WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN INDIA – AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I have tried to address the reasons contributing to improper balance of work-life in India and the various strategies that have been designed by firms like TCS to keep their employees happy. As the younger generation of Indian employees are offered great pay with it comes more work pressure which also takes a toll on their relationships and life itself. Indian women and senior employees suffer the most. The employees need to realize that they need to balance work and life for both success at the workplace and a fulfilled life. Organizations can only facilitate, but the initiative should be taken by the employee. There are many measures that companies can take to ensure work-life balance, such as employee benefits like child care facilities, video conferencing to reduce travel, not scheduling work events during school holidays and so on.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fact that employees in huge buildings of prospering Indian firms take home huge pay every month, can paint a rosy picture of their lives in anyone’s mind. However, when we take a closer look, we see another reality that is not so bright. In reality, the lives of these individuals are marked by pressures, hectic schedules, and extremely long hours at work which takes a toll on their health, and also relationships at home and social engagements.
It is true that there is no substitute for hard work, especially for the Indian professionals who are beginning to make a mark in the global business world. But, striking a balance between work and personal life is equally imperative. After all, one cannot be expected to make a living at the expense the quality of life that all humans deserve.

NEED FOR BALANCE

According to psychotherapists and trainer-consultants in personal growth, human beings do not have just one drive, but many drives and needs. In order for them to have a sense of wellbeing, these needs are to be met adequately. Work is important and it gives a lot of meaning in life, but one must always remember that life is bigger than work. When our lives are only about work, other needs will not be met and which results in frustration.

When work-life balance is not maintained, a person begins to experience sense of emptiness and hollowness which is difficult to deal with. In addition, relationships take a beating and the person begins to experience loneliness, depression, despair and cynicism.

A result of work-life imbalance can be seen in a survey on career couples by Team Lease in February 2008. It showed that 54 percent of the respondents felt they were merely “weekend parents. In addition, 34 percent of the working couples surveyed felt that since there were two careers the chances of a divorce were high. Moreover, most participants agreed that working in odd shift hours had a bearing on their marital relationships.

The psychotherapists believe that mid-career professionals are most prone to having work-life imbalance. Since they believe that they need very little time to reach the position of desire. This crisis often leads to a tendency to overwork to achieve things faster, and the work-life balance gets disturbed. One must not act while she or he is facing this anxiety. Being led by the feelings can be disastrous. One must take time to understand the feelings and realize that it is natural to have those feelings. The work-life balance is also essential for the professional growth of a person. Research has found that a healthy balance increases the individual’s professional productivity due to a sense of greater self-confidence, it helps in the ability to communicate effectively, and it boosts morale – which ultimately helps the organization as well.
NEED OF THE HOUR

Peter Ellwood, chairman of a unique U.K.-based advocacy group, believes that work-life balance is more crucial at this point in time than ever before. Globalization, demographics, and societal changes have changed or forced business to transform the way they operate. Strategies dealing with work-life balance are a valuable tool in this transformation. They offer a win-win situation, engaging employees on the basis that there is ‘something in it for them’ too, and humanizing the process of change. The lobby defines work-life balance as thus: It is about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual’s right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society.

CASE FOR BALANCE IN INDIA

The industry in the U.K., and elsewhere in the West, is far ahead in this area than its counterparts in developing economies like India’s. Even government legislations in many Western countries make it mandatory for business establishments to provide work-life balance to their employees. Yet, there exist groups such as the Employers for Work-Life Balance in the U.K. and the Centre for Work-Life Policy in the U.S. Having said this, how much more India Inc. needs to do in this area is not difficult to imagine. India makes a stronger case for work-life balance given that the boom in her economy is a more recent phenomenon which puts the workforce in greater stress than in developed nations. What’s more, India is a service destination for numerous global business firms due to the availability of cheaper workers, many of who are required to work in night shifts. Most Indian professionals find it difficult to cope with the stress levels. Increasing work pressures and the rising need to travel for work are potential contributors to a new, mounting stress placed on corporate executives like me. Gone are the days when executives were concerned only about the bottom line and market share.
WOMEN BEAR THE BRUNT

The entry of a large percentage of women into the workforce is adding to the complexity, in a largely male-dominated society like India’s, women are made to shoulder all the major responsibilities of the household, be it buying groceries or raising kids. This is generally true even when the woman of the house has a career. Not that this attitude is not changing, but its pace is far slower than needed given that the number of women choosing to have a career is growing by the day. For instance, about 20 percent of the employees in Motorola India are women. For women, the problems are a lot more serious and so they opt out. The Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 demands that all women workers be given a three-month paid maternity leave. Unfortunately, almost all pregnant working women choose to work till very close to the delivery date so that they can utilize the leave to look after their babies. But is it easy for nursing mothers to leave the baby home after three months? And it is not easy even to go back to work with a feeling of guilt for leaving their babies with maids or old grand parents. Besides, there is no legal provision for paternity leave, and therefore husbands can be of little help. Here is where it is in the interest of organizations to do something to ‘tap into this talent pool’ that will otherwise go unutilized.

INDUSTRY’S RESPONSE

Are Indian firms helping their employees balance work and life? Independent HR (human resource) experts think otherwise. Indian organizations are not really doing much and are not likely to. This is not a priority at all. You can see that many IT (information technology) companies are looking at a six-day week to bill additional revenue.

NEED FOR EMPLOYEES’ INITIATIVE

But can such policies alone help in striking a balance?

As regards finding the time for family and social life, depends on how each individual manages her or his time. If one finishes the work within the office hours, there will always be time for other engagements. The employees need to realize that they need to balance work and life for both success at the workplace and a fulfilled life. Organizations can only facilitate, but the initiative should be taken by the employee. Attaining a better work-life balance by utilizing mobility and technology in daily work schedules is the need of the hour. Technology like Blackberry increases professional agility by allowing the freedom to work anytime and from anywhere. Many organizations today have implemented intranets, virtual private networks and other knowledge management systems, these technologies must be used by employees to stay in touch even if it means they have to work from home for non-work related purposes such as tending to a sick child or parents.

RECOMMENDED POLICIES & CONCLUSION
There are many measures that companies can take to ensure work-life balance, such as employee benefits like child care facilities, video conferencing to reduce travel, not scheduling work events during school holidays and so on.

Identifying the key need or reason for introducing work-life balance policies, building the commitment to it into the organization’s vision statement, setting up a special task force, examining current practices, holding joint discussions with employees to evolve policies - while also identifying possible barriers, communicating policies through handbooks, newsletters, intranet and so on, holding workshops to help managers implement and manage policies, monitoring implementation and putting feedback systems into place.

The government could play a critical role in being a catalyst of change. An advantage that Indian industry will however have is learning from the experiences of other countries in what has worked and what has not. But, there’s no ‘one size that fits all’ and Indian companies will have to adapt policies to fit in with not just the nature of industry, profile of workforce and other such factors but also with the local culture and environment.

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