

ALL WORK

&

NO PLAY WILL TAKE YOUR YOUNG GUNS AWAY

We all want flexible working arrangements, the five-day work week, sabbaticals and other employee-friendly initiatives. But where does Singapore rank today on work-life balance, especially for the young workforce? *HRM* investigates

The 1990s saw the emergence of a new generation of workers who are characterized by decreased loyalty to their companies and increased expectations for autonomy, self-development and greater involvement in companies' decision-making. Simultaneously, in Singapore and in many parts of the world, the increasing emphasis on knowledge-based competitiveness in the current turbulent environment has also accelerated the importance of human capital. Consequently, today businesses are struggling to keep pace with a new generation of young people entering the workforce who have starkly different attitudes and desires than employees over the past few decades.

Generation Y workforce craves for a more collaborative work environment and detest drudgery, say workplace analysts. And they want a work-life balance, which is often at odds with the values of the corporate world. "Gen Y demands a different set of rules and practices compared to their parents' generation, and companies should manage those demands. The distinction between 'work' and 'life' is often a sore point," says Raymond Arogyaswamy, senior vice president for Operations, Emerio Corporation. But a log of the larger corporations, and even the smaller ones, he feels, are managing this by "encouraging a mobile workforce, and implementing work-from-home policies".

Getting straight down to it

Some organizations understand that human capital is scarce and, with the growing demands for talent from both the local and global markets there will be a shrinking supply of workers with the right set of skills within each industry. Those companies that have not been very proactive in this regard need to sit up and address the issue.

“The costs involved to train an employee and the tacit knowledge gathered over the years will be lost if an employee decides to leave the organization due to work-family conflict. Business needs all this talent to meet the demands in today’s 24/7 economy,” underlines John Quek, Project Consultant, Great Work Solutions.

But as Arogyaswamy insists, often it is difficult to set down policies because work-life balance is a very personal equation. “It is very difficult to draw a line between work and life as well, as these days the lines are often blurred. One person’s tele-commute is another’s interference of official work into his or her home; one man’s balance is another person’s inability to snap the umbilical cord with the organization.”

In such cases, employers have to tackle the situation with a fine balance. “At Emerio, we encourage the family to ‘buy in’ to the company – support them when the employee is off on a business trip and network across families, so that stress from employees trying to balance their lives is managed. In the final analysis, work is life and vice versa, so the only way to have a balance is to ensure that it doesn’t remain a moot point,” he shares.

Work-life balance as a retention tool

It is clear that as society progresses, the needs of a worker will continue to evolve. Different groups of workers at various stages of their life will have different expectations, priorities and outlook. For most companies, the main challenge is to address the work-life needs of employees across different age-groups, Quek informs.

To attract and retain talent, companies need to have a work-life programme that is both cost effective and equitable, he suggests. “In general, the implementation of family-friendly policies is associated with positive outcomes. Efforts by the managers to enhance organisation commitment are

likely to have the additional benefit of helping workers cope better with the competing demands of work and family.” Some organisations choose to be proactive and have in place policies that ‘prevent’ work-family conflict from arising. These companies are commonly viewed as an employer of choice and most of them would have sound HR practices, he adds. “For others, they tend to be rather reactive and introduce work-life programmes only to ‘manage’ a current issue or problem. Of course you also get those companies that do practically nothing and brush these problems aside.”

However, if carefully used, work-life balance can be an important instrument to attract and retain young workers, say experts. “Gen Y has grown up watching their parents sell their souls to their work, and so personal time becomes very important to them. Once you put work-life balance out there, they generally appreciate that we’re not asking for them to give their lives to the company like their parents did. Our long-term efforts aim to remove the distinction between work and life, by encouraging families to become part of the extended corporation, because ultimately, if you enjoy your work, then it’s not really ‘work’, is it?” says Arogyaswamy.

Quek further points out that Gen Y is a group of workers that are generally perceived to be more educated, tech-savvy and highly mobile. “To address the needs of these workers, you don’t need to have a comprehensive range of programmes and policies that are complicated and expensive. The key to any successful work-life project is to have a supportive working environment and greater flexibility in the workplace. The introduction of a flexi-benefits scheme is slowly gaining in popularity among companies. This scheme allows an employee to select a range of benefits that include medical subsidies, health and fitness club memberships, personal development courses, flexi-time and many others. The truth is that you can never keep everyone happy. You have to identify your core group of workers that you wish to attract and retain, and have in place programmes and policies that have perceived value to these workers,” he maintains.

The gist of it

When a company’s programmes are combined with a supportive culture, it produces more positive results, Quek says. Employers need to start recognizing that work-life policies will have little impact if they are not well implemented or if the attitudes of the management discourage the employees from using the programmes. In some cases, supervisors can actively

discourage employees from using the available work-life programmes or alternatively permit more flexibility that is formally allowed. “Support from the management, typically the key individual responsible for the maintenance of the psychological contract at work, has a central impact on the experience and perception of workplace well-being. Employees who perceive support from the organisation value their companies on a greater scale and will respond with extra effort, which will in turn affect their job performance. By increasing management’s awareness of their role in the outcomes of the programmes, this will increase the probability of achieving the intended outcomes of the work-life project,” he remarks.

Finally, as Arogyaswamy points out, getting employees to realize that stress is part of everyday work-life, and that work-life balance is a very personal matter, is the crux of getting them to subscribe to the thought that one can only manage stress, never eliminate it.