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When work-life balance looks too hard

If anyone needed convincing, the EEO Trust's recent¹ survey of relationships and work gave adequate evidence that in some work environments work-life balance was still a distant dream. While the survey focussed on the effects, good and bad, of work on relationships and vice versa, many of the comments highlighted the challenges created by particular working patterns.

For example, from a hospital caregiver, "A few years ago management introduced a rolling roster which is four days on and two days off. This means I work most weekends and public holidays when my family are off. In the place where I work, all caregivers and some registered nurses have to follow this work pattern."

Another shiftworker had some advice for employers, "There needs to be a lot more flexibility in shift work to compensate and allow employees to carry out their work on a long-term basis, instead of putting up with it until breaking point then leaving a job they perform well and are otherwise happy with."

Occupational Safety and Health and other research reports that businesses lose shiftworkers relatively quickly with one study reporting that by age 40 most former shiftworkers have left shiftwork, resulting in ongoing recruitment and training costs for employers, and the lost of the most skilled, knowledgeable and experienced employees.²

The New Zealand Council of Trade Union's (NZCTU) 2002 research³ on the impact of long work hours on workers and their families also highlighted the

challenges of working irregular or unsociable hours.

The report says, "For yet other workers, it was the unpredictability of their working hours, both the length and distribution, which caused them the greatest concern, and the greatest intrusion into other aspects of their lives. Workers commented on work days which ballooned at the end of the day by an hour, or two or three, extra shifts, and unexpected shift changes, or increasingly common, the extension of work into evenings and weekends with the advent of new technology."

One respondent to the NZCTU survey commented on the challenges of maintaining friendships while doing shift work, "I've got mates I've tried to keep up with since starting this job but it's just too hard. When I'm not working they're working, and when they're free I'm at work or asleep. Besides, if your mates are shiftworkers as well, they understand what it means, that sometimes you're just too tired to do anything and you just want to hang at home, and not do much."

Other New Zealand and international research confirms that while shiftwork can assist with balancing home and work life,⁴ more often than not it threatens work-life balance.⁵

Poor rosters, including changing and unpredictable rosters, have been identified by the Australian Council of Trade Unions as one of the main causes of stress amongst shiftworkers.⁶ Changing or rotating shifts create daily challenges in meeting childcare, family

and other responsibilities.

For this issue of the *Work & Life Bulletin* we have interviewed some New Zealand employers who believe they have created solutions which meet the needs of workers as well as the workplace and its customers.

Predictability and a degree of choice are critical factors for both the Bank of New Zealand and the New Zealand Fire Service. The Bank of New Zealand has also put a great deal of thought and money into creating a positive work environment for its customer call centre workers and enabling them to move to other positions within the bank.

¹ Findings of the EEO Trust on-line paid work and personal relationships survey. EEO Trust 2004. www.eeotrust.org.nz

² Flexible schedules and shift work: replacing the '9-to-5' workday by Thomas M Beers (2002). Monthly Labor Review, June 2000, pp 33-40; Shiftwork: reducing its effect on health and safety: advice for employes and employees (1998). www.osh.dol.govt.nz

³ *Thirty Families: Interim Report of the Thirty Families Project: The Impact of Work Hours on New Zealand Workers and Their Families*. New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, 2002

⁴ *Shiftwork*, Work and Family Information Series, Department of Employment and Workplace Relationships (1999) www.dewrsb.govt.nz

⁵ *Ibid*; *Shiftwork in nursing – Philip Bohle's research* by Gerry Van Wyk (2002). Work and Family, No 23, Aug 2000, p 5; OHS guidelines for shift work and extended working hours.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (2001). www.actu.asn.au;

⁶ ACTU (2001)

Fixed shifts key to customer service at BNZ call centres

Since late 2001, staff at the Bank of New Zealand's customer contact centres in Auckland and Wellington have worked fixed shifts with the ability to change shifts when a vacancy arises.

General Manager of Sales and Service at the BNZ, Shona Bishop, says the change to a fixed shift system was accompanied by changes to the remuneration package and the office environment, all designed to create a culture which encourages creativity and productivity. Bishop says a commitment to work-life balance underpinned all the changes, with an ultimate goal of business success.

