

Guilt-Free Work Life Balance

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Originally appeared in The Vancouver Sun October 21st, 2006, as "Keeping Staff Safe and Well Is Worth Effort"

Feeling guilty?

Most people do when they struggle to balance their work, family and personal lives. Something always seems to get short shrift. Maybe it's your spouse or kids. Or, your best friend doesn't see you anymore and you can't remember the last time you got to the gym or visited your grandmother. And to top it all off, you have to work another weekend just to catch up.

Canadians work an average of 50 hours a week and more of us are juggling aging parents, children and increasingly complex, high-stress jobs.

To add to the difficulty, labour shortages across many sectors are making people feel overwhelmed by the demands of work, family and other responsibilities.

However, there is hope in some progressive organizations. Psychologically healthy workplaces where strong values guide workplace relations and where accountability is shared across the organization tend to find gains in performance and profitability.

There are several factors essential in the creation of a psychologically healthy workplace. And companies that target these fair better than those that neglect organizational well-being. For example, the American Psychological Association (APA) indicates that focusing on involving employees, keeping them safe and well, attending to their growth and development and recognizing their efforts, reduces absenteeism and turnover, lowers injury rates, and results in fewer grievances and less sickness. Plus, efforts to help employees combine their work, family and personal lives further contains costs and helps organizations retain valuable talent.

There are four ways organizations can do this:

1. Help With Child Rearing Responsibilities

Companies that help families look after their children are employers of choice. Providing childcare assistance can run from giving information about obtaining quality child care to offering onsite daycare. Helping people pay for child care through assistance plans or covering activity fees for after-school care can help. For example, one company required staff to make phone calls to clients in the evening. In return for the stress of calling when dinner and parenting duties beckoned, the company helped parents by paying for child care during those hectic times.

Organizations also offer employees parenting tips and advice through speakers, lunch-and-learn sessions and access to parent-oriented reading material. Advice on parenting a teenager, help with the “terrible two’s” or how to work with your child’s school are topics that parents enjoy discussing.

2. Recognize the Needs of Elderly Parents

The “sandwich” generation finds itself managing children and parents concurrently. This can be stressful when these duties are not recognized as time consuming and necessary. Employers who offer referrals to resources involved in elder care can assist staff greatly. For example, helping staff to place a parent in quality elder-care facilities can be appreciated. Providing financial assistance programs for in-home caregivers or names and numbers of support people and programs are ways employers can help staff. Providing employees with information about what to expect when parents age, what medical issues may arise and the appropriate resources to help is key. For example, understanding Alzhiemers Disease, arthritis or prostate cancer and care can help staff involved in the medical lives of the elderly.

3. Provide Flexible Work Arrangements

Allowing staff to find ways to get the job done without punching a time clock or sitting at a desk for set periods is important. Working from home is a solution, as are varying start and end times. Workers experience more control over their lives when they can fit work, into their lives and their lives into their work.

The most beneficial practice that companies can offer is giving people flexibility in the number of hours worked in a week. Research shows that having control over hours worked gives an even greater sense of control than when one starts the day. Organizing one's time to get the job done well rather than being measured by how much time you spend at your desk helps staff balance work and life.

One staff person in a creative position got into trouble when his boss found out that he spent time in his day wandering around the streets. When asked how this was considered "working", the employee described a whole new branding idea he came up with on one of his morning walkabouts.

Coming in later if the baby was up all night or taking phone calls at home can decrease stress and give people a sense of control over their lives. While this may contradict the idea of placing strict boundaries around one's home and work time, nowadays, throwing the baseball with the kids then answering a few e-mails is more the norm and a less rigid way of living.

4. Offering Life Skills and Family Support

Helping employees balance work and life can mean assisting staff with their financial lives or personal issues. For example, aiding staff in how to save for a house, invest or stick to a budget can make a big difference. Also, when people encounter personal problems, an effective employee and family assistance program is key. Stress is greatly reduced when one's financial and personal life is balanced.

You may notice that your company helps staff balance work and life effectively or fits the other criteria for a psychologically healthy workplace. If this is the case please contact us for an application form for the 2007 Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award given by the British Columbia Psychological Association. The deadline for applications is January 31st, 2007

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