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## **HR-PRACTICES FOR MAINTAINING A WORK-LIFE-BALANCE**



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**Abstract:** The article is devoted to the study of Russian and foreign management practices in maintaining a work-life-balance, identifying and describing those that are best suited for Russian companies. The importance of maintaining a work-life-balance is proved, which requires a change in the managers' way of thinking. The results of the author's sociological research about this balance are presented, which prove that the main subject of maintaining the work-life-balance in Russia is the workers themselves and their families. A survey of 500 households has showed that working problems and issues are discussed in families; members of households perform part of the production functions after working hours at home, but some of the household problems are solved during working hours. The article describes further the most common organizational practices in maintaining a balance between work and family, including the use of flexible work schedules and childcare assistance. The advantages of each measure are described and forms of flexible work schedules are studied. And also the forms of companies' assistance in caring about workers' children are described. The article may be of interest to scientists and practitioners - specialists in personnel management.

**Keywords:** work-life-balance; HR-practices; flexible work schedules; remote work; working parents; childcare assistance.

**JEL code:** J 290.

### **Introduction.**

Until the middle of the twentieth century, people worked mostly to earn their living. The work determined largely the person's identity, the society position and formed an attitude towards him/her. "In fact, a person was perceived primarily as a representative of his profession (doctor, barber, carpenter, worker), and it was easy to determine his occupation by his outward appearance.

The turning point came in the late 50's - early 60-ies of the last century. Thanks to the development of production, the workers' and employees' educational level has risen sharply, and the monetary incentives have gradually stopped to play a key role in maintaining a high level of productivity ... It can be said that at that time a "conflict" between work and personal life arose. Person began to share their time into two spheres, and personal life began to gain increasing value" [1].

The aim of the article is to study the experience of applying such innovative HR-practice as maintaining the employees' work-life-balance.

## **1. The different countries experience in maintaining the personal work-life-balance**

Speaking about "private life" each person means different time inputs: the maintenance of health, both communication with family, friends, both personal development, and hobbies and others; that means all except work for income.

According to the dictionary, the balance (from Latin bilanx - "of two bowls") means equilibrium, the balance of the separate parts; quantitative expression of the relationship between the parties of an activity that should balance each other (eg, income and expenses) [2].

Such a balance does not necessarily mean equal time spent on work and personal life (50/50), as the importance (weight) of each cost is also important for the balance.

The fact is that "the concept of "balance "is very individual. One employee needs a flexible schedule, the ability to work remotely at that time when he can perform more effective, and engage in sports during the day. The other needs conversely to come every day to the office at a certain time and leave the workplace without delaying for a minute. And the thing is that it is impossible to come up with one "balance" for everyone!" [1]

The author has stressed repeatedly in publications that the individual (nano-) level of labor management is the least studied issue in the Russian labor economy. The author sees the reasons for the lack of studies and lack of practical steps to maintain the work-life-balance in most Russian organizations in this respect exactly. Since the work-life-balance is individual, so far, a personalized approach is required in its provision; at the modern level of IT technology development, this is not a problem from a technical point of view, even in large organizations, but it requires a change in the managers' way of thinking.

The concept of "work-life-balance" (balance of work and personal life) appeared firstly in the late 80's. "The scientists proved then that the imbalance of working and personal time leads often to depression, chronic fatigue, and mental disorders. On the contrary, people who managed to achieve the work-life-balance are more effective in professional terms and have good health.

There is a close relationship between the worker's harmonious life and the income of the enterprise. For example, the owners of the hotel chain "Marriott" adhere to such philosophy: "Take care of your employees, and they will take care of your customers, who will take care of your profits themselves."

Some large German companies are actively helping staff to find a balance between career and personal life. A goodwill policy is introduced into the working parents' life. The schedule changes to flexible or remote. More attention is paid to health and physical development.

The problems of "work-life-balance" in Japan are gradually beginning to be solved on the state level. The Population and Gender Equality Minister asked to include into the staff-list the position - Head of the department for creating the main spheres of life balance - "work/personal time".

A Decree on the balance of personal life and work was issued by the Government of Japan. It includes 14 items. In one of them it is recommended, for example, to increase the number of employees with the remote work possibility" [3].

