Maintaining Work-Life Balance in 2010

Just as little Susie moves to center stage for her dance solo, a cell phone chirps. As this distraction becomes annoying, you realize it’s your phone. Quickly, you grab the device; it’s your boss, so you run out of the auditorium to take the call. Upon returning, you have missed Susie and are the target of the “look” from your significant other. Sound familiar? You are probably suffering from an all-too-common affliction: the lack of work-life balance.

24/7 CONNECTIVITY

In 2010, the line between work and personal time will become even more blurred than it is today. Although productivity tools such as Blackberries, cell phones, and wireless networking allow everyone to stay connected anywhere, they make everyone more available than ever. Companies now expect to reach anyone 24/7, regardless of time or location.

You might live wherever you want, but must be available at 3 a.m. for a user on the other side of the globe. Conference calls with developers in India, supply chain partners in China, and your manager in Europe will continue to change the definition of a work day, as I learned when my company opened an office in Shenzhen, China. The continued growth of international business partners and services will drive the need for high availability and flexibility.

SELECTIVE OUTSOURCING

My own situation illustrates how companies are adapting to these shifting needs. Advanced Energy helps clients improve their manufacturing processes. To support this business, my department runs networking and communication infrastructures, and a help desk for 1,700 employees worldwide. Advanced Energy also provides SAP R/3 services to its clients for enterprise resource planning. So, for a small to medium-sized company, Advanced Energy has a fairly complex IT operation.

At one point, the company determined that supporting a 24/7 SAP operation was not its core competency, so it recently outsourced SAP hosting to Affiliated Computer Services, a Dallas, Texas, company that runs these SAP servers from an Arizona location. I manage that relationship from an office in Colorado, and it takes a significant amount of time. In the future, expect to see companies making these sorts of trade-offs in what technologies they outsource or keep in-house.

In addition, Advanced Energy is investigating other cost and resource changes to ease the workload. For example, the company is considering voice over IP. The goal would be to log onto computer and voice mail networks at the same time, perhaps lowering the costs of communicating with international suppliers and offices. It would also offer employees better communication options while away from the office. Another cost-controlling step was to partner with SBC Communications for most of the company’s telecommunication needs. Vendors like SBC can be very helpful in pointing out potential cost savings, but in-house staff must do extensive work to sanity check vendor proposals. In the future, companies will continue employing this and other technologies to control costs and improve worker productivity.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR IT PROS

Over the next five years, IT professionals will also need to continually upgrade their technical skills to remain competitive. But more importantly, they will need to remain flexible and adaptable.
More breadth, less depth

For example, a well-rounded skill set is important. Large companies like IBM or Hewlett-Packard can afford to hire three separate people to handle systems administration, backup and recovery, and e-mail administration. But small to medium-sized companies like Advanced Energy must hire one person to handle all three responsibilities. At this time, I don’t have that one person, but the industry will expect more of this sort of multitasking from IT professionals.

Knowledge in single areas won’t be as deep as it was in the old days when five people worked together to do one job. Instead, companies will hire consulting firms or other independent contractors for that in-depth expertise. So the ability to bring in and manage outside resources to do a job will become a big issue, and project management skills will be important.

Time management and discipline will also become critical skills to achieve the work-life balance that all IT people seek.

Increasing integration of work and personal time

To compensate for the 24/7 demands on IT people, the traditional workday in 2010 will explode into bites of time throughout the day that we’ll allocate to work, family, and hobbies. In some ways, this will be liberating, because it will empower us to, during the traditional workday, visit our kids’ schools, take a Pilates class, play a round of golf, or even catch an afternoon matinee. Our companies will still have their 10 to 12 hours from us throughout the rest of the day; it just won’t be in a contiguous chunk.

The challenge will be to keep work from intruding into and competing with the bites of time we’ve set aside for our personal lives. Burn out will be a problem that employees and employers must face. There’s already a trend toward IT professionals taking career sabbaticals. Some sociologists predict that by 2010, harried professionals will be abandoning the IT field in search of simpler and less intrusive careers.

In 2010, work-life balance will be a serious issue for employees struggling to juggle their lives and careers; it will also be a critical issue for employers fighting to attract and retain IT personnel. The technology that keeps everyone connected 24/7 is racing ahead of our understanding of its implications. If companies are not thoughtful about helping employees balance their personal lives, they might find more employees balancing their lives by leaving the profession.

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