FAMILY ISSUES AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

1. Background information

Over the past few decades, a dramatic change has occurred in the labour market and demographic profiles of employees. Families have shifted from the traditional male 'breadwinner' role to dual-earner couples and single parent families[1, 2, 3]. Relative to the working environment, organisations are demanding an increase in employee flexibility[4] and productivity[5]. The traditional "job for life" has changed into an economic environment of instability and job uncertainty[5]. Workers' perspectives and expectations have also changed towards work. New orientations towards life-long learning, personal and career development, and an increased awareness and need for a balance between work and life have affected organisations through incentivising the introduction of policies such as flexible working[2, 4]. As a result of these demographic, employment and organisational trends, both men and women have experienced an increase in demands from the familial, household and work domains[3].

Work-life balance is a broad and complex phenomenon, lacking in a universal definition[4, 6]. Greenhaus and colleagues[6] define work-family balance as the "extent to which an individual is equally engaged in -and equally satisfied with- his or her work role and family role". Work-life balance consists of three components[6]:

- **time balance** refers to equal time being given to both work and family roles;

- **involvement balance** refers to equal levels of psychological involvement in both work and family roles;

- and finally, **satisfaction balance** refers to equal levels of satisfaction in both work and family roles.

Therefore, in order to achieve a work-life balance these components should be considered.

When individuals struggle to maintain and satisfy the demands placed on them by both the work and family domains, an imbalance may occur. **Work-family conflict** can be defined as a source of stress resulting from irreconcilable pressure from the work and family spheres[7]. This can take two forms:

- work to family conflict and;

- family to work conflict.

Work-family conflict may assume the form of:

- time-based;

- strain-based and;

- behaviour-based conflict[5, 7].

Research and policies directed at work-life balance have focussed on the causes, consequences and how to improve levels of this phenomenon. This article will discuss the changing world of work relative to work-life balance, the motivational factors for why work-life balance should be considered, and provide practical advice for employers and employees.

2. Changing world of work and families: Perspectives and statistics

In the European Union, 64.2 % of the population are in employment with approximately 19.2% in part-time employment[8]. Over the past 20 years in Europe, particularly in countries where policies are in place for flexible working, part-time employment has been on the rise[9].

The traditional eight-hour working day is no longer the norm. The emergence of information communication technology ensures that employees may access work 24/7. In addition to this, flexible working hours and shift work have been introduced into organisations[2]. Although these developments have resulted in significantly changed working environments, differences exist across countries.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions[10] conducted research into the 2009 working time developments across European countries. In 2009, the average collectively agreed weekly working time in the European Union was 38.7 hours. However, in relation to self-reported actual hours worked by full-time employees 20 out of 28 countries worked longer hours than those collectively agreed. Those in Romania, Malta, Luxembourg and the UK had the highest levels of actual working hours; whereas Finland, Ireland, France and Italy had the lowest[11]. In addition to these results, differences exist between men and women in actual weekly hours. Men exceeded women in hours worked in all countries, with the average difference being 2.1 hours in the EU27. These statistics suggest that workers are working longer hours, but highlight that there are differences across European countries.

Not only has the working environment transformed in relation to working time and accessibility to work, but the content of work has also changed. There is an increased need for employees to be adaptable, multi-skilled, and having the ability to work to intensive deadlines[2]. In the EU27, approximately 60% of employees perceive that at least a quarter of their time consists of working at a very high speed[11].

As previously mentioned, the demographics of workers relative to familial composition has shifted in the past few years. Kotowska and colleagues[5] conducted a European wide investigation into family life and work provides an in-depth examination of current trends. The authors found that while there is diversity across countries and life stages relative to family composition, living as a couple with a child is the most prominent structure for 35-49 year olds. Household workload consists primarily of care responsibilities, with childcare occupying more time than caring for relatives. Additionally, the study found that for women, time spent working in the home does not differ significantly across countries. The gender gap exists relative to perceptions of gender roles and inequality in time spent doing household tasks. Additionally, the study found that men perceived that they do less household chores whereas women felt that they do more than their fair share of chores.

