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“Time to take another look? The mentoring option for work-life balance.”

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The value and use of mentoring and the concerns associated with achieving work-life balance have captured the attention of many. Separately both the use of mentoring and achieving improved work-life balance have been seen as effective means of enhancing performance and competitive advantage. To this end, many different approaches to mentoring and to achieving work-life balance have been tried, with varying levels of success. This paper explores the idea of bringing the two debates together, and hypothesises that some elements of mentoring and the mentoring process may serve to reduce or minimise the impact of many work related issues in the work-life balance equation.

Introduction

The increased complexities and pressures of modern life, combined with attempts to balance both work and life commitments have culminated in a rethinking of both how to improve the quality, efficiency and commitment of employees and how to provide a more work-life friendly work environment. To date no one single answer has been able to address these issues. However, through a combination of actions, activities and programs many organisations have been able to improve aspects of work-life balance for their employees. This paper proposes that the use of mentoring adds a further dimension to the work-life balance repertoire by offering ways to reduce the impact of work issues and concerns.

To accomplish this, this paper will first discuss the work-life balance concept, the work-life balance approaches adopted by organisations and their experiences to date, and explore the notion of developing further work-life balance approaches. This will be followed by an examination of the concept of mentoring, the perceived benefits of mentoring programs, and provide some examples of organisations that have used mentoring to address specific concerns. The final section will explore the notion that mentoring programs could be used as a means of addressing some work-life balance issues; perhaps even helping to minimise work-life balance concerns that are not able to be adequately addressed by other approaches. It is not intended, within this paper, to present a model for developing mentoring for work-life balance, but merely to introduce an idea that might be appropriate for discussion and debate. Establishing such a program would involve considerable work and commitment from all those involved, but could serve as a useful means of addressing many organisational and individual concerns.

Achieving Work-life Balance: Successes and Problems

In 2002, Prime Minister John Howard said ‘Nothing is more important than the debate that goes on in the community - I call it a barbeque stopper – about the balance between work and family’ (Parliament of Australia, 2006: 22-23). This area of debate is not just limited to families and the position of carers, as in the past (Hogarth, Hasluck, et al. 2000: 100). More recently it has been widened to encapsulate ‘everyone’ (Russell & Bowman 2000: 80; Edgar 2005: 70) with the term ‘work-life balance’ used to indicate that access to organisational work-life balance practices is not limited to those with family and / or caring responsibilities.

Defining Work-Life Balance

This barbeque stopper debate has also been enlivened by arguments that the term work-life balance (WLB) may be misleading for a number of reasons. The first issue being that the word ‘balance’ implies that the two parts should be equal like the scales of justice (Guest, 2001; Edgar, 2005). However, an individual may actually feel satisfied with the scale being tipped more in one direction due to personal preference and different stages encountered throughout life. The second issue, is whether work should include paid and non-paid work (Guest, 2001; Pocock, 2003). Guest (2001) states, in simple terms “work” is normally conceived of as including only paid employment. Such issues have therefore resulted in different definitions being offered for the WLB. Essentially though work-life balance is “a self-defined, self-determined state of well being that a person can reach, or can set as a goal, that allows them to manage effectively multiple responsibilities at work, at home, and in their community; it supports physical, emotional, family, and community health, and does

so without grief, stress or negative impact”(Canadian Department of Labour, as cited in Bardoel, 2006).

The need for WLB

‘The work/life collision has important effects beyond how we feel: it affects vital economic and demographic trends’ (Pocock, 2003: 5). According to Campbell and Charlesworth (2004: 40) such a collision can affect the ability of workers and families to participate as fully as they might like in the workforce, which can have consequences such as increased rates of absenteeism, illness, reduced productivity and stress.

Bardoel (2006) highlights three factors that have influenced work-life needs (i) demographic factors that affect the labour force (for example, the significant increase in the participation of women in the workforce resulting in an increased need to balance work responsibilities with life outside of work, such as caring and domestic duties); (ii) labour market trends and changing employment relationships (for example the increasing number of stressed people due to longer hours being worked and the intensity of the work); and (iii) the changes in societal values and attitudes (for example, men as well as women wanting to play a significant role in their children’s development) (Bardoel, 2006). Given the increasingly tight labour market and the introduction of legislative measures within Australia such as *The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 (Cth)* (EOWA) Pocock (2005) believes there is some basis for optimism for the continued development of WLB practices in the longer term.

