

Guidelines

to build the business case for work-life balance in public authorities

Work-life Balance in the Public Sector

2 and 3 November 2017

1. Diagnosis - understanding the challenges and pain points

The first thing to do is to identify what the lack of work-life balance means for the organisation in terms of costs. For instance, a pain point of an organisation can be lack of women in leadership positions, losing and difficulty in attracting diverse talent, high turnover or low employee engagement etc. Only by identifying these pain points can an organisation begin to turn work-life balance from a “nice-to-have” into a “must-have” and initiate sustainable change.

In order to initiate changes in your organisation to improve work-life balance for employees and civil servants, it is important to consider the following aspects:

1.1 The nature of the work

Is your workforce composed primarily by employees working in an office, or do you also have a part that is providing service to clients, citizens, patients? How are you planning to roll-out work-life balance to the entire population of your organisation? What are the challenges? How have the differences been accommodated so far? Are there tensions, negotiations with the trade unions?

This is particularly important, as one of the keys to achieving work-life balance or work flexibility, is transforming management from presenteeism to managing by objectives. Line managers have a great responsibility here in defining the objectives of individuals and of teams, and establishing a fair reporting system to accompany it - this is what is key in enabling staff members to work any time any place - within the rules of engagement.

1.2 The culture of the organisation

This may include everything from the transparency of the decision making process, accountability, gender equality and inclusiveness. You may identify certain bottlenecks such as the number of women returners, the ratio of men taking parental leave, the diversity of the

employees. What is the aspirational culture of the organisation? What initiatives are already in place? Is there a learning culture?

Communication and the language used within the organisation is a key indicator about the culture, and also one aspect that needs to change to make everyone comfortable in using work-life balance options (flexible work, tele-work, leaves). If sarcastic comments are a feature of internal communication, that needs to change. Organisations that successfully introduced work-life balance also introduced new language, adapted to the employer brand, together with eliminating harmful, discriminatory language. Visual and verbal communication tools are incredibly helpful to culture transformation.

1.3 The departments involved

Often work-life balance is considered to be at the sole responsibility of the HR department, however a number of other functions are also involved, who need to understand their share of responsibility in making the desired changes and supporting the initiatives.

IT department: the informatics system and hardware can be either helpful or a bottleneck to working from home, or from satellite offices. Is your organisation working with a safe, cloud-based system? Can colleagues access information and files from anywhere? Are the security and data issues? What about the costs of internet access, phone bills and other expenses related to working from elsewhere. Do employees have laptops or phones, can they do at least part of their reporting and administrative work from home?

Facilities: The actual workplace has a huge influence on employee wellbeing, and also how people work and what they do. A certain level of design thinking needs to accompany flexibilisation of work, as the purpose of some of the workplaces will change, from individual to collaborative. There is a broad spectrum of 'types of places' that serve the different stages and aspects of work, from collaborative to calm spaces. In addition, facilities also have a role to play in ensuring breastfeeding rooms, parent-child offices, all the way to childcare facilities,...etc.

CSR: In many organisations some aspects of work-life balance falls under the responsibility of CSR - fair working hours, childcare in the community, ..etc. Worth checking to make sure efforts are not duplicated.

Health and Safety: There is great potential in the cooperation with OHS in finding a strong alliance partner for work-life balance, both for the physical work environment, but specially for the prevention of mental health issues, such as burnout, fatigue, anxiety.. etc. OHS departments

may even develop further and look at physical wellbeing of employees who are carers (skeletal-muscular conditions), effects of menopause, substance abuse, lack of sleep..

Line managers: Line managers or heads of units are absolutely mission critical in implementing work-life balance. They need to be empowered and also equipped with tools to manage a much more diverse and fluid workforce, who may be working from elsewhere.

2. Set-up a Work-Life Advisory group and secure leadership buy-in

One dedicated HR manager or director cannot make this transformation alone. It really needs to be a team, and organisational effort. It is vital to identify champions from different levels in the organisation, and also from a diverse, representative background. On the one hand this will spread out the responsibility and the weight of the task, on the other, this will ensure transparency and accountability from the get-go. Only by communicating openly about this process, about the mistakes and early successes will the process be credible.

This Steering group, Advisory group, committee... whatever the name, can then bring the identified pain points, together with figures, to the senior leadership. If necessary, bring in outside thought-leaders, academics, to really make the point.

3. Determine Success Factors

Without setting up objectives and desired outcomes, it will be difficult to sustain momentum and energy. Before it will get better, it will get difficult first - because in any change process, before the new becomes the norm, there is a period of confusion and ambiguity. Until the rules of engagement are clarified for everyone, and everyone adapts to the new work habits, there will be a period of hesitation and many questions. This is why the goals must be very clear - to act as the Lighthouse for the re-organisation and culture change.

4. Designing information collection and setting up a project plan, who does what, when, how ..

This is a very important feature of the entire organisation moving forward together. Everyone needs to be on board, engaged, understand the desired outcome, and also know the piece they

are responsible for. Departments and units can use gamification to work out their own tele-work charter, flexible work charter for example.

To be held accountable, some data needs to be collected prior to the pilot phase and roll-out, to maintain institutional learning and allow for reporting, as well as celebrating success - short-term and longer-term. This can be about hard HR data and payroll, and also soft, perception indicators.

5. Calculate the real business case - calculating the cost of the problem, then the benefits of the work-life programs

Cost does not always refer to up-front investment in cash. Not every organisation will invest in infrastructure like childcare, or up-grade their IT system, buy laptops - even though many of these investments make absolute sense during this change.

The cost of the problem is more difficult to calculate for the public sector in monetary terms, but it can be measured in effectiveness, customer satisfaction, reputation, credibility. Identifying “business-like” objectives can be a very helpful exercise even in the public sector.

What will the organisation gain? This again can be monetized (reduced turnover, absenteeism, more returns, less burnout...), or not necessarily, like employee morale, employee engagement, improved working conditions, improved culture, improved service to customers and citizens..

6. Communicate the findings - the writing of your “work-life elevator pitch”

Every organisation that has successfully embraced work-life balance has developed strong messaging around it. Straplines and hashtags that can be repeated, used in all communication, new terminology..etc, to reinforce the messaging, and influence the language the organisation is using the “talk about the way we work here”. Don’t hesitate to use verbal and visual communication tools, messages from top leadership, posters, social media campaigns - any tool you want to reinforce the message, discourage stigmatization and create more champions.