Introduction

Work-life balance is about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual's right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society¹.

In the rapidly changing NHS it is often difficult to find the time to even consider the issue of work-life balance, let alone make necessary changes to achieve it. But unless managers and staff make that time, they put individuals at risk of high levels of stress, increase the likelihood of stress-related illness and the organisation risks not being able to provide the first-class service to patients that is expected of it.

This chapter is not intended as a complete guide to implementing work-life balance policies, and indeed, many trusts will already have done so as part of the Improving Working Lives programme. Instead, it is intended to give a brief overview of the subject and introduce readers to the business case for introducing a work-life balance policy, together with providing best practice tips for doing so. It also provides links to other organisations that are able to provide further advice and guidance on implementation.

What is work-life balance?

Work-life balance has been described in many different ways, including being judged by one prominent commentator as a complete misnomer on the grounds that work is, for most of us, actually a very important part of life.

The term can also be seen as suggesting that work is not good for us, or at best a necessary evil, when in fact we know that people gain in so many ways – not just financially – from being in work. Health, relationships and all round well-being is improved by being in work and in daily contact with others.

When the Improving Working Lives (IWL) initiative was being developed by the Department of Health, it was based on the premise that employees should be able to choose how much of their life they wanted to spend at work and how much on other things that were of importance to them, such as family and recreation. IWL was also considered to include a major element of staff being in control, not only of the hours they worked but also of where and when and, to a certain extent, how. It was predominantly about the ability and opportunity to work flexibly.

¹ Employers for work-life balance - www.employersforwork-lifebalance.org.uk
Additionally, all of the literature and research on managing stress, such as that carried out by the Health and Safety Executive in support of its Stress Management Standards, suggests that the feeling of being in control of your life is a major factor in alleviating stress. IWL, therefore, became a cornerstone of the NHS commitment to addressing the causes of work-related stress. (See the chapter on stress management.)

The IWL definition also recognised that work-life balance will not be the same for everyone and that there has to be an element of choice and self-regulation in the process of developing a balance that is right for the individual. We all know people who thrive on long hours and very little sleep whose concept of work-life balance will be very different from that of a single mother with three children and a busy and demanding job. Work-life balance may also change during an individual’s life – perhaps encompassing different stages of their children’s development, the pressures of having elderly parents and even choosing to work fewer hours later in life to leave more time for hobbies or grandchildren.

The Trades Union Congress agrees with this reading, and says “Work-life balance is central to positive flexibility in the organisation of work. But to be successful, to achieve a win/win outcome for staff and management, everyone affected must have the opportunity to participate actively in the process of change. Flexibility can mean management imposing forms of work organisation on employees who are given no opportunity to state their opinions or explain their needs. Positive flexibility is where working people have more autonomy and choice, and where the employer invests in development and training and works in partnership with the workforce”.  

The legal position

In many cases employers have no legal obligation to change working hours or practices to accommodate employees’ demands for a different work-life balance. However, they may choose to do so for other reasons – the desire to be a good employer, to retain and attract staff, and because sometimes the changes may suit the business as well.

However, there are several pieces of legislation which employers should bear in mind when dealing with work-life balance.

Some groups of workers have a legal right to request flexible working and to have this considered seriously by their employer. These groups are:

- parents of children under six
- parents of disabled children under 18
- employees who are or who are expected to become carers of spouses, partners, civil partners or relatives.

Changes can be:

- changing the hours they work – for example, working fewer hours or days

---

2 TUC Changing Times - www.tuc.org.uk/changing times
• changing the times they work – such as starting later because of school or nursery times

• working wholly or partly from home.

In these cases, employers should consider a request seriously and can only legally turn it down if there is a recognised business ground for doing so.

The Department for Trade and Industry has guidance on www.dti.gov.uk on how to handle requests for flexible working and the grounds on which requests can be turned down.

Employers should also bear in mind the European Working Time Directive, which limits the maximum working hours that can be imposed on workers. In general, working hours above 48 – or 56 for junior doctors – will have to be agreed to by the worker.

Finally, employers should consider whether the hours or intensity of work are impacting on the patient’s health and well-being – and therefore might fall under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. The section on stress looks at the impact of work on stress levels (see chapter on stress management).

