

# Values Shift in the Workplace

By John Izzo, PhD, and Pam Withers

In a new book out this fall, John Izzo, PhD, a local author and leadership expert teams up with Vancouver writer Pam Withers on *Values Shift: The New Work Ethic & What it Means for Business* (Prentice-Hall, 2000). In the book, they identify six major shifts in Canadian's values about work, and what companies will have to do to attract and keep this changing workforce. We're running an excerpt from one of the six chapters on the shifts, which include the expectation for balance and synergy; for work as noble cause; for partnership; for community at work; for growth and development; and for trust.

At a large health organization in Western Canada, the corporate culture was so linked with overwork that all 18,000 employees regularly pushed the envelope of how much work and how little life could be fit into a day. Leaving the building late at night and carrying bulging briefcases home appeared to be de rigeur for managers of all levels. One day, however, the CEO stood before his entire management team and announced, "I don't want to lead an organization where no one feels they can have a life. We can't sustain it. I want each of you to push back on me, and on each other, when the demands are unreasonable."

The corporate culture didn't change overnight, but recognition by senior leadership of the building tension was a critical first step.

The desire for greater balance and harmony between work and one's personal life comprises the first of the six shifts in what today's workers want. More than any of the other shifts, this one cuts across all demographic differences, even though its permutation varies. At first glance, this newfound desire stems from longer work hours and increased demands. But a deeper look suggests that not only will workers today sacrifice a great deal to have more flexibility and personal time, they harbor an unmistakable desire for these two aspects of life to become more synergistic. They want less compartmentalization of their lives, more flow across the boundaries, and a deeper trust that being their "full" selves at work won't be held against them. A boss who understands and taps into this gives time off freely so employees can nurse a sick relative or comes through when asked unexpectedly for advice about a romantic entanglement.

"There are companies that don't want people to talk about their personal lives, but I say, 'Bring it on.' If people can get something off their chests for an hour, then I've got them for the next ten," says Paula Lawlor, founder of Medi-Health in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. Employees there are allowed to bring their children to work and arrange their schedules around their families' needs. Anyone can take a three-month leave of absence without risking job security.

In Japan, divorced men lose work promotions on the assumption that if they can't manage home life, they're poor bets for managing their work. In contrast, our culture since the Industrial Age has been rather proud of the way it has partitioned work and the rest of life. Surely this church-and-state-style separation has led to more work efficiency and personal privacy, has it not?

Let's counter that question with three others: First, were the two ever successfully separated, even in the old economy? (Hint: Back in the 50s, wives of executive candidates were sometimes interviewed along with their husbands, and the CEO's wife could tell lower-ranking corporate wives how to decorate their homes.) Second, since technology and the

new economy have blurred the lines between work and personal life, and societal changes have seriously wounded former after-work support systems, how valid is the notion that the separation serves efficiency and privacy? And third, in whose interest were the two sides separated, and who's in the driver's seat now? (Hint: Answers to choose from are management and employees.)

Workers want more balance and synergy, and they want it now. In fact, they say they'd be willing to give up a whopping 21% of their work hours and salary to achieve more balance—nearly double the amount they were willing to sacrifice just seven years ago. A lack of balance between work and personal life is one of the top six reasons why new managers fail. But perhaps most telling of all, a poll of all employees on flexible schedules at one major company found that 65% of them would have left the firm without the flex time.

The desire for flexibility isn't generation-specific. Sixty percent of men and women under age 25 with children say they'd make "a lot" of sacrifices in money and career advancement to spend more time with their families. Fifty-five percent of 18- to 34-year-olds identify the freedom to take extended leaves or sabbaticals as a key workplace benefit. Workers close to or past retirement age want flexibility to catch up on all the things that a lifetime of work has put off. In any case, when the boomers' mass retirement begins to wreak havoc with an already mushrooming employee shortage—spawning a need to increase the labor participation of those over 55 by 25%—flexibility will be the key to wooing some of them to stay a little longer. The alternative is convincing younger workers to put in longer hours (good luck) and/or opening immigration floodgates, which is more expensive if immigrants lack the proper education and skills training.

There's a growing awareness in North America that home and work life significantly impact each other. In *The Corporate Mystic*, Gay Hendricks and Kate Ludeman write, "Many people mess up by trying to get their home needs met at work, and vice versa. A person who is hurting because he does not know how to communicate with his kids becomes a blustery communication obstructor at work. Another person walks in the door at night so full of undigested work issues that no one in the family can get through to her. This problem, unless corrected, becomes a self-fulfilling spiral downward. He or she spends more time at work to get away from home problems, which creates more conflict at home, which causes them to withdraw into work more."

