



Research Request

WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION:
THE NEW NORM?

Trends, Strategies &
Best Practice Approaches

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The Case for Work-Life Integration

Companies that earn a reputation for supporting effective work-life integration differentiate themselves in today's business environment and have a competitive edge in the search for talent.

Attaining a satisfactory work-life balance has become increasingly elusive for many workers. Advancements in technology and the connectivity afforded by mobile devices have made employees available and accessible 24/7 and essentially erased the separation between work and life away from work. A study published in [American Sociological Review](#), found that 70 percent of US workers struggle to achieve an acceptable balance between work and family life. In a recent survey conducted by the [Hay Group](#), 39 percent of respondents indicated that they did not have the right balance between work and personal lives. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said they worked for a company that didn't support work-life balance and indicated that they planned to look for new work within two years.



The US workforce is burned out. The average full-time employee is working more hours than ever, including putting in time on weekends. A study by [Harvard Business School](#) found that 94 percent of people are working more than 50 hours a week - almost half of them work more than 65 hours a week. In the Staples Business Advantage (SBA) [Workplace Index](#), which surveyed thousands of US workers and managers, nearly half of respondents reported that feeling overworked was motivating them to look for a new job. Research by the [Mental Health Foundation](#) found that employees that work extended hours are more likely to feel depressed, anxious, and irritable, all of which can negatively impact worker satisfaction, productivity, loyalty, and retention.

The reality is, work will interrupt life and life will interrupt work. The challenge is finding a way to effectively integrate the two. The focus has clearly shifted from work-life balance to work-life integration. To support a beneficial work-life integration for employees, many companies have begun to offer flexible working arrangements, telecommuting options, on-site amenities, and a range of other benefits and incentives. This is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Today's workforce has multiple diversity dimensions and is comprised of employees at different career stages, and from varying cultural and societal backgrounds. In addition, for the first time ever, there are four generations working side-by-side in the workforce, making 'life-stage' another factor for consideration.

Business leaders must understand and reconcile the unique work-life needs of their employees. Work-life strategies must attend to workforce diversity as well as individual preferences. Not having the right work-life strategies can create discord among workers and exacerbate work-life deficiencies. For example, after work happy hours or free on-site childcare may alienate older workers; providing benefits such as long-term care insurance or supplemental insurance to cover gaps in Medicare will do little to attract or incentivize younger workers.

This report highlights a wide array of work-life integration strategies and best practices. However, employers need to understand what motivates their workforce, and design work-life programs that meet the needs of employees throughout their organization and across all diversity dimensions.

Strategies & Best Practices

Get Input from Employees

To be successful, work-life integration strategies must be relevant and responsive to the needs of employees – all employees. To gather employee input, many companies hold regularly scheduled meetings or conduct ad hoc focus groups to discuss work-life priorities and frame work-life strategies and interventions. Companywide surveys are also effective tools for collecting information across business units and geographic locations. It is important that data collection efforts fully engage employees across diversity dimensions and in different life- and career-stages.

Lead by Example

The behaviors of company leadership can have a significant impact on how employees view and embrace work-life integration. In a [Harvard Business Review](#) study of employees across global locations, only 25% of employees reported that their company leaders modeled sustainable work-life practices. Simply stating the company supports work-life integration isn't enough. Business leaders need to 'walk the talk' and demonstrate their own commitment to achieving work-life equilibrium: this means taking advantage of the same work-life options, amenities, and rewards offered to employees.

[HubSpot](#) offers its employees a chance to rest and recharge in designated nap rooms, replete with hammock and cloud-covered walls. CMO Mike Volpe uses the nap room frequently and has publicly stated that a 20-minute nap is often all he needs to regain focus and re-energize for the rest of the day.

Emphasize Outcomes Not Hours

Progressive companies understand that productivity doesn't always come in eight-hour increments, and working long hours doesn't necessarily equate to being more productive. As a case in point, [UK employees](#) on average work longer hours than other European countries, but have lower overall productivity rates. Today, work performance is increasingly evaluated in terms of outcomes and deliverables rather than hours worked or time in the office. This may require retraining managers and establishing new performance targets for employees that reward performance in terms of productivity and outcomes rather than hours clocked.

Promote & Celebrate Diversity

Companies with a diverse workforce have proven to be more productive and profitable, and have better recruitment and retention outcomes. Millennial workers, (which will comprise [75 percent](#) of the US workforce by 2025), often rank a diverse workforce higher on a scale of importance than salary and benefits. In the [millennial generation](#), whites have already become a minority population; 58 percent the LGBTQ segment of the US population are millennial-age. Promoting and celebrating workforce diversity engages workers across the workforce and encourages workers in all diversity dimensions to bring their 'whole-selves' to work.