Some time ago, the British company EOS published research data about the healthy and unhealthy balance between work and personal life. So, for example, it was estimated that there are 35 working hours in a healthy 168 hours week and 65 - in an unhealthy week. In order to get to work and back - 5 and 20 hours respectively, 49 and 35 hours on sleeping, 20 and 10 hours on spending time with a family... [4].

In Russia, the main subject of maintaining the work-life-balance is the workers themselves and their families. As part of our sociological survey of 500 households in Sverdlovsk region, we found out:

firstly, families discuss working problems and issues. The main methods of family influence on a person are advice and conviction. Figure 1 shows the structure of families on the question whether industrial issues (problems) are discussed at home or not.

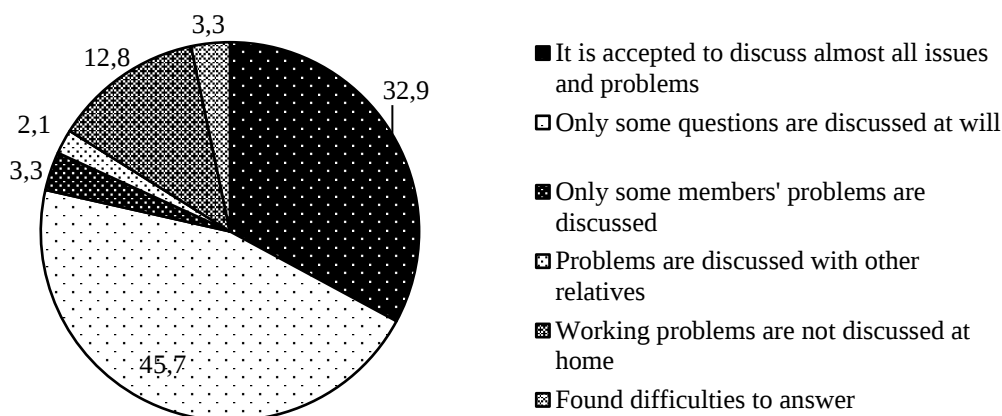


Fig. 1: Structure of households surveyed about the discussion productive issues (problems) at home, %

The figure shows clearly that almost all problems and questions arising at work are discussed in a third of households; more than 45% of households partially discuss issues (problems) at the request of family members, and if you add those households where only some family members' problems are being discussed (3.3%) and those, where is a discussion of problems with other relatives, not members of the household (2.1%), then we can conclude that about 85% of households are actively influence the workers' labor behavior in each specific production case not only aware of the problems at work;

secondly, the time between performance of labor functions at work and at home is redistributed in families. When the author asked about the households' attitude to the fact that some members carry out work functions at home, they solve their working problems at home afterhours, only 18.8% of households answered that no one takes a job at home. It was unexpected for the author, that a proportion of households, in which some or all of their members redistribute time, occupying part of the nonworking time by performing work functions is so large (4/5). Initially, the author hypothesized that the share of such households is not more than 60%. This is important, because working at home strengthens the influence of the family (household) on the labor behavior.

At the same time, households compensate for carrying out work functions at home, redistributing the working time. So, being asked whether household members solve household problems during working hours, 65% of the respondents answered positively; and another 13.3% noted that only some members of the family do so. And only 14.6% answered that it hasn't been taken to solve domestic problems during working hours in their household, almost all of the mentioned households are those in which no one takes work home.

## **2. HR-practices for maintaining a work-life-balance adapted for Russian companies**

Specialists [5] propose for companies that intend to introduce work-life-balance practices to use various actions aimed at supporting workers in many areas of their activity. Most of these activities focus on improving the working conditions, providing employees opportunities to care for children, parents and relatives. The Information Technology development has contributed to the distance work, which allows employees to perform their duties at home.

One of the key elements for achieving an effective work-life-balance in any organization is the concept of the work schedule flexibility. If employees have the opportunity to organize their flexible work schedule, they become more motivated and productive. The absenteeism level is reduced also thanks to a flexible work schedule. A flexible work schedule allows employees to manage emergency situations, fulfill their work duties and have time for special events occurring in their lives. This opportunity allows the team to develop other aspects of their professional activities, which can influence positively on their work in the company.

Providing flexible work schedule allows employers to:

- improve customer service;
- increase the women return level after happy event, that will reduce the company's costs of staff recruiting and training;
- reduce the illnesses level and absences at the workplaces;
- improve the punctuality level;
- creativity and energy increase.

