

Markus Frind has carved out a prosperous niche for himself. He works from his home office at the top floor of a luxury condominium in downtown Vancouver. His online platform for singles, Plentyoffish.com, has annual profits of \$10 million. Yet he insists he never works more than 10 hours – per week, not per day. Frind is the poster boy for a successful work-life balance.

The example of the 29-year-old German from Donauwörth, who immigrated to Canada with his parents at the age of five, is an exception. However, balancing work and personal life has in recent years become a subject of intense political discussions in America and Europe. In the U.S. over the past decade, a rise in workplace violence, an increase of people on sick leave and rising workers' compensation claims are evidence of a burned-out workforce. According to the Center for Work-Life Policy, 1.7 million Americans consider their work hours excessive. Seventy percent say their jobs are taking a toll on their health.

What exactly is work-life balance? It is how each person can satisfyingly combine professional and personal life, family, friends and hobbies. While introduced in the U.S. about 20 years ago, the idea has been embraced by individuals, politicians and even corporations, but mostly in Europe.

"Maybe because the concept matches our traditional European lifestyle a little better than the fast-paced American way of life," said Susanne Bohn, a Nuremberg-based organizational consultant and work-life balance coach. Bohn identifies four pillars on which the "stages of life" rests: work and professional accomplishment, family and relationships, body and health, and finally, values. In a perfect world, all four pillars are in balance and harmony. "In reality though, that is a hard thing to achieve," admitted Bohn.

Work Less, Live Healthy

A work-life balance is an engine of economic success | By Katja Ridderbusch

For millions, it's a daily high-wire act: trying to get ahead at work while enjoying a fulfilling family life. European governments have long been trying to help their citizens strike that balance. In the U.S., companies like Google are making "work" and "life" nearly synonymous.



Typical symptoms of a life out of balance are health problems such as exhaustion, back pain, nervousness or simply burnout.

The 41-year-old mother of two teenage daughters says it's little things that can make a difference: "Getting up an hour earlier in the morning to exercise and have breakfast with your family. Taking little breaks during a hectic day, stepping out for a few minutes and catching a whiff of fresh air. Going to bed early

after a hard day at work instead of falling asleep in front of the TV." These are little things that require a lot of discipline, Bohn says.

Public policy and the introduction of new legislation have helped European countries incorporate the concept of work-life balance. The EU Working Time Directive has implemented a maximum of 48 working hours per week. Most western European countries have opted for fewer hours. In Germany, for example, the

working week averages 40 hours. The Netherlands has chosen a 32-hour week, and France attempted to introduce a 35-hour workweek but the proposal ultimately failed.

While American workers average 10 days of paid vacation a year, German employees average 30. According to a study released by Harvard University in 2007, the United States is one of five out of 173 countries without federal laws guaranteeing paid maternity

leave. The others are Lesotho, Liberia, Swaziland and Papua-New Guinea.

Many European governments bankroll parental leave for up to three years. Flexible working hours, part-time employment, telecommuting, job sharing and sabbaticals make it easier, especially for young women, to combine work and life, career and family.

Childcare is organized in different ways across Europe. In France and Belgium, the federal government offers free daycare, first in nurseries and later in public preschools called maternelles. In Germany, by contrast, access to public daycare is limited and private daycare is expensive. The German government has tried to alleviate the situation by increasing the number of daycare facilities and subsidizing mothers who wish to enter or reenter the workforce.

But government funding is only one solution, says Rocco Thiede, the Berlin-based project manager of a work-life balance study group at the Bertelsmann Foundation. "We also need more initiative from the private sector, such as increasing the number of corporate daycare facilities," he said.

The U.S., where many employers offer childcare, could serve as a role model, he added. Many U.S. corporations have embraced the idea of making the work-life balance an engine of economic success. Internet giant Google, for example, has built its iconic corporate culture on the "feel good" factor: With free gourmet food available to all employees, a swimming pool, volleyball court, laundry service, breast feeding zones and coffee bars throughout the corporate campus in Silicon Valley, Google wants its employees to integrate their lives in their work and, as a result, stay longer on the job.

Germany, however, is catching up. To spur the idea of the fun and family-friendly company, the Ministry for Family Affairs

launched an annual competition in 2005 to single out the nation's top employers for parents.

The various initiatives and incentives, public and private, in European countries to bring young women (and men) back into the workforce and help balance job and family are more than the carefree blessings of the welfare state. They are also based on real necessity: Europe's population is declining. In Germany, 40 percent of female college graduates forgo having children altogether, as kids are perceived to be career killers and working mothers widely judged as uncaring mothers.

Not so in the U.S., where the question of work and motherhood is generally seen as one of individual choice. That may be one reason why, despite all the inadequacies regarding parental leave provisions and flexible working hours, America still is an attractive place to have children. In the U.S., the birthrate average is 2.1 children per couple, compared with 1.4 in Germany and 1.5 in the entire European Union.

Meanwhile, statistics show a change of attitude in the United States, gravitating more toward quality of life and family values. According to the New York Times, fewer women are enrolling today in top business schools such as Harvard and Columbia than they did in 2003.

A sign of resignation? Not at all, says Joe Gregory, president of investment bank Lehman Brothers. "But the days of the psycho-workaholic with no work-life balance are numbered," he added, saying that is not only in the U.S. but also worldwide. "It's just not a recipe for success."

Frind, the German-born self-made man in Vancouver with a 10-hour workweek, couldn't agree more.

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