

The Business Ethics Center of Jerusalem

ONLINE HI-TECH MAGAZINE: Balancing Work and Personal Life

Introduction

Once, long ago, there was the 40-hour workweek. While the advancement of technology promised to radically shorten the hours workers need to spend on the job, in fact the average hours spent on the job have been on the rise. This is especially common in the Hi-Tech world. By its nature, the Hi-Tech industry demands rapid innovation and short time to market. As technology changes at a dizzying rate, employees in Hi-Tech companies are generally expected to work long hours. These long hours can put added pressures on the employee, his family and his company.

In the Old Economy, only top-level company executives were expected to consistently spend long hours on the job. Now, however, nearly all employees in Hi-Tech companies are expected to be in the office for a large portion of their days. For employees of Israeli Hi-Tech companies, as well as those across the world who work with companies in the U.S., the time difference with the U.S. means that regular working hours can stretch well into the night.

Important Facts About the Work-Life Balance

- The average **Israeli Hi-Tech employee** devotes **11-12 hours a day** to work. ([Globes- Israel's Business Arena](#), Oct. 2, 2000)
- **One third of all US workers** spend more than **10 hours a day** at work. (The BrainWaves Group)
- **95%** of U.S. workers say they worry that **work is taking too much time away from their families**, and 87% say increased work demands are keeping them from getting enough sleep. (John J. Heidrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University and the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut)
- A poll of 10,339 workers in the U.S., Europe, Russia and Japan found that **worldwide, the ability to "balance the needs of work and family or personal life"** was either the most or second-most **important attribute in a job**. (Yankelovich, Gemini Consulting, 1998)

When employees try to balance between work and personal life, often both suffer. People that work harder find less time for their families. While on the job, they are more tired and more distracted by their personal life, and are therefore less productive. Companies that help their employees to balance their home and work lives are proven to be top performers in their industries. Shares of public companies on the "Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For" list rose 37% annualized over the past three years, compared with 25% for the S&P 500. Many of these companies offer benefits such as flexible schedules and day care, and help their employees to balance their lives.

Perspective From Jewish Sources **by Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir**

BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY OBLIGATIONS

The tension between family life and work or study is an ancient one, and Jewish law and tradition provide some specific criteria to help resolve it.

One important criterion is *consent*. In a pivotal incident in ancient Jewish history, the young scholar Rebbe Eliezer ben Azariah was nominated to head the world's foremost Torah learning center. He pointedly replied that he had to consult with his wife before accepting this demanding post, for the new post would limit the amount of time he could spend with her. Jewish law gives specific guidelines as to how much time any husband may spend working away from home without his wife's consent. The principles that are embodied in these laws apply to either working spouse.

The role of *expectations* is also critical. Whatever equilibrium is reached between time spent on work or study and that spent with the family, the husband needs to be scrupulous not to disappoint his wife's expectations. Our Sages relate that when a certain scholar remained late studying on the roof of the study hall, delaying his periodic visit to his wife and causing her distress, the roof caved in underneath him. We can understand the significance of this incident if we view the husband as the "roof" of the family: While he protects and shelters the wife and children, he is also dependent on their support. If he disappoints their expectations, he may find this support collapsing beneath him.

A closely related consideration is that of *identification with the workplace*. The attitude of the family towards a "workaholic" parent is likely to be more supportive if the work is critical to an ideal like national security or to a vital necessity like family subsistence than if it is merely a way of generating excessive wealth. Jewish tradition also takes account of the social value of an occupation, and so sanctions longer absences for Torah study than for business.

But the expectations and demands of family members are only part of the story, for time spent at home is also a need for the working parent himself. Judaism views building a healthy family as a basic human obligation, and this is reflected in Jewish law. Even with the wife's consent, there are limits to the amount of time a husband may be away from home, and these differ at different stages of married life. During the first year of marriage, and particularly during the first week, when the emotional foundation is being laid for the rest of the couple's married life, restrictions on separation are particularly strict. Even later on in marriage, excessive absences are forbidden.

We can tie together these various strands by stating that Jewish tradition views the family as a single unit, almost like a single individual. As it says in the book of Bereishit, "And G_d created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female created He them." The divine image is complete only when male and female are united in the family unit.

