

SOURCE LINES

Work - Life Balance: Major Revolution or Flavour-of-the-Week?

The Problem

An important reassessment of how we think about balancing our working and personal lives is under way. It is taking place at all levels in the workplace. This re-evaluation of how we balance our living and working lives is being driven by a number of different variables.

To begin, 'muscle-lift' of the 20th century has been replaced by 'mental-lift' in the 21st. More than ever before, no matter what one's position is in an organization, mental "strength" not physical strength is the real source of success. Business magazines today sing the praises of employee creativity as the element that separates the wheat from the chaff when it comes to business success.

Until very recently **work-life balance** was viewed as the individual employee's responsibility, not the employer's. That is, not until the costs of chronically whacked-out work-life balance began showing up on organizational bottom lines and employee's work engagement surveys and exit interviews.

The most disturbing way it showed up was an increase in mental health problems associated with employees. In North America, mental health concerns are now the largest reason for short and long-term disability claims. Of these mental health claims fully three-quarters are for clinical depression. Clinical depression, although highly

treatable, is one of the most under-diagnosed illnesses. The Canadian Medical Association states that the chances of a clinically depressed patient being correctly diagnosed by their own GP are one in three. To correct this under diagnosis the CMA has recently sent out six questions that they want all family practitioners to ask their patients.

In our experience the vast majority of clinically depressed employees had terrible work-life balance before their illness was diagnosed. This doesn't mean that poor work-life balance caused all this depression but it is definitely associated with the problem.



So how bad is the work-life balance problem for employees? Dr. Linda Duxbury of Carlton University has conducted a systematic analysis of the trends in Work-Life Balance comparing a survey she conducted in 1991 with a survey of 32,000 workers conducted by Health Canada in 2000. The following are some of the highlights of Duxbury's research.

Between 1991 and 2000 there was:

- a 20% decrease in job satisfaction
- a 14% increase in job stress
- a 30% decrease in employee commitment to the job

- a 10% decrease in employee's personal life satisfaction
- in 2001 70% of the workforce took work home
- in 1991 - 1 in 12 employees had an eldercare issue; in 2001 - 1 in 2 employees had the problem – the baby boom's parents were 10 years older
- in 1991, – 25% of employees worked 50 hours or more — in 2001, – 38% did it; a 13% increase
- in the medical system the three biggest families of prescribed medications families are antidepressants, heart related medications & birth control – all in various ways related to working life. Birth control you ask? Yes, women are putting off starting families for their careers.

So, does this all sound pretty grim? Well take heart!

Increasingly employers are aware of the costs associated with the loss of knowledge and creativity when experienced employees leave the company prematurely because of *presentism* (your body shows up to work with it's brain in the fog), disability, or to find a more "progressive

employer". In response, the first steps of changing these work-life balance patterns are now under way. Many employees are now starting to re-think and modify their own personal work-life balance policies. Some, for example, have made achieving a healthy work-life balance a shared objective and included it in Performance Appraisals with specific goals identified. For one employee the goal might be a simple as committing to not taking work home on the weekend; a change that can have obvious beneficial effects for someone with family obligations that were always taking a backseat to work.

As some smart person once said, "In order to solve the problem first there needs to be recognition that there is one."

Healthy work-life balance is a revolution and won't be going away soon! The evidence is mounting: the quality of work-life balance impacts entire organizations just as much as individual employees. Sustaining success in the market place requires supporting a balanced approach to work and personal life.

Distress is like an equal opportunity employer. It is blind to race, sex, age or occupation. It only has one rule – if you don't deal with your stress, your stress will deal with you. C.E. Crowther

Research has shown that the following factors help promote good health:

- confidence & optimism
 - high social support
- well-defined spiritual beliefs
 - a healthy diet

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