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The Ongoing WFH Renaissance has Failed Miserably to Serve its Purpose

Research shows that remote working can increase productivity levels, improve health and wellbeing amongst employees, and increase retention levels. However, remote working can also blur work-life boundaries. This lack of a boundary between work and home can severely impact a worker's work-life balance. In this article, we understand how employers can support their remote workers in achieving an ideal work-life balance when working from home.

A friend who was managing her career in senior management reasonably well shared over the weekend that she resigned from her job as the work pressure was getting out of hand while she juggled between work and personal chores. All this while working from home (WFH) for the past 4 months! Now that's surprising, isn't it? Wasn't WFH supposed to be the epitome of a relaxed work environment with increased personal flexibility? Apparently, not anymore.

The coronavirus pandemic that caused millions to work from home and forced companies worldwide to adapt to an environment where all or most of their employees are working remotely started with an initial premise of encouraging mental well-being and maintaining a work-life balance. Unfortunately, all those efforts have fallen flat—the situation has left us all scrambling to maintain our professional lives as much as possible. It is now fuelling the very fire that it was assumed to douse—increased work stress and reduced personal time.

While HR and admin teams did a splendid job in ensuring seamless connectivity and other work
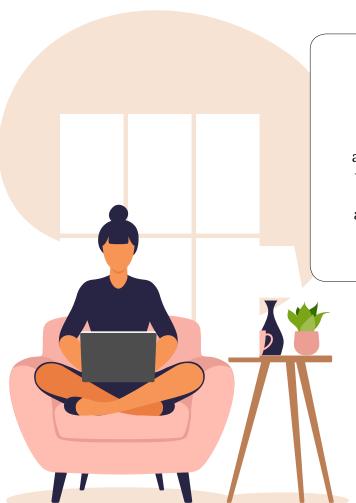
arrangements to ensure business as usual, organizations forgot that we are still very much in the midst of a pandemic that requires increased emotional intelligence to navigate through. This is not an opportunity to squeeze the last ounce of energy from people but to be their pillar of support to navigate through these tough times TOGETHER. Who exactly sets the tone to define and drive the intent with which expectations from work are communicated to the entire organization? You guessed it right, the leadership.

Any intervention, especially in HR that is introduced solely because it's good-to-have or a forced necessity will eventually fail. The reason is simple—most organizations chase the WHAT but not the WHY (taking a cue from Simon Sinek's Golden Circle), and as soon the WHY goes off the radar (if it existed in the first place that is) the entire narrative and subsequently the purpose is lost.

My conversations with corporate professionals across industries have one glaring theme in common— the line between office time and personal time has never been blurrier and what's happening currently is worse than how it was in the pre-COVID era. Experts have described this phenomenon as "role blurring", which is "the experience of confusion or difficulty in distinguishing one's work from one's family roles in a given setting in which these roles are seen as highly integrated, such as doing paid work at home". The expectation from most organizations (managers essentially) is to be in an always-on mode. Since you have nowhere else to go (literally and figuratively), it's assumed that you're always available to discuss work. Employees are silently bearing the brunt primarily for the fear of being branded as a non-performer, possibly being hand-picked for a furlough or in a worst-case scenario for a lay-off.

There have to be specific boundaries to a remote employee's working day, management can't have an assumption that their employees must always be available. For this, the employees must be given breathing space to actively manage boundaries between work and family and not expected to be on call 24 hours a day. With clear guidelines in place, employers can stop this from becoming a problem.

After all, employee burnout is an organisational problem, not a personal one.

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So how are some progressive employers solving for this? I spoke to a few CHROs to understand how they're dealing with this challenge within their workplaces. Here are some initiatives that these leaders are thinking of:

- Creating awareness within their leadership to specifically drive sensitivities around WFH burnout and ensuring the expectation is cascaded to their people managers

- Define company-wide 'core working hours' for all to ensure a significant overlap between teams to engage and connect

- Taking up personal well-being and mental health as a leadership-driven organizational priority and not a mere passing fad that HR would like to own

- Agenda-less check-in calls by managers and HR to their teams to talk about anything but work

- Clear communication on no meetings beyond a certain time of the day or certain days in a week or both

All of the above needs to be not only communicated but over-communicated to drive home the intent. In fact, given the current scenario, there's nothing called over-communication, the more information, the better. Since people do not meet in-person and touch-points have significantly reduced, organizational agenda and updates need to be driven home via town halls, emails, daily standups at a regular frequency. Make it abundantly clear across the organization of the revised norms & behaviours, new workplace rules, and revised expectations from people managers.

The only vaccine to this ongoing WFH pandemic is love, empathy & respect carefully administered by organizational leaders and ably supported by their HR/People teams.

This is the time to be that compassionate hero and not the villain that pulls the rug from under the feet.

About the author

Vishal Naithani is a People & Culture evangelist and a Certified Professional Coach with a personal vision to create Inspiring Workplaces and facilitate peak individual potential through self-discovery. Post his MBA from MDI, he has a diverse experience of working with both, large MNCs and growth-stage startups, spaced with a personal entrepreneurial stint as well. His keen areas of interest are Workplace Culture, Leadership, Organisation Development & Employee Value Propositioning. In addition, the causes that he advocates passionately are - Thought Leadership in HR, Servant Leadership, Women in the Workforce & Emotional Intelligence at Work.