

70-Hour-Week/Work-Life Balance In India

—By Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur, VSM (Retd.)

While Group Discussions (GDs) are routinely conducted in public and private organisations to collect more information on a subject or resolve an issue, these are also comprehensive techniques to accurately assess individuals' suitability and compatibility for admissions, scholarships, jobs, etc. A Group Discussion assesses the overall personality—thoughts, feelings and behaviour—of an individual in a group. During a Group Discussion round, a topic is given to the group members for discussion. While the GD is in progress, a team of panellists closely observes the participating candidates, and through this observation, it assesses the intellectual, social, leadership, and communication skills of candidates taking part in the Group Discussion. For admissions to several prestigious universities and B-Schools, campus placements after graduation, or entry-level recruitment in a multinational company, one needs to possess knowledge of the respective fields and also have the skill to work in a group. However, many candidates do not have the ability to sail through the GD round, since they have not been exposed to such a situation in their lives as one usually faces during a Group Discussion. Given this, a few practical hints to improve performance in a GD round are discussed here. Firstly, if one does not know much about the topic, there is no need to come forward to initiate the discussion. Instead, it is recommended to pick up clues from the ongoing discussion, and intelligently add points that come to one's mind about the topic and then speak. It is always advantageous to back up points with facts and figures. Secondly, one must have a respectful attitude towards the viewpoints of others and remain calm and composed while others are speaking. Thirdly, in case the discussion takes a hostile turn, it would be fruitful to intervene to make the situation relaxed. By doing so, one displays leadership



Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur is a senior selector and trainer. He has worked as a selector at two Services Selection Boards and as Chief Instructor at Defence Institute of Psychological Research, New Delhi. He has conducted many interviews and group discussions during the last two decades and has authored four books, including two on Interviews and Group Discussions. He has received Vishisht Seva Medal awarded by the President of India and Commendation by the Chief of Air Staff.

skills and problem-solving abilities. Finally, one's body language must convey ease of behaviour and a relaxed attitude to resolve issues under adverse circumstances.

The above topic was given to a group of candidates during the screening process of candidates who were seeking admission to the MBA course conducted by a prestigious institution. The candidates arrived formally dressed and were allotted Identification Numbers before the commencement of GD. Three assessors, who were tasked with judging these candidates, thoroughly briefed the candidates regarding the do's and don'ts to be observed during this Group Discussion. Candidates were given 3-4 minutes to recapitulate and jot down some points, which could be used during the discussion by the candidates. They were asked to conclude the GD within 25-30 minutes.

Subsequently, the Group Discussion started in the following manner:

Candidate No. 2 : Good afternoon, friends. How are you all doing this afternoon? We have been given a very hot topic for our discussion today. As

you know the topic is: '70-Hour-Week/Work-Life Balance In India'. In India, the Central Government is presently following a five-day-a-week work culture, which was changed from a six-day-a-week culture in 1985. Working for 8 hours in a day is popularly known as 9 to 5 work culture, which implies that people are required to work from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day. However, in the recent past, some corporate leaders have spoken for imposing a 9-hour work schedule for Indians to meet the present requirements of Indian industry. Consequently, some other corporate leaders have vehemently opposed this idea of extending working hours. According to them, long working hours would adversely impact the work-life balance of corporate employees and could lead to even mental health issues. So, this debate on work-life balance in India goes unabated. How long should Indians work, that is the question? You all can now give your views on this topic. Thanks.

Candidate No. 6 : I think Number 2 has introduced the topic quite appropriately.

Candidate No. 7 : Yes, I would like to clarify that initially, it was Mr. N.R. Narayana Murthy, co-founder of Infosys, who ignited this debate a few months ago. He strongly advocated a 70-hour work week so that the country could compete with the best globally. But this debate erupted afresh with Larsen & Toubro Chairman and Managing Director Mr. S.N. Subrahmanyam later supporting this idea of having longer working hours for Indians. He also advocated a 90-hour work week and even exhorted employees to work on Sundays as well. "How long can you stare at your wives", he was heard saying in a purported video-address to employees where he urged them to spend less time at home and more in the office. He also added that he would be happier if he could make employees work on Sundays because he worked on Sundays too.

Candidate No. 1 : You are quite right, and Number 7 has accurately traced the origin of the present debate.

Candidate No. 8 : Friends, before we discuss this topic any further, I think, it is relevant to explain what exactly is meant by work-life balance. It implies the balance between the time spent working and the time spent with family and doing other activities. It is also about managing your time and responsibilities so you can be productive at work and have time for yourself.

Candidate No. 5 : But, friends, I am really wondering why is work-life balance considered so significant. I do not think, in India, we really care so much about it. Am I right?

