

The New Buzz on Work-Life



Damilola Akinduro and Njideka Enetanya

Work-life balance remains a topic of interest in the field of rewards. Some believe that the term work-life balance is the allocation of equal amounts of time to paid work and non-work activities. Also, the term “work-life balance” implies a separation of work and life and seems to imply that the two worlds are not meant to collide.

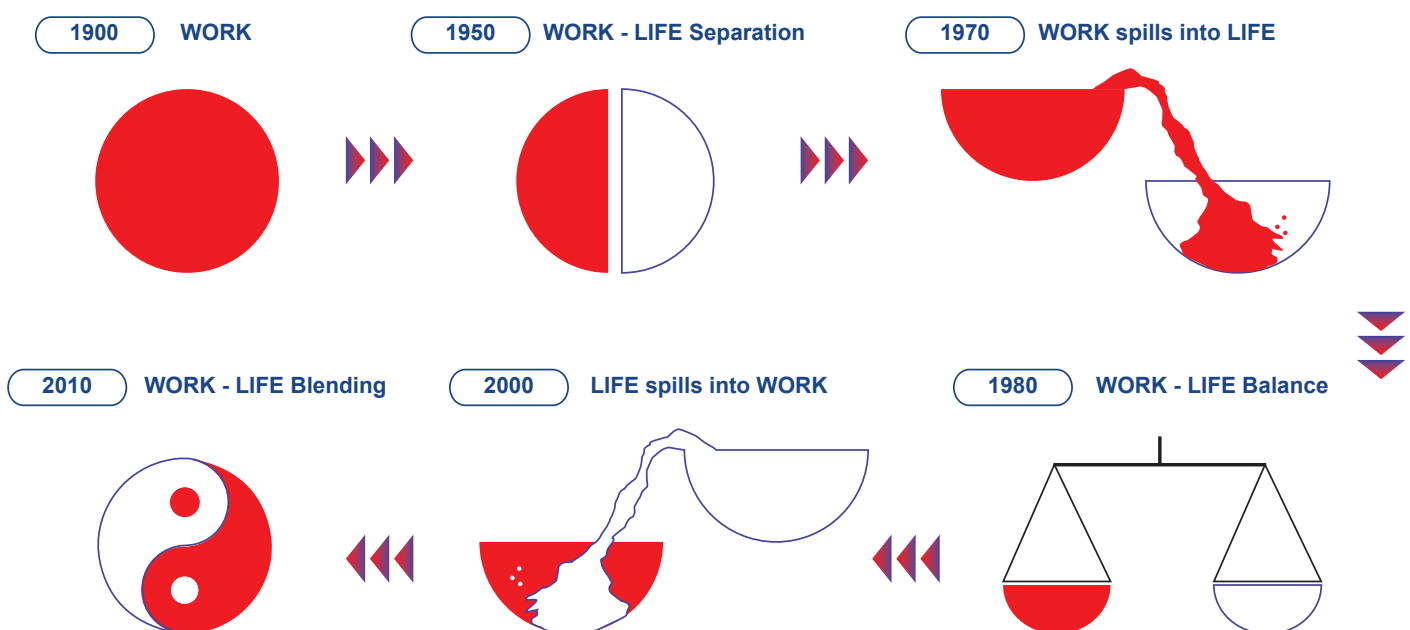
Employees now view this concept as archaic and unachievable, and this has increased pressure on employers and reward practitioners to come up with winning integrative initiatives, to meet employees changing expectations.

This article covers the history and evolution of work-life balance, strengths and weaknesses of the traditional work-life initiatives, the new work-life balance and its associated downsides.

History & Evolution of Work-Life Balance

The term work-life balance may have been coined as a result of the concerns and desires of women to raise a family, whilst also having meaningful careers. Recent studies by the UK Office for National Statistics have shown a rise in the percentage of female workers over the past 40 years relative to their male counterparts. However, changes in the workforce have not only been in terms of demographics, but also globalisation and fluidity in movement across various regions. The resultant effect has led to a change in expectation in terms of work-life balance.

