

Outlook for 2008

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Future Trends in the Dimensions of Work-Life

*“The future is already here.
It’s just not evenly distributed
everywhere at the same time.”*

— Mary O’Hara Devereaux, Futurist

Last summer, a select group of work-life practitioners, researchers and not-for-profit leaders gathered in Boston without a single PowerPoint presentation—a noted departure for this erudite group of experts. This group was tasked with engaging in a two-day “future search” process at the invitation of the Boston College Center for Work & Family. The ultimate goal was to develop a vision for the future of work force management, of which work and family integration is becoming a central element.

After brainstorming every conceivable important current and future trend that can impact work force management, four issues were deemed most influential:

- Expanding diversity (in the broadest sense, adding generational diversity to the challenges that will be presented by managing an increasingly diverse workplace along the more conventional fault lines of gender, race, ethnicity, faith and personal style);
- Managing cultural challenges;
- Dealing with increasing levels of stress and overwork; and
- Resolving the two-edged sword of technology, which manifests itself simultaneously as a problem and a solution.*

Expanding Diversity

Traditional gender roles and aspirations will continue to erode as an ever-higher percentage of working families will be two-career households. Women continue to garner the majority of college and professional degrees (with the exception of those in science and engineering, at least in the short run) and a lion’s share of managerial positions.

This will result in more women out-earning their

husbands/partners, who will enjoy the increased work and life options that this will provide them. Men will become more vocal and energetic about their genuine desire to spend more time directly involved in raising children, in workplaces that trust and respect them, and in communities that are green.

As the wave of retiring baby boomers continues to swell, more employers will begin to pay attention to the brain drain that is about to engulf them. In the meantime, the realities of eliciting the engagement of four generations simultaneously will give leaders much-needed exposure to the future state of talent management, when boomers no longer reign.

Two specific diversity outcomes will require the most attention from human resource leaders in the near term:

- The non-traditional family will continue to evolve and predominate. As our current health care system becomes even less sustainable, the definition of who is family for coverage under corporate health and welfare benefits will require major overhaul. Along with the rest of us, employers will need to consider the potential advantages of social policy in support of extended family members.
- Women are re-inventing themselves, such that their choices and growing economic power are transforming the household, even in China. As they continue to outpace men in education and managerial experience, women are beginning and will continue to lead innovation in their firms. Attracting and retaining your fair share of female talent creates women-friendly work environments, a cultural shift that has been shown to float all boats by increasing the productivity and engagement of all employees.

Managing Cultural Challenges

Work-life leaders have been at the forefront of culture change for the past several decades, and this pivotal role will pick up velocity as monumental change is occurring everywhere at once: at home, in the workplace, in technology and in the nature of work itself. The focus for work-life practitioners will require a four-prong strategy. The first two strategies are continuations of existing efforts, but at a more intense level:

- *Human resources policies and programs* – working even more collaboratively with other HR specialists to

*Source: *The Work-Life Evolution Study* (2007) by Prof. Brad Harrington, Executive Director, Center for Work & Family



develop policies and programs that address the broadest range of work-life issues.

- **Influencing organizational leaders** – embedding work-life management practices into the organization’s values, culture and management behaviors.

The next two imperatives are newer endeavors for many work-life professionals, but equally necessary in the face of increased levels of stress and overwork, the resulting decline in health and mental well-being, widening income inequity, and serious concerns about the sustainability of the corporate health and welfare system we take for granted today.

- **Individual career management** – providing employees with the support and tools they need to make and negotiate their career and life choices.
- **Influencing social policy** – working externally to ensure that the needs of all stakeholders (employers, employees, customers, families and communities) are supported as necessary.

Dealing with Stress and Overwork

It is not accidental that health care costs are on the rise in tandem with overwork and stress. However well-intentioned, most of the efforts by HR teams to slow the rise in claims and costs focus on treating symptoms, not the root causes of escalating mental and physical ill health in the workplace. It is not helpful that vocabulary from the Industrial Age is used to describe the collective efforts of people today, especially the phrase “24/7.” Only machines can work around the clock without stopping, not humans.

An important trend in the short term that will help crack the code on health care outcomes will require a much closer collaboration between all functions within HR, so that the relationship between work-life practices (which are, after all, designed to ameliorate stress and overwork) and positive health outcomes are much better understood and integrated into people strategy.

For example, there is more and more research that correlates flexible work practices with higher rates of mental and physical health. Integrating work practice flexibility into health promotion practices represents one promising new frontier. So does the painful eradication of unexamined or redundant processes. A third attack on

stress and overwork involves training everyone in the workplace in the techniques of recovery and resilience, as explained by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz in their “corporate athlete” research.


Resolving the Two-Edged Sword of Technology

There is an emerging body of thought from the domain of brain research that suggests that people can absorb and respond to a finite amount of incoming stimuli before performance deteriorates. This is the subject of Edward Hallowell’s article in the *Harvard Business Review* titled “Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform” (January 2005).

More energy has been expended to develop almost limitless new technological capability than has been devoted to understanding and controlling the impact on human lives and performance. Many questions arise about quality of work and the boundaries of attention span. Multi-tasking is an efficient concept, but lacks something in execution. We’re certainly moving faster and producing more output, but is the increased level of burnout worth the expenditure, or are there other ways to work?

The philosophy of work-life is that HR needs to turn its attention to helping people define boundaries and apply the brakes when necessary. The same technology that keeps us tethered around the clock also can be used in a positive direction. For example, managers could earn part of their incentive compensation for making sure that direct reports use all of their vacation time. Employees could be rewarded for identifying and re-engineering wasteful processes that deplete instead of renew energy.

Bringing the Future in Focus

Work-life issues are fast becoming a business issue, with implications and dimensions beyond HR. When focused on balancing the needs of employees, customers and the organization, work-life programs result in workplaces that are more effective, healthy and productive. 

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