Time spent on the job in a given year has increased by 163 hours in the last 20 years, translating into about an extra month of work time, while leisure has declined by one-third. All this at a time when a stable family life and community involvement (still our best stress-busters) appear to be unraveling right along with job security. Like body builders who get muscle-bound from overdeveloping one set of muscles in relation to another, we need to build a new program.

Workers need company brass to take the lead on the balance issue. Forty-one percent of British managers say they're disappointed with the work/life balance they find in their current job and 85% believe vacation should be compulsory. Yet 48% of people say they feel guilty when they leave on time. The culprit here is the outdated "face time" tradition, in which work is measured by presence rather than output.

As a 36-year-old employee told us, "It's normal in my company to hear negative jabs about people who leave at five, or who take lunch, even if they have incredible output. If your boss works until ten, you feel coerced to do the same. I want the flexibility to spend time with my family, and I get frustrated that face-time is valued over accountability or actual quality of work."

Benjamin Hunnicutt, a historian at the University of Iowa, has spent a lifetime advocating the six-hour workday as optimal for human performance. Whether or not he's correct, today's leaders are well advised to seriously question whether long hours devoid of personal time can truly lead to better performance.

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### **RESPONDING TO THE SHIFT TOWARDS BALANCE**

Gemcom Services in Vancouver, a mining software producer that employs primarily Gen X and Yers, views employee retention as a life-or-death matter, and supervisor Mark Metin attributes the firm's low turnover to its relaxed management structure, flex time, social atmosphere, and emphasis on honest communication and positive feedback. Above all, he stays vigilant for burnout, actively discouraging 60-hour weeks.

A Gen Xer himself, Metin has found that mentoring to younger employees with personal problems also goes with the territory. "We make an extra effort to feed people's souls as well as pocketbooks," he explains. "They could get as much money working somewhere else, but we have a family relationship with most people in the company."

Dangerous? Perhaps, although mentoring training should make it less so. Necessary for retention? Absolutely.

There are employers who scoff at letting personal matters creep across the office doorstep. But companies mindful that it can cost 150% of a worker's salary to replace them understand that boundaries between work and home began fading with the introduction of the cellular phone, laptop computer, and fax.

In an age where there's a shortage of educated and self-reliant workers, responding to workers' desire for balance and synergy is a surefire way to win loyalty. A Fortune magazine poll of headhunters recently determined that the employees most likely to refuse job offers had flex time. Other studies show that flex time isn't enough on its own; employees are often hesitant to use it if they feel it may sideline their careers. Leaders who are serious about using flex time to increase retention must ensure that no ambivalent messages seep into the process. When a low percentage of workers appears to be taking advantage of such policies, it's time to broadcast a "no strings attached" message and live by it.

One of the best predictors of retention for women is whether they sense they can attend to personal life and still develop in the company. That is, flex time and parental leaves mean little to ambitious women who find that exercising these policies puts them on a "mommy track" against their will.

The service provider DDC Inc. has teamed up with Medela, a supplier of breast pumps and breast-feeding accessories, to offer a new lactation program called M@W (Mothers at Work). M@W offers prenatal training, 24-hour counselling services of a certified lactation consultant, and equipment and support for employers who are introducing the lactation program. The program also provides a guide for managers that explains the benefits of workplace lactation programs and the manager's critical role in the mother's return to work.

When Dawson Personnel Systems conducted an in-house survey, they found their employees rated two items -making a contribution toward the good of the company and spending time with their families-above earning more. Based on this, executives formulated a daring new policy. First, they met with the sales team and assigned it productivity goals

20% higher than the previous year. Then they informed these salespeople that as soon as they hit their target, they could go home each day at two o'clock for the rest of the month. Also, the first salesperson to sell more than \$50,000 would have the last two days of the month off. The result? The team broke every record in the company's 52-year history as members focused like never before and worked well together.

Next, senior management allowed other departments to set their own goals and hours, and promised that for particularly productive weeks, everyone could go home early on Friday. They also mandated a noon closing on holiday weekends. Sales for the year increased by 20%, and profits shot up 40%.

