

What Burnaby Businesses are Saying about Sustainableⁱ and Work-life Balance Practices: Highlights from our BBOT Interviews

The Burnaby Board of Trade recently conducted interviews with some of its members to determine how small and medium size businesses are affected by employees' familyⁱⁱ demands or personal circumstances. We interviewed 24 owners or senior-level managers from our member organizations and asked them 11 questions mainly focusing on how productivity is effected when certain personal situations arise as well as how the organization manages such situations.

Care Issues

Some Burnaby businesses have employees with young children and/or aging parents for whom the employees have care responsibilities. Many of our interviewees thought that their employees were handling childcare responsibilities well, and thus, not a major issue affecting productivity. However, it should be noted that our interviewees are more likely to already be practicing family-friendly strategies, easing their employees' situation. Regardless, employers were sympathetic to the ever-rising costs of childcare and general affordability of living in the Burnaby area.

Many employers spoke of the need to be understanding and supportive of employees with children when unpredictable circumstances arise such as when a child has temper tantrum causing the parent to be late for work that morning. Several employers stated that employees need support not scrutiny when life interferes with work and that an employee will be more productive, engaged at work, and loyal to the company when given the flexibility to deal with these family matters. As one interviewee said, "If we don't work with them, we'll lose them."ⁱⁱⁱ

An employee dealing with eldercare issues can be challenging as well; slips and falls or emergency trips to the hospital make planning for work coverage difficult and can affect productivity. Several employers said developing a plan and ongoing communication is the key to keeping business moving with minimal interruption. Other employers spoke of the need for employees to utilize the federal Employment Insurance under the compassionate care benefits program as some organizations simply cannot operate without constant staff – this allows them to hire temporarily.

Maintaining Productivity

Organizations have different staffing requirements depending on their size and the type of operations/services provided. When down an employee due to personal circumstances, some organizations are able to meet productivity or client demand by calling in casual or part-time staff or dispersing the workload amongst other staff members, while service- or client-driven organizations sometimes have to cancel appointments or programs. Many organizations mentioned the need to cross train their staff on each other's duties for situations where an employee is absent from work. This teamwork requires buy-in and an inclusive culture in order to achieve smooth operations. Employers noted that staff generally do not mind helping other staff members out when personal circumstances arise, however when the work continually gets shifted on to the rest of the staff, then employees start feeling resentful.

Depending on the type of work an employee performs, some employers allow for flexible working arrangements such as working from home or working non-standard hours that complement daycare hours. Of those employers who have employees working from home, none of them said they were

concerned about the productivity of their employees while not physically at the office as the work would speak for itself. Several employers spoke of the benefits of employees working from home or with flexible hours; employees, especially mothers with young children, appreciate better work-life balance and employers benefit from happy, productive, and loyal employees. One interviewee stated that he does not like the idea of employees working from home as he thinks it is unhealthy – work too easily encroaches upon family life and personal time.

The Effects of Formal Policy on Operations

The research committee expected small and medium size businesses to operate highly informally and flexibly to employee needs as situations arise; however, our interviewees indicated otherwise. When asked about whether formal written policy is a benefit or constraint, employers said written policy is a must in order to keep transparent, consistent and fair not only for employees but also for the employer. As one interviewee said,

I am human. I have good days and bad days. When I'm having a good day, I may be more generous, when I'm grumpy, less so. Written policy helps ensure that my actions are consistent. Also, a boss will connect with some employees more than others – this can affect decisions unless there is formal policy to keep you in check.

It was also mentioned that too much formal policy can be constraining but what is there must be clearly worded and unambiguous.

How Staff Respond to Family-friendly-Practices

Our interviewees said employee reaction to flexible and family-friendly practices have been received well. A couple of employers each recalled only one negative situation whereby an employee complained that they felt people with children were getting preferential treatment. Our interviewees expressed the need to let staff know that flexibility applies to all employees, not just parents, although parents are more likely to be the ones who need to utilize these practices and more often. Several employers spoke of how they have changed their hiring practices; they hire staff who are willing to be flexible, accommodating, and understanding of employees' differing personal circumstances and needs.

Sustainable Business Practices

When asked how employers retain good employees, interviewees acknowledged there are two components: first is the technical aspect of work – the type of work itself, pay, and benefits; the other component is managerial style, which includes processes of decision making and how responsive an organization is to an employee's needs. Our interviewees said sustainable workplaces are more than just about the individuals who work there but how all these individuals come together to create an effective, productive workplace. The added benefit of a cohesive staff, is the tendency for employees to be supportive and help each other through challenging life circumstances, which benefits employees emotionally and helps maintain the organization's productivity.

Through our interviews, it is clear that many employers here in Burnaby understand that implementing flexible and family-friendly practices to balance the work and life spheres not only benefits employees but also business. A recurring theme throughout the interviews is the importance of working with employees, being understanding and flexible to their needs, and doing what you can, within reason, to accommodate them. Finding solutions to problems that are mutually developed and agreed upon generates vast

amounts of good will. Our interviewees understand these practices are essential to not lose employees to larger businesses that can provide higher pay and better benefits. As many participants said, the small things mean a lot and a happy employee is a productive employee and will provide years of quality service and loyalty.

ⁱ Sustainable practices in our study refers to practices that maintain a certain level of productivity and ensure longevity of an organization. We are not referring to environmental practices with which the word sustainability is now commonly associated.

ⁱⁱ We define family to include traditional models as well as but not limited to same-sex couples, common law, single parent households, and extended family.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview transcripts were not recorded. Interviewers did their best to transcribe verbatim; where interviewees are quoted, there may be slight errors in exact wording, however the message intent remains correct.