"We made a philosophical decision based on the service/profit chain," she says. "Happy staff mean happy customers, which means shareholders are also happy."

The results have been dramatic. Before the changes were made, attrition rates were in line with the average for New Zealand call centres, 40-70% per year. They are now down to 25% and about half of the people leaving BNZ call centres move to other roles in the bank.

BNZ's customer call centres employ around 400 people who speak to more than 400,000 customers every month. Before the move to fixed shifts, they worked rotating shifts with little certainty around what hours they would be working and when their days off would fall.

"There was minimal flexibility to cater for lifestyle choices with rotating, short-term shifts which didn't cater to people's commitments or interests outside

work," says Bishop. "Our employee opinion survey demonstrated that we had problems with morale and we knew the high attrition rates were costing us dearly."

Bishop says the shift system was typical of most call centres because fluctuating and irregular call flow means flexibility is important. "Most call centres change their shifts seasonally and based on changes in call traffic. We said let's employ more people, give them stability and put more people on during the peak times."

More than 70% of workers start work between 7am and 3.30pm on weekdays and put in a 7.5 hour shift. A separate team, comprising 13% of customer call centre staff, covers the night shift and another shift covers the weekend through to Tuesday. They work 10 hour days for each of the four days.

Bishop says the idea of a four-day, 10-hour shift was initially greeted with scepticism, but the response from staff was positive. "It suits some people very well. For example, people sharing childcare with their partner or university students who can get their working week over by Tuesday night and then focus on other things. Surfers and skiers particularly like it."

People can apply for a different shift or starting time during the weekday shift and are moved as soon as a vacancy arises. Annual leave is four weeks and sick leave is flexible.

Retaining and promoting workers

As well as improving retention rates, Bishop says the fixed shift system has resulted in a change in the sorts of people working in the call centres. Staff tend to be older and more than half of them have at least one degree.

"We have a fantastic culture where people have a chance to be successful so there's a huge amount of movement from the contact centres across and through other areas of the bank," says Bishop. "People want to stay, they want to be part of the culture and they want to be successful. Leadership is fantastic and the remuneration system is good."

The base pay is comparable with other call centres but staff are also eligible for uncapped performance-based remuneration. The bank is positioned within the top quartile in the market for total remuneration. Performance is monitored monthly and is based on customer satisfaction, sales results and call monitoring. Bishop stresses that the culture very much rewards success rather than punishing mistakes and has a strong emphasis on training and development.

Improvements in the physical environment have also made a difference to staff retention and performance. "It's a really fabulous environment that we spent millions of dollars creating," Bishop says, explaining that call centre staff enjoy waterfalls, fish tanks, and time-out and TV rooms.

The success of the BNZ's approach to managing contact centre staff is reflected in its performance in industry awards. For example, it won the Best Customer Service Award across all industries in the CRM Customer Service Awards last year and was judged winner of the TUANZ Contact Centre of the Year Award in 2002.

Benefits outweigh costs

But what about the cost? Bishop says the fixed shift system results in

ensuring that there is over-staffing at times, particularly on Mondays and Tuesdays. The additional resources on these days are specifically resourced so that all staff can be released from calls for training and development "We see it as an investment in the business rather than a cost. Call centre staff deal with so many customers every day that their skills, commitment and attitude have a significant impact on the business."

And the savings are considerable, with

recruitment costs reduced by \$200,000 pa, training costs reduced by \$150,000 pa, sales conversion rates increased three times and customer satisfaction up 10%.

Other work-life balance initiatives at the BNZ include seminars on a range of issues including health and wellness and stress management, and an EAP programme. An on-site nurse ensures that workstations are suitable and safe.

Helping staff control aspects of their work helps with balance

Shift work and working public holidays is an inevitable part of life for anyone working in emergency services.

The New Zealand Fire Service has operated a rotating roster for many years. Its 1,680 operational staff are divided into four watches working two 10-hour days and two 14-hour nights followed by four days off. Traditionally, day shifts are full working shifts and night shifts involve meeting the station and operational requirements.

