
Work-Life Balance

By Lothar Katz

As a Vice President leading his company's software division, Dave prides himself with working very hard. He is on the job '24/7', continually staying in touch with clients and employees. Even during holiday periods, it never takes him long to return a call or email a response. Dave expects the same dedication of his people. He occasionally brags that his young daughter sometimes starts crying when on his arm: he's on the road so often that the little girl is not always comfortable around him. Shows how committed he is to his job, doesn't it? For Dave, work always comes first!

Dave's name is not 'Dave'. The rest of the story is true, though. When reading through it, did you assume that he is American? You bet he is!

Dave's attitude towards work reflects values shared by most Americans: a strong belief that work is more than an 8am-to-5pm absence from your real life, that strong job performance means staying in touch with your job whenever required, and that excelling at work may require significant sacrifices in your personal life. On the flip side, Dave seems a bit conflicted about another American value: the importance of family.

Struggling to balance work and personal life is a common experience for most humans, no matter where they live and what kind of jobs they have. Not everyone sets the same priorities, though. The choices and trade-offs we make depend on our personal objectives and preferences, as well as on profession, aspirations, age and many other aspects. Given all these individual factors, it is surprising to find how strongly culture-specific views influence people's decisions about work-life trade-offs. In this area, differences in attitudes between countries and cultures can be substantial, as the following overview of professional practices shows:

Countries Where Work Generally Comes First

Most eminent in this group are the United States. Americans admire hard work and accept that a job usually takes priority over private matters. Many work long hours and are willing to "do whatever it takes" to get their jobs done. This doesn't mean that work always takes priority, though. For instance, holidays such as Thanksgiving or Christmas are expected to be 'family time' during which email may go unread and voicemails unreturned at least for a few days. Staying incommunicado for much longer than that, however, for instance while on vacation, is a no-no for most white-collar employees, unless someone else is assigned to fill in for the absentee.

Other countries in this group include ... uhmm... err ... well ... uhmm ...

Ok, let's face it: no other culture seems to belong into this category. There are places such as Korea or Japan, where people on average work longer hours and receive less vacation time than Americans do. However, employees in those countries tend to compartmentalize work and private life more strictly than American professionals do, as we will see in the next category.

Countries Where Work And Personal Life Are Both Very Important

In most industrialized countries and in some of the emerging economies, professional employees are also used to giving high priority to their jobs. Checking email over the weekend or working overtime if needed is now commonplace in Western and Northern Europe, in some other European countries, Australia, Canada, China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and a few other places. Degrees may vary but in principle, attitudes towards work in these cultures are not unlike those found in the United States.

However, practices and expectations can be considerably different during vacations or holiday seasons: then, employees are commonly considered 'gone' and may not be expected to check in with work at all. As many global managers have learned the hard way, little happens during France's or Germany's summer vacations, China's New Year celebrations, or Japan's Golden Week. Expecting people to show a continuous commitment to their work during these periods at best meets with puzzlement on the other side.

Countries Where Personal Life Generally Comes First

A popular Italian maxim states "*Lavoriamo per vivere....ma non viviamo per lavorare!*" (We work to live, but we don't live to work!). Italy, especially the southern part of the country, is but one among the many cultures where the American concept of work commitment stands in sometimes stark contrast with local values. That does not mean that employees in these countries don't work hard or won't put in overtime. However, a common agreement among members of these cultures is that employers need to accept that time off is sheltered and that the demands (and pleasures) of personal life sometimes weigh more strongly than regular job requirements. To most Italians, Uncle Domenico's birthday will always be more important than that spreadsheet the boss asked for.

Implications

Leaders of global teams and organizations are well advised to pay attention to these different practices and expectations. What may be viewed as not worth mentioning in one culture could trigger expectations of extra compensation (through money or time off) in others. Worst case, a team member may be deeply offended by a request to work during a time that is special to them. Properly planning resource availability and keeping sufficient flexibility in all schedules usually keeps such cultural attitudes from affecting the success of your projects.

While doing what it takes to meet this objective, though, don't forget to keep your own work-life balance at the right level: balanced!

Lothar Katz is an International Business Advisor and the author of "Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries Around the World". He has a wealth of experience in achieving productive cooperation across cultures and driving business success on a global scale.

A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center Instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
