

Does work-life balance depend on where and how you work?

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Abstract

This article reports on a symposium presented in EAWOP, 2009 that examined work-life balance issues in different occupational contexts. During a global recession where developing work-life balance policies may not be considered organizational priorities; we argue that the need for systematic research into work-life balance has never been greater. The findings of the four papers included in the symposium suggest that work-life balance initiatives that are firmly grounded in workplace context and that acknowledge diverse approaches to conceptualising and managing the work-home interface will be more successful than those that assume "one size fits all".

Introduction

Work-life balance is a key issue in all types of employment as dual-career families, high work demands and long working hours have become the norm. Over the last decade or so, the importance of helping employees achieve a balance between the demands of their work and their home lives has been emphasised. A strong business case for the implementation of work-life balance policies has been highlighted by the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI, 2003) in the UK. According to this survey, the benefits to organizations include increased productivity, reduced overheads, improved recruitment and retention and lower levels of absenteeism. In terms of individual outcomes, research has found strong relationships between perceptions of work-life conflict and psychological and physical ill health, substance abuse and family functioning (Kinman & Jones, 2001). This work shows that the potential benefits of helping employees manage the work-home interface are clear.

Daniels, Lewis and McCarraher (2000) have documented a four-stage process for organizational development in the field of work-life balance. Stage 1 (Grass Roots) focuses on the provision of child-care, which is generally provided in response to pressure from women with young children. Stage 2 (Human Resources) is when initiatives are broadened in response to a growing recognition of the benefits provided by introducing work-life balance policies. At the third stage (Culture Change) the focus broadens further to encompass the work-life concerns of the workforce as a whole. At this stage comes recognition that work-life policies will only be effective in a culture that is fully supportive of their aims. Finally, by Stage 4 (Work Redesign), there is a greater awareness of how organizational objectives and employees' work-life balance needs could be satisfied simultaneously. At this stage, work-life balance is seen as an integral component of fulfilling the goals of the organization.

Although many examples of good practice exist, the majority of organizations remain at all the “Grass Roots” stage; only focusing on helping employees to meet their caring responsibilities. In the UK, a number of “family friendly” working arrangements have been made available to some employees, options include: part-time work, shift work, job-sharing, term-time contracts, flexitime, compressed working week, reduced hours and the opportunity to work annualised hours allowing some gaps in employment to allow for school holidays, for example (Kodz, Harper & Dench, 2002).

More progressive organizations have been working towards the second (“Human Resources”) stage in the model developed by Daniels and colleagues, where initiatives are developed in response to a growing recognition of the benefits provided by broader work-life balance policies. This might involve providing employees with opportunities for leave of absence to pursue personal projects. Few have arrived at the third stage, “Culture Change”, where work-life policies are recognised as of fundamental importance to fulfilling the goals of the organization. At this stage, the work-life concerns of the workforce as a whole are considered and work-life balance is seen as an integral component of fulfilling the goals of the organization. This would involve blending corporate priorities with employees' lifestyle responsibilities and personal aspirations and would require regular re-evaluation to reflect the changing needs of employers and employees.

With the world economy in recession, there are serious concerns that further development of work-life balance initiatives will no longer be organizational priorities. Companies that were working towards extending their policies and practices beyond the grass roots stage may currently see work-life balance as a luxury they can no longer afford. There is evidence that many organizations are putting their employees under increasing work pressure in an attempt to survive until economic recovery; and in turn, people who are still employed may be working longer and harder in an attempt to hold onto precious jobs.

The UK government argues vehemently for maintaining the controversial opt-out of the European Working Time Directive's recommended maximum of 48 hours per week; insisting that workers and employers need more, not less, flexibility in the current economic climate. Whilst such approaches might yield short term benefits, down-grading work-life balance initiatives will have serious human and organizational costs (Duxbury, 2009). The latest wave of the 24/7 Work Life Balance Survey (Hurst, Skinner & Worrall, 2009) highlights the initial impact of the recession on workload and the work-home interface. Sixty-two percent of the sample (n = 1,898) indicated that their workload had increased in the previous 12 months compared to 56 percent in the 2008 survey. Moreover, seventy-five percent of participants reported having difficulty achieving an acceptable work-life balance: a percentage increase on the previous year's findings.

There are also indicators that increased pressure upon people's resources comes at a cost, as absenteeism is on the rise. A recent survey by the Work Life Balance Centre and Coventry University (n = 1,900) found that absenteeism has nearly doubled, with senior managers the most prolific absentees (Baker, 2009). The average employee was absent for 9 days in the year to January, 2009 compared to 5 days in the previous year, whilst senior managers took an average of 11 days off this year.

