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WORK/LIFE BALANCE - CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN PRESENT SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

In organizations and on the home front, the challenge of work/life balance is rising to the top of many employers' and employees' consciousness. In today's fast-paced society, human resource professionals seek options to positively impact the bottom line of their companies, improve employee morale, retain employees with valuable company knowledge, and keep pace with workplace trends. This article provides human resource professionals with an historical perspective, data and possible solutions—for organizations and employees alike to work/life balance. Three factors global competition, personal lives/family values, and an aging workforce present challenges that exacerbate work/life balance. This article offers the perspective that human resource professionals can assist their companies to capitalize on these factors by using work/life initiatives to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Keywords: *Employees, values, competition and work life balance.*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, most companies do agree that engaged employees – those willing to 'go the extra mile' – can have a very strong effect on the success of a business and so are seeking effective techniques that will allow them to build engagement. Employee engagement has generated a great deal of interest in recent years as a widely used term in organizations and consulting firms. Towers Perrin, looking at over 35,000 employees across dozens of companies, showed a positive relationship between employee engagement and sales growth, lower cost of goods sold, customer focus, and reduced turnover. In today's knowledge economy employees today are looking for: opportunities to learn and improve their skills and to have an open valve for imagination, creativity and ideas; senior management interest in employee wellbeing; and to work for an organization with a reputation as a good employer. Research shows that organizations that provide a workplace culture with the psychological conditions of meaningfulness (job enrichment, work-role fit), safety (supportive manager and co-workers) and availability (resources available) are more likely to have engaged employees.

2.1 Defining Work/Life Balance
Work/Life Balance
Life is a balancing act, and in American society, it is safe to say that almost everyone is seeking work/lifebalance. But what exactly is work/life balance? We have all heard the term, and many of us complain thatwe don't have enough of *it* in our lives. Among men and women alike, the frustrating search for work/lifebalance is a frequent topic of conversation, usually translated into not enough time and/or support *to do,to handle, to manage ...* our work commitments or personal responsibilities.

"Juggling competing demands is tiring if not stressful and brings lower productivity, sickness, and absenteeism, so work/life balance is an issue for all employees and all organizations."

The meaning of work/life balance has chameleon characteristics. It means different things to differentgroups, and the meaning often depends on the context of the conversation and the speaker's viewpoint.

The following are working definitions of terms used regarding work/life balance; some definitions overlapand some are continuing to evolve.

Work/family: a term more frequently used in the past than today. The current trend is to use titles that include the phrase *work/life*, giving a broader work/life connotation or labeling referring to specific areas of support.

Work/family conflict: the push and pull between work and family responsibilities.
Work/life balance *from the employee viewpoint*: the dilemma of managing work obligations and personal/family responsibilities.

Work/life balance from the employer viewpoint:the challenge of creating a supportive companyculture where employees can focus on their jobswhile at work.

2.2.Personal Lives and Family Values

Personal Lives and Family Values to the Forefront

The American work ethic remains intact, yet in recent years personal and family lives have become criticalvalues that Americans are less willing to put on hold, put aside, or ignore, for the sake of work. Over time,the American workforce has begun to change course from being willing to spend every hour working tolearning to manage the complexities of modern living. In addition, the impact of the terrorist attacks ofSeptember 11 has led many people to re-evaluate their lives and consider the meaning of work.Consequently, Americans are looking for options that allow for both a personal and family life, andmany seek ways to have it all. As a result, the U.S. management philosophy that expects employees toput work first, ahead of personal lives and family commitments, is becoming less accepted.

The Changing Face of Family

With the growing diversity of family structures represented in the workforce in the new millennium, it isimportant that human resource professionals better understand the interface of work and family relationshipsand the resulting impact in the work place. Research by Parasuraman and Greenhaus documented that segments of the workforce may besubject to unique work/family pressures, yet often have few sources of support.4 The under-representation
of these groups of individuals with potentially difficult types of work/family pressures represents amajor gap in work/family research and employers' understanding of their needs. Typically, studies havefocused on employed men and women who are married or living with a partner or those with children.Omitted from research are single-earner mothers and fathers, single and childless employees with extensiveresponsibility for eldercare, blended families with children from both partners' prior marriages, familieswith shared custody of children, and grandparents raising their grandchildren.

From both the employer and employee viewpoint,the changing nature of what constitutes family isone of the complications of today's society.As human resource professionals design policies and programs to address employee retention, jobsatisfaction, employee morale, and productivity,this research warrants serious consideration.

