



Work-Life Balance



Introduction

This section seeks to assist employers to understand what is meant by work-life balance and to achieve such a balance in the workplace. It is important for employers to keep a balance between efforts and reward, expected concentration levels and allowed relaxation levels. Time spent on work engagements and time spent on non-work engagements should therefore be 'balanced'.

What is work-life balance?

The term 'work-life balance' may be a new one, but the concept is not – think of the old saying 'all work and no play'. It refers to the need in all of us to have a balance in our lives; we perform better when we have some element of work as well as some element of leisure. Scientific studies have measured the performance of different groups – those who work through long periods, those who take rest breaks, those who take rest breaks as well as breaks doing something they enjoy (such as a hobby) and those who take only leisure breaks – how they feel, how they perform on a given task and how they interact. The research shows that the group which performs best across the three areas – work performance, interaction and 'feeling' good – tends to be the group that takes rest and leisure breaks.

Are leisure breaks the same as rest breaks?

Leisure is not just rest. Although rest is needed, and so we should sleep approximately eight hours per day, we also need awake time where we 'play' or do things that are rewarding outside of work. The real term here is 'engagement'. As humans, we need to be engaged in other activities, such as a sport, reading, watching a film, singing in a band, doing DIY, walking, taking photographs, painting.

What are the indicators of a good work-life balance?

A good work-life balance is in place when:

- Employees work between five and nine hours per day.
- Employees do not have to travel more than one hour to and from work.
- Employees have and take advantage of proper rest and eating periods within their working day/night.
- Employees know in advance what shifts/days they are scheduled to work.
- Employees have interests/pursuits outside the workplace.
- Doing their jobs does not mean employees have no time left to be engaged in activities that have no connection to work.

Work–Life Balance

What has this to do with me as an employer?

You will benefit from employees who have balanced lives. Employees also benefit from supervisors, managers and employers who have balanced lives. When interacting with each other, whether in the workplace, in the course of employment, in the communities in which we live or in broader society, we benefit from interacting with people who are relaxed, patient, reasonable, satisfied and content; these people usually have a balance in their lives between their work and their non-work activities.

Your business can especially benefit from employees who have work–life balance because satisfied employees are more productive, make fewer mistakes, have fewer accidents and cause less unrest in groups.

Financially you can benefit in terms of increased productivity and reductions in conflict issues at work, industrial relations issues, accident rates, medical treatment, absence from work, social welfare compensation and possible civil claims, training time and resources and, in extreme situations, mental health problems. Unrest often starts with one or two individuals but becomes a broader issue across teams if not tackled early on. In many instances unrest is totally preventable by simple inexpensive measures to identify, promote and support a balanced approach to work for your employees.

Can I get support to promote work–life balance?

A number of statutory and non-statutory agencies will help you promote work–life balance and there are websites offering additional information. These resources are listed at the end of this section.

The HSA does not have a remit in this area and there is no direct health and safety legislation referring to work–life balance. However, employers do have a duty of care to employees and also a duty to carry out risk assessments (see Section 2 of this Toolkit).

Does any legislation cover work–life balance issues?

Some family-friendly working arrangements are regulated under Irish law as statutory entitlements. Some of these attract a social welfare payment. Other non-statutory arrangements are agreed between the employer and the employee, perhaps regulated by a workplace collective agreement or policy, but they are not legal entitlements.

Important legislation in this area includes:

- Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act.
- Organisation of Working Time Act.
- Maternity Protection Act.
- Parental Leave Act.
- Force Majeure Leave.
- Adoptive Leave Act.
- Carer's Leave.

For more information on the above, contact the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

What is the take-up of flexible working time among Irish employees?

In general the take-up is less than expected. Within specific sectors, where there is a cultural acceptance of the benefits of such flexibility, there is higher take-up. Suspicion that those taking such leave are disrupting the system or are less productive can discourage participation. This is often a misconception and when transparent and fair work–life balance policies are in place, and regularly monitored and reviewed, it can lead to measurable, visible increases in take-up across various types of service and production-oriented enterprises.

What should I do to explore this further?

First, contact agencies that specialise in the area. It is vitally important, particularly in the current economic environment that any actions you take are seen as non-threatening and will be viewed with an open mind by employees. During an economic downturn it can be beneficial to offer employees more flexibility in how they work, with some preferring to work fewer hours to suit family needs or to engage in other non-pay or pay-related activities. Thus, your workplace can accommodate people whilst also accommodating the recessionary context.

A systematic approach is vital. Consult with employees about the work–life balance project, perhaps keep it within a specified time frame or operate a pilot project at first. There are several ways that such a system can be implemented:

- Get accurate information from agencies.
- Consult with employees, explaining what work–life balance is and how they can benefit from reading material on it.
- Get information on other benefits to employees, see case studies at www.worklifebalance.ie. For instance, an employee may prefer to have one more day per week off, and the resultant change in take-home pay may not be as prohibitive as he or she expected.
- Target one or two new initiatives that you could promote in terms of work–life balance and consider it for a three-month period, with review after that time.
- Consider all employees and rotate any system you bring in so that everyone can access it at some level.

What is a work–life balance policy?

A work–life balance policy will identify and set out the organisation's commitment to:

- A planned and systematic approach to work–life balance.
- Implementing flexible working arrangements necessary for work–life balance for employees and to meet the objectives of the business.
- Promoting non-discrimination at work in that no disadvantage accrues to staff who avail of flexible arrangements.

- Designing these arrangements in a manner that takes account of staff diversity across the nine grounds covered under equality legislation, in particular ensuring their relevance to employees with caring responsibilities, older employees, employees with disabilities and employees from minority ethnic groups.

How should a work–life balance policy be implemented?

It is best to implement work–life balance arrangements on a partnership basis, which involves developing a programme that:

- Sets out objectives in terms of what the work–life balance programme seeks to achieve for the business, for employees and for workplace equality.
- Specifies a range of employee work–life balance needs that the programme seeks to respond to.
- Outlines who can access what and for how long and the systems and practices needed to support the programme, including training, staff responsibilities in the area, application procedures and monitoring arrangements.

Is any special training required?

Training in designing and operating work–life balance working arrangements:

- Supports an awareness of the work–life balance policy.
- Develops attitudinal change among staff as necessary in relation to work–life balance.

- Informs an understanding of the particular needs of people who avail of flexible working arrangements.
- Develops skills in the design and management of flexible working arrangements.

Why should I develop policy and action around work–life balance?

- It enhances recruitment and retention of employees.
- It builds morale and productivity (crucial in current climate).
- It assists employees to remain in employment while dealing with other responsibilities.
- It offers employees the chance to avail of new opportunities alongside their work responsibilities.
- It supports workplace equality and diversity.
- It helps older employees in terms of phased approaches to retirement.
- It assists in meeting requirements under equality legislation.

Contacts/References

Further information is available from:

- **Case studies may be found on the National Framework Committee for Work Life Balance's website:** www.worklifebalance.ie.
- **National Centre for Partnership and Performance. Website:** www.ncpp.ie.
– The Changing Workplace: A Survey of Employee Views and Experiences (NCP, 2003).
- **Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Website:** www.entemp.ie.
- **Fathers and Mothers & Work Life Balance: A European Study (2007) by M. Fine-Davis.**

Work-Life Balance

