

FAILING TO IMPRESS: FROM DINNER PARTIES TO WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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HOW TO SET THE TABLE FOR WORK- LIFE BALANCE

Most of us can name the most common work-life balance initiatives out there today, and most organizations know that they “gotta have one.” While few object to having better work-life balance, even fewer know how to implement an effective program.

In this paper, we focus on the **how**: how to select and how to present a work-life balance program that balances the needs of employees and employers.

Though it can feel like an overwhelming task, there are experts to guide you through the process. Like when hosting a dinner party, organizations should put thoughtful effort and due diligence into the occasion so that they don't find themselves failing to impress.

WINE ME, DINE ME

Over the phone this morning, Angela's daughter entreated her to host a dinner party and invite her fiancé's family to celebrate her recent engagement to Maxwell Figgus. The Southern-born, raised-wealthy Figgus family would be in town next weekend, making it the perfect opportunity. Still sipping her first cup of coffee, Angela looked at her stained wood floors and shabby window treatments. “You know I'd love to, honey,” she said, knowing she had just enlisted in a week of sleepless nights and anxious days leading up to the dinner. After hanging up, Ecclesiastes 10:19 came to mind: “A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry; but money answereth all things.” She didn't feel much merriment right now.

The Figgus's drink only the finest wines, and for such an occasion Angela cannot serve anything less. However, lacking experience with and knowledge of wines, Angela wonders how she could select such a wine. The options are overwhelming, the guests' preferences unknown, and the cost potentially extravagant. She cannot afford the most expensive wines, she doesn't have the time to become a wine expert, and a wine guide would not help her narrow her focus. Her peers only confirm the gravity of her situation: “Yes, you had better choose an impressive wine, Angela, or your guests will be disappointed.” Angela picks up the phone and calls a wine expert. The host needs help, not discourse.

THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE CONNECTION

Selecting a work-life balance program can feel like selecting a wine for an important dinner party. Organizations need impressive programs, but not at exorbitant costs. They don't have the time to vet every option, and they are not authorities

on work-life balance, able to distinguish the best practices. Yet, if the organization fails to select a strong program, it risks losing top talent. The remaining option is expert advice. Workforce asset management professionals (WAM-Pros) help organizations select work-life balance programs to attract and retain assets, not squander them.

Connoisseurs boast that enjoying wine requires a refined palate when what they really mean is an educated palate. Education comes from a combination of knowledge and experience. Drinkers of fine wine may be willing to pay to find the best, but most employees already have experienced what they like and dislike about their work-life balance. Angela needs to know how to do two things: first, select her wine, and second, serve and present it. The wine expert, or the WAM-Pro, has the specialized knowledge and experience to help with both.

PRICE

At the recommendation of her wine expert, Angela visits her local wine merchant. He pours three wines, each of differing price. The first wine, thin and sour, costs \$10. The second wine, complex and fragrant, costs \$150. The third wine is an impressive underdog. Its earthy, rustic flavor won favor with critics, and its modest price tag, \$30, wins favor with Angela's checkbook. The value wine achieves its purpose—it's drinkable and affordable. Angela's guests might or might not love it, but even if they drank it all, she wouldn't miss a mortgage payment. Value must be measured in returns, not price. Like wine, work-life balance programs need not be expensive to be effective.

If an organization is in sticker shock after calculating the cost of offering more paid time off, consider creative alternatives. If the organization cannot offer a paid sabbatical, can it offer annualized hours? For example, Roger may work 200 hours per month for four months and take off the fifth month. He then works 160 hours each month for the remainder of the year. Roger's annualized hours allow him and his manager to plan work dispersion in advance, maintaining his average annual pay rate. Industries with seasonal variation in workload or capacity would be ripe for this type of compromise. As with wine, with work-life balance we want to receive the best possible value at the most reasonable price.

A WAM-Pro might also suggest funding programs by reallocating assets. For example, an organization could reward employees with continuing education bonuses when they comply with such organizational goals as reliable attendance. Employees value training and education personally and competitively. Organizations valuing continuing education reap the benefits of an educated workforce and demonstrate to the employee an investment in their future and personal development. If an organization has a large population of near-retirement workers, it might offer financial management classes to help employees better manage their money and gradually acclimate to the new retirement lifestyle. During these classes, an organization might also find ways to lessen the brain drain, and keep retirees on as mentors or part-time consultants. It's like making a tasty Sangria from a lesser wine.

