Work-Life Balance

Work–life balance is a concept including correct prioritising between "work" (career and ambition) and "lifestyle" (health, pleasure, leisure, family and spiritual development/meditation).

The term ‘work-life balance’ has been around since 1986 when it was first used in the United States in relation to the swathe of Americans working longer and longer hours to the detriment of their family life. Since then it has been used in the workplace to try to halt the rise of presenteeism and ever increasing working days.

The pressure of an increasingly demanding work culture in the UK is a pressing challenge to the mental health of the general population. The cumulative effect of increased working hours is having an important effect on the lifestyle of a huge number of people, (13% of the UK working population work 49 hours or more per week) which is likely to prove damaging to their mental well-being and our organisations’ reputations and economic outputs. There is concern that a sizeable group of people are neglecting the factors in their lives that make them resistant or resilient to mental health problems.

It is estimated that nearly three in every ten employees will experience a mental health problem in any one year. Our hopes, worries and priorities are carried with us at all times so when something is happening in one area of our life, it will impact all other areas, and when those things cause even the slightest anxiety, our cognitive capacity will be diminished because our brains will place a focus on the problem.

Work related stress already costs Britain 10.4 million working days per year. A key way to protect your mental health against the potential detrimental effects of work related stress is to ensure that you have a healthy work-life balance.

Amongst other findings, a recent Mental Health Foundation survey found that:

- More than 40% of employees are neglecting other aspects of their life because of work, which may increase their vulnerability to mental health problems.
- The more hours you spend at work, the more hours outside of work you are likely to spend thinking or worrying about it.
- Nearly two thirds of employees have experienced a negative effect on their personal life, including lack of personal development, physical and mental health problems, poor relationships and poor home life.
Take Action!

You can take some actions which may help to bring a little more balance to your daily routine, such as taking personal responsibility for your work-life balance; this includes speaking up when work expectations and demands are too much. Employers need to be aware of where the pressures lie in order to address them.

Ensure that you build downtime into your schedule; make a point to schedule time with your family and friends, and activities that help you recharge your batteries. Ensuring that a line is drawn between work and leisure is important; if you do need to take work home, establish a certain area of your home that you can work in and that you can close the door on.

Try to ‘work smart, not long’. This involves tight prioritisation and allowing yourself a certain amount of time per task. Try not to get caught up in less productive activities at work. Make sure that you take proper breaks at work, for example by taking at least half an hour for lunch, moving away from your work area and even getting out of the workplace if you can. If you have a hectic day, try to take a 10 or 15 minute break to do something that will regain your energy.

Take seriously the link between work-related stress and mental ill health, for example through exercise, relaxation or hobbies, all of which can help to reduce stress. So get moving! It’s hard to make time for exercise when you have a jam-packed schedule, but it may ultimately help you get more done by boosting your energy level and ability to concentrate.

Remember that a little relaxation goes a long way. Don’t assume that you need to make big changes to bring more balance to your life. Set realistic goals, like leaving the office earlier one night per week, or slowly build more activities into your schedule that are important to you. You could rethink your errands and, where you can, drop activities that sap your time or energy. Consider whether you can outsource any of your time-consuming household chores or errands, even if you’re on a tight budget, you may discover that the time you’ll save will make it worth it; for example, doing your weekly food shop online and having it delivered to you.

Ultimately, you need to recognise the importance of protective factors to your health, including exercise, leisure activities and friendships. A highly successful businessman once said “… that to succeed and be happy it is not necessary to work extra-long hours that don’t allow family time.”

Employers

Employers can also contribute to improving work–life balance, some suggestions are:

- Promote the messages about work–life balance to individuals in the workplace
- Develop policies that acknowledge the association between work-related stress and mental health
- Encourage a culture of openness about time constraints and workload. Employees must feel able to speak up if the demands placed on them are too great
- Give good training to managers so that they can spot stress, poor work–life balance and its effects on the individual. Managers should also be trained to develop better systems to protect everyone in the workplace
- Promote a culture of ‘working smart, not long’
- Audit work environments to identify elements of practice, policy or culture that may be detrimental to a healthy work–life balance
- Encourage activities that promote good mental health, for example lunchtime exercise or relaxation classes

References

http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-a-z/w/work-life-balance/
http://www.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2013/06/04/how-do-you-rate-your-work-life-balance.aspx
http://www.webmd.com/health-insurance/protect-health-13/balance-life