

Problem sharing a solution in itself

"People find it very relieving to talk about their work/life balance and to be listened to. The mutual understanding within Business Groups and the participants' willingness to come to grips with the issue enhances openness. Recognising one another's struggles in this area is a kind of solution in itself. Talking openly about stress causes and mechanisms, peer pressure, role models and work/life balance is experienced as an enormous improvement in the Shell Global Solutions culture."

Consultant Elise van Doorne can hardly stop talking about the work/life balance workshops. "I'm deeply committed to them," she says. "Although I can't solve people's individual struggles in this area, it's very rewarding to give them insight into stress mechanisms as this helps them cope."

SERIOUS ISSUE

In the last couple of months, Elise has facilitated over ten work/life balance workshops for Shell Global Solutions International Business Groups in The Hague and Amsterdam. The Shell Global Solutions Management Team recognises the work/life balance as a serious issue to be dealt with and encourages Business Groups to attend this useful workshop.

Usually the workshop takes six hours in a hotel or conference centre near The Hague or Amsterdam. In order to derive maximum benefit, some pre-reading and preparatory work need to be done. This includes a web based survey on stress causes within the participating Business Group.

symptoms and addressing them with a combination of approaches on individual, team and organisational level is the best one can do. And that is exactly the approach of this workshop."

AWARENESS

The workshop's objectives are gaining awareness and understanding of stress mechanisms and discussing solutions that Business Groups could undertake to improve the work/life balance. Participants study stress symptoms and learn how to identify them in themselves and their colleagues. Discussions on the causes of stress lead on to proposed actions to be taken. "People value this approach as very helpful," is Elise's experience. "We also point out jointly what can be done about it, such as good prevention, recognising your own boundaries and prioritising. Very important is the question 'do you have the guts to say no and if so, are you ready to face the consequences of that choice?' When they reach this point, many people admit they've neglected much of their own responsibility."

The work/life balance workshop was launched in early 2001 as a spin-off from a series of Coaching sessions, addressing Human Resources elements of the outcome of the Shell People Survey. This Shell Global Solutions training programme, involving all Shell Global Solutions staff, is now in its last phase.

Initiated by Graeme Sweeney, then Vice President based at Shell Global Solutions (UK)'s Cheshire Innovation Park (CIP), the first work/life balance workshops were held at this site early in 2001. Many benefited here from the lectures of clinical psychologist Bill Mitchell, who pointed out the physical manifestations of stress and how you can keep stress under control by a combination of simple actions. However, to really cope with stress, not the symptoms but the actual problems should be tackled.

Elise's workshop has elements of Bill's lectures, but its

Feedback is always very positive, and participants' quotes reflect their increased insight into the issue and their appreciation of the tools available to make a difference at work and in their personal lives. In most Business Groups this has resulted in work/life balance related Key Performance Indicators or targets for groups and individuals.

"There is no one-line answer to work/life balance related problems," says Elise, an organisational psychologist and physical therapist. "A good work/life balance varies from person to person. Recognising



Workshop facilitator Elise van Doorne. (PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA DE JONG)

main target is helping people within their own Business Group to jointly build a working environment enabling them to strike the best possible balance between private life and work. The Management Team fully supports this approach and promotes tools such as open communication on work/life balance, making work/life balance part of Business Group Managers' PPCs (Personal Performance Contracts), availability of work/life balance modules, and directly addressing the work overload. The MT even had a workshop themselves with Bill Mitchell about a year ago.

Other Shell organisations, among them Pernis Refinery in the Netherlands and Shell UK Exploration & Production, have shown interest in the approach of Shell Global Solutions to discussing work/life balance openly within the Business Groups.

Those interested in a work/life balance workshop are welcome to contact Elise van Doorne or her assistant Sandy Abrahams: tel. +31 70 377 1529 in The Hague.

Mutual understanding enhances openness.



Participants comment

Siva Govender (Supply & Manufacturing Consultancy): "The workshop revealed that within our team we each had different mechanisms for recognising and dealing with stress, I guess due to our cultural diversity as we come from different parts of the world: the Netherlands, UK, Malaysia, Japan, Germany, Uruguay and South Africa. The opportunity for sharing our experiences in this regard proved very rewarding, and we agreed that it would be helpful to extend this through social gatherings outside of the office. On a more general note, it is impressive that Shell Global Solutions' focus on work/life balance related issues has changed so much. Four years ago, when I

joined this department, it wasn't even on the agenda. Now there is greater awareness and concerted effort is made to reduce the "out of office" workload – and we even have a target in our Business Plan to reduce weekends spent on business away from home."

Ron van den Handel, Business Group Manager Rotating Equipment: "Since I am very keen on the work/life balance, our workshop took a whole day due to the extra attention we paid to work stress. This was received very well in our group, and people say they are better able to recognise and deal with symptoms. In the fourth quarter of this year we will have a follow up

workshop to hear about even more tools for recognising and dealing with stress. Furthermore, we will repeat the work/life balance questionnaire from the first workshop, in order to spot any trends and differences."

Dick Uittenbroek (Civil, Storage & Marine Engineering): "It was a very useful workshop and I have the feeling that, together with our Business Group's approach towards the work/life balance, it has resulted in less tension and a more relaxed way of working in our department. People feel free to take some rest after travelling, and more work is done at home. Trust and own responsibility are crucial in this respect."

Most frequent problems

- Conflicting demands;
- Too much work with not enough time to deliver high quality;
- Work overload a burden in private time;
- Feeling isolated from the rest;
- Lack of active organisational support to personal development.

What people regard as contributing positively to their work/life balance

- Good team spirit and good humour;
- Freedom to work at home;
- Flexibility in working hours;
- Reducing frequency of team meetings;
- Effective priority setting on projects.