The evolution of work-life balance is illustrated below:



Source: www.ribbonfarm.com

Traditional Work-Life Initiatives - Strengths and Weaknesses

Traditional Work-Life Initiatives	Strengths	Weaknesses
Flexible Work Arrangement – (fixed number of hours but flexible timing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees have the right to decide their work hours Reduces stress levels by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> reducing commuting time to and fro work increasing opportunity for rest, before and after standard work hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standard work hours remain unchanged and may not reduce work load Conflicting work schedules may have a negative impact on work, in a team-based environment
Flexible Work Arrangement – (reduced work time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces commuting time to and fro work Reduces employee burnout due to work overload Employees have time for other personal interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced employee earnings May affect promotion and performance Organisational culture may not support the adoption of reduced work time arrangements
Gym / Fitness Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saves time otherwise spent during weekends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees may be exhausted after work to utilize the facilities Timing may not suit individual preferences
Crèche	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Solves the dilemma of childcare and creates emotional stability for nursing parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased cost Reduces mother-child bonding



A Case for Review

In addition to the weaknesses of the traditional work-life initiatives, the case for change borders around the fact that work-life balance implies that employees' life should be on hold during the conventional "8 to 5" work hours and vice-versa, thus creating a sense of competition between work and life. Also, typical work-life propositions cannot possibly address all employee groups or categories. For instance, the core areas of employees' life which they wish to "balance" may be sports, entertainment, and other personal interests, which may differ from an employer's proposition.



The New Buzz on Work-Life

The new phrase is "work-life integration," where

professionals have to blend what they do personally and professionally. Work-Life Integration is an approach that allows more synergies among all areas that define "work" and "life".

Millennials have started to embrace this paradigm shift. Most people now try to attend to personal matters while at work and vice versa. With the help of technology and social media platforms, people can easily interact with the outside world, whilst at work.

Trending work-life integration initiatives hover around flexibility in location, as discussed in the table below:

Trending Work-Life Integration Initiatives	Comments
 <p>"Work at Home"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is fast gaining popularity in the workplace. Some companies in Nigeria have adopted this initiative but the majority are cautious, as this may have an adverse effect on business results, if not properly managed. In Nigeria, "work-at-home" is mostly targeted at specific days of the week, to enable employees integrate work and life responsibilities • In the global space, "work-at-home" jobs are now available to employees. Unlike local practices, this is contractual and it gives employees the flexibility they desire
 <p>"Work Anywhere"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This includes working from locations other than the home, such as regional or area offices • It is a shift from the rigid definition of a work environment. Virtual offices or the use of technology interfaces have made it easy for business activities to be carried out, whilst having reduced face time with supervisors • It is believed that this will reduce the emotional pressure in the work place and allow flexibility

Possible Downsides to Work-Life Integration

- Stress related issues may not be solved, integrating work and life
- The boundaries between family and career may be further blurred
- Risk of "workaholism"
- Lack of trust between employer and employee may stifle execution of initiatives
- Potential abuse by employees

Conclusion

Today's professionals are not only interested in intellectually challenging work, but also in finding work environments that are flexible enough to accommodate personal life needs and interests.

To attain an edge in talent recruitment and retention, organisations have to recognise that meeting the wide range of needs from employees across their various life stages can be achieved through work-life initiatives. This can be a strategic business tool for win-win outcomes in the current competitive business environment.

However, the success of work-life integration programmes is dependent on creating an atmosphere of trust, with the responsibility for work-life integration shared among all related parties.

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Contact Us

Bukunmi Olaniyonu

M: 0703 071 9141

E: bukunmi.olaniyonu@ng.kpmg.com

Nneka Jethro-Iruobe

M: 0808 313 3012

E: nneka.jethro-iruobe@ng.kpmg.com

Oludolapo Ogunkanmi

M: 0803 853 7737

E: oludolapo.ogunkanmi@ng.kpmg.com

Boluwaji Apanpa

M: 0706 417 1642

E: boluwaji.apanpa@ng.kpmg.com

Nike Yomi-Faseun

M: 0803 402 1044

E: nike.yomi-faseun@ng.kpmg.com

Adewale Ajayi

M: 0803 402 1014

E: adewale.ajayi@ng.kpmg.com

www.kpmg.com/ng

kpmg.com/socialmedia

