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Homewood Health

Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Finding Work-Life Balance in a Post-Pandemic World

It wasn't so long ago that the COVID-19 Pandemic upended our lives in ways we couldn't have imagined. While the significance of this global event is feeling farther away, the reality is that the Pandemic forced many of us to adapt quickly to makeshift home offices and virtual meetings by untethering us "from [our] daily commutes…[to] urban cores."[1] We had to rethink how we defined work and home because we merged our professional and personal lives for a time. Technology certainly had a hand in helping everything, showing that we could stay connected and be productive, even distanced.

As we continue to navigate a post-Pandemic world, it's increasingly clear that our definition of work-life balance has undergone a profound shift. These changes affect our well-being and productivity now and will continue in the future.

In this article, we'll explore the current work-life balance landscape. Some employers focus on returning employees to physical worksites for at least part of the work week, while others have embraced flexibility and adopted work-from-anywhere policies. But it's important to remember that both employers and employees are responsible for developing healthier workplaces. As a result, our perception of work and its role in our lives has also evolved. Let's explore the new concepts associated with work-life balance and why embracing them is crucial for greater fulfillment and well-being.

Redefining Work and Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is a term that means different things to different people. For some, having clear boundaries between work and personal time offers the best balance. For others, it might mean having the ability to work flexible hours or even remotely. With many people having obligations to take care of young children or lead the care for elderly parents with increasing health needs, we can appreciate that having the idea of equilibrium depends significantly on the situations that you find yourself in at any moment and the recognition that things may change over time. At its core, however, work-life balance is about determining the best way to seamlessly blend being productive at work while enjoying your personal life in a way that enhances both.

How can you tell if you have a healthy balance?

Signs of healthy balance include:

- Feeling less stressed.
- Having time for hobbies, family, and friends.
- Not feeling overwhelmed by work outside of office hours.

Essentially, you're able to meet work demands without making sacrifices for your well-being.

How did we view work-life balance before the Pandemic and now?

Before the Pandemic, many people struggled to keep their work and personal lives separate. Long commutes, strict office hours, and the pressure to always be available at any time of the day made it difficult to balance priorities. Many of us felt conflicted by worry, increasing pressure, and stress.

The Pandemic changed all that. With remote work becoming the norm in many cases, people found that they were more productive in both aspects of their lives – professional and personal. Today, we face a new challenge after having proven that priorities can shift positively and more work can be accomplished when we aren't worried about how we will make it on time to watch our kids play soccer. We have flipped the narrative and now focus on integrating work into life in a way that enhances both because “to find success, almost every employee needs work/life support at some point.”[2]

We see influences from companies such as Google, where "flexible work weeks" allow employees to work from home two days a week, giving them more control over their schedules and improving their overall well-being. Much of today’s workplace wellness initiatives implement “programs that support work/life balance promote productivity, reduce turnover, and improve employees’ mental and physical health” while at the same time “boost [the] organization’s diversity.”[3]

The Great Resignation: Seeking Fulfillment Over Wages

The Pandemic created a tremendous amount of “uncertainty and upheaval,” which resulted in “large-scale disruption in the economy,” that led people to “have a renewed focus” on what mattered most to them.[4] Employees who recognized dissatisfaction with their work environments, pay, and lack of work-life balance saw many voluntarily resign “from jobs and careers they no longer wanted to pursue” after re-evaluating their priorities.[5] This quest to find more fulfilling opportunities has significant impacted the concept of work. For employees, it meant seeking roles that offered greater happiness and job satisfaction. For employers, it meant rethinking their strategies to retain talent.

A shift in priorities

Rather than stay in unfulfilling jobs, employees began looking for roles that provided:

- Meaningful work,
- Flexibility,
- Positive and supportive work environments, and
- Opportunities for personal and professional development.

This shift in priorities to find roles that offer greater happiness and flexibility has been a big driver of the Great Resignation. Companies that understood started offering more flexible work arrangements, emphasizing employee well-being, and creating positive work cultures. For example, some companies have implemented mental health days and flexible work schedules to better support their employees. Employees feel valued and experience tangible support, they are more likely to stay with their employers.

