

Managing work life balance

[Business](#), [Work](#)



The current economic situation has been blamed for causing income loss, extended working hours and intense stress in workplaces all over the world. Due to this today people are being challenged to strike a balance between work life and family life. People are overwhelmed by the demanding careers, demanding families, a slow economy and so on. This has left people with little time for what they need and want to do. Motivation refers to the desire, effort and passion to achieve something (Paul, Hoang, 2007).

In business terms it is often referred to as the willingness to complete a task or job with enthusiasm. There are different motivators for every person. Some people are motivated by fears. Others are motivated by rewards. Many businesses recognize the fact that employees are their most important and valuable asset. And so it is essential that these businesses can get the most of them i. e.

higher productivity so that their average cost of production is lowered and profits increased. However managers often are not able to get the best out of their employees which eventually leads to employees leaving the organization. We are all familiar with stress. Stress is commonly associated with how well or badly people cope with changes in their lives - at home, within the family, at work or in social situations (Stranks, Jeremy W. , 2005). So stress can be looked upon as an emotional and physical strain that is caused to people when they experience pressure from the outside world. Stress eventually leads to tension, irritation, lack of concentration and some physical problems such as headache, fast heart beats and high/low blood pressure.

Stress in work place if not managed properly will surely cause harm both to employer and employee. Job stress has become a common and costly problem in most workplaces. Stress can be classified as positive and negative. Stress when handled well can prove to be positive but the pre-requisite of this is a mature manager who essentially gives positive stress in the form of targets to be achieved by the employees. This leads to extrinsic motivation as the managers makes the employees in the organization participate in an activity because of the benefits and rewards associated with the activity. When people participate in these activities and achieve targets then they are motivated. People working for the organization are motivated as achievable and practical targets give them a sense of achievement and the rewards associated with them satiates their esteem needs.

In absence of targets/guidelines often people lack goal that guide them which lead to de-motivation. According to the American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) people have a need for self-actualization (Paul, Hoang, 2007). Managers can encourage this by providing opportunities for personal development and promotion by setting targets. People also have esteem/ego needs according to Maslow (Paul, Hoang, 2007). This refers to the desire for recognition and being able to have self-respect. A manager is instrumental in providing both recognition and self-respect if employees in the organization are allowed to participate in decision making and are offered promotion if they achieve targets. These inconsiderate managers ignore the indications of stress amongst people working in the organization at all levels.

These managers do not realise that such ignorance will prove to be costly for the organization as it would lead to low motivation, high absenteeism, fall in productivity, incorrect decision-making, poor industrial relations and lowered efficiency. There are also other ways of motivating people at work by reducing stress. Managers need to involve more people in the decision making process (it is not possible to involve all of them). The more managers involve them the more attached they become to their work which makes them more involved and they like their work. When people like what they are doing then they do not face stress. Rewarding employees also helps in reducing their stress. When they work hard and their work is recognized through bonuses or salary increases, they feel better.

In today's times people apart from money also look for time offs so that they can spend their time with their family. Awarding them with holidays as rewards provided work does not suffer is also a good way of reducing stress and motivating people. Another really effective way for rewarding and motivating people at work is to recognize them for any great achievements. A pat on the back goes a long way. An immature manager/boss provides negative stress or distress which arises out of unreasonable targets and deadlines which affects the health of the employees adversely. According to Rensis Likert, (1967), these leaders are exploitative autocratic who do not trust their employees and so order them to perform by putting pressure of performance by using threat and punishments (Paul, Hoang, 2007). Negative stress comes with a cost.

It is estimated billions of pounds every year in lost production in UK due to stress at work (ANI, 2008). Managers who distress their employee fail to realize that with long working hours and unrealistic goals employees in the organization are not only losing on their standard of living but also their quality of life. Another important way in which a manager can help employees cope with stress is through work-life balance. A 2001 study of women working in telecommunications companies found that investment in work-life balance was closely correlated with higher retention and workforce diversity (Clutterbuck, David, 2003). Other surveys and case studies have linked a positive approach to work-life balance to productivity, creativity, positive attitudes towards work, and employee commitment (willingness to 'go the extra mile' on behalf of the customer or the company). Commitment has in turn been linked to financial performance, one international study finding that companies with committed employees provide an average return to shareholders of 112 per cent over three years, compared to 90 per cent for companies with average commitment (Clutterbuck, David, 2003). Work and life balance can be defined as the ability to make choices that fulfills one's purpose over the course of time (Ronald, Claiborne, 2009).