The business case for flexible working

In March 2000 the Government launched a Work-Life Balance Campaign for England and Scotland to encourage employers to introduce flexible working practices that would not only help to improve the working lives of employees but also contribute to improving service delivery. It also published a best practice guide to work-life balance.

Outside of the legislative framework there are real gains to be made for any organisation in working with its employees to improve their work-life balance. These can and do affect the ‘bottom line’ of service delivery, which will improve along with the health, well-being and commitment of staff.

There is evidence that employers in both the public and private sectors are already taking seriously the message about gains to be made from work-life balance. Research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found evidence that “employers, especially in larger workplaces, have been adapting to changes in family life and employee responsibilities by offering an array of work-life policies”. The reasons for change were found to be varied but it did appear that recognising the costs of ignoring problems was one motivator and competition for high-quality staff was another.

Analyses of the Workplace Employee Relations Survey (a nationally representative survey of British workplaces) found that “flexible working arrangements could be associated with improved business performance”. In-depth case studies of a range of smaller organisations found that “contrary to survey findings, smaller businesses could be highly innovative in their response

---

4 Dex and Smith, 2002
5 Dex and Smith, 2002
6 Dex and Scheibl, 2002
to employee requests for flexible working, possibly to a greater extent than is possible in larger organisations.”

One issue identified by Employers for Work-Life Balance is changes in the country’s demography, with people spending more time in education and looking to retire earlier. Mothers with young children are also much more likely to work than in previous generations. There is also some evidence that young workers will look at an organisation’s track record on corporate social responsibility and are not afraid to negotiate flexible working terms. These factors suggest there could be increased demand for different patterns and hours of work in the future.

The NHS position

The 2006 NHS staff survey found that 42 per cent of staff had someone “to whom they had to give special help.” In these cases, 84 per cent of staff had children to look after, 24 per cent had elderly people and 9 per cent had disabled people. This suggests that some employees had both children and elderly relatives to care for.

However, more than half of NHS staff reported doing unpaid hours. Of those working more than their contracted hours, either paid or unpaid, 62 per cent said they did extra hours because “it is impossible to do my job if I don’t” and 69 per cent said they did so to not let colleagues down. However, 52 per cent said their immediate manager helped them find a good work-life balance.

Work carried out in South West London and particularly in a pilot project at the Croydon PCT has shown that for employers the benefits are:

- better use of resources and of the existing workforce
- employees feeling valued and a more motivated workforce
- a less stressful work environment
- attracting a wider pool of candidates for new posts
- increases in productivity
- reduced absenteeism, sickness and stress
- attracting a wider range of candidates such as part-time workers
- creating a reputation as employer of first choice
- retaining valued employees and recruiting new staff
- improvements in services.

For employees the benefits are:

- choice and control of working time, work organisation and working lives
- better relations between management and staff

---

7 Changing Times in Health – A practical guide to work-life balance (2005) SW London SHA
• improved self-esteem, health and confidence
• improved loyalty and commitment
• job satisfaction and a better working environment
• reduced stress and work pressure
• a better balance between work and life outside work, including lifelong learning.

Problems

As with most employment issues, there is a need for good communication of the policy for improving work-life balance to staff within the organisation. Research carried out for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2000 found that as many as half of employees in six large workplaces, including those with caring responsibilities, were unaware of the options available to them.

A further report\(^9\) found from studies of a range of business settings\(^10\) that although many employers are taking up the challenge, implementation of work-life policies has some way to go:

• communication and awareness about the work-life policies need to be improved
• training of line managers needs increasing and improving
• flexibility needs to be part of workplace culture
• more prominence and recognition should be given to the relatively neglected needs of those caring for older adults and disabled children
• measures are needed to address the ubiquitous long hours culture, particularly prevalent among managers, that runs counter to work-life balance and sets working practice standards that many employees feel they cannot meet
• the growth of weekend work raises issues for parents.

The research also found that work-life balance issues for some groups of workers have not been considered and that these were mainly “the self-employed, employees who are relocated by their employer, and employees in predominantly male workplaces.”

Best practice in implementing work-life balance policies

---

\(^9\) Yeandle et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2002; Bond et al., 2002; Reynolds et al., 2003
\(^10\) Bell and La Valle, 2003; Green and Canny, 2003; Basu and Altimay, 2003; Baines et al., 2003
Evidence from the research carried out for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests the following as best practice in implementing effective work-life balance policies and flexible working:

- involve employees in devising flexible solutions. Customised solutions work best for employees. This also provides opportunities for greater employee partnership, initiative and autonomy.

