

Wellness@BCTF

November 2007

Bike/bus combo to go

Dale Costanzo has found an innovative way to get around town. Her new bicycle weighs a very manageable 26 pounds and folds down to the size of a collapsed stroller. This portability allows Dale to transport her bike on the sky train and buses at peak hours. When she combines public transportation and her own pedal power in getting to work, Dale shaves fifteen minutes off her regular transit time, and burns a few calories along the route!



"Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face."

—Victor Hugo

Work-life balance and employee wellbeing

Synopsis of a presentation by Dr. Linda Duxbury
(Carleton University)

I recently had the privilege of attending a half-day presentation given by Dr. Linda Duxbury, Canada's leading expert on the topic of work-life balance. Dr. Duxbury has been actively involved in researching work-life balance for more than 20 years. She is on top of the very latest statistics and trends in this area and guides PhD students in completing their theses on issues related to work-life balance. Given her background, I was not surprised that her talk was very informative, but her lively and engaging style was a big bonus.

Introduction

Dr. Linda Duxbury had come from Ottawa to address a group of approximately 150 men and women, mostly municipal public sector employees, on why organizations need to take action now to reduce work-life conflict in their firms. Although work-life balance has been a serious issue for more than a decade, little has been done so far to address these problems. Using Duxbury's metaphor, standing still is no longer an option; we are at the edge of a precipice and must address the burgeoning increase in work-life conflict and role overload. We must act not only in the interest of the individual's physical and mental health, but also in the interest of the organization, and in the interest of our already overburdened health system.

Summary of the issues

The workplace challenges that we need to be addressing, according to Duxbury, are "role overload," "work to family conflict," "family to work conflict." Role overload is defined as "having too much to do in the amount of time allocated to do it." Work to family conflict, as the term suggests, is when work responsibilities negatively impact one's relationship with family. Family to work conflict occurs when family illness or other crises prevent one from meeting work responsibilities.

According to Duxbury's figures, almost 60% of employees report high levels of role overload. This in turn is the #1 predictor of prescription drug use in Canada with Prozac being the most prescribed drug.

Work to family conflict, as Duxbury points out, rose from about 25% to 30% over the decade from 1991 to 2001 and has been continuing to rise ever since. This has resulted in increased levels of job stress, depression, burnout, and physical illness, as well as higher rates of absenteeism and lower levels of engagement at work.

Family to work conflict has also risen from 3% to 12% over the same decade (1991-2001), is currently on the rise, and is expected to increase dramatically in the years to come as elder care becomes an even bigger issue, particularly among “boomer” employees.

Why has work-life conflict spiralled out of control?

There are a number of reasons postulated as to why work-life conflict has become such a major issue in today’s workplaces. In exploring these reasons, Duxbury first examines the myth that has spawned many poor workplace policies—the myth that work and family are separate domains that bear no relationship to each other. Recognizing that the two spheres are inextricably entwined and what affects one will affect the other is the first step in dealing with the issue of work-life conflict.

Workforce demographics is also a factor Duxbury highlights, pointing out our increased need for dependent care including child care, elder care, and for some unfortunate individuals, both of these.

An area that Duxbury spends a significant amount of time discussing is that of organizational cultures. She scorns the fact some workplaces have an implicit belief that more hours equals more commitment or higher productivity. Her data, much of it derived from Statistics Canada reports, show the exact opposite is true.

Technology has also played a large role in exacerbating work-life conflict, a phenomenon with which most of us can relate. Many employees now receive huge volumes of e-mail, and along with this comes the expectation that they will be answered immediately. In some cases, there

is the further expectation that employees be connected and available 24/7.

What makes work-life conflict an even bigger issue for employers today?

As if these soaring work-life conflict issues were not challenge enough for individuals and organizations, they are set against a backdrop of the tightest labour market since the 1950s, escalating retirement numbers, plummeting birth rates nation-wide and globally, an aging population, and fierce global competition for skilled workers.

