

Can You Turn Down A Work Life Balance Request?



Many organizations tout as their intention the desire to provide employees with a work and life balance. Yet delivering on this intention is frequently difficult even as lines between work and life have greyed.

Rights and Responsibilities

The complex demands of being a caregiver, whether for a child, spouse, parent or other person while also being an employee for an organization are difficult to navigate. Tasks such as taking the dependant person to an appointment, caring for them when they are ill and more can wreck havoc on a person's ability to work.

Over the past few years the rights of primary caregivers to be accommodated in the workplace have continued to evolve. In most cases an Employer has the obligation to accommodate primary caregivers time off, and provide flexible schedules to perform caregiving activities when the employee has a legitimate need that cannot otherwise be resolved. This extends to altering hours of work, including arrival and departure times, working fewer hours and more. This includes not only short term but ongoing adjustments and accommodation.

Yet not all requests for accommodation need to be accommodated. There are times that an employer must say 'No, we cannot accommodate your request.

Remembering Work in the Work Life Balance Equation

Organizations who genuinely seek to provide employees with a work culture that provides the freedom and flexibility to prioritize family and personal life still need to ensure the work gets done.

If an employee is the primary caregiver for another individual and the employee finds it nearly impossible to accommodate these primary caregiving responsibilities with his/her work schedule it may be the employer who has to bend to accommodate the employee.

What happens when the employee wants accommodation but it does not sound like it is a necessity? Consider the scenario where a parent would like to alter a work schedule to accompany a child to after school music lessons. This would not pass any of the current tests that would require the employer to make the adjustment, yet if they can many employers might consider making the adjustment. However, before these

adjustments are made it is useful to consider the implications. Once you open a door in one direction it is difficult to stop all employees from walking through it.

Assessing Your Ability to Accommodate the Request

It is valuable to have a formal process you can follow when faced with questions of re-scheduling changes in work structure. If your workplace truly is flexible for all people then allowing an employee to alter work schedules for any reason may not be a hardship. However, what happens if you can only accommodate a couple of employees this way? This can set you up for other problems down the road.

When faced with a request where you are almost certain you do not have a legal requirement to accommodate you then want to have a process that allows you to make decisions and then be able to cite this process when saying 'No'.

Steps To Assessing Accommodation Obligation

- Determine if the employee is in fact the primary caregiver of a dependant other.
- If the employee is not the primary caregiver the employee would not need to be accommodated except at your discretion.
- If the employee is the primary caregiver and/or at your discretion to choose to consider accommodation review the request and make a decision
- Assess the impact of making the adjustment; consider the impact if all employees made a similar request; consider how disruptive accommodating the request would be to others in the same department or role
- Determine if you want to make the adjustment
- Talk to the individual about your decision

Prepare for Requests Today Create a policy for the requirements and process for requesting an ongoing structural change in work. Clearly layout the requirements when a change will be accommodated (i.e. primary caregiver who has exhausted other options.)

- Create a policy for requesting a limited change in work structure. Clearly layout the requirements for requesting and approving a limited time change.

Saying No

Sometimes you will be unable to accommodate a request. When this is the case how you manage the situation can save you many headaches down the road. When a request arrives provide the employee with information on the policy for ongoing and limited time accommodation.

- Tell the employee that you are unable to accommodate the request because it does not satisfy the policy. Explore with the employee other changes that may include moving to a new role if they are interested
- What can you say? "I am sorry but I have reviewed your request and it is not possible to make the change you requested on an ongoing basis."

Accommodating employee requests especially as they request to work-life balance is something most organizations strive to deliver. Sometimes accommodations simply are not feasible. If you demonstrate a reasonable effort to accommodate employees when and where you are able then saying "No" to requests you cannot accommodate is a reasonable response when necessary.