

PRESBYTERIAN PEOPLE

Employment news & information bulletin

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Employment update

Welcome to the July edition of Presbyterian People.



Presbyterian Church
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This month we discuss the issue of 'work-life' balance which is becoming increasingly popular amongst workplaces and how you can use it in your workplace.

Work-Life Balance

In recent times, the subject of 'work-life' balance has been gaining traction in a number of workplaces—especially those within government. However, there does not seem to be a definitive explanation of what it is and why we should be trying to adopt it in our workplaces.

A work-life balance programme is initiated by employers and includes strategies such as allowing flexible working hours for parents of young children to managers encouraging employees to take better care of themselves. However, depending on who you talk to, the term can also be applied to staff lunches and the company netball team.

Likewise, there are a range of reasons being promoted as to why you should adopt work-life strategies in your workplace: it reduces employer liability under the Health and Safety in Employment Act (presumably due to less stress as said netball team would lead to the odd injury), it increases productivity through an increase of 'employee engagement' (more on that later) and it positions you as an 'employer of choice' - especially with generation Y.

However, it still begs a question, and it's a blunt one—what's the point?

The Problems

I suggest we start by looking at the New Zealand labour market. Admittedly, this will be in a very broad fashion and there is nothing here that you do not already know.

But, the following work patterns are evident in New Zealand:

- Long hours (we consistently work some of the longest hours in the OECD)
- We have a poor reputation for workplace safety and employee fatigue
- Ageing (some employees are struggling with age-related health effects whilst others have elder care responsibilities)
- High employment (making it that much more difficult to attract the employees we want)

So, what has any of this to do with us as employers?

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Lets start with the first two points. People who undertake any activity for long periods of time are likely to become tired, stressed and accident-prone. No argument there. And, employers have a responsibility under employment legislation to ensure that jobs are sized appropriately, to ensure adequate staffing to carry out tasks and to ensure that employees have adequate rest. Likewise, employers are responsible for ensuring that employees undertake their work safely.

By allowing employees to work long hours (whether that be through turning a blind eye to staffing shortages or even encouraging a 'martyrdom' culture) the employer bears a responsibility for what happens to that employee. This responsibility may include prosecution under the HSEA for stress-related illnesses and collateral damage caused when an exhausted employee has a motor accident on their way home.

However, before we've reached the stage of legal redress, the employee is likely to have already suffered damage to personal relationships and the employer is also likely to have suffered in terms of a decrease in productivity.

Then there are the problems that arise when you have an aging population. The most obvious concern is from age-related health issues that may affect a long-standing employee's ability to do their job. However, another important issue that is frequently overlooked is to do with elder care. Right now, a growing proportion of employees aged 25 and over are responsible for caring for an aging parent or grandparent. However, it is very rarely discussed as it does not have the social appeal of, say, caring for small children.

Finally there is the issue of high employment. Every employer has a finite amount it can afford to spend on employees' salaries. However, an employer may be able to set themselves apart from the pack by developing a work-life programme that will appeal to employees. Research by the Equal Employment Opportunities Trust (EEO) suggests greater employee engagement in workplaces that offer a range of work-life balance initiatives.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is the term given to the 'discretionary hours' performed by employees. Confused? It simply means the degree to which an employee feels inclined to work over and above their normal working hours for the employer for no additional remuneration or compensation.

Employees who feel valued by their employers are more likely to work longer hours out of loyalty to their employer. So, for example, an employer who provides enhanced annual leave entitlements and regular, paid, medical check-ups for staff is more likely to have a workforce that will put in the extra hours when it counts.

In fact, employee engagement appears to be the number one reason employers implement work-life programmes. However we need to be careful that we are not sending the wrong message and instead creating a martyrdom culture, effectively replacing one problem with another.

Work-Life Programme

Now we return to a question I asked at the beginning: What exactly is work-life balance?

As I have already mentioned, there appears to be a range of definitions. However, for the purposes of this discussion I will define work-life balance as an intentional programme to ensure employees are working a reasonable number of hours and have adequate time off for rest and recuperation from the job itself; and that this programme recognizes that employees have differing circumstances outside of the workplace that can affect their ability to do their jobs.

This definition promotes work-life programmes that are compliant with existing employment legislation but are still flexible enough to cater for different employees and workplaces, without spending time on trivial issues such as what colour the netball team's uniform will be.

Such a programme could include:

- Clear policies for use of time in lieu—ensuring that employees take it within a short period of time to ensure they are resting adequately after busy periods
- Enhanced annual leave entitlements for employees whose work demands very long hours and/or working in stressful situations
- Promoting well-being through offering free or discounted influenza vaccines, annual check-ups with doctors and/or optometrists
- Providing information to employees on handling stress, smoking cessation programmes and looking after themselves in general
- Creating a culture where it is okay to admit things are not going well at home (people often cannot leave their problems at home, so it is better to be proactive rather than wait for a costly error to be made at work)
- Allowing for flexible working hours (flexi-time) for employees who have competing demands such as child or elder care responsibilities
- Developing organisational 'depth' so that employees can take sick leave in peace, without constant telephone calls and emails from work asking for help
- Being open to older employees wanting to reduce their number of hours due to age-related medical issues, providing time off for doctors' appointments

Whichever elements you choose to add to your work-life programme, it is important that they are:

- Relevant
- Cost-effective
- Applied consistently

For example, there might be little point in offering subsidized child-care to older workers. However, those same workers may appreciate a flexi-time arrangement that allows for the care of grandchildren after school. Likewise, employees are more likely to appreciate a management culture that supports them through difficult times rather than a lavish Christmas party once a year.

Whatever you do, I must stress the importance of applying any strategies consistently across your workforce. You should be able to defend your decision to offer a flexi-time arrangement to one employee over another.

And, avoid the trap of assigning value to the types of issues your employees face. If you allow parents with young children to start and finish earlier so they can better manage their child care responsibilities, do you also extend this to other employees that may need time to visit an elderly parent in hospital? Alternately, are you more inclined to allow the employee who strained their back moving house to modify their duties for the week than the one who has a stress fracture in their wrist from a mountain-biking accident?

Conclusion

The area of work-life balance seems to be fraught with confusion over what it is, how it can be applied, and the degree of employer responsibility.

What is clear, from the research that has been carried out by the EEO, employees do value work-life balance strategies. Therefore these programmes can be a useful tool for employers to help them attract and retain the best employees and to show they value their employees in a cost-effective way.

At the same time, work-life programmes, by their very nature, address many of the issues that need to be addressed in order to remain compliant with legislation in the areas of employment and health and safety.

Hopefully I have given you something to think about.

Please feel free to drop me a line on this topic or any other human resource issue at juliette@presbyterian.org.nz.

