

#HR Thought Leadership

Bringing Balance to the Boardroom

Three Keys to A Balanced Organisation



Work Life Integration • Gender Balance • Wellbeing

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Summary

Fostering a balanced working culture is a business imperative. In the corporate world work-life balance challenges and the lack of gender balance go hand in hand. The single biggest factor persuading professional women to “off ramp” is an inability to see how they might demonstrate an appropriate commitment to their career while taking primary responsibility for their children. Organisations struggle to contain leaky pipelines.

At the same time technology is pushing us relentlessly towards an #AlwaysOn culture. Sustaining work-life balance has become the biggest challenge on the wellbeing agenda. Good work-life balance is essential for good physical and mental health, employee engagement and retention – as evidenced by thirty years of research.

Within the HR profession we have the skills to bring balance to the boardroom. To date most organisations have been approaching these issues in a transactional manner – often in response to legislative drivers. It is time to pull the pieces together into a coherent strategy that benefits both employers and employees.

Based on my ground-breaking research and a quarter of a century supporting employers and women to rebalance their working practices I have identified the three critical keys needed to bring about a balanced organisation. These are explored in the following pages.

Key 1: A strategic approach that covers the entire employee journey.

Key 2: Leveraging current circumstances to build a balanced future.

Key 3: Understanding it’s always personal.

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Balanced Working – the 21st Century Superpower?

We're creating a world where work dominates our lives. That's not to say we're constantly working – although some of us are – but that we allow work to interrupt our non-work time and distract us from what's important. Our inability to switch off – to rebalance our working lives – has serious implications for our health and wellbeing. As employers we should be worried.

Research evidence accumulated over the last thirty years confirms that good work-life balance supports good physical and mental health; and leads to more commitment and stronger engagement at work. How can we even begin to talk about sustainable organisations unless we look at sustaining the people that comprise them?

Work-life balance challenges are not simply a wellbeing issue. They are also the single biggest factor persuading professional women to “off ramp” – whether that means holding themselves back from promotion or dropping out of careers altogether. Against this backdrop the evidence that gender balanced organisations are more profitable continues to mount.

It is widely recognised that outmoded corporate cultures often create a situation where ambitious women find themselves unable to see how they might demonstrate an appropriate commitment to their career while taking primary responsibility for children.

Culture change is a slow process best tackled with a roadmap – as I discovered when researching culture change in financial and professional organisations in the City of London.

We in the HR profession have the skills to guide change. When we take a strategic approach to balanced working we can stem those leaky pipelines that create the “missing middle”; and we mitigate existing stresses created by an #AlwaysOn culture.

The benefits of taking a strategic approach to balanced working:

1. The underlying focus is on empowering people to manage their wellbeing. This leads to improved engagement and retention. And affirms integrity by demonstrating people really are your most valuable asset.

2. With a focus on outputs and contribution jobs can be crafted so employees and the organisation can make best use of their skills. Which in turn improves productivity.
3. Managers are trained to make evidence based decisions rather than acting on emotional assumptions driven by unconscious bias or fear of losing control.
4. It safeguards talent pools. Balanced working supports other HR activities such as retention and career progression strategies.
5. An inclusive organisational culture that supports balanced working for all. Employees know they can reach senior levels while working “non-standard” arrangements.



KEY 1: A strategic approach that covers the entire employee journey

1. Talented women need flexibility to progress their careers

Research conducted in 2016 revealed that almost two million people currently in part-time roles are stuck below their skills level. At the same time, only six per cent of vacancies are advertised on a flexible basis – mostly at junior grades.

This has a particular impact on women - who generally bear the burden of caring responsibilities and who require more flexibility in career paths as a consequence. Women are likely to forgo promotion opportunities because of concerns about managing their work life balance.

Offering flexibility at senior levels is the key to retaining talent and supporting women's careers.

2. Embed flexibility in all policies, grades and jobs

Telstra - a leading Australian telecoms and technology company – began a pioneering initiative several years ago when they declared #AllRolesFlex. The results suggest an improvement in their attraction and retention of women. Supporting this type of flexibility requires equipping people with the skills and tools to create quality flexible jobs.

Faced with irreconcilable work life balance challenges it's been my experience that most women fix the problem in one of two ways. They either leave the corporate world or they move themselves onto "mommy track" jobs. Either way their skills are lost – sometimes irretrievably. In many instances they don't ask for flexibility in a current role or when considering promotion. The corporate culture has signalled this is not possible.