Although budgets have recently come under increasing stress, most organizations probably have a training budget in place. Offering training as part of a work-life balance program could not only lower the actual cost through asset reallocation, it could also attach meaningful metrics to the distribution of training dollars. Some time and attendance systems might already be set up to track attendance with point systems that punish frequent offenders. If used as a positive point systems that rewarded

deserving employees, then it could promote organizational and individual goals. This enhances real work-life balance, rather than simply penalizing the tardy or absent.

VINTAGE

The wine merchant holds the common belief that the older a wine is, the better. He tells Angela that older wines have had time to age and develop fuller flavors. “A wine over twenty years is considered a true vintage,” he says. In fact, even wine connoisseurs drink wines relatively young. Any wine kept long enough will eventually sour. Work-life balance ideas also lose their power to improve morale, productivity, and organizational cohesiveness if never acted upon. For example, if an organization implements a policy around laptops and lights off after 7 p.m., but the leaders and managers continue their late-night emailing habits, the program’s benefit is moot. What may seem like time-tested approaches to work-life balance problems may not be as helpful to today’s organizations and employees as they once were. Any idea, if poorly implemented, is as inappropriate as Angela serving vinegar at her daughter’s celebratory dinner. The goal is not to sour employees, but retain and reward them adequately.

For example, if an employee satisfaction survey reported poor work-life balance, and employees specified that they wanted more consecutive days off, their organization might change its policy. However, after six months, the organization’s survey still shows that employees are dissatisfied with their work-life balance. Even worse, company sales are down.

The organization brings in three WAM-Pros. After reviewing sales and attendance records and pay codes, they quickly discover that the new work-life balance policy failed because weekends are the organization’s highest demand and highest shift pay periods. Employees scheduled out of those shifts by the new days-off policy felt the scheduling was unfair. Meanwhile, fewer weekend workers meant more work for those present, making demand impossible to meet.

When employees said they wanted consecutive days off, they didn’t necessarily mean the traditional Saturday-Sunday weekend. The executive office, because its members had weekends off, assumed that workers wanted the same schedule. Management’s effort to answer employees’ needs actually *hurt* the business: employees preferred taking two midweek days off, so long as they had advance notice.

The WAM-Pros suggested an advanced scheduling class for managers. This training could help a manager design schedules that both met demand and offered consecutive days off. Managers found that they could even create rotating or cyclical repeating schedules, offering employees more predictability in planning ahead. Angela need not be wary of wines simply based on their age or type; preconceived notions may obscure her ability to select the best quality.

LET IT BREATHE

Bottle in hand, Angela returns home feeling better about the dinner party already. However, she remembers that the wine expert told her that selection is only the first step: next comes serving. The expert mentioned that the best time to drink it is not right after pulling the cork. Before serving, she must let the wine breathe. New policies and procedures, even those that benefit employees, take time to catch on. Wine and work-life balance programs need time to breathe. The business itself, as well as the employees, must warm to the idea, and adjust to the new practices.

If an organization decides to stagger employees' work hours, for example, the organization must also change tardy alerts and possibly rounding rules. Although it may be possible to make certain rules that pertain only to certain employees, even that can become complex. If Margaret comes in Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 9:15 a.m. and on Tuesday and Thursday at 8:00 a.m., then switches those times halfway through the week, the system might not keep up; she might look as if she were tardy. When implementing a new work-life balance program, leave time and room for adjustments, mistakes, and inconsistencies. Carefully review audit trails and reports for problems like unintended late penalties.

Another option for adapting to a new work-life balance program is to build reminders into the system. For example, when an organization wanted to give employees a thirty minute break for every 6 hours of work, employees complained that the policy was on the books, but supervisors did not enforce or sometimes even allow it.

The organization's team of WAM-Pros suggested that break pop-ups and that reminders pop up on manager's dashboards a few minutes before the break. With a scheduling system linked to the time and attendance system, flags should go up for missed break, telling upper management that the policy is not yet consistent.

Wine and work-life balance programs need some time to reach full suitability. Some employees may not like the program at first. The first sip can flood the palate. Time to let the wine, and the taster, adjust means a better chance for appreciation, and even enjoyment.

