The British Psychological Society

Division of Occupational Psychology

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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Work-life Balance
- a Psychological Perspective for Coaches

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'?

The term 'work-life balance' can be misleading, implying a static balance with an equal division between two separate spheres of 'work' and 'life'.

"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"

Trying to achieve a perfect balance can be just another impossible demand. In fact, psychology research has found that the interface between working and private lives is personal and dynamic and varies between individuals and over time. Balance is about finding a way that suits an individual and their current priorities, to integrate the various areas of life in a fulfilling way. When psychologists talk about work-life balance, they broadly distinguish between two aspects, which relate to the negative and the positive sides of combining work and personal life. First, they refer to work-life or work-family conflict, which relates to work interfering with other areas of life (in particular with family life) and how non-work 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 may be that of employee, another may be that of carer (for a child or elderly person). As time and energy levels are not infinite, if our work becomes very demanding, or we get extremely involved in it, we are likely to have less time and energy to dedicate to other roles, for instance for socialising with friends. We may also feel torn between different roles or guilty that we are not performing any of these to a sufficiently high standard. Similarly, if we have problems in our non-work life, this may have an impact on our work, such as when a child or parent becomes ill and needs care during working hours.

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

"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).

Studies suggest individuals combining different roles are likely to experience conflict and enrichment/facilitation rather than it being an 'either/or' situation.

Implications for Coaches

In summary, the evidence that demands and experiences relating to different areas of our lives "spill over" both positively and negatively to affect each other is overwhelming. As coaches we can help our coachees to gain in-sight into the type of work-life balance that best suits them as individuals, by enabling them to reduce conflict and increase facilitation and enrichment.

Research has also confirmed that our work-life balance needs and wants change during the lifespan. We should encourage our coachees to maintain a flexible approach to adapting their balance as their circumstances alter.

Work life balance risk factors – what to watch out for

Studies have identified a variety of factors which increase work-life conflict, including:

Work: having a demanding job, having limited control over work content and pace, doing work that is emotionally draining, having little schedule flexibility, having little support in the workplace from managers or colleagues

Outside work: experiencing high family stress, experiencing relationship problems, having young children, caring for elderly relatives, having limited family support

Individual attitudes: High levels of job involvement and commitment to work

We can help coachees to distinguish between those factors which are beyond their control and those they can influence to improve their personal balance.

The benefits of a good work life balance for all

Research evidence confirms that helping an individual to develop a work-life balance that meets their needs will benefit both them and their employers, and ultimately also the community and wider society. For instance, research has shown that children are very aware of their parents' work-life balance issues. Improving work-life balance has a positive effect on mental and physical health and overall satisfaction with life. It is also beneficial for the employer, leading to better performance, reduced sick leave, higher levels of commitment and longer tenure in an organisation. While 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. It is important that work-life balance is addressed proactively rather than waiting until problems have become ingrained.

Useful concepts: border theory & resource conservation

Border theory conceptualises work and non-work as different spheres of operation, with boundaries of varying degrees of permeability between the two. In the course of a day, people cross borders between different roles. Segmentation occurs when boundaries are clearly defined, with strong separation between non-work and work. Integration is when boundaries are blurred and work and non-work roles are integrated. Recent research has found that neither is universally preferable: the achievement of work-life balance is affected by the match between an individual's preferences and their reality. The coach can work with a coachee to elicit their current preferences, to discuss whether these might change in the near future, and to conduct a 'gap analysis' with the current situation. If clearer boundaries are preferred, the coaching can address ways of better marking the separation between work and personal life (e.g. actively managing business texts/email use when at home).

Conservation of resources theory recognises that people strive to hold on to valued resources, such as time and energy. However stressful life events can deplete resources very quickly. From the work-life balance perspective, an event such as the serious illness of a close relative can be highly draining, leaving the individual with less energy for working life even if there is minimal impact on their time. On the other hand, energy resources can be increased by fulfilling multiple roles provided these are satisfying and not overwhelming. A stimulating working role can increase a person's energy, having a positive benefit on the energy they bring to their home life. The coach can help a coachee to recognise the importance of recovery and respite when they are under stress, and to identify when they are energised and their resources are enhanced.

Strategies for coaches to help coachees to manage their work-life balance

Use the literature and frameworks: each of the work-life balance models has something to offer, but none of them can explain everything.

Use self-observation: Encourage coachees to work out their own work-life balance needs in terms of what works best for them, rather than making comparisons with others. Examining their past and current experiences can be a rich source of information. Ask them to identify times, maybe using a journal, when they have been 'in balance' and 'out of balance' and discuss their behaviours and feelings in each situation.

Use creative techniques: Drawing can be useful to explore desired and actual separation/integration of work and non-work and identify actions to narrow the gap

Develop a practical work-life plan: Considering personal realities and job demands help coachees to identify a plan that will suit them and make business sense for their organisations. Explore ways of crafting their role and reviewing their work schedules, in particular negotiating more flexibility as to when and where they work.

Consider work-life choices in relation to values: Work with coachees to clarify their values in all different are-as of their life and to consider whether they are too involved in their work to the detriment of other life priorities. Identify important areas that are being neglected, such as friends or health, and consider how they can reallocate their time and energy.

Encourage healthy living: Look at ways for coachees to build in 'down time' through exercise and active rest. Adequate sleep is also essential for recovery.

Develop sources of support: Help coachees to develop a support network to obtain practical and emotional support from colleagues, supervisors, family and friends. Research has confirmed that support helps us to cope better with stressful situations and buffers the negative effects of demands from work and home.