

# Employee Well-being

## Key concepts and terms

- Employee assistance programme (EAP)
- Work environment
- Quality of working life
- Work–life balance

## Learning outcomes

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also know about:

- Reasons for concern with well-being
- The achievement of work–life balance
- Sexual harassment
- Services for individuals
- The significance of the work environment
- Managing stress
- Bullying
- Group employee services

## Introduction

Well-being at work exists when people are happy with their lot – what they do, how they are treated, how they get on with others. The well-being of employees depends on the quality of working life provided by their employers – the feelings of satisfaction and happiness arising from the work itself and the work environment. The concept of the quality of working life emerged in the 1970s (Wilson, 1973) but has been less prominent recently, partly because of the preoccupation with work–life balance, which is dealt with later in this chapter. As defined by Taylor (2008) the quality of working life is related to the basic extrinsic job factors of wages, hours and working conditions and the intrinsic factors of the work itself. Warr *et al* (1970) focused their definition on work involvement, intrinsic job motivation, job satisfaction and happiness.

Some time ago Martin (1967) put the case for welfare, as it was then known, as follows: ‘People (at work) are entitled to be treated as full human beings with personal needs, hopes and anxieties.’ This requirement has not changed since then.

There are three reasons why organizations should be concerned with the well-being of their employees. First, and most importantly, they have a duty of care and this means adopting a socially responsible approach to looking after their people. Second, employers are responsible for creating a good work environment not only because it is their duty to do so but also as part of the total reward system. Third, it is in the interests of employers to do so because this will increase the likelihood of their employees being committed to the organization and help to establish it as a ‘best place to work’.

A key aspect of well-being for employees is their health and safety, as covered in Chapter 58. Job design factors, as discussed in Chapter 27, are also important. The other aspects dealt with in this chapter are creating a satisfactory work environment, which includes dealing with how people are treated at work, managing stress, attending to work–life balance issues, providing services for individuals including employee assistance programmes, and group services.

## Improving of the work environment

The work environment consists of the system of work, the design of jobs, working conditions and the ways in which people are treated at work by their managers and co-workers. Well-being is achieved when account is taken in designing the work system and the jobs in it of the needs of the people concerned (see Chapter 27). Working conditions need to meet health and safety requirements as listed in Chapter 58. The way people are treated is a matter of managerial behaviour, achieving work–life balance and dealing with issues such as stress, harassment and bullying, as discussed below.

## Managerial behaviour

Lawler (2003) suggests that what managers have to do is 'to treat people right'. This means recognizing them as individuals with different needs and wants, rewarding their achievements, helping them to develop, and treating them with consideration as human beings.

## Work–life balance

Work–life balance employment practices are concerned with providing scope for employees to balance what they do at work with the responsibilities and interests they have outside work and so reconcile the competing claims of work and home by meeting their own needs as well as those of their employers. The term 'work–life balance' has largely replaced 'family-friendly policy'. As Kodz *et al* (2002) explain, the principle of work–life balance is that: 'There should be a balance between an individual's work and their life outside work, and that this balance should be healthy.'

As defined by the Work Foundation (2003b) the concept of work–life balance is 'about employees achieving a satisfactory equilibrium between work and non-work activities (ie parental responsibilities and wider caring duties, as well as other activities and interests)'. The Work Foundation recommends that practical day-to-day business and related needs should be considered when organizations set about selecting the range of work–life options that should be made available to staff, whether on a collective basis (as, for example, flexitime arrangements) or on an individual level (say, allowing an individual to move to term-time working provisions). Individual requests for a particular working arrangement generally need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, but it is important for a culture to exist that does not discourage employees from making such requests. In addition to fearing the reaction of line managers, the risk of career damage is a common reason for poor take-up of work–life balance arrangements. Line management will need to be convinced that work–life balance measures are important and pay off in terms of increased engagement.

The IRS (2002) considers that 'Flexible working is considered the most practical solution to establishing an effective work–life balance.' The term 'flexible working' covers flexitime, home-working, part-time working, compressed working weeks, annualized hours, job sharing and term-time only working. It also refers to special leave schemes that provide employees with the freedom to respond to a domestic crisis or to take a career break without jeopardizing their employment status. However, IRS noted that 'creating an environment in which staff who opt to work flexibly and those who raise work–life issues will require a cultural shift in many organizations, backed by senior level support'.

The Work Foundation (2003b) survey of work–life balance established that the most common work–life balance measures taken by employers were the provision of part-time working (90 per cent), family/emergency leave (85 per cent) and general unpaid leave (78 per cent). Formal

policies are most likely to be found in public and voluntary sector organizations (35 per cent) and least likely to be found in manufacturing (14 per cent).

Management resistance is the most common difficulty met in introducing work–life balance policies. However, the work–life balance survey conducted by the DTI in 2003 found that there was a high level of support amongst employers (65 per cent). A large proportion of employers (74 per cent) believed that people who work flexibly are just as likely to be promoted as those who do not. The survey established that the benefits claimed from introducing work–life balance policies were:

- improved productivity and quality of work;
- improved commitment and morale;
- reduced staff turnover;
- reduced casual absence;
- improved utilization of new recruits.

