

Juggling the Work-Life Balance in a Small Business

Release Date: 05 / 29 / 2007

Work-life balance has become the new buzzword for companies seeking to create more employee-friendly work environments. Actually, to call it "new" is a bit of a misnomer; employers have been exploring this concept for several years, but lately the interest in establishing work-life policies has been accelerating as more companies jump on the bandwagon.

Work-life balance has different interpretations, but in general, it involves allowing employees a degree of flexibility in incorporating a measure of personal activities--making personal calls, taking time off to attend non-work events, surfing the Internet or watching key sporting events, for example--during work hours.

For example, Sunnyvale, Calif.-based Yahoo! has a phone booth that employees can use to make personal calls. Several times a month, the company has someone come on-site to wash cars, and it brings in a hairdresser as well. Environmental Communications & Marketing, a Lutz, Fla.-based public relations agency, lets employees take time off during work hours to attend Weight Watchers meetings, work out at a local gym or conduct other personal business. The Lyndon Group, an accounting, financial and executive management firm in Newport Beach, Calif., allows its project consultants, who work off-site or at the client's office, to set their own work schedules. Other companies set aside computers specifically for personal use, host baby and wedding showers on-site and so on.

You get the picture. Where the line between work and personal life was once firmly etched, demarcation has now blurred decidedly.

There are several reasons why this is occurring. The concern over attracting and retaining employees is a big one, says Linda Finkle, CEO of Incedo Group, an executive coaching firm based in Washington, D.C.

"I get a lot of questions about whether this is a good idea, and if so, how you can manage an organization where you understand your employees' personal life needs but still conduct business," she says. "I think employers are fearful of losing talent. They've read all the media stories about how people are jumping ship because of work-life balance. While I believe some of what they read is true, I don't believe it's as bleak as the media paints."

Although Finkle says it's unrealistic to try to keep personal activity out of the workplace entirely, especially since many of today's employers expect their staff to be accessible after work hours, she cautions against giving employees too much flexibility.

"They become unappreciative of what is given to them, whether this is the opportunity to handle personal things at work, watch TV or anything else that is meant to demonstrate that the company understands their needs," she explains. "The first time it's given, employees are excited, thankful and saying good things. The second time they're still saying thanks but aren't necessarily saying good things. By the third time, it's no longer appreciated--they expect it and no longer see it as a gift from the company but something that is due to them."

Still, maybe that's the point of work-life policies; they're not extended as a gift but rather as an acknowledgement that life both in and out of the office has changed, and that this change requires a rethinking of the traditional workplace rules. Technology has had a huge hand in this restructuring.

Consider the results of a recent Yahoo! HotJobs survey on the use of wireless devices. As managing editor Tom Musbach explains, the results indicate that laptops, cell phones, smart phone and the like have created virtual offices, where employees are on duty well past the hours of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Some examples:

- Ninety-two percent of the respondents (900 office professionals who use wireless devices) report they are still engaged in work, even when at home.
- Twenty-six percent of respondents reported they felt these devices kept them "on a permanent corporate leash."
- Work-related e-mails and calls distract 23 percent of the respondents during personal time.
- Only 13 percent of the respondents said they always interrupted work time to take personal calls and e-mails, while 54 percent reported they occasionally do so if important. "So it doesn't appear from what we're seeing that the workplace is getting the short end of the stick," Musbach says.

On the other hand, despite intruding on personal time, these devices allow people to work remotely and stay connected--factors that can make it easier for companies to inject more work-life flexibility into their organizations, helping to overcome some of the stress of staying so tethered to the job. This is another motivating desire behind these work-life efforts.

"We work in a very high-stress environment," says Diane Jones, agency director for Environmental Communications & Marketing. "We always have to be billable. Allowing us to blow off some of that stress keeps us healthy and sane. And when we're out, we're always available by cell phone."

Their policy is in a trial period to see how it goes, she says. It's also unspoken, relying on good judgment to stay on course. For example, making calls to schedule appointments is fine; calling your best friend for a half-hour chat isn't.

"The downside is, that if it gets abused, the boss will take it away from us all," Jones says. "If it doesn't work for one person, it won't work for any of us."

But if a company is clear on its expectations and knows what qualities to hire for, you can avoid these problems, says Ken Jones, CPA and managing director of The Lyndon Group. Strong, hands-on management also helps, he continues. If someone couldn't handle the flexibility,

he would be quickly identified, coached and/or moved to another environment or project.

Jones sees only an upside to his policy.

"This has increased our application pool, and people just don't leave the company," he says. "I've lost maybe four people since we opened in 2000, and we've been steadily growing."

But Finkle says these policies don't always lead to reduced turnover, especially for younger employees who tend to have a "jump around" mindset no matter how inviting the work environment. So, investigate before you conclude your turnover is related to work-life issues. If you do decide to implement work/life policies:

- Ask your employees what they would value. Don't assume everyone will see the same things as a benefit.
- Consider how you'll address everyone's needs. For example, if you allow employees to attend Weight Watcher meetings, etc., but others aren't interested, how will they be compensated? "How does everyone get their fair share without having chaos?" Finkle asks.
- It's up to the bosses to set the tone, Musbach says. "It's really important for employees to speak to their managers. Wireless devices don't come with rules of engagement."

And don't get too specific by saying things like "You can spend X amount of time doing personal things," because employees will spend this time doing it regardless, Finkle says.

"I think it's better to say, 'We know you'll have to do some personal things; we understand, but we have an expectation that you are adult enough to understand what is reasonable,' " she says. "And then communicate with them when they start to stretch the boundaries."