

WORK LIFE BALANCE CASE STUDY: STROUD AND SWINDON BUILDING SOCIETY



By Lynne Copp, Managing Director, The Worklife Company

How it used to be...

The journey towards worklife balance model recognition started for Stroud & Swindon Building Society in October 1999 when WLB was raised as an issue during the corporate planning process. In July of the following year, the organisation applied for and was awarded funding to improve the working lives of all employees, via the Challenge Fund for Worklife Balance. At that time, The Stroud & Swindon Building Society had grown considerably from its original base of £0.5Bn to £1.2Bn. They employed around 417 people, 170 in Head Office and the remainder in 27 branches in London, Wiltshire and the Southwest. Attrition sat at 21% and sickness absence was high at around 14%. It was the belief that a high percentage of leavers resigned for better salaries and that the high rate of absence was due to worklife imbalance.

The Society was also going through major internal change at the same time. A number of new managers at senior levels had been employed to bring specific expertise to the Society that would drive their commitment to change the business model. Their vision was to transition from a “traditional” head office and branch run organisation, to a company that was “sales focused, proactive and regarded as the employer of choice in the area”.

The Initial Project

In the early stages of the project, an employee survey was carried out to establish the key issues relating to attrition and absence. This was linked to exploring worklife balance needs and the need for flexible working. Results indicated that staff had concerns over:

1. Long Hours - The extra hours being worked, especially by managers and part-timers
2. Dependent care - A higher than expected proportion of staff – 22% – said they had responsibility for dependents.
3. Access to training & development – especially part-time and branch staff far from Head Office.
4. Balance for Childcare - Rather than wanting childcare facilities, staff called for more flexible hours.

The Journey

Oct 1999	WLB Highlighted as an issue
July 2000	Application for Dti Funding accepted
Oct 2000	Work began to improve WLB
April 2002	Applied for further funding to support culture change
Feb 2003	Pilot run of IIP WLB model
Apr 2003	Flexible Working Policies agreed by Board
Nov 2003	Launched WLB week – H/O & Branch
All 2004	Consolidation and deployment of policies
Apr 2005	Worklife Evolution assessment – top marks
Feb 2006	IIP Assessment
The future?	Read on...

“Overall, we recognised after the survey that we had a general challenge to educate managers and staff in adopting a more flexible approach,” said Sara Phelps, HR Support Services Manager. The start of that process was to feed back the results of the survey in publications and presentations and then explore new ways to work.

In addition, a ‘Worklife Focus Group’ was set up to assess the implications of the research and to decide on the way forward. This group comprised a cross-section of managers and staff, each of whom had their own work life balance issues. For example, one member of the group was a single father, another cared for both her parents. “We wanted to be sure that typical needs were addressed,” says Sara.

**“We could not have predicted the improvement in morale and teamwork
– our people are much happier and productive!”**

The Journey

As a result of the staff survey, a number of family friendly policies were set in place – most prior to legislation. These policies included:

- Dependant Care Leave
- Paternity Leave
- Parental Leave
- Emergency Leave
- Career Breaks
- New Maternity Policy

Out of all the policies the Dependant Care Leave policy created biggest impact for the organisation. In addition, 3 days emergency leave were awarded to all employees (paid) for those times when the employee was experiencing an emergency at home, for example, a sick child, dependant care issue, broken central heating boiler – whatever the reason, the employee could take up to 3 days – in hour blocks. Managers were concerned that people might take advantage, but the data showed that employees on average over a 12 month period took just 7.2 hours. However, the real win came in a reduction in sickness absence and a strong reduction in turnover of staff. In the first year alone, Stroud & Swindon saved a substantial amount of cost. When asked “How come you didn’t take advantage of the 3 days?” employees responded “We may have needed it, why would we take advantage?”

The IIP Worklife Balance Model Assessments

The first IIP assessment provided a clear indication of the areas for improvement – particularly in leadership involvement and staff/ management development. Since that report 2 years ago, The Stroud & Swindon Building Society has been working hard to make worklife balance a way of life. With support from Quality South West experts and internal consultants, the Society has made great strides and in February were awarded the much desired status. In the recent assessment, the following strengths were highlighted for the organisation:

- Top level commitment and support – from the board and throughout the senior team
- Good support and direction from HR
- Good communication and information accessible to all employees and their managers
- Focused approach to individuals, teams and the whole organisation
- Strong support from managers – practicing what they preach
- An “impressive” range of flexible working options

Flexible Options on Offer

1. Job share – part week, part month, park task – any options welcome!
2. Part time
3. Working from Home
4. Compressed working week
5. Term-time working
6. Emergency Leave
7. Dependant care leave
8. New maternity policy – including paternity and adoption
9. 9 day fortnight
10. Holiday buy scheme
11. Secondments
12. Career breaks – available to all levels

“Because we’re all on different patterns and never really in at the same time, our manager will run 2 team meetings to make sure that everyone can attend! I can see that is difficult to manage but they do, they work around us!”

A view from the top

Simon Whitwham, Director of Customer Service said “If we wish to attract and retain the best people in our business that can deliver excellence to our customers time and again, then we have to differentiate ourselves! The competition for talent in our region is fierce and we need to make sure that we develop a great place to work where our people will not want to leave us for the competition. We want engaged employees who are motivated by their work and keen to do a great job. If we do not recognise their need for balance and don’t respect the fact that staff have a life outside of work, then we will end up with disengaged and demotivated employees. Our business could end up the same because our customers will believe that is how we are! Would you want to do business with a company like that or one that is excellent? It’s not even a choice, it’s a requirement.

So What about the future?

We have a real opportunity to further improve the deployment of worklife balance” explains Simon, “We have invested a lot in management development but we need to go a stage further and ensure consistency of approach and supporting managers to get more creative in how they apply worklife and flexible working.

We are focusing on increasing management capability in recruitment – we need to develop our best performers whereby they can move around the business to gain more experience and at the same time widen their scope and motivation. There is such an opportunity for us to share best practice and we are developing ways to do that both internally and externally. It is an exciting time to be part of the Society and I for one believe that worklife balance and flexibility has been a key catalyst to changing our culture and modernising our business model!”

Sue Bailey, Senior Manager, Human Resources added “The branches are a key focus to us, our communication of flexible options has worked, but some branch managers are still a bit nervous. We are working with them to take some risks – after all, if it works it works! It does not require months of data collection. “

- 25% of the workforce are currently working some sort of flexible pattern
- 20% are male
- 12% say motivation and morale has improved
- 16% say job satisfaction has increased
- Over 50% say that their hours now meet home needs fully
- Staff turnover in the group that work flexibly is now 6% compared with 22% in the rest of the Society

Summary

Worklife Balance is not a tick in the box or a name on an organisation chart for Stroud & Swindon. So far, it has been a major change project that has been regarded as integral to the way the business is run. It has never been “just another fashionable initiative”, it is a journey that has brought them this far and will extend well into the future.

Every employee from the most experienced to the most junior is regarded with respect and dignity; they should be proud that staff see them as an employer of choice.

They are to be commended for their tenacity, leadership, consistency and focus. Well done and congratulations on their successful assessment, they are truly a best practice organisation.
Lynne Copp, Managing Director, The Worklife Company

“They’re brilliant employers! They trust and support you! I had some leave booked and had to take some time off beforehand because of illness. They were just concerned about me not about the time!”