Work-Life Balance: Denmark vs. USA

Sarah Gardner
Brigham Young University, sarah24gardner@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/marriottstudentreview

Part of the Accounting Commons, Business Administration, Management, and Operations Commons, Business and Corporate Communications Commons, and the Entrepreneurial and Small Business Operations Commons

Marriott Student Review is a student journal created and published as a project for the Writing for Business Communications course at Brigham Young University (BYU). The views expressed in Marriott Student Review are not necessarily endorsed by BYU or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/marriottstudentreview/vol2/iss3/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marriott Student Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Growing up, I never really saw my dad. He was around for the important things, but I knew that his focus wasn’t really on me; it was on his work. Soon after my dad turned fifty-five years old, his workaholic tendencies caught up to him. His heart rate and blood pressure spiked, which caused him to incur some brain damage and increased his risk of a heart attack. After this event, he could no longer function at the same capacity. He couldn’t work, he could hardly socialize, and it would take him years to recover—both mentally and emotionally. This health crisis happened in large part because of his working too much.

But in the United States, this kind of working isn’t uncommon—in fact, some might say working yourself to death isn’t a bad thing and is even the best route to success in business. But what are the costs? According to Joan Williams, a legal scholar and director of the Center for WorkLife Law, Americans define success as “sacrific[ing] other areas of . . . life in order to achieve workplace success.” So what kind of effect does this have on workers? Clearly not a good one. Is this really the best attitude to have? I think the easy answer is no. Before addressing possible solutions to this issue, consider the differences between Denmark and the US in the areas of work-life balance.
DENMARK

In Denmark, there is a much different attitude about work-life balance. “Stop by a Danish office at 5 pm and nearly every desk will be empty.” Despite working significantly less hours, Danes still take pride in their work while also enjoying a healthy lifestyle outside of work. Studies show that more educated, religious, tolerant, and caring countries are better at implementing family-friendly work practices and policies. In addition, another study suggests that having a good work-life balance increases both job satisfaction and family satisfaction.

But even if a healthy work-life balance is good for employees, how does work-life balance affect a company’s success? In 2011, one company (First Tennessee Bank) piloted a flexible, supportive work environment to gauge what effects it would have. Soon after, retention increased by 50 percent, leading to 7 percent higher customer retention; this resulted in $106 million of extra income over two years. As evidenced by this pilot program, work-life balance practices are beneficial for employees and employers alike, and Denmark excels at this.

THE USA

America, on the other hand, has cheaper housing costs and higher income. Simply put, Americans value money. The culture required to earn the most money demands long work hours, strict company policies, focused attention on work above family, and a (highly) competitive attitude. In summary, becoming a successful businessperson in the USA often demands the sacrifice of a healthy personal and family life.

So what can Americans do to change their unhealthy work-life balance? How can Americans become more like Danes in their attitudes? Consider the following three suggestions that can help Americans have a better work-life balance: (1) family-friendly work policies, (2) reasonable work hours, and (3) a healthier focus on happiness.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORK POLICIES

In order for companies to truly respect a work-life balance, they need to have policies in place to support employees—especially regarding building a family. Policy options include paid maternity/paternity leave, flexibility in the workplace, and general work schedules that support family life. Figure 2 (right) illustrates the current situations for paid maternity leave.

Paid Maternity Leave

As shown in Figure 2, the USA has no legal mandate for paid maternity leave in the USA. Working USA parents are guaranteed only an unpaid twelve-week leave. In contrast, Denmark offers fifty-two weeks of paid leave that can be flexibly applied to either the mother or father and can be used in a flexible timespan up until the child is nine. These policies show that Denmark not only supports the birth of a child, but also the immense amount of time required to raise a child long after birth.

Flexibility

In addition, companies can support families in the workplace by providing flexible options for employees to work. Examples include job shares, telecommuting, stable scheduling, and a general respect for important family events. Such policies or values practiced in a company will better support both men and women striving to build a family. As Joan Williams stated, “it doesn’t take three or ten months to raise a child, it takes twenty years.” As important as maternity leave is, supporting families is so much more than that—and Americans can do better at recognizing that.