To respond successfully to these new labour force conditions there is a need for a change in mindset. Organisations must move away from a focus on work-life issues that are reactive to individual concerns to a proactive, strategic approach supported by all stakeholders, to ensure diverse contemporary issues are managed appropriately in an integrated manner that benefits all. The benefits to be derived for two of these major stakeholders, employees and employers, are numerous and the inclusion of benefits common to both allow for a greater chance of a company achieving improved performance and competitive advantage (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: Benefits of a better WLB

| Organisational | Individual |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reduced turnover - a positive impact on productivity - reduced absenteeism - increased return rate - a positive impact on client customer service - increase in employee motivation and satisfaction - assist in attracting staff - reduction in induction and training costs - reduces stress - compliance with legislative requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - decreased work-life conflict which leads to: - decreased absenteeism - increased overall motivation and satisfaction - greater organisational commitment - increased productivity - decreased stress levels - a positive impact on client customer service |

Sources: Dench et al. 2000; Holmes, 2005; Mc Donald, Brown and Bradley, 2005; Pocock, 2005.

Prevalence and utilisation of WLB practices

There is vast array of WLB practices that a company can seek to implement to address WLB issues (Parliament of Australia, 2006; De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott, & Pettit, 2005b). For example, Bardoel, Tharenou and Moss (1998) identified 100 different work-family practices based on previous studies. From this extensive list they developed 36 types of work-family policies by combining overlapping categories. This allowed grouping into five work-family categories which included:

child and dependant care benefits, flexible working conditions, leave options, information services and HRM policies, and organisational cultural issues. Similarly, McDonald, Brown and Bradley (2005) identify three major types of work-life balance policies (i) flexible work options; (ii) specialized leave policies; and (iii) dependant care benefits.

The extent to which organisations as a whole adopt work-life balance practices varies, with De Cieri et al. (2005) noting that of the three surveys they examined the most frequently cited WLB practices in order were: part-time work; study leave, flexible starting and finishing times, working from home on an ad hoc basis and job sharing. Noteworthy, however, is that whilst WLB policies may exist the actual adoption of them by employees is not necessarily widespread (McDonald et al., 2005; Waters & Bardoel, 2006) and often lags behind implementation. For example, De Cieri et al. (2005: 95) found that only 6 per cent of organisations had more than 80 per cent of their employees using available WLB strategies within their organisations.

Thinking outside the square: Exploring other options

Current programs offer only a partial answer

Reasons for the lack of employee uptake of work-life balance policies may be attributed to recent empirical research findings (De Cieri et al., 2005) which demonstrated that some barriers can render the implementation of WLB practices ineffective. For example, barriers listed include: an organisational culture which recognises and rewards long hours; an isolated, unfriendly and unaccommodating workplace for employees with commitments outside of work; a lack of supervisor and manager support; preference of management to recruit people perceived as alike to

themselves; and a lack of communication and education about WLB strategies (De Cieri et al., 2005). Similarly, Waters & Bardoel (2006) found six emerging themes for barriers to utilization of work-family practices by employees. These included: poor communication of policies, high workloads, career repercussions, management attitudes, influence of peers, and administrative processes.

What other factors need to be considered

To overcome such barriers some general implementation guidelines have been postulated, these include: promote and appoint managers who advocate and practice flexibility; align WLB practices with business goals; ensure there is top management support; develop a multi-layered communication strategy; hold managers accountable for the success of the process; and ensure it is part of an integrated approach to managing work and the workforce in which formal measures of evaluation are implemented (CCH , 2006; McDonald & Bardoel, 2006). Similarly, Kossek, Dass and DeMarr. (1994) advocate that managerial attitudes to work-life balance strategies need to change if innovative and inclusive behaviours and organisational cultures are to be developed to address the changing needs of the current workforce.

What might be helpful - best practice examples

Best practice is a term that describes the method of identifying, developing and implementing workplace practices and strategies that will improve business productivity and competitiveness (Wolcott, 1996: 23). Best practice principles can be adapted by individual organisations to develop suitable strategies that assist employees' in achieving their desired work-life balance.

