



Work-Life Balance

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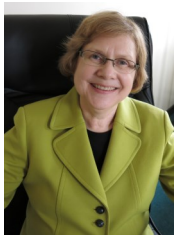
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Abstract

Work-life balance signifies the extent to which an employee experiences feeling fulfilled and having his or her needs met in both work and non-work facets of life. Through experiencing greater work-life balance, individuals report feeling better in general (e.g., greater job and life satisfaction) and tend to behave in favorable ways (e.g., lower turnover and absenteeism). Historically, the influx of women in the workplace jumpstarted research into how female employees could successfully care for families while working, but today work-life balance is discussed with respect to multiple affected groups (e.g., men, single parents). In the modern era of technology and convenience, organizations have begun to provide their employees with helpful ways to balance their work and non-work roles through benefits like flexible work hours, telecommuting, and so on. However, offering these benefits is not enough; the organization and management must stand behind its promotion of healthy work-life balance for employees by creating a culture as such and designing policies that support this initiative. Otherwise, employees feel pressure to continuously work, which can be perpetuated by mobile devices and constant accessibility of the internet that allows employees to transport a workstation wherever they go. Results indicate that in general many people report experiencing poor work-life balance but not for lack of wanting it; therefore, employers and employees alike should consider what is most important for achieving this healthy balance. Implications and next steps for practitioners are discussed.

Introduction

Employees with *work-life balance* feel their lives are fulfilled both inside and outside of work (Byrne, 2005), and they experience minimal conflict between work and non-work roles. Those who achieve this balance tend to have higher levels of satisfaction with their jobs and life in general, as well as lower levels of stress and depression. From an employer's viewpoint, encouraging work-life balance may attract new hires, help reduce turnover and absenteeism, and increase the chances of employees voluntarily engaging in "pro-social" behaviors that rise above and beyond their job requirements. Nevertheless, findings are mixed with respect to effects of employee work-life balance on the company's bottom line. For example, having family-friendly work policies, when a firm uses good management practices overall, does not detract from profitability, but may not always increase profits. In sum, evidence suggests a work strategy of "running yourself ragged" has costs both for meeting performance goals and enjoying

life; the employee and the organization benefit most when workers experience greater balance between what they do on and off the clock.

Background

Original concerns with *work-family conflict* more recently have broadened to consider *work-life balance/spillover*. In this newer perspective, multiple work and life (not just family!) roles are viewed as potentially benefitting, as well as harming, one another. When role conflicts do occur, they can involve time, effort, resources, behavior, and/or affect, and they may originate both from work-to-family and family-to-work, with different causes identified for each direction (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Experiencing either form of conflict causes employees psychological distress and lower job performance and, since individuals have a limited supply of time and energy resources, “something has to give” when multiple roles exhaust the person of time and effort. Finally, although traditional thinking about work-life balance has tended to emphasize its relevance for women with children, there is increasing consideration of its importance for men, and for singles or couples without children.

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Historically, several important pieces of legislation (e.g., Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pregnancy Discrimination Act, Family Medical Leave Act) helped women to obtain work, and, as women often had primary caretaking responsibilities for families, promoted work-life balance initiatives as well. However, even given legislative standards, research shows that employees tend to feel comfortable attending to their non-work-related needs (e.g., by taking family- or health-related leave that they are legally entitled to) only when organizational policies, cultural norms, supervisors, and surrounding coworkers also demonstrate a commitment to work-life balance (see, for example, Kossek, Baltes, & Matthews, 2011). In other words, organizational support is critical to promoting a healthy work-life balance for employees.

How can an organization support its employees? Doing so requires attention to the details of policies and practices related to:

- ⇒ work hours and job design (restricted hours, minimal work required during off-hours)
- ⇒ organizational culture (e.g., minimize negative norms such as “No one leaves until 7pm”)
- ⇒ incentives that encourage balancing work and non-work domains (e.g., take vacation or the cash pay-out is less)

Work-life balance policies frequently include benefits such as flexible work hours, child- and elder-care provisions, paid maternity leave, adoption assistance, leave/time off, education assistance, health assistance, and housing assistance. Flexible work hours, telecommuting, and job sharing also may encourage work-life balance, and for some organizations may help reduce costs for non-work-related absences. However, research clearly shows that regardless of what the organization promotes, direct supervisors/managers greatly influence the work-life balance of their subordinates. Managers who focus on the desired work product, rather than requiring “face time” or logging overtime hours, can better enable their employees to balance work and life demands. An important caveat to note: when organizations advertise a culture of work-life balance to job applicants but then fail to implement or enforce the policies, they may quickly lose those new hires. Also important to note, the menu of work-life balance supports should be broad enough to meet the needs not only of parents with children, but also singles and childless couples.