In Canada, over the past 25 years the labour force has grown by about 226,000 per year, but by 2016 a zero annual growth rate is expected. We will need to have a huge increase in immigration to offset this yet this is unlikely to happen as fertility rates in many countries are even lower than Canada’s 1.5 (data from 2003).

What would be the cost of doing nothing?

The costs of not addressing work-life conflict in the workplace are 3-pronged. There are the costs to the employee in terms of increased stress, depression, burnout, and physical illness. There are the costs to the organization which include dissatisfied and disengaged employees, higher absenteeism, increased medical benefit costs, and the costs of recruiting and training new employees. Finally, there is the cost to our health system. Duxbury estimates that high role overload costs \$1.8 billion in doctors’ visits, \$4 billion for in-patient hospital stays, and a quarter of a billion dollars for emergency department visits. While the dollar figure for

drugs prescribed to employees suffering from work-related stress and depression was not quoted in Duxbury’s presentation, it seems reasonable to assume that this would also amount to billions of dollars. It is simply unsustainable.

What can be done to turn things around?

Flexibility in the workplace is key. However, in addition to policies and contract language allowing for flexible hours, telecommuting, etc., the organization must also ensure that managers and supervisors are supportive of strategies aimed at reducing work-life conflict. In this regard, Duxbury presented data to show that having a supportive manager was linked with higher job satisfaction, less job stress, less absenteeism, higher organizational commitment, and better physical and mental health.

A healthy organizational culture is essential in bringing about change in the area of work-life conflict. According to Duxbury, a healthy organizational culture is one that values employees and provides flexibility where possible. Furthermore, this value is communicated throughout the organization with managers and supervisors being encouraged to provide flexibility to the employees they manage.

Problematic organizational cultures, as Duxbury describes them in her presentation, include those that continue to add more work and responsibilities to employees’ workloads; those that are very hierarchical; those whose main focus is on money or the bottom line; those that fail to put policies into practice; those that expect employees to be connected and available 24/7;

and those that tend to be reactive rather than proactive.

Rather than hanging on to these dysfunctional cultural beliefs and practices, Duxbury suggests treating employees respectfully. She says, "give them responsibility, show you trust them, give them a say in things that matter to them, and listen to them."

Overall, Linda Duxbury enlightened us with some startling statistics and trends. She discussed the key factors that have brought us to where we are today, with a majority of the working population suffering from role overload, and skyrocketing increases in mental illness and prescription drug use.

She then placed these factors against the backdrop of today's economic climate and labour market, thus illustrating the imperative of recognizing the seriousness of the issue and taking action. In so doing, she urged us to look at the staggering cost attached to ignoring the problem.

Finally, Duxbury gave us hope that we could turn things around through the implementation of flexible workplace policies, such as flexible hours and telecommuting, developing healthy organizational cultures, and treating employees as the valuable assets they are.

Personal note:

I found Dr. Linda Duxbury's presentation not only very enlightening but also personally rewarding as she gave a huge amount of acknowledgement to the struggles we face daily in trying to balance our work, family, and personal needs. Thanks to everyone who helped make my attendance possible.

—Glynis Andersson

EFAP

The **Employee and Family Assistance Program** offers confidential counseling services 24 hours per day for you and your extended family. The following are just some of the problems they can help with:

- Family and marital relationships
- Work and personal/family balance
- Personal and emotional difficulties
- Depressions, anxiety and stress
- Workplace stress
- Alcoholism and drug dependency
- Grief and bereavement issues
- Childcare/eldercare issues
- Legal and financial concerns
- Health and diet planning

Check out their informative and interesting website:

www.fgiworldmembers.com

Username: bctf

Password: bctf001

or call: (English) 1-800-268-5211

or (French) 1-800-363-3872.

—Dale Costanzo



Diabetic screening news

"The good news is that soon doctors will be able to read your blood sugar levels by merely shining a light on your forearm. A new device called Scout measures collagen changes and the amount of blood sugar by-products in your skin."

—Source: Prevention, March 2007, p.34.

Don't cough into your hands!

"The viruses that cause the common cold and the flu are spread in several ways, the most obvious being human contact. So obviously one of the easiest ways to keep from getting sick is to avoid being in contact with anyone who is sick.