VMware encourages activities to celebrate the cultural heritage of its employees. For example, the company supports Diwali, the Hindu "Festival of Lights," with a company-wide event organized by the VMware Indian Employee Network, and provides flexible work schedules for about 50 members in the month leading up to the event to allow them to plan and organize activities. It's also not unusual for employees at VMware to take an impromptu gym break or practice dance class moves in between work sessions.

Develop a Supportive Culture

The key to a successful work-life integration program lies in establishing a workplace culture based on trust (on the part of managers) and personal responsibility (on the part of employees). For managers, developing trust means letting go of pre-conceived notions that office face-time and working long hours equates to high performance. For employees, it means effectively communicating individual work-life needs and responsibly utilizing the options and benefits available to productively fulfill job requirements.

Establish & Promote Work-life Policies

Unless properly managed, differences in beliefs and expectations about work-life integration can lead to discord and resentment. Business leaders need to develop clear work-life policies, communicate the benefits of effective work-life integration to the organization and the individual, and strongly encourage employees to utilize available work-life supports. In the absence of formal policies and a clear articulation of company expectations, employees reluctant to participate in new business practices may resent workers who take advantage of those practices, and managers may view those same workers as less committed to their job.

Support Flexible Schedules

In a [national study](#), 63 percent of employee respondents believe that working 9-to-5 is an outdated concept. Today's workers want the flexibility to perform their jobs when, how, and where they want. Every employee experiences work-life conflicts at some point in their career, and having the flexibility to attend to family related issues and other personal concerns without guilt or repercussion is highly valued. Options for flexibility may include allowing employees to meet a 40-hour work commitment by staggering the number of hours worked each day, or doing away with the notion of a 40-hour work week altogether and evaluating employee performance solely on the basis of deliverables and outcomes.

[Capital One](#) allows employees to work on their own timetables in work settings that best suit their needs, whether at home, in the company's new, eco-friendly office settings, or at the local coffee shop. As a result, the company has increased worker productivity and satisfaction, lowered real estate costs by requiring less overall space, and even driven environmental benefits through reduced commuting.

Offer Telecommuting Options

[Studies](#) have shown that workers are up to 13% more productive working from home. Today, many companies offer employees telecommuting options that allow employees to work remotely, typically from a home-based office, sanctioning them to attend to 'life' concerns while still getting 'work' done. Mobile technology has played a critical role in connecting employees to work regardless of location. According to a recent [study](#), 60 percent of workers are connected to work through their smartphones 13.5 hours or more per day. In another [study](#), 50 percent of workers reported they check or respond to work emails outside of work, and 38 percent say they continue to work outside of normal office hours. Sixty-two percent of workers say staying connected to work outside business hours is a choice rather than an obligation.

Create an Eco-friendly Workplace

Implementing an eco-friendly workplace is in the interest of the company, the employee and the greater good. Sustainable workplace practices include water filling stations, recycled office technology, green cleaning products, and furniture made from sustainable materials. Employees who engage in their company's sustainability and CSR initiatives have statistically higher engagement rates. Seventy-three percent of respondents participating in the SBA [Workplace Index](#) say an eco-friendly company is an important factor when making an employment decision.

Provide Tools & Technology

With the right technology and software, employees can stay connected whether they are in or out of the office. Today's tools and technology allow for mobile access, live file sharing, video-chats, and on-line meetings. In a [survey](#) of US workers, 75 percent of respondents reported their employer does not give them access to the latest technology and that they could be more productive with the right tools.

Create Innovative Workspaces

In the SBA [Workplace Index](#), 65 percent of workers say they feel inspired at the office, but only 16 percent of those same workers described their office design as inspiring. Designing spaces that will appeal to workers means taking into consideration generational differences. For example, older workers tend to prefer ergonomic equipment and enclosed offices. Younger workers prefer standing desks and open-office spaces and lounge areas. Natural lighting, eco-friendly office products, and abundance of plant-life are highly valued by most employees.

At Unilever, employees aren't assigned desks. They can choose any location to work, including couches, pods, open spaces, and stationary walking treadmills. Meditation and inspiration rooms are available to all workers, and the company stocks kitchens and pantries with a wide variety of healthy options.

Designate Quiet Space

Many companies are designating quiet spaces where employees can take a mental break to unplug, meditate, and recharge. [Experts](#) recommend that such spaces be uncluttered and free of company materials. Including greenery, comfortable seating, light reading material, and soft music will all contribute to a calm environment that will help employees relax and de-stress. It is important that spaces designated for quiet time and meditation don't become employee break rooms or used as a space for venting or holding private meetings.

