

The State of Work-Life Balance in Hong Kong 2006

Summary of Stakeholder Engagement on Top Obstacles and Desired Solutions



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Shalini Mahtani, Kate Vernon and Kym Leo
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INTRODUCTION

On 18 October 2006, Community Business hosted The State of Work-Life Balance in Hong Kong 2006 Seminar at the University of Hong Kong. Community Business used this forum to announce the findings of its latest work-life balance survey conducted in July 2006.

The seminar attracted over 140 delegates. These were mostly senior business executives representing various industries. As part of the seminar programme, delegates participated in a forty-minute facilitated dialogue. Participants were invited to identify what they considered to be the greatest obstacles to achieving work-life balance in their organisations and to come up with desired solutions. This paper summarises the findings from this facilitated dialogue.

OBJECTIVES

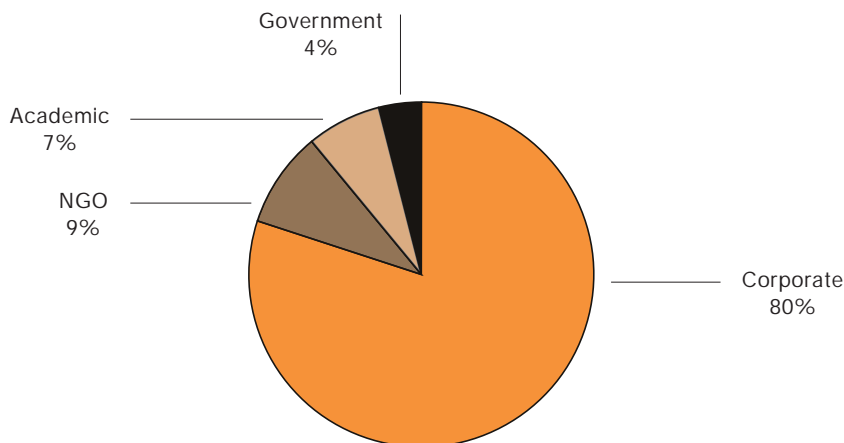
This paper outlines the views of participants on work-life balance and specifically what they perceived to be:

- 1) the three greatest obstacles to achieving work-life balance
- 2) the three most desired solutions for employers addressing work-life balance

PROFILE OF SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

In total, there were 141 delegates who attended the seminar. 80% were from the corporate sector, 9% from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), 7% from academic institutions and 4% from government sectors as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Profile of Delegates By Type of Organisation

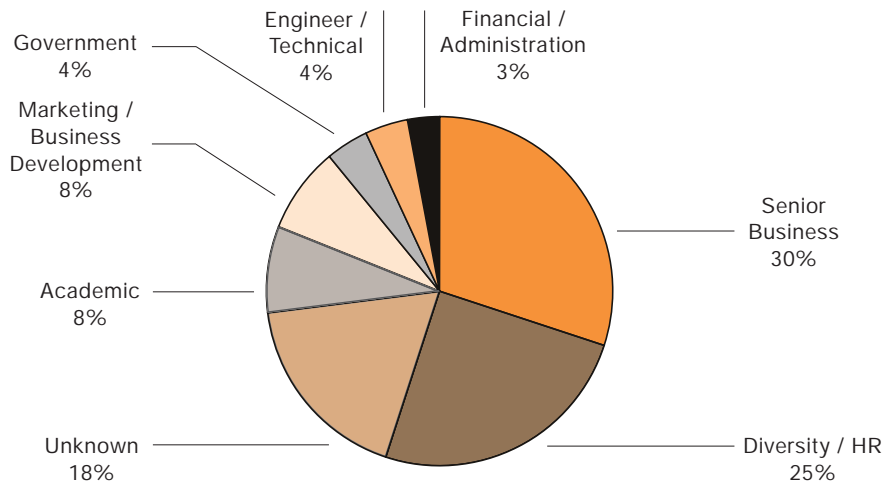




Summary of Stakeholder Engagement on Top Obstacles and Desired Solutions

The majority of delegates held senior business roles in organisations (30%) or were Human Resource or Diversity specialists (25%). Figure 2 gives a further breakdown of their job functions.

Figure 2: Profile of Delegates by Job Function



In total, 96 delegates participated in the facilitated dialogue. We assume that the profile of delegates for this session mirrored the total delegate list.