This means that when we weigh an extra hour at work against an extra hour at home, we shouldn't pit our desires against those of other family members; instead, we should honestly evaluate the interests of the family as a unified whole. Conversely, the

homebound spouse who would like the working partner to spend more time at home can impartially consider if the family's interests and values might not be better served by an extra hour away from home - providing a greater chance for promotion, or an extra hour serving mankind.

Sources: Newspaper series: Wall Street Journal, July 19 2000, August 16 2000 and others. Rebbe Elazar ben Azaria: Berakhot 27b; Pitchei Teshuva Even HaEzer 76. Travel without consent for work or Torah study: Shulchan Arukh and Rema, Even HaEzer 76:5. With consent: Shulchan Arukh and Rema Even HaEzer 64:1; Rambam Melakhim 7:10; Be'er HaGola Yoreh Deah 334. Roof: Ketubot 62b, explanation of Rav Ariele Weiss. Divine image on couple: Bereshit 1:27 according to Yevamot 63b.

Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir is the Director of the Jewish Business Response Forum, at the JCT Center for Business Ethics. The response forum welcomes questions from business managers. For more information, email Rabbi Meir.

A View From the Trenches

From Silicon Valley to Silicon Wadi

Values for Management recently interviewed Dick Kleiman, an R&D Product Manager at Versaware, Inc. Versaware is a three and a half year old company focusing on eBook publishing and distribution located in Jerusalem. In his 30 years of working in the computer industry, Mr. Kleiman has experienced the full spectrum of Hi-Tech, having worked for a defense contractor in California to a start-up company in Israel.

Q: What do you see as the cause for long hours in Hi-Tech companies?

A: There are three main causes for the long hours. First, companies in Hi-Tech face a lot of competition and have a need to get their products ready for release on very short (and often unrealistic) schedules. People need to work long hours to try to meet those schedules. Second, in many cases, new ground is being broken, so solving problems that were not anticipated requires extra effort by employees. A third problem is the lack of planning that many companies show. A team in the company may be pushing toward an aggressive but meetable

A: People have more of a choice of jobs in the U.S. If a person has a job with a lot of stress and a high salary, it is easy to change to a job that is less stressful and with a lower salary, and that provides more time for family. In Israel, it is necessary to scramble harder to get a job. You may have to put up with a high-pressure situation because that's what you can get. There is also a better infrastructure in the U.S. for workers with families. For example, day care is much more widely available.

Q: Are the pressures in Hi-Tech companies necessary, or could they be reduced through better planning and time management?

A: The push to get products out before they become obsolete or upstaged by a competitor, and the technical challenges involved, are the primary sources of pressure. However, the pressures of the market are often excuses for poor planning. I believe that thinking ahead in a more formal way can identify problems sooner, so that they can be avoided.

Q: How do the pressures at Versaware

deadline, when they are suddenly redirected due to a company leadership decision to make a significant product change without easing the due date.

Q: Are the pressures in Hi-Tech companies different than in Old Economy companies?

A: Old, established companies can rely on the income they receive from their existing products and services while they create new ones. This allows their R&D teams to be somewhat protected compared to young companies trying to start from scratch. The new Hi-Tech companies have to satisfy investors now and beat the competition quickly, and this pressure can flow down to the workers.

Q: Do Hi-Tech companies provide adequate support to workers with families?

A: Many do. There is currently such a demand for experienced staff that companies look for ways to attract employees with families. Examples of this include on-site daycare, flexible hours, time off to deal with child emergencies, working from home, etc. Having said this, the company expects a high level of commitment in exchange for these benefits.

Q: Do employees stay late out of a general expectation that this is the right thing to do, or because of the demands of their work?

A: Some companies explicitly require long hours of their staff, but at many firms, the employees commit to dates and then work all-out to meet those dates. Employees do this because they are paid very well, they hope to profit from the company's success via stock options, and they truly enjoy their work and put in a lot of time in order to produce a quality product. In exchange for these rewards, some workers find that they have made a choice of work vs. family or outside life or even good health. If the only significant reward is stock options that are of dubious future value, all the hard work will have been for nothing.

compare with the pressures in other Hi-Tech companies?

A: There are less pressures at Versaware than at other Hi-Tech companies. The chief executive Harry Fox explicitly says that the family is most important, and that the company is second. The company is very supportive of people with children. Employees are encouraged to take time for family issues, take time off to take the kids to the doctor, etc. These policies are built into the company. Companies must provide resources for their employees, in order to hold onto them.

