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The Good News and Bad News About

Work-Life Surveys

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QUICK LOOK

- ➔ Many organizations are a decade or more behind on the pulse of employees' work-life needs.
- ➔ Today, the work-life needs assessment is taking on new forms and is targeted to demographic segments, rather than the whole workforce.
- ➔ As the workforce continues to age and baby boomers experience a host of elder-care needs that cut into their productivity and create extreme stress — the kind that leads to increased health-care costs — it's rare to see any robust elder-care programs in place.

Nowadays it seems every work-life consultant or service provider has a return-on-investment (ROI) calculator in his or her back pocket — a silver bullet used to appease pleading practitioners.

But in the eyes of company executives, these calculators rarely have the statistical validity and reliability necessary to be credible. And many work-life professionals seem to have lost sight of a tool that proved extremely effective a decade ago at a time when work-life benefits were being introduced and employers were jumping on the bandwagon as the “new work-force” demanded more balance for busy professionals.

The tool — a work-life needs-assessment survey — was the primary way work-life practitioners built their business cases. The content was well-aligned with the seven categories of work-life effectiveness, in particular, workplace flexibility, caring for dependents, paid and unpaid time off, management involvement and culture. In six to eight pages employees identified their needs — what they valued when compared to the traditional benefits they had been receiving for years, but in some cases, no longer appreciated or even used. They also indicated where they stood on the demographic ladder — by age, gender, family status, etc. For the first time, companies were able to mix and match work-life benefits to the needs of a variety of demographic segments within their workforce. So why did this popular tool fade away?

The Good News and Bad News

The comprehensive employee satisfaction survey — made easy with the latest electronic technology — returned to corporate America in the late '90s with a flourish as the economy boomed, the talent wars grew fierce and companies renewed their interest in the importance of recruiting and retaining human capital. The good news: Work-life issues began to surface as a category in the satisfaction survey. The bad news: Barely a handful of questions were asked on work-life issues as the topic took a back seat to other HR initiatives that were higher management priorities. Work-life never got its fair share, and conducting a second, work-life-specific survey, was out of the question. The end result was that many organizations are a decade or more behind on the pulse of employees' work-life needs. Some areas in which organizations are lacking in data include the following:

- How much do employees appreciate the work-life benefits provided?
- How often do they use these benefits?
- What new work-life benefits would be more important to them in their current life stages?
- How important are work-life benefits compared to traditional benefits?
- How much time do employees save and how much productivity does the company gain because these work-life benefits are in place?

- Do they make a difference in a recruit's decision to join the company?
- Do they make a difference in a valued employee's decision to stay with the company?

The Ingredients for a New and Improved Work-Life Survey

But there's more good news. There is currently a resurgence of the old work-life assessment tool. Today, it's taking on new forms and it's targeted to demographic segments, rather than the whole workforce. The format can be a series of focus groups or an electronic “pulse” survey. And the questions are looking at new issues, including the following:

- Elder care
- Wellness
- Stress reduction
- Backup child care
- Backup adult care
- Integrated employee assistance (EAP) and work-life services
- Preferences by generation — generation Y, generation X and baby boomers
- Impact of technology — e.g., self-service portals
- Impact of communications.

Elder care is a good example of how far behind companies really are in recognizing employee needs. As the workforce continues to age and baby boomers experience a host of elder-care needs that cut into their productivity and create extreme stress — the kind that leads to increased health-care costs — it's rare to see any robust elder-care programs in place.

A few companies are providing onsite geriatric counseling. Some are offering backup adult care. And, in rare cases, long-distance care is being introduced. But all too often, employers are offering simple elder-care information and referral services, at best, and utilization is low due to ineffective education and communication. Despite the obvious — an impending problem as workers continue to age — are any companies asking employees about their elder-care needs?

Similarly, stress in the workplace is a huge issue and, although every employer is aware of rising health-care costs, few have tracked the correlation between stress and health-care costs. And fewer have assessed their employees' needs for reducing stress.

New Developments

The areas mentioned above, particularly elder care, are some of the important work-life issues that are facing the aging workforce today. If companies want to compete for the best and brightest workers, it's becoming increasingly clear that assessing needs and providing work-life benefits over

The Art and Science of Conducting a Work-Life Needs-Assessment Survey

No matter how great the questions are and how well-designed the work-life needs-assessment survey is, it will be destined for failure if work-life professionals don't abide by the following distribution and reporting rules:

Distribution

- **Anonymity and confidentiality are paramount.**
Employees will only respond honestly and candidly if they are assured that no one — especially no one in human resources — knows who they are. In the old days of paper surveys, it was actually easier to meet this assurance test. Employees could simply fill out the survey and mail it directly to a third-party administrator who swore confidentiality. But paper surveys are expensive, outdated, data-collection nightmares and absolutely the wrong way to go in this current age of speedy response. Back then, a 20-percent return of paper surveys was considered acceptable. But electronic surveys — because of the ease of distribution via e-mail or intranet, as well as the quick-click ease of completing them, make them employee favorites. For electronic surveys, failure likely is receiving a less than 50-percent response rate. Many companies experience response rates of more than 80 percent, even 90 percent.

For employers, it's a low-cost, often no-cost, remedy for low employee morale and productivity. Better still, it's a win-win rather than a "whine-whine" form of employee research in contrast to other company surveys. So how do companies assure anonymity and confidentiality? Almost always, it means relying on a third-party source

that lets employees know the information will go to an outside source. They must be convinced their responses will stay confidential.

- **Every employee should receive it.**
Even very focused assessment surveys, such as child-care feasibility surveys, should go to everyone. For example, employees without kids may have them in the future, and employees who have no intention of ever having kids should have the right to hear why their company is willing to spend more money on employees with family than those without. In reality, most employees see work-life needs-assessment surveys as a good thing no matter what the topic, even if they plan to live for work rather than work to live at this stage of their lives.

Survey Findings and Analysis

- **Cutting and analyzing the data is key.** With electronic surveys, it's easy to cut the data in meaningful ways to develop a comprehensive report on the findings that can be shared with management and employees. The data crunching is typically handled best by a third-party source that knows what the cuts should be and how they can be built into a compelling findings report that convinces senior management to take action steps if employee responses suggest them.
- **Presenting the findings to senior management.** Every survey should have at least one open-ended question. Even though it's more time-consuming to collect and analyze this data, senior management is always blown away with the real words of employees — comments that can't be captured in paraphrase or speculation. A high-level Powerpoint presentation works best. Follow the KISS IT method and keep it short and sell it!

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and above the norm will make a difference between success and failure. The solution to these growing concerns may be a rebirth of the work-life needs assessment survey. 

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