"Taking a Stand for Balance"
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I am fascinated by the investment Americans make in pursuit of a healthy lifestyle. We are obsessed with weight loss, exercise programs, and reducing the risks of cancer and heart disease. We have fad diets that suddenly emerge and then fade almost as quickly as fashion trends. We pop pills and supplements at a far greater rate than ever before, and invest millions in exercise machines that we use as clothes racks more often than cardio boosters.

One health area that has received some attention in the last ten years, but is still in need of more focus, is stress. Stress is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as, *"A mentally or emotionally disruptive or upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influence and capable of affecting physical health, usually characterized by increased heart rate, a rise in blood pressure, muscular tension, irritability, and depression."* In the past, much attention has been paid to family issues in diagnosing the causes of stress in our lives, while the impact of work was being overlooked. Yet, most of our waking hours are spent working. We have, in fact, finally surpassed Japan and now have the longest work year in the world. The payoff is higher levels of stress. Over the last twenty years, in recognition of the impact of work on our stress and our health, sociologists and psychiatrists have focused their research and attention on the stress that results from interactions among employees, organizations, and work environments.

The Impact of Stress

Today we have a growing database of information about how stress affects us at work, and higher awareness of the implications of stress. We recognize and acknowledge the connection between stress and many chronic diseases. From a survey on workplace stress conducted in the early 1990's by Northwestern National Life Insurance Company, we learn that high stress lowers employee morale and productivity:

- 72% of workers reported experiencing frequent stress-related physical or mental conditions that could increase health costs
- 69% say that high stress levels reduce their productivity on the job
- 39% often think about quitting their jobs due to stress.

In the late 1990's, we began to see that workplace stress had reached epidemic proportions:

- 72% of workers often experience 3 or more stress-related health conditions
- 46% of workers feel their job is very or extremely stressful
- 34% of workers believe they will burn out on the job in the next 1-2 years
- 27% of workers say their job is the single greatest cause of stress in life.

Employee stress and burnout not only have a serious impact on the individuals concerned, but they also have a significant impact on the organization. Stress makes employees feel angry,

resentful, and fed up. These emotions can lead to a loss of job loyalty and a resulting decision to leave the company. The two biggest cost implications for the organization are costly job turnover rates (and the concomitant expenses of hiring and training new employees), and the damaging impact of intellectual capital walking out the door.

The New Map of Adult Life

In addition to the implications of stress at the workplace, the growing population of aging Baby Boomers also brings new demands and expectations to their work and their lives. Gail Sheehy, groundbreaking author of Passages in the 1970's and the more recent book New Passages, an insightful look at our adult progression through middle and late life, tells us that adults begin a second adulthood at about age 45 with very different goals and objectives than our earlier adulthood. According to Sheehy, people in this stage yearn to express meaning in their lives and to follow their passions. Baby Boomers desire to increase learning, take more risks, pioneer new things, and make a meaningful contribution to the world by leaving a legacy. Since Baby Boomers make up a large percentage of people who work, this pattern creates the need for organizations who wish to keep these valued employees to develop innovative ways to accommodate them and allow them to contribute and express themselves in meaningful ways.

Progressive Organizations Take a Stand

Thus, many of today's more forward-thinking organizations recognize that, though there will inevitably be conflicts between the demands of any professional career and an active and rewarding personal life, professional success and personal health need not be mutually exclusive. Progressive firms are providing programs that help employees to strike a balance between the demands of work and life outside the office. Many organizations are pioneering these new programs for all the right reasons – not because this is the hot, sexy topic du jour at the workplace, but because research and insight teach us that these efforts lead to employee satisfaction, loyalty, morale and retention -- all of which have a direct and measurable impact on the organization's bottom line.

In addition to implementing personal leave programs under the landmark legislation passed in the 1990's (the Family and Medical Leave Act) many organizations, such as the international consulting firm Booz, Allen & Hamilton, have created cutting-edge part-time arrangements for employees.

Booz, Allen & Hamilton's work / life balance efforts include flexible work arrangements, job sharing, part-time employment, and flexible scheduling for full-time employees to fulfill personal, family, community, and educational responsibilities. Booz, Allen & Hamilton also offers on-site day care, paid personal leave, parental leave, benefits for domestic partners, and a resource and referral program that provides information on topics ranging from living wills to credit management, legal to financial advice, and finding a nanny to providing pet care.

One of the most ground-breaking and significant work / life commitments we've seen is Booz, Allen & Hamilton's program that allows employees the opportunity to give back to the community through firm-sponsored volunteer activities and pro bono assignments at non-profit organizations. These projects enable employees to accomplish personal objectives through their professional activities.

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There is an ongoing need for innovative programs that facilitate work/life balance. Organizations that seek to enhance their employees' ability to maintain a crucial balance are now taking lifestyle issues into consideration when deciding on new employee policies and programs, because they understand that this approach will reap positive, tangible rewards. Effective employees not only work better, they work smarter. Firms that give work / life balance the high priority it deserves are well on their way to attracting and retaining the best talent, thereby sustaining their advantage on the competitive edge of today's global workplace.

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Sources:

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