METHODOLOGY

Facilitation process

The facilitation process was developed by Community Business and the planning took place before the conference. 15 nominated facilitators conducted the facilitated dialogue and were allocated to small groups.

Set-up

Each delegate had been assigned to a specific group prior to the event to ensure that there was a good representation from different companies in each group. Each group comprised 8 people on average.



THE THREE GREATEST OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Process

In their groups, participants were asked to prioritise what they considered to be the three greatest obstacles to achieving work-life balance in their respective organisations. Each group then agreed on the top three obstacles for the group as whole. The findings presented below represent the cumulative views expressed by all participants.

Findings

Based on the above results, it was found that “Workload” came in as the greatest obstacle to achieving work-life balance while “Demands of customers and the marketplace” was ranked second. “Lack of leadership support” and “Position of Hong Kong as regional hub” were ranked equal third. These obstacles are ranked in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Three Greatest Obstacles to Achieving Work-Life Balance

The Three Greatest Obstacles to Achieving Work-Life Balance	
1	Workload
2	Demands of customers and the marketplace
3	Lack of leadership support
3	Position of Hong Kong as regional hub

THE THREE MOST DESIRED SOLUTIONS FOR EMPLOYERS ADDRESSING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Process

Within each group, participants were divided into sub-groups to come up with a maximum of three solutions for each of the three greatest obstacles identified in their groups. The findings presented below represent the cumulative views expressed by all participants.

Findings

For each of the obstacles noted above, we outlined the three most desired solutions according to participants.

For the greatest obstacle “Workload”, the following were the most desired solutions:

Table 2: Solutions for Obstacle 1 - Workload

Workload	
1	Provide good leadership and management
2	Reduce staff turnover
3	Make better use of technology
3	Streamline policies and procedures

1) Provide good leadership and management

Participants stated that to address the universally recognised challenge of heavy workloads, leadership needed to proactively manage the situation and lead by example. One tangible example cited by a number of participants was to encourage leaders to communicate to staff that they are not expected to reply to emails after a certain hour. It was felt that leadership has a proactive role to play in fostering a work culture which empowers and encourages staff at all levels to “push back” or say “no” when they simply cannot take on more work. In addition participants said that all levels of management should be taught how to manage staff workload, define roles, set clear objectives and respect the differing needs of individual employees. Participants also stated that more work should be done to ensure that employees are taught how to prioritise their work effectively.

2) Reduce staff turnover

High staff turnover was identified as one of the main causes of heavy workload. It was recognised that high staff turnover often results in the duplication of effort as new hires take time to get up to speed, understand their job responsibilities and navigate the internal culture of the organisation. Participants felt that more needs to be done to ensure that staff turnover is reduced and that job transitions are managed properly.

3) Make better use of technology

Participants acknowledged that technology has a key role to play in managing heavy workloads. Participants stated that companies should train staff to make better use of available technology to enhance their efficiency. This might include extending knowledge of office software such as Windows Outlook, or optimising the use of technology to streamline communications and facilitate collaborative working.

3) Streamline policies and procedures

It was recognised that inefficient and cumbersome internal processes often contribute to unnecessary workload. It was felt that time should be taken to review and streamline policies and procedures. This might include automating certain processes or reducing the number of people involved in the work processes.



For the second greatest obstacle, "Demands of customers and the marketplace", the following were the most desired solutions:

Table 3: Solutions for Obstacle 2 - Demands of Customers and Marketplace

Demands of Customers and Marketplace	
1	Manage customer expectations
2	Provide training on how to manage customer expectations

1) Manage customer expectations

Participants highlighted that the growing demands of customers and the marketplace are putting increasing pressure on companies and employees and is having a negative impact on employees' work-life balance. The growing importance of customer service, for example, and rising expectations of "24x7" availability provide a constant challenge. Participants aired the view that companies have a responsibility to manage customer expectations. It was felt that whilst companies should not compromise their commitment to issues such as customer service and quality, for the sake of their employees, companies have an obligation to communicate to customers what is realistic. One way identified to do this is through a customer service pledge which clearly states what clients can expect. It was highlighted that such a service pledge should be communicated both internally and externally.

2) Provide training on how to manage customer expectations

Participants stated that managers and staff alike should be taught how to manage customer expectations.