It's not enough to simply review recruitment and maternity policies. A clean sweep of other policies is also needed – in particular those around promotion and development. How easy is it for women with caring responsibilities to gain the necessary experience to progress in your organisation? Is it possible to work less than full-time and still be promoted? Your approach to headcount is also essential. Allowing managers to structure roles as FTE enables the development of flexible jobs.

3. Review working practices and cultural expectations

Many organisational cultures retain deeply embedded unconscious biases around flexible working. When coupled with biases against working mothers (not likely to be committed to career; likely to want a “softer” option where they can put family first) this will inevitably hold many women back.

Organisations are coming to understand that tackling unconscious bias is challenging. But given they are constantly adapting to change, addressing outmoded and ineffective working practices that stand in the way of women’s progress is likely to be easier. Despite massive changes in the nature of work, and the way it can be done, organisational practices developed half a century ago often remain unchallenged. Beliefs that are deeply embedded into organisational cultures continue to propagate the myth that people must choose between a career or a balanced life.

For example, I recently spoke with a senior manager at one of the major banks. She returned from maternity leave on a reduced hours basis – in line with their policy – but struggles with senior manager meeting where the expectation is that socialising will continue into the evening. Shifting the focus to socialising at lunchtime would enable her to go home to her daughter at the end of the day instead of having to stay away overnight.

Moving from a culture that perpetuates long working hours and presenteeism to one that focuses on outputs or results enables the crafting of jobs that make the best use of skills and support better balance.

Taking Action

- Introduce a policy of #AllRolesFlex
- Use the strapline “Happy to Talk Flexible Working” developed by Working Families on all job adverts – and encourage third parties working on your behalf (such as recruitment consultancies) to do the same.
- Upgrade your Inclusion and Wellness functions by appointing a Head of Balanced Working, Wellbeing and Inclusion (see Appendix II) to drive a strategic approach.

KEY 2: Leveraging current circumstances to build a balanced future

1. Identify what's already going on 'under the radar'

It's been my experience that a lot more is going on under the radar in many organisations than people realise. And when it comes to flexible working it's often good news. When working with corporate clients I begin by getting managers together to build a database of expertise. Who is already managing informal flexible working arrangements? Or working flexibly themselves? Summarising this internal knowledge creates a powerful resource for the organisation.

Publicising role models working non-standard arrangements is another powerful way to change thinking. Particularly where those role models are working at senior levels and clearly achieving key corporate goals.

Once you've explored your current reality it becomes a springboard to set and achieve new targets. Internal experience to date will also help identify stumbling blocks – for example, a need for better training or support.



2. Build on success with a positive approach

Since the turn of the century Positive Psychology has made more and more tools available for driving effective organisational change. Two that I particularly favour in my work are Appreciative Inquiry and Solutions Focus.

Appreciative Inquiry is a positive approach that aims to identify positive organisational practices. Even where it seems people are struggling with work-life balance, asking “when or where do we see it happening well?” can identify potential on which to build.

Solutions Focus asks: “what would it look like if it was working well? How would we know?” It bypasses tendencies to become locked in analysing what’s going wrong and focuses on how people can take small steps to improve the situation.

A good place to start is by identifying quick wins – things that people can do within existing policies, with a little more HR support and without the need for detailed or expensive changes.

3. Aim for empowerment rather than ‘equality’

When I attend events around supporting women there’s often talk about making corporate processes fairer to them by eradicating biases etc. Some of this becomes complex and convoluted. Providing people with parameters within which they can work and supporting the behaviours that result is often more effective.

A simple statement that all roles will be open to flexibility together with credible role models (employees promoted while working non-standard arrangements for example) is very powerful.

When people are given the tools to define and manage their balance within a culture that fosters a mature attitude to discussion they become empowered to craft productive and supportive working arrangements.

Taking Action

- Establish what’s already going on “under the radar”. Ask questions as part of your regular employee engagement survey, run focus groups, enlist the help of internal networks.
- Use positive psychology to build on current successes and create a new vision for the future.
- Aim for empowerment over “fairness”.

KEY 3: Understanding it's always personal

1. Work-Life Balance preferences differ – and may change over the life course

Professor Ellen Ernst Kossek is a world-leading work-life balance expert and the developer of the 'flexstyles' model. This groups people into categories based on how they manage work and non-work boundaries; and on where their priorities lie. These preferences are likely to change as we navigate our life course. In Ellen's view preferences are less important than whether an individual feels in control of her boundaries. It's the lack of control that is likely to impact wellbeing.

In any organisation employees will have a range of styles so it's essential to create a mature culture that supports individual preferences.

