my children engaged during the holidays.
- Yesterday I was blessed with a baby and today my Boss wants me to go on a foreign assignment.
- I am qualified software professional and I am a traditional Indian housewife. I have to take care of the house, family and children. How can I continue to work and ensure the family life is not disturbed?



- I have put on weight and I am not finding time to manage my weight.
- I have to attend the monthly parents meeting at my child's school and I don't know how to make it for.
- I live far away from the workplace and I find no point in travelling for so long, wasting time. I'd rather sit at home and do the work more productively.
- I have children coming home at 3o' clock after school and I have to be there at home by that time.
- Can I work four hours in the morning and four hours in the evening which facilitates some of the things at home?

Reasons for 24X7 Work Culture/Causes

Organizational Culture: Long hours of work existed in the US because of the work oriented culture which valued long work hours and equated it to commitment and high performance. Long working hours were always correlated with productivity. Therefore, even if an employee overworked, it was considered right because it enabled in achieving profit. On the contrary, people who wanted to humanize the working conditions by working less were known as slackers in the company or as second tier workers. So, they usually stepped back and were afraid of putting their views, in front of the authorities.

Technological Change: The introduction of electronic gadgets like computers, mobile phones etc., led to the increase in efficiency, speed and flexibility of work at one end and increase in the work hours at the other. The employees had to constantly adjust and adapt to these working conditions and therefore, kept abreast of the accelerating speed of work that often translated into more work to be done in lesser time. Further, the use of laptops, voice mail and email enabled the employees to have an access from home encouraging people to do additional work from home and constantly stayed in touch with the office.

Downsizing and Outsourcing: it was considered more profitable to hire smaller number of people for longer hours than to extend the hours by employing more workers who would then expect paid benefits. Therefore, several companies adopted a strategy of downsizing in order to maintain profitability, which subsequently created two categories of workers: workers with longer hours, and more contract or temporary workers, also known as contingent workers. The workers working longer hours had larger workloads and hence demanded more, as fewer employees had to deal with the same amount of work. The contingent workers lacked employee benefits and job security as they worked on contract basis. In addition, they worked part time adding up more hours to their work with no benefits. The downsizing resulted in job insecurity and the disintegration of loyalty and trust between the employer and the employees. This, along with the presence of high unemployment rates and increasing demands placed on employees to be more productive, left the workers with more pressure to meet the demands of their job. Another problem was the increase in outsourcing, which generally created apprehensions amongst the employees that they could easily be replaced.

Implications of 24X7 Work Culture

Health Hazards: Workplace stress has resulted in numerous health problems such as chronic anxiety, insomnia, stress, depression, physical and mental illness and addictions such as smoking and drinking, all of which contributed to the overall health risk, lower levels of performance and commitment from the employees.

Absenteeism & Lower Performance Level: Clinically depressed employees gave rise to low productivity and higher rates of absenteeism.

Lack of Leisure: With the technological advancement the line between work and play has blurred. The modern work has changed the meaning of leisure for people and such a hectic life has created stress and ill effects on the health of these people.

Conflict between Work & Family: One of the main reasons for the increase in workload in the family was the majority of both husband and wife as wage earners. Such dual earner couples were likely to have at least one spouse working late night, rotating shifts or doing weekend work giving rise to substantially less quality time for their family which led to more marital unhappiness.

Diffusing/Strategies/Remedies/Alternative Work Patterns:Work life balance is all about the individuals having a complete control of work. It is not only the money that drives the employees for better productivity, but there are also other things the organizations should look into.

Flexitime: Flexitime referred to the flexible work arrangements wherein, the employer and the employee were allowed to determine a mutually acceptable distribution of working hours per shift or over a determined period of time, and according to a specific schedule. Example: variable starting and ending times for work, compressed work week, work week reduction,



shift swap, job sharing and part time hours within certain limits. The company capitalizing on these benefits, will aid recruitment, retention, high morale and longer hours of operations.

Job Sharing/Distribute the Work Load: Job sharing was an alternative arrangement in which a job can be shared between two part time employees instead of one full time employee. Employee sharing a job accrued vacation, sick leave and holiday pay on a prorated basis. Two employees sharing a job also were entitled to share health insurance benefits, dividing the salary between them according to the hours worked and even the benefits and seniority were often prorated according to the hours worked.

Shift Swap: Shift swapping enabled workers to voluntarily exchange shifts or workdays to accommodate their family needs.
Work Week Reduction: This referred to a work pattern where the number of working days in a week was reduced by increasing the number of hours per day or adopting five days week while increasing the working hours on week days.

Compressed Work Week: This option allows employees to work their total employees to work their total number of hours over fewer days. It was a weekly and bi-weekly arrangement in which a full time employee was allowed to eliminate at least one working day every other week by working longer hours during the remaining days. For instance, by putting in longer hours, an employee can work for only four days in a week.

Alternative Shifts: A combination of different work patterns were also attempted by several companies resulting in a unique work arrangement. For instance, by having some engineers committed to the off hours, the rest of the engineers were free to live their other lives, and a customer receives better, faster service.

Part Time Work: Part time work gave workers the flexibility to take care of their family needs while still receiving income. However, it would become more effective only when it would include healthcare and other benefits.

Teleworking: Due to the spread of information and communication technologies, the employees can choose to work at home depending on the nature of jobs. Example those which can be accomplished using a computer.

Encouraging Wellness Programmes: Providing assistance for employees to protect their health can enable them to deal with unavoidable stress at work more effectively. Example: gym, organizing periodic family get-togethers /programs /games /functions, good family support can minimize work life conflict, so carrying negative moods home from work is likely to affect an employee's future productivity etc.

Conclusion

Culturally, we tend to honor hard work, and most people feel that it pays off. But in the end, if it replaces the more important things in life, like relationships, you end up with less. (Goldsmith, 2007, P.45). It's time for one to realize the importance of integrating the work life rather than balancing it. If we try to balance it that means we are acknowledging the fact that there is a difference or both work and the private life are in different dimensions and are trying to balance them. It is time that both need to be seen from the same angle. Thus, the future of work belongs to those who will log their hours, when they want, how they want, and most important where they want. Remember, worrying does not solve the problems, as Baz Luhrmann, Academy Award winning Director, rightly said, don't worry about the future or worry, but know that worrying is as effective as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubble gum.

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