The roster is published for the whole year and its predictability means firefighters know exactly when they'll be working years in advance. The roster also has annual leave built into it.

According to the Fire Service's senior HR advisor, Karen Quigan, the system works very well, partly because of its predictability, but mainly because it is conducive to work-life balance. "Effectively you get a compressed working week, working four days and having four off. The firefighters with

younger children in particular are very pleased that they can spend time with them during the day for much of the week. Other workers are very keen on sports and can dedicate time to training while others might be pursuing other business activities."

There is some flexibility within the structure of the roster as staff can swap shifts with each other on an informal basis. Overtime is also available and managed by the local rosters officer in each station.

Another tool to put local firefighters and officers in control of their working life is the new Station Management System. "You never know when you're going to get that emergency call. But non-emergency work can now be planned and recorded at station level by firefighters and officers," says Quigan. She says the Station Management System is more than a computer system. "It is a total concept and principle of having firefighters more involved in the day to day planning of



their activities against the organisation's objectives."

According to Quigan, activities like Ponsonby's Franklin Road Christmas lights are an opportunity for firefighters to raise community safety awareness while working a night shift.

Flexibility in the US – pilots show improved productivity

Stories of two US organisations that have managed to offer flexibility in difficult work environments were presented at the International Diversity Conference held in New York in May which EEO Trust CE Philippa Reed attended.

Beatrice Fitzpatrick who worked with The Chubb Group of Insurance Companies and Nextel Communications to introduce flexibility and other work-life initiatives said the traditional view of flexible work arrangements has tended to limit their uptake. "They are seen as an employee perk; employees are reluctant to request flexible arrangements because they see it as career limiting and one-off arrangements lead to perceptions of unfairness or favouritism."

In fact, as Dr Reed reports from the conference, flexibility can be seen as a creative and innovative approach to getting the work done. "It was clear that discussions around flexibility need to include reference to customer needs and the needs of the business, but employee engagement is critical. Beatrice Fitzpatrick was adamant that input must be sought from employees and that the effectiveness of flexible work arrangements needs to be the shared responsibility of the manager and the team members."

One example of this approach is Chubb's Western Claims Service Centre in Phoenix, Arizona. It employs 180 people and operates across all US time zones.

Chubb was facing local competition for staff and wanted to introduce flexibility to expand service hours, increase productivity and capacity, retain valued employees and attract new talent.

It initially ran a 90-day pilot project designed by a team of employees across three of its units employing 15 people. The participants proposed a nine-hour day over a four and half day week and a four-day, 40 hour week. They wanted flexible lunch hours, opportunities to make up missed time and the ability to work from home two days a month.

Each unit had specific objectives for the pilot including increased capacity,

reduced overtime and speedier processing of claims. All the objectives were exceeded. For example, more than 82% of claims were processed within 24 hours compared with 62% before the pilot, 89% of payments were processed within 24 hours compared with 86% before the pilot. In addition unscheduled time off and overtime were both reduced. This was the first time Chubb had been able to offer workplace flexibility **and** increase productivity.

Overall, employees perceived that extended work hours:

- helped them be more productive,
- increased file quality,
- increased employee engagement.
- enhanced teamwork, and
- improved work-life balance.

The team dynamic changed as a result of coming together as a group on a daily basis with more focus on meeting the workload and less focus on individual's work.

As a result of the pilots, Chubb learned a number of lessons:

- Business demands come first
- Participants in flexible work arrangements need to be flexible
- Managers need to allow employees to design the programme
- Managers must work with staff to ensure that business and personal goals are met
- Communication between team members is critical

Chubb is currently conducting pilots in other call centres throughout the US, partly as a result of other Chubb employees hearing about the Phoenix pilots.

Another example is Nextel Communications which employs more than 19,000 people providing integrated wireless services. Nextel wanted to pilot flexible work arrangements to improve work-life balance, reduce stress and maintain productivity. The amount of time spent commuting to work is a major issue for employees who sometimes spend two hours completing a journey that would normally take 30 minutes.

