

Work Life Blending During Covid 19: Challenges And Remedies For Organizations During Tough Times

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Abstract:

The unexpected Covid 19 pandemic has left everyone in a state of devastation and despair. Fear, uncertainty, insecurity is on rise amongst the masses. Many people have lost their lives and many have lost their livelihoods. The atmosphere around is not very promising as presently no one can say when the life will come back to normal. The conventional systems are challenged everywhere there is a demand for keeping the systems ready for future pandemics too. In this scenario there are certain lessons this pandemic has taught and pushed everyone towards a different life which itself pushes one towards stress. The paper focuses on the analysis of the scope for work life blending, the causes of stress due to new working conditions and some recommendations for organizations to reap the benefits of technology in the form of work life blending practices.

Keywords: Pandemic, Work-life, Stress

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I. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 Pandemic or Corona Virus has hit the large part of globe most unanticipatedly. Since its outbreak in Wuhan, scientists are still struggling to understand and predict its relationship with the environmental factors, the virus structure and for effective control and vaccination for the virus. Due to novel nature of virus and no certain medication available the governments are forced to protect their citizens by lockdowns and quarantines across the globe. (Hamzelou, 2020). As of now India has witnessed 6.39 million cases so far and almost 1 million deaths have been reported.* Experts are also predicting a bigger impact of Covid in coming months in the winter season as studies suggest that virus spread at faster pace in cold atmosphere as compared to warm climate. (Bloom, Feshbach et al., 2013). In India also as months from October to February are colder than the rest part of year, the expert from health and medical are predicting a worse scenario.

The last eight months in India from Ending of March to beginning of October have been very challenging for public at large, for corporations and for government.

This is a proven fact that uncertainty leads to stress and this further leads to various other mental and physical health related issues. Peters, A., & McEwen, B. S. (2015). When people are uncertain about something, they experience heightened levels of stress too. The recent pandemic has led to enormous uncertainties. Questions like “when will the life be normal?”, “when can I again go out with my friends?”, “when will the schools reopen?”, “will we be able to unite and celebrate with our families again?” are arousing uncertainty in every mind. Where the students are uncertain about their studies and career, the employees are worried about the jobs and financial security and nevertheless all age groups

especially old age people are worried about their health. Reducing this uncertainty also leads to reduction in stress. Harris, J. J., Jolivet, R., & Attwell, D. (2012).

Although the Covid 19 pandemic has caused a lifestyle change and stress across all the people irrespective of their genders and age groups, it has caused a major life style change amongst employees. Now most of the people who used to work for hours sitting in office for 5-6 days of week; have been working from home since during 2020. The concept of work life blending, work from home (WFH) and flexible working were never so popular and practiced as they are being practiced during this pandemic.

With the advent of 21st century, the concept of work life balance bloomed into the concept of work life blending.

According to JA Provost – 1990, Work-life balance is a concept that pertains to creating a balance between work and personal life. This concept grew popular amongst corporations due to global competition, renewed interest in personal lives/ family values and an aging workforce. Lockwood, N. R. (2003).

“Work-family balance as “the extent to which an individual is equally—self engaged and equally satisfied with—his or her work role and family” as defined by Greenhaus et al., (2003)

Later the concept of Work Life Balance evolved in Work Life Blending. The term work life blending used for work place practices that allow employees to fulfil demands of work and family in efficient way.

In 1999 Sprang, G., Secret, M., & Bradford, J. (1999). Talked about work life balance that “option that “allows mothers to

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*<https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/in> accessed on 02/10/2020.

blend the often-competing demands of work and family and provides high-quality child care to their infants in the workplace.”

Work life blending increasingly became popular in last two decades. Bloom, N. (2014) said that let employees work from home significantly increases the productivity. Basically, work life blending means giving a liberty to employee to manage work with increased flexibility like flexible working hours, working from home etc. Schein, V. E., Maurer, E. H., & Novak, J. F. (1977) found a significant impact of flexible working hours on productivity on a group of employees. Janssen, D., & Nachreiner, F. (2004). Stated that high variability of working hours is associated with increased impairments in health and well-being. So the arguments have been built upon to support flexible working options. Going one step further Choudhury, P., Foroughi, C., & Larson, B. Z. (2020). Supported the concept of working from anywhere which means not constraining geographical locations of the employee. And this option of working from anywhere (WFA) has become very popular during the recent pandemic where employees are returning to their native places and are working from there. The technology has made it possible for the employees to work from remote location efficiently and effectively.

On the top of that the pandemic has forced corporations to maintain the guidelines of social distancing and thus leading to make them provide more flexible work options. The line separating work and life and the work life balance policies has faded and corporation willingly or unwillingly have been forced to blend work and life together.

But the question is that is it really that convenient and easy? Because working from home or working from anywhere also brings out the challenges like lack of concentration, lack of personal space etc.

The major challenges which people may face while trying blend work and personal life together are:

Inability to prioritise things: when whole day employees are working then the boundaries between personal and professional work fade which lead to inability to prioritise things and most people cannot prioritise their health and family issues.

