

Family-friendly business pays

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The work-life balance issue is not about balancing 'work' and 'life'. It's about restructuring the relationship between people and organisations and integrating 'work' and 'life' in a way that combines meaningful contribution with personal fulfilment.

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It's hard to believe that the self-confessed talent-strapped business world requires even the gentlest prod towards the 'family friendly' policies being promoted this week.

Where is the collective business brain on this issue? The bottom line rewards of designing a workplace that values people as people, rather than people as 'resources' are well-known. Data shows again and again that satisfied employees are more productive, more innovative, and more loyal.

Companies that have established human-focused workplaces acknowledge what others have yet to discover: creating a workplace worth working in and staying in, is not a one-off fig-leaf exercise. It's about a total transformation of corporate culture. And it pays.

At *Container Store*, which has topped Fortune magazine's '100 Best Companies to Work For' listing for the second year running, 97% of the 1500 workforce say employees care about each other and recommend their workplace to

others. (Last year 41% of new recruits joined via word of mouth.)

And at former Fortune 100 poll-topper *Synovus Financial*, no one has been laid off in 112 years, while 80% of its 10,000 employees intend to stay until they retire, *because they like being there*.

Loyalty begets loyalty.

Contrast best-practice workplaces like these with a random selection of companies across Europe and the USA polled recently: while only 35% of the 1,000 high-fliers felt that changing companies is the best way to develop their careers, more than 40% expect to leave their current employer within two years. This seems to say: we don't necessarily want to go - but why should we stay?

Replacing an employee is estimated to cost between 1 and 2.5 times annual salary. Add to this the far higher cost of losing their knowledge, skills and their relationships with colleagues and customers and it would seem to be a sum worth doing, yet this very real haemorrhage doesn't make it onto the balance sheet.

Family Friendly Day doesn't come close to responding to the real issues. As a concept, it puts 'work' firmly in the driving seat, implying that the task is to find cleverer ways of squeezing children, partners and our real selves into work. In so doing, it contributes handsomely to maintaining a business-as-usual agenda which ultimately is unsustainable not just for individuals, but for society, the environment and ironically, for business itself.

The concept also embodies a perceived need to balance work and home life, and this also misses the point because it fails to acknowledge that for many people, work *is* home. In a world where our connections with family and neighbour-hood are increasingly fragile, even non-existent, work provides many people with a sense of belonging and self-definition, some of their most important friendships and even life partners.

Work has always mattered for humans, and this hasn't changed. What has changed profoundly however is the psychological relationship people have with organisations, and it's not difficult to see why. Ruthless cost-cutting and so-called downsizing in the eighties, successfully broke the bond and the corporate message to employees rang clear: the needs of our shareholders have primacy over your welfare and interests. Basically, you're on your own.

For many, the damage was catastrophic but people adapted with remarkable speed. They embraced employability over longterm security as the key career ambition and most of the current generation now accepts that they can no longer depend on any company.

Increasingly, people *want* to be CEO of their own lives. But they need more autonomy. Of the US and European high-fliers polled, 41% wanted more choice over their working hours, and 20% of both men and women would like to work part-time.

The work-life issue is not about balancing 'work' and 'life'. It's about fundamentally

reconstructing the relationship between people and organisations and integrating 'work' into 'life' in a way that combines meaningful contribution with personal fulfilment.

But organisations are deeply ambivalent. They've removed longterm security and require more flexibility - but most retain a very traditional view of what a 'serious employee' is. The subtle message is: if you want to get on here, there's just one way of engaging with the company - the old way. Be present. Be visible. And whatever happens, be here between nine and six, Monday through Friday. Minimum.

Fine words on one 'Family Friendly' day cannot disguise a value system so comprehensively communicated by business on the other 364: profit is the core agenda and everything else - people, partners, families, relationships, the community and the environment - is a consumable in the relentless pursuit of this god. And everyone knows it. It doesn't matter how often the mantra "our people are our greatest asset" is trotted out, the evidence to the contrary is unequivocal.

In short, business is standing in its own way. And until it shifts its paradigm to genuinely focus on people, Family Friendly days, like World Hunger Day or Senior Citizens' Day, will come and go without making the slightest difference to people's real lives. All talk. No walk.

Far more urgent is a day - or a month or a year - when business seriously examines how its current paradigm impacts our landscape and our lives. The question is not, how can people serve business better, but how can *business* transform itself to serve people in becoming all they can become? ||| dya

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