Q: What can people do to maintain a work-personal life balance? What can companies do to help their employees to do this?

A: Even while pursuing rewards, an individual has to set personal priorities. It may be limiting long days to one or two a week, or, say, going home to spend time with children and then returning to work, or going in very early. A company needs to be flexible about schedules. First-line managers should also be aware of their employees' families and be sure that the employees know that, although the job is important, that their families come first.

Q: How do Israeli Hi-Tech companies compare with their counterparts in the U.S.?

Sage Advice From Down Under

Amidst all the hype that it is impossible to work in Hi-Tech and stay sane, a company in Australia has found a way. Consulting firm [Sage Computer Support](#), claims that it has helped its 50 employees to achieve a balance between their personal lives and their careers. The corporate vision includes, "To be a viable and profitable business that provides progressive and secure employment for our people." No employee is expected to work more than 40 hours per week except when on deadline. Furthermore, employees can choose their work schedule, be it full-time, part-time, tele-commuting from home, etc.

The company encourages its employees to take time off when their children are sick, and the managing director and co-founder Lynda Bertoli takes Fridays off to volunteer at her children's school. Although the company admits that it might have grown faster with less family-friendly policies, turnover is practically nil and client retention is high. The company has won numerous awards from the business community in its ten years of operation, as well as the admiration of clients and competitors alike.

For more information, see [Fortune Magazine, November 10, 1997](#)

Solutions

There is a temptation for management to demand very long hours from workers, whether on the factory floor or in the computer cubicle. However research has shown that succumbing to this temptation can be counterproductive, leading to burnout, low morale and reduced productivity. Companies need to realize that extra activity does not necessarily mean extra productivity.

Why should a company desire to limit the amount of hours its employees work? Employees that are able to balance their professional and personal lives have a lower level of distraction while at work regarding their non-work priorities, so that when they are at work they can give 100% to the job. Employees that are more focused and satisfied are more likely to stay with the company and perform effectively. Companies with flexible work schedules can attract and retain a wider pool of potential recruits who may not be available to work full-time, and can create a more diverse workforce to match the customer profile.

There are numerous alternatives to the standard 40-hour workweek. These include:

- [Tele-commuting](#): Working from home is a good option for employees with young families. For the company, telecommuting can help reduce office costs and ease pressure on office space. A study by KPMG in 1997 found that nearly one-fourth of the largest U.S. companies have employees who regularly telecommute either

part- or full-time. Many of those said workers enjoyed "increased productivity and job satisfaction." Lexis-Nexis in 1997 announced that it had cut its operating expenses by more than 45% by implementing a telecommuting program (in which 20% of their workforce participates) and a flexible work environment. Some companies have discontinued their tele-commuting programs, finding that face-to-face interaction in the office is an important commodity. Tele-commuting can also create resentment among employees who are not eligible for it.

- Flexitime: This allows you to choose, within limits, start & finish of work times. This allows employees to fit their work hours around unpredictable commuting time or visits to a sick relative.
- Compressed Working Week: Allows workers to work a week of normal hours, but in fewer days (i.e. four 10-hour days).
- Part-Time Working: Voluntarily agreed reduced hours for less pay but same status.
- Job-Sharing: Where two people share the responsibilities, pay, holidays, etc. of one full-time job. This is possible at all levels. Job-sharing is ideal for those with children or who need to care for elderly parents, or older employees who want to reduce their hours. This can enhance productivity for employers by doubling the skills base and problems-solving abilities.
- Bring Your Baby to Work: Many companies are now encouraging new parents to bring their babies to the office, which allows for shortened parental leave. This program helps workers who are unable or reluctant to find daycare, and helps the company to retain qualified workers.

Companies can benefit by having managers meet regularly with employees, to discuss the situation and difficulties that the employees face. Most importantly, companies need to inform their workers about the options available to them. The 1998 Business Work-Life Study by the Families and Work Institute found that nearly 40% of employees feel their careers would be negatively affected if they took advantage of flexible schedules. If a company is committed to flexible schedules, this message needs to be properly communicated, and the company must follow through on what it says.

Companies can also help their employees by providing information on local care providers, sponsoring day care centers, giving loans or allowances to help pay for care, etc.