

Creating solutions for work-life balance



Work and relationships – how they affect each other

Preliminary findings from the EEO Trust's on-line survey on how work affects relationships and vice versa show that most respondents (81%) think work has a positive effect on their relationships. Most people (60%) also thought their workplace valued and supported their relationships with friends and partners.

One respondent wrote about the positive effects of work for his partner, "Paid work provides my spouse with more motivation that she didn't have when off work. Home life is better when we both have a job."

However a third of respondents had experienced a break-up with their spouse/partner where the impact of paid work had been a contributing factor. Work pressure, exhaustion and stress were the main reasons followed by long working hours and unpredictable working hours.

When asked about the effects of relationship problems on paid work, 74% of respondents said they did not work as well if they were having problems in their relationships with friends or their spouse/partner.

A large number of people (86%) said that when their relationships are going well they were more productive at work because they felt better. Many (76%) also said that emotional support from their relationships had a positive impact on work performance.

When asked what workplace initiatives would support their relationships, more than half the respondents wanted flexible work hours. Other preferred workplace initiatives included training for managers to increase their awareness of work practices that impact on relationships. One respondent said, "Greater manager awareness and compassion for staff (particularly while making changes) would be a big advantage".

Work-life jigsaw taking shape

The Work-Life Balance Project is a major drive to encourage New Zealanders and New Zealand businesses to take stock about quality of life: to identify what the issues are, what solutions currently work well and what more can be done in the future.

Many organisations are already investing in work practices that support good work-life balance. But there are also suggestions that more could be done to support and promote these approaches.

Many individuals and organisations have already put forward their views, ideas and suggestions. The project team wants to hear from more people and recognises that the practical solutions need to come from people who are already finding workable ways to build successful organisations and support individuals who want to lead healthy, productive working lives.

A public consultation exercise is underway until the end of March. Submissions to date highlight issues around childcare and working parents, the need for part-time work options, handling work stress, workplace culture and the need to improve flexibility at work. People are also talking about the benefits of creating innovative solutions and others are raising issues faced by small business owners.

The overwhelming message is that work-life balance is an issue – although not everyone agrees that more can be done or what the solutions might be. Whatever your views are on work-life balance, the project team wants to hear from you.

Individuals or organisations can contribute by completing the response form online at www.worklife.govt.nz. Discussion packs and hard copy response forms are also available by emailing the project at: worklife@dol.govt.nz.

Work-life balance – taking the office to the beach

Stephan Spencer goes out of his way to provide flexibility for his staff – he even moved his company from downtown, gridlocked Auckland to Browns Bay, just a block from the beach.

There's an open plan office, breakfast bar and magazine stand, arcade games to help de-stress, a patio area, table and chairs and a barbeque.

He's created a cruisy, laidback environment that helps a high powered, high pressure business succeed.

For Stephan, it's a deliberate philosophy that values lifestyle over a 'dilbert' type existence, with people 'slogging their guts out.'



Stephan Spencer

Stephan moved from Wisconsin five years ago and believes New Zealanders take for granted what they've got. He's amazed how many people he meets who live in Auckland and haven't even visited Waiheke Island or Rangitoto.

His company, Netconcepts Ltd, is a web design business with the majority of clients in the United States.

Most of the staff are 'creatives,' working on cutting edge projects that stretch them mentally. Stephan says it's important they can take five minutes out to clear their heads or go for a walk on the beach at lunch time. He enjoys high retention rates among his staff and when he moved to Browns Bays, many of the staff also shifted. "My primary goal for staff is to protect their cvs and improve their skill sets.

"I can only take on new work if I can maintain key staff. If we lost them we would lose something special to our business."

The reality for me is that I was working flat out, telling myself all these hours are for the good of the family. Reality was that it turned me into a grumpy, unapproachable mess and ended up with no family, just me by myself and still the bills. Hindsight is a good thing. The only problem with it is that I will never make up the time I missed with my kids so I am in full support of doing something about work-life balance: workplace creches, return to the 40 hour week, support from the elected government.

A response from the public consultation

Financial benefits of providing work-life balance for staff

HR Consultant Stewart Forsyth outlines the financial benefits to organisations being seen by staff as supporting their work-life balance.

Stewart, of FX Consultants, analysed the Pohlen Kean Work-Life Balance survey of 1,187 staff at 25 New Zealand organisations. He found a strong relationship between staff's views that their organisation supported their work-life balance and their loyalty.

Providing such support represents a significant savings opportunity for many New Zealand businesses says Forsyth. He says organisations seen by staff as providing work-life balance support can expect financial benefit through reducing the cost of replacing staff.

