



Nine recommendations for moving towards a fully supportive Work-Life Balance culture.

Summary

The Families and Work Institute has developed a five stage model or the evolving business case for work-life initiatives⁽¹⁾. The start (step 1) is the provision of childcare support. Step 2 moves to a broader work-life focus, often driven by HR policies. It's only at step 3 that attention turns to changing organisational culture. Hearts and minds are won and the organisation accepts the benefits of supporting good work life balance (WLB) for everyone.

While the majority of employers would claim to support WLB, organisational initiatives are often developed piecemeal - driven by a combination of workplace legislation and operational factors. Employers wishing to build a culture fully supportive of WLB for everyone need to take a more strategic approach; and ensure the nine steps outlined below are all in place.

- 1 Start with a public commitment to supporting WLB for everybody.
- 2 Ensure transparency in HR policies. Communicate them clearly to everyone and make them accessible for future reference.
- 3 Train all managers and staff in why policies have been developed and how they should be applied.
- 4 Establish a centre of WLB expertise and a database of current organisational experience.
- 5 Take positive steps to move the organisation towards a more empowering culture based on trust.
- 6 Redesign the Performance Management/Appraisal system to support WLB.
- 7 Provide on-going support for managers and staff in the form of further training and access to technology.
- 8 Incorporate WLB into business planning.
- 9 Introduce flexible benefits.

(1) Galinsky, Ellen & Johnson, Arlene A "Reframing the Business Case for Work Life Initiatives", 1998, Families and Work Institute

1 Start with a public commitment to supporting WLB for everybody.

When the CEO drafts and signs a public statement of commitment to WLB it signals the organisation is embarking on a bigger WLB journey. Be clear about what WLB means so that everyone understands the goal they're working towards. And keep in mind that personal balance is dynamic and likely to change throughout the life course.

WLB is about more than offering flexible working to qualifying staff. Typically it's supported by three categories of policies: (1) access to appropriate flexible working arrangement for everyone (full-time or reduced hours); (2) leave provision and (3) other support for carers (e.g. information lines, publications etc.) In addition, it's essential to ensure other HR policies are compatible with individual efforts to achieve WLB.

For guidance on drafting a WLB statement, see the Appendix.

2 Ensure transparency in HR policies. Communicate them clearly to everyone and make them accessible for future reference.

Most organisations will have a number of policies designed to support WLB – for example, maternity, paternity and flexible working policies. However, staff may not always be aware of their existence so it's important to remind them regularly. Communication should include reasons for the existence of policies (clearly grounded in the business case) and the support which will be provided to ensure their success. Policies should be readily available to staff. Using the company intranet is an effective way to achieve this.

Policies and practices developed piecemeal may be contradictory. For example, while flexible working may be available, flexible development opportunities may not. To take a more strategic approach, carry out a brief audit and ensure all HR policies are both transparent and working to support each other.

3 Train all managers and staff in why the policies have been developed and how they should be applied.

All the evidence suggests the success of policies in any organisation depends on the managers required to implement and manage them. In many organisations it's common for managers to interpret policies according to their own understanding and preferences (and sometimes according to the employee involved). This situation is undoubtedly seen as unfair. It's essential that managers are given initial training in how to negotiate flexibility with staff, and how to manage the resulting situation.

Managers are likely (and justifiably so) to have concerns about the impact of flexible arrangements on themselves and the rest of their team. They need to understand the business benefits of encouraging WLB.

The most successful arrangements are where a member of staff develops his/her own business case for a different way of working, and where the organisational culture fully supports flexibility. Staff must take personal responsibility for ensuring the success of their own arrangements.

4 Establish a centre of WLB expertise and a database of current organisational experience.

Academic research into WLB has burgeoned in the past thirty years. It's a complex topic and most employers will need specialist assistance in progressing the culture and practices within their organisation. Identify one or more WLB Champions and build a database of existing expertise to inform future activities.

5 Take positive steps that move the organisation towards a more empowering culture based on trust.

The most frequent barrier to enabling more flexible working arrangements – particularly remote working – is a lack of trust. Focusing on results rather than presence in the office or number of hours worked can change this. Managers should agree clear outcomes and deadlines with subordinates, so that everyone knows what's expected of them. Within this framework it becomes easier for people to manage their working hours to meet both their work commitments and their WLB needs.

