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Balanced lives help us all

The more family-friendly employers are,
the greater the benefits for them,
their staff and society as a whole

All of us get the feeling sometimes that 24 hours are not enough to accommodate a day's work, family life, personal interests and social commitments.

This is not a new phenomenon, of course. One piece of research by two business school professors in the 1980s, for example, warned that a successful career in business usually led to an individual feeling miserable in their personal life.

Now, though, there seems to be a consensus that the problem is more acute than ever. Technology has blurred the boundaries between work and non-work, while globalisation has led to 24/7 demands on many employees. Meanwhile, in families where parents go out to work, childcare at home is often difficult to arrange, likewise care for elderly relatives.

Rapid changes in business, social and legal structures

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require companies and individuals to be agile and adaptable. This has created new work and business opportunities, as well as new career structures, but it has also placed more stress on employees, managers, organisations and society.

The lack of a proper work-life balance is costly for everyone. Our research at the International Center for Work and Family at IESE Business School, covers companies of all sizes around the world. It has shown the benefits of helping employees achieve a balance: when companies support employees and provide them with the resources for their work and family lives, these workers strive for excellence and perform better.

People who work in family-friendly environments perform up to 19 per cent better than those in workplaces without this advantage, according to our findings. Their sleep quality is twice as good and they are also four times more committed to their jobs and companies.

This suggests one way to help employees thrive in today's ever-demanding and all-consuming business environment is to provide them with the resources to engage with their families while still being committed at work. Here, then, are some measures that employers could introduce.

Provide emotional support. Listen to and help employees to solve conflicts between their work and non-work. This translates into greater commitment, engagement and motivation, better overall health, better sleep and higher satisfaction with work-family balance.

This kind of support is relevant to different cultures and countries. Our research shows the same effects in places as varied as Chile, Nigeria, the Netherlands and the Philippines, for men and women, and employees with and without children. When employees work in healthy organisations, they enjoy better health in their private and family lives.

Offer customised terms of employment. Such deals help workers improve their performance at home as well as in the workplace, reduce work-family conflict and are a helpful point of reference for colleagues.

Examples include allowing employees to work remotely. This helps cut absenteeism, and a reduction in commuting is better for the environment. Letting employees work to compressed or alternative schedules gives them more time for other areas of their life, such as being with their children or playing sport.

Employees who negotiate this kind of deal with their manager will experience the benefits, and in turn are more likely to grant such conditions to staff they manage themselves. If a manager has had to care for an elderly relative at home, for example, they tend to be more sympathetic towards the needs of their staff.

When leaders or managers show staff they are engaging in non-work activities such as family life, employees will perceive it as positive and legitimate, and follow suit. As role models, managers are sending a signal that it is fine to disconnect from work. This in turn improves workers' ability to recover and replenish their energy. All of these are positive outcomes, benefiting both employers and employees.

Achieving a perfect work-life balance is practically impossible, but leaders can help their staff move closer to that goal. Helping employees means helping society at large to reap the benefits of better health, wellbeing, performance and engagement. ●