

Work-life balance upsides add up for Surrey firm

Obsidian Property Management recognized with workplace award, but debate over telecommuting continues

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 [Human Resources \(/sections/human-resources/\)](/sections/human-resources/)

By Patrick Blennerhassett

In April 2014, employee federations and unions in France signed a legally binding agreement that forced almost a quarter of a million workers to forgo checking work emails on mobile devices after 6 p.m. in a bid to keep employees from taking their work home. France has also capped its work week for many employees at 35 hours, and those who work over that threshold can acquire additional vacation days or overtime pay. The country has been both heralded and scolded for its progressive stance on the work-life balance issue.

Sean Michaels, managing broker and president of Surrey's Obsidian Property Management Ltd., said he's implemented some work-life balance initiatives at his company similar to those instituted in France.

"Just having a job isn't enough anymore. The average worker is looking for fulfilment and purpose, not just a paycheque."

The most noteworthy policy for the strata management company, which recently won the Surrey Board of Trade's Surrey Child and Family Friendly Workplace Award, is making an unlimited number of sick and vacation days available to its employees.

He said that a couple of employees were terminated for taking advantage of the unlimited sick leave policy.

"Not everyone is capable of self-governance."

But Michaels added that it provided an indirect way to weed out workers who aren't fully committed to the job, and that his long-tenured employees have thrived under the new system.

“My employees are professionals; as such I trust their judgment to get the job done. Essentially, as long as the work is being done and the clients they have are happy, when they accomplish the work doesn't matter. Further, I respect the fact that life and the universe do not care about time and certainly not about a punch clock.”

Obsidian also has IT equipment available for its employees so that, aside from attending required strata meetings at night, they can complete most of their tasks from home.

Lieke ten Brummelhuis, a Simon Fraser University Beedie School of Business management and organization studies assistant professor, said telecommuting from home is a double-edged sword.

Working from home, she said, can be isolating.

“In general, people like being around other people, so if you lack the social factor at work, employees can become less motivated or feel less energetic and even a little down.”

But ten Brummelhuis added that working from home can also save commuting time and increase employee efficiency because office interruptions are removed.

“Also, they feel more in control, and this adds to job satisfaction and work engagement.”

Ten Brummelhuis noted that some companies in her Netherlands homeland have had success with allowing employees a mix of telecommuting and in-office work.

However, in 2013 Yahoo Inc. (Nasdaq:YHOO) chief executive officer Marissa Mayer banned telecommuting at the search engine giant, reigniting the debate around how to best manage work-life balance with employee productivity.

Michaels said one way he keeps his employees happy is by limiting their portfolio size and workload. His strata management representatives cap out at eight clients or 1,000 units, whichever comes first.

He said the policy helps prevent employees from taking on too much work and subsequently burning out.

“I think implementing progressive management styles is not just for the large juggernauts of business or the IT sector such as EA (Nasdaq:EA), Google (Nasdaq:GOOGL), Microsoft (Nasdaq:MSFT). It's what will be required to attract and retain our employees. As business leaders we have to figure out what we can do for our employees, prior to expecting something from them.”

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