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Wanted: Jobs with work-life balance

The good news is more bosses are taking steps to boost staff wellness

MAVIS TOH

Bogged down in that job? Account manager X.Y. Lee thinks she is, and has finally decided to quit.

As soon as she steps into the research firm where she works, at 8.30am, she finds it hard to leave her desk. Ms Lee, 27, gets at least 200 e-mail messages and 20 phone calls each day.

Last year, unable to cope with the work stress, she even turned to a psychiatrist. "I was very depressed and stressed out, and had constant mood swings," she said. "I have now decided to quit."

She is serving out her one month's notice.

In looking for a new job, she has added a criterion to her checklist: work-life balance. "The firm I join needs to be supportive of work-life balance and care about its employees' well-being," she said.

Increasingly, Singaporeans like Ms Lee are putting more emphasis on life beyond work. The good news is, so are many employers.

A Singapore Institute of Management survey this year said some 80 per cent of the 750 managers polled placed health and work-life balance above job and pay on their priority lists. This, at a time when jobs are not easy to come by.

Stress can be disruptive. The Straits Times recently reported that young office workers in China used unorthodox stress relief activities.

Some formed groups and prowled supermarkets, swiping biscuits, defizzing soft drinks and crushing noodle packets. Others turned to stress-eating.

Meanwhile, more companies in Singapore are doing something about staff wellness. The Health Promotion Board (HPB) said the proportion of private-sector workplaces that have Workplace Health Promotion (WHP) programmes increased from 45 per cent in 2003 to 59 per cent in 2006.

Almost all public-sector organisations have ongoing WHP programmes.

Mr Dharendra Shantilal, Kelly Services' senior vice-president of Asia-Pacific, explained:

Stressed out

"I was very depressed and stressed out, and had constant mood swings. I have now decided to quit."

MS X.Y. LEE, an account manager, who had to turn to a psychiatrist to cope with work stress. She is now serving out her month's notice in her current job

“Good employee wellness programmes help attract and retain top talent and healthy, productive employees - all key factors in the success of any business.”

Employees are more likely to perform better when their physical and mental health is robust, he added.

Mr Josh Goh, the GMP Group’s assistant director of corporate services, said that many corporate wellness programmes now include gym membership, yoga and pilates classes, health talks, fruit days and grooming classes.

At Singapore Airlines (SIA), staff are encouraged to join recreational and sporting activities to maintain wellness and to relieve stress. A runners’ club, a cabin crew performance arts circle as well as a community service club have been set up.

SIA said the airline industry is dynamic and the job demands of front-line staff are fast-paced, with them having to interact with various customers and deal with issues. “With more than half our staff working in the front line, Singapore Airlines is dedicated to ensuring that staff are mentally and physically fit to tackle challenges at work,” its spokesman said.

Transport operator SMRT focuses on building a supportive environment at work. This includes having “care officers” to provide first-line trauma counselling for staff involved in unfortunate incidents like accidents in the course of work. Counselling is also offered to staff facing difficult situations in their personal lives.

Utilities and marine group Sembcorp promotes good mental health among its employees, as well as trauma counselling. It has taken out additional insurance to cover its staff’s inpatient psychiatric treatment, which is a standard exclusion for regular insurance plans.

The company also sponsors employees who sign up for sporting events. Its business development manager Paul Low, 39, received close to \$50,000 in sponsorship to pay for equipment, lodging, food, airfare and allowances when he competed in overseas Ironman triathlons and desert races. He also gets up to two weeks off from work when he goes for the races.

“The company, my bosses and colleagues are all very supportive and understanding,” said Mr Low, who is competing in the Everest Marathon at the end of the year. “Keeping fit also makes me more efficient at work.”

At OCBC Bank, the pro-family employer emphasises work-life balance options and programmes.

These include having an in-house childcare centre and flexible work arrangements to enable employees to plan their office hours with family schedules in mind. Medical coverage and insurance are also provided for the staff’s immediate family members.

Mr Goh from GMP noted that big organisations tend to have more of such programmes because they have the resources.

But in April this year, the HPB introduced a WHP grant for small and medium-sized enterprises to extend more financial support to them. The grant co-funds up to 90 per cent of the cost incurred for health promotion activities, capped at \$10,000 for each application.

Especially in good times, with jobs aplenty, the availability of work-life balance programmes would sway an employee's decision on whether to join a firm, Mr Goh said. "For an employee, it's like the icing on the cake," he said. "For an employer, the idea is to keep the attrition rate low, retain staff and keep morale and productivity high."

mavistoh@sph.com.sg