- review the overall organisation of work, rather than bolting on flexible working policies. This brings far greater benefits and also addresses ineffective and low productivity working practices.

- carry out rigorous cost-benefit analyses of employee relocation to test that it is necessary, as well as finding ways of alleviating some of the bad effects on families of this policy.

- allow flexibility to both men and women in order to avoid discriminating in favour of one group.

- encourage the spread of multi-skilling, teamwork, rotating sabbaticals in other teams, and systems of explicit reciprocity between employers and employees.

- encourage better communication between employers, managers and employees and transparent policies so that employees and line managers are aware of organisational policies. This may mean avoiding over-long lists of policies and confusing names.

**Messages for staff**

Implementing an effective work-life balance policy requires the buy-in and active involvement of staff as well as management, and there are things that staff can do to help the process. They need to make decisions and set ground rules for themselves so that they are clear about what they want to achieve by way of a work-life balance.

Suggestions might be made to staff in the implementation stage about what they need to consider. These could include any of the following:

- think about what you want out of work and out of life.
- agree with yourself that you will not work through lunch.
- agree that you will delegate.
- plan ahead for time off – not just major holidays but shorter breaks – something to look forward to.
- plan ahead for continuous professional development (CPD) and studying and make sure you stick to the plan.
- consider an activity that will help you relieve the stresses that are part of the job – a walk in the evening, alternative therapies, going to concerts (the choices will be as individual as you are, the important thing is that they work for you).
• look at the NHS Employers website, www.nhsemployers.org, which has a whole section on managing work-related stress and links to other sites where you can find a range of good advice

• talk to your family, friends and colleagues about what you are doing and why it is necessary – get their buy-in and support.

It is also important to stress to staff that work-related stress is the major problem facing all employers in the public and private sectors, not just in the NHS. It is partly the result of the world we live in and the way in which we live, but also of the expectations we have of ourselves and others have of us. Working to achieve a balance between work and the rest of life will allow people to reduce the impact of everyday life on their well-being and help them to live healthier and happier lives. They will perform better at work and this will benefit the organisation, colleagues, patients and their own self-esteem.

**Developing a work-life balance policy**

The South West London SHA pilot found the benefits of a work-life balance policy are that:

• clear rules and entitlements are set out

• an organisational commitment to work-life balance is visible

• the document can be used for recruiting new staff and widening the pool of potential new recruits.

Based on the pilot, the guidelines for drawing up a policy should be:

• make the parameters of flexible working clear. Most policies state that requests for flexible working will be accommodated as long as they do not adversely affect the needs of the service

• set out flexible working options available to staff and provide brief information about entitlements, for example, how much time can be carried over in flexi-time systems, banked in a time bank at any one time, or how many daily hours can be worked in a compressed working week. It will be important to set these entitlements within the framework of legislation on working time

• make reference to equal opportunities in the policy. This can include specific points regarding flexible working time, for example, for older workers, disabled workers, parents and carers

• consult widely with staff teams and unions and ensure they are fully involved in drawing up the policy

• consult with service users and identify clearly how the work-life balance policy will contribute to improved patient care

• ensure that the policy is widely disseminated to all staff

• produce a staff handbook setting out, in straightforward ways, the different flexible working options to staff.
More information

For further information and advice, see www.direct.gov.uk

Employers for Work-Life Balance
www.employersforwork-lifebalance.org.uk

The Work Foundation
www.indsoc.co.uk

Working Families
www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform
www.dti.gov.uk – guidance and standard forms on work-life balance can be found in the publications section

TUC Changing Times
www.tuc.org.uk/changingtimes

Equal Opportunities Commission
www.eoc.org.uk

ACAS
www.acas.org.uk
ACAS Helpline 08457 474747

Further reading

Changing patterns of work, 2004, ACAS

Getting the right work-life balance, 2004, CIPD

Clutterbuck, David. Managing work-life balance: A guide for HR in achieving organisational and individual change.

Stredwick and Ellis, 1998, Flexible working practices: techniques and innovations.

About time for a change, 2003, Work Foundation

Trade Union Congress Flexible Working for Parents, 2004, TUC