



WHY WORK-LIFE BALANCE ?

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As I write this article on work-life balance I am sitting in the airport waiting for my 7pm flight home to Sydney after a 10 hour day in Melbourne. My children will be asleep when I get home. I am in this predicament because I am passionate about my work, and the clients I work for. I love what I do, and can see the enormous value of the service we provide for clients. At the same time work doesn't get all of me – I am able to work from home regularly, and start late on most days so that I can drop the kids off to school.

My story reflects the complex and counter-intuitive results we've found in research with over 16,000 employees across Australia. Over the years 2002 to 2006 we looked at whether people are satisfied with their ability to balance work and other life commitments, and how important work-life balance really is for engaging and retaining staff compared to a range of other aspects of the work environment.

If you keep abreast of the frequent media reports around work-life balance, you might believe that work-life balance policies are a vital strategy for attracting and retaining talented employees. Organisations are changing the way they structure work hours and conditions to particularly capture a diverse workforce; it is most often cited as a drawcard for women, older employees, and the younger 'work to live' generation 'Y'. Indeed, we know from our own research that employers are more likely to implement work-life balance practices if they are facing a shortage of skilled labour.

However, empirical evidence from our research across thousands of employees, and our experience diagnosing drivers of engagement in client organisations, consistently reveals a different story. Looked at in isolation, yes, satisfaction with work-life balance does have a small positive effect on staff's commitment to their organisation and their intention to stay.

At the same time, highly engaged employees will sometimes sacrifice work-life balance to achieve organisational goals, especially if the organisation provides support in other ways. This 'big picture' evaluation of organisational practices tells us something much more important, that is, compared to the 28 other aspects of the work environment in our survey, work-life balance was least related to employee engagement and intention to stay. Instead, management practices such as effective change management, innovation and alignment of staff values with the mission and purpose of the organisation were much more important.

In fact, most employees (73%) reported being able to satisfactorily meet both their non-work and work responsibilities, and balance work with other aspects of their lives. In contrast, most employees were dissatisfied with the organisation's ability to provide career opportunities, to consult employees about decisions that affected them, or to share information and knowledge between different sections in the organisation. Also, work-life balance was no more important for engaging women than men. Women actually reported a slightly higher satisfaction with work-life balance due to their greater likelihood of part-time or casual employment. Although not as exciting as the current debate about generational differences, our data also showed the unsurprising finding that work-life balance is harder to achieve and more important for middle-aged employees with children, and less important for engaging single employees and under 30s (generation 'Y').

Does this mean that work-life balance is unimportant? While it is clearly not the answer to our current labour crisis, there is plenty of evidence from other research that a poor balance of work and life has negative consequences for individuals, couple relationships, children, and communities. Our research with not-for-profit organisations in particular shows that staff perceptions of organisational success are closely linked to their reputation for being ethical. To the extent that employees and their families are key stakeholders of corporations, work-life balance may be considered a key performance indicator of ethical corporate behaviour, and a core strategy for constructing and managing work in a socially sustainable way.

So what are some proven strategies that effectively support work-life balance? Our results show work-life balance is linked to:

- ▶ better management of workloads to reduce stress – long working hours are of course the highest predictor of poor work-life balance
- ▶ providing flexible work arrangements, such as flexible start and finish times, and work-from-home arrangements
- ▶ fair and supportive supervisors
- ▶ good relationships with co-workers,
- ▶ support for diversity (such as the prevention of harassment and bullying), and a concern for equal opportunity in the workplace, and
- ▶ a priority placed on safety within the workplace.

To add to the complexity, we have found that several work practices regularly employed by management to 'engage' staff can, as a side-effect, impact negatively on work-life balance. These include practices focussing on individual progress such as performance appraisal (especially if performance is linked to pay), career development and involvement in decision-making. While these practices can bring financial and career rewards, they can also induce pressure to work long and intensively.

Managers need to examine the relationship between their work-life balance policies and other work practices. For example, many employees believe that they are less likely to get ahead in their careers if they use flexible workplace arrangements, or they use their flexibility to spend more time working. It may be that reward and performance appraisal systems need to more accurately reflect performance outcomes (rather than time in the office), while participation and involvement in decision-making needs to be facilitated for all employees. A more considered approach to impact of such policies will reduce the impact of diversity, increase employee engagement and retention, and flow on to greater satisfaction with work-life balance.

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The good news for not-for-profit organisations is that work and life need not be so opposed. In fact, creating work-life alignment through congruent goals and values is strongly related to satisfaction and engagement. If managed in a socially responsible way, our research suggests there is room for a more positive integration of work and life to allow the cross-pollination of values, passions, interests and abilities between life and work domains.

If you are interested in reading more of Voice Project's research on work-life balance, please see our article in the current issue of *Journal of Management & Organization*. ■