

The pay-off for supporting work-life balance

In the course of identifying what makes managers of health services successful I had the opportunity to talk with the manager of a birthing unit. Her staff work 24/7, because babies don't always enter the world between 9 and 5. The midwives working for the unit are almost all working mums. One of the job requirements for their manager is to know if they will be able to work their scheduled roster. Knowing about the personal lives and out of work constraints of her people is fundamental to her success.

With this workforce it is not realistic for the manager to tell her skilled and hard to replace employees to change their lives to suit the roster. She has to make sure the job is working for these talents.

McKinsey described the 'war for talent' in the late 90s. Talent continues to be in demand and is globally mobile. As it becomes rarer it becomes more important.

Most organisations realise that they need to manage both ends of the talent equation – pulling the talents in, and also keeping them - so 'talent magnetism' is an important part of a manager's skills. More organisations are working to make their employment value proposition attractive to talent. More managers are using objective assessment and learning behavioural interviewing skills so they can identify the talent from those who want to join.

While attraction (and selection) is important, most attention goes to retention, because it can be a profound shock to lose good people. One argument for supporting the needs of people to balance their work and their life balance is that this increases their loyalty to their employer. Recent New Zealand research (see below for reference) has demonstrated the link between businesses supporting work-life balance and their people's intention to stay.

Previous research has found that work-life balance is one of a mix of factors (including interesting work and career opportunities) that New Zealand workers consider when deciding to leave a job. The new research advances this by demonstrating that New Zealand workers will consider the extent to which their organisation supports their achieving work-life balance in deciding their likelihood of leaving.

By applying causal statistical analysis to the reports of over 1,000 people from 25 diverse organisations, it was possible to demonstrate how this relationship worked. Employees' view of organisational support for work-life balance improved their job satisfaction, decreased work pressure, and in turn contributed to reduced intention to leave. This final link in the statistical chain – 'intention to leave' – is unsurprisingly the best predictor of whether people will leave. It may sound a bit mechanical but the model predicts that a one-point increase in the

perception of support for work-life balance will reduce voluntary staff turnover by 20% (e.g., from 10% to 8%).

This model provides the business argument for investing in work-life balance initiatives. There will be a point where the costs of implementing and maintaining work-life balance initiatives will be repaid by the savings from retained employees. Given that over one third of the workers surveyed considered that their organisations did not provide appreciable work-life balance support, this seems to be an area where many organisations could make a real difference to their retention.

You need to keep in mind that providing a range of work-life balance offerings is not the critical factor. That is the necessary but not sufficient step. Your people may well look at your menu of work-life balance offerings and see them as irrelevant. Or some of these offerings could be desirable but not accessible under their present manager. You need to keep tuned in to what it is that they need, and be flexible around providing that, if you want to make it easy for them to stay. See the box for some suggestions.

It comes back to managers who have a good relationship with and are able to talk to their people at a personal level. And who are empowered to make the changes that will provide useful support.

Box –

Practical ways to ensure your business is supporting its people's work-life balance:

Help your managers understand the value of having personal relationships with staff. Ensure that senior managers build relationships with the managers who report to them, and that all managers know how important this level of rapport is to the organisation. This can be signalled by making managers accountable for objective measures – such as job satisfaction, intention to leave, and voluntary staff turnover.

Make sure these leaders model flexibility around how work is done – with an emphasis on delivering results rather than face time. Some examples: working in short bursts with re-energising breaks; taking time to chat with friends; booking distraction-free time for reflection and regeneration.

Evaluate your work-life balance initiatives (just as you do all your investments in your people!). Do your people think they are getting the benefits you hope to deliver? Is it making a difference to the important issues of job satisfaction and work pressure?

Don't take the balance mantra too literally – it can be useful to take work home or work in the weekend, so long as you ring-fence the important things – helping children learn, keeping up connections in the community.

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The research – Stewart Forsyth and Andrea Polzer-Debruyne, 2007. The organisational pay-offs for perceived work--life balance support. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 45(1): 113--123. Thanks to Pohlen Kean who had the vision to sponsor the original research. Stewart is Director of FX Consultants; specialists in creative approaches to improving organisational productivity.

