

The key to achieve the illusive balance between work and life

The year is off to a brisk start, with many people feeling refreshed after the holidays and promising themselves that they will maintain a better work-life balance in the new year. But is it really possible in this day and age?

Cathie Webb, director at the South African Payroll Association (SAPA), says people talk about work-life balance as if one can interchange the one with the other without any issue. "I do not think that is as achievable as we would like it to be."

Understand your purpose

People have to take responsibilities for their roles in a business, and they should understand that they are employed for a purpose. People also need to know where they fit in to the organisation that they work for, and why they are important for the business.

"In many instances people understand what their jobs are, but they don't understand why it is integral to the success of the business," says Webb. There are very few businesses who have "reserves" to fill in the gaps when people are not available, or when they are not doing what they are supposed to do.

The South African reality

Many South Africans have to commute extraordinary distances between their home and workplaces, especially when dependent on public transport. Increased traffic and deteriorating roads mean that an eight to five job may take many more hours out of one's day than the time actually at work.

People who tend to have a more balanced work and private life are those who generally work in isolation and who do not have to keep regular office hours. Even if a company allows for more flexibility – where people can start earlier and finish earlier or the other way around – there is an added level of complexity as soon as the job is "customer facing" or the employee is part of a team.

Webb stresses the importance of honest and open communication at work and at home. "It is important for employees to be honest about challenges they may be facing at home. They must be equally honest at home about challenges they are facing at work."

Signs of imbalance

Webb says people start working longer hours to get tasks done, or they tend to come in a bit later than they should in the mornings. Managers who have smaller teams will be able to pick up on signs that the balance between work and private life is affected. "Make time to meet with your team regularly. It does not have to be a lengthy meeting with everyone weekly, but you need to meet often enough to understand what is happening in their lives."

Webb says if someone has issues at home which affect performance at work, one should try to find workable solutions for the company and the employee who is trying to keep all the balls in the air. For example, time given off formally to deal with a specific issue, rather than "stolen"

hours having to be taken randomly through a work day, may mean much to an employee under pressure.

Statistics provided by the South African Revenue Service and National Treasury indicate that 2,744 taxpayers worked over-time in 2013 compared to 656 in 2016. The income from overtime dropped from a combined R33m to R14m during the same time.

There is no underlying information to these stats, and the reduction may be due to the economic requirement for businesses to reduce overtime spend. But, Webb says, it may signify an increased awareness on the part of employers that people need “me time” too, even in a pressurised economy.

Stock responses

When people are asked how they are, most tend to give the “stock response” of Fine, Hectic or Does not help to complain. Many of these responses become a habit. People should learn to check their habitual response to this question, and ask themselves why they use them. Managers equally have to pay attention to why people respond the way they do. If someone is always genuinely hectic, there is something wrong, somewhere.

“We are responsible for the way we think about ourselves. We can make ourselves feel more positive about ourselves and our day, as well as making others feel more optimistic.”

The key

Webb says the balance comes from being “fully present” when you are at work. People have to be committed to the tasks they need to fulfil. “You need to find a way to switch-off when you are on your way home so that you can also be fully present at home.”

She says the importance of spending time with the family over dinner (not in front of the television) should never be underestimated. If you need to put in extra time at home, at least spent time during dinner to catch up on the day.

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