Work-Life Balance
Reconciling aspirations and performance
POINT OF VIEW: CEO of Me


TESTIMONY: Work-Life Balance is a Business Imperative

Interview with Stuart WOOLLARD, director of the HRM Learning Board, King’s College London (England), December 2008.

TESTIMONY: Microsoft Spain: Good Business and Happy Lives, Hand in Hand

Interview with Elena DINESEN, director of human resources, Microsoft Spain, December 2008.

Key ideas

Why is it so difficult to achieve the right work — life balance? For Ellen Ernst Kossek and Brenda A. Lautsch, authors of “CEO of Me”, identifying aspirations and realizing them involves a flexible approach that needs to be nurtured. It is impossible to achieve the ideal work-life balance without formalizing one’s aspirations.

Stuart Woolard believes that there’s a close link between employee wellbeing and performance. Implementing measures to improve work-life balance result in a higher staff retention rate, more trust between managers and employees, less stress and burnout, and better corporate results in general. What’s surprising is that not all companies are aware of this correlation.

Microsoft Spain: both employees and their company gain from finding the right work-life balance, according to Elena Dinesen, head of HR at Microsoft Spain. In 2003, she implemented a three-part plan to improve employee wellbeing, which resulted in excellent business results and won the admiration of many organizations.
CEO of Me: Creating a Life that Works in the Flexible Job Age


Are you dissatisfied with the balance between your professional and personal life, despite your best efforts to reconcile the two? Do you sometimes doubt that it is even possible? Ellen Ernst Kossek and Brenda A. Lautsch have written a book responding to these questions, offering practical insight on how to regain control over your work/life balance.

Most likely, you have several goals in your life: building a successful career, being there for your family and living life to its fullest. But there are only 24 hours in a day, and separating the professional from the personal can be tough. You look at e-mail from work before going to bed, send text messages to set up meetings while sitting stuck in traffic and make doctor’s appointments from the office. But how long can this blurring of your personal and professional lives go on? Constant juggling inevitably leads to stress and exhaustion, neither of which contributes to productivity. What’s more your company’s success is ultimately at stake! When you write e-mails during meals, are they 100% effective? Is taking part in a conference call while on vacation good for your family life? Probably not, say Ellen Ernst Kossek and Brenda A. Lautsch, co-authors of CEO of Me. They have defined a concept called flexstyle to help you figure out which style is right for you.

DISCOVER YOUR FLEXSTYLE

People have different ways of combining their personal and professional lives according to their personality, and everyone has his or her own degree of flexibility, or flexstyle. From those who make no distinction between work and family to those who put up clear barriers between the two, Kossek and Lautsch present three main flexstyles.

■ Flexstyles

• Integrators: These individuals blend their personal and professional lives both time and space-wise. During vacations they answer e-mails while sitting by the pool and make business calls between social calls.

• Separators: These individuals distinctly separate their private and work lives both physically and psychologically. They concentrate on work while at the office and on their family when at home. They generally do not work at home; should the need arise, they will most likely organize a specific time and space in which to do so.

• Volleys: These are individuals whose behaviour mimics that of both separators and integrators depending on the circumstances. During a rush at the office, for example, they make themselves available 24/7, but do not take any phone calls when on vacation under any circumstances.

To find out what your flexstyle is, take the “Find your flexstyle” test (see insert).

■ Pros & cons of different flexstyles

No flexstyle is intrinsically better than another; each one simply reflects a different personality type. Nonetheless, within each group, there are those who have found a fulfilling work/life balance, and others who constantly struggle with the clash between their personal and professional lives.

• Integrators – fusion lovers vs. reactors: Fusion lovers enjoy the fusional nature of the relationship between their private and professional activities. This mixture reflects their values, and, thus, they are easily able to keep the situation under control. On the other hand, reactors feel dissatisfied with this blending because it is in direct opposition to their personal goals. They feel their lives are no longer within their control, and that one area constantly overshadows the other.

