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Human Capital

The Perfect Balance

2006

A recent study conducted by the Families and Work Institute (FWI) in the US has found that supporting employees and their families is not the main reason why employers offer these initiatives. Nearly half, (47%) of organisations said they provide these initiatives to recruit and retain employees, while 25% reported they offered them to enhance productivity and commitment.

Organisations which have embraced these initiatives are now reaping the benefits. The Work/Life Balance Benchmarking survey conducted by Managing Work/Life Balance International and CCH Australia found that a majority (58%) of the surveyed organisations reported their initiatives had a positive impact on productivity, while almost two thirds (59%) said their programs enabled them to attract and recruit the best possible talent. More than half (51%) of the respondents managed to reduce their staff turnover thanks to their work-life balance programs.

"I think organisations are starting to get serious about this because the landscape is changing. You can't recruit like you used to anymore. It's very important for employers to hold on to the people that they have. That means understanding not just the individual work needs but also their personal needs," says **Vilma Faoro** *Managing Director of Diversity Factory*.

Work is only as good as the life it gives

An effective work-life balance program enables employees to feel they have the freedom to perform their jobs to the best of their ability and also maintain a life style that suits their needs and the demands placed on them. For some people, this may be leaving work at a time that suits their families, for others, it may be the freedom to work around their social or fitness requirements, and for some, it may be the ability to structure their leave or pay to suit their requirements. "Work-life balance has moved beyond simply ensuring that all employees leave by 5pm and don't work weekends. In a busy and constant work environment, it's about getting work done and still having a life that isn't dominated by work demands," explains Sean Curtin, HR director of Sensis.

Easier said than done

While a growing number of work-life balance programs and options have evolved in the recent years, getting the right balance between the demands of work and family life remains a flight of fancy for many employees and one of the biggest challenges for HR managers.

"One of the reasons we're not there yet is because here we still believe that the best way to do business is to have staff completely dedicated to work. But US research shows that if people have a dual focus on work and family, they are more sustainable in the workplace. If you can get the balance right between work and family, you have more energy at work or at home. It's seen as two parts of the whole," explains Juliet Bourke, partner with Aequus Partners. The other difficulty is in understanding the concept itself. Work-life balance means different things to different people, so there are challenges in ensuring that everyone feels as though there's an option for them.

"I think work-life balance is all about choice. It's your choice. You can work your 12 hours a day if you wish, and there's nothing wrong with that. Some people love it, some people don't. What we feel is the key is discovering what balance is for you, and structuring your life and activities around to complement each other. Working longer hours is not necessarily a bad thing as long as you get the balance that suits what you want to do," says John Eddy, HR director with Citibank.

Thirdly, even after you have reframed work/life to be complementary and given people choice, the most difficult challenge is changing the way work is done - and that's about implementing a change programme.

Managing a balanced program

There is no one solution for work-life balance, but in order to put an effective program in place, it is essential to have a thorough analysis and well-structured roadmap to help you with your quest. "I think it comes down to the employees establishing their own work-life balance boundaries. What are they prepared to give and take? What resources do they want to pick up? How are they going to balance their personal and work commitments? I guess managing their time today is not easy, but they have to do that, and managers have the specific responsibility to work with individual staff members on their own work-life balance. I think overall, if you can implement it with a team-like program, it will improve how people want to work or have balance outside of work. It's the responsibility of our managers to make sure that their customers are trained and educated on what's its all about," comments John Eddy of Citibank.