2.1. Prevalence of work-life conflict

Work-life conflict is prevalent in Europe. It is estimated that more than one quarter of Europeans suffered from some form of work-family conflict[5].

Relative to time:

- 27% of workers in the EU perceived that they spend too much time at work;

- 28% felt that they spend too little time with their families;

- 36 % felt that they do not have enough time for friends and other social contacts;

- 51% believed that they do not have enough time for their own hobbies and interests.

In relation to gender differences, women were more likely to report that they have too little time for daily life activities, whereas men perceived that they spend too much time at work. However, this gender disparity was not present in the Nordic countries[5]. A significant number of workers have difficulties in performing family responsibilities due to work intensity and time: for example, 22% reported that they are too tired from work for household chores, and 10% reported that time spent at work affects their family responsibilities. Women were more likely to cite these pressures than men[5]. Approximately 50% of workers perceived that family and work time demands overlapped due to

pressure at work and/or at home. Less than 10% of workers experienced no pressure in any direction; work to family conflict or family to work conflict. Overall, strain-based conflict was found to be slightly higher for women[5].

3.   Motivating factors to consider work-life balance

3.1.   *Work-life conflict and health*

Work-family conflict may be viewed as a stressor for individuals[1]. Research has established and documented that conflict between the work and family domains has a number of significant negative consequences for individuals. Research has observed work-life conflict to be associated with a myriad of indicators of poor health and impaired wellbeing including:

- poorer mental and physical health;
- less life satisfaction;
- higher levels of stress;
- higher levels of emotional exhaustion;
- less physical exercise;
- higher likelihood to engage in problem drinking;
- increased anxiety and depression levels;
- poor appetite and;
- fatigue[1, 3, 12].

Both work to family conflict and family to work conflict are associated with negative effects for the individual. Frone and colleagues[1] conducted a study examining the relationship of work to family conflict, and family to work conflict on health outcomes. The results indicated that both are associated with depression, poor physical health and heavy alcohol use. No significant gender differences were found in this study. Kossek and Ozeki[13] found that both directions of work-family conflict have negative relationships with job-life satisfaction. Additionally, this relationship was stronger for women. Canivet and colleagues[14] found that work to family conflict and family to work had a strong relationship with exhaustion in a Swedish sample. While work-family conflict was more prevalent in men, it had a stronger association with exhaustion in women. Rupert, Stevanovic and Hunley[15] examined the relationships between work-family conflict and burnout in a group of practicing psychologists. Their results indicated that both work to family conflict and family to work conflict are significantly related to burnout. Specifically, conflict is related to lower personal accomplishment, greater emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. However, no gender differences were found.

Levels of work-life conflict have also been associated with workaholism. Bonebright, Clay and Ankenmann[16] examined the differences between two typologies of workaholics in relation to work-life conflict, life satisfaction and purpose in life. Enthusiastic workaholics and non-enthusiastic workaholics may be defined as those who exhibit high work involvement and a high drive to work; with the former differing in high enjoyment in work, and the later reporting low enjoyment of work. The study found both types of workaholism report higher levels of work-life conflict, but enthusiastic workaholics have more life satisfaction and purpose in life[16].

These studies provide evidence for the negative consequences experienced by the individual as a result of work-family conflict. However, there are disparities on whether or not gender differences exist. In their recent literature review, Rose and colleagues[12] concluded that while both genders experience negative consequences, the relationships are stronger in women.

Not only does work-family conflict cause problems for individuals, but it is also detrimental to organisations.

3.2. *Work-life conflict and organisational outcomes*

There can be many knock on effects for organisations in many areas as a result of employees experiencing work-family conflict[12]. Work-life conflict has been found to be associated with:

- decreased employee job satisfaction;
- increased staff turnover and absenteeism;
- lower performance and increased job stress levels;
- and intention to leave the organisation.

