



Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



Does this sound familiar? To get ahead, employees must show their dedication to getting the job done at all costs to demonstrate their support for the organization and their teammates.

For a long time, statements like this favoured employers. The implication was that employees should be willing to make significant personal sacrifices to prove their loyalty, which in turn would hopefully secure recognition and success at work. Instead, it's had the unfortunate effect of leaving many workers exhausted, burnt out, anxious, and depressed. The cost of such beliefs is profound, creating a cycle of unhealthy patterns that affect people's social, physical, and mental health. Organizationally, the consequences of this kind of philosophy appear as productivity lapses, presenteeism, and absenteeism. In workplaces where this ideology prevails, the bar to measure success always increases, and it remains just out of reach for many.

Today's employees have shifted away from the kind of "get-ahead" mindsets favoured by employers. As a result, the employment market continues to evolve rapidly. Employees are more decisive, clear, and open about what they are willing to give to an employer. Employees experiences during the pandemic have emphasized the need for classifying work as one aspect of their lives. Now, they expect employers to be supportive of different approaches that offer more flexibility that will finally deliver on the somewhat elusive promise of work-life balance. Savvy, responsive employers are re-engineering their HR policies and practices, providing that flexibility, while also operating with transparency and authenticity to hold themselves accountable for taking sincere actions that will help them attract and retain employees over the longer term.

The importance of work-life balance

Work-life balance has been a constant in business terminology for decades. It evolved from the need for women who had entered the workforce to seek more flexible schedules to reduce the stress of managing their careers, raising families, and finding time to live more fully. After 50 years, it's now seen as a marker of assessing whether an organization has a healthy work environment. But companies are still struggling to develop a culture that advocates this philosophy. Organizations must have the courage to do a lot of honest self-reflection to achieve a proper work-life balance. As Janet Pogue McLaurin, a global workplace researcher, said, "the best work environment can be found in organizations that are willing to actually listen to their employees and adapt to their needs and wants. Too often, companies rely on shortcuts that claim to tell them what workers really want and how they can easily deliver it. In the process, most companies totally miss the point."¹

"The Great Resignation" has shown how vital developing work-life balance must be since employees are more willing to leave an organization when the practice is not implemented sincerely. There has been a radical shift in the job market, and many employers still struggle to find workers to fill roles. However, organizations that demonstrate progress with how work gets done attract workers in droves. A big point of contention is employers insisting that employees return to physical workspaces after many companies rapidly pivoted to remote work arrangements during the most intense days of the COVID-19 Pandemic. In most cases, employees proved that remote work was equally productive, despite needing to juggle home-schooling, childcare, and compete for bandwidth within their household Internet connections. However, the time savings realized in not needing to commute, reductions in expenses for transportation, clothing, and meals, plus the flexibility in managing their households during a broader window offered a glimpse into how remote work showed efficiencies on both sides of the work equation. For companies, the benefits included more focused attention, better mindfulness for staff, reduced workplace stress and improved motivation. Workers also benefited from improved physical, emotional and mental health.

How else has the Pandemic affected work-life balance?

While remote work has tangible benefits, challenges have arisen because merging job duties and home lives into one

location means that lines and boundaries can blur. Often, and especially for women, there are heavier workloads on all fronts; keeping up with the demand of their jobs, having kids at home, and frequently taking the lead in managing care for aging parents.² Benefits Canada magazine recently shared some poignant results from MetLife Inc.'s annual U.S. employee benefit trends survey in 2021: workers across all age groups are experiencing burnout, anxiety, and depression.³

The survey further revealed a few generational differences in defining and preserving work-life balance are divided between younger and older workers⁴:

- 51% of U.S. employees surveyed who were in their 20s reported having improved work-life balance than before the pandemic
- Only ¼ of older employees, baby boomers, said the same
- 67% of Gen Z, 52% of millennials, and 52% of Gen X workers expressed concern about their social well-being
- Again, ¼ of baby boomers said they were also concerned

However, there were areas of consensus amongst all employees who responded.

- 80% of employees want remote work to continue post-pandemic
- Roughly half of employees stated that "they're working outside of their normal work hours more often now than before the pandemic."⁵

In Canada, the Ontario government recently introduced legislation to help employees achieve better work-life balance. Bill 27, the "Working for Workers Act," signals a shift in policies and can be directly attributed to the effect that remote work during the Pandemic has had on people. One of the critical pillars of the legislation offers relief for workers who have felt obligated to be more available to their employers because of the flexibility remote work offers. This employee-friendly change allows employees to disconnect after their regular workday "not engaging in work-related communications, including emails, telephone calls, video calls or the sending or reviewing of other messages, so as to be free from the performance of work."⁶

Innovative approaches that organizations can take to support work-life balance

Employers willing to explore different approaches can make significant gains in differentiating from competitors. Here are a few innovations that your organization might consider exploring:

- Encourage breaks and be supportive of time off to recharge. It will demonstrate how your organization endorses physical and mental well-being for all employees.

Regardless of where people work, taking a break to stretch and walk is good for business. Ideally, people who complete desk work should take a short break to walk or even a “30-second microbreak” several times throughout the day.⁷ The benefits are significant. People will get physical exercise, gain insight from clearing their minds of stress, plus be more focused and creative.

People eating at their desks should be a red flag for any workplace. Working through lunch or eating at a desk are strong indicators that people feel overworked and stressed because they have too much to attend to. Employees should be encouraged to take lunch breaks away from their desks and socialize with others.

The work will get done, and the organization will benefit from the higher quality output, and a healthier, happier workforce.

- **Shift the focus from hours of work to productivity and results.**

Trust your employees to know when they are most productive and let them use that strength as an organizational superpower. There will be times when they may need to invest more time to complete a task, and they will do so, but there will also be times when they've accomplished a lot in less than a total of eight hours, and it would be more productive for them to begin something new the next day.

A Stanford research study found that “after employees work 50 hours or more,” productivity drops dramatically. For workers who put in 55 hours or up to 70 hours in a work week, researchers found that “they don't produce anything more with the additional hours.”⁸

- **Consider extending flexibility for where people can work.**

It demonstrates trust and validates why you selected them to join your organization. Employees feel valued when employers allow workers to manage their time and complete their work where they need to.

- **Explore alternatives to a standard 5-day work week without cutting pay.**

There have been many trials of alternate work weeks in the public and private sectors worldwide. Several countries advocate for a reduced work week after realizing the economic benefits during formal tests.

For example, over four years, Iceland conducted many large-scale trials of a 4-day work week across various employers. The results showed that productivity was either unaffected or improved, and employees involved felt less stressed and could achieve better work-life balance.⁹

Tips for managers to encourage/support work-life balance

Employees look to their managers to model behaviours that endorse good work-life balance. Here are some tips that managers can implement in their practices:

- Set expectations with clients that demonstrate support for employees.
- As a leader, set boundaries and lead by example to show employees that it's fine to turn off their work lives at the end of the workday.
- Provide more flexibility for employees who are supporting children or aging parents.
- Regularly review workloads.
- Encourage open dialogue with employees about the things that would be helpful and create a better work-life balance.
- Recognize and appreciate individual differences and offer accommodations because there isn't one solution that will work well for everyone.

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