There are the following versions for flexible work schedules [5]:

1. Part-time. There is no exact timetable for this type of work. It can include both a later starting, an earlier finishing of the working day and work only in the morning or evening hours. In addition, fewer working days per week also apply to part-time or another opportunity that allows an employee to work less time than full-time work. Opportunity for part-time work is provided mainly to young employees who combine their studies and work.

Companies have different ways of scheduling part-time work. The most popular is the additional day off provision for the employee, who worked the required hours per week. This practice is common in the USA. The greatest advantage of this method is the personnel retention possibility those who have the necessary work skills but can't work full-time.

2. Short working hours. This method allows employees to work out the total number of weekly working hours for fewer days. Usually, a 5-day working week can be reduced to 4 days. This type of work minimizes the staff turnover and the absences at the workplaces. In addition,

short working hours give employees more free time (usually one extra day off) that they can use for solving their personal problems or other useful purposes.

3. Flexi-time. It provides employees the opportunity to vary their working hours each week. This practice is interesting for workers who want to work overtime, and then have extra free time hours. This opportunity can also be used by employees who do not want to get to work and back during rush hour traffic.

4. Varied start time. This type of work is similar to the previous one. Employees have the opportunity to start or finish their working day at any convenient time for themselves. However, this method does not provide a reduction in the number of weekly working hours.

5. Sharing working schedule. This type of flexible working time provides for two employees to perform work that is usually performed by one person.

6. Work on terms. The employee has the opportunity to take paid or unpaid leave during the school holidays, reserving the right of returning to his workplace. Using this type of work the employer has the opportunity to retain the most valuable employees who have underage children. In addition, the company reduces staff turnover, because work on terms prevents work breaks, as well as the leaving for another company.

7. Voluntary reduction of working hours. The employee reduces the number of working hours per week for a certain period voluntarily as agreed and approved by the employer. The employee has a guarantee that after the end of this period he will be able to work full time. Such an opportunity is necessary for those employees who take care of the disabled elderly or children.

8. Workplace at home. Today, using the site as a workplace is becoming an increasingly popular method of work. The IT development makes available a workplace at home for more employees. It allows to reduce the cost of maintaining the office space and to give employees more opportunities to fulfill their family responsibilities.

The second element of the work-life-balance regulating is childcare assistance by the company.

Childcare is important for every employer, since a significant percentage of any company profits depends on young working parents. Therefore, opportunities for caring for children are quite popular in the work-life-balance system [6]. Some companies have their own day care centers for workers' children.

In general, there are the following benefits for employers that help workers in childcare:

- increase in productivity;
- increased flexibility;
- valuable employees retention;

- improvement of employees' motivation and loyalty who highly appreciate assistance in caring for children;
- reducing the absenteeism level;
- improving the staff recruitment through access to a broad base of highly qualified personnel;
- improvement of the company's image.

Assistance in caring for children is provided in the following forms:

1. Providing information about childcare. Employers support largely their employees by using this form. In particular, transmitted information may include all types of medical and social services provided to children in a certain place. Some American companies have a position in charge of the interaction between young parents and organizations that provide services to children.

2. Leave for parents. Companies today pay significant attention to parental leave, which allows young fathers and mothers to leave work in order to take care of their children. The leave policy for parents is well developed in the Scandinavian countries, particularly in Denmark, where the rights of parents to care about the child exist for 20 years. In general, fathers are given paid leave to take care of a child in 65 countries, in 31 of which paid leave lasts 14 weeks.

3. Remote work. It is carried out by agreement between the employee and the employer about the flexible place & working time. Long distance remote work has become possible thanks to the use of information technologies such as video conferencing, virtual networks, Voice over IP (VOIP). [5].

## **Conclusion**

The competent workforce deficit is the scarcest factor of production in modern situation, which is a threat of a breakdown in the processes of Russian economy innovative development. Therefore, employers are forced to retain skilled employees. The practices for maintaining a work-life-balance are relevant not only in Japan [7] and the USA [8], but also in other countries [9; 10] and in-demand among such employees who have rare communications with their families because of having a lot of work.

In practical terms, developing individual methods of maintaining the work-life-balance is extremely time-consuming and economically unprofitable. Therefore we propose for greater efficiency in the management process to allocate a certain number of types and models of workers' needs and to develop principles and a management mechanism for a group of individuals with the possibility of individual tuning.

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