



Improving Company Performance by Addressing Employees' Need for Work-life Design

By Alan Wong, Managing Director, Kelly Services Hong Kong

- Almost half of Hong Kong employees are willing to trade pay rises for better work-life balance, as most companies are not meeting staff's needs in this area.
- Individual staff need to be empowered to create their own work-life design plans, with HR recognising that needs vary between people and over time.

A few of Kelly's clients in the retail sector were troubled by the high turnover of shop-front sales staff, in particular between June and August every year. Meanwhile, another client, a renowned logistics company, also faced the same problem with its customer service personnel resigning during the same period. Was it mere coincidence?

After some research and investigation,

a pattern was found – most of those who resigned were young parents. Because of the high demand for young talent in Hong Kong, it is relatively easy for them to quickly find a new job. So when it comes to the summer holiday period, many young parents decide to resign from their current roles to enjoy a longer vacation with their families.

This finding also brought with it a far more important message: the

importance of work-life balance for those who work in a somewhat “perfect economy”, where entry and departure from the job market is almost without barrier.

The latest *Kelly Global Workforce Index* (KGWI) survey gathered work and workplace insights from approximately 164,000 respondents in 28 countries. It found that when choosing one job over another, 86% of Hong Kong

employees will make their decisions based on salary and remuneration (versus 89% in 2014), 75% on expected work-life balance (72% in 2014), and 58% on opportunities for advancement (56% in 2014). This indicates a growing enthusiasm for better work-life balance, while the gap from the traditional main talent attraction factor – salary and remuneration – is decreasing.

The survey also reflected that Hong Kong employees are more willing to pass up their salaries and pay rises for various work-life balance benefits when compared with their APAC counterparts.

Many companies still attempt to improve work-life balance by using a top-down approach. Expensive initiatives such as relaxation corners with massage chairs or child-care centres in the office are sometimes used – but more often than not, the penetration is low. These one-size-fits-all benefits and organisational policies often fall short of delivering their desired results.

A critical fact of work-life balance is often overlooked: not only are everyone’s personal needs different, but their needs also vary over time. The work-life balance needs of an unmarried young worker will be vastly different from a new parent who has to take care of children at home. The former may see innovative projects and overseas travel as exciting exposure that add to their work-life balance, while the latter may prefer flexible

work arrangements and paid time off.

Key to dealing with this for Hong Kong hirers is to shift to a “bottom-up” and “consultative” approach in identifying the ever-changing needs, interests and aspirations of the workforce. The end objective must be to enable greater autonomy for each staff member to “design” their own perfect balance between their personal and professional lives.

Introducing ‘work-life design’

A growing movement within the workforce, “work-life design” redefines the concept of work-life balance. It recognises that workers have ever-evolving needs, interests and aspirations. In an intriguing finding gleaned from Kelly’s global workforce research, talents are looking to “design” their ideal balance with respect to at least five different aspects:

- 1. Flexible hours:** Flexible work arrangements; paid time off; opportunities to purchase additional vacation time
- 2. Work governance:** Limitations on working outside typical business hours; limitations on workplace email communications after working hours; encouragement and support from bosses to use all vacation time
- 3. Personal realisation and empowerment:** Opportunities to work on innovative projects during work hours; opportunities to volunteer or give back to the

community during office hours; sabbaticals to pursue personal interests outside work; short-term assignments with other departments within the company

- 4. Workplace culture:** Environmentally friendly work practices; a good corporate record on diversity and equal opportunity; encouragement to pursue initiatives related to corporate social responsibility
- 5. Lifestyle benefits and amenities:** Employee wellness programmes; cafeteria-style amenities and benefits; childcare support programmes; caregiver support programmes

