Maintaining Work-Life Balance: A Pragmatic Approach

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Abstract

As the traditional way of living life gives way to modern lifestyle, the quality of living life everyday has reduced. We have less and less time for things and people whom we actually care about. Life has become more about running around and getting things done on time rather than enjoying them. People especially in the metros, working in corporate world are experiencing this more and more. Organizations too are working towards solving this problem and offering options that provide a balance between work and life such as employee benefits like child care facilities, video conferencing to reduce travel, not scheduling work events during school holidays and so on. This paper focuses on challenges people in corporate jobs face towards maintaining the work life balance and what is the most pragmatic approach to achieve this balance.

Keywords: Work life balance, Stress, Modern Lifestyle

Introduction

Here are some of the real life instances of people who symbolize the problem of maintaining work life balance.

Kavan, 34, has been working as software architect with a major IT company at Gurgaon for the last ten years. During all these years, he has travelled to various countries across the globe in different continents. To begin with, he was enjoying but trouble started when he got married. He was not around when his first child was born nor was he around when he started learning to walk. He was not able to enjoy the time his second child was growing up. Home meant a place where he could just come back, eat and sleep. Personal relationships with kids, wife, parents and other extended family were seriously affected. Around this time, he developed IBS, a severe health problem i.e. Irritable Bowel Syndrome, the prime reason of which is stress. He had to resign from his job finally to take a break. He is now looking for other “stress
free” alternatives which might not give him the same financial level but will surely give him some mental peace.

Geeta, 31, a banker who had to quit her job after her second child was born, is confused how she will manage the job if she wants to rejoin even if she takes the option to work from home. She feels even working from home is too difficult when one has to look after two kids.

Deepali, 38, HR Consultant, feels she is running at top speed all the time, as managing the kitchen in the morning and reaching work on time. Managing a team of 150 people at office and then coming back just in time to be there for the children in the evening for their homework is quite taxing. She feels she is doing at least four tasks at the same time, all the time. She would love to give up her job to be there more for her children. She has not been able to enjoy the bliss of her motherhood. At times, she feels guilty of not being able to look after her fairly well.

Gaurav, 35, another IT professional is grappling with severe cervical pain in his back which requires long treatment. This he feels is the result of travelling, sitting in front of computers and work related stress that comes along with this job.

One thing that is common with most people like the ones cited above is, “Stress”. Stress is defined as, “a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances”. Aspirations and expectations are high which exert even more pressure on the mind and cause stress and stress related problems related to physical and mental health, relationships and lifestyle. It becomes difficult for the people to find time for their own self, their loved ones and the people who are important to them. This causes an imbalance between work and personal life and stress-related disorders, like loss of sleep and other illnesses. This problem is growing with the modern lifestyle. It is common among all types of professions and this paper will attempt to highlight the reasons for the same in the Indian corporate.

What is Work Life Balance?
The English Dictionary[1] defines Work Life Balance (hereafter WLB) as, “the amount of time you spend doing your job compared with the amount of time you spend with your family and doing things you enjoy. It can be difficult to get the right work-life balance.” It is an individual’s ability to meet their work and family commitments, as well as other non-work responsibilities and activities [2] for achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains [3]. It is a two way process involving a consideration of the needs of employees as well as those of employers [4]. WLB is also defined as satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with minimum of role conflict [5] and the absence of unacceptable levels of conflict between work and non-work demands [6].

The concept of work-life balance has gained enormous attention in companies, families and individuals. As people are recognizing the lack of work life balance in their lives, they are also realizing that this may be the reason for dissatisfaction from
work, non-genuine work absence and general lack of interest towards work [7]. Juggling between work and other non-work priorities means either the personal life suffers or the professional one, leading to dissatisfaction and stress.

**WLB situation in India**

Indian demographics highlight this fact that India will soon have a fifth of the world’s working-age population [8]. It urgently needs to provide them with better jobs and overall life. The current system of our society puts a lot of stress on an individual first to get educated from elitist of the institutions. And secure most lucrative pay packages. The more lucrative the pay package is, the more demanding is it on the time and energy of an individual. Then there is again more pressure to get married and get into the family life cycle. It becomes more difficult when there are kids in the family who have to be educated and ageing parents who need to be looked after as well. Professions are very demanding and a low performance can mean a delay in promotion and further additional benefits.