The pilot was conducted in several

teams in Nextel's sales operations department and involved 112 employees. Guidelines and tools were provided to participating managers but they were free to pursue the flexibility initiative in any way that suited their own work requirements and managerial style.

The flexible work options offered included telecommuting, flexi-time, a compressed work week and working at a satellite office. Participants had to submit a daily work plan to their manager, keep their mobile phones on, meet regularly with managers and submit timely reports.

A survey of internal customers after the pilot found that the majority of people thought productivity, responsiveness and effectiveness stayed the same. None perceived a decrease and some perceived an increase. Internal customers were unanimous that they would recommend that their team adopted a similar approach. They said employees worked the same or better during the pilot and that morale was higher during the pilot.

Participants in the pilot experienced higher job satisfaction and better morale. One said, "I feel so good about flexibility. When I come into work, I really want to be there and connect with people."

One manager said, "We are performing at a higher level. We are taking on more work without adding resources, and meeting deadlines."

And another: "I see that when I manage people this way, they do more on their own and take on more responsibility."

As a result of the pilot, Nextel's sales operations department will continue to offer flexible work options. Corporate-wide policy and tools have been developed to help other business units implement flexible work options.

Dr Reed says employee involvement and measuring results were two critical elements in successfully developing and assessing both pilot programmes. "In New Zealand, we're generally good at the former but don't tend to have the same emphasis on measurement. This can hinder our ability to argue a strong case for flexibility."

News

\$1.8m towards work-life balance

In April, the Associate Labour Minister, Ruth Dyson, announced that \$1.8 million has been committed over the next three years to an initiative to help achieve work-life balance.

Ms Dyson said the Department of Labour will work with participating public and private sector workplaces to identify issues affecting work-life balance, develop practical tools for implementing work-life balance initiatives and evaluate their effectiveness.

The organisations taking part include Feltex Carpets, IndeServe, Child, Youth and Family, the Department of Labour, the Education Review Office, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and The Treasury.

"The issues and solutions could include working hours, flexible working arrangements, rostering, retention, training, and out-of-school childcare," said Ms Dyson at the launch. She said that encouraging work-life balance was one way of addressing skills shortages, retaining staff, and increasing productivity.

"Improving our work-life balance is a critical factor in increasing both our quality of life and living standards."

Proposed flexible working legislation

In March, MP Sue Kedgley's private members bill on flexible working hours was selected from the ballot and proceeded to Select Committee with support from the Labour and the Green party.

The proposed amendment to the Employment Relations Act would give employees the statutory right to request

to work flexible working hours if they had children under five or disabled children under 18. Employees would have the statutory duty to consider their request and would have to present a good business case to turn it down.

Sue Kedgley says the Bill is based on UK legislation, where 80% of requests for flexible working are granted, and a compromise reached on a further 10%.

"Flexible working hours makes sense for individual families, for employers, and for society as a whole," said Kedgley on introducing the Bill. "As a society, it makes sense that we help parents spend more time with their families when they are young. It makes sense that we modernise our workplaces and change our workplace culture so that they are results driven, not work-to-clock cultures. It makes sense that we redesign work in a way that responds to employees' needs and gives employees some choice over the actual time they work."

Work-life balance in the state sector

The State Services Commission has published a guide on work-life balance for state sector employers. In his introduction, Commissioner Mark Prebble writes that in order to attract high achievers, the State Services need to position themselves as employers of choice offering excellent workplace conditions, including work-life balance initiatives.

The guide includes principles, practical steps and brief case studies which address specific workplace and employee issues. It provides useful information and ideas for public and private sector

employees alike.

The whole publication or sections of it can be downloaded from www.ssc.govt.nz/worklifebalance or order a printed copy from The Publications Officer, SSC, PO Box 329, Wellington 04 495 6709.

World-wide

Network for caring

A UK government department has taken a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of carers on its staff of around 13,000.

The Department of Constitutional Affairs created a network for carers in 2001 with its own dedicated staff as well as regional representatives who can devote five per cent of their time to the network.

