

Work-Life Balance is not a soft issue: it is about work performance **By Helen Whitten, illumine lead trainer on personal effectiveness**

Achieving the balance between work and life is a key challenge of our time. Our clients constantly report how difficult it is to manage all their work tasks efficiently and get home in a fit state to have quality time outside the workplace.

Work-life balance has often been regarded as a soft-issue, a nice-to-have, but those companies who have the insight to realize that supporting staff in attaining a fulfilling home life alongside their work commitments recognise that balance does enhance work performance in many tangible ways.

This article will explore the factors that are impacting the lives of working people and will outline the solutions that illumine offers to remedy this situation.

So why has Work-Life Balance become an issue?

The world has changed radically in the last 20 years. Advances in technology has introduced a 24/7 world where professional people are constantly on call whether they are in the office, on public transport, or at home. This has resulted in literally a world of information being available to people through the internet; to a huge number of emails landing in people's inbox daily; to mobile phone and email access available worldwide with the outcome that people rarely switch off. There is no longer a straightforward cut-off from work when you get home. Indeed, with globalization many people are expected to participate in conference calls either early in the morning or late in the evening in order to communicate with colleagues across time zones.

Alongside this there has been social change. Now that women are in the workplace home back-up needs careful planning. Yet many companies continue to operate 'as if' there were someone at home when the reality is that a working couple have to fit caring and domestic responsibilities into their evenings and weekends, often when they are exhausted.

What are the consequences of being out of balance?

Our experience demonstrates that being out of balance results in exhaustion and stress, both of which impact performance and prevent clarity of thought. People report making more mistakes, becoming aggressive and not being efficient. They also report a reduction in creativity. As the old saying goes 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy (and Jill a dull girl!)'. People become tunnel visioned when they spend the majority of their time in the workplace as it gives them less opportunity to discuss business and world issues with people outside their sector and therefore broaden their perspective.

Ill-health is another consequence. Where the workplace culture is such that people work long-hours and feel awkward about taking time out if they are sick, or to see the doctor, the likelihood is that by the time they do address their illness the ailment will have got worse - and they may well have spread it around the office at the same time! Equally, if people are discouraged from taking time off to go to the gym or to eat a healthy lunch away from their desk their mind becomes sluggish and they will lack the energy required to accomplish their daily tasks effectively.

At home the effort of managing work and life can result in relationships and family life deteriorating. With many people living far from their families they can feel isolated and unsupported. Again this is not supportive of performance as an employee going through divorce or personal difficulties will not have their mind clear to focus on work. Therefore these are hard issues - impacting daily performance, communication, client relationships and productivity - and companies can take steps to prevent employees being overstretched.

How illumine supports people achieving work and life balance

Our course **The Balancing Act** enables people to address their lives in the context of their priorities both in the workplace and in their personal lives. They devise solutions that support quality of work and quality of life, using our tried and tested methods.

Delegates are given the opportunity to analyse their current working practices in relation to today's world and evaluate whether the way their work is organised supports personal and team performance. For this reason it is an excellent programme to run as a team as it provides time to assess outdated and unhelpful habits and behaviours and to brainstorm new strategies that are better aligned to the current environment.

Tips are provided on how to manage the demands of technology and how to rationalise the expectations of clients, bosses and colleagues with regard to response times. Delegates are made aware of the addictive nature of email and mobile phones, both of which feed into people's natural need to be included and significant. Through understanding the nature of habitual behaviour delegates are given a headstart in managing change.

As work-life balance is different for everyone, the group discuss what is acceptable and not acceptable in terms of work demands and are encouraged to set boundaries for the future. The introduction of the 4-quadrant HBDI Herrmann Thinking Preference model, based on Nobel-Prize-winner Professor Roger Sperry's research on the brain, enables people to understand why different members of staff have diverse priorities and how best to negotiate and focus on what is most important.

The question of whether work-life balance is the responsibility of the organisation or of the individual is raised, including health and safety issues. Case studies from a variety of sectors provide strategies that an organisation and managers can adopt and the business benefits that can be gained.

Finally, following discussion and input individuals are given time to envision an ideal future and to devise an action plan for change. This is based on the assertion that to take care of oneself first is the responsible rather than the selfish course of action as those who don't often end up taking time out and thus risk putting a greater burden on team and family members.

The programme has made a difference to the lives of individuals and teams and has demonstrated that small changes can make a beneficial impact on morale, motivation and performance. To find out more about our range of Well-being for Personal Effectiveness courses see more visit www.illumine.co.uk.

On the website you can also find out about our **Mastering Information Overload** courses that enable people to manage their workload faster and more effectively, thus releasing time for greater balance in their life.

So take action - it makes business sense!