Lack of focus: most people when they work in conventional settings can focus on work and home separately but this practice of working from home on a continuous basis for whole day, has resulted into a less focus on both family as well as work

Fading boundaries of time between work and health priorities: people are also noticing a fall in their health as they are continuously on call from work and meetings which has affected their schedule for exercise and health routine. The blending of work life has happened on physical level: integration of home and office spaces as well as psychologically: thinking of work and life simultaneously.

So, this is the responsibility of organizations to respond to these tough time and challenges more responsibly and make their people stress free.

This pandemic has brought challenge to the leaders of organizations and burdened them with a responsibility to struggle to quickly enable employees to work from home. As

for many of the organizations it was a thick line which divided work and family or work and life, blending these two together for their employees was the biggest challenge for them.

The integration of work and life now is not a choice but it's the only strategic choice which companies have to make in order to survive in these tough times. However, this new practice not only has increased the stress level of leaders but also all the employees. the employees are also served with a number of challenges such as balancing their work and home life effectively, dealing with the fear of uncertainty, dealing with insecurity of losing jobs and understanding the new work settings etc.

The recommendations to the leaders for this change are:

Use of technology for physical blending of work life:

Technology has made it very convenient and possible for the companies to perform most of the tasks with the same efficiency from home as well. But they need to follow systematic approach to blend these two aspects carefully and effectively:

Identify task and differentiate the ones which can be performed with same efficiency from home too, for example the tasks like talking to online clients, analysis, projects etc, where the place of work has little or no impact on quality of work. For these works the organizations just need to ensure that your employees have a clear understanding of tasks and they can seek help and guidance whenever required. So, the process is really very convenient, delegating the tasks for full work from home or anywhere and providing help and guidance whenever required through any online platform.

The tasks where a continuous interaction is required: there are certain task which are performed on a team basis and the team leaders and members are required to meet and discuss the things and progress on a regular basis. Here the most important missing aspect will be the team spirit. The organizations need to create some team base interface and provide a platform for keeping the team spirit high and technology can create the same artificial platform for meeting and discussing things together,

There are certain tasks where office floor or workplace s are imperative part of tasks, there the organization need to come up with innovative approaches to replace them with new ideas and perform the jobs from home.

Psychological blending of work and life:

The more complicated challenge in front of the organizations is changing the psychology of employees in a way that it doesn't affect their working efficiency and effectiveness.

As the work from home perfectly blends work and life together. The experiences and the organizations need to take care of certain aspects such as:

Changing the culture of the organization which motivate the practice of work from home.

Redefining the values to foster energy among the employees to work more efficiently from home.

Innovating the ways to enhance customer experiences by using the work life blend.

Ongoing training and development to foster the culture here employees work with the same integrity and motivation from home.

Continuous moral support and guidance from top leaders.

This needs to bring a cultural shift in the mindset of employees and this is more difficult in comparison to making a structural change in the organizations.

According to S.A. Burtonshaw - Gunn and M.G. Salameh, 2007, there are different strategies which can be adopted by leaders for managing change:

Expert strategy

Negotiating strategy

Directive strategy

Educative strategy

Participative strategy

So accordingly, leaders can adopt the required strategy to bring in the change, the success of change depends on the organizations top management's understanding of the reasons which are responsible for stress amongst the employees and the remedies they opt for to deal with stress triggers the general factors responsible for stress and unwillingness to change are:

- Fear of uncertainty
- Fear of Layoff
- Job instability
- Fear of increased Work pressure
- Fear of losing promotion opportunities
- Fear of losing power and status
- Fear of long working hours and work pressure
- Fear of frequently happening changes
- Fear of inability to cope with the technological changes and work processes

The steps to be followed by leaders in these tough circumstances are:

- Make employees understand the requirement of the change and new work procedures.
- Make employees realise the indispensability of the change which is required to be brought in.
- Give opportunities to employees to freely express their fear, insecurities and doubts through formal and informal communications.
- Solve the doubts and understand the reasons for the fear or resistance to change.
- If the reasons are fear of new technology or lack of skills, training programmes for developing knowledge and skills should be organized.
- Utilise informal leaders to reinforce the values of change
- Link the rewards with adaptability to change and adoption of new processes,
- Share positive feedback and stories
- Open communication policy and support for employees wherever they require technical support or guidance,

With these strategies leaders can bring the stress level and resistance level of employees down and can successfully prepare them for a new normal during covid era.

II. CONCLUSION

Although work life blending has a wide range of benefits of benefits to offer to organizations in the current pandemic. But every change comes with a cost. So, this is advised to leaders and top managers to critically evaluate the pros and cons and then make a decision for the welfare of employees as well as organizational effectiveness. While implementing the new practices leaders must carefully analyse the organizational internal environment and culture and develop a suitable model for integrating work life blending with the organizational culture. Leaders must also guide, direct and counsel employees before, during and post implementation of work life blending practices. Although work life blending and work from anywhere has emerged as boon for the employers and employees during this pandemic, but also a geta care must be taken to prevent this concept being converted into a bane for both the parties. Managing stress and taking care of mental health of employees is must to combat the challenges of working during pandemic.

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