Work–life balance policies can lower absence and help to tackle the low morale and high degrees of stress that can lead to retention problems as employees tire of juggling work and life responsibilities. The research conducted by the Institute of Employment Studies (Kodz *et al*, 2002) identified employees who were staying longer with their firms because of access to flexible working arrangements.

## Managing stress

There are four main reasons why organizations should take account of stress and do something about it. First, they have the social responsibility to provide a good quality of working life; second, because excessive stress causes illness; third, because it can result in inability to cope with the demands of the job which, of course, creates more stress, and finally because excessive stress can reduce employee effectiveness and therefore organizational performance.

The ways in which stress can be managed by an organization include the following.

### *Ways of managing stress*

- Job design – clarifying roles, reducing the danger of role ambiguity and conflict and giving people more autonomy within a defined structure to manage their responsibilities.
- Targets and performance standards – setting reasonable and achievable targets that may stretch people but do not place impossible burdens on them.

- Job placement – taking care to place people in jobs that are within their capabilities.
- Career development – planning careers and promoting staff in accordance with their capabilities, taking care not to over- or under-promote.
- Performance management processes, which allow a dialogue to take place between managers and individuals about the latter's work problems and ambitions.
- Counselling – giving individuals the opportunity to talk about their problems with a member of the HR department, or through an employee assistance programme, as described later in this chapter.
- Anti-bullying campaigns – bullying at work is a major cause of stress.
- Management training in what managers can do to alleviate their own stress and reduce it in others.

## Sexual harassment

Sadly, sexual harassment has always been a feature of life at work. Perhaps it is not always quite as blatant today as it has been in the past, but it is still there, in more or less subtle forms, and it is just as unpleasant. People subject to sexual harassment can take legal action but it must be the policy of the organization to make it clear that it will not be tolerated, and this policy should be backed up by procedures and practices for dealing with harassment.

### *Problems of dealing with harassment*

There are three problems in dealing with harassment. First, it can be difficult to make a clear-cut case. An accusation of harassment can be hard to prove unless there are witnesses, and those who indulge in this practice usually take care to carry it out on a one-to-one basis. In this situation, it may be a case of one person's word against another's. The harasser, almost inevitably a man, resorts to two defences: one, that it did not take place ('it was all in her mind'); and two, that if anything did take place it was provoked by the behaviour of the female. When this happens, whoever deals with the case has to exercise judgement and attempt, difficult though it may be, to remove any prejudice in favour of the word of the man, the woman, the boss or the subordinate.

The second problem is that victims of sexual harassment are often unwilling to take action and in practice seldom do so. This is because of the actual or perceived difficulty of proving their case. But they may also feel that they will not get a fair hearing and are worried about the effect

making such accusations will have on how they are treated by their boss or their colleagues in the future, whether or not they have substantiated their accusation.

The third, and perhaps the most deep-rooted and difficult problem is that sexual harassment may be part of the culture of the organization – ‘the way we do things around here’; a norm, practised at all levels.

## *Solutions*

There are no easy solutions to these problems. It may be very hard to eradicate sexual harassment completely, but the effort must be made along the following lines.

### *Dealing with harassment*

1. Issue a clear statement by the chief executive that sexual harassment will not be tolerated.
2. Back up the statement with a policy directive that spells out in more detail that the organization deprecates it, why it is not acceptable and what people who believe they are being subjected to harassment can do about it.
3. Reinforce the policy statement by behaviour at senior level that demonstrates that it is not merely words but that these exhortations have meaning.
4. Ensure that the sexual harassment policy is stated clearly in induction courses and is conveyed to everyone on promotion. Reinforce this message by regular reminders.
5. Make arrangements for employees subjected to sexual harassment to seek advice, support and counselling without any obligation to take a complaint forward. They could talk informally with someone in HR. Alternatively, a counsellor (possibly engaged as part of an employee assistance programme) can usefully offer guidance on harassment problems, assist in resolving them informally by seeking, with the agreement of the complainant, a confidential and voluntary interview with the person complained against to achieve a solution without recourse to a formal disciplinary procedure, assist in submitting a complaint if the employee wishes to raise it formally, and counselling the parties on their future conduct.
6. Create a special procedure for hearing complaints about sexual harassment. The normal procedure may not be suitable because the harasser could be the employee's line manager. The procedure should provide for employees to bring their complaint to someone of their own sex, should they so choose.

7. Handle complaints about harassment with sensitivity and due respect for the rights of both the complainant and the accused. Ensure that hearings are conducted fairly and both parties are given an equal opportunity to put their case.
8. Where sexual harassment has taken place, crack down on it. It should be stated in the policy that it is regarded as gross misconduct and, if it is proved, makes the individual liable to instant dismissal. Less severe penalties may be reserved for minor cases, but there should always be a warning that repetition will result in dismissal.
9. Ensure that everyone is aware that the organization does take action when required to punish those who indulge in sexual harassment.
10. Provide training to line managers and team leaders to ensure that the policy is properly implemented and to make them aware of their direct responsibility to prevent harassment taking place and to take action if it does.