Results from a longitudinal work-life balance survey of Australian businesses conducted annually for the past nine years indicate that organisations demonstrating best practice in work-life balance are more likely to have: an implementation strategy that is growing in support and impact; been motivated to implement work-life strategy to attract and retain quality staff; utilised an organisational culture survey and /or work-life questionnaire to identify employee needs; evaluated the results of their work-life strategy; created a supportive work-life balance environment (by means of adopting the above implementation guidelines); taken steps to reduce harassment and discrimination in the workplace; published guidelines for negotiating flexible work arrangements; and accrued bottom line benefits (Holmes, 2005: 14). Reported benefits include: turnover reduced by up to 6%; absenteeism decreased by up to 5%; an increased rate of return from parental leave of up to 28%; and increases of up to 16% in employee motivation and satisfaction (Holmes, 2005).

Specifically, since introducing work-life practices Hollywood Hospital in WA has been enjoying significant cost savings due to a 95% reduction in the total number of lost days from 4,067 (1994/95) to 203 in (1999/2000) (EOWA, 2006). As Kevin Cass-Ryall, Executive Director, of Hollywood Hospital, WA states “Seventy per cent of the total operating budget relates to labour costs, so it makes good sense to nurture this resource.” (EOWA, 2006)

Mentoring as a viable option

Mentoring is well recognised as a method of transmitting acquired knowledge and skills and is traditionally used to prepare employees for current or future positions; particularly in management roles. Whilst its popularity waned for several years due to

the increased emphasis placed on formal qualifications (ie. university degrees) there has been a resurgence of interest in mentoring over the last two decades. This can be attributed to a number of factors, but the primary reasons are associated with the different skills, competencies, qualities and attitudes that can be addressed through mentoring.

Defining Mentoring

There are numerous ways of describing mentoring and the mentoring process. However, in essence mentoring involves “a relationship which gives people the opportunity to share their professional and personal skills and experiences, and to grow and develop in the process” (Spencer, 1996:5) (see Mathews, 2003 for further definitions). Whilst definitions of mentoring are also quite varied it is generally agreed that “(1) a mentor is usually a high ranking, influential, senior member of the organisation with significant experience and knowledge, and (2) the individual is also willing to share their experience with younger employees” (Mathews, 2003:316).

The Resurgence of Mentoring

The revitalisation of mentoring as a popular approach to staff development stems from a recognition of the wide variety of knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies and attributes needed for effectiveness in the twenty-first century; particularly in relation to business management and leadership (see Mathews and Edwards (2005) for more details). Whilst universities provide a sound introduction to the tangible knowledge and skills needed, many of these qualities cannot be developed through formal education. This realisation combined with the general dissatisfaction of many organisations with formal development programs has served as a catalyst for the

search for alternative approaches to staff development that better meet their specific needs; hence the increased use of mentoring.

The question of why mentoring is considered a valuable approach for developing these skills can be seen by simply glancing at the recognised benefits of mentoring programs (see Table 2). Clearly, the staff development potential of mentoring is massive, and one of the most attractive features of such programs is that benefits can be derived for all those involved in the mentoring process: mentees (protégés), mentors and the organisation. The versatility of mentoring is also an attraction. Mentoring programs can be targeted to address specific issues or areas of development, or used simply to enhance general staff development.

Table 2: Benefits of mentoring in the workplace

| Organisational Benefits | Mentor Benefits | Mentee Benefits |
|--|---|---|
| 1. Improved productivity, performance and service delivery | 1. Intrinsic rewards: personal growth, satisfaction, renewed enthusiasm, self-esteem | 1. Personal growth through the acquisition of skills and knowledge, exposure to corporate culture, improved communication and self-confidence |
| 2. Improved management, communication, and technical skills | 2. Opportunity to share knowledge, reflect, test new ideas, acquire information and recognition | 2. Acquisition of a role model that is supportive, empowering, and assists in building networks |
| 3. Better recruitment and retention of skilled staff, retention of corporate knowledge, and support of corporate culture | 3. Exposure to fresh perspectives and ideas | 3. Expanded outlook that provides opportunities for personal satisfaction, recognition, career mobility and the exchange of information |
| 4. Better assessment, recognition and reward of individual contributions | 4. Improvement of skills such as communication and leadership | 4. Reduction of stress associated with new positions, roles and responsibilities |
| 5. Improved employee development (talent, leadership qualities, challenges) | | |
| 6. Development of support networks and commitment | | |

Sources: Alleman (cited in Carruthers, 1993); Carrell, Kuzmits, and Elbert (1992); Spencer, (1996); Lacey (1999); Mullen and Noe, (1999); Rolfe-Flett (2002) and Jassawalla, Asgary and Sashittal (2006).