"But human contact is not the only way you can catch a cold or the flu. In fact, an easier and more prevalent way to pick up germs has nothing to do with being near someone who is coughing or sneezing. Cold and flu viruses can live for hours on the fingers of sick people, but they can live for days on any other surface those fingers might have touched.

"For example, in the office there are hundreds of places germs can take up residence—door handles, computer keyboards, telephones, file cabinets, and any other surface shared by more than one person.

"However, no disinfectant in the world can replace the benefits of good old fashioned hand washing, which is one of the best ways to avoid spreading germs.

"If you do get sick, there are a couple of important things to remember to help ensure that you don't infect anyone else. Most importantly, cover your sneezes and coughs, but not with your hands—sneeze into your bent arm or elbow instead. Better yet, stay home if you're sick, especially if you're coughing or sneezing."

—submitted by Vanessa Terrel
Excerpted from <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/preventing-colds-flu-simple-wash-hands.html>

Did you know?

“In Sweden, a test market in the council of Tanum is recycling urine for use as fertilizer on farms. All new homes in the area are required by law to have special toilets that separate urine and pipe it into a holding tank that farmers access at regular intervals.

“Experts say this is better for the environment because the special toilets use less water. And less energy is utilized at treatment facilities.

“Most importantly, human urine has the most concentrated source of phosphorus, which is a vital ingredient in agricultural fertilizer. Tell that to the neighbour with the great lawn.”

—Source: www.cbc.ca/news/goinggreen/reusing-water.html



BCTF Wellness Committee Members

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The contents of this newsletter are intended to encourage better health decisions, not to provide medical advice. Please consult a qualified health professional before embarking on any new diet or exercise regime.

A daily dose of chocolate

Health food or fattening indulgence?

Dark chocolate contains the antioxidant epicatechin, a plant flavonoid which is also found in tea, red wine, and various fruits and vegetables. (Flavonoids benefit your body by attacking free radicals—the generally bad stuff that causes cell damage, leading to heart disease, strokes and cancer). Consuming small, regular amounts of dark chocolate (with a cocoa content of 70% or more) may lower LDL (bad) cholesterol levels, reduce the risk of blood clots, and reduce hypertension.

Plant flavonoids contribute to colour. Accordingly, the darker the chocolate, the higher the level of flavonoids. Three-quarters of an ounce of dark chocolate contains about the same amount of flavonoids as a glass of red wine. Milk proteins appear to bind to these antioxidant qualities, blocking absorption by the body. Accordingly, milk and white chocolate do not contain beneficial amounts of flavonoids, and consuming a glass of milk with your dark chocolate will negate the health benefits of the dark chocolate.

The fat in dark chocolate comes from cocoa butter, which is equal parts oleic acid (heart-healthy monounsaturated fat), stearic acid (a somewhat heart-neutral fat, which may lower LDL), and palmitic acid (a saturated fat, which will raise LDL).

The bad news about chocolate, of course, is that it is high in calories. Adding a 1-ounce bar to your daily diet will pack approximately 150 calories into your waistline. That can quickly reverse any health benefits! If you do indulge in a square or two a day, make sure you offset the extra calories. And please remember that fair-trade chocolate is generally available.

—Karen Steel

HeartMath fitness tip

The Institute of HeartMath is a great information organization for research linking emotions and “heart-brain communication” (www.heartmath.org/).

In one of their recent newsletters, they offered a “HeartMath Fitness Tip”—which you might enjoy:

“When you’re exercising, choose an attitude you want to carry with you during the day. Before you start your exercise, take a minute to focus on the feeling of that attitude. An example would be if you want to have an attitude of “ease” through your day, focus on what it feels like when you are moving through your day effortlessly, handling whatever comes up during the day with clear thoughts and a balanced feeling inside.

“While holding that feeling in your heart, you can then start breathing that attitude and carry the attitude and feeling with you into your workout routine and for the rest of the day.”

Happy heart-filled exercising!

—Nancy Hinds