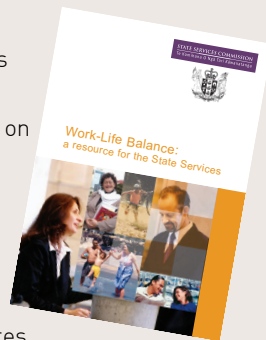
The network's brief includes raising awareness of carer issues, providing a safe environment for carers to exchange views and gain support and advice and identifying and raising issues with senior staff. It runs regular managers' awareness seminars to raise the profile of carers and determine what issues managers face in balancing the needs of the business with those of the carers and other members of their team.

The DCA believes that its carers' policies yield tangible business benefits in terms of recruitment and retention, improving absenteeism, retaining staff skills and improving employee morale.

The DCA's approach won the 2004 Carers UK Carers in Employment Award.

New legislation introduced in the UK in April this year specifically addresses the needs of carers. The legislation, called the [Carers \(Equal Opportunities\) Act 2004](#), was achieved through a Private Member's Bill with support from unions and employers.

Find out more from *Equal Opportunities Review*, April 2005. Published by Butterworths ISSN 0268-7143.



Latest research

UK line managers need help with flexible working

Recent UK research has found that line managers' ability to manage flexible workers and their attitudes to flexible working are a major barrier to successfully implementing flexible working practices.

The research was undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) within the context of the UK legislation which requires employers to assess requests for flexible work.

Rebecca Clark of CIPD said the workplaces reported needing to get more than just buy-in from line managers. "They need to set clear criteria against which flexible working requests are assessed. This will enable line managers to make informed decisions on requests for flexible working and demonstrate fairness between different employees. Employers should look for opportunities to use flexible working where employee needs and business needs coincide."

The survey of 585 employers found that 84% believe that flexible working increases employee retention and 70% think it has a positive impact on motivation.

Flexible working: Impact and Implementation, An Employer Survey, available at www.cipd.co.uk/onlineinfodocuments/surveys.

When work works

Analysis of data from the Families and Work Institute's 2002 "National Study of the Changing Workforce" compared six qualities of an "effective" workplace against four outcomes - employee

engagement, satisfaction, retention and mental health.

The qualities that the researchers believe create an "effective" workplace are job autonomy, flexible workplace options, involvement in decision making, learning opportunities and challenges on the job, supervisor support and co-worker support.

The research showed that "effective" workplaces have higher levels of all four outcomes.

The authors argue that their research supports current management theory that sharing greater responsibility with employees and increasing workplace flexibility has positive effects on the bottom line. "As growing numbers of employees experience greater autonomy in their jobs and greater flexibility in their workplaces, we expect it to become increasingly difficult for employers who are **not** on board to attract, grow, and retain the talent they need."

[When work works. Flexibility – a critical ingredient in creating an effective workplace.](#) By James T. Bond, Ellen Galinsky and E. Jeffrey Hill.

The Way Ahead Report – Australia

The results of Australian research on work-life balance are now available. This is the eighth year Managing Work-Life Balance has conducted this research which was completed by 377 workplaces last year.

The research showed that work-life strategies have contributed to the bottom-line through:

- reduced turnover by an average of 3.6% compared with Best Practice Organisations;
- reduced absenteeism by an average of

3.8%;

- increased return rate from parental leave by an average of 21%; and,
- increased employee satisfaction by an average of 13%.

The executive summary of the *2005 Managing Work Life Balance: the way ahead annual survey* can be downloaded from www.worklifebalance.com.au

Please read on...

Beyond Work-Family Balance – Advancing gender equity and workplace performance

The authors of this US book argue that the image of "balance" is out-moded and that a new approach is needed to describe and counter the difficulties people face in meeting their often conflicting responsibilities. They say that "work-personal life integration" encapsulates a way of approaching the issue which endeavours to integrate personal considerations with the demands of the workplace.

Their approach is based on their research in a number of workplaces and attempts to change a number of workplace practices that create work-life conflicts and the resulting loss of productivity.

By Rhona Rapport et al. Jossey-Bass 2002. ISBN 0-7879-5730-5

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