• Separators – firsters vs. captives: Firsters (work-firsters or family-firsters) have decided to give top priority to either their personal or work life, and accept the fact one naturally takes precedence over the other. In contrast, captives feel power-
less, and see one aspect of their life forcing them to sacrifice the other. For example, they are incapable of taking time out of their work day to deal with personal matters, like looking for an apartment, calling the bank, or attending a parent-teacher conference.

- **Volleyers – quality timers vs. job warriors:** Quality-timers rely on time references (i.e. the work week vs. the weekend, rushes vs. slow periods, etc.) to decide whether to integrate or separate their personal and professional lives. In either case, they remain in full control. Job warriors, however, have an extremely hard time switching from one context to the other, and end up mixing their private and professional lives when they should be separating them, and vice versa.

### PREPARING TO CHANGE

According to Kossek and Lautsch, the discomfort and stress that people sometimes experience when it comes to work/life balance is not rooted in their flexstyle but rather in its incongruity with their personal aspirations. A gap between an individual’s real vs. ideal flexstyle upsets this balance. Thus, Kossek and Lautsch propose a five-step process to uncover the areas where change needs to happen.

1. **Take stock**
   Start out by taking note of when problems come up. Which particular days or times of day are generally sources of conflict between your private and professional lives (i.e. demanding times at work, family vacations, etc.).

2. **Recognize the need to change**
   Despite everyone’s natural reluctance to change, regaining control over your life begins with a willingness to change. A crisis, like a health problem or family crisis, often acts as a catalyst for change. Try to recognize the signs that indicate a need for change!

3. **Imagine alternatives**
   Take time to reflect upon your ideal work/family balance. Are you comfortable dealing with e-mails when you are on the beach? Would you like to take some work time to organize your personal life better? Answering questions like these will enable you to determine the direction in which you should move.

4. **Create a healthy context for change**
   Seek emotional support from the people close to you. Talk to them about the difficulties you are having balancing work and family life, and take advice from people who have dealt with similar challenges.

5. **Test your options**
   Test various options in order to increase your chances of finding the right balance. When your workload is particularly heavy, you might try getting a babysitter to help out at home, or taking on an intern at the office.

### IMPLEMENTING A CHANGE STRATEGY

Once you have realized that you need to make some changes, you can adopt one of three strategies for building up your current flexstyle or, if necessary, radically changing it.

- **Regaining control**
  What reactors, captives, and job warriors all have in common is the feeling of a loss of control. Someone from work always calls when you are with your family. Each time you take a vacation, you must also deal with a long distance work crisis! When you are in control of your life, however, you know how to say “yes”, “no” or “we’ll see about that later”, thus making deliberate decisions about just how involved you are willing to get when. To regain control, you must reassess your desires both at work and at home. For instance, renegotiate your work hours, take all of your vacation time, delegate certain tasks, request additional resources, and, at home, divide up household chores more equally!

- **Solving problems with your current flexstyle**
  Every flexstyle presents specific problems that can be dealt with on an individual basis. Take the example of reactors. Their families and co-workers expect them to be 100% available at all times, which means they must set clear, firm limits. Captives, on the other hand, tend to neglect their private lives, where they should make a point of devoting more time to personal matters. Finally, job warriors have trouble figuring out when to integrate and when to separate their private and professional lives. What can they do about it? Set up a simple timetable that establishes when it is time to shift from one context to the other. For instance, once you are on your way home, it is time to stop thinking about work.

- **Exploring new flexstyles**
  Sometimes, honing your flexstyle is not enough; you might need to undertake a more radical approach.

  - **Become an integrator:** Make yourself more available to family, friends and colleagues at important times. Discipline yourself to concentrate on the priorities at hand. Keep your family up to date about work, and vice versa, thus ensuring that everyone is aware of where your priorities lie.
**...**

**Become a separator:** Keep talk about work to a minimum when you are at home, and vice versa. Strive to finish the task at hand. If you have to work over the weekend, for instance, do so in a place that is separate from the rest of the family, and be sure not to go over a specific amount of time allotted for work.

