

Work-Life Balance

A Balanced Life – Working Healthily and More Successfully

For many years “work life balance” has been an important topic of discussion in North America, now it has become one in Europe also. The need to reconcile professional or working life with life outside work is now much more than just wishful thinking. Identifying solutions to this challenge now represents one of the crucial strategic success factors – for the workers in our ever more demanding world of work, and for the employers who are operating in an ever tougher and more competitive environment. A higher quality of life and greater satisfaction are preconditions for worker commitment and productivity and these lead to additional company benefits in the area of staff loyalty and recruitment. Taken as a whole these factors speak in favour of a corporate strategy which offers a strong work life balance for healthy employees in healthy enterprises.

The importance of a balanced relationship between work and private life must not be underestimated, particularly as it involves not only the individual, but also his or her family and friends. Special significance is also given at a societal level of the difficulty of reconciling the contrasting needs of global competitiveness, citizen well-being and national health.

What does work-life conflict look like?

There are a number of constellations and life realities which do not make it easy for employees to reconcile the variety of demands they face. For example, signs of role overload arise when there is too little time for the things that need to be done; or competing role demands and expectations (family – work – career) (role interference) can only be reconciled with great difficulty. Additional private responsibilities – such as looking after children and dependants (parenting, eldercare) – as well as financial difficulties may exacerbate the conflict even more.

Studies show that within an organisation factors such as excessive workloads, caused by factors such as downsizing, and an inability to plan and set priorities effectively; a lack of support from the supervisor (non-supportive management) as well as a corporate culture which focuses more on working hours, money or the strict separation of the different areas of life (culture of hours, culture of money, culture based on the myth of “separate worlds”) than on the needs of the employees, makes reconciling work and non working life even more difficult. Where the organisations own management does not set a good example, and where clear rules are missing, the employees are exposed to additional stresses.

New values – changed labour market

Issues of the reconcilability of family, private life and work in politics and industry have been gaining increasing attention since the 80s. Enabling the employees in a company to reconcile work and private life has developed in recent years into a key field of management action.

EfH Guideline – Watchpoints

1

The work-life balance is an important core area of a corporate culture based on partnership. The relevant issues no longer deal solely with the needs of mothers and families but increasingly with the social responsibility and private ties of all employees throughout their working lives. Companies which recognise and respect the needs of their employees at different stages in life are best positioned and prepared to meet the challenges of the changing world of work.

2

Corporate strategies to improve the work-life balance should take specific national and regional circumstances into account. Sociodemographic changes as well as changes in the labour market situation have an impact on the make-up of the workforce in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, family, health and lifestyle. These differences create different individual needs to which strategies to improve the work-life balance must respond.

3

Companies can organize a broad range of external support mechanisms providing care and other resources to specific needs of the workforce. If these activities are to have a substantial impact on important business targets (retention, recruitment, employee motivation and performance), they must be grounded on culture change which adopts a partnership approach. Furthermore, for work-life balance to be implemented successfully it needs to be an integral part of the management system. Only on this basis can investments in work-life balance be seen to be contributing to the business case. Finally, work-life balance practices should not only consider balance in terms of employees and their families but also consider the wider impact on society and the environment. Companies who facilitate the involvement of their employees in community activities not only demonstrate their social responsibility but also strengthen social networks in a wider sense, in turn contributing to a higher level of employability of the workforce.



“Research clearly shows that work-life policies have an impact on retention, motivation and productivity.”

Gisela Erler, pme Familienservice GmbH,
Germany

The need to develop work-life balance concepts emerged throughout Europe in the early 90s when an increasing number of well qualified women entered the labour market. And the increasing desire of many men for committed fatherhood and that of single people for more space for their private lives contributed towards this development. Accordingly, work-life balance relates to all target groups in a company – women and men, couples and singles, those with care responsibilities and those without.