One design option available in the office space market is the [Studio Room](#). Intended as a place for wellness and rejuvenation, the room includes a reclining lounge chair for napping, floor space for stretching, and a built-in wall monitor that displays yoga moves and Zen nature scenes.

Promote Breaks

Remaining sedentary in front of a computer screen for long hours can result in a variety of health concerns. Encouraging employees to take frequent breaks throughout the workday can reduce stress and increase productivity. In the SBA [Workplace Index](#), 78 percent of employees reported they were more productive after a break. However, in the same survey, employees reported they are often reluctant to take breaks because they felt guilty. Fifty percent of survey respondents said they wished taking breaks was encouraged by their company.

Promote Health & Wellness

In a [national survey](#), 62 percent of employees said the availability of a wellness program is a primary selling point when looking for a new job. In the same survey, 58 percent of employees reported their company doesn't offer such a program. Wellness benefits include providing nutritional food options, conducting health screenings, and offering preventive and personal care education and services. While health and wellness services benefit all employees, they are particularly important for older workers who are more at risk for injury and illness.

[Motorola](#) encourages employees to participate in their LIVESMART program, which provides health and wellness education, offers advice on commute management, and even assists in will preparation.

Provide Fitness Options

Employees who eat right and exercise are healthier and miss less work. Studies show that exercise is one of the most effective means of reducing stress: the [CDC](#) recommends that able-bodied adults get at least 30 minutes of exercise each day. Unfortunately, long work hours and commutes to the office often force employees to sacrifice opportunities to focus on their health. To address the issue, many companies provide stationary walking treadmill work stations, and on-site workout facilities and fitness classes, or offer employee discounts at a local gym. Some companies go a step further and provide employees with Fitbits and promote interoffice competitions around specific health objectives, for example, reducing workforce obesity. In addition to physical fitness, companies should provide programs to support mental fitness and well-being. For example, providing employees opportunities to work on creative projects stimulates innovative thinking and generates new ideas, both of which can benefit the company.

Google offers a program which allows developers to spend 20 percent of their time on creative side projects; workers value the break from day-to-day responsibilities and appreciate the opportunity to develop new skill sets.

Encourage Napping

A [NASA study](#) found that a 26-minute nap can boost productivity by 34 percent and increase alertness by 54 percent. Many companies are embracing the power of the nap and have begun to designate appropriate spaces to allow employees opportunities to rest and recharge during the workday.

Google was one of the first companies to promote the benefits of napping. The company introduced 'energy pods' into the workplace: reclining chairs inside a large bubble with built-in music and soothing sounds. An alarm gently wakes up nappers with lights and vibrations.

Promote Life-long Learning

Advances in technology and globalization of the workforce have made access to continuing education and opportunities for skills development important employment factors for today's worker. Encouraging the learning objectives of employees not only builds in-house expertise: retention rates also improve when employees feel they are supported and are advancing in their careers.

Today, [learning is produced](#) by thousands of sources (e.g., MOOCs, universities, experts, professional associations); most of them are expert-authored video with increasing levels of entertainment, interactivity, and assessment. Through Coursera, EdX, NovoEd, Udacity, Udemy, lynda.com, Skillsoft, Grovo, and dozens of other content creators, millions of video-based courses are available on the Internet.

Increase Vacation Days

Many US companies provide limited vacation time - often only one to two weeks. However, [studies and surveys have shown](#) that two weeks off per year isn't enough to achieve a work-life balance. [MarketWatch](#) reported that in 2014, US employees on average used only half of their paid vacation time. This excess of unused vacation time is often linked to company culture and perceptions that taking even paid vacation time signals less commitment to the job. One way to encourage employees to use their vacation time is to encourage managers to use theirs. Another strategy is to implement a 'use it or lose it' policy, whereby allotted vacation time expires if not used. The company might even assign a benign penalty to employees that don't use earned vacation time.

Provide Family-care Supports

Family-care supports vary for different generations in the workforce. For workers with young children, employers might offer onsite babysitting and daycare services, or discounts for childcare services if it isn't feasible to offer on-site supports. Other benefits include flexible start/end times for workers who drive their children to school, or time off to pick up a sick child or attend a soccer game at the end of the day. Family-care supports also apply to workers caring for aging parents or a spouse. According to a [Pew Research Center](#) report, one in seven US adults in their 40s and 50s financially support both an aging parent and at least one child. For workers that have responsibility caring for a parent or ailing spouse, employers can provide reduced hours and workload, and offer caregiver-specific assistance through their EAP. Other options include flexible spending accounts that can be used to pay for elder care services, or establishing leave banks that allow participating workers to donate and draw upon paid leave after exhausting their own.