**Become a volleyer:** Look for clues that will you tell when it is time to shift from a situation where you can mix your personal and work lives to one where you need to separate the two. You might choose a specific time of day; as of 6 p.m., for instance, you integrate work and family, but at 9 p.m. you become a separator.

**How to change**
You cannot change without support from your family, friends and colleagues. A few simple steps will help garner support for your decision to change in order to achieve a better work/life balance.

**A win-win solution:** When you negotiate with your superiors, explain that they will not lose out by accepting your change proposal. Your decreased involvement at certain times of the year will be compensated for at others.

**Dispel your boss’s greatest fears:** Your boss might misunderstand your request for flexible hours. Reassure him or her that you will work as much as ever, and that any problems can be resolved through effective organization.

**Find allies:** Draw on the strength of the group, showing that everyone would benefit from more flexible work hours. Still, be sure that management does not feel forced to accept your proposal.

**Involve your family:** New work arrangements are likely to also mean changes at home. You must therefore keep your family up-to-date to avoid imposing your decisions unilaterally.

Once you have adopted the flexstyle that is right for you, you need to consider sustaining it. To ensure that changes take root in the long-term, Kossek and Lautsch suggest imposing them in the workplace. Define new office rules (no more consulting e-mail during vacations); adopt family-friendly practices (no more meetings after 5 p.m. on Fridays); spread the culture throughout the hierarchy by demonstrating its benefits (gains in productivity, worker loyalty, etc.).

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**Find your flexstyle**

For each statement, check the box that best describes your level of agreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A Fully agree</th>
<th>B Somewhat agree</th>
<th>C Indifferent</th>
<th>D Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>E Fully disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I try to keep my personal and professional lives separate.</td>
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<td>When I am at work, I only deal with personal and family matters during breaks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When I am at work, there is a clear distinction between my professional and private lives.</td>
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<td>I am generally able see exactly where my work stops and my private life begins.</td>
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<td>I rarely attend to personal matters when I am at work.</td>
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<td>I almost never work overtime.</td>
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<td>I do not usually take professional calls or respond to work-related e-mails during evenings, weekends or vacations.</td>
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<td>At work, I speak about my private life as little as possible.</td>
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<td>When I am at work, I keep personal e-mail separate from professional e-mail.</td>
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<td>I rarely think about work when I am at home.</td>
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<td>If I have to work at home, I do so in a specific place.</td>
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<td>I do not think about my family or friends when I am at the office.</td>
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<td>I rarely discuss problems at work with my family and friends.</td>
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<td>If I am working at home, I tell people not to bother me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When I work at home, I give all my attention to my professional tasks.</td>
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**Count how many boxes you have checked in each column.**

**Analysis**
- If you have a majority of A’s and B’s, you are a separator.
- If you have a majority of D’s and E’s, you are an integrator.
- If you have equal amounts of A’s, B’s, C’s, D’s and E’s you are probably a volleyer.
The Work–Life Balance is a Business Imperative
in a Crisis and Not Just When Things are Going Well.

Interview with Stuart WOOLLARD, director of the HRM Learning Board, King’s College London (England), December 2008.

For most managers, the employees are the most precious resource in the company. This is why it’s important for companies to take the necessary measures to balance professional and working lives, so that employees are happy with their working conditions and are free of stress. Companies will then be able to maintain cohesion in times of difficulty. But, many business leaders are reluctant to see the impact that such a measure would have on their company’s performance, even though studies indicate they have nothing to worry about. Stuart Woollard believes this is a mistake.

An employee’s well-being and performance are extremely important

According to a recent study by Foresight, stress is the most common professional risk, and the primary cause of absenteeism due to work-related illness. Stress is also responsible for 5% of staff turnover. There are various causes of stress: extensive travelling, strained relations with a boss or work colleagues, excessive working hours, and the absence of a balance between private and professional lives. How can companies reduce stress and improve the performance of their employees? Stuart Woollard believes that flexible time management is a good solution, but companies are often reluctant to adopt this measure as “managers very often see the work–life balance in terms of cost and don’t consider it an investment. And yet, research has shown over the last few years that there are close links between work–life balance and performance.”