Stress and the Consequencesfor Employer and Employee

We live in stressful times, and each of us deals with stress every day. In the past three years, an increasingnumber of employees surveyed indicate they are struggling with work/life balance.
Scientists agree that in moderate amounts stress can be benign, even beneficial, and most people areequipped to deal with it. However, increasing levels of stress can rapidly lead to low employee morale, poorproductivity, and decreasing job satisfaction. Some of the specific symptoms that relate directly to productivityin the work environment are abuse of sick time, cheating, chronic absenteeism, distrust, embezzlement,organizational sabotage, tardiness, task avoidance, and violence in the workplace. Other seriousrepercussions are depression, alcohol and drug abuse, marital and financial problems, compulsiveeating disorders, and employee burnout. Dr. Bruce S.McEwen, director of the neuroendocrinology laboratoryat Rockefeller University, has been studying stress for more than three decades. As he notes, "blaring caralarms, controlling bosses, two-career marriages, sixmile traffic

jams, and rude salesclerks were simplynot part of the plan.Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), offered by many employers, are an excellent resource for employeesunder stress. EAPs provide a myriad of services, from drug and alcohol abuse counseling to addressingfamily and marriage problems, financial and legal difficulties, and stress-related problems. In addition, inline with the times and the increasing stress levels in our society, a new profession has emerged: work/life professionals. The concept of work/life professionals originally developed as an extension of wellness programs and EAPs. The Alliance for Work/LifeProgress, the national association for work/life professionals, leads and promoteswork/life initiatives in business, academia, and the public sector to support a healthier work/life balancebetween work, personal, and family life.

Work/life programs represent a largely untapped workplace solution that have the potential to significantlyaddress stressful work environments.

2.3.The Employer's Perspective:

The Employer's Perspective Return on Investment (ROI)

An employer's commitment to work/life initiatives is influenced by the perception of whether or not suchinitiatives have a positive return on investment. In recent years, employers increasingly realize that thequality of an employee's personal and family life impacts work quality and that there are concrete businessreasons to promote work and family integration.

Diversity and Work/Life Balance

While some companies may view diversity and work/life balance as separate functions, the businesscase for managing diversity is, in large part, the same for work/life balance. Both diversity and work/lifeinitiatives promote employee commitment, improve productivity, lower turnover, result in fewer employeerelations challenges, and decrease the likelihood of unethical business practices.

Is Your Organization Culture-Ready for Work/Life Initiatives?
"A common thread that links the reasons work/life benefits go unused is organizational culture."
Before establishing work/life initiatives, it is important to know if the organization's culture is open and readyto support work/life programs. The path to determining culture readiness may be as formal as using anemployee survey assessment or as simple as a thoughtful judgment made by the organization. Thefollowing provides food for thought regarding whether an organization is ready to begin work/life initiatives.
As with most change initiatives, work/life programs require support from senior management. In addition,for the work environment to be ready for work/life benefits, it is helpful to have a "corporate culture thatencourages employees to look at business in an entirely different way and supports and acceptsemployees as individuals with priorities beyond the workplace.

Communication is Key

Communication about work/life programs is essential. Although an organization may offer a rich menu ofwork/life benefits, the desired effect—yielding positive business results—is unlikely to occur if employeesdo not know about the programs or understand them. Human resource professionals should considerfour critical questions: 1) does the company culture truly support work/life benefits; 2) does the managementphilosophy, starting with senior management, sincerely endorse work/life benefits; 3) do managers and supervisors understand the impact work/life balance has on their workforce; and 4) are employeesaware of and do they understand the company's work/life programs?
If a company already offers work/life benefits, the next step may be to repackage and recommunicatethem so employees see how these benefits offer ways to manage work/family conflict. In addition,developing a human resources strategy that is clearly integrated with the company's mission will demonstrate how committed the organization is to employee needs. The following are suggestions to promotework/life programs:
Review the human resources strategy to see if it supports the company's mission.
- Through questionnaires or focus groups, find out what employees feel about work/life balance.
- Align work/life initiatives with HR strategy (e.g., employer of choice).

- Create a work/life award program using noncash incentives aligned with business objectives.

Work/life initiatives create positive employer branding, promote being an employer of choice, foster organizational citizenship, and support diversity initiatives. Building a strategic business case for work/life initiatives requires hard data documenting positive results on the balance sheet. Toward this end, there havebeen a number of studies dedicated to the financial impact of work/life programs in the last decade.

