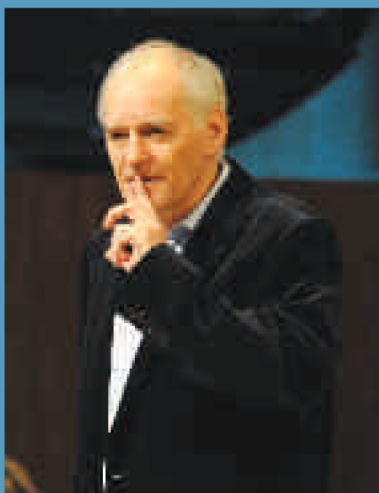


Goodbye to Work/Life Balance?



Is our work/life balance disappearing? Whether this long-held aspiration can survive a world of rising unemployment and growing job insecurity must now be in doubt. And although a work/life balance sounds attractive, it is increasingly being questioned.

Balance may not appeal to those passionate about their work. What is needed within many companies is a more fundamental shift towards encouraging healthy living. Another desirable shift is towards ensuring that everyone feels fully engaged with their work, something that research shows is woefully missing in many environments.

While promoting the idea of a work/life balance, some companies continue to allow unhealthy practices such as command-and-control management that makes excessive demands on employees and ultimately undermines the whole concept of healthy living.

Rather than some kind of artificial boundary or balance between work and non-work, it may prove more practical to aim for a work/life fusion, in which people learn how to keep sensible boundaries, and understand

the importance of being themselves in both situations.

When people enjoy their work, feel engaged by it and consequently give their best, the company is likely to reap rich rewards that ultimately affect the bottom line. When work is emotionally as well as financially rewarding, it feeds us at home; and vice versa. Rather than keeping the two worlds of work and leisure apart and neatly balanced, we need instead to learn how to distribute our energy appropriately between the two.

The belief system needed in today's working environment is self-management or self-mastery. Employees need to free themselves from the re-emergence of the excesses of the Protestant work ethic, and rather develop a consciousness of what drives them in life, assert their boundaries and act in a self-aware manner.

With the explosion of job losses around the country, HR practitioners need to be clear on where they now stand on the work/life balance. With few exceptions, most have supported the concept. Many have worked hard to provide a climate in which it can thrive.

But as the director of one leading development company recently commented in *People Management* magazine, 'At work the human balance sheet is as bankrupt as the economy.' Too many in HR have stood by helplessly and even connived at management practices that have destroyed rather than enhanced people's self-worth and involvement at work.

We might write the obituary of the work/life balance, were it not for compelling and inconvenient facts about performance at work. Studies in both the UK and the US show high levels of performance to be closely associated with equally high levels of engagement. Yet engagement is precisely what is missing in so many jobs, as research by Gallup and others demonstrates.

Tackling the work/life balance may often come down to some practical steps that are low cost to pursue. If you

are never parted from your Blackberry, for example, the bombardment of e-mail and other intrusions will be constant. Learning to turn the thing off or to only check your e-mail at certain times can help reduce the pressure and add more balance between work and non-work.

Other low-cost contributions to a work/life balance include allowing people enough time for breaks and relaxation, and offering facilities like massage and even games to play, all of which can help to make work seem less relentless and all consuming.

Will HR practitioners continue to promote the work/life balance now that the going is getting rough? Or will they conclude that the countervailing forces are too strong? Will they give a collective sigh in these straightened times and consign the work/life balance to the cupboard of history?

