A Global Review of Work Life Balance Issues, Practices, and Initiatives

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Introduction

As global competition and economic challenges intensify, employees are requesting that companies recognize work life issues that affect employee engagement. As a result, companies are creating policies and initiatives that address employee work life balance. While United States human resources managers understand what U.S.-based employees expect as it pertains to work life balance initiatives, figuring out how to translate those initiatives onto a global stage presents a unique challenge for human resources managers who operate internationally.

According to a recent Towers Perrin survey, work life balance ranked number three out of the top 10 benefits that attract employees to a potential employer. In addition, the Families and Work Institute's national study of employers found that 92 percent of organizations offer at least eight work life balance initiatives and 47 percent use such initiatives to recruit and retain employees.¹

This report focuses on programmatic solutions to work life balance and cultural influences on work life that enhance or curtail workplace flexibility. It includes several examples of corporate best practices regarding work life policies from around the globe.

Today’s 24/7 virtual availability, achieved through smart phones, laptops, videoconferencing, and the Internet, have changed the work landscape and made many work life initiatives such as telecommuting necessary and possible, as well as convenient and cost-effective. The most successful work life strategies focus on what individual employees and the organization can do to create optimal work life balance, as well as all of the pressures and influencers in employees’ work and personal lives that may prevent them from achieving that balance.

Human resource practitioners charged with developing work life programs and initiatives should consider the following guidelines commonly used by organizations with successful work life initiatives:²

• Consistently communicate the company’s work life balance philosophy as one of the organization’s core values in its vision, mission statement, and human resource policies.
• Examine the organization’s culture and work processes to determine if they are aligned with the work life strategy.

• Regularly identify and evaluate employees’ needs with tools such as surveys, using the results to add or modify work life benefits as needed.

• Offer employees the choice of a wide range of benefits to meet their individual needs.

• Hold supervisors and managers accountable for supporting work life balance, and include the competency in performance reviews.

• Measure results by examining employee participation in various programs.

**Work Life Balance with a Global Perspective**

The difficulties of balancing work and personal life are experienced worldwide, regardless of country, religious affiliation, culture, or gender. For companies operating internationally, it is important to define a global work life strategy built on shared principles and guidelines that allows for initiatives driven by geographic, cultural, and economic differences.

Global assessments done by leading work life consultants Abby Shapiro and Karen Noble identified three themes that employees all over the world see as barriers to reconciling their work and personal lives:

• A lack of flexible work policies and practices
• The availability and affordability of dependent care,
• The negative impact of work overload and long work hours on their family life and well-being.

To offer employee benefits and programs that resonate with a global workforce, companies must examine the issue from their employees' perspectives. That means within a social, cultural, and national context, including traditions, social and governmental policies, community resources and infrastructure, and workplace practices and demographics.

A 2011 global business survey of more than 17,000 senior business executives in 80 countries conducted by U.K.-based Regus, a leading provider of flexible workplaces, found that flexible work practices have become widespread around the world. Such
practices reduce costs, contribute to business performance, improve motivation and productivity, increase access a wider talent pool, and aid retention. The survey also revealed that:

- Eighty-one percent of firms offer their employees a level of choice about when and where they work.
- Sixty percent of businesses believe flexible working practices are more cost efficient than fixed office working.
- Seventy percent of firms consider flexible working to be more family friendly.
- 59 percent of businesses allow some flexibility to workers regardless of seniority, age or service record.

Many of the responding companies reported work life issues such as the universal tug felt by mothers to effectively juggle the need or desire to work with child rearing. This evidence suggests these issues are primarily the same across cultures. However, many countries and cultures have very specific challenges to work life balance.

**Cultural Influences on Workplace Flexibility**

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| China  | • Most Chinese professionals work seven days a week. Employees may be in the office until 7 or 8 at night, though 80 percent leave the office by 6 or 7 p.m. <sup>v</sup>  
• Chinese employees balance work and personal life in ways westerners don’t easily understand. Where westerners compartmentalize work, family, social interactions, and recreation, Chinese approach these as an “organic whole.” The boundaries between work and social tend to be much less pronounced in China. <sup>vi</sup>  
• Expectations are high for women in China to have a career and the country’s evolving capitalist culture supports gender equality. Men have more pressure to be involved with children rearing, however, they are still expected to be the primary breadwinner <sup>vii</sup>  
• Different regions also have different values regarding family life, for example, in Shanghai a “good husband” is one who buys food and cooks. |
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<td>Traditional values and expectations require that the younger generation care for their parents and grandparents. This responsibility impacts financial and job security, which is a major driver of behavior for Chinese workers.</td>
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**Brazil**

