

# Getting the Balance Right

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## The cost of ignoring work life balance

Recruiting and retaining the best staff for your company is an expensive business. How important it is then to ensure that the picture that you paint of your company to potential recruits attracts the very best, and that the experience they encounter once they are on board is one which causes them to want to stay with you and enables them to perform well.

Recent research tells us that poor work life balance impacts on:

- *recruitment* - 57% of students considered achieving a balanced lifestyle as their top priority in their future career (PWC International Student Survey - 1999)
- *retention* - 33% of UK managers would leave their jobs if they felt they could improve their work life balance (Ceridian Performance Partners/Management Today - 1999)
- *performance* - over 33% of people who work long hours say they make mistakes as a result of tiredness (CIPD - 2001)

So ignore work life balance at your peril.

## What is work life balance?

This is where it can be a bit tricky because if you take a room full of 20 people and ask each of them what work life balance means to them, as we do on our workshops, you're likely to come up with 20 different answers.

Work life balance is about creating an environment where people can balance the demands and aspirations of their personal lives with the demands and aspirations of their working lives. And as each of our lives is different, this means that work life balance will be different for each of us too.

So does that mean that enabling people to achieve work life balance is a bit anarchic - letting everyone do what they want? Well no, because it also means balancing the needs of the individual with the needs of the business.

But it does mean:

- working flexibly
- challenging the status quo
- managing performance
- trusting people.

## Working flexibly

This could include flexibility of:

- *time* - ask yourself when work needs to be done - in an increasingly 24/7 world, work can be done at all sorts of times (and often our customers expect this of us!)
- *place* - with the technology available to us now, much of the work that we do can be done at various locations eg at home or in different parts of the country
- *working methods* - if you ask your staff you will often find that they can suggest different ways of achieving the same (or even a better) result.

## Challenging the status quo

This is about creating a cultural mind-set, which encourages:

- *continuous improvement* - not a blame or fear culture where people are frightened to suggest, or try out, different ways of doing things for fear of reprisals or criticism
- *innovation* - thinking creatively to find ways of making work life balance work for people.

## Managing performance

Many managers object to suggestions, for example, that work could be done at home, on the basis that "I won't know whether people are working or not". One of the basic foundations of work life balance is that we manage our people's contribution to the business through the results that they produce rather than the hours where they are visible to us at a desk.

## Trusting people

Believing that people generally want to do a good job and trusting them to do this is also critical. So organisations where there is a lack of mutual respect between management and staff will find that they need to tackle their culture first before embarking on any work around work life balance.

## First steps towards work life balance

Some first steps in creating an environment where your people can achieve work life balance are:

### *1: Understand what work life balance means for your people*

- Conduct a staff attitude survey
- Get groups of people together to discuss how they feel about this

### *2: Agree what's possible /desirable for your organisation*

- Review current HR policies and procedures
- Consider what could be possible with an open mind
- Benchmark with other organisations

### *3: Decide what to do differently*

- Ask staff for suggestions about what would work
- Consider allowing different teams to agree what will work for them
- Manage people's expectations

### *4: Identify success criteria*

- Consider the performance criteria you will use to measure the impact of these actions on your business (eg recruitment, retention, absenteeism etc)
- Consider also measures related to the perceptions of your staff (eg morale, motivation, stress levels etc)
- Benchmark your progress against the Work-Life Balance Standard, which is a nationally recognised standard of good practice backed by the DTI

### 5: Implement and monitor your plans

- Build in a communication strategy
- Set clear milestones
- Don't expect results overnight - recognise that changing the culture of the organisation takes time.

#### Helpers and hinderers

There are certain things that can help or hinder the improvement of work life balance. Use the checklist below to help you to identify all those that apply in your business and ensure that your implementation plan includes ways of capitalising on your helpers, and eliminating or minimising your hinderers.

Helpers		Hinderers	
Senior managers who 'walk the talk'		Long hours culture	
Good performance management systems		A blame or fear culture	
Strong team working		Too few people to do the job	
Good internal communications		A 'clock watching' culture	
Line management capability		Insistence that there's only one way of doing the job	
Trust		Managers who only know how to manage what they can see	
Open-mindedness		Poor prioritisation of work	
Respect for the needs of others		Culture of presenteeism "if you're not at your desk, you're not committed to the job"	
Good business planning processes		Fear of new ideas	
Empowered staff		Rigid HR procedures	

#### Creating an environment where people can flourish

Enabling your people to achieve an appropriate work life balance will allow them to flourish both at work and in their personal lives.

The rewards to your business will be heightened motivation and genuine commitment to the business together with the improvements in performance and productivity that this brings.

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