



Work-life balance now top of workers' minds; Employees now work to live, not live to work

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Almost a year ago, Mats Lindeberg interviewed for a position with Ottawa's Pleora Technologies.

During a three-hour session with executives from the video-networking firm, he was grilled on a number of issues. But when it came time for him to ask questions, just one concern took priority.

"I made it clear. I have a 31/2-year-old son and I have to drop him off and pick him up at daycare," said Lindeberg, 40. "I need this to make my life work."

Lindeberg's request is one that is becoming more common in today's workplace. For years, companies have expected employees to work long hours, push off personal commitments and, in extreme cases during the technology boom in 2000, even sleep at the office. But the pendulum has swung, says Barbara Moses, a Toronto human-resources expert and author of the best-selling book *Dish: Midlife Women Tell the Truth about Work, Relationships, and the Rest of Life*.

"Companies in general are now realizing that workers are putting work-life balance on the table as a priority," Moses said. "Work demands have escalated; a lot of people are just panting in terms of keeping things together."

Some Ottawa tech companies are rushing to offer new programs and policies that encourage people to better mesh their professional lives with their personal lives. On-site child care and emergency child-care assistance, flexible work arrangements to allow telecommuting and working from home, family-leave policies, fitness facilities and seminars and workshops about general health and wellness -- all are coming into the mix.

Moses said the trend of companies giving back to their employees has been a long time coming.

"People have been talking about the importance of work-life balance since the early '90s," she said. "We are seeing these self-confident twentysomethings who are now starting to populate the ranks. They are in demand. They will not hesitate to push back. Because of the skills shortage, they know they are in demand."

While younger workers may drive the push for more work-life-balance initiatives in the workplace, baby boomers also embrace the changes. Although they no longer have young children, many boomers deal with their own complex family issues. As their parents age, boomers increasingly deal with elder care.

Regardless of age, employees everywhere are rallying around the idea of working to live, instead of living to work, which had become the de-facto work ethic of the 1990s. As companies struggled to compete during that go-go decade, the work week became longer and employees were expected to bring mountains of work home with them. Working regular hours from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. fell by the wayside. The trends gave rise to the term "role overload," referring to the increasing pressures of the job and an employee's inability to manage those pressures.

The scenario sparked a host of studies of human resources. An October 2001 report from [Canadian Policy Research Networks](#) found that the physical and mental health of Canadian workers was in decline due to work stress. Employees were calling in sick more than ever.

Due to increasing work stress, employees were less satisfied and more depressed, the study found. "No demographic group appears to have been left behind," read the CPRN report.

Illustration:

- Colour Photo: CanWest News Service / Mats Lindeberg demanded time to pick up his young son before accepting a new job.

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