For example, PricewaterhouseCooper implemented a number of work-life balance initiatives. They have been able to provide workers with increased control over where, when and how they work. As a result satisfaction scores for staff's work-life balance increased by 30% [18].

3.3. *Costs of work-life conflict for the individual and organisation*

Work-life conflict may also incur economic costs for the individual, society and the organisation. Job stress is estimated to cost industry in the US more than $300 (c EUR 226.7) billion a year in related costs such as absenteeism and reduced productivity[19, 20]. Stewart, Ricci, Chee and Morganstein[21] estimate that productivity losses due to personal or family health problems cost US employers $225.8 (c EUR 170.6) billion a year. In the US, more than half of adults report that family responsibilities are a source of stress and 55% indicated that they experienced work-family conflict in the past 3 months[22].

Not only does work-family conflict affect organisations, but it can also affect individuals through a loss of pay and medical expenses. Personal costs may also occur for the individual. Adams and colleagues [23] found that higher levels of work-family conflict predicted lower levels of familial support, and higher levels of familial support predicted lower levels of family-work conflict.

4. Practical advice for employers and workplace

In the following sections are examples of interventions in the area of working hours which have been successful in improving work-life balance. They include part-time, compensated reduced working hours, flexible working hours and compressed workweeks.

4.1. *Part-time*

Part-time may be one way to reduce working hours and thereby improve work-life balance. There are, however, some potential built-in negatives e.g. risk of reduced career opportunities and increased workload, because the demands are not decreased correspondingly[24].

4.2. *Fully compensated reduced working hours*

In Sweden a reduction of weekly working hours from 8 to 6 hours per day with full wage compensation led to the experience of more time for social activities, particularly time for friends and relaxation[24].

4.3. *Flexible working hours*

Flexible working hours or self-rostering covers flexible start and finish times and a possibility for employees to request specific working hours on a regular basis. Thereby increased choice and control by the employee is enabled. The system may be based on a paper version or by use of computer. Such increased influence has in several cases shown to increase work-life balance[25].

4.4.   Compressed workweeks

Compressed workweeks imply work schedules with fewer, but longer workdays. The number of worked hours per week is the same. It could be four 12-hour shifts with three or four days off. This gives more days without work, less commuting time, but also longer workdays[26, 43].

Table 1: Positive and negative effects of different interventions

Intervention/good practice	Positive effects	Negative effects
Part-time	More time for family and social activities	Reduced pay Risk of reduced career opportunities
Fully compensated reduced working hours	More time for family and social activities	Risk of intensification of work
Flexible working hours (self-rostering)	Possible to schedule working hours around family and personal needs	Less predictability
Compressed workweeks	More days off Less time spent on transport	More hours on workdays

Source: (24, 25, 26)

4.5.   Workplace policy on work-life balance

A formal workplace policy on work-life balance may include:

4.5.1.   Organisational practices

Work-life balance policies may be tailored to the need of different organisations depending on culture, demographic and needs of the organisation and its employees. Such practices may include[27]:

- flexible hours arrangement e.g. job-sharing, flexi-time and part-time working;
- flexible leave arrangements e.g. career breaks, sabbaticals and parental leave;
- possibility of teleworking;
- availability of information on possibilities;
- emergency childcare.

4.5.2.   Procedures

Agreed procedures and policies can help to manage exceptions, reduce the amount of queries, ensure equal treatment of all workers and help line managers in the application of work-life balance policies[27]. Such procedures may include:

- survey to analyse staff needs;
- disseminate information on the work-life balance policies to staff;
- include work-balance issue in the induction programme and/or manual.

4.5.3.   Management

To be successful, management needs to understand the rationale behind the introduction of work-life balance programmes and buy into it. It is therefore a good idea to include work-life balance training for managers and supervisors[27].

