

Expatriate Work Life Balance Survey

The concept of work life balance is one that is well known. As technology advances and the line between work time and personal time becomes increasingly blurred the pressure on individuals to be available 24/7 is increasing. Understandably therefore, companies are employing work life balance initiatives as a coping method for expatriates who are suffering from stress. With this in mind, as well as the lack of research on the effect of these practices and policies on the expatriate workforce, ORC Worldwide decided to conduct a repeat of their Work Life Balance study during the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007.

The survey drew responses from 452 expatriates and looks at numerous areas, such as the intrusion of work into family life, gender issues and the effect of company work life balance policies felt by expatriates.

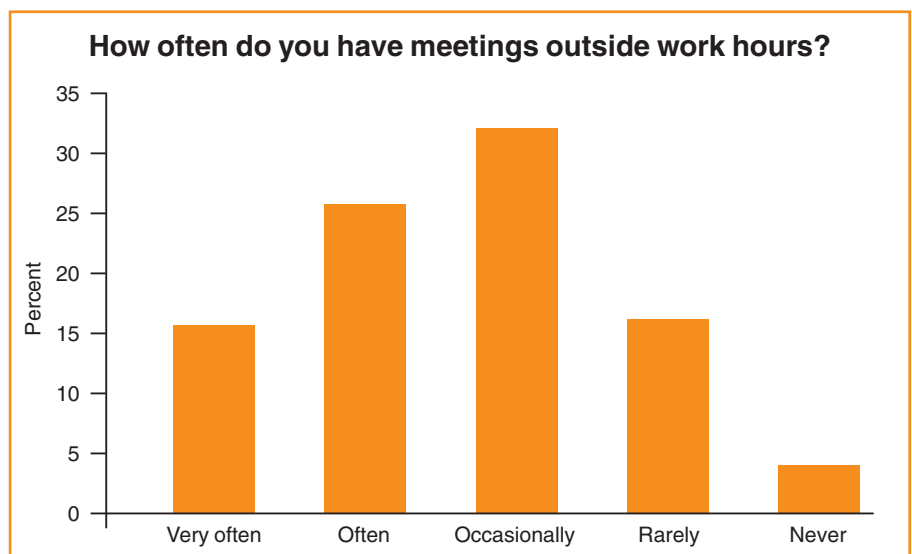
Interesting findings conclude that two-thirds of expatriates surveyed feel they worked longer hours abroad than they did at home. The survey also found that although the primary locations were popular as assignment locations e.g. Western Europe, North America and Asia Pacific, a significant number of participants were also located in other host locations such as Africa and South America.

Over 65% of expatriates believed that they were suffering from stress as a result of going on assignment. Meetings, conference calls and business travel were all stated as encroaching into personal time and seen as significant causes of stress. Over 60% were required to travel out of work hours and during weekends and were not given time off in lieu for this.

Further, over half the respondents felt that their company required them to work outside their normal working hours to carry out work for them and, again, over half of them did not use all their vacation entitlement.

Overall the findings demonstrate that the largest causes of stress for expatriates include the loss of support networks and the inability for spouses to get a job in the host country. In fact many expatriates stated that their family members were commenting on the hours they were working and that the language and cultural difficulties experienced when in the host country also added to the problem.

Currently the issue of work life balance



seems to be further exacerbated by the lack of knowledge of company provisions; most participants were unaware whether their company had a work life balance policy indicating some weakness in communication. And a large number of respondents did not feel that their company was committed to helping their expatriates achieve a healthy balance between work and home, so it is little wonder then that such a resounding message on stress and work life balance came through.

Readdressing the balance

Exercise, seen as a key mechanism in reducing stress, was also examined in the survey. Although just under half of the expatriates exercised 1-3 times a week many did not exercise at all, stating lack of time as the key reason. This may also be related to the fact that very few companies subsidised club membership for expatriates.

In general the survey finds that few expatriates benefit from work life balance policies and most are unaware whether these actually exist for their company. It seems that cultural and language differences are a key factor in stress as well for expatriates. Although language courses were offered, few expatriates felt they could take full advantage of these again due to lack of time. So it would seem that both communication of policy and assistance in implementation of important training is crucial.

Interestingly the results show again that both genders replied quite differently, with females responding that they were suffering with very high levels of stress mainly due to balancing family and work. In expatriation this can be key to the suc-

cess and failure of an assignment and therefore family life whilst on assignment is an important element for organisations to address. There was also some differences between the genders regarding their awareness of work life balance policies, with men more often stating that their company had no policy.

Key suggestions for improvement were put forward by expatriates and are highlighted in the results of the survey, for example some suggest encouraging expatriates to complete the cultural and language courses to better assist understanding of cultural differences resulting in a smoother transition into the new location. Communication at the time of expatriation may also help in providing a better awareness, understanding and implementation of company work life balance policies if they are in place. Employers were also encouraged to look closely at why the expatriate is willing to move location in order to better understand their needs during assignment.

For further details on this survey and to obtain a copy of the full results, please email info@orcworldwide.co.uk or contact Siobhan Cummins (tel: +44 207 591 5600).

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