### **ROOTS OF THE BALANCE REVOLUTION**

Today's search for balance and synergy has deep roots in North American society. Poet, social commentator, and author of *The Sibling Society*, Robert Bly says when the Industrial Age removed men from the home (where, in the Agrarian Age, they mixed work with family and enjoyed more intimate relationships with their children), it eroded their "soft" side and led them to overvalue work and devalue family life. Eventually, they learned to stake their identity, sense of contribution, and self-esteem on the job, which led to increasing hours at work and fewer at leisure and home. As the Modern Age dawned, women flocked to the world of work, where a "higher" status-compared with the devalued work of parenting-seemed to be waiting. Birth control, liberalized divorce laws, the siren of consumerism and a sense of "pioneering" a new role for womankind all encouraged this. But women became ensconced in the work world just as the global market accelerated business demands to an astounding degree. This, combined with a lack of flexibility for childcare, gave them pause for thought. They applied pressure on male partners to shoulder more household responsibility, only to learn that males (both boomers and Gen Xers) were also growing weary of an overemphasis on achievement and were hankering for intimacy.

Fast-forward to 1993, when Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin published a book entitled *Your Money or Your Life* that instructed readers on how to live well for less and better align their financial priorities with their values. It has become a national bestseller. Employers who equate salary with retention need to bone up on this text because it represents where things are headed. Example: In the last five years, 28% of workers have voluntarily made changes in their life that resulted in making less money, primarily in pursuit of a more balanced life.

### **MORE THAN TIME**

As the economy continues to speed up, the desire to devote more time to pursuits outside of work grows accordingly. A company of 1,000 employees loses \$1 million per year in stress-induced absenteeism alone. If so much of workers' waking life must be spent at work, they yearn for work with qualities of fun and community they used to enjoy after hours. And if work no longer lays primary claim to their sense of identity, contribution, and self-esteem, commitment to it is easier to shrug off-unless the workplace deliberately offers synergy in this regard.

Today's workers want something they can't quite define, and something many managers are far from willing to accept: balance on a very deep level. Synergy between work and what some euphemistically call their "real life." Acknowledgment, if you will, that their work and personal selves need not be chopped up and displayed selectively to different audiences. Support-physically and psychologically-of their goals and activities outside of work. Confirmation that if work can invade the rest of their lives, then the rest of their lives can do "field trips" to work. In a 1998 study, Gallup found that managers who were perceived to care about their staff enjoyed the highest employee engagement. Royal Bank

found a similar rise in productivity when supervisors took an interest in employees' personal lives.

Each organization must find its own best answer in this search for balance and synergy. But it all begins with helping people juggle work and personal life more effectively. For example, companies are taking increasing responsibility for helping their people with the day-to-day challenges of parenting. In 1984, when Fortune magazine first started publishing its list of the 100 best companies to work for in America, only two of the hundred had on-site day care. Fifteen years later, one-third of the top 100 had such facilities.

The same is true for things like flexible work schedules. In the early 80s, only two of the top 100 offered flex time. By the late 90s, 87% of the top 100 offered telecommuting, 72% offered job sharing, 89% boasted the option of a compressed work week, and 70% included flexible work schedules. Times have changed, big time. These figures demonstrate how balance has come to be identified with great places to work.

One of the greatest challenges facing company leaders today is ensuring that the desire to support balance and synergy runs deeper than a slogan of the month. That's why at Edward Jones, the brokerage house, managers are encouraged to handle flex time requests with the following guidance: "Do what is right and human."

What happens when a company creates balance and synergy? At one manufacturing company, the simple act of changing a work shift to coincide with the end of the school day cut turnover in half and created a buzz in the community that working women should try to get a job at this particular plant. This company is now the community's employer of choice.

Work today is filled with ironies. On the one hand, work has eaten up so much of people's lives that many are saying, "Wait a minute. The rest of my life deserves attention, too." On the other hand-thanks to a lack of job security, more invasive technology, and the new empowerment of front-line workers-work is by necessity a greater obsession than ever. Younger workers, especially, must constantly groom new skills and networks to "make a living." Older workers must live with increasing age discrimination and a sense that they had better stay on guard lest they become expendable at work. All of this means that companies must deal with their employees' growing desire for balance and their obsessive compulsion about staying employed. Perhaps it's this paradox-the desire to work less and the need to focus on it obsessively-that drives today's workers to demand more synergy.

A mid-level manager in a large technology company said it best: "In this company, you get the feeling that they really care about your personal life. Whether it's a sick kid, a death in the family, volunteer work you believe in, or a course you want to take, there seems to be a core philosophy that these things are central to productivity. How do I know that? I think it's the little things they do and say every day, not the daycare centre. If I can, I'll stay here forever!"