

Escaping the sound and the fury



INDIVIDUALS, CORPORATES AND POLICYMAKERS MAY PAY LIP SERVICE TO IT, BUT HOW MANY ORGANISATIONS REALLY PROMOTE WELLBEING AMONG STAFF AND HOW CAN INDIVIDUALS ENSURE THEIR ESSENTIAL NEEDS ARE MET? JANICE HADDON SUGGESTS SOME STARTING POINTS

Work-life balance seems to be a hot topic at the moment and something many regard as an unobtainable goal in the 24/7 culture most of us now live in.

In recent research conducted by Morgan Redwood, helping employees achieve a good work-life balance is seen as low down on the list of priorities for UK HR departments, as the focus is now on recruiting top talent for the business, a view that's supported by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's *Labour Market Outlook: Spring 2015*. However, the same Morgan Redwood research revealed that the majority of businesses regard a good work-life balance as the top morale influencer for employees. Why is there such a mismatch between what organisations focus on compared to what employees are asking for?

Research and management reports produced since time immemorial show that motivated employees maximise their performance and therefore bring benefits to the bottom line. The Morgan Redwood 2015 research underlines this, with organisations that do pay attention to work-life balance and the wellbeing of their staff gaining 27% higher net earnings per employee than those organisations that do not. So why is it that a lot of organisations don't seem to be getting it right? Is it a lack of focus and care or is it that we're not sure how to get it right so it becomes easier to ignore the problem and focus on what we do know how to fix?

The cost of sickness absence through lost productivity, replacing staff and pressure on those covering for absent colleagues is a continuing concern. In

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many countries, a lack of work-life balance combined with pressure and stress is having a major impact and is responsible for high rates of sickness absence and poor mental health. In the UK, four in 10 employees are estimated to suffer from some form of mental ill health in any one year, with the forecast set to rise. Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer for England, states that there's been a 24% rise in the number of days lost to stress, depression and anxiety since 2009.¹ Estimates suggest that this equates to 70 million working days lost to mental illness, which is a staggering £100bn loss to the UK economy.

Daily pressures

For us to attain a positive work-life balance, we need to personally have the right energy and resilience. That means not only keeping the

areas of our work and life in balance, but also keeping ourselves in positive health. Taking the World Health Organization's definition, health is not just the absence of disease or infirmity, but a positive state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing. A healthy working environment, therefore, is one where there is not only an absence of harmful conditions, but also where there is an abundance of health-promoting ones.

It is also important to not confuse pressure and stress. We all have daily pressures in our lives and working under pressure is an unavoidable occurrence for many of us. Pressure can be what keeps us going and motivates us to do things. It is when we exceed our personal capacity to cope that those pressures can become stressful. The physical impact of stress has proven links to lack of

concentration, low tolerance levels, irritation and poor communication, as well as many other things, including bad decision-making – none of which are good for individuals or conducive for a positive, productive working environment.

The contradiction that organisations need to negotiate is that you can recruit all the top talent in the world, but if you don't have the right policies in place with ways to keep staff happy and support them with their

performance management, review mechanisms, development, reward and recognition, family-friendly policies, teamwork, great communication mechanisms, control on working hours and leaders who genuinely understand and inspire others to perform at the top of their game rather than leaving them in stunned silence or afraid of putting their head above the parapet.

It doesn't end there, as when you have the basics right you need to get your

If you don't have the right policies in place with ways to support staff with personal wellbeing and life balance, you are unlikely to hang on to them

personal wellbeing and life balance, then you are unlikely to hang on to them. When pressure turns into stress, people leave – especially in a more buoyant economy.

So how do we attain such an illusive balance?

As an organisation, you need to get the basics right with your policies and culture. That means clear job roles, defined targets, methods of

employee engagement and wellbeing strategy right to get you ahead of the game. When you do that, you will be working alongside your employees and supporting them to find their own personal life balance. In return, you will be tapping into the unspoken psychological contract and providing a great place for them to work and perform at their best.

TOP TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS

In the workplace, ensure the demands and pressures are matched to an individual's knowledge and abilities.

Pay attention to working hours and the demands placed on employees.

Have the right policies and culture in place to set the foundation stones.

Develop your leaders with effective skills to support and inspire others.

Support employees with ways for them to be consciously aware of their own balance and wellbeing needs.

A successful balance

With such a list of things to get right, maybe it isn't surprising that a lot of organisations seem to be avoiding the subject. The truth is, when you consider the statistics on ill health and the negative impact it has on individuals and the organisation alike, you can't afford to ignore the topic any longer. Now is the time to assess where you are, establish your organisational baseline and then plan your route map through to a successful balance.

The fundamentals here are what any organisation can consider for employees, but it is also the foundation for

each of us to take personal responsibility for our own wellbeing and balance. So whether you are heading up an organisation, a department or looking out for yourself, consider the following:

The foundation for mental wellbeing is to get your essential needs met across all areas of your life. Your essential needs are:

- Being in personal control;
- Feeling safe in your environment and interactions;
- Having good communications and connection to others;
- Being appreciated for your contribution;
- Feeling competent in what you do;
- Having mental stretch and creativity; and
- Having personal space and downtime.

When more than two or three of those essential 'emotional' needs are in levels of dissatisfaction, we start feeling stressed and ultimately depressed, so find your satisfaction levels.

To continue boosting your mental resilience, give your thinking brain a rest and make time for creativity, hobbies, rest and relaxation. Get plenty of sleep as that is when your body and brain regenerate. If you cut back on your sleep you are cutting back on your resilience.

The final pieces in the personal jigsaw are healthy diet and exercise. Keep a focus on the fuel you put into your body to boost your energy. This means a balanced diet; healthy snacks of things such as nuts and protein rather than sugar and biscuits. Cut back on alcohol and caffeine, and

TOP TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS

Find your own balance of time you spend on each area of your life.

Make sure you find time for relaxation and pursuing hobbies.

Get plenty of sleep – it supports your body and mind in rest and recharge.

Switch off from your to-do list and allow yourself to recharge.

Be mindful and fully present in whatever you are doing.

Hone your communication skills and actively listen to others.

Get some exercise, drink plenty of water and make sure you put the right fuel into your body to boost your energy levels.

drink plenty of water to help flush out the toxins.

Exercise is the best thing for boosting your endorphin levels – your body's natural happy hormone. Find what works for you. It doesn't have to mean an hour in the gym; a good brisk walk will provide many benefits. Do what you can within the boundaries of your current health and plan your way into a resilient future.

Be the best you can be and make the most of every day – you never get it back. Whatever job you do, find ways to support and have a positive impact on others. The benefits are numerous. ♡

1 www.gov.uk/government/publications/chief-medical-officer-cmo-annual-report-public-mental-health

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