The work–life balance is a daily concern

• Who should be responsible for introducing such a measure?
One of the things preventing the introduction of flexible working hours is the absence of an initiative from management. The main reason for this is that such a measure is seen as incompatible with practices that associate long working hours with results. Stuart Woollard believes HR has an important role to play in institutionalizing a policy of work–life balance. “If HR understood the business imperatives behind flexibility and the work–life balance, they wouldn’t wait for employees to complain before taking action. They must be in constant contact with the managers to find flexible solutions”. But, he warns that: “A policy only works if managers adopt and support it. The challenge for HR therefore consists of being persuasive enough to gain the support of managers and organizational trust.”

• How can such a measure be introduced?
Stuart Woollard believes flexible working hours need to be arranged on a case-by-case basis. “I see the work–life balance as an ideal situation, in which the professional and personal aspects of one’s life are in perfect harmony with one another. This balance varies according to a person’s...
...generation and culture. For example, the younger generations (Gen-Yers) are less likely than their predecessors to accept long hours and poor working conditions. The reason for this is that they’ve got the upper hand in the employment market — they know they can easily change their job if they’re not happy. But it remains to be seen whether, in the current crisis, this attitude to mobility will remain the same.

The work–life balance is the key to success in times of crisis.

In periods of uncertainty, employees who are committed and resistant to stress are the key to success. Stuart Woollard says: “It’s well known that stress damages individual — and therefore collective — performance. People are more concerned about job security during a recession — companies can’t mobilize all their employees if they haven’t established a dialogue of trust first. There is also a close association between organizational performance and the faith everyone has in the company — faith that employees are much more likely to have if the company’s already taken steps to establish a policy of work–life balance”.

When things are going well, it is important for companies to protect their most important asset — the employees. And it’s even more important they do so in periods of crisis. A policy of work–life balance can be a good way to improve employee satisfaction and well-being. But it would be a mistake to believe that flexible time management on its own is enough to win the loyalty of the talents in the company. Employees also expect to be respected, treated fairly, and valued. This requires more effective HR management and better communication through open dialogue and positive feedback.


The potential advantages of flexible working hours

Advantages for the company:
- A reduction in the costs of illness and absenteeism
- An increase in employee loyalty and a reduction in employee turnover
- A reduction in training and recruitment costs
- Employees are more committed
- An increase in productivity and quality
- An improvement in service and customer satisfaction
- Preservation of corporate culture through staff retention
- Increased returns on investment in training
- A reduction in the cost of office space
- An increase in trust between management and employees

Advantages for the employees:
- Flexibility in where they can live
- An improvement in health and well-being
- Increased work satisfaction
- An increase in employee morale and motivation
- Less stress
- Improved performance
- Reduced travelling time


Performance and cost reduction at Sun Microsystems

At Sun, flexible working hours have produced a number of advantages. Sun’s “Open Work” policy (in operation for 14 years) allows employees to work wherever and whenever they want to, using whichever tool they wish. This flexibility has contributed to an increase in employee satisfaction (73% according to the latest Sun poll) and a reduction in turnover and costs. Sun has realized office space savings equivalent to US$387 million in six years. The cost of supporting and provisioning a full-time employee costs around US$15,000 a year, compared to US$7,000 for an employee working on a flexible basis. Sun has also saved US$24 million a year in administrative and energy costs. The company estimates that each employee saves about 160 hours a year in commuting time, reducing expenditure on fuel and CO2 emissions.

Microsoft Spain:  
Good Business and Happy Lives, Hand in Hand

Since 2003, Microsoft Spain has come a long way in terms of work-life balance. 12-hour days in the office have been replaced by 8 hours of “connectedness” via laptop and smartphone, and current policy says no meetings after 6 p.m. How did this shift come about? Through a 3-project change scheme to increase well-being and thus productivity.