Below are the experiences of people working in corporate jobs:

- The occupational satisfaction increases and dissatisfaction decreases with age of the person and it coincides with the development in the life cycle [9].
- The continuing evolution of communication technologies has freed workers from the confines of a particular workplace, allowing them to work just about anywhere, anytime making them, the ‘portable humanoid office’ [10]. But the boundaries that separated work from other spheres of life have disappeared.
- However, for knowledge and information workers, for those that can use these new e-technologies the boundaries between work and home become even weaker [11].
- Even though working from home is often portrayed as a solution to work-life balance, Hislop and Axtell [12] found in their review of the literature that it was often contradictory and ambiguous and it may depend upon the number of hours individuals are working and the need to extend work into one’s home space.
- People in the working age group feel they have little time for recreation or socializing and almost no time to be involved as active citizens in the community. As parents with young children, this is a time in their lives when combining work and family responsibilities will probably be the most difficult for them.
- For women as compared to men, work encroaches into their homes [13]. The Indian family system is favorably inclined towards men meaning that it is not expected (and even considered to be the pride of the family that its men do not work at home) from the men in the family to participate in the household chores when they have to go to work or come back [14]. But the same is not true for the women. Adding to house work, women have to look after the children’s education, well-being etc.
It is hereby important to also acknowledge that a woman has various roles to play [15]. Even the women who are not mothers have significant responsibilities too. Men on the other hand have totally different set of responsibilities. But one thing that is common is that all of us are practicing multiple identities. Organisations are indeed using gender neutral terms but the effectiveness depends on wider cultural changes in the society as a whole.

Besides, review of research studies both in India and abroad have revealed that some of the most common problems arising out of work life imbalance are hearing ailments, sleeping disorders, depression, digestive system related problems, discipline and behavioral issues, detachment from the family, changing & increasing work pressures, eyesight problems, hearing ailments, among others.

Is this problem different for India?
As a developing economy, Indian workforce is facing fierce competition. Due to the liberalization, privatisation and globalization, the workforce of India are always under pressure. Apart from this, the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and the increased level of female participation in the workforce add complexity while balancing paid work and personal life. Stress is also increased by feeling the pressure to stand up with the increased global competition as more corporates go global and online. This is even more with the young population and the off shoring style of jobs. Hence, it is crucial that the workforce of India have to be given work-life balancing programs to balance their paid work and their personal life.

Managing Work Life Balance
There’s no ‘one size that fits all’. But the most pragmatic approach to manage work life balance would include combination of ‘family-friendly’ employer policies, such as flexible working hours, working from home and state assisted nursery places but there may be other practices as well from the employer which may be equally beneficial to attain the same [16]. Despite the juggling act that they have to perform, many seem to be finding spaces during which they felt their lives were not too unbalanced. To achieve this desired state, most had to erect firm boundaries around their paid work to keep it ‘in its box’ so that they could lead somewhat healthy lives.

- Fleximoms—is an alternative for women with kids to take care of, to work part time from home for a few hours in a week. It is a recruitment portal providing a platform to such women to choose work according to their convenience.
- Corporates offer work from home and they also save money on infrastructure, seat, travel, parking etc besides being beneficial for the employees.
- People are taking career breaks, go on sabbatical to try out new things that are more relaxed.
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- BPO’s have odd office shifts leading to sleep disorders and distance from family
- Making the working environment more attractive
- Improvements to the working environment can boost morale and help the corporate to retain valued staff. Typical techniques include:
  - free exercise classes
  - a free/subsidized canteen
  - company days out
  - childcare vouchers
  - funding/time-off for learning
- Employee’s maternity, paternity, adoption or parental leave in excess of the statutory minimum, e.g. higher pay or longer leave. These schemes give employees a measure of control over how their working lives are organized and foster greater employee loyalty and commitment.

Introducing appropriate employment practices to help employees achieve a better work/life balance. It can enable employees to feel more in control of their working life and lead to increased productivity, lower absenteeism and a happier, less stressed workforce [17]. Certain employees have the right to request flexible working. Demographic changes, including an ageing population and smaller family structures, will increase the likelihood of your employees requesting flexible working arrangements. Introducing employment policies that encourage a healthier work/life balance for your employees can bring real benefits to your business. Flexible working and work/life balance policies will also foster a more positive perception of you as an employer. This can lead to better relations with your employees and greater staff loyalty, commitment and motivation, reducing staff turnover and recruitment costs.

References

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