

HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS OF THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE DILEMMA

Research studies are showing conflicting information about the importance on taking work-life balance into account when designing human capital management strategies.

On the one hand, according to Accenture in Best Employers South Africa 2007, “diverse gender, generational and cultural requirements mean companies also require flexible working conditions – work-life balance is pivotal”. In the UK, scenarios prepared by the Chartered Management Institute predict that by 2018, there will be a “blurring of boundaries between family and career” – driven by major changes to the traditional workplace. The new terminology for the future is “work-life integration” rather than “work-life balance”. David Clutterbuck in his book “Managing Work-Life Balance – a guide for HR in achieving organisational change” cites many European and US examples of employees demanding changes to organisational practices to achieve their personal work-life balance goals. These examples fit with the generally accepted notion of the Generation Y employees who see no conflict between their aspirations for a rewarding and challenging career and their desire not to be subsumed by long working hours.

But on the other hand, the 2004 global Employee Engagement study by the Corporate Leadership Council (CLC) found that, firstly, work-life balance issues are not valued as highly by employees as compensation/benefits and the development/work environment. Drilling down, the CLC found that non-high performing employees place more emphasis on health benefits and work-life balance attributes, while high performing employees place more emphasis on development and work environment attributes.

So the answer to the question as to whether this is an important issue for human capital management would appear not to be straightforward.

What is the work-life balance dilemma? It probably differs at different socio-economic levels. For the more upwardly mobile, the dilemma is “Must I trade quality of life for standard of living?” or in other words, “I have to work so hard to earn the money to buy everything I aspire to and enjoy the leisure activities I want to enjoy, that I don’t have time to enjoy them”, while for the poorer people, the dilemma is “How can I have any quality of life when I am struggling to survive?”. The dilemma also no doubt intensifies in harsher economic times such as we see now – here the issue is probably working hard enough to earn enough money to maintain both necessities and luxuries bought earlier on cheaper interest rates.

There is no doubt that for many, if not most employees, there is a real struggle between conflicting priorities of the various important parts of their life. In South Africa this is probably heightened by factors such as our skills shortages, early promotions of people with short experience, safety and security issues and, for the mass population of employees, the sheer drudgery of long hours of commuting to and from work coupled with anxieties about lack of delivery of education and other social and community support services.

In many cases, this struggle is not made any easier by organisational attitudes and practices. In one study of high level executive women in the Western Cape, all participants indicated a “complete lack of support and understanding from their organisations”. This is not a purely South African experience, as a similar study in the US found “a complete lack of organisational savvy in dealing with professional women, and a working environment not conducive to living a balanced life”. The conclusion of this study was that “organisations are merely paying lip service to the work-life balance issue”.¹ The Best Employers 2007 study would seem to support this because out of the 38 companies profiled, only 12% mention

¹ Dissertation by Thana Whitehead on Career and Life Balance of Professional Women in a South African Context. RAU 2003

work-life balance at all. Of the 6 companies who do mention it, most of them refer to flexible working hours or support services such as concierge, homework centres for children and access to financial/legal advice. One small company stands out as an exception – the CEO of Missing Link personally drives the work-life balance approaches and he really walks the talk – staff are assessed on work-life balance during their performance reviews and could lose some of their bonus if they have let the balance slide.

But companies wishing to address work-life balance issues in a strategic way immediately run into some practical problems. Firstly, balance is not permanent – a person can achieve a personally acceptable balance at one stage in their life, only to have this destabilised either by natural progression to another life or career stage, or by an external event. Secondly, each person's view on what is acceptable balance is individual to him or her – so two people working next to each other in the same job could experience very different levels of balance or imbalance. Thirdly, what is seen as fair by one person or group could be seen as unfair by another group. The classic example is maternity leave – seen as unfair often by those groups or people who are either not eligible (men, older women) or who have chosen not to have families. Whilst the social acceptability of maternity leave is relatively well established, this is not the case for other practices such as elderly parent care leave.

Companies are learning to segment their employee populations for various purposes – succession management, training and development, employee benefits and so on. But it is not clear whether such segmentation will address work-life balance issues where possibly each employee is his/her own “segment”, with individual needs. This means that maybe well-intentioned HR management efforts to introduce work-life balance policies and practices are set up for failure.

It is probably beneficial for any company which has identified work-life balance as an important issue in its people management priorities to undertake an introspection into the real attitudes and philosophies enacted in the workplace through its culture. For example:

- What are the assumptions around pressure – what is acceptable and what is not?
- What is the reaction to, for example, a high potential employee refusing a transfer due to family circumstances? (No, really, what is the reaction. It's not what is stated in policies or fancy recruiting literature – it's what is communicated verbally and non-verbally by senior managers at the time, and what happens to that person in the short and medium term.)
- What is the link between creativity (or lack of it) and pressure?
- What are the assumptions around time spent at work and quality of output/contribution. Most senior and top managers role model long working hours and it is sad but true that people who keep to more restrained working hours are often doubted as to their commitment and ambitions.

An integrated approach to work towards a work-life balance culture needs to address policies; attitudes and behaviours; and employee awareness and capability. Each employee needs to be treated as a unique individual, with his/her own needs. In order to do this, the approach has to enable and empower employees to identify and articulate their needs and also to motivate, enable and empower managers to respond to those needs.

Achieving a work-life balance culture is probably a leadership issue as much as anything. It will require congruence between the talk and the walk, it will require everyone in a leadership position being aware of what they role model, it will require wisdom in assisting and supporting people in one's team to work out acceptable ways in which to prioritise and balance their lives.

So before embarking on such a journey, it would be worthwhile to reflect carefully on why the organisation wants to take up the work-life balance issue, what the ultimate benefits might be and what “sacred cows” might have to be sacrificed in the process. Otherwise work-life balance could become yet another high-minded set of statements in employee brochures and

recruitment advertisements – honoured more in the breach than in reality and thereby generating cynicism amongst employees.

Author

Penny Abbott is one of the founding partners and Directors of Clutterbuck Associates South Africa. She was previously Head of Corporate HR globally for Holcim Ltd, based in Zurich – one of the three biggest global cement and aggregates companies with operations in over 70 countries and employing 90'000 people. Her earlier positions included Group HR Director at Adcock Ingram Limited and HR Director at Alpha Ltd (later Holcim SA). She is a Mentor of the South African Board of Personnel Practice and is also a Director of the Institute of People Management.

pabbott@clutterbuckassociates.co.za. Telephone 082 566 8074.

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