There are several key factors to be considered in measuring ROI of work/life programs: the audience,the culture, designing the data collection process, integrating findings and making projections, and identifyingthe company's primary goals. For many organizations, however, quantifying the data presents the greatest challenge. The best place to start is to consider five key areas: 1) employee time saved; 2) employee retention; 3) increased motivation and productivity; 4) absenteeism; and 5) decreased health care costs and stress-related illnesses

Work-life balance drives Employee engagement in diligences

Over the last couple of decades we have seen a dramatic shift in the workforce and the needs of employees to effectively manage demanding work schedules and their personal lives. The McCrindle Research study of 3000 Australians shows that work-life balance is the number one factor of job attraction & retention (even above salary). Employers seeking scarce staff are increasingly touting their commitment to work-life balance in recruitment advertising.

But apart from attracting someone into a job, do initiatives to encourage work-life balance also stimulate employee engagement. HR Partner can explore options and create recommendations for making change around programs, such as paid and unpaid time off plans, flexible work arrangements and child and elder care resources. The increased demand for work/life balance and the changing relationship between employers and employees are driving the need for HR professionals and their organizations to truly understand what employees need and want and then determine how to meet those needs while at the same time developing and leveraging workplace talents at all levels.

Work-life Balance policies & practices stimulating employee engagement inIndustries

Over the last decade the evidence for the business benefits of work-life balance policies has been growing in volume and strength. The studies show strong links between work-life balance policies and reduced absenteeism, increased productivity and job satisfaction. Other benefits include improved recruitment and retention rates with associated cost savings, reduced sick leave usage, a reduction in worker stress and improvements in employee satisfaction and loyalty, greater flexibility for business operating hours, an improved corporate image.

The Workplace Employee Relations Survey 1998 suggests that the workplaces that are doing best on a number of dimensions were those with 'high commitment management practices' well embedded in the labour process, and where a large proportion of employees feel committed to the organisation. They defined high commitment management practices to include policies on communication with employees and family-friendly working practices.

Impact of Family-Friendly policies towards Employee commitment

There is mixed evidence regarding the cost-effectiveness of work-life balance and familyfriendly policies. Some research links these policies with reduced levels of employee turnover, increased employee satisfaction, commitment and productivity, and decreased rates of physical and emotional disorders associated with work-life conflict (for a review see Brough and O'Driscoll 2005). For example, Glass and Riley (1998) demonstrated that a positive relationship existed between the provision of adequate maternity leave and reduced rates of turnover in US female employees. Similarly, Australian research found that 70% of businesses that incorporated telework options reported a number of positive benefits, such as increased business productivity and reduced costs, improved employee flexibility and work life balance, and increased workforce participation (Australian Telework Advisory Committee 2006).

A major study funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and carried out on a nation-wide level by researchers at the university of Cambridge (Dex and Smith, 2002), concluded that:
1. There are positive effects on employee commitment from having family-friendly policies.
2. Approximately nine out of every ten establishments with some experience of these policies found them cost effective.

3. Increase in performance was associated with having one or other family-friendly policy in the case of five out of six performance indicators Practices that are typically associated with 'family-friendly' provisions that may ease the stresses on employed parents and caregivers such as maternity, paternity, parental and adoption leave, child care and elder care supports, and options to work at home or with more flexible schedules to accommodate work and care.

Work/Life Balance in the Relief World

In the "relief world," comprised of organizations with employees and volunteers that provide service andcare to communities in need locally and worldwide, the demands of an aging population in the comingdecade are increasing the current strong competition for qualified individuals upon which relief organizationsdepend. "Not only will there be fewer young, keen and free-to-travel individuals who will want to beconvinced that agencies are caring, 'best-practice' employers, but more skills and experience will be possessedby older staff likely to have families and other commitments and thus different priorities for theirwork/life balance." Therefore, organizations that provide relief services may experience increasing difficultystaffing and retaining employees due to the pull of family commitments at home.Furthermore, the challenges of work/life balance will no doubt impact recruitment, retention and willingnessto serve in hardship locations. In view of these factors, voluntary organizations and aid agencieswhose missions and services are critical in many parts of the world may well have an even greater needfor work/life programs to attract and retain staff.

Work-Life Policies as Strategic Human Resource Management Decisions

There are some motives for applying work-life practices by organizations: to increase participation of female personnel and make use of their capacities, to keep employee motivated and well performing, to make the organization more attractive to employees, to have a better corporate social responsibility.