Moreover, the labour and recruitment market is becoming increasingly challenging for companies. The lack of skilled workers and executives is ever more widespread and in times when people-related factors such as innovation capability, creativity, experience and commitment are increasingly important, special activities are in demand to support and increasingly exploit this employee potential. In this respect, achieving balance between work and private life can improve an organisations profile in a competitive labour market (war of talents) and enables employers to become employers of choice for highly qualified and skilled workers. Giving work life balance its proper place in the organisation of work can make a significant contribution to retention issues, and as evidence from a number of surveys shows, the reconcilability of work and private life is one of the crucial criteria used by high potential, prospective employees, when choosing an organisation to join.

The relevance of the issue is highlighted by the recent flood of publications and events, the strong demand for company practice to evolve quickly and the growth in individual coaching in consultancy practice. New approaches for the reconcilability of work and leisure, time management etc. are being developed with top priority. And that for good reason!

Why invest in work-life balance?

An imbalance between work and private life leads to employees experiencing very specific stressful situations with negative health consequences. A lack of reconcilability, however, ultimately impacts not only on the employees but in many respects also on the success of the employers.

The reasons why profit-oriented companies include strategies on work-life balance in their corporate culture and actively invest in this field are many and varied, but are underpinned by empirical studies. These demonstrate that in addition to benefiting the recruitment of staff, linked most strongly to the much-sought-after “high potential” prospective employees, there are also benefits with regard to existing staff. Savings are achieved through lower staff fluctuation as, for example, parents can be won back to work after taking time out to raise a family.

The employees are more motivated and productive, showing greater flexibility and “inner absence” can be prevented. Levels of sickness absence in the company fall, partly owing to the genuine drop in stress, e.g. through childcare possibilities, and partly due to the higher degree of loyalty towards the employer.

The image of a company that also discharges its social responsibility gains in attraction in society and among customers and shareholders.

More balance through greater flexibility

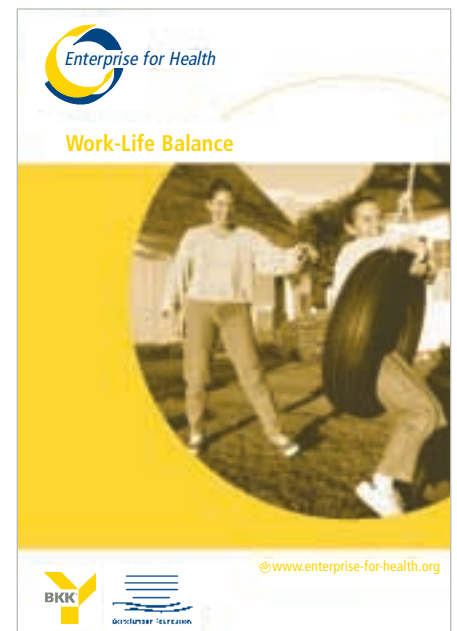
Work-life balance strategies are varied and, depending on the company, target and needs-oriented. Possible activities and action fall into the fields of work design, human resources and health policy. They primarily serve to increase work flexibility and promote the desired work life balance balance and therefore reduce stressors and strengthen resources.

Work-life balance activities include for example:

- ▶ flexible working hours (e.g. flexitime, part time, annual/life working time accounts, release programmes such as special holidays, sabbaticals)
- ▶ flexible place of work (e.g. working from home and teleworking)
- ▶ flexible design of work processes and work content (e.g. team formation, job sharing, job rotation)
- ▶ provision of financial and social support (e.g. providing childcare, care arrangements for family members in need of care/eldercare, childcare and child bonus allowances, household/concierge services)
- ▶ qualifications to encourage work-life balance and staff development (incl. management development and career design) (e.g. reintegration programmes, support for women, management training, coaching, mentoring)
- ▶ stress management (time and self-management), health circles, workplace and sport programmes.

“Culture change means that work-life policies are strongly supported from the top-down and are regarded as an integral part of management with setting and communicating clear goals.”

Gisela Erler, pme Familienservice GmbH,
Germany



The EfH brochure
Work-Life Balance

is available for downloading at
www.enterprise-for-health.org