Modern technologies, providing constant accessibility to internet and mobile devices, can blur the boundaries between work and non-work. Some employees’ workplaces are portable—traveling in the car or airplane, and residing at home or other locations – thus pushing work activities into what were traditionally non-work spaces. Conversely, employees easily can import personal activities (e.g., online shopping, videos, music, texting family and friends) into the workplace. This new capacity created by technology appears to be a mixed blessing for employees and their organizations. By creating pressure for employees to be “always on,” technology’s constant accessibility may lower employee satisfaction and productivity, which defeats its purpose. If employees feel obligated and are rewarded for responding to incoming technological communications, they may develop a compulsion to instantly check their messages, which interrupts the flow of their personal lives (Tarafdar, Tu, Ragu-Nathan, & Ragu-Nathan, 2011).

Yet, a benefit of modern technology is the relative ease of telecommuting. Most telecommuters give back at least half of the commute time to work time (Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1998), and they value having greater flexibility and control over

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their schedules. However, telecommuting also blurs the physical boundary between work and home, so that telecommuters are likely to work longer hours than if they drove to the company office.

Employees vary in their approaches to separating or balancing work from other domains. For instance, some employees prefer to set firmer boundaries between work and non-work, referred to as “segmenting.” As a result, segmenters tend to report lower work-life conflict, but they may also experience less positive spillover of satisfaction from work to home, compared to those employees who do more integration across work-life boundaries.

Implications for Practice

A survey by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) in 2002 showed 70% of employees report an unhealthy balance between their work and personal lives. Still, 70% of employees ranked family as the most important priority in their lives (up from previous years; Halpern & Murphy, 2005). Taken together, the survey results suggest that employees view family as an increasingly valuable, but less attainable aspect of their busy lives. Employees report blatant failure when attempting to balance work and non-work demands.

After years of research and organizational policies, why are employees still struggling to balance work and life demands? The answer in some organizations is because work-life balance has yet to become a genuine priority. Upper management needs to implement the policies, and front-line managers need to enforce them. Without gener-

ating a supportive work-life culture in which employees feel they should (or could) utilize work-life benefits, employees feel discouraged or even punished for taking time away from work to meet non-work needs. Organizations that establish a positive work-life culture will gain a favorable reputation among job applicants to target and retain higher-quality individuals.

Next Steps

To attain work-life balance, employers can promote a positive work-life culture by actions at several different levels. First, at an organization-wide or department-wide level, consider implementing one or more work-life benefits such as telecommuting or flexible work hour options for employees, if and when possible. Look to other organizations as a source of innovative ideas. For example, the Families and Work Institute, in conjunction with the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), publishes annual guides suggesting innovative ideas based on many diverse companies that have won the Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Excellence in Workplace Effectiveness and Flexibility. Second, remember that when managers and supervisors buy into the policies created to help balance work and life, employees are more likely to take advantage of them. Efforts targeted at supervisors can ensure that they understand how to implement these policies and benefits, as well as the potential benefits to the company of doing so.

Third, make employees aware of efforts they can undertake to optimize their own work-life balance. For example, encourage employees to utilize vacation time for purposes of recovery. By doing so, employees physically and psychologically detach from their work, and they report greater well-being in general. Recovery periods like breaks during the work day or vacations could be particularly valuable for the employees whose jobs prohibit other work-life benefits. In addition, consider sharing information from recent studies that identify and describe how employees have dealt with specific types of work-home boundary violations, including strategies that are behavioral (e.g., develop guidelines for



triaging work and non-work demands), temporal (e.g., control work time, find respite), physical (e.g., manipulate physical space), and communicative (e.g., set expectations) (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2009).

Finally, lead by example. If employees observe their manager setting firm boundaries between work and non-work domains, such as not responding to emails after 8pm, then they are more likely to follow suit. Large-scale actions targeted towards work-life balance, such as family-friendly benefits and policies can be important, but do not ignore the importance of small-scale, subtle (yet crucial) efforts such as day-to-day support from supervisors and coworkers to promote work-life balance within the organization. Regardless of organizational policy, the best driver of an employee's work-life balance may be how well the surrounding manager and coworkers balance their own work and life demands.

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