

# Life balance is becoming a priority

By Harold Taylor

A front page article in the July 5, 1997 issue of the *Toronto Star* by Steven Theobald was headed "Canadians burning the midnight oil - for free." Putting in overtime is apparently due to recession-induced downsizing and an attempt to retain employment in a competitive market. But a backlash is on the horizon.

No longer are people willing to come to work an hour early, salute the company flag, and put in 12 hours at the office before dragging a briefcase full of paperwork home. Increasingly in seminars during the past few years I have heard people indicate that a balanced life is their top priority. Dissatisfaction with work time infringing on family time is common. Employees don't seem to mind a heavy workload, as long as that workload does not put their health and family time at risk.

At first I thought this might be primarily the baby boomers talking. Having worked hard, educated their children, and paid off the bulk of their mortgages, they were now interested in enjoying the balance of their lives. Yet studies don't support this. Management consultants Coopers & Lybrand interviewed 1200 students at 30 universities around the world. The survey showed that these young people are not interested in working themselves to death climbing the corporate ladder. Rather, the report summarized by Adam Myers in the April 7, 1997 issue of the *Toronto Star*, indicated that young people also want a balanced lifestyle and a rewarding life outside of work, with plenty of time for themselves and their families.

CEO's are already aware of this trend. Kelly King, President of Southern National Corporation, remarked during an interview at the 1996 National Speaker's Association convention, that he was concerned about the "decay of the work ethic in our society." He claimed that a 40 hour work week might have been okay 20 years ago, but that today their officers are expected to work 50, 60 plus hours per week. He is worried that the future generation will not be willing to make that kind of commitment.

His worry is well founded. Fewer people are willing to put in the number of hours that many senior executives seem to feel is warranted. But is this laziness? I thought the work ethic referred to the belief that one had to work for a living, not the belief that one had to live for work. Workaholism is not an ethic; it is a disease. You can still be ambitious, goal-oriented and productive without working 60 or more hours per week. In fact, the American Productivity and Quality Center concluded from a survey that overtime is not worth the effort for managers. Eighty-five percent of those polled said it's not cost effective, since after ten straight hours of work, fatigue sets in and productivity plummets. Working lunch

hours makes the situation worse.

Corporate employees are as interested in being effective in their personal lives as they are in managing their workload. Although the emphasis in my seminars is on the work environment, participants seem extremely interested in time management away from the office as well. Topics such as packrat tendencies, organizing housework, the personal organizer for home use, closet control generate extreme interest as well. This is not surprising when you consider that thousands of people in North America make their living or a partial living helping others organize their homes, closets and finances. In fact, the National Association of Professional Organizers, headquartered in Austin, Texas, boasts over 800 members who do just that.

To attract good people and to motivate existing employees, companies should take a good look at personal development programs that address all aspects of people's lives. Time management should not be limited to time on the job, but time away from the office as well. Chris Knight, writing in the June 16, 1997 issue of *Canadian HR Reporter*, believes that companies are beginning to recognize this: "The balance between work and family life is one that many companies are beginning to recognize contributes ultimately to their workers' happiness and productivity."

In the past, companies have been able to overcome ineffective work habits, poor time management practices and obsolete methods simply by working longer hours. This will no longer be possible. "Working smarter, not harder" is no longer a time management platitude, it is an organizational necessity. Personal productivity becomes even more critical as the 70-hour-per-week executives step down, possibly due to poor health, and are replaced by 40-hour-per-week executives who are determined to keep their lives in balance. Mathematics tell us that they will have to be ultra effective in order for the company to remain competitive. And time-saving technology will become even more important.

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