

Work life balance when working from anywhere

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Prelude

'Flexibility' has been the buzz word which has attracted a great deal of attention amongst all other parameters of the phenomena of work life balance (WLB). The longing for flexibility in terms of structuring, scheduling, and conducting jobs (along with where and how to complete them) has been the major focus of those people who spearheaded the agenda of work life balance from the very beginning. The desire to have flexibility is most prevalent with some sections of the population (Gen-Y, Gen-Z, and the Millennials) across the globe. In developed countries, flexibility reverberation has reached a new height as people in general are more health and wellbeing conscious now compared to any other time in the past. People at large are convinced that they 'do not live to work'. Rather, they work to make a living. To these people, work is just the 'means, but not the ends.' Hence, the logical expectation is that work must not interfere with lives outside work hours. Employees manage work related stress better if they are provided with flexibility. This has the potential to improve the productivity of an organisation as well. Greater flexibility allows employees to fulfil their obligations away from work (including fulfilling the needs of the families and friends and discharging other commitments) relatively better.

Ground reality

During the last two and a half years when the world was ravaged by the covid virus, a powerful new trend was already in the making. The workplaces in Australia, USA, Europe and in some part of Asia witnessed an unprecedented disruption when employers had to shut their doors and ask employees to leave the premises. No one knew what to expect and how things would unfold. Jobs which could not be completed online (nursing, age care, delivery, supermarket, cleaning, policing etc.) were treated differently though. Many millions had to adjust with a life that literally changed overnight. This triggered an attitudinal change in employees' minds all over the world when they inadvertently started valuing certain aspects of life which were once at the back burners or used to be taken for granted. But for those who had appetite for WLB- this came as a windfall. Overall, nearly everyone- the supporters as well as the opponents- could understand firsthand deep inside the value of home, social life, and the quality of life. Employees who were suddenly pushed online started to realise and value the importance of mental/ emotional wellbeing, the quality time they were spending with their family and friends. The value of social life- which for all practical purposes was on the retreat for many people prior to the onslaught of covid 19 due to their hands to mouth condition- had now started to be well understood and appreciated. In brief, there has been a paradigm shift in the way employees perceived their work during the covid period. This trend is unlikely to die down anytime soon.

Net gain

Among all the changes that covid 19 has brought, flexibility has been a welcome serendipity. This worked beautifully as the gig work and gig economy naturally fits smoothly with the idea of flexibility. Covid-driven disruptions at the beginning of 2020 forced nearly everyone to be off-site. The opportunity to be 'online' has been the saviour for many organisations. Government activism in terms of 'job keeper' and 'job seeker' allowances has helped

businesses to remain afloat during this tough time. The net benefit of all these new normal phenomena has been manifold. The forced off-site and online situation helped save travel time to and from the workplace, avoid the risks of being on the road physically, save travel costs, and reduce the risk of catching the virus during work-related travel or from the workplaces. Naturally, one would hope to have some of these features in place while they aspire to enjoy a good work life balance.

Realisation

Covid-19 has forced many millions of employees to revisit and re-evaluate the value of work in their lives. The sheer number of fatalities [6,514,397 as of 26 September 2022 (WHO, 2022)] has shaken the resolve of the world from the most developed to the least, and from the technologically well-advanced all the way to the techno-devoid nations. The powerful message is that work is only one part and that there are a lot more in life. This wholesome view of life is what makes us human. If an individual's mindset shifts from being a 'flame out track' to valuing relationships, health, leisure, and wellbeing; then the crazy race of obsessive materialism and workaholism is bound to be slow for sure. However, the longing for a well-paid job, a higher position, a higher status, more power, and commensurate prestige is unlikely to disappear overnight. But the ground has visibly started to shift. Only time will tell if shifts is for the better or for the worse.

The risks

The world for all practical purposes seems to have embraced the fourth industrial revolution (Industry 4.0). The omnipresent interconnectivity, the availability of smart and intelligent technology and automation (artificial intelligence, robots etc.) have been some of the main drivers paving the way for this phenomenon to take a firm hold. The Industry 4.0 journey, among others, shall require the ready-availability of a skilful e-aware workforce (with digital literacy available nearly 24/7) capable of surviving the peril of 'presenteeism' which costs the economy lot more compared to the cost of 'absenteeism'. This trend (presenteeism) is bound to have big impact on the quality of life. Automation, robots, and artificial intelligence shall force employees to learn new sets of skills to remain relevant in the changing world of work. Many might end up losing their livelihood due to their inability to learn new skills or due to the shrinkage of opportunities in traditional fields. Some of these people might endeavour to acquire new skills out of sheer fear. Either way, this could potentially have an adverse effect on the WLB. Business leaders and managers, therefore, need to look at the possible downsides of the increased use of technologies in workplaces. A workforce that is increasingly connected and contactable means that work is becoming nearly 24/7 with a real potential to affect worker's health and well-being. The probable invasion of peoples' private space is also a real- threat here.

Concluding remarks

Though the momentum gained is gratifying, but there is no scope for being complacent about the progress to date on this front. Therefore, the anticipation is that the WLB i.e., the quality-of-life movement will continue to occupy space, generate waves, and capture grounds with even better traction in the days to come.

Reference

WHO, 2022. WHO Coronavirus (Covid 19) Dashboard. Retrieved on 27 September 2022 from <https://covid19.who.int/>

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