

## WORK-LIFE BALANCE : REVISITED

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*The professional and personal lives of employees in a business organisation shall be viewed as complementary rather than competing priorities. For, in case the employees neglect their personal and family needs in favour of business targets, the resulting disturbances at their personal and family levels in effect spill over to the workplace in the form of a lower productive efficiency. Thus it becomes imperative on the part of management to ensure a proper 'work-life balance' for their employees. Despite initial hurdles, the potential benefits of such an approach are likely to far outweigh its costs thereby benefiting the employees, management as well as the organisations concerned*

### ***The Genesis of the Problem: How the Imbalance between Professional and Personal Lives came about?***

Traditionally speaking, workplace and personal life of employees of an organisation were believed to be competing priorities in a zero-sum game in as much as a trade-off was supposed to exist between the objectives of the organisation on the one hand and the personal lives of its employees on the other. Accordingly, it was presumed that the employees of an organisation could fulfil their work-related goals only at the cost of their personal lives be it their family life, social life, recreation, leisure and the like.

It was this misplaced belief that led to a poor 'Work-Life Balance' on the part of employees in various companies and business organisations across various countries and no one even recognised it as a serious problem at least till the early 1980s. That is to say, with a view to meeting ever increasing business targets, the employees of different organisations developed a tendency of neglecting their family lives, ignoring their personal comfort & rest, and even went ahead with sacrificing their social interactions, friendships, hobbies etc.' Such a short-sighted approach in turn developed a very unhealthy corporate culture characterised by cut-throat competition and 'overwork' on the part of management as well as workers becoming the order of the day.

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It is worth noting that over time, family economy has changed from 'the household production economy' to 'the breadwinner/homemaker economy' and finally to 'the working family economy' (Moen & Yu, 2000). Moreover, the percentage of single parent households has increased (Bianchi & Raley, 2003) and at the same time the percentage of dual career couples has also increased (Jacobs, 2003). Against the backdrop of these developments in the society, a few organisations even experimented with employing the spouses of some of their existing employees so that they could spend more time together at the workplace itself instead of going to their respective homes. Evidently, under such a scenario, the conventional notions of "5 Days Week" or "9 to 5" as the working hours lost their meaning and relevance. And as (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996) observe, with a view to integrating the two segregate poles of work and life, for some employees work had become home and home had become work. This meant that workers were putting long time at work place to avoid family time (Horsechild, 1994).

In other words, guided by the materialistic objective of somehow fulfilling the highly ambitious business targets, the family priorities and values were totally relegated to the backseat. The situation worsened to such an extent that in the case of many school-going children, none of the parents used to be available to participate in the meetings of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or attend other functions of the school. In quite a few cases, the concerned schools had to manage the PTA meetings with the Grandparents of the concerned students and accordingly organised and celebrated 'Grandparents Day' as the parents of such students were too busy to participate in any social gathering or function of the school of their children. As if to justify this emerging and degenerated way of life, new concepts like **DINKs** i.e., 'Double Income, No Kids' came into being and started gaining social acceptability!

### **Implications of not maintaining Work-Life Balance**

Going by the Indian culture and traditions, such a lifestyle whereby people become extremely materialistic and target-oriented to such an extent that they even ignore their personal and social responsibilities in the quest for higher and higher levels of profits is not acceptable on any count. For, it is clearly mentioned in our ancient scriptures that every human being has to repay three types of indebtedness viz., Dev Rin (Divine Debt), Rishi Rin (Sages Debt) and Pitri Rin (Parental Debt). What this essentially implies is that in order to sustain life and with a view to ensuring the smooth conduct of society from generation to generation, it is the moral responsibility of each and every human being to preserve and enrich the existing reservoir of knowledge as well as natural and human

resources for the subsequent generations. Evidently, the newly emerging notions such as 'DINKs' and the underlying materialistic tendencies of neglecting family values and responsibilities in favour of some unrealistically set business targets at the workplace clearly contradict with our ancient culture, heritage and philosophy.

