



# Doing It Right and Avoiding the Pitfalls in Work-Life Balance

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**Abstract:** *The demand for work-life-balance solutions by employees and managers is expanding at an unprecedented rate. As a result, work-life balance is an increasingly hot topic in boardrooms and government halls today. Over the coming decade it will be one of the most important issues that executives and human resource professionals will be expected to manage.*

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## I. THE TWO LEGS OF THE WORK-LIFE STRATEGY

Until recently, most organizations have taken a one-sided “systems” approach to their work-life efforts. Their focus has been on adopting organization policies, benefits, and procedures to solve the work-life-balance problem. Although helpful, the systems approach overlooks a critical fact: At its core, work-life balance is more an individual issue that affects the organization than it is an organizational issue that affects the individual.

### A. THE LEFT LEG OF YOUR WORK-LIFE STRATEGY--IMPLEMENTATION OPPORTUNITIES:

The systems approach is the left leg of the ladder. If your organization is like most, you have already built a fairly solid left leg. You have health insurance, vacation time, various benefits, and possibly EAP or education programs or flexible work policies. Keep in mind that anything you recommend and implement must be consistent with the business objectives of your organization. Here are ten options for the systems leg of your strategy.

1. Reinforce through better communications what you are already doing. Most companies’ work-life benefits, procedures, and policies are isolated from each other. Pull them together and publicize them as your work-life package. At a minimum, post them on your Web site as a package.
2. Abolish internal Friday-afternoon meetings. With full support from management, this policy alone can bring very quick and positive results.
3. Give a half day off on Fridays if the individual has put in the incremental hours earlier in the week and assuming that no outside customer meetings are scheduled.
4. Endorse working from home one day per week.
5. Offer subsidies for off-site exercise.
6. Create and support athletic teams. Consider underwriting part of the expense.
7. Provide one or two days off with pay for approved community involvement.
8. Create and encourage an annual or quarterly “bring your family to work” day.
9. Establish a “disconnect from work” vacation policy--no cell phones or laptops.
10. Create a more accommodating “on- and off-ramp” policy for those who leave the firm, especially if it is to spend time with family. When they show interest in coming back, make it easy for them to get back on where they left.

### B. A ONE-LEGGED LADDER WON’T STAND UP:

Even with the most comprehensive programs, the systems approach will not stand by itself. With only one leg, your work-life ladder will fall. You won’t be able to climb up to the retention, morale, and revenue rungs you were targeting.

As we mentioned earlier, the right leg is, “What has the individual done for him or herself to create their own best work-life balance?” The lack of a supporting right-leg strategy is why most organizations have failed to achieve the work-like results they desire.



### **C. THE RIGHT LEG OF YOUR WORK-LIFE LADDER--INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES:**

The right leg is essential because the best work-life balance is different for everyone. The best work-life balance for you is different from that for your coworker, or your boss or your neighbor. For some, working long hours creates value and balance in their lives. For others, it is not a routine they can productively or enjoyably maintain.

As a result, for most organizations the key work-life strategy question becomes, “What can we do to support that right leg of individual responsibility, accountability, and action that touches everybody? How do we make sure all managers and individual contributors have the skills and a common language to positively sort it out for themselves?”

## **II. THE “NEXT BIG THING”: DUAL-PURPOSE WORK AND LIFE TRAINING**

Dual-purpose learning is education that applies both to learners’ on-the-job lives and to their off-the-job lives. It has proven to be the quickest way to accomplish the organization’s most critical work objectives and the individual’s work-life balance objectives simultaneously.

Once you make the strategy commitment, implementation can be relatively easy. The HR professional can take the role of change-agent champion who secures commitment to the strategy. Or the HR professional can coordinate the implementation or actually deliver the training. You can also bring a solution recommendation to the attention of senior executives or work-life teams who request work-life answers.

### **A. HOW TO IMPLEMENT DUAL-PURPOSE TRAINING:**

Here are steps you can take to implement dual-purpose work-life training successfully into your organization. You do not need to implement all of the steps to produce a successful program, but being aware of them can be helpful as you continue your program over time.

1. Search out and evaluate the training alternatives. They include:
  - a) Internal development and delivery of a work-life training program. Do you have the knowledgeable internal resources and time?
  - b) Outsource the training to a proven vendor. Excellent, cost-effective options exist. Be sure to check references carefully and that the firm specializes and has proven success in the field.
  - c) Trainer certification: external content, internal delivery. Certify your internal trainers to deliver and coordinate a proven external work-life educational program.
2. Make sure the training you plan is “dual purpose” and practical. The skills that your program teaches must affect job performance and off-the job value and balance. This point is critical. The right leg of your strategy is not just awareness training. It is practical, how- to training that works both on and off the job. A discussion of theories or concepts will not successfully accomplish the objective. The learning should focus on practical tools that produce immediate results during the training, both personal and professional.
3. Find a co-champion to support your efforts. It may be a senior executive. Sometimes there is more pain and thus more demand in pockets such as finance, IT or sales. If so, partner with that department’s manager in running a pilot.
4. Run a dual-purpose training pilot. Select attendees from different areas of the company or deliver to your champion’s group. Address their needs and build a success story that makes the business and budget case for a larger rollout.
5. Secure senior management’s full buy-in and support. Expose senior management to the training early and get their endorsement and support. Real support means they will participate in one of the early training sessions, encourage the use of the tools, and lend their signatures to e-mails and notices promoting it.
6. Select and train the trainer(s) to do the rollout. Within your firm, HR professionals, trainers, members of the work-life team, and interested line managers and executives can all be good choices for trainer certification.
7. Start your training rollout with managers. Bosses are the number-one reason people quit, and the top complaints about bosses are work-life issues. As a result, whenever possible, train all your people managers first. Improving supervisors’ and managers’ skill sets has the widest and fastest impact.
8. Cascade to employees in a time frame that works for your trainers and budget resources. By delivering the same skill set to employees that you delivered to managers, you create a common tool set and work-life language to get things done more effectively on the job and create more individual value and balance off the job.
9. Put out a monthly work-life newsletter. As part of your ongoing educational program, a monthly newsletter demonstrates more than a one-time commitment to work-life balance within your organization.
10. Use multiple delivery venues. Doing so creates and reinforces the common language. Most important, it drives an ongoing positive perception about your organization’s commitment to work-life balance. Work-life firms have existing packages to support your efforts. You can run multiple delivery venues internally or externally with very limited administrative time or costs. Delivery venues include:
  - a) Live delivery



- b) On-demand Web training
- c) Access to Web training for family members
- d) Monthly newsletter
- e) E-mail prompts

Work-Life education replaces separate work- training and life-benefit efforts with one approach that delivers key elements of both. The result is that both the work training and the life benefit are implemented more effectively and for a fraction of the costs, greatly expanding the impact of training and benefits budgets.

Work-life training is the right leg--the individual side of your work-life strategy ladder. It puts the responsibility and skill set in the hands of each individual to create his or her own best work-life balance.

#### REFERENCES

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