## Bullying

Bullying is a form of harassment and can be very unpleasant. It is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of employee relationships to control. Like sexual harassment, it can be hard to prove that bullying has taken place and employees may be reluctant to complain about a bullying boss, simply because he or she is a bully. But this does not mean that an organization can ignore the problem. A policy should be published that states that bullying is unacceptable behaviour. People who feel that they are being bullied should have the right to discuss the problem with someone in the HR department or a trained counsellor. Bullies should not be punished automatically. They should initially be helped to acknowledge the impact of their behaviours, and to change. Punishment should be reserved for those who persist in spite of this guidance.

## Services for individuals

Services may be provided for individuals to help them deal with their problems. This may involve counselling or personal case work where the aim is as far as possible to get individuals to help themselves. Counselling is a skilled business, and is best carried out by trained people. This is where employee assistance programmes (EAPs) can be useful. EAP services are provided by external agencies that give employees access to counselling through a phone service, although face-to-face counselling may also be offered. Employers can refer employees to the service, which is provided in confidence between the agency and the individual.

The areas where counselling and other forms of help may be provided are as follows.

### *Areas where counselling and other forms of help may be provided*

- Sickness – the provision of help and advice to employees absent from work for long periods due to illness; this might include sick visits.
- Bereavement – advice on how to cope with the death of a partner or close relative.
- Domestic problems – normally they should not be the concern of the employer, but if someone is very distressed help can be offered through a counselling service.
- Retirement – advice can be made available to employees who are about to retire to prepare them for their new circumstances; continued counselling and visiting services can be provided for retired employees.

## Group employee services

Group employee services mainly consist of subsidized restaurants, sports and social clubs and child care facilities.

Restaurant facilities are desirable in any large establishment where local facilities are limited. Sports or social clubs should not be laid on because they are ‘good for morale’; there is no evidence that they are. They should only be provided if there is a real need for them arising from a lack of local facilities. In the latter case the facilities should be shared with the local community.

Child care facilities are one of the most popular forms of group services if they fill a need that cannot be met easily elsewhere.

## Employee well-being – key learning points

### **Reasons for concern with well-being**

- Employers have a duty of care and this means adopting a socially responsible approach to looking after their people.
- Employers are responsible for creating a good work environment, not only because it is their duty to do so but also as part of the total reward system.

## Employee well-being – key learning points (continued)

- It is in the interests of employers to do so because this will increase the likelihood of their employees being committed to the organization and help to establish it as a 'best place to work'.

### **The significance of the work environment**

The work environment consists of the system of work, the design of jobs, working conditions and the ways in which people are treated at work by their managers and co-workers. Well-being is achieved when account is taken in designing the work system and the jobs in it of the needs of the people concerned. Working conditions need to meet health and safety requirements. The way people are treated is a matter of managerial behaviour, achieving work-life balance and dealing with issues such as stress, harassment and bullying.

### **The achievement of work-life balance**

Flexible working is the most practical solution to establishing an effective work-life balance. This covers flexitime, homeworking, part-time working, compressed working weeks, annualized hours, job sharing and term-time only working. It also refers to special leave schemes that provide employees with the freedom to respond to a domestic crisis or to take a career break without jeopardizing their employment status.

### **Managing stress**

- Employers have the social responsibility to provide a good quality of

working life.

- Excessive stress causes illness.
- Stress can result in inability to cope with the demands of the job, which creates more stress.
- Excessive stress can reduce employee effectiveness and therefore organizational performance.

### **Sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment is difficult to deal with but it is important to make a determined attempt to minimize it through policy statements backed up by special procedures for seeking help and making complaints.

### **Bullying**

A policy should be published that states that bullying is unacceptable behaviour. People who feel that they are being bullied should have the right to discuss the problem with someone in the HR department or a trained counsellor.

### **Services for individuals**

Counselling, possibly through EAP programmes, can be provided for sickness, bereavement, domestic problems and retirement.

### **Group employee services**

These mainly consist of subsidized restaurants, sports and social clubs and child care facilities.

## Questions

1. What does employee well-being mean?
2. What is work–life balance and what can be done about it?
3. How can stress be managed?
4. What are employee assistance programmes (EAPs)?

## References

- DTI (2003) *Work–life Balance Survey 2*, DTI, London
- IRS (2002) *Work/life Balance*, IRS, London
- Kodz, J, Harper, H and Dench, S (2002) *Work–life Balance: Beyond the rhetoric*, Report 384, Institute of Employment Studies, Brighton
- Lawler E E (2003) *Treat People Right! How organisations and individuals can propel each other into a virtuous spiral of success*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA
- Martin, A O (1967) *Welfare at Work*, Batsford, London
- Taylor, S (2008) *People Resourcing*, CIPD, London
- Warr, P B, Bird, M W and Rackham, N (1970) *Evaluation of Management Training*, Gower, Aldershot
- Wilson, N A B (1973) *On the Quality of Working Life*, HMSO, London
- Work Foundation (2003b) *Work–life Balance*, Work Foundation, London