THE PERFECT PAIRING

The hyphen between "work" and "life" in work-life balance should not signify a tug of war between competing priorities, but rather collaborative effort to balance each. Some people's view of work-life

We might see wine and work-life balance as luxuries, but these are must-haves in certain situations. In ancient times, wine was served because the water was often undrinkable. Today, organizations offer work-life balance as a reward for commendable loyalty and service.

In a competitive and connected world, it is more difficult to separate work from home life than it used to be. Work-life balance responds to this new challenge by creating compromise. Track the effectiveness of these compromises with metrics and display findings on views and dashboards. Utilize technology as the enabler—like a glass serves as the measuring device and delivery vessel for wine.

balance is greater access to work. However, people become stuck in their ways, not only with the wines they prefer with steak or fish, but also in how they identify with or what they expect from certain job roles.

A wine that pairs with everything is rare, but universal design is known to the workforce. The Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy recognized the increased need for customized employment, or workplace flexibility, and encourages restructuring the workload to make jobs more available to those with different abilities. By using job-task negotiation, employers can break down a particular job or role and focus on *how* the work was done instead of when or where. For example, cashiers check out customers, make change, and may bag groceries, but they might not count the cash drawer at the end of the night; that task may be assigned to a manager. By dividing the whole into a sum of parts, tasks can be regrouped into more meaningful roles for the organization's employees.

Delineating and designating tasks is also important from a technological standpoint, especially in special work-life balance programs like job-sharing, where two people share the same job role. Pay codes and schedules are just two of the system settings that might need adjustment. James might need a pay code transfer when working with toxic chemicals, and Jill might get shift differential for working a late shift. If James and Jill work at the same time, they would need to perform separate tasks. If concurrent activity cannot happen, then they might split their schedule (e.g. one working the a.m., the other working the p.m.).

Angela may think she only likes California cabernets, but if she broke down the flavors she would discover that she enjoys fruit-forward and tannic wines. Winemakers experimenting with new wines may have a few flavor profiles in mind at the start, but might end up with a completely original, and tasty, concoction. The same is possible in the workplace. Break the boundaries of the traditional job role and distinguish work by individual goals and tasks, instead of the typical job description.

CHECK FOR CORKED BOTTLES

No host wants to present a spoiled bottle of wine, just as no employer wants to create a serious work-life imbalance. Sometimes the best method to avoid imbalance is to use precaution—know if the wine has turned bad before pouring the first glass. Workforce management technology offers lots of solutions and indicators when it comes to tracking and monitoring.

Use the time and attendance system to monitor working hours, even among the exempt employee population. Fatigue and stress are often correlated with overtime, so even if employees are not paid by the hour, tracking their time worked can alert managers to excessive hours. Sometimes a guest might not notice their wine has gone bad, just like some employees can grow accustomed to high levels of work and not even realize their fatigue. Just like the host who switches out the bad for the good bottle, when employers monitor system and employee performance they can alleviate obstacles and divert resources to places in need.

Handling affects the taste of wine and the effectiveness of work-life balance programs. After sustaining prolonged light or heat exposure, or a broken seal, the wine might have a completely different taste—most often for the worse. The same can be said for workforce management systems. WAM-Pros use the workforce management system to manage alerts on system usage and handling.

WAM-Pros can see if people are using self-service tools, abusing pay premiums, or if certain policies are going unused. If employees use the same ID card to get into the gym as they do to access the office, then the organization might monitor that data to quantify gym use and determine if the work-life balance initiative meets its target.

CONCLUSIONS

In the end, every employee has a preference on work-life balance, just like every wine connoisseur has a favorite flavor profile. Some employees want fewer hours each week or just the hours they choose; others want flexible start and end times for attending work or no weekend work; and still others want to work remotely or have fewer travel days. Neither Angela nor the employer can please everyone all the time. Knowing how to select and serve the appropriate wine, or work-life balance program, is the first step. Angela, like the employer, needs a selection that suits her guests and matches the occasion, but doesn't break her budget. It's not always about the specific wine, or the details of a particular work-life balance program; it's about how the experience and implementation improves our lives.

“We begin to see, therefore, the importance of selecting our environment with the greatest of care, because environment is the mental feeding ground out of which the food that goes into our minds is extracted.”

Hill, Napoleon. *The Law of Success*. Canada: Penguin Group, 2008. 440.
(Original publish date, 1928)



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