For the third greatest obstacle, "Lack of Leadership Support", the following were the most desired solutions:

Table 4: Solution for Obstacle 3 - Lack of Leadership Support

Lack of Leadership Support	
1	Ensure leadership understands importance of work-life balance
2	Train management on work-life balance
3	Encourage greater communication between management and employees

1) Ensure leadership understands importance of work-life balance

Participants agreed that leadership needs to understand the importance of work-life balance, to view it not simply as a 'nice to have' but as a business imperative. Leaders need to understand the negative effects of poor work-life balance and the direct link to lower productivity, inefficiency, morale and higher absenteeism. Only then will they be able to "walk the talk" and be a role model for work-life balance.

2) Train management on work-life balance

It was believed that leadership should communicate to management the importance of work-life balance and should ensure that managers understand how to effectively manage the work-life balance of staff. It was discussed that training should be made compulsory for managers and should focus on how to address individual needs of staff as well as propose solutions that the company is willing to entertain. In addition, it was highlighted that the notion that staff should put in “face time” should be strongly discouraged in training.

3) Encourage greater communication between management and employees

Participants stated that managers should open the dialogue on work-life balance with staff individually and look at creative ways to manage their needs. Employees should be encouraged by their managers to say no to accepting more tasks, without fear of being penalised.

For the third greatest obstacle, “Position of Hong Kong as regional hub”, the following were the most desired solutions:

Table 5: Solutions for Obstacle 3 - Position of Hong Kong as regional hub

Position of Hong Kong as regional hub	
1	Managers to manage expectations of overseas colleagues
2	Introduce flexible work hours

1) Managers to manage expectations of overseas colleagues

Participants stressed that managers had a key role to play in setting appropriate expectations with overseas colleagues, particularly colleagues in Europe and the United States, and managing the way that communication should take place. It was felt that the conference call system was often abused, with too many calls taking place and often with little respect for local time zones and regular working hours. It was suggested that companies should set out clear guidelines on how and when conference calls should be conducted and efforts made to drive a more truly ‘global’ mindset of employees.

2) Introduce flexible work hours

As Hong Kong is a regional hub and many employees work outside of regular work hours, participants suggested that companies should compensate staff by providing them with an opportunity to work flexible hours.



CONCLUSION

The results of this facilitated dialogue show that “Workload” is viewed as the top obstacle to achieving work-life balance. This is consistent with Community Business’ The State of Work-Life Balance 2006 Survey finding that over 83% of employees in Hong Kong said they work overtime because they have too much work to do and have to keep up with their workload.

Furthermore, both The State of Work-Life Balance 2006 Survey, as well as the responses from the facilitated dialogue demonstrate that employers can do much more to address the work-life balance of staff.

This paper highlights the three greatest obstacles to employees achieving work-life balance and proposes solutions for each of these. What appears to be the overarching problem in most organisations is the lack of leadership support for work-life balance. Apparently, many of the employers who encourage work-life balance are not always matching this rhetoric with action by communicating its importance to managers and leading by example.

This facilitated dialogue shows that many employees agree that customer service quality and delivery must not interfere with greater work-life balance initiatives for staff and managers must be taught how to manage customer expectations from the outset.

The question has to be asked why leadership support in Hong Kong is lacking on this issue. Is it because leadership is not yet convinced that there is a business case for work-life balance or is it that leaders simply do not know how to move forward? Whatever the reason, companies that do not address work-life balance of staff must face up to the fact that this is becoming increasingly important to employees and unless they address it proactively they may lose out in the war for talent.

About Community Business

Community Business is a unique membership based non-profit organisation whose mission is to lead, inspire and support businesses in Hong Kong to continuously improve their positive impact on people and communities. Community Business provides training, facilitation and advice to some of the world's largest companies in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and its major areas of focus include CSR strategy and policy, corporate community investment and diversity and work-life balance in the workplace. Founded in 2003, Community Business currently works with a range of small, medium and large companies committed to CSR. For more information, visit www.communitybusiness.org.hk

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For More Information

Please contact Shalini Mahtani on +852 2152 1889 or email at shalini@communitybusiness.org.hk

The summary report on The State of Work-Life Balance in Hong Kong 2006 Survey can be found at the website: www.communitybusiness.org.hk

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Room 701, Cheungs Building, 1-3 Wing Lok Street, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2152 1889 Fax: (852) 2540 9520
Email: info@communitybusiness.org.hk
URL: www.communitybusiness.org.hk