The increased popularity of mentoring is reflected in the number of organisations introducing such programs, and the purposes for which they are being used. Many organisations have adopted mentoring to enhance general staff development and harness some of the recognised benefits. Others have adopted mentoring programs to address specific problems or issues. The strategic benefits of adopting mentoring for specific purposes can be seen through examining the mentoring efforts of selected organisations. For example, Coca-Cola foods has used mentoring for many years to improve their competitive advantage by establishing better, more effective links between human resource management activities and staff development (Wachtel and Veale, 1998); the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Co. introduced mentoring to speed up the ability of new employees to acquire relevant company knowledge (Messmer, 1998); and CPA (US) embraced mentoring to enhance professional growth, performance and attitudes (Kleinmen, Siegel and Eckstein, 2001; Siegel, Rigsby, Agrawal and Lavins, 1995).

However, the benefits gained through mentoring often extend beyond the target issues identified. The CPA (US) found that mentoring had the added benefits of improved job satisfaction, organisational commitment, lower turnover, less role ambiguity and job burnout and better employee socialisation (Kleinmen, Siegel and Eckstein, 2001; Siegel, Rigsby, Agrawal and Lavins, 1995); a finding mirrored in an Australian study (Herbohn, 2004) which examined the results of mentoring of female accountants. The Australian CPA mentoring program has also received similar results and is helping to address issues of staff retention and job satisfaction and has the potential to be

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extended to include more experienced accountants (Mathews and Kent, 2006a; 2006b).

More recently mentoring has been recognized as one of “the most effective ways of transferring critical implicit and tacit knowledge from one individual to another” (DeLong, 2004:107), and has been adopted by many major corporations such as, NASA, Quest International, and the World Bank, who have recognized the potential difficulties associated with ‘lost knowledge’ as key personnel exit the organisation (DeLong, 2004). At a time when many countries are dealing with the potential problems of an aging workforce, skill shortages, increased employee mobility and increased levels of technology the retention of critical knowledge (corporate, operational and technical) will become more crucial in the future.

In a major study into the use of mentoring, Hansford, Ehrich and Tennent (2003:224) reviewed 151 different studies and reported that 90% of these identified positive outcomes resulting from their introduction. Considering the range of outcomes reported from using mentoring programs it is not surprising that so many organisations are prepared to try it. Spencer (1996:24-31) summarises the reported outcomes of mentoring as including increased motivation, skills, self-confidence, job satisfaction, improved resource utilization, communication, coordination, networking and support between individuals and units, and greater understanding of corporate culture and values.

The achievement of successful results, such as these, is of course dependent upon:

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1. having a focused program that is realistic and addresses the needs of the organisation and the participants
2. the program being properly designed and resourced (including time)
3. all parties involved receiving appropriate briefing or training
4. the skills and commitment of the mentor and mentee
5. effective organisational support and infrastructure for the mentoring program

Addressing work-life balance through mentoring: An integrated approach

Having briefly reviewed the concepts of mentoring and work-life balance a degree of similarity or relatedness can be seen. Both types of programs are designed to improve effectiveness, performance, commitment, etc., and all organisations are searching for ways to provide staff development and worker-friendly environments in as efficient and cost effective a way as possible. So, why not explore the possibility of designing a program that will help to address both needs, and what potential benefits might organisations gain by doing so?

The *potential* benefits acquired through the use of mentoring programs and the adoption of work-life balance practices have been well researched and contain many similarities such as improvements in productivity, staffing, job satisfaction and commitment (refer to Tables 1 & 2), and suggest that the two ideas may work well together. The terminology used and the focus of the benefits may be different but clear relationships can be established. For example, work-life balance practices attempt to reduce stress for both the organisation and individual - an issue also addressed by mentoring through providing insights into corporate culture and unwritten rules, empowerment, and improved communication. Similarly, improved

employee motivation and job satisfaction, self-confidence and personal growth can be enhanced through both programs.