- In the past 20 years, Brazil has seen a major change in the family structure and the labor market, which has complicated work life balance. These changes have not been accompanied to a great extent by efforts by the state and corporations to address the challenges today’s Brazilian families face. Harmonizing work and family is still seen as the private concern of the individual or family.
- In the last two decades, there has been a sharp reduction in the number of families with a traditional structure of a couple and their children. Another decrease has occurred in the number of extended family types, made up of a couple, their children and other relatives, such as grandparents.
- While the traditional family structure of a couple with dependent children still represents the majority of families (53.3 percent), the second most common family structure (17.8 percent) is a single female and her dependent children, with no husband or grandparents present.
- The average number of dependent children has also decreased, while the number of female-led, single-parent households has significantly increased.
- Regarding doing business in Brazil, one significant consideration is the culture’s view of time. Brazilians’ relaxed attitude toward time manifests itself in how they think about schedules and deadlines. While those in the United States tend to strictly adhere to schedules and deadlines, Brazilians make schedules and set deadlines, but are more flexible when they have to be changed due to circumstances beyond one’s control.

**Russia**

- Working mothers have traditionally been subject to discrimination. It is common for women to withdraw from the workforce to raise their children, even though it may be unaffordable financially or undesirable personally and professionally.
- The current Russian social system is based on the remnants of the Soviet system with its generous benefits and federal provision of public schools and pre-school organizations. The latter have constituted the most optimal
condition for women to return to work both during the Soviet period and in the present day.

- Russian law provides every mother with 18 months of partially paid maternity leave, which women can extend up to three years, unpaid, with the guarantee that their same job will be waiting for them when they return. The years a mother takes off also count as “work” in terms of future Social Security benefits.\textsuperscript{x}\textsubscript{i}
- After 2000, when Russia’s transition to capitalism was more or less complete and the country’s economy was more stable, Russian women delayed childbirth to start careers. Surveys show that modern Russian women prefer combining career and children, rather than choosing solely one or the other.\textsuperscript{x}\textsubscript{ii}

| India | • Concerns over balancing work and life have surpassed worries about the country’s economic slowdown, according to a biannual Nielsom study. About 20 percent of Indians cite achieving this balance as their main worry; 13 percent cite the economy.
• Indians’ third-biggest concern—at 12 percent (the highest for any Asian country)—is their parents’ welfare and happiness.\textsuperscript{x}\textsubscript{iii}
• India has progressive national laws and governmental policies guaranteeing paid maternity leave, paternity leave, a minimum number of paid sick days a year, as well as mothers’ right to breast-feed a child in the workplace. However, the laws are not always enforced, and implementation across the vast country is inconsistent.
• Most middle-class Indian homes have live-in servants or household help that take care of cleaning, cooking, and other household chores. Indian families also benefit from an extended family system, which provides more help to busy working parents.
• Family and cultural objections to married women or young mothers working outside the home are decreasing, but the gender inequity that exists regarding housework, child care, and elder care has not changed significantly.\textsuperscript{x}\textsubscript{iv} |

| Mexico | • Mexicans spend nearly 10 hours each day at work or in school and doing unpaid chores like housework and shopping after hours, making the country’s overall work day the longest in the world. Mexicans do the most housework of any country — more than three hours per day. |
- Though Mexicans have the longest overall work day on average, they only put in about six hours of paid labor a day, placing them behind countries like Japan and Korea.\textsuperscript{xv}
- Spending time with family is so important to Mexican workers that some will take extra time off from regular work hours to do so.\textsuperscript{xvi}
- Mexican women may encounter difficulties balancing work and family, leading women to wait until their children start school before returning to work. Nearly 60 percent of mothers are employed after their children start school.
- Less than half of Mexican women are employed.
- Mexicans devote about 13.6 hours a day to personal care and leisure, which is lower than the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average.
- Paid maternity leave is available for only 12 weeks and only for those women in formal employment. No paid paternity leave is available.
- Childcare enrollment for those age three and younger is only six percent, compared to 31 percent for other OECD countries. Availability and use of childcare facilitates parental employment.\textsuperscript{xvii}

### Europe

- The French system's viewpoint on health, education, and employment is that all individuals are entitled to a fundamental quality of life.
- The French government has attempted to reduce the number of jobless individuals by reducing the hours worked so another person can work those hours. Every seven people working 35 hour allows another individual to work a 35-hour workweek. The shortened workweek, according to the government, is not seen as having to do with work life balance, even though the French are, historically, a family-oriented culture.\textsuperscript{xviii}
- In the European Union (EU), work life programs often came about as a result of government legislation of public mandates. European programs tend to be based on the ideal of social responsibility rather than competitive advantage.
- There are many different approaches to work life balance in Europe, tailored to the cultures of the member countries and level of economic development. The EU is now trying to establish guidelines for all countries to reduce discrepancies between the work life initiatives across Europe.
- In contrast to the United States, EU countries impose stricter regulations on
employers, thus reducing their flexibility in administering vacation time, paternal leave, flex-time, telecommuting, etc.