Clearly, the need for systematic research into the nature of work-life conflict and further insight into ways by which the work-home interface can be more effectively managed has never been greater. Based on several years experience working with a range of occupational groups, we believe that context specific work-life balance initiatives are likely to be more effective than those that are developed from a more generic perspective. We argue that knowledge of job specific demands and working conditions, and the differing ways that people manage the work-home interface in response to these demands, is vital in order to advance knowledge. For example, schedule flexibility is generally seen to be a protective factor for work-life balance, but jobs without formal working hours might threaten rather than protect work-life balance as employees may choose to work longer and harder (see Kinman & Jones, 2009). Our symposium at the 2009 EAWOP Conference in Santiago comprised four studies that examined the work-home interface in different working contexts within the public sector using a range of different methodological approaches.

More specifically, the symposium addressed the following questions:

- What are the context specific factors that promote work-life conflict and balance in different job roles and occupational groups?
- What job-related individual difference factors enhance and impede work-life balance?
- How do different occupational groups manage the work-home interface and how successful are these strategies?
- To what extent are Western conceptualisations of the work-home interface relevant in non-Western employees?
- What are the challenges for work-life balance research and practice in a global recession and how might context specific approaches contribute to knowledge?

The individual papers within the symposium will now be described in turn, followed by a general discussion of the salient issues and priorities for future research.

Emotional labour and the work-home interface in UK teachers

The first study in the symposium, by Gail Kinman, Siobhan Wray and Calista Hindler, examined emotional labour as a predictor of work-life conflict in teachers working in secondary schools in the UK. The mechanisms by which the emotional demands of teaching are imported into the work-home interface were also examined. It has long been argued that teaching requires the management of personal emotions and those of students (Fried, 1995) and that emotional labour has the potential to “spill over” into the home environment (Wharton & Erickson, 1993). Nonetheless, as yet, little research has been conducted on emotional labour in teaching or its relationship with the work-home interface more generally. This study tested a mediated model whereby emotional labour is related to strain-based work-life conflict via emotional exhaustion.

It has recently been suggested that models of work-life conflict would be enriched by the inclusion of individual difference variables such as propensity for work involvement and job commitment (Tetrick & Buffardi, 2006). Higher levels of involvement might predispose employees to experience work-life conflict, and/or exacerbate or alleviate the negative impact of demands on the work-home interface. In this study, a second model was tested that examined job involvement as a potential moderator of the relationship between emotional labour and work-life conflict.

Results showed that emotional labour was indeed a strong predictor of work-life conflict, and that emotional exhaustion fully mediates this relationship. Teachers who were more involved in their work tended to have stronger relationships between emotional labour and work-life conflict. Findings suggest that interventions are required to enhance the emotion management skills of teachers. The development of “healthy” role separation and firmer emotional boundaries between work and home should be encouraged to ensure that the negative impact of emotional labour does not manifest itself as negative spill over.

Daily Hassles and Stressful Life Events as critical work/life balance factors in UK Police Workers

The first study in this symposium examined work-life conflict uni-directionally: i.e. from work-to-home only. In the second study, Almuth McDowall adopted a bi-directional perspective in a sample of UK police officers and support staff by examining the impact of work-related daily hassles and stressful life events and circumstances from the non-work domain as well as vice versa.

A focus group of seven experienced police workers (average length of service 20 years) discussed the type of daily hassles and stressful life events likely to be experienced by employees. An index of daily hassles and stressful life events was subsequently developed based on this focus group. Findings revealed that many of the demands experienced by the police are highly idiosyncratic such as managing unpredictable and often dangerous situations and ensuring crime targets are met, as well as more mundane duties such as completing extensive paperwork. The conservation of resources model (COR, Hobfoll, 1989) provided the

conceptual framework for this study. This holds that humans are active agents who strive to preserve, protect and retain limited resources through resource-enhancing strategies, and that stressful life events, specifically those related to the notion of loss, act to deplete one's resources more rapidly than other factors.

Building on prior research by Hobson et al. (1999) and Grandey and Cropanzano (1999) the COR framework allowed an examination of the factors that may help employees to manage the work-home interface (such as social support) as well as increase work-life conflict (such as long working hours). A negative association between levels of professional commitment and work to non-work conflict and non-work to work conflict was expected. As professional commitment might increase the risk of work demands spilling over into the non-work domain due to excessive involvement in the job role, it was tested as a potential moderator of the stressor-strain relationship.

Findings revealed that everyday hassles related to work but not stressful life events such as divorce, bullying, threat of job loss or financial problems were significantly associated with work-life conflict. Somewhat contrary to the key tenets of the COR model, non-work hassles were associated with conflict from both directions (i.e. work to non-work as well as from non-work to work). Professional commitment did not buffer the relationship between daily hassles, more serious life events and perceptions of work-life conflict.

