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Are You One of the 2 Million? Seeking Work-Life Balance: Part 2

Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics, Warwick University

If there is a work-life balance problem in lots of western countries, the 64 million Euro question is: how are we going to tackle it?

While not a direct solution, one helpful background force is the A-word. Aging. A strong pattern found in job satisfaction data -- and happiness and stress data -- is that wellbeing is U-shaped (or, more precisely, J-shaped) in age. In other words, feelings of contentment start high in your early 20s, then fall for a bit, and then begin to rise smoothly throughout the rest of your life. Researchers have now uncovered this pattern in random samples of workers from more than two dozen nations. What it means, in the modern world, is that one of the secular trends around us will gradually do its best to offset some of our work-life balance difficulty. The steady aging of the workforce will move more and more of us into the rising part of the job-satisfaction-age curve.

But new ideas are needed.

First, a good principle here would be to rely on the scientific method. We need experiments. Employers should take different parts of their organization and bring in different possible attempts at a WLBS (where S stands for solution). Yet one final part of the organization should be left untouched – call it the placebo or control group. Any possible WLBS ought to be evaluated in a cool-headed way and compared with what happens to job morale and stress levels in the placebo part of the organization.

Second, modern electronics play a distinctive part in the work-life balance crisis. One source of angst is the mobile phone. Another is email. My inclination would be to try banning each of them for a single day in randomly selected parts of the organization. Turn-off Tuesday would be a suitable name. Once people got used to these Tuesdays, it would be straightforward to do job-satisfaction surveys to

decide whether Turning Off had been a turn for the better. For one day of the week, the 1960s would return. It would be a kind of test. Once the data came in when compared to the placebo part of the organization, we could let the job-satisfaction numbers speak for themselves.

Third, we could experiment with a strict rule that nobody is allowed to send an email to, or leave a message for, anyone who was taking their annual leave entitlement -- ever. 'Leave those on leave' would say a well-hung sign.

Fourth, serious one-day holidays should be tried. Let us actually have a No-Wednesdays rule for a part of the organization. Yes, it sounds radical. But if workers were promised they could have Wednesday off every week, very possibly they would get their week's tasks done anyway, in the other days. Quite crucially, moreover, they would know that their colleagues were not in the office working hard and striving to be visible to get that next promotion, so leisure would be enjoyable again.

Fifth, a further part of the organization could be given freedom to stay at home as much as they wish – consistent with the key tasks getting done. How they did this Flexible Working, from home or otherwise, would be up to the individual.

Sixth, the multitude of 'initiatives' would be stopped. Initiative-Free Year could be implemented. There is too much change-for-change's sake.

Seventh, as in most of the Netherlands, bosses could be required by the organization to go home at 5pm. Presenteeism would then vanish.

Work-life balances solutions (WLBSs) are possible. We have to think. We have to be scientific. Above all, we have to experiment. Then we go with the ones that verifiably work.