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Globe & Mail

Why your boss should care about work-life balance

By: Barrie McKenna (October 31st, 2010)

Source: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/time-to-lead/work-life-balance/work-life-balance-why-your-boss-should-care/article1779810/>

Work-life balance issues is taking a personal toll on Canadians. It's also costing Corporate Canada millions of dollars.

Ottawa high-tech entrepreneur Rick Escher thinks of himself as a typical "9-to-5" guy.

But the routine looks a lot closer to 24/7 for the 50-year-old president of financial software maker Recognia. His Blackberry is always on. He logs onto his laptop from home – in the morning, and again in the evening after his two toddlers are in bed. Then, he'll often make late-night phone calls to his company's representative in Asia.

It's a familiar reality for millions of Canadians. Technology has blurred the lines between work and home life – for better and for worse.

Many of us are also just doing more work, period. Look at a successful professional – a manager, teacher or health-care worker – and you're likely to see someone working long hours: In 2008, even before the recession had hit, close to two million Canadians were working 50-plus hour a week, up 23 per cent from a decade earlier.

And, as we struggle with crushing demands of work and family, we're more stressed and more likely to miss work or seek medical help than ever before.

The toll isn't just a personal one.

Our inability to balance our jobs and our home life is costing corporate Canada as much as \$10-billion a year in rising absenteeism, lost output, lower productivity, missed deadlines and grumpy customers, according to estimates by business professors Linda Duxbury of Carleton University and Christopher Higgins of the University of Western Ontario.

In many ways, the recession is making the crisis worse. Layoffs and downsizing means whatever our hours are, fewer of us are doing more.

"Companies are getting rid of people, but they're not getting rid of work. It's work intensification," explains Prof. Duxbury, who along with Prof. Higgins, is conducting a third major national study of work-life balance involving as many as 100,000 workers.

"So you download clerical work on your managers and professionals, and you tell them to 'suck it up and deal with it, and be grateful' because they're lucky to be still working."

It isn't that your boss isn't aware of the problem. A recent poll of Canadian CEOs for The Globe suggests a vast majority agree work-life balance is a major concern. But more than half of those surveyed also agreed that it's a personal, not a corporate responsibility.

What they might be missing is this: Companies pay a steep price when employees are overworked, stressed and unhappy – maybe not today, but next month or next year when they walk out the door.

When disgruntled workers quit, it hits the bottom line in higher turnover and recruitment costs. A 2000 study of Canadian lawyers by Toronto-based Catalyst



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estimated that the constant churn costs law firms \$315,000 per employee (including finding and training replacements).

The upside is that creating a better work environment may actually save money, if it means talent is easier to find and keep. One study of flexible work hours at Hydro-Québec, for example, showed that the company got a better than four-to-one payback for every extra dollar it spent on the benefit due to lower turnover. A 2008 survey of U.S. technology companies similarly found that giving workers the option of working from home improved retention, cut costs and increased productivity.

But in a slow economy, keeping workers is a relatively low priority for most companies. Your employer isn't likely to feel the need to create a happier or healthier workplace because a long line of people will take your job if you falter.

What is more, in this environment, it can be a lot tougher to say "no" to extra assignments or unpaid overtime.