During the last decades there have been dramatic changes in the field of Human Resource Management. The focus has been broadened from the micro level to more macro- or strategic perspective, known as strategic human resource management. The basic promise of this perspective is that organizations that achieve congruence between their human resource practices and their strategies should enjoy superior performance (Delery and Doty, 1996). The strategic human resource management perspective emphasizes that a workforce strategy should fit an organization's business goals, culture and environmental circumstances and that human resource management practices should be interrelated and internally consistent.

Organizational outcomes and employees' benefits of work-life balancepractices.

Reduced costs – particularly those related to reduced absenteeism andturnover. Both absenteeism and high turnover rates in organizations are indicative oflow morale and job stress. Thus, reducing absenteeism is an importantorganizational objective for reducing costs. Organizations like Capital OneFinancial, a financial services company, reported that work-life balance practicesreduced turnover and increased productivity and Employee satisfaction.

Enhanced organizational image and retention of "desirable" employees:

Being perceived as having innovative work-life balance practices allowsorganizations to enhance their organizational reputation in the public domain. Thismeans that they are also well-positioned to attract and retain greater numbers of jobapplicants from which a larger pool of better qualified employees can be selected.

Increased productivity and employees' performance:

The existentliterature suggests that work-life balance practices generally have a positive impacton individual and organizational productivity. In addition to the previous referenceto Capital One Finance, Pfizer Canada reported a 30% productivity increase in itstranslation department when employees were provided with opportunities totelecommute. Focusing specifically on customer service as an indication oforganizational performance, KPMG has reported that allowing employees to take emergency time off to attend to care responsibilities has been a driving force behindtheir retention and 'superlative services' provision.

Barriers in achieving work-life balance:

Implementing of work-life practices for organizational effectiveness may becompromised by lack of use these practices. Research conducted amongstorganizations in the UK suggests that employees often remain unaware of theirwork-life entitlements following the implementation of work-life balance practices.

Managerial support is consistently emphasized in discussions and studiesas a factor influencing work-life balance. Managers play an important role in thesuccess of work/life programs because they are in a position to encourage ordiscourage employees' efforts to balance their work and family lives. Wheresupervisors enthusiastically support the integration of paid work and otherresponsibilities, employees will be more likely to take up available work-life

programs. On the other hand, it has been suggested that even in 'family-friendly'organizations, managers may send negative signals indicating that the use of flexiblebenefits is a problem for them, their colleagues and the organization as a whole

Career consequences:

The second factor associated with a barrier to thesuccessful implementation of work-life practices is the perception of negative careerconsequences. In a study of 463 professional and technical employees inbiopharmaceutical firms, found that the provision of work-lifepractices improved employees' organizational commitment, but only to the extentthat employees felt free to use the practices without negative consequences to theirwork lives—such as damaged career prospects. Similarly, cites an American Bar Association report that although 95% of American law firmshave a part-time employment policy, only 3% of lawyers have used it due to fear ofcareer derailment. The perception that using work-life balance practices will have anegative impact on their career prospects appears to be a powerful demotivator for employees' use of these practices.

Organizational time expectation:

Another factor that influence the uptakeand overall supportiveness of work-life policies is organizational time expectationsthenumber of hours employees are expected to work; how they use their time (e.g.,whether employees are expected to take work home); In several studies, however,long working hours have been identified as a signal of commitment, productivityand motivation for advancement. One study, based on interviews with engineers in aFortune 100 company in the US, concluded: "If one is to succeed, one has to be atwork, one has to be there for long hours, and one has to continuously commit to

work as a top priority. To be perceived as making a significant contribution, productivity alone is not enough. One has to maintain a continual presence at work."

Co-worker support:

An increasing amount shows that workers who makeuse of work-life practices suffer negative perceptions from colleagues and superiors.An experiment (Beauregard, Lesley, 2008) found that employees who used work lifebalance practices were perceived by co-workers as having lower levels oforganizational commitment, which was thought to affect the subsequent allocationof organizational rewards such as advancement opportunities and salary increases.Some staff that use flexible arrangements have reportedly experienced 'familyfriendly

backlash' or resentment from co-workers

3. Conclusion

Work/life programs have the potential to significantlyimprove employee morale; reduce absenteeism, andretain organizational knowledge, particularly during difficulteconomic times. In today's global marketplace,as companies aim to reduce costs, it falls to thehuman resource professional to understand the criticalissues of work/life balance and championwork/life programs. Be it employees whose familymembers and/or friends are called to serve theircountry, single mothers who are trying to raise theirchildren and make a living, Generation X and Yemployees who value their personal time, couplesstruggling to manage dual-career marriages, or companieslosing critical knowledge when employees leavefor other opportunities, work/life programs offer awin-win situation for employers and employees.

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