

Work-Life Balance Practices in the Workplace: A Cost or Benefit?

You have probably heard that families today are struggling and more stressed than ever. And you have probably heard the need for better work-life balance. But as a business owner or senior-level manager, is this problem really something that should be of your concern?

Many studies have been conducted in the area of stressed out employees and the effects on business productivity. The results indicate that stressed out workers are costing businesses in increased absenteeism and staff turnover and decreased productivity^{1,2}. There are additional costs to taxpayers in increased medical services used by these stressed individuals².

Professors Duxbury and Higgins have been conducting *The National Study on Balancing Work and Caregiving in Canada*, a study that has surveyed Canadian workers on these issues at several points in time since 1991. Their most recent 2011-12 study finds employee stress results in many costs to businesses. Within their study sample, 25% of employees were absent from work within the last year due to work-life issues, while 77% missed work in the previous six months due to health problems, physical or emotional fatigue due to stress, and childcare or eldercare issues. The absences ranged from 7.6 to 9.6 days missed per year for the above reasons. Additionally, these work-life challenges caused 19% of employees to work reduced hours, 22% said they were less productive at work, and 21% had to utilize more of the company benefits plan. Employee turnover can cost companies in the form of retraining new hires or lost productivity in the interim; the study found that between 12% and 35% of employees were contemplating leaving their current employer for reasons such as high workloads and lack of career development¹.

So what is causing all this stress?

There are many factors causing the stress of today's employees. The studies indicate that the compounding of the typical employee's work and personal responsibilities causes immense overload ultimately affecting multiple aspects of life including the work sphere. Over 60% of employees participating in the study *Revisiting Work-Life Issues in Canada: The 2012 National Study on Balancing Work and Caregiving in Canada*¹, worked over 40 hours a week and over half of the sample complete more work at home. Most employees do not have a flexible schedule. Many employees with a family say they require both partners' income to make ends meet. Of those employees who have working partners, about half also work over 45 hours per week and many of them bring work home as well. On top of the long work week, many employees have children and eldercare responsibilities. The 2012 National Study found that just over 21 hours per week are spent on childcare responsibilities while 7 hours are typically spent on taking care of an elderly family member – 31% of the sample have “three or more elderly dependants!” About 33% have child and eldercare responsibilities¹.

The 2012 National Study finds that many employees are highly committed to their jobs yet family care responsibilities demand high levels of energy and time. Family interferes with work and work interferes with family however the latter is more common¹. This study, along with numerous other studies conducted worldwide, indicate that the typical employee is overloaded with care and other responsibilities and as a result, employees are suffering a decline in physical, mental, and emotional health. In Canada, this overload is costing businesses between \$4.5 and \$6 billion dollars in absenteeism and taxpayers over \$5 billion in health expenses per year. Overall, overloaded employees are “less likely to be satisfied with their job and less committed to their employer. They are more likely to be thinking of

leaving the organization and more likely to report that work-life issues are negatively impacting their performance and productivity at work”³.

What can employers do to help their employees live more balanced lives as well as reduce costs to their organization?

Company culture appears to play an important part in employees’ perception of control and work-life balance^{1,2}. Company culture includes the values and norms embedded in everyday practices. Official policy such as flexibility within a work schedule or other family-friendly policies can help ease the stresses of employees’ work and personal life but only if employers are truly committed to the notion of work-life balance.

In the Burnaby Board of Trade’s study on the topic of employee work-life balance, many Burnaby business owners and managers recognize that having flexible and family-friendly policies are a huge benefit to their organization as it helps attract and retain great employees. While the national reports along with our own research findings makes clear the benefits to business productivity when implementing family-friendly policies, some employers still have concerns as to the potential costs of implementing such strategies. Some examples of concerns are perceived favouritism towards employees with families and decreased productivity of those employees who work from home. However, our interviewees stated these situations were never a problem for their organization. The BBOT also recognizes that many small and medium size businesses may be constrained by the nature of their organization to implement certain flexible practices, especially when an organizations serve clients in person during limited hours or when there are few employees within an organization.

If you are interested in reading more about how some BBOT business owners and senior-level managers feel about implementing flexible and family-friendly practices in their workplaces, [click here for our research findings](#).

References

¹ Duxbury, L., & Higgins, C. (2012). Revisiting work-life issues in Canada: the 2012 national study on balancing work and caregiving in Canada. Retrieved from Healthy Workplaces website: <http://www.healthyworkplaces.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/2012-National-Work-Long-Summary.pdf>

² Higgins, C., Duxbury, L., & Lyons, S. (2008). Reducing work–life conflict: what works? what doesn't? Retrieved from Health Canada website: http://hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/alt_formats/hecs-sesc/pdf/pubs/occup-travail/balancing-equilibre/full_report-rapport_complet-eng.pdf

³ Duxbury & Higgins, 2012, p. 10