What is Work-Life Balance?

- The interaction between paid work and other activities, including unpaid work in families and the community, leisure and personal development.

- Creating a productive work culture where the potential for tensions between work and other parts of people's lives is minimised. This means having appropriate employment provisions in place, and organisational systems and supportive management underpinning them.

- Having the ‘right’ combination of participation in paid work (defined by hours and working conditions), and other aspects of their lives. This combination will not remain fixed, but may change over time.

The right balance varies from person to person and is not a simple formula of time spent at work, compared with time spent on the rest of their lives. While the number of hours worked is an important factor, it may not be the principal one. For some, it is an active choice to work longer hours at some times of the year or at specific stages of their careers.

The sense of having access to work-life balance is highly related to a feeling of control, choice and the ability to match work patterns to one's own preference and stage of life. For those with young children, it is important to be home regularly for dinner, bath and bedtime rituals, even if it means doing a few hours’ work later in the evening. For others, sustained periods of intensive work are fine, so long as they are punctuated by significant breaks of real relaxation.

What makes it difficult?

Maintaining a good balance is not always easy. Besides the straight demands of the job, difficulties come from:

- Commitment and Loyalty

  Commitment to the work of their organisation and personal loyalty to their colleagues and their superiors can result in knowingly emphasising work at the expense of their personal life.

- Frustration, lack of progress or feeling that the work is not valued

  Good job satisfaction, knowing that your work is recognised and valued, and a sense of achievement can more than compensate for long hours.

- The Nature of the Role

  Some job scopes increase the difficulty of maintaining a work-life balance. Some roles are isolated, without immediate peers or subordinates to help out during busy periods.

- Technology

  Although technology can help with work-life balance, it can also make it more difficult. Cell phones and e-mails have led to an expectation of employee’s availability 7 days a week. Examples include taking a day’s leave, but spending a significant proportion of the time on the phone dealing with work issues, or going on holiday, but promising to check e-mails or review papers while away. Difficulty accessing necessary
information, dealing with incompetent staff, poor communication channels or a lack of resources can affect work and work-life balance.

- Family

Family can create another set of demands on a person, but maintaining strong family relationships can help in maintaining a reasonable work-life balance.

Are the difficulties real or perceived? They can be used as an excuse or a cover for personal choices. For some people, it had become ‘fashionable’ to work long hours and find take their identity and status in how hard they are seen to be working. Some use work as an excuse to avoid having to deal with the rest of their lives.

Acknowledging the need and difficulty of maintaining work-life balance is not always easy. At senior management levels, there is a strong expectation of highly developed self-management skills. This expectation comes from their superiors, their peer group and themselves. Admitting to yourself or to others that you are finding it difficult to maintain a sense of balance can risk being seen as incompetent.

Personal Strategies to Develop and Maintain Work-Life Balance

- Make careful choices about the job you take on. Choose work that you believe in and you enjoy.
- Be deliberate in your attitude to work, whilst keeping a sense of humour.
- Make time for exercise, be it walking to work, running at lunchtime or walking to and fro appointments.
- Make time for other activities that relax and refresh.
- Deliberately manage your diary. Mark out blocks of time in your calendar for exercise, meeting your partner or children for lunch, taking the children to school or quiet reflection.
- Schedule holidays and make sure you take them.
- Protect the boundaries between work and the rest of life. The boundaries may be time specific (e.g. never working on Saturdays), place specific (e.g. not bringing work home, or only doing work at home in the study room) or situation specific (e.g. not answering the during family meal times).
- Develop transition patterns or rituals between work and home. These can include preparing the ‘to-do’ list for the next day, organising the desk, walking home or going for a walk immediately on getting home, changing from work clothes or sitting down with a glass of wine.
- Make technology work for you. This may mean having a computer at home that is networked to the office or using a mobile phone as a contact point.
- Monitor and respond to your own stress. Monitor early stress signals and enlist the help of close family or friends where necessary.
- Structure the job appropriately. Ensure that there are a manageable number of people directly reporting to you. Negotiate reasonable deadlines. Be realistic and honest about what is and what is not possible.

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