However, the *actual* benefits acquired through the introduction of work-life balance practices are only just becoming known; as the examples discussed earlier illustrate, and the search is continuing for the most beneficial programs. An examination of the selection of practices in use, presented by Bardoel, Tharenou and Moss (1998), suggests that to date practices have been introduced to address particular concerns or issues experienced by organisations or employees. No attempt has been made to design a single strategy that will encapsulate more than one issue, despite the push for increased efficiency and cost effectiveness.

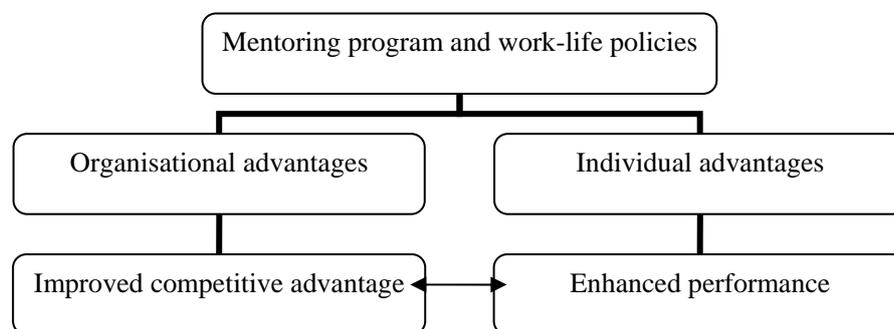
If work-life balance practices and mentoring are examined from an holistic perspective, in association with each other and with broader organisational activities, it is clear that both help to address general staffing issues such as attracting, retaining and motivating employees; the primary focus of all human resource activities. The benefits stemming from this interface are in turn reflected in specific staffing areas addressed within both the mentoring and work-life balance literature, such as lower staff turnover, decreased levels of absenteeism, better use of employee skills, and more effective acquisition of skills and knowledge that assist in socialisation.

Developing an holistic, strategic approach that seeks to integrate the overall benefits of both conceptual staff development approaches can present an organisation with several advantages. For example, at the individual level the benefits can result in a happier, more balanced employee who improves their overall work performance and

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enjoys the benefits that accrue from this, such as greater flexibility in managing conflicting personal and work demands. Likewise, from the organisational level, the overall gains are associated with an organisation's ability to improve its competitive advantage through enhancement of employee skills, improvements in productivity, efficiency and staff stability. These links are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Mentoring and work-life balance framework



The introduction of legislation (ie. *The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999*) that serves to encourage and support the inclusion of WLB programs, may stimulate the introduction of new initiatives. Perhaps it is through the EOWA that the integration of mentoring programs and work-life balance policies can in part be fostered. For example, by seeking to establish goals that meet the objectives of the Act organisations could seek to establish mentoring programs that are dependant on the organisation's needs, and help to address work-life balance concerns.

Conclusion

The potential benefits to be gained from both mentoring and work-life balance practices, for organisations, individual employees and the community, are numerous and could serve to improve the culture of the workplace and build stronger relationships between organisations and communities. However, the process of establishing, coordinating and running such an integrated program will not be easy. Commitment from all parties will be essential, and a long term view must be taken. In this paper the nature of work-life balance and mentoring and their similarities have been explored. The overlap of several areas of benefit has drawn attention to the possibility of considering whether mentoring could be used to assist organisations in addressing work-life balance issues. At first glance a “win-win” situation seems to exist – mentoring can be used to provide assistance to organisations and individuals trying to address work-life balance concerns.

At present this is just an idea. The viability and cost effectiveness of designing or adapting mentoring programs to incorporate issues that need to be addressed in the work-life balance equation needs to be further explored. Many questions still need to be answered - Is it feasible to incorporate work-life balance issues? What work-life balance issues are suited to this form of management? How can the work-life balance concerns be built into mentoring?

Perhaps you cannot make work-life balance issues disappear by “Mentoring them away”, but this could be another valuable tool in the fight to maintain better balance in our lives. After all as the old adage goes “A problem shared is a problem halved”.

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