4.5.4.   Culture

Benefits and acceptance of flexibility and innovation as the norm need to be communicated, if a work-life balance programme is to succeed. A communications programme addressing these issues can form part of the overall work-life balance strategy[27]. It could include the following:

- awareness of possibilities among employees;

- acceptance of work-family balance among employees and employers;

- availability of work-family balance options for men;

- availability of work-family balance options for employees without children;

- time limits for scheduling and announcement of important meetings and overtime.

5.   Practical advice for workers

Many workplaces have different policies and practices which may improve work-life balance during everyday life. Even if they are not formally written down there may be possibilities.

- Find out what policies and practices your employer offers. It could be flexible work hours, compressed workweeks or others.

- Are there solutions used successfully by some of your colleagues? If so, how where they applied?

- Consider if reduced working hours is a solution, maybe for a period of time.

- An annual review, a return-to-work after leave or at the beginning or end of a new project may be good opportunities to discuss your work arrangements with your manager.

Parental leave

If you or your spouse is having a child, you have rights to parental leave. An EU directive 2010/18/EU (http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:068:0013:0020:EN:PDF)
entitles men and women workers to parental leave for a minimum of four months. The right may be on the grounds of birth or adoption of a child. The rights are applicable to all employees in all Member States and to all types of contracts, for example, full-time and part-time workers, fixed-term contracts and persons with a contract with a temporary agency. At the end of parental leave, workers have the right to return to the same job, or, if that is not possible, to return to an equivalent or similar job.

The conditions of access and detailed rules are defined by law and/or collective agreements in the Member States. They also take the necessary measures to protect workers against less favourable treatment or dismissal on the ground of an application for, or the taking of, parental leave as long as they are in accordance with national law, collective agreements and/or practice.

6.   Toolkits to address work-life balance

There are different toolkits that are freely available. They can be used by employers and employees to address work-life balance. A small selection of such toolkits is presented below.

Eurobalance is a Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation project. The primary goal of this project was to develop a comprehensive and usable guide and set of training materials to help companies and employees develop and sustain work–life balance. The developed guide includes background information, implementation checklists for both employees and employers, and highlights a number of

practical solutions that can be implemented in workplace. In addition, Eurobalance has developed an "eTraining package". The training package contains a set of innovative and interactive training elements, which provide 'Work Life Champions' (anyone who would like to get involved in contributing to a better work-life balance in their workplace by helping others to understand the benefits) with the tools needed to promote effective work-jife balance policies and practices in their workplaces. The eTraining package uses a wide variety of materials, including guides, assessments, videos, hand outs and a 'Champion's course'. The eTraining package has been tailored to the needs, ambitions, laws, customs and practices of several European countries including, the UK, Greece, Denmark, Poland, and Italy. Both the eTraining programme and the developed guide are freely available from: http://www.eurobalance-wlb.eu/.

A German tool assesses the quality of work-schedules including, possibilities for participation in social life. With the tool it is possible to put in specific work-schedules and receive suggestions on how to optimise personal work-schedules in relation to social life. The toolkit can be found free of charge at http://gawo.no-ip.org:8080/IndexPage (only available in German).

A Danish tool on working hours with focus on family and social relations includes a poster, a pamphlet and a set of cards with dilemmas in relation to working hours. The toolkit can be found at http://www.etsundtarbejdsliv.dk/Stress/Arbejdstid/Balance.aspx in Danish.

The Warwickshire County Council in the UK provides an online toolkit to address work-life balance. This guide is specifically aimed at employers. The guide provides practical advice to help employers and managers to create and implement action plans for the development of work-life balance policies and to address and manage work-related stress. The guide provides a business case for work-life balance and shows employers how to conduct audit policies and procedures to plan a cost-effective framework for the developed work-life balance strategy. In addition, case studies of Employers of Choice in Warwickshire can be found online. These case studies demonstrate the positive impact flexible working and other employee benefits can have on the workplace. For more information and the toolkit please see:
http://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/web/corporate/pages.nsf/Links/D5C4741D5D440579802573C6004E BD84.

7.   References

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