Two-thirds of staff think work-life balance is more valuable than pay

3 years ago

Rising inflation and the UK's cost-of-living crisis have put a lot of pressure on employers to increase wages and starting salaries this year, but a new survey suggests that there's something that employees value more than pay – work-life balance.

HR and payroll software provider CIPHR polled over 1,000 UK workers to find out which job aspects matter most to them. Based on the results, over two-thirds (70% of women and 65% of men) see work-life balance – albeit a term that can mean different things to different people – as being more important than their pay and employee benefits combined (selected by 60% of women and 57% of men).

Having job security and feeling secure about the future of a role or organisation is the third most important consideration for over half of respondents, followed by job satisfaction (57% and 53% respectively).

Two-fifths (42%) of employees rank a healthy work environment (42%) within the top five most valuable aspects of a job. This can encompass numerous other factors, such as feeling psychologically and physically safe at work, feeling recognised, appreciated and valued, feeling trusted and included, and being listened to, among others.

In contrast, only around a quarter cite career advancement opportunities or job autonomy – the freedom and trust to do a job without being micromanaged – as important priorities (25% and 24% respectively).

Job purpose and variety, and learning and development initiatives, are also, surprisingly, even further down the list of importance, selected by just a fifth of workers (20% and 18% respectively). And, less than one in 10 (9%) think regular coaching and feedback is an essential element of a job.

The top 20 most important aspects of a job, ranked by popularity, are:

1. Work-life balance (67%)
2. Pay and benefits – total rewards package (59%)
3. Job security (57%)
4. Job satisfaction (53%)
5. Healthy work environment (42%)
6. Recognition: feeling valued and appreciated (37%)
7. Feeling safe at work (36%)
8. Feeling included / belonging at work (33%)
9. Right to disconnect from work outside of usual working hours (26%)
10. Promotion opportunities / career progression (25%)
11. Job autonomy – trusted to do a job without being micromanaged (24%)
12. Clear goals and targets (23%)
13. Correct tools for the job (20%)
14. Job purpose and variety (20%)
15. Learning and development initiatives (18%)
16. Social connection (18%)
17. Team-oriented culture (17%)
18. Transparent leadership (15%)
19. Fewer meetings (9%)
20. Regular coaching and feedback (9%)

Notably, whether an employee has flexibility in where they work has a bearing on the results (although it doesn't alter the order of the four most important job aspects – work-life balance, pay and benefits, job security, and job satisfaction).

Work-life balance is by far the most-valued job aspect for nearly four in five (79%) remote workers, compared to two-thirds (66%) of workers who are either partly remote or who never work from home.

The right to disconnect from work – and not feel obliged to do any unpaid work-related tasks outside of one's contracted hours – also appears higher in the list for employees who work 100% remotely, compared to those who don't (36% vs 25%).

Staff who are office or workplace-based, on the other hand, are more likely to see greater value in job aspects that relate to their physical workspace and working among other people, such as a healthy work environment (47%), feeling safe at work (40%), and feeling included and belonging at work (38%).

Hybrid employees, who split their time between home and their employer's office, appear to place more equal importance on how their pay and benefits, job security, and job satisfaction interrelate (56%, 55% and 55% respectively). For two-fifths (41%) of these workers, recognition and feeling valued and appreciated by their employers ranks more highly than a healthy work environment (41% compared to 39%).

Analysis of the data shows that survey respondents in leadership and senior management team (SMT) roles are the most likely to work remotely in some capacity than those in non-SMT positions (70% vs 50%). They also have different job priorities than the rest of the workforce. For them, pay and benefits are only

the fourth most important aspect of a job (46%), after work-life balance (60%), job satisfaction (52%) and job security (51%).

Opinions also differ with age and career longevity, with 24-to-44-year-olds around 20% more likely to want work-life balance than 18-to-24-year-olds (72% vs 51%). While people at the start, and end, of their careers, are more likely to place job satisfaction ahead of job security. Nearly half (45%) of 18-to-24-year-olds, and two-thirds (65%) of over 55s, prefer having a job they enjoy, even if that means it's not completely secure (39% and 55% respectively).

Conversely, for those aged 45 to 54, job security is of greater importance to them than their pay and rewards package (56% compared to 52% respectively).

Having a good or healthy work-life balance is the most important aspect of a job for most workers, it's not completely universal though. People working in finance and insurance are more likely to prize pay and benefits over work-life balance (60% compared to 58% respectively). For those in IT and software, job security tops pay and benefits and work-life balance (58% compared to 54% and 54%). And manufacturing workers rate both work-life balance and pay and benefits equally (63%).

Commenting on the results, Claire Williams, chief people officer at CIPHR, says: "CIPHR's latest findings highlight that salary often isn't the key driver that many people think it is. People rarely have just one single aspect of a job that matters most to them: there are always a variety of factors that govern whether an individual will join, stay, or leave an organisation, and these will vary depending on where they are with their career at the time.

"Everyone has their own idea of what work-life balance looks like to them. For some, it means looking for more flexibility at work – such as flexible hours, a four-day week, or remote working – while for others it's an aspiration that helps shape their career choices, the type of roles they want, and the employers they want to work for. It's certainly not a new concept, but there's no doubt that the pandemic has spurred many people to re-evaluate their work-life priorities and change how they want to spend their time at work.

"While employers are still navigating what this means in the long term, they do need to recognise that if they are not meeting their staff's current needs and priorities – particularly around any core job aspects that they want and value – it's likely that another organisation will.

"Take the time to actively listen to your workforce – perhaps by running a survey similar to this one – to find out what's important to them, and map these results against employee demographics, life stages, locations and department. An integrated HR tech stack, with a sophisticated HR system, such as CIPHR HR, at its centre, will help you gain this holistic view of your people data.

"It won't always be possible to tick every box but if you can act on the feedback where possible, it will help improve employee experience and engagement at all levels. Do nothing, and you're likely to lose staff in the long run."

CIPHR conducted an online survey of 1,006 employed UK adults, between 18-21 May 2022. Around two-fifths (61%) of those polled work at organisations which have 251+ employees, a quarter (28%) work at organisations with 51 to 250 employees, and one in 10 (11%) work at organisations with 26 to 50 employees. The full results are available at https://www.ciphr.com/the-most-important-aspects-of-a-job.

More than 600 organisations use CIPHR's integrated HR and people management solutions to help manage, retain and engage staff more effectively – while reducing the admin burden on busy HR teams.

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