Work-life balance does not involve counting the amount of time an employee spends on working vs. /he spends not-working. It involves understanding how the time was spend in working and relaxing. Work life balance can help in managing stress in people's lives as it will help them in managing their time and setting their priorities right. It is often observed that people are more successful if they are given flexibility so that they can meet the demand of their workplace and can also achieve their personal goals which are outside

the workplace. Employers can create a flexible working environment where people can work effectively so that they can respond to the needs of the business without sacrificing their personal priorities in life. In order to strike a work life balance there are some things that can prove to be effective like offering employees longer family leaves, flexible use of holidays, better sick leave, sabbaticals, flexi-time, teleworking/home working and shorter working.

In order to strike work-life balance managers may have to give up the 9-5 job culture. This rigid system can be replaced by flexi-time. This system requires employees to work a core period of the day when they are expected to be at work but the rest of the time is flexi-time (Paul, Hoang, 2007). This means that the staff decides where they work, subject to them getting their work completed by set deadlines. For example an employee who is supposed to work for 40 hours in a week might work for 10 hours from Monday to Thursday and take Friday as off or may work 25 hours in the workplace per week and the remaining from any other location home or elsewhere. Flexi-time is beneficial to employees as it gives them a greater degree of freedom to balance their work and personal life, which helps in reducing stress. On the other hand organizations that use flexi-time can have an improved image as it is seen to be providing equal opportunities to staff that are unable to work standard hours due to their other important mostly personal commitments.

A better image will help in attracting better talent to the company. It also helps in improving motivation and hence productivity and output of the

business. Businesses that use flextime can also save on paying overtime of their employees. Another suggestion would be teleworking which involves working away from the workplace by using electronic forms of communications such as telephone, fax and email. Another form of teleworking is which refers to people actually working from their own home. (Paul, Hoang, 2007). After from offering flexible working hours teleworking/home working helps in minimizing transportation costs, time and stress to the employees of traveling to work.

This will help in reduced office overheads as less prime office space is required. Also hiring talented people from around the world as geographical boundaries no longer remain a problem. However this system relies heavily on ICT communication and equipment. It makes management and control of staff difficult. Technological breakdown can cause major disruption to the business. Work life balance can also be enriched through portfolio working. Portfolio working is a vision of the way people will work in the future.

In her book “ Portfolio Working”, Joanna Grigg defines it as working for “ a group or cluster of different employers, or a job and a business, or whatever combination comes together best for us” (The Economist, 2009). Charles Handy, who was largely responsible for popularizing the idea, wrote in his book “ The Empty Raincoat”: “ Going portfolio means exchanging full-time employment for independence. The portfolio is a collection of different bits and pieces of work for different clients”. Portfolio working has evolved as job uncertainties are part and parcel in many economies today. Since job

security is not guaranteed in today's times and as more organizations went for downsizing and de-layering by shedding of many skilled employees and these people had little option and so more and more professional are today opting for portfolio working. The privatization of state enterprises also had a similar impact. Portfolio workers need to be far widely skilled as compared to a full timer.

Their competencies should range from computer skills, marketing, accounting and filling in tax returns for a secretary's job for example. A crucial part of motivation is recognition of work which is well done. For a portfolio worker this will not come by i. e. their work will neither be praised nor rewarded. Portfolio working offers people freedom to plan their days and balance their work and personal life and a far more varied workload. Nevertheless, portfolio working has not taken off to the extent as the security of comfort and allure of full-time employment remain compelling.

Employees in an organization do require some positive stress to perform. However work overload leads to negative stress. So it is the responsibility of the manager to draw a line between positive and negative stress. If signs of stress are ignored then they can prove to be costly for the organization. It also depends on people on how well they can manage stress. When they are unsuccessful in managing stress it leads to serious ill health and stress related diseases. However if they actually successfully manage stress then it can bring growth, happiness and prosperity of the employees.

So it is important that people are made aware of stress and taught to cope with it. This may be done through off the job expert training programs. Apart

of this it is important for the managers not to ignore any stress related signals that their employees give. If s/he finds that an employee is under stress, s/he should not ignore it. S/he should take steps to help them. If s/he finds it difficult to provide a solution for it, s/he should get professional help. Even if the employee is suffering from non work related stress, the manager is required to look into the issue/s, if neglected it may later lead to work related stress.

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