

Work life balance

Despite their high profile, many companies' work-life balance initiatives have stalled because they comprise discrete projects rather than systemic change

AS A CONSUMER it feels great to be able to pop into the local supermarket for a pint of milk at 3am, call your insurance company on a Sunday or pick up a prescription from the chemist at 11pm. But our 24/7 society, where more and more people expect services when and where they want them, feeds our apparent belief that we have to cram as much as possible into the shortest possible time. Workplaces are no exception. A European-wide survey carried out in 2000 found that work had grown far more intense over the previous ten years, with people typically working faster, harder and longer than ever before. A more recent London School of Economics/Policy Studies Institute survey found that over a quarter of men and women said their job left them feeling exhausted much, most or all of the time.

The situation at work is exacerbated by the growing number of people juggling work and domestic responsibilities, largely due to the influx of women to the labour market over the last 30 years. Some 70% of respondents to a Work Foundation survey in 2001 cited this as a major cause of stress. 'Work-life balance' is the term coined to describe the attempts by organisations to ensure their staff do get more of the balance that they need in their lives – and to increase their own ability to attract and retain talent.

Yet despite its high profile, the proliferation of organisations set up to advise companies on how to implement work-life balance policies and the number of companies claiming to have implemented successful work-life balance initiatives, the concept seems to have stalled. Penny de Valk, Managing Director of Ceridien Consulting and a leading adviser on work-life balance

issues, says: "Generally, there have been only very marginal improvements in work-life balance. At its heart it involves redesigning organisations that were created for male breadwinners and that is very difficult to do. Companies are fundamentally inert and cling to the status quo. So there has been lots of playing around at the edges, but very little real systemic change. One of the symptoms of the failure is that most workers don't take advantage of much-vaunted flexible working programmes because they see them as career blockers."

However, work-life balance proponents cite a raft of benefits that support the business case. These include:

- **Recruitment and retention.** Lloyds TSB, for example, believes flexible working is a powerful tool to support the motivation and commitment of its people and contributes to its goal of becoming an 'employer of choice'. Over at BT, 98% of women who go on maternity leave now come back, saving over £3 million in recruitment and induction costs alone.

- **Reduced overheads.** BT's overheads and travel costs incurred by staff have dropped dramatically now that 7,000 staff work at home.

- **Productivity and reward.** PricewaterhouseCoopers believes long hours do not necessarily equate to commitment or productivity, while the productivity of BT homeworkers has risen by about a third.

- **Flexible workforce.** Absenteesim at BT is down to 3.1% compared to a UK average of

8.5%, while other companies have found it easier to deploy people to cover absence when shifts are flexible. Roffey Park Institute has done much to promote the value of work-life balance and help companies implement successful policies.

Researcher Claire McCartney highlights a number of organisational practices that encourage a culture conducive to work-life balance. "You have to be prepared to invest in it, you need explicit organisational values around employee well-being and work-life balance, and you can incorporate the management of work-life balance into performance appraisals and reward systems," she suggests. Role modelling is also very important, she adds: "Senior managers and leaders who role model work-life balance values should be actively highlighted throughout the organisation."

And she warns that companies shouldn't have fixed expectations, or they will just replace one kind of inflexibility with another. "It's no good saying 'OK, we are going to be a balanced company – everyone go home at 5pm on the dot'," she points out. Meanwhile, research by the Work Foundation suggests that for most people work-life balance equates with having control over their own time. People value being able to determine their own hours, with the self-employed – despite their typically very long hours and the stress involved in running their own businesses – being the happiest of all.

Yet most people who work for themselves – including interim executives – put themselves under enormous pressure. Not only do they have to actually do the work, they also need to spend time marketing themselves and networking to ensure a continuous flow of work. One of the reasons people cite for going it alone is to have more control over their work and to be able to work more flexibly. But in practice flexible working often means you're at your desk at midnight or over the weekend. "It seems to be the perception of being in control that counts," says de Valk.

Alexandra Jones, Senior Researcher at the Work Foundation, says: "Ensuring you get a proper work-life balance as a self-employed person is a matter of strong self-discipline, excellent time management and setting yourself realistic targets."

Fortunately, these attributes are second nature to most interim executives, who are also results-driven, and good at prioritising and working to deadlines. Nick Duncan, a seasoned interim, says: "I am quite good at routinely taking myself out of what I am doing. I rarely take on full-time interim roles, and tend to work a three- or four-day week to give myself time to other things entirely and to develop my business. When I am working, though, I give 110% to it and blank out everything else." Duncan, who has a portfolio of work, takes leave "a little and often" – normally up to two weeks six times a year. Other interims work intensively for several months, then take a month or six weeks off before even thinking about their next assignment. "Quality of life does start to assume greater importance in your 40s and 50s and interim allows you to achieve that," says Duncan. "The more in demand you are, the more you can dictate the agenda."

But another Impact Executives interim, Lynne Smith, thinks she has failed to get the work-life balance she hoped for when she decided to become an interim. However, having control over her time means she can visit her mother in South Africa twice every year – "which would be less easy to do in a full-time job". It also allows her to do the voluntary work that is so important to her. At the moment she is working on two assignments (with Barclays and the NHS) which take up five days a week. "But at least I have the choice," she says, "and at the moment I am choosing to work hard. I enjoy the variety of what I do." The Work Foundation's Jones says: "People need to make decisions about how they live their lives as well as how they work, and that means making time to look at both sides of the equation, rather than just assuming the balance will arrive. The fundamental problem is that the way we work hasn't really caught up with the way we live."

Managerial practices to enable work-life balance

- promote and openly acknowledge formal flexibility to help the individual and organisation
- allow informal flexible working
- encourage, where possible, different types of working, including 9-day fortnight, term-time working, job share, part-time and home-working options and compressed working week flexible management
- be flexible – if team members have to work late on a project let them come in late the next day
- allow occasional late starts/early finishes and long lunch periods as required support of personal life
- talk about life outside work and encourage social activity
- understand the pressures on team members from outside the organisation
- encourage team members to honour their family commitments encourage team members to take leave
- encourage team members to take leave and time off in lieu
- allow time off when needed and unpaid leave if requested create a work-life balance culture
- monitor health and wellbeing
- establish effective communication
- actively intervene if you feel individuals are doing too much

- look actively for signs of stress, overwork and presenteeism
- promote a guilt-free environment with regard to work hours
- avoid unnecessarily pressurising your team exhibit a caring attitude
- coach through difficult situations
- trust people
- understand individual needs
- monitor the number of additional hours worked and the reasons for them
- encourage staff not to work at weekends or do excessive evening work workload management
- prioritise workloads
- encourage development in time management and participation in stress/wellbeing courses
- provide extra cover when it is needed
- avoid delegating excessive workloads
- set realistic expectations role model
- role-model work-life balance as much as possible
- try, whenever possible, to leave on time yourself

SOURCE: ROFFEY PARK INSTITUTE