

Work/Life Balance

Often, work/life balance is a phrase that is used to connote a balance between a person's work life and a person's personal life. When broken down, most people will consider work/life balance to be the perception of a realistic and fulfilling or satisfying balance between their work-related tasks and their personal tasks. Here's the biggest challenge, personal time, for many, is identified as time for leisure activities, or activities that they engage in that is specifically meant to help them unwind and recharge. This personal time should give people the ability to take a mental break and destress from the day's activities and stressors. It should not be surprising that working parents and caregivers, especially women, report lower levels of work/life balance, with higher levels of stress from work/life conflict.

Work/life conflict is when the demands of work interfere with personal life or vice versa. This can occur when a person's job demands are greater than what is expected of the role, which can cause these demands to interfere with their anticipated ability to manage their personal lives. This can also occur when unexpected events occur in their personal lives that affects their ability to focus on work related tasks. This could be something like a colleague being let go and the individual suddenly having to take on more work than what their role has historically called for with little to no notice. Alternatively, this could be a child suddenly becoming ill during the day.

This can become problematic when these one-offs interfere long-term. Such as when a person is overwhelmed or perceives they have little to no support managing their responsibilities, both fail to recognize: the support component.

Employers can be guilty of providing paid personal time off (PTO) for a certain amount of days. This varies widely around the world, from upwards of 38 days off (including holidays), to 0 paid days off (including holidays). It can also vary from organization to organization. Unfortunately, most people in the United States are lucky if they have paid holidays, many do not. Beyond that, many Americans also only have, again if they're lucky 5 days of paid vacation. Some companies do not even provide compensation for unexpected sick time, and some companies that do restrict it to one day per quarter. Essentially meaning that people who need to work to pay bills are at a disadvantage if their company does not provide paid holidays but are closed on those days. They are further disadvantaged if they are unable to take a sick day and receive compensation. Let's face it, bills don't take sick days.

What companies end up with is a staff of overstressed employees who are not motivated to be at work because they feel, often rightfully so, that they will suffer greatly by taking a day off. Or, people who take a week off often report being overstressed about their work that they feel they cannot really take a break from work or they feel that when they return, the work will be double their norm because they were not there.

This causes people, especially in the United States, to avoid using vacation time, even when available. Which results in higher levels of work-related stress and lower levels of overall productivity. Further, there is a perception that working parents, particularly women, are less dedicated to their organization and less focused on their work. The perception is that a working mother's children are her number one priority and that, ultimately, she would leave the work force to care for them. Conversely, working fathers are perceived to be more dedicated and focused at work, as the prevailing societal perspective is that they are the primary breadwinners. This perception prevails despite the fact that women are now the primary breadwinners in 40% of the households in the US. Households specifically headed by a

single woman is 14% while households headed by a single man are only 6%. Additionally, women are more likely to live alone than men are (<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2011/demo/womeninamerica.pdf>). This is further compounded by the fact that women are choosing to either not have children at all or have children later in life. Further, women who do have children, are having fewer children. Therefore, women are more likely to be negatively affected by societal beliefs in the workforce even when those beliefs are not true to the actual situation occurring.

For those who do have children, many working parents, especially in the lower socioeconomic class, are less likely to use their vacation time for actual vacation. They are more likely to use those days throughout the year for other purposes, such as a child's elementary school concert that is, for some inexplicable reason, only held during the day, thus requiring parents to take off work to attend. Or to use those days for a child's doctor appointment or dentist appointment or a meeting at the child's school (like a parent-teacher conference). Often, working parents are using their days for running errands and doing things other than relaxing and unwinding. What happens then, is that these people are less likely to have the opportunities to come back to work refreshed.

These people are also more likely to have demands at work that will either cause them to go in to work early or stay late or take a working lunch. Or worse, the work expectations within their role are unrealistic. When lofty expectations are provided, or expectations from one superstar are expected of all employees, that actually results in decreased employee morale and leads to decreased productivity and higher levels of turnover.

So, what can employers do? The first is to provide their employees with support programs to help, and not stigmatize the assistance that people receive. Working parents and caregivers are often more dedicated to their employers, because they NEED to be. These people rely on these employers because they are taking care of other people, not just themselves. But employees will need support to be able to bring their A game every day. Truly flexible schedules (for roles that allow it) may be ideal. Allowing people to work from home can be essential. Especially with everything that's happened in 2020, most companies have been forced to adopt a remote working solution. Allowing working caregivers the opportunity to get home before rush hour and take a later lunch hour, for example, can help them manage their day better. Providing external resources that can help is often an overlooked opportunity that can decrease work life conflict. External resources may include a separate company where people can have access to information about childcare options, eldercare options, legal advice, financial assistance, even other help that people may need (even mental health or fitness plans).

Giving employees the support they need will keep them committed to your organization. Even single, non-parent/non-caregiver employees. Providing these support plans is like your health insurance policy: it covers all kinds of services (like cancer treatment, or cardiac emergency treatment, or gall bladder/appendix removal) that you may never need, but you certainly appreciate having in case you do. Providing ample sick time off should be common sense, especially now with covid when people need to be out for 14 days but cannot afford to not have an income for half a month.

Providing ample opportunities for your employees to stay mentally, physically, and financially healthy should be essential components within your work/life balance policy. After all, if treat your employees exceptionally well, they will return the favor to you.

