

Managing Work/Life Balance Issues: An Examination of HR Practices Within a New Zealand International Hotel

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify international human resource management best practice with regard to work/life balance policies and practices within an international hotel in Auckland, New Zealand. The methodology included an analysis of qualitative data gleaned from exit interviews with 166 hotel employees, structured interviews with key management informants, and content analysis of written human resource policies pertaining to work/life balance.

The concept of “work/life balance” is based on individuals’ desire to balance their paid work with other activities that are important to them. A thorough review of the literature surrounding work/life balance issues will be included in the presentation, but the most common forms of work/life balance employment options include flexi-time; time off in lieu; self-rostering; job-sharing; working from home; staggered hours; shift swapping; annualised hours; tele-working; professional development work; compressed working hours; term-time working and flexible retirement schemes.

The two factors that most influence the need for work/life balance practices in New Zealand include the changing New Zealand workforce and the changing New Zealand workplace. According to the New Zealand Department of Labour, research shows that work-life balance is increasingly an issue for New Zealand employers and employees. Jobs, the workplace, and the workforce are changing rapidly. Five of the significant reasons for this change include more women and sole parents going to work; 20% of the population juggles more than one job; the workforce is aging and is becoming more diverse; businesses continue to compete globally to hire skilled workers; and technology is changing the way New Zealanders’ work.

The two most significant work life balance problems for New Zealander’s are people with not enough work or income and people who have too much work (the low paid who need to work long hours to earn enough and the higher paid who may feel trapped into working more hours than they want to). Jobs in primary industries (farming, forestry, fishing, and mining) are less plentiful. Jobs are growing in the tertiary sector such as business and financial services, retail, information technology, and hospitality.

Working hours have also changed. The trend has been away from the standards full-time week (30 – 50 hours) towards the part-time group (1-29 hours per week) and those working “over-time”

(50 hours per week or more). Non-standard employment (part-time, temporary, casual, and self-employed) is on the rise and expected to continue. People's need for flexibility is one of the key drivers of part-time and self-employed work.

Employees expectations in New Zealand have also changed in recent years. Younger skilled workers ("Generation X") expect to be able to combine work with other activities including travel and career breaks. New Zealand is in a global competition for skilled labour. Many of those who stay, come or return to New Zealand cite the lifestyle benefits of living here, and employees expect to have the time to enjoy these benefits. While women remain primarily responsible for household tasks and caring for family, many fathers now want more involvement with these activities. Both men and women can suffer from work and family stress.

The issue of remuneration and the corresponding impact on work/life balance is also unique in New Zealand. New Zealand and its neighbour Australia have among the highest hourly wage rates of any developed country. The strong influence of industry labour unions and formalised employment contracts impacts on employee leave and benefit packages. New Zealand's penalty pay legislation, for example, requires employers to pay employees a 15% incentive on all holidays.

The findings from this study suggest that while there are significant challenges, the international hotel has been proactive in identifying and implementing appropriate strategies for managing employees' expectations surrounding work/life balance issues while still meeting their business objectives. Implications for hospitality human resource practice, hospitality human resource management pedagogy, and further research are outlined.

Key Words: human resources, work/life balance, hotel management