Candidate No. 9 : Yes, you are right. But, work-life balance can assist you feel happier, more fulfilled and in better control of your life. By caring for it, you could avoid burnout which certainly impacts you adversely as far as your physical and mental health is concerned. If you do not care for a work-life balance, you will also lose your social connections. It does make you more productive and you take fewer sick leaves. So, with all these benefits, we must consider work-life balance to be quite important for our overall well-being.

Candidate No. 2 : I think, both work and home deserve our attention and energy. A large number of workers feel that 'work well-being' is extremely significant to them, and a survey reveals, that about 57% feel that maintaining work-life balance is the most important aspect of well-being in the workplace. But, work-life balance is not really about how much time you spend at your workplace versus home. It's about knowing when it's time to work and when to turn off the laptop, no matter whether you are at home or in office. In other words, it's about knowing how to set boundaries that work for your career and your home life. There is a need to carefully develop healthy habits that help establish a workable routine that practically works for a person.

Candidate No. 3 : That's a very nice suggestion.

Candidate No. 7 : To make it more simple, I would like to say work-life balance is a situation in which you're able to meet your official obligations while also having time to enjoy your hobbies and interests in your personal

time. However, the perfect ratio of work to home is different to every individual. It is also pointed out that Chinese people work 90 hours a week, while Americans work only 50 hours a week. If you want to be on top of the world, you have to work 90 hours a week. While advocating a 70-hour work week, Mr. Murthy also said that he did not believe in the concept of 'work-life balance'.

Candidate No. 9 : It is also pointed out that nation-building should be at the core of our mandate. During the last over 77 years, India's overall development has been much below the expectations. Let us not forget that this is India's decade, a time demanding collective dedication and effort to drive progress. To ensure India's faster development, we should not get bogged down merely by the work-life balance syndrome. We must be inspired by the collective effort of China as a country and its cumulative achievements, especially in the area of manufacturing all kinds of goods and enhancing its military power.

Candidate No. 2 : In this context, it is also argued that the culture of long working hours is certainly needed for students and candidates of various competitive examinations like UPSC Civil Services Examination and JEE, etc. Most candidates who clear such difficult examinations with distinction vouch for the fact that they had to put in long hours of hard work to become successful. This must be true for a nation as well. If our nation desires to be at par with developed nations, its people need to sustainably work much harder and longer. Moreover, in the Indian context, sadly, there is a big question mark as to whether we work sincerely during even the officially designated eight hours a day. That is the question.

Candidate No. 4 : Yes, I agree with you. I think this question acquires more significance in the current context of our economy and the declining value of the Rupee.

Candidate No. 8 : You have a point, but I want to add in this context that for clearing such difficult exams like UPSC Civil Services Examination and JEE, etc., this kind of long hours of preparation are needed, but asking people to work for such long hours for their entire life may even lead to mental health issues and several other problems. In this regard, it is also pointed out that there have been several cases of suicides

in Kota, where students in large numbers are preparing for JEE. Consequently, suggestions were also made to make the examinations less stressful. So, the debate on this issue goes on.

Candidate No. 7 : In this context, it would be quite apt to compare the working hours of Indians with some other countries. According to a study, in 2017, Indians worked 360 hours a year more than Americans and 763 hours more than Germans on an average. Chinese worked 57 hours more than Indians. It was also brought out that historically, working hours have fallen everywhere, except in India and China.

Candidate No. 6 : That's very relevant statistics for our discussion.

Candidate No. 4 : Friends, I want to add that in the case of Mr. Narayana Murthy, he has self-selected himself as an adviser to the nation's young for the future of our country, while in the case of L&T chief, he has been preaching to his company employees. A CEO can mandate working hours, and it's up to employees whether they fall in line or quit.

Candidate No. 9 : I find it extraordinary that some people seem to discount the fact that it's not the hours you work, but the quality of work that's more important. Secondly, is it appropriate to regiment a country's youth, especially in a democracy? It might rob the young of independent thinking and make them less creative. People work for a variety of motivations, and all said and done, all people may not be working to make our country great. The 90-hour-a-week work and working on Sundays will amount to renaming Sunday to 'Sun-Duty' and making 'day off' a mythical concept. I think, we should opt for hard and smart work rather than incessant work shifts, which would eventually lead to burnouts. To me, work-life balance is a necessity rather than a matter of choice.

Candidate No. 2 : Yes, I agree with you. We should be more worried about the quality rather than the quantity of work. Let me also add that in advanced economies, people work for fewer hours but are more productive. Globally speaking, only soldiers come close to 90-hour work-culture. Talking about China, long working hours did contribute to China's rapid economic

growth, but the country's glorified '996' culture, which means working 9 a.m. to 9 p.m./6 days a week, is now frowned upon worldwide.

