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# Now, firms stress on time out, counselling to raise productivity

Experts say a fierce competitive business environment is leading to higher stress levels at the workplace, and this may lead to a decline in efficiency

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A 35-year-old middle-level manager at information technology company **HCL Technologies Ltd** was finding it hard to juggle the demands made on her at the workplace and by her 10-year-old son, who suffers from attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. The high level of stress was impacting both her work and personal life. Fortunately, help was at hand, in the form of a counsellor provided by her employer. The executive says she has sought help several times in the last one year.

The fierce competitive business environment—where chasing tough targets often results in employees compromising their personal lives for work—is leading to extremely high stress levels at the workplace. And this, say experts, may be counterproductive for companies because stress usually leads to a decline in efficiency levels.

Surveys show that work-life imbalance is leading to a sharp rise in lifestyle diseases and low morale among staff, which threatens a company's growth. According to a study released by New Delhi-based economic think tank, the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (Icrier), in September 2007—it surveyed 81 companies across sectors—organizations annually lose around 14% of their working days due to ill health. Reducing just one health risk increases an employee's on-the-job productivity by 9% and cuts absenteeism by 2%.

Several leading companies, particularly multinational firms with policies in place globally, are making an effort to help employees attain a balance between work and their personal lives.

Many firms, however, are yet to realize the criticality of this need at a time when the new pressures imposed by globalization are accentuating work-life imbalance.

Soft drinks company **PepsiCo India Holdings Pvt. Ltd** recently introduced an employee assistance programme (EAP) dubbed Pepcare. It has hired Hong Kong-based **Human Dynamic Asia Pacific Ltd** (HDAP) to counsel employees and their immediate family members on issues such as stress, handling dissension and challenges in personal and professional relationships.

The company says it went ahead and engaged professionals after it found, in internal employee satisfaction surveys, that managing multiple priorities was a common challenge among staff. "We decided to outsource the counselling part of our work-life initiative because professionals are better equipped to coach on work-life imbalances," says Pavan Bhatia, executive director, human resources (HR), PepsiCo India. "Also, people find it easier to discuss personal—even if they are related to work—issues with strangers."

Pepsico's other work-life initiatives include a "no meeting" policy on Mondays and Fridays for outstation employees, so that they don't have to spend time travelling during weekends. Also, the sales and marketing teams have to leave early on Wednesdays—just to provide a mid-week break. To ensure compliance, the company decided on a Rs500 fine for violations.

HCL Technologies last year engaged a leading EAP provider, **PPC UK Ltd**, for its work-life balance programme called MITR. PPC has a team of in-house experts comprising psychologists and a network of affiliates, including practising clinical psychologists, counsellors and psychiatrists. The telephonic helpline service is available 24 hours, all year round. The issues covered under the programme include relationship problems, dealing with difficult situations, adapting to a new work or social environment, substance-related disorders, abuse or neglect, examination stress, and anxiety.

PepsiCo and HCL Technologies are not alone. There are other companies, such as **Essar Group**, **Johnson and Johnson**, **JPMorgan Chase and Co.**, **Dow Chemical Co.**, **Credit Suisse**, **Merrill Lynch and Co. Inc.**, **Freescall Semiconductor India Pvt. Ltd** and **Computer Sciences Corp. India Pvt. Ltd**, that have engaged professionals to help employees manage stress.

The service providers hired by organizations range from companies present in multiple geographies, including the UK-based **ICAS International Holdings Ltd**, the US-based **PPC Worldwide** and HDAP, to home-grown companies such as Bangalore-based firm **1to1help.net Pvt. Ltd**, and New Delhi-based **Empower and SantulanEAP**.

Company investments on EAP programmes can vary from Rs350-450 per employee annually for a basic programme—which includes numerous email and telephone consultations and around five face-to-face sessions—to Rs750-1,000 per employee annually for an advanced programme that includes outplacement consultation for employees to deal with stress related to layoffs and services provided to employees at critical times (for example, stress debriefing sessions in the event of deaths and accidents).

"We see an upward trend of Indian companies wanting to provide work-life coaching services for their employees," says Geeta Chaturvedi, regional manager, **Human Dynamic India Pvt. Ltd**. "Since 2003, Human Dynamic has seen increasing demand for its services in India due to growing needs," she adds. Human Dynamic reaches out to over 70,000 people—employees and their families—in India.

Explaining the need for work-life programmes, HR managers say organizations that are low on energy cannot have a competitive advantage. Therefore, it is important to have an energized workforce. "Organizations need to realize that employees become more productive and remain motivated when employers allow them to have a life beyond work," says Prabir Jha, global head of HR at **Dr Reddy's Laboratories Ltd**.

