

## **Life in the Balance**

"I called the New World into existence, to redress the balance of the Old", so saith George Canning (1770-1827) during a speech in London on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1826 to the nay-saying masses who found it difficult to believe in the then new 'high-tech' industrial revolution of that era.

We are now well into our own new 'high-tech' industrial revolution. And, with it has come the age of balance. Life has always been a balancing and juggling act. However, until recent historical times, balance in corporate America was an act largely manipulated by the entourage of employees. Value-systems in our corporate world have changed radically in the past ten years.

Most important of all in this balancing act, in my opinion, is the overwhelming lack of recognition by Human Resource departments that the balance of power in this new age has passed from the employer to the employee. Not since the hey-day of ancient Mesopotamia have we had such a turnaround or indeed such a process of democracy in our working lives.

The shift in the balance of power has made it easier for our rivals, both at home and in the merging global marketplace, to plunder our most valuable employees on a grand scale, thus leaving us spending more and more money, time, effort and energy to find new employees, train them, entice them to stay with us and, hopefully, retain them. It's a difficult business.

The shortage of qualified and competent employees is the one major issue forcing employers to see themselves, and rightly so, as being less competitive in their industries. Boards of Directors are now making executive management totally accountable for the operation and success of their various departments. Of course, there are notable exceptions. This accountability includes answerability as to why employee turnover is higher - or lower - when compared to their competitors. The profitability, and consequently, stock price, is of enormous interest to any Board of Directors, and they are directing with an eye to accelerated keen profit margins.

The keys to the new accountability are openness, transparency and communication. A major part of the new accountability is the formulation of a proper, written communications policy as part of a comprehensive Public Relations Plan, which should include all key audiences, starting with the internal audience.

Achieving a work-life balance that suits both employers and employees is just becoming a major issue on the business agenda. People expect employers to be more flexible and understanding of family commitments, to be valued for what they achieve rather than the hours they put in, and for childcare to be more readily available, better and affordable. Childcare is another issue worth discussing in a future piece.

Employers have perceived barriers to comprehensively adopting methods such as flexible working practices. Their reluctance is largely based on fears over reduced

communication, access to resources, concerns about security of information, lack of support services and difficulties in maintaining good customer relations. Some of these are, of course, real difficulties and demand a thoughtful, sensitive and equitable internal process.

A survey by British Telecom of their working practices has shown that the introduction of flexibility has allowed it to attract and retain the best workers; widen its span of productive hours, and has led to a substantial decrease in employee turnover recruitment costs, and, reduced absenteeism. Another finding was that there was a definite increase in employee motivation, loyalty, commitment, productivity and customer satisfaction. Customers are also people, and they dislike change. So if you can keep your quality employees who deal with your customers, your chances of retaining that customer is heightened. Good relationships are difficult, expensive and laborious to build under any circumstances, but under the umbrella of a commercial environment, they are a key component of customer satisfaction and retention. They must be resourced.

How to move forward? A properly trained HR department, that is given the tools, time, resources, and access to outside specialists and training, is indeed an invaluable asset today to any company, irrespective of size. Where HR departments fail is in measuring the return on investment in their people. Most executives now view their employees as their most important asset, yet there are so few companies or organizations that measure the real return they get on this asset.

HR benchmarking, or human asset measurement, allows companies to maximize the contributions employees make to meeting organizational objectives and to achieving competitive advantage at the least cost. Many surveys over the past several years have shown a decline in commitment by workers to employers. Online recruitment has changed the whole nature of employment. So, benchmarking will enable HR departments to prove their bottom line impact and help to show companies how to focus on winning the war for talent.

Companies that develop a positive, cohesive and well-formulated performance culture will be in a powerful position to recognize merit and deal with slackers. The annual employee evaluation is no longer a strong process to measure any level of competence. Slackers de-motivate good people and cause them to either become slackers themselves or they leave. A benchmarking process involves a close, measured and careful look at employee remuneration packages. Companies have employees who are extremely valuable and productive but who are often earning only a fraction above the slacker who may have ostensible advantage of, say, longevity.

In these circumstances, the online recruiters target productive and de-motivated people and you're then into the "Gotcha" syndrome. A qualitative and quantitative system of benchmarking will be an enormous asset to any company or organization. Haste and panic driven furtive systems never work.

Balance in our work lives; balance in our private lives; balance in our family lives; balance in our social lives; balance in our environment, and balance in our nation

all need to be considered when employment policies are being formulated. Surely it is not beyond the wit of man (and woman) today to call the New World by its name and redress the balance of the Old World.##ENDS