Further, on closer examination we find that the overworked schedules (Barnett, Gareis, & Brennan, 1999; Gareis, Barnett, & Brennan, 2003) at the workplace also hinder the personal and spiritual development of employees in as much as they are unable to devote requisite time for their enjoyment, hobbies, personality development and self-actualisation (Frone, 2003; Rice, Frone, & McFarlin, 1992).

Side-by-side, the families of such employees have to bear the opportunity cost of their stressful lifestyle in terms of lack of proper care of children & elderly (Burkett 2000; Young 1999) as also lesser time being spent with relatives and friends. All these developments create tensions in the families of the concerned employees thereby having a dampening effect on their efficiency at the workplace. That is to say, *the disturbances generated at the family level on account of a poor work-life balance in effect spill over to the workplace in the form of a lower productive efficiency of the concerned employees of an organisation.* Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald (2002) have discussed the concept of Work-Family Spill-over. In another relevant study Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter (2000) found behaviour of children getting impacted by work-life conflict of parents.

Still another fallout of such an imbalance between the work and personal lives of employees is a sharp decline in *productive efficiency* on account of numerous *physical and psychological disorders* faced by them as for instance, stress, tension, exhaustion, lack of appetite, blood-pressure, backache, cervical, neuroskeletal diseases etc. (Noor, 2003). The rise in the number of dual-earning families resulted in increased work-family conflict (Marchese, Bassham, & Ryan, 2002), where work interferes with family life and family-work conflict, where the family life interferes with the work life. There has been negative effect of these conflicts like poor physical health, depression and incidence of hypertension as well as heart disease (Hayne et al., 1984).

Thus it is amply clear that when employees are unable to establish a proper balance between the requirements of their workplace and personal lives, not only they and their families but even their organisations have to bear the brunt of it. To put it differently, *when work is stretched beyond the capacities of employees, not only their families but even their companies are bound to pay the price for it!*

### **What can be done for maintaining a proper Work-Life Balance?**

In view of all the aforementioned repercussions of not striking a proper balance between the priorities of work and personal lives, the traditional approach to management has given way to a newly emerging approach ever since the mid-1980s whereby ensuring 'Work-Life Balance' on the part of the employees is supposed to be the chief responsibility of the companies' management itself. In other words, realising the significance of a better balance between the official and personal priorities of workers, the managers of modern-day organisations are expected to guide and assist the employees in maintaining proper work-life balance in their mutual interest only. For, productive efficiency at the workplace could be maximised only when the employees concerned are stress-free, energetic, motivated and zealous which in turn can only be brought about when they feel happy and contented both at the workplace as also the family front. Streisand (2012) said that in order to strike balance you have to be good and happy.

In some of the studies, home-working is presented as an antidote to the stresses of working life (Bulos and Chaker, 1991; Qvortrup, 1992; Mirchandani, 1998; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). There is an interesting perspective that to have work life balance, 'inner work life' consisting of emotions, perceptions and motivations should be in balance on a daily basis (Amabile & Kramer, 2012).

Towards this end, the management can evidently play a very crucial contributory role. To begin with, all that is required is a change in the mindset of management so as to judge their employees by the quality of their work rather than the amount of time they spend at the office or workplace. And curiously enough, this 'quality of work' could only be improved when the management is flexible enough and gives room to the personal priorities of employees as dictated by their family needs, interests and hobbies. As is often said, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull guy". The same logic applies to the employees in an organisation.

More specifically, it has become common knowledge that when teachers and parents focus on the 'all-round personality development' of students and children paying due attention to their 'extra-curricular activities' then it tends to generate positive externalities for their academic life as well and all such students have typically been observed to score higher in their curriculum-based examinations also. To put it simply, the academic performance of students is not necessarily governed by the number of

hours spent on studies but rather by the efficiency of their learning which itself is conditional on their enthusiasm, zeal and motivation that get enhanced by their participation in extra-curricular activities. Likewise, in any modern business organisation today, the need of the hour is for the management to adopt such a paternalistic attitude towards their employees and shed all orthodox and conservative notions whereby performance of an employee was necessarily judged in terms of the number of hours spent on work instead of the end results.