6 Redesign the Performance Management/Appraisal system to support WLB.

A performance management system based on agreed outputs and deadlines will provide support for individual WLB efforts. In addition, the system can be used to collect information about current WLB issues within the organisation as a precursor to addressing these. Alternatively, an employee survey or focus groups can be an effective means of gathering information about WLB concerns.

7 Provide on-going support for managers and staff in the form of further training and access to technology.

The inconsistent approach to flexibility adopted by managers was mentioned earlier. Reasons for this typically centre around an individual manager's circumstances and confidence in his/her ability to manage the staff involved. Managing flexible workers does require a different mix of skills from more traditional management. However, it can also be made easier by judicious application of technology. Project management and employee scheduling software can enable managers to keep track of flexible workers.

Mobile phones and call forwarding arrangements enable staff to work from any location. Internet based technologies facilitate home or remote working.

Flexibility requires commitment and understanding from staff as well as from managers. In particular, those who choose to continue working traditional arrangements should be encouraged to develop a mind-set that supports the flexibility of their colleagues. In part, this is an issue about organisational culture, but it's also important to provide everyone with appropriate tools to do their work.

8 Incorporate WLB into business planning.

All the evidence suggests that WLB initiatives are more likely to succeed where they have been fully incorporated into the business process, which begins with inclusion in the business planning cycle. It's important to stress the business benefits of supporting WLB.

An increasing amount of research evidence confirms the link between good WLB and personal health and wellbeing. It's been clearly demonstrated that negative consequences of poor WLB impact on workplace performance and the accompanying negative emotions are contagious among co-workers. Supporting WLB can also aid in the recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce with potential implications for customer service.

9 Introduce Flexible Benefits

In discussion there's often (unsurprisingly) a lack of consensus as to which WLB initiatives an employer should prioritise. While health club membership can be important for some staff, it's irrelevant for others. Similarly some staff will want paid support for carers, while others prefer more access to leave. One way to address the diversity of needs is to introduce a flexible benefits package.

Typical arrangements under such packages are that all employees receive a very basic range of benefits (some pension provision, holiday at the statutory minimum, sick pay) and are assigned a 'budget' to buy those further benefits which are of most value to them. This can include buying and selling holiday entitlement above the legal minimum, the purchase of childcare and eldercare vouchers, health club membership and the purchase of additional pension contributions. (This is not a comprehensive list). The advantages of offering a flexible benefits package are that it underlines the organisation's commitment to tailoring arrangements to individual circumstances by extending it to remuneration policy; and that employees become more aware of the true cost of individual benefits to their employer and thus tend to value these benefits more highly.

Model Work-Life Balance Policy⁽¹⁾

Our Commitment To Work-Life Balance

The Equilibrium Company is committed to supporting all employees in the achievement of work-life balance which is defined as:

“the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual’s current life priorities”⁽²⁾.

The long term success of this organisation depends, to a large extent, on the commitment, expertise, creativity; and dedication to quality and customer care of our employees. To remain competitive and successful in a changing world managers and staff must be flexible and prepared to adapt to circumstances.

We believe that our employees, regardless of age or personal circumstances, can work best when they are able to maintain a satisfactory personal balance between their paid work and other aspects of their lives. We understand that individual needs are likely to change as people progress through the life cycle and we will make available a range of flexible working arrangements and leave provision to accommodate these circumstances.

We will continue to foster a culture within this organisation which makes it acceptable for individuals to discuss openly their concerns about work-life balance.

Responsibility for the success of our work-life balance strategy lies jointly with *the Equilibrium Company* as an employer and with every employee. It is important to remember that nobody has the absolute right to work flexibly. The decision to alter working arrangements or allow a period of leave must be based on a sound business case. Along with their legal rights, it is important that both parties recognise their responsibilities to work together to create a win-win situation.

Our efforts to achieve work-life balance are supported by the following policies:

- Annual Leave
- Appraisal
- Carer’s leave
- Disability
- Employee Assistance Programme
- Flexible benefits
- Flexible working

- Health & safety (in respect of home working and mental health at work)
- Parental leave (adoption, maternity, parental, paternity)
- Right to request
- Special Leave Arrangements

The WLB Champion is: William Adams, HR department

Mary Smith

Chief Executive

- (1) Policy originally developed for the government's Work Life Balance Challenge Fund, 2000.
- (2) See Kalliath, T & Brough P "Work-life balance: A review of the meaning of the balance construct, Journal of Management & Organization (2008) 14: 323-327