

Work And Life: Hanging In The Balance

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Abstract

This paper discusses the work-life balance fundamentals and how perception and factors may influence how that balance is viewed. It also discusses if employers should take the lead on promotion of a healthy work-life balance for all employees.

Keywords: *work, life, work-life balance, balance, overwork, work-family separation*

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There are many ways to view the work-life balance and it is up to interpretation on what that “balance” is. Starting with a general definition will give a starting point at which discussion can then take place. The definition this paper will use is as follows: “...the relationship between work and non-work aspects of individuals' lives, where achieving a satisfactory work-life balance is normally understood as restricting one side (usually work), to have more time for the other.” (Kelliher, 2019) The interpretation of the work-life balance comes from a larger view on life and the importance of matters within it (i.e., work, family, economics, etc.). Some of this is based on the importance of each in the individual's life and also the ability of the employee to physically and mentally separate the factors. This is explained through boundary theory that explains how individuals create and maintain boundaries that separate life domains (Althammer, 2021). The boundaries can either be segregated or integrated, work and life are totally separate entities or work and life are two sides of the same coin and must work together to create one's balance. This includes the physical aspects of work and home and also the cognitive-emotional boundaries required for a mental detachment from work or home (Althammer, 2021).

Many works discuss the ability to cope or gain an insight into a work-life balance, not create one. Understanding the factors that affect work-life balance and how to utilize or overcome those factors are the leading discussions. A study conducted by Ioana Lupu and Mayra Ruiz-Castro showed that in order to achieve a better balance, one must use a combination of reflexivity, or questioning assumptions to increase self-awareness, and role redefinition (Ioana, 2021). The same study showed that there was a positive increase in feelings of balance when a cyclic approach was used rather than a one-time fix approach. Those steps are as follows: Pause and Denormalize, or stop and ask what is the cause of stress or dissatisfaction; Pay Attention to

your Emotions, or, after one has increased awareness, ask what emotions are being felt due to the denormalizing factor; Reprioritize; Consider alternatives; and Implement Changes (Ioana, 2021).

An article in Forbes focuses on the individual understanding of what is meant by the work-life balance. The first level of understanding is that convenience is not the same as balance (Thomas, 2022). Some convenience items, such as laundry and walking the dog, should be done on personal time and not be a balance factor when considering if work and life are balanced. The second level of understanding is that balance does not mean equal time to everything (Thomas, 2022). Equal time fails as there are underlying factors that affect a person's consideration for being at home or at work. The person in question may not have a family or receives gratification from working more than being at home. The way an individual views the overall picture of a work and life balance along with the factors that affect those are important for said person to discover in the cycle of maintaining that balance.

Factors influence along the same plane, the only difference is the mental ability and self-awareness to identify and disconnect from the stressing factors. These factors cause the employee to undergo psychological conflict, or be "...mentally distracted or preoccupied with one role while physically in another role." (Althammer, 2021) This can include work when the mind is distracted by home factors or home when the mind is distracted by work factors. A study on different working environments, such as work-from-home and part-time working, and its effect on parent-child enrichment interactions gives insight to some factors that may affect work-life balance. The study, conducted by Jaeseung Kim (2018) took three different factors into consideration, including income status, single or dual parent households, gender of parent. A positive increase in parent-child enrichment was found in single-parent low-income households, part-time mother in a dual-parent any-income household, and part-time father in a dual-parent

dual-earner household (Kim, 2020). These increases in enrichment interaction have a direct correlation in the feeling of a more balanced work-home life (Kim, 2020).

An effort to keep a balanced workforce within a company leads to longer tenure and increased employee happiness, and in return greater project completion (Reid, 2015). An article in the Harvard Business Review by Sarah Carmichael (2015) discusses the negative impacts of overwork whether done by force or choice on the individual and the company. Employers could not tell the difference between employees that worked 80 hours per week and those that worked 40 and pretended to work the other 40 (Carmichael, 2015). Carmichael (2015) goes on to discuss the negative employee affects of overwork, including many types of stress, exhaustion, and health problems, and the negative employer impacts, including absenteeism, turnover, and rising health insurance costs. Why would anyone overwork without being forced to? Reid (2015) considers this to be a representation of the “Expected Professional Identity”. This is the hard, always working employee that is glorified by the employer and colleagues alike, also known as the “go getter” (Reid, 2015). Reid’s study shows that 57% of subjects were in a work-life conflict with the expected professional identity and either altered their own work to aid balance or asked the employer to restructure their work to better meet their needs (Reid, 2015). A balance of work and leisure would aid in reducing overwork and the negative effects associated with it. Most of the subjects in Reid’s study agreed that they wanted to work the hours necessary and be a “good” employee but maintained that work-life conflict would not allow it (Reid, 2015). Companies can aid these individuals by working with employees to maintain a balanced work-to-life scenario that has positive affects on employee and employer alike.

Conclusion

Looking at the work-life balance from a larger, zoomed-out perspective may lead to an understanding of what it actually means and a greater degree of self-awareness. The employee will need to do self-actualization to understand how much of each, home and work, is required to create that balance specific to them. Many factors may affect how one views the balance of life and work, including socioeconomic status, family status, and gender. Those factors contribution to stressors can be mitigated by a self-awareness and stress-management techniques to reach the realization of work-life balance. Employers and employees benefit from a good balance of work and home life. Employers should embrace that fact and aid employees in reaching their ideal balance, if possible.

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