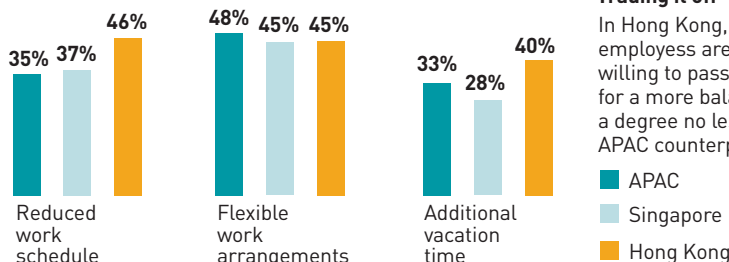
Of these, some of the most desired components were flexible work schedules and arrangements, such as working remotely away from the office or telecommuting (61% of respondents); limitations on working outside business hours (60%); getting more paid time off, including vacation and sick days (44%); reducing the expectation on work-related emails outside business hours (34%); the availability of wellness programmes such as fitness centres, health club memberships and stress-reduction programmes (31%); the opportunity to work on special or innovative initiatives during work hours (30%); and encouragement from employers to utilise all allotted vacation time (30%).

Additionally, the survey found that workplace flexibility is no longer a request solely demanded by female workers. What was once driven by women juggling their family and careers is now a priority for both women (79%) and men (73%) in Hong Kong who want a job that fits in with their personal lives.

Five steps to work-life design strategy and implementation

In order to maximise the effectiveness of the programme, it is important to

Willingness to sacrifice higher pay for



Trading it off

In Hong Kong, many employees are increasingly willing to pass up pay rises for a more balanced life, by a degree no less than our APAC counterparts

- APAC
- Singapore
- Hong Kong

Source: Kelly Global Workforce Index

No longer a gender issue

Support for work-life design is no longer a gender issue, upending conventional wisdom that it is females who desire balance and flexibility the most. Instead, both men and women are driving the push.

The top 5 work-life factors for Hong Kong:

Flexible work arrangements



Limitations for working beyond typical business hours



Paid time off



Limitations for email communication beyond typical business hours



Wellness programme offered by your employer



Source: Kelly Global Workforce Index

define the roles of the programme sponsors:

The company – is the provider of benefits, policies and company procedures.

The work-life design champion (WDC) – is the guardian of the roll-out pilots.

The staff – are the drivers of their own work-life programme.

Below is a five-step implementation plan for work-life design:

1. Planning

- Define the company's strategy for work-life balance.
- Form a WDC team.
- Gather the insights of staff – both

permanent and contract – via surveys or workgroups.

- Formulate a basket of relevant work-life design elements.

2. Setting KPIs

The following KPIs should be considered: 1) productivity, which varies according to business nature and the roles involved, 2) staff retention, 3) staff satisfaction, 4) employer brand, and 5) customer satisfaction (especially for customer-facing roles).

3. Pre-rollout for managers

- Train managers on work-life balance skill sets that reinforce an individual's success on and off the job. This should include time

management, coaching, project-management tools, and practical work revolving around the creation and attaining of life goals.

- Add their team's work-life KPIs to their overall performance KPIs.
- Plan a short pilot launch for managers two or three months before the formal roll out to help them understand and savour its benefits.

4. Rollout

- The WDC conducts briefings for staff in groups, following up with one-on-one sessions for those interested.
- In the one-on-one session, the WDC learns the individual's work-life balance needs, personal dreams and goals, and interests and talents, and encourages them to come up with their own work-life balance plan.
- The individual shares their work-life balance plan with the WDC and their manager, and other related parties to assist implementation.

5. Evaluation

Benchmark yearly performance against KPIs to track programme performance and ongoing improvements.

A 2015 report commissioned by Regus found that 14% of Hong Kong employees are working an average of 15 hours overtime every week; now, the KGWI survey finds that almost half would rather pass up their pay rises for better work-life balance. This is an area HR professionals need to improve on. More emphasis must be put on flexible and open-minded work modes, and HR must support individual staff to design their own plans. With the right motivation, improvements can be made to staff attraction, retention and motivation, as well as product/service quality and customer satisfaction, making Hong Kong not only more competitive, but also a better place to work in. 