“Creating a good balance between professional and private lives is partly a personal skill,” says Elena Dinesen, “but the company has to be an enabler in this area.” So while people have to know their own limits, learn to plan, and - be responsible, the experience of Microsoft Spain shows how organizational initiatives to improve work-life balance can translate into optimal business results.

A harsh wake-up call
In spring 2003, the Microsoft (MS) annual employee satisfaction poll revealed grim results for MS Spain: only 35% of polled employees said they were satisfied with the workplace environment, putting the 350-person company in last place in the Group. Furthermore, the company ranked only 54th in Spain’s Best Place to Work survey. To make matters worse, the company suffered from low customer satisfaction ratings, 8% employee turnover (especially losses of female talent aged 30-35), and an organizational reputation as a tough, aggressive place to work. This was the situation Dinesen was confronted with when she arrived at MS Spain in May 2003. She responded by developing a dynamic turnaround plan to launch as of July 2003, the new fiscal year.

New place, new ways
Coincidentally, MS Spain was set to move offices in December 2003, and Dinesen leveraged this physical change to implement mental and operational modifications as well. The new open space would initiate open-minded attitudes toward work hours and execution. The company invested in laptops and home ADSL connections for all employees, enabling them to work from a variety of locations. This initiative helped to successfully shift the company focus to personal responsibility and productivity, rather than supervised presence.

“When people are happy, they go further for the company,” says Dinesen. With this in mind, the HR team designed three projects to improve the quality of employees’ lives, and in turn, boost productivity. The HR team took care of ...
80% of project implementation, calling upon outside consultants for specific needs. A volunteer work group including one person from each of the firm’s 12 departments was formed to provide HR with continual input and feedback on initiatives. The group is still active today, with its membership rotating every September.

Three parallel projects to create a new balance

I. Cultural Awareness
The first project addressed cultural disparities between traditional Spanish work habits and the notion of well-balanced professional/private lives. All MS Spain employees participated (in groups of 20) in seminars on issues like “happiness” and “family time.” Led by an outside consultant, the sessions surprised and stimulated employees who had not expected the company to invest in non-technical training. “But it is wholly legitimate for a company to focus on “soft” skills. Investments in personal development produce business benefits like higher employee and customer satisfaction ratings, fewer sick leaves, and lower rotation.” During workshops, employees also looked at company benefits, like childcare, holiday parties, and lunch tickets.

II. Technology
This project involved training and the development of sophisticated new information sharing software. Training courses were designed to ensure that all employees were capable of using company products and services. Training was also given on a large number of fundamental business skills, including meeting organization and leadership, conflict management, and worker focus was directed toward health issues. This meant on-site medical check-ups, cancer awareness seminars, and insurance coverage for orthodontics for employees’ children. Since 2006, social issues have taken center stage, such as “green” behavior, social service, and supporting disabled talent acquisition and employees who have disabled family members.

Revised management
How has MS Spain ensured the “work” part of the balance? Through management-by-objectives, monthly meetings, and fixed hours for virtual, if not physical presence. Approximately half of the now 850-strong workforce rarely comes to the office, working either at customers’ offices or from home. But they are all available to co-workers and customers from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m., and non-negotiable one-hour monthly meetings between employee and manager ensure that professional objectives are regularly reviewed and revised. Training needs can also be identified at this time, and personal matters discussed. Indeed, the notion of separating work and life has become obsolete.

Goals achieved
Dinesen says that 20 MS Spain employees now work part-time, and those who take sabbaticals can nonetheless expect to continue upwards on their career path upon their return. The new company environment, flexible work options, and distinctive benefits have greatly increased employee loyalty. Turnover has dropped to a healthy 2%, which has in turn generated 20% savings in search and recruitment costs. In sharp contrast to 2003, MS Spain has ranked number one in Spain in the Best Place to Work survey for the past two years. Finally, in 2007, MS Spain reported its highest revenues ever. Now an example for others, MS Spain has opened its doors to other organizations that want to benchmark its good work/life practices.