A potential explanation for these findings is that police and associated personnel are trained to deal with unforeseen circumstances, but may be much less equipped to deal with everyday stressors. The impact of everyday hassles may well be exacerbated when life problems spill over into work: a situation that is not seen as acceptable in many organizational environments. For example, concerns over a sick child may result in an employee being distracted and be seen to threaten performance in a safety critical working environment such as the police. The implications are that there is a need for training and awareness raising to help employees successfully manage the work-home interface beyond immediate work demands.

The interface of work and families among Thai nursing staff

The findings of the first two studies highlight the need to examine the impact of job-specific demands on the work-home interface and the factors that might mediate or moderate this relationship. The third study presented by ChatsaranTengpongthorn and Almuth McDowall, explored how Thai nurses conceptualise and manage the work-home interface.

In Thailand, nurses are generally required to reconcile high work demands with high home demands. The objectives of this study were to explore to which extent work-family constructs, such as conflict and facilitation, are relevant to Thai nurses, and how they might relate to each other.

As little was previously known about the experience of work-life balance in this cultural context, this study utilised qualitative methodology and adopted a "bottom up" approach rather than imposing Western models and measures. Transcripts from semi-structured interviews with 26 nurses working in three different hospitals in Thailand were thematically coded using Template Analysis (King, 1998). In order to capture heterogeneous experiences, the sample comprised nurses who were single as well as married, with or without children and those whose husbands were living away from home (with or without children).

Whilst some of the nurses' experiences can be mapped on to Western concepts of facilitation and conflict (e.g., demands are high and contribute to perceptions of conflict); other factors appear more culture specific. Important differences between conceptualisations of work-life balance held by this group and the dominant Western individualistic perspective were revealed. Most importantly, work-life conflict and facilitation were found to be fluid, and negotiated at a group level. Whilst support structures, such as family or colleagues, can be a source of facilitation, they can also be a source of conflict due to expectations for loyalty and reciprocation.

Thai people are socialised to be interdependent rather than independent; thus people are expected to have total loyalty to in-group members and share resources with them. Thus, support can come at a price. There was also evidence of "informal accommodations" which are

unlike experiences in Western countries, such as spouses interfering in work schedules, or creating exceptional home demands. Work supervisors were found to play a particularly key role as 'border keepers' between different domains, in particular they used informal accommodations (such as requests for late notice shift changes) as favours granted only to what they considered "high performing" employees. Nurses increasingly live and work in multi-cultural settings. The findings of this study indicate that insight into non-Western attitudes towards the work-home interface will help develop more inclusive ways of helping employees gain a work-life balance that meets their needs and those of their families.

Blurring the boundaries between the personal and the professional: Work-life conflict and recovery in UK academic employees

Borders and boundaries between work and home played an important role in the final contribution of this paper. A multi-method study of a large representative sample of academic employees working in UK universities was conducted by Gail Kinman and Fiona Jones. Previous research suggests that work-life balance might be generally poor in this sector and that this is a particularly strong predictor of poor psychological well-being and low job satisfaction (Kinman & Jones, 2003). The primary aim of this study was to examine working practices and strategies utilised by academics to manage the work-home interface.

Although academic work is highly demanding and long working hours are commonplace in the sector, relatively high levels of control over where and when these demands can be fulfilled have been documented (Kinman, Jones & Kinman, 2007). A range of strategies utilised to manage the work-home interface were examined as predictors of work-life conflict. The extent of working at home, the type of work most likely to be done there and the use of mobile technologies to facilitate this practice were assessed. Also investigated were the strength of boundaries between work and home, together with the level of work-home integration that was currently experienced compared with the academics' ideal position. The role played by the individual difference variable over-commitment to the job role in predicting work-life conflict was also examined. Qualitative data was utilised to explore specific strategies used by academics to manage the work-home interface.

Findings revealed that a high proportion of workload was done at home, with some core academic tasks (such as marking and writing for publication) were performed exclusively in this domain. Although working at home was related to perceptions of blurred boundaries and work-life conflict, some academics (especially those with young children) found that this helped them manage the work-home interface more effectively. Similarly, considerable variation was found in the extent to which employees wish for a firm boundary between work and home; some desired almost total separation between domains, whilst others wished for a high degree of integration. The "fit" between the level of work-life integration/separation that academics currently experienced and their ideal situation was a particularly strong predictor of work-life conflict. Academics that were more over-committed to the job role also tended to perceive higher levels of work-life conflict.

Thematic analysis of qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions included in the survey highlighted several strategies employed by academic employees to manage the work-home interface. These encompassed forward planning and time management, drawing support from family and friends and reducing involvement in family life and work activities deemed excessive. Significant costs to role performance in the work and family domains of some practices were highlighted. This study once again highlights the importance of examining the work-home interface in different occupational contexts. In contrast to the findings of studies suggesting that a firm boundary between work and home and role separation is uniformly beneficial (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000), the findings reported here indicate that the optimal degree of integration/separation is to a large extent subject to individual preference.