With the advent of modern telecommunication tools as for instance mobile phones, computer networks, internet, teleconferencing, e-mail, voice-mail and the like, the employees of any modern-day organisation can obviously be trained to achieve better results with lesser time being spent on work so that the time so freed could be fruitfully utilised on their personal priorities, family needs and self-actualisation thereby bringing the desired 'work-life balance' for them. All this will evidently become possible only when the management realises that the professional and personal lives of employees shall be viewed as complementary rather than competing priorities.

At the operational level, the need of the hour is for the management of any organisation to adopt a 'Flexible Time' approach wherein the goals of the organisation are well specified but employees are granted sufficient liberty and autonomy as regards how to achieve the already laid down goals. That is to say, instead of insisting on a rigid schedule of pre-specified working hours for all employees across the board, the management shall allow different employees to choose the work-schedule as per their personal convenience and go by their ultimate performance rather than the amount of time spent at the workplace.

Further, as far as possible, the management must assign responsibilities to various employees not only in accordance with their skill and competence but also in line with their personal interests and inclinations. For instance, in the case of a newspaper office, the task of handling sports news should preferably be entrusted to only those journalists who are genuinely interested in sports as they would turn out to be relatively more efficient in their job. In an exactly analogous manner, profession and hobby could be fruitfully combined to yield better results by assigning the news columns on travel & tourism, academics, films, art, culture, music & dance and the like to those workers who are genuinely interested in the same. Evidently, when employees in an organisation are assigned a task that they enjoy doing, they get a feeling of self-actualisation thereby

establishing a better 'work-life balance' and becoming more productive at the margin.

Side-by-side, all attempts must be made by the management in ensuring that the employees get access to the best facilities and services in the organisation so that they could feel at home at the workplace itself. This for instance could be achieved by paying due attention to cafeteria, first-aid and medical facilities, air-conditioning, furnishings and other such infrastructural facilities at the office or workplace of the employees. Apart from mere physical infrastructure, however, the management must give due weightage to the social and emotional requirements of workers and take due care of their sensitivities by adopting a 'human relations' approach.

Towards this end, more and more social gatherings, functions and parties could be organised especially on major festivals and relevant occasions for the organisation where the family members of the employees concerned are not only invited but encouraged to participate in cultural events and competitions such as dance, drama, race etc. As a gesture of goodwill and a confidence-building measure, the management could then reward and issue certificates to the winners of all such competitions who would invariably be from the families of the employees like their spouses, children, parents and relatives. This way, the employees will develop a better sense of belonging with their organisations and even their families as also near and dear ones will tend to identify with the organisations concerned. The ensuing social bondage can be reasonably expected to improve the perception of employees as regards their work-culture and environment and is likely to provide a greater sense of fulfilment to them thereby bringing about a better work-life balance on the part of the employees of the organisation.

### **Work-Life Balance: Is it a Tight-Rope-Walk?**

It is often alleged by critics that the whole conception of 'work and life balance' is too idealistic and utopian which is not practicable in actual life. First of all, the critics feel that identifying the personal priorities of each and every employee explicitly and balancing them with the business priorities of the organisation would be too difficult and complicated a task for the management concerned.

Moreover, the critics are of the opinion that 'work-life balance' could become an easy excuse for some non-sincere workers and employees to shirk away their business responsibilities in the name of personal priorities and compulsions and if this principle is selectively applied by management then it could become a potential source of heartburn and resentment in the concerned organisation.

The supporters of work and life balance thesis, however, do not accept such apprehensions and pre-conceived notions of the critics. For, though there is no denying the fact that such a departure from traditional approach as is implied by 'work-life balance' thesis cannot come about so easily and will face initial hiccups, yet it is not so unpractical or complex as it appears to be on the face of it. After all, where there is a will, there is a way. Thus the strong will or commitment towards 'work-life balance' on the part of management is the key to its feasibility and implementation. In other words, business success can be achieved hand in hand with individual fulfilment once the management recognises and is fully convinced on the business value of allowing employees to meet personal commitments while pursuing organisational goals.