Best Practice Examples

Scotiabank Mexico

With more than 70,000 employees and about 18.6 million customers in 50 countries around the world, Scotiabank is one of North America’s largest financial institutions and Canada’s most international bank. In 2007, Scotiabank Mexico leaders began looking at ways to promote and improve employee well-being, using data collected from focus groups. They found that employees worried about finding time to balance all of their personal and professional obligations. As a result, the company created an employee assistance program to provide a confidential telephone line to help employees with stress, family, or health problems and “My Wellness Center,” an internal website that provides information on such issues as healthy eating and techniques to stop smoking. Scotiabank employees are actively encouraged to investigate flexible work schedules, including telecommuting.

Scotiabank Mexico also linked the other work life programs with the employee assistance program and created new services to give employees more options to satisfy their individual needs. The result was the Life and Stability Line, an integrated work life balance program for the bank's 9,500 employees and retirees, which is the first such program for Scotiabank’s international operations. It offers a comprehensive menu of services so that Scotiabank employees can tailor their work life information requests to their individual needs. Today, according to Scotiabank’s own statistics, 80 percent of its employees believe Scotiabank Group supports work life balance.

Infosys Limited

With 142,000 employees, Infosys Limited, a global technology services firm headquartered in Bangalore, India, provides business consulting, technology, engineering, and outsourcing support to clients in more than 30 countries around the world. The company has instituted support systems, polices, and facilities to help women achieve work life balance. Working mothers can use flex-time and part-time hours, and
even take child care sabbaticals separate from maternity leave. A peer counseling network helps mothers with work and parenting challenges, and other personal challenges as well.

All company offices in India have stations for nursing mothers, and the company has identified external day care facilities that mothers can take advantage of. Women returning from maternity leave receive work performance appraisals based on the work they did pre-maternity leave, and maternity leaves are not held against a woman in terms of her performance.\textsuperscript{\textit{xii}}

**IBM**

Headquartered in Armonk, NY, IBM is among the world’s largest and perhaps most well-known multinational technology and consulting company. With 425,000 employees, IBM serves customers in more than 200 countries and holds more patents than any other U.S.-based technology company.

According to IBM’s Vice President Integrated Health Services Martín J. Sepúlveda: “Advancing the health, safety, and well-being of our global workforce is an absolute priority; it’s a commitment that encompasses the environments in which employees work and the communities in which they live.”

IBM claims to incorporate health and well-being into in every aspect of its global business — strategic and business planning, procurement, construction, manufacturing equipment, real estate leases, product development, acquisitions, and outsourcing arrangements. However, global economic, demographic, and emerging healthcare trends still pose challenges to IBM’s ability to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of its workforce. IBM works to meet those challenges by focusing on a “total health management” strategy that recognizes the importance of physical and psychological health to fostering productive and well-adjusted employees. The strategy ensures consistency across geographies, time zones, and cultures and, driven by IBM’s Well-being Management System, ensures effective planning, execution, measurement, and continuous improvement.
IBM’s Integrated Health Services organization, made up of occupational medicine, industrial hygiene, safety, health benefits, and wellness professionals oversees the company’s employee well-being programs around the world.\textsuperscript{xix}

**Agilent**

Agilent is a leading manufacturer of electronic and bio-analytical measurement instruments, with 18,500 employees serving customers in more than 100 countries. It provides a broad range of programs and activities to promote work life balance, utilizing tools and services to help employees save time and energy, and manage stress. Through these programs and activities, Agilent works to provide employees with the flexibility to customize solutions to their unique needs and circumstances. For example, more than 15 percent of Agilent employees use flextime arrangements such as part-time hours, telecommuting, job-shares, and variable work schedules. Agilent's Flexible Time Off program allows employees to use paid time off however they please—for vacation, sick days, personal business, or to take care of ill family members, for example.

The Reinventing Work program helps work teams examine work processes with a work life focus and provides a framework for managers and employees to address job demands and work-pressure issues. Agilent also provides resource and referral services for employees who have dependent care responsibilities, with the goal of helping them to achieve their business objectives while they are at work. Local Agilent entities have the option of investing additional resources in dependent care support in locations where community based services are inadequate.

