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Press Handout

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Juggling Work-Life Commitments

Points from Education Minister Louis Galea's Speech at the National Conference - 'Juggling Work-Life Commitments' by the Richmond Foundation and the Foundation for Human Resource Development at the Radisson Hotel on the 7th October 2003.

You are surely familiar with experiences like those of Julia (fictitious name). She works as an HR executive with a local company. She is a mother of two, married to a Head of School, who also - somehow - manages to spend regular quality time with her elderly mother who lives in a residential care facility and studies for a masters programme through distance learning. Julia is a very hardworking and committed executive who, in spite of manically planning her life minutely, ends up frustrated, overwhelmed and supremely guilty because of the intense lifestyle she lives, the compromises she has make, and the eternal juggling she has become skilled at in order to drill some sense into the hectic work, home and personal life. On the rare occasions when she is alone with herself, she dreams up this balanced master plan which she calls *BeJu* or *Beyond Juggling Work-Life Commitments*. Julia is very much aware that she has to think beyond juggling since she knows that she may no longer be able to sustain her current balancing act. Juggling is unsustainable.

For women and men in leadership positions, this contemporary condition seems like a never-ending and perilous walk on a tightrope - the stress must be enormous.

I am sure that, besides empathising with Julia's condition, you have today gleaned important tips about how you can stop your work and that of your employees from overwhelming your lives. I am sure that you have discussed strategies for the creation of balance-friendly corporate cultures - a key strategic goal for HR professionals nowadays.

Socially responsible and effective corporate cultures are ones that value workforce well-being and invest in it. Appreciating workers' needs outside of work is a key employee motivating force.

The following extract from RealityCheck, the Canadian Review of Well-Being, is particularly apt:

"when we build a new plant or purchase new equipment, we recognize this as a capital investment that depreciates over time. Eventually we'll need to repair or replace that equipment if we want to maintain or expand the value of the asset. But we often ignore other kinds of wealth that are just as valuable, and we don't pay attention when they depreciate, or when it's time to re-invest. Human capital is a good example of this - we don't always track the health of our workplace as a vital component of our human wealth and economy."

Employers need to move from being reactive to becoming active and proactive in this area. Workers need to be helped to plan a balanced work-life

schedule rather than offered mental health counselling when on the brink of a depression. A range of choices and measures need to be available for workers to create their own balance in their work and personal life. I am sure that you have today discussed a number of possible choices that workers can be offered such as the possibility of working 40 hours in a 4 working days; flexitime; supported child care; subsidies for further studies; leave policies; and wellness programmes. These are just a few examples of measures that build healthier workplace communities.

Changing economic trends as well as shifts in values and work expectations are our ongoing challenges. We may not have all the answers. However, a corporate readiness to invest in work/life strategies, the presence of effective leaders and supportive managers, as well as employee ownership of the tools at their disposal, will enable that we come up with other creative and workable solutions

However, it is crucial for us to monitor practices in this area and to determine what works and what doesn't, to share ideas and to develop innovative measures.

I know that, in Malta, many still find it hard to understand why achieving work-life balance is important. It may take us time to achieve a change in attitudes and culture. Some may argue that with today's economic environment, the need to control costs is reason enough for not doing it. But there is much more to work-life balance. It is definitely not a short-term solution. Rather, it is a long-term commitment that includes a solid business strategy while ensuring the presence of quality workers and teams that can

help maximize results. The real cost will be felt by organisations that lack such a philosophy; these will increasingly find it difficult to attract the best.

Work-life balance measures enable organisations to improve the quality of service provided to clients. If employees are treated well, if work environments are created where the needs of individuals are respected, where people care for and help each other, then employees will serve their customers with dignity and respect.

Humanity would be more visible in the workplace.