Candidate No. 7 : Very correct. After a surge in the 2000s, China's productivity growth levelled and slowed down. Now, China is seen as a low-productivity economy that pushes forward through sheer scale. In this context, we should also talk about the salaries Indians receive. Compared to other countries, in 2023, India's average monthly earnings were the world's 12th lowest in PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) terms. Even within the most well-paying services sector, Indian employees earned more in PPP than only 15 other countries, low-income and lower-middle income economies like Rwanda, Zambia, Indonesia, Egypt, etc.

Candidate No. 1 : I agree. These are relevant facts.

Candidate No. 4 : The present debate shows that the sensibilities of some elites in India are coming up against the realities of India's status as a low-middle-income country struggling to grow at a fast pace. Frankly, work-life balance and high levels of worker rights are desirable outcomes, but nearly all societies and countries fell short of those standards during major economic transitions, like in the West during the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Candidate No. 9 : Long work hours have now long been an Asian norm. In Japan, a 2016 Government survey showed nearly a quarter of companies required employees to put in more than 80 hours of overtime a month, and Japanese workers didn't avail of 10 of their paid vacation days. It's a trend normal across East Asia, especially after the Second World War when the region commenced its spectacular growth trajectory. The results have been remarkable, and in about four decades, the region has become the world's largest economic engine after the U.S., with several nations graduating to 'rich' status. So I think, no nation in economic transition has workers achieving work-life balance.

Candidate No. 8 : Friends, I feel India is caught between a desire to preserve work-life balance, extensive labour protection, and a risk-free approach to preserving macro-economic stability. However, all these, in some ways, hold back efforts towards

maximising growth and development. That is the problem we are confronted with.

Candidate No. 7 : It would be pertinent to add that when several countries, including India, are discussing the significance of work-life balance, Mr. Elon Musk, who is now a close associate of newly-elected American President Mr. Donald Trump, has recently pushed for a significantly long work week instead. He declared that employees in his newly-launched Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) work 120 hours a week, while his bureaucratic opponents work only 40 hours a week, and that is why they are losing rapidly. As expected, his remarks were met with massive criticism and people discussed the toll that such work culture would take on employees' life and health, but many supported him as well. Mr. Musk claimed that he has followed same long-working-hours culture for some time and found this strategy rewarding.

Candidate No. 9 : Friends, I wanted to add that India is a developing nation and during this period of transition, there is certainly a need to put in extended working hours by our working manpower to keep our country at the right pace of development. Also, let us not forget that India is now the most populated country in the world, which requires much faster development to meet the ever increasing needs of our huge population. However, despite this inescapable need to work harder and longer, we cannot willy-nilly push people to a situation where they face burnouts or mental health issues. Therefore, there is certainly a need to find a middle path where work-life balance is also given its rightful place in our busy lives.

Candidate No. 3 : Quite right, I completely agree with you.

Candidate No. 8 : Friends, the time allotted to us is now over and we must conclude.

Candidate No. 7 : If you all agree, I can conclude.

Candidate No. 5 : Number 7, please go ahead.

Candidate No. 7 : Friends, we had a lively discussion on this topic, which has generated much heat recently. In the beginning, we traced the origin of the present controversy. This was followed by defining what exactly is meant by work-life balance. Thereafter,

we talked in detail about the significance of work-life balance in our lives. We also highlighted why India needs faster development and then compared working hours of Indians with some other countries. Subsequently, we mentioned why should we lay more emphasis on the quality of work rather than the quantity of work. Towards the end, we discussed the working hours followed in China and what are its repercussions in China. Finally, we also highlighted the importance of work-life balance, while appreciating the need to work harder in a developing country like India.

Thanks, friends and you all have a nice day.

Critical Analysis of Candidates' Performance :

Good : 2, 7 and 9

Looking at the performance of these candidates, it's obvious that they had come quite well-prepared to participate in this Group Discussion. They had collected sufficient data and information on this topic, and, therefore, could fruitfully use it to support their arguments. They spoke with self-confidence but, at the same time, did not overly dominate the discussion. Other candidates did not contradict them, and mostly agreed with their points of view. In view of these facts, performance of these candidates has been assessed as 'Good'.

Average : 4 and 8

These candidates also took part in the discussion and took initiative to guide the discussion to proceed in the desired direction. They did make some timely interjections. It became apparent that they had some knowledge of this topic, but this was not considered sufficient for them to lead the discussion. Their lack of preparation hampered their overall performance, but it was felt that they did possess potential to put up a much better performance. In view of all these factors, their performance has been adjudged as 'Average'.

Below the Average : 1, 3, 5 and 6

The contribution of these candidates towards this GD was barely noticeable. It appeared that they did not possess much awareness of this topic. They were observed to be either agreeing with, or appreciating other candidates who were actively participating in this discussion. Candidates need to be reminded that they must prepare adequately and acquire sufficient information about current topics to significantly participate in competitive Group Discussion like the present one. Owing to all these reasons, their contribution has been assessed as 'Below the Average'.

CSR