Challenges and opportunities for work-life balance research

The findings of the papers described above indicate that work-life balance issues differ by occupational context. They are also strongly influenced by cultural assumptions and practices and individual differences such as job involvement, over-commitment and preference for work/life integration. We also acknowledge that work-life balance needs are also likely to differ by gender, age, role, seniority and other factors. If we are to develop more effective interventions to enhance work-life balance in different sectors of the economy, the need for context specificity and diversity in approaches should be acknowledged..

Our discussant Richard MacKinnon argued; there is a fine line between advancing theory to develop broadly applicable models and being over-reliant on the assumption that common issues will apply in all organizational settings. This also brings up the issue of ownership and responsibility. To some extent, the responsibility for finding a balance between work demands and family life and leisure lies with the individual employee. Nonetheless, organizations have some responsibility in ensuring that their work-life balance policies and practices are developed beyond the basic grass roots level. As discussed above, working environment that supports employees in establishing and maintaining a fair balance between their work and non-work lives is likely to improve employee well-being and organizational functioning.

Research in different occupational contexts should provide more detailed information on the needs and concerns of the workforce, thus facilitating the development of more inclusive work-life balance policies that apply to the workforce as a whole rather than just people with caring responsibilities. Rather than aim to help employees create firmer boundaries between work and home, the findings presented in this paper suggest that professionals may expect some degree of work-life integration. Helping employees identify ways by which they can close the gap between the work-life balance that they currently experience and that which they wish for might be a fruitful approach

Burke (2006) has argued that collaborative “action research” projects, where researchers work jointly with organizations to address work and personal life concerns, have considerable potential in facilitating work-life balance. Such initiatives will reflect the characteristics of different working environments and the diverse needs of employees; they can also make a more explicit link between workers’ personal needs and business objectives.

Based on the findings of the studies presented in this paper, the following priorities for future research have been identified for specific occupational groups:

- Which strategies are effective in helping teachers manage the emotional demands of their work and aiding recovery from these demands?
- Which kind of strategies would help police staff to deal with the job-related hassles that they experience? Are interventions required at the organizational level that focuses on awareness raising and/or training, or is this indeed an issue that is best handled at the individual level?
- How can Thai nurses manage their work-life balance, given that this appears to be a collective issue?
- How could we help academics manage the work-home interface in the face of high work demands from a number of sources, which may be compounded by a tendency towards high job commitment?

These contributions also highlight a need to address broader conceptual questions.

Previous research has consistently found that work affects family more than vice versa (Frone, 2003). Consequently research has tended to focus on work-to-family conflict. However, with the recession acting as a catalyst, workers may be more likely to bring worries about home demands (e.g. financial worries) into the workplace. Research recently conducted by the Trades Union Congress in the UK suggests that problems emanating from domestic life (such as financial worries and relationship problems) may be more stressful than work experiences. It is therefore important that we investigate these relationships in both directions.

A diverse range of methods is required to investigate work-life issues, as the current body of evidence is dominated by cross-sectional quantitative studies. There are topics that are better suited to a theory-building qualitative approach, for instance the study of Thai nurses described

above, indicated that we cannot assume that tried and tested constructs will be relevant across cultures.

There is a clear need for more intervention studies. Whilst it is useful to be able to diagnose salient issues in any organizational context, the work-life balance field would progress considerably if an evidence base were to be developed for interventions, such as training or awareness raising, and their association with individual and organizational outcomes investigated.

The future

Supported by the Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP) of the British Psychological Society (BPS), we have recently set up a Working Group on work-life balance. As argued above, the work-home interface needs to be considered not only at the individual level, in terms of subjective perceptions and strategies utilised to balance work and home lives, but also the organizational level, in terms of what is available to employees to facilitate the interface of work and other domains. We argue for a multi-level perspective, that considers the potentially different needs and perspectives of employers and employees that extend from the individual workplace and family to the wider community. Our approach is underpinned by our recognition that functional work-life balance has long-term benefits for employers and employees, and that employers need to be actively involved and not see work-life balance as an individual issue.

The scope of the Working Group will be broad and will include topics such as recovery from work, work-family conflict, enrichment, integration and facilitation, cross-over within families, as well as organizational culture and change. We are particularly keen to include practitioners and the Human Resource community to ensure that any outputs and outcomes relate firmly to the real needs of contemporary organizations, employees and their families. We would welcome contributions from people from other European countries with an interest in the work-home interface. Indeed, this can only enhance our knowledge of the context specific nature of work-life conflict and how best to achieve a balance between the demands of work and home that meets the needs of employees and organizations.

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