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Tipping the Work/Life Balance Scales in Your Favour

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It's a well known fact we live in a 24/7 consumer culture. The rise of technology means that almost every aspect of our life has an expectation of immediacy, from our 24 hour news culture, to shops extending their opening hours, to smart phones giving us access to a wealth of information anywhere, at any time. In a blink of an eye our world has changed and our pace of living has accelerated. This has resulted in a permanent shift of our social expectations and for many, our work/life balance. Long gone is the typical 9-5.

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Often leaving the office is just a shift in geography rather than a metaphorical home/life boundary. Whilst technology's rapid developments have created opportunities for companies, they have also created problems for employees. Most employees now have constant access to work emails on their smart phones, leaving many feeling constantly 'on call'. Numerous studies have shown that emailing out of hours can lead to higher stress levels, cynicism and eventual burnout.

Statistics from the health insurer BUPA show that currently nearly half a million people in the UK are experiencing work related stress, which they believe is making them ill. The latest report from the Government's Health and Safety Executive shows that more than 10.4 million working days are lost in Britain each year because of work-related stress - costing the economy around £17 billion a year. Added to this, 68% of the UK have dependent family members and personal responsibilities when we get home, leaving many people feeling like they are stuck on a hamster wheel. So what's the solution? How can you reclaim an effective work/life balance (which is so essential to our wellbeing) whilst boosting your career prospects? Instead of working harder, I would urge you to explore the options that work better for you, or "work smarter".

This summer the Government extended flexible working rights to all employees who have worked for 26 weeks or more at their company. Now, all employees are entitled to ask for flexible working patterns. Act on this and see if your employer would consider letting you work flexible hours, either contractually or informally - a survey amongst Women in Rail members has shown that informally often works better.

Flexible working is fluid and can be adapted to suit an employee's needs, role, and contract types (eg permanent, temp, full time, and part time). True to its name, an employee can dip in and out of these arrangements depending on their businesses' situation - or personal circumstances. Government surveys have shown that 41% of employees work flexibly at some stage in their career.

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Most company's ICT systems mean we no longer need to be in the workplace to actually do our job - empowering parents to arrange their working hours to avoid the burden of after school care costs, or instead of wasting time on a long commute, you could use that time to care for an elderly relative one or two days a week. Discuss it with your employer and see if this could work for both of you because there are clear employer benefits for flexitime too. A 2012 Stanford University study showed a significant rise in the productivity of employees working off site, with companies which allowed the scheme experiencing a 13% performance increase and a 50% increased staff retention rate. Staff were sick less often, took less time on their breaks and answered 4% more calls than their office based colleagues. Not to mention enabling the workforce to retain its brightest staff, particularly women who often have to change their schedules to support young children. It also allows experienced older workers stay on, whilst introducing new, young talent to the workforce in a way they can fit around studying. Not forgetting the employee satisfaction benefits!

An IBM Smarter Workforce study found that using flexible work arrangements leads to significant higher feelings of work life balance amongst 75% women and 60% of men. Many employees shy away from requesting flexibility at work, for fear of the 'out of sight, out of mind' syndrome when the next promotion comes up. But their study revealed workers who took advantage of flexible arrangements experienced two or more promotions over the past five years than those that didn't.

Of course, bosses need to be assured that if they do implement flexible working- whether its job sharing, compressed hours, or working from home, they won't be taken advantage of.

The Institute of Leadership and Management spoke to more than 1000 managers in 2012 and identified the key skills an employee need to have demonstrated when deciding whether to grant flexible working hours. All managers agreed that candidates must have demonstrated an ability to manage their workloads, and in turn produce results. These qualities were closely followed by good time management which was priority for 93% of managers. Other crucial attributes were being a trustworthy (92%) and being committed to their team and its organisational goals (91%).

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The traditional objections to flexible working are: "you can't do that senior role part time", "the rest of the team will pick up the slack" and that's the difficulty with this area: there's often quite deep ingrained habit against these things...unconscious bias. What is needed to make flexible working work is, above all, leadership buy-in, flexible working linked to a business objective, greater trust at all levels and transparency in the recruitment process.

In the rail sector, flexible working is a sensitive issue. Shift patterns can make flexible working difficult to implement for employers, but not impossible. Done well, it can work to both the employers and employees benefit. After all it costs a substantial amount of money to train highly specialised staff, like train drivers. If companies fail to embrace flexible working requests then many of their most talented staff - young mothers for example, may have no choice but to leave the sector as inflexible structures make it impossible for them to also meet the demands of family life - resulting in significant financial loss to the company which trained them.

So think about it. Next time you feel like life is getting too much, or perhaps that conflicting pressures are spreading you too thinly, ask yourself and ask your employer - is your work routine as smart as you are?

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