

Work-Life Balance: Is It Possible?

A popular buzzword in the workforce lately has been the term “work-life balance.” Human resource managers discuss its importance, and employees say they want more of it, but what exactly is it?

First, work-life balance is not an equal distribution of hours between work and personal time. Neither is it a stagnate equation set in stone nor a one-size-fits-all plan employers can put in place for an entire workforce. Rather, work-life balance is a feeling of achievement and enjoyment in four key areas—work, family, friends and community, and self. If people feel they are able to achieve and enjoy their lives in each of these four categories, then they can say they've had a balanced day. If they are able to string those days into months and then into years, they can say they've achieved a good work-life balance.

Return on Investment for Employers

As work has changed from a necessity for survival to both a necessity and a source of personal satisfaction, employers have started to treat their work-life balance programs as a relatively inexpensive investment. Work-life balance programs lead to productivity gains, lower turnover, strong team spirit, and loyalty. They're also an effective tool to attract and retain workers, giving employees a competitive advantage over firms that don't provide similar benefits.

Some examples of work-life balance programs that you could consider for your company are:

- Flex-time—for example, four-day workweeks or part-time hours
- Telecommuting, which saves time for employees and office space expense for employers
- Child care in the form of in-house facilities, after-school programs, subsidies, and referral services
- Elder care, much like the child-care options above
- Leave, including paternity and maternity leave—in 2002 more than 19 percent of companies went beyond the 12-week requirement of the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA)
- Job-sharing
- Employee assistance programs, which are becoming a commonly offered welfare benefit
- In-house services, such as banking and dry cleaning, which save employees time before and after work hours
- Gym subsidies
- Concierge services
- Increased vacation

The Future of Work-Life Balance Programs

All indications show a strong future for work-life balance programs. The programs do, however, face some hurdles. First, employers must train their workers to take responsibility themselves to balance their work lives. Often, people regard work-life balance only in terms of what the company does for the individual—but achieving a balance is also the responsibility of the individual employee. Another issue involves communication. Many companies offer work-life balance programs, but their leaders send a message that they do not fully support employees and managers who want to take advantage of them. In order for these programs to be successful, leaders must fully incorporate them into the company culture.

If both employers and employees show dedication, however, they can overcome such challenges. Doing so is important. As workplaces become more diverse in the 21st century, work-life balance programs will be an increasingly valuable resource for drawing the best employees and capitalizing on them.