The 2002 Pohlen Kean survey covered public and private sector organisations throughout New Zealand, varying from 20 staff to over 1,000.

Forsyth says employer support around work-life balance contributes to job satisfaction and helps reduce work pressure or stress, which in turn reduces the intention of staff to leave their employer.

For managers earning around the \$80,000 level the benefit of an increment in perceived support is estimated at \$6,300 per manager. The financial return of a lift in the view of employees that their employer is helping work-life balance could be around \$300 per employee for employees earning at \$25,000.

Forsyth says supervisors need to be able to listen to staff to be able to address issues that matter to them. "It's about listening to and supporting staff towards solving their problems. It's also about the employer being prepared to make the changes that matter in a cost-effective way."

Forsyth believes the major benefit of the Pohlen Kean analysis is that it can help organisations decide where to focus their HR initiatives. "By putting a dollar value on the impact of work-life balance initiatives we don't mean to reduce such personal matters simply to dollars and cents. But the numbers give an objective guideline to the importance of this issue."



Extension to paid parental leave helps family work-life balance

Thousands more women and families are expected to benefit from the government's decision this month to extend the eligibility and duration of paid parental leave. The leave period will be extended from 12 to 14 weeks, phased in over two years.

Parents will also be able to take paid parental leave if they have been in the same job for at least six months, rather than a year as at present. Prime Minister Helen Clark and Women's Affairs Minister Ruth Dyson, who now has responsibility for work-life balance policies, said an evaluation of the paid parental leave scheme shows it has been a resounding success.

"A Department of Labour evaluation shows both employees and employers have adjusted well to the entitlement with few administrative or employment issues arising.

"The ability to take 12 weeks paid leave, and return to the workplace has increased employees' well-being and feeling of being appreciated, while retaining competent staff has been a benefit to employers.

"A third of employers surveyed last year cited a positive or very positive impact on their businesses, half said it had no real

impact and only nine per cent believed the overall impact of paid parental leave had been less favourable.

"From the employers' perspective, the most frequently cited benefits of the scheme were: that staff were happier and more satisfied, that they were more likely to retain experienced staff, and that the scheme stopped mothers returning to work too early or before they were ready.

"New Zealand businesses have to compete internationally for skilled employees, so it is important that New Zealand employees' quality of life matches that of other developed countries," Helen Clark and Ruth Dyson said.

It is estimated that around 26,000 employed women have babies each year. Latest figures confirm that 19,000 parents accessed paid parental leave in its first year. A further 3,400 women are expected to benefit from the extensions to the scheme.

Breastfeeding ordeal for working mum

Vanessa Tate went back to work two days a week when her baby was six months old. She was breastfeeding which meant expressing milk at work.

The experience turned out to be a nightmare. She couldn't find anywhere to go so she spent every break she had, in the toilets, expressing milk.

"I just dreaded it in the end. I was sitting between the toilet and a hand basin expressing milk and eating my lunch. It was awful."

A nurse at a private hospital, most of her bosses were women who were sympathetic but didn't offer any solutions. "People would say to me things like 'good on you' and 'you poor thing' but I didn't feel very valued and I swore I would never do it again."

She eventually found a room she could use that was three floors down from where she was working. "It was pretty difficult. If it was busy, I sometimes couldn't get anyone to cover for me so sometimes I just ended up with a few minutes. It wasn't ideal but it was better than the toilets."

Despite saying never again, Vanessa is now preparing to go back to work after her second child and plans to express again.

"Last time I was embarrassed. It was my first child and I was not sure about things. This time I am working in a different part of the hospital. I have found a space and I have spoken to my managers about what I want to do."

"I really think it would be helpful if someone went round workplaces just telling stories like this to make employers understand a bit more.

Breastfeeding is something mothers are really encouraged to do but experiences like mine are not very nice and it shouldn't have to be like that. I think it is just a matter of awareness in most cases. Women just need a bit of privacy. It's not really too much to ask."



Vanessa Tate

I'm under constant pressure all day, always balancing off different deadlines. When your work's that intense it's impossible to forget about, even at night. It's like you never get to relax. I have consciously sat back and looked at my job, and drawn a line in the sand to be corny. I thought if I have to work such intense hours during the week, then I'm not going to come in on the weekend. At work, I try to be professional and honest about my limits. I'm asked to do work for someone, I get a brief from them and then accurately tell them how much time's involved. That way, you're clear with your manager about what you can and can't achieve.

A response from the public consultation