The fact of the matter is that once employees are allowed to lead a more satisfying personal life by modifying their work schedules so as to accommodate their individual pursuits, they tend to develop a sense of belonging with their organisation as also gratitude and loyalty towards management thereby investing more energy in their work. In this manner, their performance improves considerably and as a consequence of it, their organisation benefits immensely. This implies that the potential benefits of work-life balance are likely to far outweigh the possible costs involved in the identification of personal priorities of individual employees by the management.

Even here, the atmosphere of trust and faith that gets developed between management and employees on account of a more sympathetic and accommodating posture adopted by the management can be reasonably expected to go a long way in overcoming the communication barrier between them thereby easing on the collection of explicit information as regards the personal priorities of individual employees. In the ultimate analysis, it must be borne in mind that 'work-life balance' is inherently a process requiring a partnership between the management and individual employees!

As far as the question of possible heart-burn or resentment among employees is concerned, even that possibility is practically ruled out as by definition, 'work-life balance' can never be applied in a discriminatory fashion and thus extends to each and every employee in an organisation. The hunch that thereby it would turn out to be a loose rope wherein at least some non-sincere employees would have a tendency to become free riders is also neither compatible with rational behaviour nor supported by empirical evidence. For, as is evident in the research conducted by Friedman, Christensen & DeGroot (2000), in all those business organisations where the management has experimented with adopting the 'work-life balance' approach, such a remote theoretical

possibility has not fructified in actual life thereby establishing that it is more of a pre-conceived notion rather than a factual reality.

Thus it follows that it is in the wider interest of employees, management and business organisations to stick to the philosophy of maintaining 'work life balance' as the potential benefits of such a pragmatic approach can be reasonably expected to far outweigh the time, energy and other costs incurred by the management in implementing this strategy.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

According to the traditional approach to management, a trade-off was supposed to exist between the objectives of a business organisation on the one hand and the priorities of personal lives of its employees on the other. Under this misplaced belief, with a view to achieving ever increasing business targets, the employees of different organisations developed a tendency of neglecting their family lives, ignoring their personal comfort & rest, and even went ahead with sacrificing their social interactions, friendships, hobbies, recreation, leisure and the like.

Such an imbalance between the professional and personal lives generated numerous physical and psychological disorders among the concerned employees and created serious tensions in their families thereby leading to a sharp decline in their productive efficiency. Thus it became amply clear that when employees are unable to establish a proper balance between the requirements of their workplace and personal lives, not only they and their families but even their organisations have to pay the price for it.

In view of this, the traditional approach to management has given way to a newly emerging approach ever since the mid-1980s whereby ensuring 'Work-Life Balance' on the part of the employees in an organisation is supposed to be the chief responsibility of the management itself. Accordingly, in any modern business organisation, the managers adopt a paternalistic attitude towards their employees and judge their performance in terms of the energy spent on work and the end results rather than the number of hours spent at the workplace. In this context, the state-of-the art information technology at the disposal of employees as for instance mobile phones, computer networks, internet, teleconferencing, e-mail, voice-mail etc. becomes instrumental in achieving better results with lesser time being spent on work. The time of the employees so freed could in turn be fruitfully utilised on their personal priorities, family needs and self-actualisation thereby bringing the desired 'work-life balance' for them.



Any fears of the 'work and life balance' approach being 'impracticable' or being a 'potential source of resentment' as expressed by the critics have turned out to be unfounded at least on empirical grounds. To the contrary, the actual experience of those organisations practising the work-life balance approach has revealed that the potential benefits of work-life balance in the form of 'efficiency gains' and 'improved performance' on account of self-actualisation of the employees are likely to far outweigh the possible costs thereby benefiting the employees, managers as well as the organisations concerned.

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