Adil Malia, group president of HR at Essar Group, says: "Work is a reality of modern life, and quality of life is the purpose of living. What we need to do is help employees strike a balance between purpose and reality." Robust work-life programmes have a positive impact on employee morale and lead to better employee engagement, lower attrition and enhanced productivity, adds Malia.

At the steel and logistics company, two teams work on work-life initiatives that aim at building communities around hobbies, interests, lifestyle and leisure activities, or CHILL. Currently, around 40% of Essar's more than 3,000 employees in Mumbai are availing of counselling services.

While HR managers are united on the business imperative of promoting work-life balance, not everyone is in agreement on the need for work-life coaching by a service provider.

"This is about psychological contract and not strategy consulting," says Mala Bali, vice-president of HR at **HT Media Ltd**, which also publishes *Mint* and *Campaign*. "We are talking about our people and our managers who are so involved and hands-on with their teams that even we in HR are there to really support and enable them. We don't feel the need for an external employee assistance programme," she adds.

Bali says that since people in HT Media work to different time slots, the company is conscious of offering varied working flexibility as the roles demand. This includes a selective sabbatical policy so that people can take time off to relax, unwind and pursue their individual passions. From this year, the company plans to make leave mandatory for all employees as part of one of its affirmative actions towards encouraging work-life balance.

Experts say that despite the growing recognition among companies in India of the importance of work-life balance, many are yet to buy into the criticality of its need. Such programmes are limited mostly to multinationals, which have policies on work-life that they replicate across geographies. Experts say that India is not yet ready—economic development is perceived as being more important than social well-being and people issues, they add.

The Icrier study shows that though the country's rapid economic expansion has increased profits and employee incomes, it has also led to a rise in workplace stress and lifestyle diseases that few Indian companies have addressed. "Companies targeting employer of choice awards symbolically practise work-life balance," says Ganesh Shermon, partner and head of human capital advisory service at **KPMG India**. "These are mostly information technology and new age companies. Many IT companies try hard to articulate such practices."

Agrees Shveta Kumaria, head of operations at PPC Worldwide India, "For some companies, it is just a tick in the box as they are an MNC and it is part of their global policy requirements. They would rather go by the traditional group method of handling work-life balance, which is the training/workshop methodology." Also, they do not recognize that not being able to prioritize work-life is as much an individual issue as it is a skills issue, and generic workshops are not an answer, Kumaria adds.

Increasing globalization and the resultant productivity pressures, which are further skewing the notions of productivity and efficiency, are in fact undermining progressive policies in the workplace. "Emerging forms of work,

and the way in which work is organized within the workplace and beyond, has made work-life balance very difficult to maintain," says J. John, editor of *Labour File*, a journal of labour and economic affairs. The structural nuances of work are embedded in corporate values and not in individuals, as one would like to believe. "In fact, notions of efficiency and an individual's contribution to the organization get drilled right from the level of professional education."

So, even in the West, the intensity of work rivals that of countries such as India or China and, despite the fact that Western countries have been early adopters of work-life balance initiatives, systemic changes have been tardy, say experts.

In fact, work is intensifying, they observe. "Work is now being extracted through technology, and flexible working arrangements are often associated with more work because one is simultaneously handling chores and office assignments," says John. He adds, "By removing the distinction between work and life, the theory of work-life balance is challenged." Thus, most times, work-life programmes are going to be actually symbolic because the idea is to see that these imbalances are accommodated and not really removed, adds John.

The consensus is that an overemphasis on economics has led to an overall decline in the well-being of human capital. Experts say what is compounding these problems is the current limited thinking on the issue. In fact, most often, successful employees are workaholics or ambitious to the extent that they don't hesitate to sacrifice their personal lives, say psychologists. "It is distressing to see an increasing number of professionals in the age group of 35-40 experiencing burnout," says Bhavna Barmi, senior clinical psychologist and a consultant at Escorts Heart Institute and Research Centre in New Delhi. "The number of professionals coming to us with problems resulting from work-related stress has gone up by more than 50% in the last 10 years."

Emphasizing the need for work-life coaching, Barmi says: "There is a pressing need for training and workshops on work-life balance, lifestyle and stress management, given the frightening pace of increase in lifestyle diseases, stress and relationship problems (that) employees are suffering ."

Earlier, children would take elderly parents, suffering from diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, to the doctor. Now, it is the other way round as lifestyle diseases strike young professionals in their most productive years.