



## Work-life Balance - a Psychological Perspective for Organisations

### 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.

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### The Work-life Balance Working Group

#### What we cover in this fact sheet:

- What is work-life balance?
- What are the benefits of a good work-life balance?
- What are the risk factors?
- Top tips for employers

#### What do we mean by 'work-life balance'?

When psychologists talk about work-life balance, they look at two aspects, relating to both the negative and positive sides of combining work and personal life. First, psychologists refer to **work-life** or **work-family conflict**, which relates to work interfering with other life domains (in particular with family life), and how life (family) interferes with 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 been 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 organisational 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.

It can be difficult to identify "good work-life balance" in an organisational context. For a start, please see the working definition.

#### **As a starting point, employers might like to consider this definition:**

*"Work-life balance is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities"*

(Kalliath & Brough, 2008)

## More on work - life balance

In summary, the evidence that demands and resources relating to different areas of our lives “spill over” to affect each other is overwhelming. Therefore, organisations will get the best out of their workforce by gaining insight into the type of work-life balance their employees require. By nature, work-life balance always stretches beyond the workplace, so does not just relate to initiatives or issues that stem from the workplace. It is therefore essential to consider

employees as people who have got responsibilities and needs in their private lives that may be just as important as their work responsibilities. Organisations should acknowledge that the interface between their employees’ working lives and their private lives is complex and varied. Re-research suggests that the type of work -life balance people need changes over their lifespan; it is therefore important for employers to maintain a flexible and open-

minded approach. Psychologists are uniquely placed to help organisations design and implement equitable initiatives to help enhance work-life balance, through our knowledge of individual differences and an in depth understanding of organisational context and change. It is of course important that these initiatives are effectively translated into practice and employees have the opportunity to utilise them without stigmatisation.

## Work life balance risk factors – what to watch out for

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

**The job itself:** having a demanding job; doing work that is emotionally draining; having little support in the workplace from managers or colleagues; little schedule flexibility (e.g. having to stick to very rigid working hours) and little control over work content and pace.

**Workers’ attitudes:** high levels of job involvement and commitment to work and the organisation can turn into over-commitment, where employees find it hard to switch off from work when they are at home or socialising. This is often exacerbated by an organisational culture that considers long working hours to be synonymous with dedication and productivity.

**Factors outside work:** having lots of family stress; experiencing relationship problems; having caring responsibilities and having little support from the family.

## The benefits of a good work life balance for all

Research evidence confirms that helping employees develop a work-life balance that meets their needs will benefit everyone. Workers will perform more effectively, be more committed, be less likely to take time off sick, and more likely to stay in their jobs. This will reap benefits for the employer, as research says that organisations which have effective work-life balance policies are more productive and satisfied customers.

Whilst people often assume that work-life balance is only an issue for women with young children, recent research has shown that this issue concerns everyone regardless of caring responsibilities. Organisations which acknowledge the need for equity in developing work-life balance initiatives, and go beyond the legal requirements (which are mainly aimed at working parents) tend to be more successful.

## Top tips for employers

Based on research evidence, there are a number of strategies that employers can utilise to ensure a more positive and equitable organisational approach to work-life balance. We acknowledge that not all organisations can consider all of these, as for instance the implementation of formal policies may be more suited to larger organisations. But finding out what your workforce needs and wants is an important first step in any environment.

**Review work schedules and support flexible working:** Working more flexibly can help employees balance their work and non-work demands. Psychologists are clear that flexibility itself is positive, and that it is likely to be most beneficial where employees can choose their own schedules. The research evidence is less clear, however, about the kind of flexible working models that are best for people. Thus, It is important to gain insight into what suits a particular employee best, and how you can make their preferences work in practice. Wherever possible ensure you have a flexible working policy which offers a range of options such as flexitime, job share, and home working. Provide managers and employees with guidance on how to make these arrangements work, and publicise successful initiatives widely within your organisation.

**Take active steps to understand your employees’ needs:** a “one size fits all” approach to managing work-life balance is unlikely to succeed. Remember that work and other areas of life affect each other, but employees’ needs will vary. It is therefore important to gain insight into the work-life balance needs of individual employees (possibly through their annual appraisal process) and your workforce as a whole (by including work-life balance questions in surveys of employee satisfaction and wellbeing).

**Open up lines of communication:** make sure that managers appreciate the need to minimise work-life conflict in their staff, and feel equipped to address work-life balance issues proactively and constructively through appropriate channels, such as team meetings and performance appraisals. If you need more information about how best to train your staff to be responsive to work-life balance needs, seek further advice.

**Keep an eye on working hours:** encourage employees to work efficiently and productively, and measure performance by outputs, not by hours. Make sure you have role models in the organisation who champion this approach.

**Recognise that people need to switch off:** manage the use of email, in terms of volume and reply, and turnaround times. For instance, email auto lists should be used with caution, as their overuse often swamps people with information that may not be personally relevant. Ask yourself whether you could use e-discussion boards, or internal social networks to limit the email volume. Do you have a policy outlining how you expect people to use (and respond to) emails?

**Watch out for signs of over-commitment and over-involvement:** whilst it is good to have employees who love their job, some can get too involved in their work. Although this may be beneficial to business in the short term, it can lead to ill health and burnout in the long run. Encourage people to take active rest through exercise and healthy living in a sensitive and appropriate way. Consider whether your workplace has a “long working hours” culture and take steps to rectify this. Are your managers modelling what is seen as “appropriate” behaviour? If they work very long hours, your employees are likely to do the same.

**Actively facilitate a supportive culture and environment:** listen to the conversations at ground level. Do your employees feel it is appropriate to discuss work life balance issues at work, or is this stigmatised? Are good role models applauded? Do you have a database of best practice examples so that managers can learn from each others’ experiences?

**If in doubt, seek expert advice:** Work-life balance issues are by their nature complex. If you are in doubt about how best to tackle any issues, seek advice from someone who can help you, such as an occupational psychologist.

*“Work life balance needs change over time; employers need to maintain a flexible approach”*