



## Culture matters

A Mozayiks position paper

### A cultural model of work-life balance

Much emphasis is placed on the importance of achieving a good work-life balance.

European directives aim to improve the lot of the worker by regulating time spent at and away from work; employers in the UK are encouraged to apply for government funded advice on how to make work more people-friendly; researchers churn out statistics informing us of the low state of worker satisfaction and we hear that the younger generation promise to rebel against a culture of long-hours. How does it work for the multi-national organisation with operations in different cultures?

We consider how a global work-life balance programmes might fail if cultural factors are not considered.

#### What is 'work-life balance'?

What indeed is understood by the term work-life balance? It was suggested as an alternative to the rather biased term family-friendly working which aimed at enabling working parents – more generally understood to be mothers – to combine work with childcare responsibilities. The bias lay in the assumption that anyone without a specific investment in childcare did not need family-friendly working.

The term work-life balance actually appears to have originated in north America and aimed to redress inequalities brought about by family-friendly. It was intended to include more diverse groups of employees and has now been in use for several years. But how do we define the term in a cultural context? What exactly do we mean when we talk about work-life balance? And what is understood by the people to whom we are seeking to offer it?

#### Cultural definitions of the work/life relationship

Trompenaars suggests five cultural models of work-life balance:

A segmentation model which requires the areas of work and life to remain separate. Problems from home are not brought to work or vice versa.

A spill over model which anticipates that home and work will influence one another.

A compensation model which allows a less satisfying career or home life to be offset against a more satisfying alternative in the opposite sphere.

An instrumental model whereby status at work confers status outside work and

A conflict model which grants higher status in one area and lower status in another.

It is difficult to find a single definition for work-life balance. It is always individually interpreted and will be influenced by many factors. It may extend beyond flexible working arrangements and include career opportunities, benefit options and employee assistance programmes.

As the term work-life balance is so loaded with cultural reference, organisations which are planning a global campaign might be advised to consider alternative titles, preferably abstract ones, with which to brand the campaign.

#### Perceptions of time

It is the balance of time which is at the heart of the debate on work-life balance: how much time should be devoted to work, to leisure, to family? This division is seen as natural by cultures with a strong protestant work ethic. To an American or northern European, time is a resource. It can be spent, wasted or used profitably ~ 'time is money'. It is linear in nature and once passed, cannot be regained.

This leads to an imposition of structure (bureaucracy) so that opportunities are maximised. Great emphasis is placed on punctuality and sequential handling of tasks. These are described as monochronic cultures.



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In many cultures, however, time is circular and opportunities will return again and again (consider Buddhist and Hindu beliefs in reincarnation and the law of karma). It is less important for activities to take place in sequence, and more possible for them to be performed consecutively.

This may lead to an impression of poor time management when viewed from a northern European perspective, but will make sense within a polychronic culture. Attempts to impose more rigid structures designed for a monochronic model alone may meet with intransigence.

### The role of women

Perhaps it is the changing role of women which has been the major influence in both creating and raising awareness of a work-life conflict. Yet, despite the growing numbers of women in paid employment, responsibility for child and eldercare remains a women's issue in most cultures.

This also brings a conflict for those men who may wish to have greater involvement in their children's upbringing, but who may be battling with role stereotyping, particularly in more masculine cultures.

### Masculinity/femininity

The degree of masculinity or femininity in a culture will dictate its openness to changing gender roles. Compare, for example, the more feminine culture of the Netherlands with its open approach to men working flexibly, with that of the UK where the prevailing attitude remains one of flexible working being suitable for women alone.

### Society and the family

How many work-life balance programmes are designed with the nuclear family in mind? In societies where the extended family plays a more significant role in an individual's life, a broader interpretation of the extent of the family may be more suitable.

### Individual or collectivist?

Attitudes towards care of the elderly will be shaped by the degree of individualism within a society. For example, in more individualistic societies, eldercare is likely to be performed by a person(s) employed outside the wider family group; in more collectivist societies, eldercare is likely to be the responsibility of family members.

This has implications not only for employers considering offering flexible working

arrangements; it also needs to be taken into consideration in planning which employee benefits to offer. An employee from a more collectivist society, may not value pension options as highly as other benefits ~ they may expect to have the wider family group to turn to for support in old age.

### Geography and climate

How and when activities are performed will also be influenced by factors such as location and climate.

Consider the example of the lunchtime siesta. Popular in climates where the midday temperature may impose limits on physical activity, its regenerative effects allow a longer working day, with much business continuing late into the evening.

Another example of adaptation is annual hours working. It is no accident that this was first developed in Scandinavia where long dark winters focus peoples' minds on precious short summers.

### Religion

With three of the world's major religions designating different Sabbaths, it is obvious that a standard definition of weekend will be difficult to apply. Add to this the cyclical rhythms of religious rites and practices and



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a programme designed for one culture alone may not offer enough to those outside it.

#### Management style and power distance

The degree of power distance in a culture will also affect work-life balance. This is likely to manifest itself in two ways. First in the degree of open dialogue which is encouraged between levels and secondly in the degree to which managers are seen as role models.

An important element of work-life balance programmes in the UK has been to canvas the opinions of staff. This works well in cultures where a frank exchange of ideas, if not always encouraged, is at least culturally accepted. But what of cultures where a public expression of opinion is inhibited by cultural mores? Where it would be seen as undesirable to even hint at a negative issue because to do so would cause all to lose face?

#### Where 'no' would cause offence

Some cultures have a strong resistance to saying 'no' as this is seen as an impolite response to a question. In such cases, a positive response will be given, even if not entirely accurate.

Whilst an organisation in one culture may use a particular method of enquiry such as a one-to-one meeting with a manager; an organisation in a culture which does not tend to give negative or even direct feedback, may need to consider more subtle approaches to achieve accurate information.

The manager as role model can also have a powerful impact on work-life balance. Consider the example of a German manager transferred to the organisation's Tokyo office. With his family still in Germany, he regularly works late and is amazed to find everyone still in the office as he leaves.

While he thinks his Japanese employees work much harder than those in Frankfurt, he has missed the cultural significance of what is happening: the signal to go home comes when the boss leaves.

#### Conclusion

Whilst it will always be easier for large multi-nationals to implement standardised work-life balance solutions from head office, as in any other area of global management, such campaigns are more likely to have greater success if they are designed around cultural sensitivities.

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