

Working Group: Work-Life: Current Practices and Future Opportunities

co-hosted by CAHRS and American Express

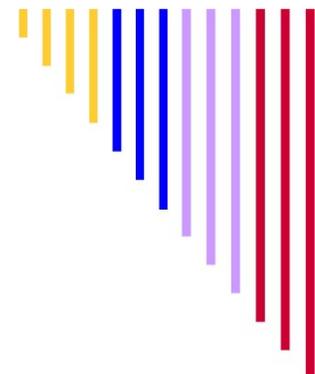
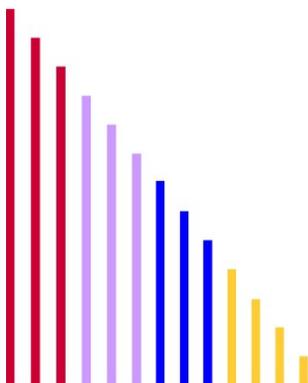
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Key Takeaways

1. Most companies offer a similar suite of work-life programs that include elements of flexible work, parental leave, back-up care, financial well-being, and mental health services. The focus, however, has shifted to fit; offering programs that are flexible enough to fit the diverse needs that exist across departments and individuals.
2. Employee burnout is a growing concern within companies. Accordingly, resilience and recovery are taking center stage as companies formulate the next evolution of their work-life strategies.
3. To meet the needs of a multi-generational workforce, companies are increasingly focused on tying different programs and services to moments that matter in the employee lifecycle.
4. Companies have found success using a variety of different media and methods to communicate information about work-life programs and policies, including email, Yammer, environmental signage, champions and sponsors. A current push, however, is driving more seamless and synergistic communication across these different channels.
5. Although work-life programs have typically been assessed based on activity metrics (i.e., participation, utilization), efforts are underway across companies to link specific programs to impact metrics, such as retention, engagement, and performance, as well as to use well-being dashboards and scorecards to create greater accountability among leaders.

Participating Companies

American Express
Cornell University
Ecolab
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Johnson & Johnson
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Companies today are focusing more attention than ever on their work-life strategies and practices. This is due, in part, to the now well-established link between work-life and important employee outcomes, such as burnout, stress, health, and performance. In today's tight labor market, work-life benefits and flexibility can also serve a key differentiator for attracting and retaining critical talent. Although parental leave policies and family friendly benefits have historically taken central stage, many companies are now exploring new work-life benefits to keep pace with the needs and preferences of an ever-changing workforce. Thus, a key question companies are asking with regard to their work-life strategy is "what's next?"

In this CAHRS working group, we discussed the current state of work-life strategies as well as how companies expect these strategies to evolve in the future. A few of the key themes and insights that emerged during the day are summarized below.

Key Components of Work-Life Strategies

The group began the day by discussing how their companies currently think about work-life and the programs and initiatives that fall within the scope of their current efforts.

Most companies offer a somewhat similar suite of programs, which often incorporates elements of flexible work, parental leave, back-up childcare and/or eldercare, financial well-being, and mental health services. At the same time, however, they recognize that there are often differences across departments and individuals in terms of their needs and, accordingly, the support they will require to navigate work-life demands. That is, there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

As a result, the focus in many companies has shifted to fit; offering programs that are flexible enough to fit the needs of different employees. While straightforward in principle, increasing flexibility and fit comes with its own challenges. For example, culture change is often required to ensure that employees are aware of and feel comfortable utilizing the services that are available. There are also often differences across geographies; some markets may be more or less progressive than others. And there are the practical challenges associated with implementation, such as backfilling employees on leave.

Shining a Spotlight on Burnout

Employee burnout has become a critical challenge due to a host of factors that fall within both the work and life domains. On the work front, organizations are running lean, which has created greater employee stress and pressure. Also, employees are inundated with meetings and redundant work is common due to poor organizational memory. Outside of work employees have to navigate information overload as well as a litany of stressful world events. There is no safe harbor.

Accordingly, resilience and recovery are taking center stage as companies formulate the next evolution of their work-life strategies. These efforts need to again account for differences that exist across individuals, departments, and geographies. For example, some countries have stronger worker protections than others. Employees in certain geographies (i.e., Asia) often find themselves stretched thin by late night or early morning calls. And, the stigma associated with mental health issues remains stronger in some countries than others.

These geographic differences require companies to strike a balance between global and local needs. In some companies, this takes the form of a consistent, global cultural philosophy but more localized programs. Other companies try to roll out global programs while allowing for tailoring where it makes sense. Regardless of the approach, it is important when developing new programs to seek regional feedback in order to identify where local customization may be required. It is also important to determine who (e.g., HRBPs, compensation and benefits leaders) will be responsible for communication and implementation in the local markets.

Multi-Generational Workforce

Companies are also seeking to respond to the differences that exist across the increasingly multi-generational workforce. À la carte benefits programs, for example, create flexibility for individuals to utilize those benefits that are most relevant to where they are in their lives. A challenge, however, is making people aware of all of the different options that are available to meet their specific work-life needs. Accordingly, some organizations have begun to organize their communications around moments that matter during the employee lifecycle, though the responsibility still largely falls on the employee because it is difficult to know when employees have experienced different life events. Other approaches include creating a more consumer-driven experience where employees are able to opt-in/opt-out of different communications and programs, which can allow for greater personalization and segmentation. Also, several companies have created multi-generational employee resource groups.

Communication

Communication around work-life programs is often disjointed because employees receive information from many different sources. To address this issue, some companies have created an HR communications group to help connect the dots through more consistent branding, messaging, and scheduling. Other approaches include online portals that serve as a one-stop shop for information on work-life programs/policies and well-being champions who help spread the word.

Although more seamless, synergistic communication is needed, participants noted that it is still important to use a multi-pronged communication strategy since different employees gravitate to different channels. Some of the media/methods that companies have found work well include email, Yammer, environmental signage, champions and sponsors, and calendar invites.

Companies have also found that it is important to connect with employees on a personal level. For example, sharing the stories of real colleagues tends to resonate with employees. Also, it is important to provide managers with training and toolkits that enable them to proactively connect people to services when they recognize an issue.

Metrics and Analytics

While companies recognize the value in measuring the impact of their work-life programs, for many this remains more of an aspiration than a reality. The focus to date has often been more on activity than impact. That is, programs are typically assessed based on participation and utilization rates, sometimes supplemented with surveys of employees' reactions. Nonetheless, efforts are underway at a number of companies to link specific programs to impact metrics such as retention, engagement, and performance as well to use well-being dashboards and scorecards to create greater accountability among leaders.



This Summary Report was prepared by Brad Bell for participants of the Work-Life: Current Practices and Future Opportunities Working Group.

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