

Work-Life Balance Is Easier When Your Manager Knows How to Assess Performance

by Scott Behson

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DAVE WHEELER FOR HBR

Not long ago, a manager asked me to name the most important work-life benefit for employees. I answered that the most important benefit isn't a benefit at all. Of course, child care, flexible scheduling, and family leave policies are important, but in my experience the best thing we can do to support working parents (and all employees) is to get better at one of the most basic and poorly executed functions of managers: performance appraisals.

He groaned and admitted that he dreaded doing performance evaluations, and his employees hated them too. He ticked off the usual complaints – how long they take to complete, their subjective nature, the infrequent timing, and so on.

Moreover, he told me that considering the knowledge work his employees performed, it was relatively hard to know how well his people were performing, yet it was relatively easy to observe the quantity of work and of work hours in the office. As a result, “chair time” and “face time” became considerations, even when he knew these shouldn’t be treated as paramount. But because he did not feel confident in identifying performance, he resorted to the easier course of action.

I have to give him credit for his honesty. Too many managers resort to measuring face time instead of actual work performance, but they rarely admit it.

And that’s why the best thing managers can do for all their employees – and especially those facing work-family conflicts – is to do the hard work of actually evaluating performance, not chair time or face time.

When managers do so, they free employees to arrange their work lives so that they can be the most effective. Surprise, surprise: When you focus on measuring face time, you get...face time. But when you actually focus on performance, you get superior performance.

For example, Ryan, LLC has been lauded far and wide (and rightly so) for how they transformed its successful but overly time-intensive workplace into an even more successful firm that now couples its high-performance culture with respect for time flexibility.

It accomplished this transformation with a constellation of changes over a decade, but the central intervention was its new performance evaluation system. Instead of infrequent, subjective evaluations based largely on “time on task,” Ryan now has managers, employees, and teams develop a set of agreed-upon performance metrics that are consistently tracked. As long as these metrics are met and customers and coworkers are happy with their access to employees, managers at Ryan generally do not track office hours. Once Ryan made the change, some employees who had been receiving high ratings by working 70 hours weeks were revealed to have been less productive than many who worked fewer but more efficient hours. Turnover plummeted; satisfaction, engagement, and financial performance soared.

When I laid out all of this for my manager friend, he was interested but daunted. He's right that not every company can transform the way Ryan did, certainly not in the short run. But some of the changes required don't require a full-scale overhaul of your company's performance management system. They're relatively small changes that many managers can make on their own.

And changing the way we evaluate goes to the very core of good management. Think about how much more competitive your whole organization would be if managers:

- Defined performance in terms of customer satisfaction, core activities, or project completion.
- Regularly held goal-setting and feedback sessions with employees, and used goal attainment as the core of performance evaluation.
- Understood which aspects of employees' jobs lend themselves to flexible work and which need to be performed at set times in the office.
- Allowed more flexibility in how, when, and where work gets done, while ensuring that enough time is spent at the office to promote communication, collaboration and innovation.
- Gradually allowed more freedom and flexibility employees who perform well and earn trust.
- Recognized that we can maintain or even increase performance standards in professional environments while letting go of exactly how work gets done.

A fitness wristband can track how long you sit in your desk chair. It takes a leader to understand how the work really gets done, and by whom. By implementing some of these changes, we allow all employees to construct schedules that work best for their success at work and at home. This obviously benefits working parents, but all employees also gain – and so will their companies, in terms of engagement and performance.



Scott Behson is a Professor of Management at Fairleigh Dickinson University, and the author of *The Working Dad's Survival Guide: How to Succeed at Work and at Home*. He writes about work and family issues for *Time*, *WSJ*, *the Huffington Post* and his blog, *Fathers, Work and Family*. A national expert in work-family issues, Scott was a featured speaker at the White House Summit for Working Families. Follow him on Twitter @ScottBehson.

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
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anthony gell 8 days ago

Brilliant - this is why Google and other enlightened organizations have decided not to measure how many vacation days you take - who cares, the only thing that matters is - have you hit your goals?... increasingly (good) employers care less about the how / where - welcome to a new entrepreneurial way of working, even in Big Cos.

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