



Work-life Balance - a Psychological Perspective for Individuals

The Work-Life Balance Working Group

Reshaping work and life for a fulfilling and sustainable future

Our working group brings together experts in the field of work-life balance. It is our mission to ensure that work-life balance is a core element of organizational practice, facilitated by state-of-the-art evidence. To this end, we bring together experts in the field to debate relevant topics and further research and practice. Work-life balance is an issue that concerns us all, we are promoting a triple agenda for the benefit of employers, individuals and the wider society.

St Andrews House
48 Princess Road East
Leicester
LE1 7DR

Tel: +44 (0)116 254 9568

Fax: +44 (0)116 227 1314

Email: enquiries@bps.org.uk

For further information on work-life balance and our working group please contact:

- **Dr Almuth McDowall**, Birkbeck University of London, a.mcdowall@bbk.ac.uk
- **Professor Gail Kinman**, University of Bedfordshire, gail.kinman@beds.ac.uk
- **Anna Meller**, anna@sustainableworking.co.uk

The Work-life Balance Working Group

What we cover in this fact sheet:

- What is work-life balance?
- What are the risk factors?
- How can we manage our work-life balance more effectively?

What do we mean by ‘work-life balance’?

We suspect that the reason why you are reading this fact sheet is that you want to learn more about work-life balance, that you might sometimes find it difficult to find balance in your life, or you might find the topic interesting in itself. When psychologists talk about work-life balance, they look at two aspects, relating to both the negative and positive aspects of combining work and personal life. First, they talk about **work-life conflict** or **work-family conflict**, which relates to how our work can interfere with other life domains (in particular with family life), and how our personal life might interfere with our work.

We all fulfil **multiple roles** in our lives and, at times, combining these roles can lead to problems. One role might be that of worker, another role might be that of carer (for a child or an elderly person). There are only 24 hours in the day, and our energy levels are not infinite. Consequently, if our work becomes very demanding, or we get very involved in it, we are likely to have less time and energy to dedicate to other roles: for instance our leisure interests or socialising with our friends may suffer. We may also feel torn between different roles, or guilty that we are not performing any of these to a sufficiently high standard.

If experiences of conflict continue over time, they can have a negative impact on **our life satisfaction, our physical and psychological health**, and the quality of our **personal relationships**. Conflict can also impact on our performance at work. Similarly, if we are experiencing difficulties in our personal life, this may have an impact on our work. An example might be a worker who has just become a parent or one who had to move house.

Although much of the focus has tended to be on work-life conflict, a growing body of research suggests fulfilling a variety of roles can also have positive benefits. This is what psychologists term **enrichment**, or **facilitation**. Having enriching experiences in one area of our life can make us more satisfied overall, by giving us an energy boost and helping us develop our skills. For instance, we might find that learning to “juggle” multiple deadlines and to multi-task efficiently are useful skills that help us manage both our work and non-work time more effectively, or having successful day at work can put us in a good mood for an evening out with friends.

“You experience work-life conflict when demands from different areas of your life are difficult to combine. We call it enrichment or facilitation when experiences form different areas gives you a boost”

More on work - life balance

Overall, psychological research has confirmed that experiences at the work-home interface can be positive, negative or both; and that the quality of these experiences will impact on our health, our work, and our life in general. Research has also confirmed that the type of work-life balance that suits us best is likely to change over our lifespan. We should be mindful that we, and our working environment, may need to change and adapt.

One way of helping us improve our work-life balance is by considering our work schedule. Working more flexibly could help us balance the demands of our work and non-work life more effectively. It should be emphasised, however, that whilst research suggests that flexibility itself is a good thing; we do not yet know what kind of work models work best for particular people. What we do know is that flexibility is most beneficial if it is borne out

of choice: for instance, an employee who opts for, and successfully negotiates, part-time hours or flexitime will find this more beneficial than one who has a flexible work model imposed on her or him.

Work life balance risk factors – what to watch out for

These are some of the key risk factors for a negative work-life balance:

Our work: for instance having a demanding job; doing work that is emotionally draining; working long hours; being very committed to and involved in our work; having little opportunity for “down-time”.

Our lives: for instance experiencing family stress; having young children; caring for elderly relatives; relationship problems.

Research has confirmed that having support from our workplace and our family is a good thing. This helps us to cope better with stressful situations, and offsets the negative impact of demands from work or home.

The benefits of a good work life balance for all

Psychological research has demonstrated that having a work-life balance that meets our current needs is good for us, as we will be healthier and more satisfied with work and life in general.

There are also benefits for our employers, as we will perform more effectively, be more committed, take less sick leave, and be more likely to stay in our organisation. It is important that work-life balance is

an issue that is addressed proactively, rather than waiting until problems have become ingrained. It is also important that we recognise that everyone needs a good work-life balance. Whilst people often assume that work-life balance is only an issue for women with young children, recent research has shown that it concerns us all regardless of caring responsibilities.

Top tips for managing your work-life balance

Here are some simple strategies that you can put into place to help you achieve a more acceptable work-life balance:

Observe yourself: watch out for when you are feeling good about your work-life balance and when you are not. Which situations and feelings contribute to these experiences? Some people find that it helps to write them down in a diary. Can you see a pattern emerging? This will help you make changes in your life.

Remember that there is no ‘once size fits all’ approach: trying to achieve the “perfect” balance can seem like just another demand made upon us. Accept that life and work change constantly, and that there will always be days when things seem better balanced than others. Try and work out what works best for you, rather than copy what seems to work for other people.

Speak up and negotiate: tell your manager, your family, and other important people how you feel about your work-life balance, and highlight any concerns. Consider whether you can get more flexibility relating to when and where you work.

Keep an eye on your working hours: working long hours will drain your energy in the long run. Can you work more efficiently or more productively? Can you delegate any of your job tasks? Are you staying at work late because you feel you have to, or because you really need to or want to?

Manage your phone and email use: do calls, texts and emails help you balance your work and home life, or are they just distractions? Plan your use of social media technology wisely. For example, you might try checking your emails only at designated times and for a designated length of time. Schedule in times when you can switch off from the phone and email completely.

Watch out for signs of over-commitment and over-involvement in your work: whilst it is good to love your job, we can sometimes get too involved. If you find you are thinking about work constantly and are finding it difficult to switch off, it is time to reconsider. Work out your priorities in life, and try and balance them out: how much time and energy do you spend on work compared to other things? Are there any areas that you have been neglecting, such as your friends or your health and fitness? How can you make some space in your life for these important things?

Plan some “down time”: build exercise and active rest into your life. For example, learn how to meditate or practice yoga, or work with a qualified psychologist or coach to help you work out your priorities and help you relax.

“Work-life balance is good for you, as you will feel better mentally and physically, for your employer, as you will perform more effectively, and for the wider society”