Agilent’s working parent networks enable employees to formally share resources, tools, and other services with other parents. Some Agilent facilities offer a "mother's room" to support new moms or a "quiet room" to support employees who just need some quiet time.\textsuperscript{xxi}

**Unilever**

Global personal care firm Unilever is a British-Dutch company with headquarters in London and Rotterdam, The Netherlands. With 160,000 employees, the company owns many of the world’s consumer brands in food, beverages, cleaning agents, and personal care products. The company is a member of Diversity Best Practices. Unilever’s website
says that the company recognizes that “people are more likely to be motivated in their career if they are also fulfilled individuals.” As such, Unilever allows employees flexibility through part-time hours, working from home, and job-sharing arrangements, as well as sabbaticals and extended maternity leave. To minimize the need for employees to be away from home for meetings, Unilever provides videoconferencing, virtual meetings, videophones, and online collaboration.

The company’s Personal Vitality campaign, which was launched in 2005, promotes programs and activities that help employees take care of themselves physically and emotionally. Programs focus on health assessments and fitness, nutrition, hygiene, and personal care. The campaign encourages employees to engage with local communities and achieve a better work life balance. An example of the company’s support is to include healthy menus in cafeterias, provide opportunities for physical activity and community involvement, and encourage employee health assessments by occupational health departments. In addition, personal vitality guides have been produced to promote various aspects of the campaign. For example, one of the first guides was called, “Enjoy Nutrition,” and included nutrition information, on-line learning modules, and a local activation campaign.

Yamaha

Based in Japan, Yamaha Corporation is a multinational corporation and conglomerate that offers products and services including musical instruments, electronics, home appliances, semiconductors, computer-related products, industrial robots, motorcycles, and power sports equipment. The company has nearly 51,500 employees and sells its products all over the world.

For years, Yamaha Corporation has worked on several initiatives to shorten total work hours and provide support for work and family, including providing child care and nursing care leave ahead of statutory requirements. In April 2006, Yamaha established the Work Life Balance Committee to promote individual employees’ efforts to juggle work while maintaining a healthy, full life outside of the office. Initiatives include reduced working hours and improved support systems for the diverse range of employee’s personal situations.
In efforts to prevent work-related burnout, management and employees worked together to establish guidelines for overtime. Employees are encouraged to use their paid holidays, take special leave, and revise their work styles to meet their needs. In 2007, Yamaha re-introduced a system that allows employees to take their accumulated paid vacation time all at once, and in 2008, the company mandated at least one "No Overtime" day per week companywide to further reduce hours worked. The company also prohibits employees working past 10 p.m.

In 2008, management agreed to expand systems for work life balance, creating an employee assistance program, extending the period of eligibility for shortened work hours for employees with small children, and establishing shortened work hours for parents to attend school events. Employees attending school can also take advantage of the shortened work hours. xxv

Norway

Norway is an example of how a country’s government can positively influence work life balance for its citizens. Through legislation, the country has expanded its parental leave rules and increased parental leave benefits. Kindergartens and day-care centers throughout the country have multiplied. Fathers are encouraged to take more paternity leave in the critical first year of their babies’ lives. In fact, in 1993 Norway established a “father quota” of 12 weeks of paid parental leave. As a result, nine out of 10 fathers take the time off, enabling mothers to resume work. Once parental leave ends, parents can tap into state subsidies for daycare.

Norway’s family-centered policies equal 2.8 percent of gross domestic product, but the government justifies the cost by considering the return on female labor and tax revenues. xxvi

Conclusion

All around the world, companies are instituting practices and policies that address work life balance issues. However, when multinational organizations institute these practices, they must take into account the various local cultural, traditional, economic, and social mores. A one-size-fits-all approach will not suffice. As Norway finds, creating policies that help workers balance the competing needs of their careers and families provides a
net return to the society in engaged employees, tax revenues, stable families, and female labor contributions.

Endnotes

16 Chardac, Emily, “Massage to sushi to shortened workweeks: Different approaches to work life balance,” Employee Benefit News, July 1, 2011


Scotiabank Mexico website [http://www.scotiabank.com/cda/content/0,1608,CID13073_LIDen,00.html]


IBM Website, Employee Well-being [http://www.ibm.com/ibm/responsibility/employee_well_being.shtml]


Unilever website [http://www.unilever.com/careers/whyjoinus/experiencedprofessionals/worklifebalance/]