Work-life balance researchers talk about 'recovery' – the opportunity to disengage from work and refresh ourselves. As technology pushes employees to be always available we must be aware of the detrimental impact on health and the resulting loss in quality of outputs.

2. Job Crafting provides the means to make the most of skills

Job crafting is defined as: *"A set of techniques to reconfigure elements of your job for greater engagement and meaning."*

Research has shown that job crafting can boost employee happiness and creativity.

Professor Amy Wrzesniewski has identified three forms of crafting: Task, Cognitive and Relational and suggests the best results occur when people use all three together.

When it comes to supporting women through the talent pipeline, job crafting makes sense as it focuses on best use of limited employee time and maximum use of key skills. Crafting can also provide a way for high potential managers to create time for strategic thinking.



3. Treat managing work-life balance as a competency

Managing one's work life balance – and enabling that of subordinates – is best seen as a competency. And as with other competencies people need training and tools to achieve optimum results. Both my Balanced Leader Programme and my Balanced Leader Bespoke coaching/mentoring have been developed with this in mind.

Taking Action

- Treat managing work-life balance as a competency. Provide relevant training and tools.
- Equip people with the skills to craft quality flexible jobs. I offer a one day masterclass based on my corporate HR history and in depth work-life balance expertise. See page 16 for further details.
- Establish a culture that supports wellbeing for all; and which recognises that work-life balance preferences are personal and dynamic.

Balanced working : the ROI

In our high pressure fast paced corporate environments there's sometimes a mistaken belief that supporting work-life balance is a luxury we cannot afford. Nothing could be further from the truth and the evidence for the return on our investment comes in many forms.

1. Research is increasingly demonstrating that gender balanced organisations tend to be more profitable. See for example:
the report 'The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women's Representation on Boards' based on research carried out by Catalyst (www.catalyst.org).
and the HBR (February 2016) article 'Study: Firms with more women in the C-Suite are more profitable' (www.hbr.org).
2. Replacing the skills lost through leaky pipelines is expensive and can be calculated as the cost of executive recruiter fees plus training costs and loss of time while the new candidate gets up to speed in the role.
3. Thirty years of research evidence has shown that poor work-life balance results in poor physical and mental wellbeing – both of which are likely to be reflected in higher rates of sickness absence.



Evidence based practices

In many organisations a minority of managers continue to decline flexible working requests out of hand. This is despite the wealth of evidence that flexible arrangements can both support work-life balance and facilitate women's career progression and the fact that an increasing number of workers say they want more flexible schedules.

In all probability they have a sneaking suspicion that managing flexible workers will require more effort, will look more anarchic and will have a negative impact on both customers and work output. They have my sympathy. In my work I favour an evidence based approach which can overcome these emotional reactions often driven by unconscious bias, erroneous beliefs or even fear of losing control. When given an opportunity to discuss the facts and figures, I've seen managers move from resistance to confidence in their ability to manage new ways of working, and to a better understanding of the benefits.

So what counts as evidence in this context? Here are five categories I use in my client work:

1. In-company role models (discussed further in Key 2 point 1)
2. Manager experience of managing flexible arrangements (also discussed in Key 2 point 1)
3. External evidence – including experience from other organisations as well as academic research – considered in Keys 1 point 2 and 3 points 1 & 2.
4. Calculating potential financial savings by measuring things such as: attraction – both in terms of candidate numbers and quality - wellbeing, turnover rates and reasons for attrition, premises costs and occupancy ratios.
5. Pilot schemes run in-house.

When it comes to line manager resistance to the pull of flexible working, Einstein's observation that "*everything has changed except our way of thinking*" seems apposite. Given the way the world of work is going, changing thinking is crucial. A focus on providing evidence will both support more rational decisions and enable managers to identify and overcome their own skills gaps.

Summary: Keys and recommended actions

Key 1: A strategic approach that covers the entire employee journey

- Introduce a policy of #AllRolesFlex
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- Upgrade your Inclusion and Wellness functions by appointing a Head of Balanced Working, Wellbeing and Inclusion (see Appendix II) to drive a strategic approach.

Key 2: Leveraging current circumstances to build a balanced future.

- Establish what’s already going on “under the radar”. Ask questions as part of your regular employee engagement survey, run focus groups, enlist the help of internal networks.
- Use positive psychology to build on current successes and create a new vision for the future.
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- Equip people with the skills to craft quality flexible jobs. I offer a one day masterclass based on my corporate HR history and in depth work-life balance expertise. See page 16 for further details.
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Why your business needs a Head of Balanced Working

In the next decade progressive employers will recognise balanced working as a key source of competitive advantage.

