

Better Balance, Better Business

N.J. COMPANIES EXPLORE WAYS TO GIVE EMPLOYEES BALANCED LIVES

BY DIANA DRAKE

Employers who fail to recognize that workers have priorities outside of the workplace do so at their own risk. That was the findings of a Kelly Services survey in which about nine out of 10 Millennials said work-life balance is an important factor contributing to satisfaction and happiness at work.



Julie Levinson Werner

Tom Senter

Balancing work and life has been a trendy workplace topic for years, and companies are focusing even more these days on providing the flexible schedules, tele-

commuting opportunities and other work-life benefits their employees crave.

“Employers should ask employees, ‘How can we help make your life better?’” said Thomas Senter, partner and head of the employee benefits practice at Greenbaum Rowe Smith & Davis in Woodbridge. “Anything an employer can do to keep a workforce happy and healthy, and to eliminate absenteeism will lead to increased productivity.”

The Expectations of Young Professionals

New Jersey businesses are providing their employees with more opportunities for part-time and home-based work, said Maureen Binetti, chair of the employment law team at Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer in Woodbridge.

“Younger professionals – men and women – have more of an expectation that there will be consideration for work-life balance,” said Binetti, who joined Wilentz in 1981. “When I started, that was not the case.”

The Risks

But employers should tread thoughtfully because implementing new policy comes with challenges.

First and foremost, “It’s important that the employer document all arrangements in an employment handbook that explains employee rights,” Senter said. It should be in writing, for example, when companies require that employees use their vacation days rather than get paid for vacation

days they don’t use, Senter said.

Agreements that allow employees to work off-site, meanwhile, could increase the company’s risk of a data breach.

“Businesses that have employees working from home have less of an ability to protect sensitive information,” said Julie Levinson Werner, senior counsel with Lowenstein Sandler in Roseland. “If a salesperson is taking calls at Starbucks, companies need to be sure that proprietary information is protected.”

She added, “Businesses can train employees to make sure they are responsible, and they can also use electronic monitoring. You don’t want to be overly intrusive, but you can let employees know that you reserve the right to monitor and even remotely turn off a phone or delete access” to proprietary information.

Treat Employees Fairly

Binetti cautioned employers to be fair.

“Make sure you are treating everybody in the same job category or situation at work equally, so that there isn’t a concern about favoritism or discrimination between people who are allowed to do these things and people who aren’t,” she said. “Even if you’re not doing it for a discriminatory reason, it can look like it. That can lead to morale issues.”

And what if flex-time employees are not meeting expectations?

“Call the employee in and remind him that these benefits are a privilege, not a right,” Binetti said. “Give the person the opportunity to improve, and monitor the situation to make sure the work is getting done.”

Bottom line: It doesn’t matter where or when, as long as the work gets done. Flexible schedules also widen the pool of good job candidates – a key consideration in today’s talent wars in industries like technology.

“Employers should encourage flexibility,” said Levinson Werner, whose firm has an office near Silicon Valley, the epicenter of the balanced work-life mindset. “As employees have more responsibilities taking care of children and aging parents, more flexibility allows for an increased scope of quality employees. That’s a good thing.” ♦

