

Work-Life Balance: Time for a Change

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According to conventional wisdom, protecting work-life balance represents a key feature of stress prevention. Other widely accepted attributes of a 'good job' include having comfortable working conditions, such as fair pay, fair treatment, good welfare provision, a suitable balance between being "stretched" without being over-stretched, and social capital [1]. The latter implies a value in social networks that is separate, for example, from monetary gain from work. Implicit in these attributes is an assumption that there is some stability in the relationship between the employer and employee. Going forward, trends towards increased globalisation and technological advances could make it increasingly more difficult to maintain the classical attributes of a 'good job', not least because of greater flux in the job market [1,2] and more transient working.

A proliferation of temporary contracts and more remote working might mean that there is less incentive for one party to look out for the long term interests of the other, and less opportunity to immerse a worker into the culture of an organisation. Established convention on what constitutes effective line management [3] will have to adapt to the more impersonal nature of remote working. An expectation of 24/7 availability and more complex health needs, both within the workforce and amongst their dependents, could also heighten the intensity of demands experienced by a given worker.

By way of raising awareness of what needs to be done to respond to these challenges, a recent meeting of the Partnership for European Research in Occupational Safety and Health's (PEROSH) Wellbeing Group [4] concluded that protecting good jobs in the future will require greater self-management by, and empowerment of, workers to proactively manage 'instant access' expectations and choose terms and conditions that suit their personal circumstances. It will also necessitate greater flexibility by employers to accommodate the health needs of their workforce and their dependents as well as clearer exposition of the benefits of their doing so. Similarly, protecting good jobs will require:

exploration of the interface between home and work; recognition that work importantly contributes to who we are and how we, and others, perceive ourselves; understanding that a supportive home life hugely benefits work; inclusion of 'good job' terms and conditions into temporary contracts as standard, and a need for the trade union movement to adapt to more flux in the job market and amongst the workers they represent.

The PEROSH Wellbeing Group also identified that the boundaries between work life and home become increasingly more indistinct, the ability to protect time away from work responsibilities, as a concept and coping strategy, is likely to become increasingly difficult as a consequence of the times in which we live. The interests of workers may be better served by employers, occupational health professionals and related experts alike, if a switch in emphasis was made towards reframing a 'good job' as one that allows a fulfilling life by blending positive attributes from both work and home life, and not by keeping these two parts of life totally separate.

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