In 2004 author Mike Johnson suggested the new world of work would require new job titles – among them “Chief life-work balance officer”. The last decade has indeed seen the emergence of new HR job titles – Business Partner is now ubiquitous and who knew ten years ago that we needed Talent Management Specialists? With the extension to the Right to Request Flexible Working, the moment has come to revisit the corporate approach to work life balance; and create a new role of Head of Balanced Working, Wellbeing and Inclusion. I’ve grouped these areas together as I consider them to be inextricably linked for the following reasons:

1. In many organisations flexible working is the new normal – but it’s not necessarily balanced working. A 24/7 X 365 global economy often requires employees to work across time zones – stretching start or finish times and increasing total working hours. Given the freedom to do so, most of these workers are perfectly capable of adjusting their working patterns to achieve results and lead a more balanced life. The first big task for the Head of Balanced Working is therefore to move the organisation to a results (or outputs) oriented work environment.

2. Research continues to demonstrate the intricate links between good work life balance and employee wellbeing. Poor balance has been shown to result in poorer eating habits, less time spent on exercise, higher levels of stress and lower employee engagement. All of which are reflected in rising healthcare costs and sickness absence levels. Furthermore, the effects of poor balance are contagious – a stressed worker is likely to have a negative impact on the rest of his team.

3. Human talent is a scarce resource that employers must nurture. In 2014 McKinsey published their investigation into how organisations can make best use of scarce natural resources but they appear to have overlooked the critical one – people. We all know that running an electronic device (tablet, smartphone etc) for long periods of time not only drains but also eventually degrades the battery. Human beings also need to recharge their batteries, and if these run out they cannot be replaced. If you lose key talent through burnout you cannot simply have another one shipped from a factory somewhere or invest in an upgrade.

4. An increasing proportion of the talent that organisations struggle to attract and retain is looking for more balanced working arrangements. Women, in particular, regularly cite the lack of work-life balance at senior levels as a major barrier to career progression. Increasingly men – as they become carers – are beginning to say the same. The second big task for the Head of Balanced Working is therefore to develop inclusive HR policies and practices that revolve around making the best of available talent, not around standard 9-5 jobs. This means reviewing everything – from the terms on which new hires are appointed, to the basis on which people are developed and promoted; and to redefining the senior role models that junior staff will emulate.

Even without the extended legislation, the interminable move towards flexible working is non-negotiable. IT and FM colleagues are contemplating Agile Working. HR needs to join that conversation. At the end of the day premises can be renovated and technical equipment replaced. It's the human talent that makes it all work and it needs to be sustained.



I'd like to work with you. How can I help?

I'm the Work ReBalance Mentor. With twenty five years' experience supporting individuals and organisations to better work-life balance I'm the UK's premier expert.

I work with ambitious professional women who want to balance their corporate career with their family life. Through my Balanced Leader training, coaching and mentoring I empower them to make choices that work for them and their employers – so that they keep their careers and their employers keep key talent.

My Services:

The Balanced Leader Programme

Designed for high potential women in the 30 to 45 age range struggling to balance the challenges of stimulating work with family responsibilities. Women who've worked hard to achieve career success and want to remain on the corporate ladder. And who also want to do the best by their family.

Comprising four days over four consecutive months, the unique value of this programme lies in its acknowledgement we need balance in our lives; and an emphasis on developing leadership skills which help maintain that balance.

Balanced Leader Coaching/Mentoring

The Balanced Leader Programme is designed so that participants can support each other through the journey to a more balanced life. However, I know that some women will prefer to work with me one to one – allowing us to focus more specifically on individual challenges in a shorter period of time. For this reason I also offer **Balanced Leader Bespoke** – a coaching and mentoring programme that can be personally tailored.

Crafting Quality Flexible Jobs – Masterclass

For Line Managers faced with the challenges of flexible working, In-House Recruiters seeking solutions for hard to fill vacancies, Diversity Specialists and Talent Managers. Attendees will end the day with a clear plan for crafting Quality Flexible Jobs that work for them and their organisation.

Consulting and Speaking

Information about my consulting and research experience can be found on my website: www.sustainableworking.co.uk

As the UK's foremost Work-Life Balance expert I've spoken to a wide range of audiences from postgraduate students to professional groups. I'm particularly keen to share my expertise with professional women's networks. If you're looking for a speaker please email me (anna@sustainableworking.co.uk) to discuss topics.

Learn more about me on my website: http://www.sustainableworking.co.uk/about_anna.htm

Read my Balanced Leader blog: <https://thebalancedleader.wordpress.com/>

Keep in touch by signing up to my monthly email newsletter

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