Offer Leave for Significant Life Events

Major life events such as death, providing care for an ill family member, and even the birth of a child create stress for employees and distract from the job. Offering time off builds loyalty and allows employees to deal with complicated situations in an effective way. Some employers offer paid leave for life events that don't qualify under the [Family and Medical Leave Act](#), such as caring for a sick family member, or providing bereavement leave following the death of a loved one. As an example, to remain competitive, many companies are implementing generous parental leave policies and expanding benefits to include fathers, secondary caregivers, same sex couples, and the LGBTQ community. These benefits often apply to adoption, surrogacy, and foster care in addition to live birth, and can last weeks, months, and in some cases, more than a year. Some companies also offer phased return-to-work policies that allow employees to phase back into work after an extended leave on a reduced and/or flexible schedule.

[Facebook](#) provides employees 20 days of paid bereavement leave following the loss of an immediate family member, and ten days of paid leave for the loss of an extended family member. Facebook employees receive six weeks of paid leave within a 12-month period to spend time with a family member who has a long-term illness, and three days to take care of a family member with a short-term illness.

[Patagonia](#) offers new mothers 16 weeks of fully paid maternity leave; fathers and adoptive mothers get 12 weeks of leave with full pay. The company has an on-site child-care center that is run by teachers, some of whom are bilingual and trained in child development. Parents often each lunch with their kids, take them to the farmer's market, or play with them outside. The company buses school-age kids back to the child-care center after school, allowing parents to reconnect with them during the workday.

Support Communities & Causes

Another effective way to integrate work-life is to sponsor and participate in meaningful community activities and social causes. Many companies have begun to provide paid time off to allow employees to volunteer for the charity or cause of their choice. Participating in meaningful initiatives is satisfying, good for morale, and can boost company image. But decisions related to participating in causes shouldn't be made in a vacuum - business leaders need to take the time to understand what their employees value and in what causes they would prefer to get involved.

[Urban Airship](#) keeps employees engaged in the company and the community by hosting an array of events, including monthly game nights, pancake breakfasts, and community service projects. In addition, for every three years worked, Urban Airship employees receive a company-paid vacation.

Host Company Outings

Outings not only reward and encourage employees, they also provide an excellent opportunity for workers to network and develop relationships across business lines, generations, and diversity dimensions. Low-key outings and in-office activities can be just as effective as high budget events.

[Omnigon](#) plans monthly outings to interesting destinations and holds 5 PM happy hours with foosball tournaments every week. Employees can also unwind with professional massages, recharge at the onsite espresso bar, or snack from fully stocked pantries and weekly deliveries from Fresh Direct.

Provide Amenities & Perks

According to [Glassdoor's Employment Confidence Survey](#), 89 percent of millennials prefer benefits and perks to pay raises. Companies like Walgreens, Lyft, and Starbucks utilize the platform [Perkspot](#) to offer their employees a way to save money and find discounts on lifestyle goods in categories including entertainment, auto, wellness, and travel. Another amenity commonly provided by most companies are healthy food choices, whether through on-site cafeterias, stocked pantries, or food delivery services.

[AddThis](#) provides its employees a constant supply of free, healthy, and delicious food. Lunch is catered daily and free snacks and drinks are available all day - with more options available during its hosted speaker series. The company also has an open leave policy that encourages employees to take time off as they need it.

Offer 'Concierge' Services

In-house supports that help employees manage their personal errands and household responsibilities can reduce stress, especially when employers are able to handle them during work hours allowing for more leisure time and better work-life balance. Some companies provide laundry and dry cleaning services, auto maintenance and repair, tax preparation, estate planning, catering for personal events, and even personal shopping and gift-wrapping.

Conclusion

In the SBA [Workplace Index](#), 65 percent of respondents say workplace stress impacts them; nearly half report feeling overworked and cite that as a reason to look for another job. Fifteen percent have taken a workplace stress-related leave of absence. According to a study by the [American Journal of Nursing](#), work stress and burnout can cause employees to become disconnected from work- and home-life because they don't have the energy to sustain both. The study found that burnout results in higher absenteeism, workplace injuries, reduced quality of work, and physical and mental exhaustion. Compounding the issue, employees aren't likely to admit if they are feeling burned out and overworked because they fear they will be viewed as unable to handle their job.

Empowering employees and providing them the tools and supports to take control of their work-life needs can have a profound impact on job satisfaction, productivity, performance, and retention. Work-life integration strategies that fully engage employees and are responsive to both individual and organizational needs have become a foundational element in today's competitive business environment. The prospect of achieving true work-life balance may be unrealistic and outdated, but achieving satisfaction and harmony through work-life integration is a real possibility.