The Importance of Having Purpose and Positive Associations with One’s Workplace

People need to feel motivated and energized by their work to be happy and productive. When work feels meaningful and employees see the impact of their efforts, they are more engaged and satisfied. Positive experiences build associations that provide a sense of purpose. When businesses can deliver this by ensuring a collaborative work environment, great interactions with coworkers, work that aligns with the company’s achievable goals, and increased productivity, it can significantly improve an employee's attitude and mental well-being.

Involving employees in decision-making processes, providing opportunities to recognize their contributions to the organization's success, and offering learning and development opportunities to grow are vital ways to help people feel valued.

The Rise of Mental Health Awareness: Increased acceptance and awareness

Since the Pandemic, people have become more open about discussing their mental health, and there is a greater understanding of the importance of prioritizing mental well-being, self-care, and stress management. It has reshaped how workplaces support mental health. Many companies offer more mental health resources, such as counselling services, stress management programs, and mental health days, to create healthier, more productive work environments.

What Can Employers Do to Support Mental Health and Work-Life Balance?

Employees and employers each have responsibilities for investing in and achieving work-life balance. None of this can happen though, without a supportive workplace environment. There are a few things that employers can do to set things on the right path:

- Appreciate the value of having happy employees

Employers should create a positive work environment where employees feel happy. Help them find meaning in their work by recognizing their achievements, providing growth opportunities, and cultivating a supportive culture.

• Set and practice boundaries

Encourage employees to set boundaries and have reasonable expectations at work. It means respecting their personal time rather than expecting them to be available 24/7.

• Offer meaningful supports

Employers can create more supportive environments by offering flexible work arrangements, mental health resources, and opportunities for social interaction.

• Be open to flexible work arrangements

When employers offer hybrid, flexible, and remote work options, these arrangements help employees more effectively balance their work and personal lives.

• Talk to employees

Employers need to develop a greater understanding and a more open approach to discovering what factors might be affecting employees and causing them to struggle to find work-life balance. Open communication that focuses on listening to understand people's realities and addressing employees' concerns will ensure that everyone can work towards developing solutions that make sense and meet employees' needs.

How Can You Take Charge of Improving Your Work-Life Balance?

You can start with self-reflection and then move on to make a plan to address the issues.

• Identify the sources of stress that are causing your work-life imbalance

This might be due to a high workload, tight deadlines, or difficulty detaching from work. Do you take regular breaks during your workday? If not, recognize how beneficial it can be to refresh your thinking and feel more productive.

• Have an honest conversation with your supervisor

Discuss your current work-life balance. Work together to find solutions to make your work more manageable. This could involve reprioritizing tasks, delegating work, or taking advantage of flexible/remote work when needed to provide some relief.

Be bold and discuss how you must create a schedule that includes time for personal activities. This will help reframe expectations for you and your employer.

• Be open to a change in your mindset

If you can't change your environment, consider changing how you approach your job. It might mean adjusting your priorities. You would be amazed at how your attitude can shift to a more positive space.

- Can you delegate some tasks at home?
- Are there others you can talk to about sharing responsibilities, like carpooling kids?
- What kinds of boundaries can you set at work?
  - For example, why not establish a commitment to not checking or sending after-hours emails?

• Reflect on your personality traits and mental health

Are you a perfectionist? Do you have a condition such as ADHD (Attention-deficit/hyperactive disorder) and find it hard to stay focused? Do you feel anxious under stressful situations you encounter at home and work? Recognize that these feelings can be affecting the degree of work-life balance you have.

Taking time to get help may be what you need. Counselling services offer many flexible delivery methods that may make it easier for you to fit into your day. For example, if in-person sessions are difficult to attend, Homewood Health offers remote options such as phone or video sessions.

• Leave your workday behind

Find ways to disengage mentally once your workday has ended.

- Listen to a book or podcast on the commute home.
- Dedicate family time to share responsibilities for cooking meals, eating together, and learning about each other's days.
- Join a sports team or exercise.
- Find a passion outside of work to help you unwind.
  - Pursue a hobby you've always wanted to do.
  - Be social within your community through clubs and volunteering.

• Consider changing jobs

You may need to change jobs or employers if your current role doesn't support your efforts to develop a healthy work-life balance.

The one constant in our lives is change. That means we must learn to adapt and be flexible as our needs shift over time. Work must focus on well-being and feeling fulfilled in our jobs so that we feel secure enough to take practical steps to manage work-life balance more effectively, both as employers and employees.

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1-866-299-1299
1-866-398-9505 : (Numéro sans frais - en français)
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