Studies have also shown that initiating family-friendly work policies—especially if a company is the first to do so—has a positive impact on shareholder return values. Initiating family-friendly policies has a positive impact on both employees and companies and can be well worth the time and effort needed to implement them.
Limitations

A limitation to Danish work success (shown in Figure 1) is that Danes have a much lower average income than Americans; the USA has a significantly higher income than all other countries surveyed in the Better Life Index. The reasons for this may be associated with certain governmental policies. For example, Denmark has the highest personal income tax (surveyed by the OECD) at 53 percent, compared to the average at 24 percent. This income tax contributes to free, socialized education and healthcare. Because Danes do not need to pay for healthcare and education, they may not need a higher income. In addition, what may have started as a higher income could be smaller, partially because of high tax rates.

Additionally, Americans have a better ratio of income to housing expenses, meaning that Danes have much more expensive housing costs when compared to their income than Americans do. Had the housing costs been cheaper, this could have explained why Danes do not focus on earning a high income.

A Better Focus

It seems that Danes have a general lack of desire to earn a higher income because their priorities are elsewhere. Despite lower income, Danes have lower unemployment rates and higher gender equality in the workplace than the USA. For Danes, a healthy work-life balance and higher life satisfaction are much more important than a big paycheck, and definitely worth the lower income.

For a business, focusing on revenue and employee effectiveness is clearly important; however, just as important is a focus on the well-being of its employees. Employees with better life and family satisfaction are more productive, healthy, and creative in the workplace. Even without being required by the government, American companies ought to adopt these shorter work hours and have an attitude of respect towards employees’ own lives and their families.

Despite a mentality in the USA that working long hours is the ideal lifestyle, in Denmark, they’ve shown otherwise. As shown in Figure 3 (right), the average Danish work week is 38.5 hours for men, in comparison to 42.5 hours for men in the USA. Danes also enjoy five weeks of mandatory vacation for both holidays and family events, and they have a policy that employees should not have to work more than an average of forty-eight hours a week.

In addition to fewer hours worked, Danish employers highly respect the personal and leisure time of their employees. Instead of dinner or weekend meetings, Danes strive to have midday or lunch-time meetings to respect employees’ needs to return home to a family.

**HEALTHIER FOCUS ON HAPPINESS**

Some words in the Danish language illustrate the attitude Danes have towards employment: _hygge_ (pronounced _hoo-gah_), meaning “a feeling of coziness and contentment or a warm glow” and _arbejdsglæde_ (pronounced _are-bite-glue_), simply meaning “happiness at work.” These words are widely celebrated in Denmark, as they focus on the family, personal fulfillment, balance, and happiness.

These attitudes towards work highlight the Danish definition of an ideal worker. An ideal worker in Denmark values family over work and understands the importance of a good work-life balance. One woman shared her personal experience of moving to Denmark in order to achieve a more positive lifestyle. She shared that Danish work environments are built on trust and that Danes spend less time commuting and more time living.
Culture

Companies need to foster a culture of happiness and individuality. Company policies should focus around employee satisfaction and supporting their life endeavors—whether that be family or something else. With a culture so focused on money and working, Americans may lose sight of what really matters in life. Because of Danes’ focus on happiness and balance, they—as a country—have the second-best work-life balance rating from the OECD Better Life Index.26

Conclusion

In conclusion, Americans can improve their work-life balance by understanding the attitude Danes have towards work and life. Danes live for family, not for work. They focus on happiness, not on income. Working fewer hours and encouraging family-friendly policies are simply the result of a healthy balance between work and life.

Americans can improve their focus on family and living life to the fullest by taking the focus off of income and prestige. A shift in focus will benefit companies more than it detracts.27 The specific suggestions given in this article have been shown to be effective ways of increasing work-life balance.28 As companies strive for family-friendly work policies, reasonable work hours, and a healthier focus on happiness, studies show that they will experience better employee retention, increased productivity, and a better work environment for creativity and positivity.29

Notes

5 Madhusoodanan, “What will it take.”
7 Gray, “Denmark has the best.”
8 Madhusoodanan, “What will it take.”
11 Madhusoodanan, “What will it take.”
18 OECD Better Life Index, “Denmark.”
19 OECD Better Life Index, “Denmark.”
20 OECD Better Life Index, “Denmark.”
21 OECD Better Life Index, “Denmark.”
25 Haynes, “nailing the work-life balance.”
26 OECD Better Life Index, “Denmark.”