

# Alpha Mummy

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**"Work-life balance" and 9 other outmoded buzzwords**



How do you achieve balance between work and family? Scale back, adjust your expectations, be flexible, goes the accepted thinking. But experts at a recent conference at Madrid's IESE Business School have better ideas.

**At Building Sustainable Societies: Trends and Best Practices in Work and Family Balance**, academics and businesspeople presented some of the new and innovative ways to think about getting our lives into kilter. In these crazy economic times, everyone is reevaluating what's important, making healthy working lives more important than ever. And that means ditching these 10 worst outmoded phrases.

## **1. Work-life balance**

Everybody wants it, nobody has any clue about how to get it. That's because the idea is all wrong, according to Dr Steven Poelmans, co-founder of the International Centre of Work and Family at Madrid's IESE Business School. "I don't like the word balance," he says, since it means if you put more into one side (say, work or family responsibilities), there's less time for another. Instead companies and employees need to think about harmonising work life, prioritising things in the various parts of life

as you need you to. "Work-life balance is about having a sense of meaning and purpose in life," says Poelmans.

## **2. Career ladder**

The problem with the career ladder is that there's only one way to go: up. If you try to dangle one leg off by working part-time or taking a break, others zoom past you to the top. It's an old-fashioned notion, says Brett Walsh, of Deloitte Consulting, who ranks in HR Magazine's Top 100 Most Influential.

Post-Baby Boom generations don't want the bureaucracy or the set trajectory, he says. These days we need to think in terms of a career lattice, one where there are multiple paths upwards, where people can move faster, slower and change directions, depending on their career-life fit. As employees we can try to create a web that takes into account the myriad ways in which we learn and develop. As employers and managers, we can recognise that not everybody needs to advance in the same way. In return, the benefits are increased loyalty, increased productivity and decreased recruitment costs.

## **3. Mummy track**

The "mommy track", a term prevalent in America, describes what happens once a woman becomes a parent. Her fast track to the top becomes a mommy track, the equivalent of the career slip road. But in these days of mass customisation, it doesn't have to be. After all, says Walsh, you can customise your iPod, you can customise your car, it's time we think about workplaces that allow us to bring our individuality to work with us. By matching talents to tasks, employers and employees ditch the notion that there's only one template. With more dads taking on parenting responsibilities, the "mummy track" becomes obsolete.

**4. Glass ceiling** – This term evokes an old-fashioned way of thinking about the workplace and combines baggage (like "mummy track") and the closed-minded thinking of "career ladder". It also tacitly reinforces that women can't get to the top without changing. (Recently the EHRC said [it's a concrete ceiling.](#))

"Mostly the women who have arrived to power positions have disguised themselves as if they were men just to arrive," says Dr Nuria Chinchilla, Director of the International Centre of Work and Family. Instead of bringing diversity into the workplace, this reinforces old-fashioned notions of the power structure. By

recognising the different attributes men and women bring to the table, we create a stronger workforce, says Nuria, named "Best Manager of the Year" by the Spanish Federation of Executive Women.

## **5. Sandwich generation**

This term came into parlance several years ago and gives a corrosive spin to the problems faced by people who look after children and elderly parents. Work-life conflict is not a fad, like metallic leggings and speed dating. It's driven by fundamental sociological changes, says Poelmans, and its not going away. More of us are looking after parents who live longer, and juggling school and childcare that is a patchwork of cover and care. It's hard to think of a worker who at one time or another won't need time to attend to family matters. Using the phrase labels the problem – dividing those workers from “the rest of us” - without offering a solution or even constructive dialogue. Additionally, every person's challenges, goals and demands on their time are distinct and individual. Ditching "sandwich generation" allows us to approach each person and situation fresh to think more constructively about what works in their situation.

## **6. Time-poor**

Everybody's day is the same length. It feels shorter when our stress and responsibilities from work follow us into our home environment and our home concerns dog us at the office, says Poelmans. The stress we feel at home undermines our relationships and reduces our ability to cope; in the office, we become less engaged and less productive. What we need to do instead: allow ourselves time to refocus between work and home. By more effectively separating our milieus, we are able to more effectively use our time – and enjoy it.

## **7. Sacrifice**

It's become a normal philosophy of the modern career – you have to make sacrifices. You have to choose between the school play and the corner office; working from home or playing with the big boys. It's that kind of thinking that requires employees to be at their desk a certain number of hours, whether or not the work requires them to be there. As bosses, supervisors and workers we can challenge that notion, by looking at a person's effectiveness at their task (and promoting our own work to higher-ups) that

doesn't focus on just how much misery was endured along the way.

## **8. Open-door policy**

"Come in any time", the boss says. My door is always open. It's a cliché that all bosses say this; it's also true that few employees take them up on the blanket offer. The quandary of course is that employees are afraid to ask for reduced hours, fewer responsibilities, more time with their families because of fear of fallout. Whether or not their work schedule changes, they're afraid they'll be perceived as not dedicated. For companies and employees to forge workable alternatives, there has to be "psychological safety", says Poelmans. For supervisors and HR professionals, that means not just telling employees they can come to you; it also means reaching out if you sense them struggling. "Family friendly" policies in the employee handbook are important, but they need to be backed up with an environment in which employees feel they can take them up.

## **9. Accountability**

Rather than talking about accountability, let's talk about measurable results. One speaker at a recent conference at Madrid's IESE Business School described an exchange with her boss about an employee who wanted to work from home. "I don't want her ironing clothes during the day," the boss harrumphed. "I don't care if she irons clothes!" the speaker responded. "If she gets her work done and has time enough to iron clothes during the day, great." Championing accountability implies employees don't live up to their responsibilities unless monitored by management. Measuring results keeps the focus where it belongs – on projects and actions that help the business.

## **10. Flexibility**

In the minds of some, "flexibility" has come to mean compromise and dissatisfaction for everyone - employers and employees. The solution: ditch the term with all of its associated baggage. We need to learn a new language says Walsh. That means adopting new models in our business and taking advantage of new strategies, like the ones mentioned here. After all, it's the mindset - not the job - that needs to be flexible.

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