

***Work-Life Balance in the New Millennium:
Where Are We?
Where Do We Need to Go?***

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

We all have a number of roles that we hold throughout life. Work-life conflict occurs when time and energy demands imposed by our many roles become incompatible with one another; participation in one role is made increasingly difficult by participation in another.

This paper examines the effects of three types of work-life conflict: role overload (having too much to do), work to family interference, where work gets in the way of family, and family to work interference, where family demands (such as a child or elder care) get in the way of work.

To what extent is work-life conflict a problem in Canada and what progress has been made in this area?

Some claim that work-life conflict has become less of a problem and that organizations have made progress in recent years. They in part attribute this shift to an alleged increase in corporate awareness regarding the need to focus on recruitment and retention of workers, and a perceived shift in employee attitudes towards work. It is claimed that these changes have provided an incentive for companies to make increased use of flexible and more family-friendly workplaces practices.

Others however argue that during the 1990s, an increasing number of employed Canadians experienced work-life interference. Labour market changes during the 1990s have resulted in increased job insecurity and increased work demands – all of which can be linked to heightened work-life conflict. Technological changes also have blurred the boundary between work and family.

This paper uses data from Duxbury and Higgin's 1991 and 2001 work and family studies to examine this and other related issues by asking: Has work life balance become more difficult for Canadians over the decade? How does work-life balance affect quality of life and organizational performance? What factors have the biggest impact on achieving balance? What can be done to help employees balance the demands of work and family?

The findings presented in this paper can be assumed to be representative of the population of employees working for medium and large public and private organizations across Canada.

The 1990s Was a Decade of Change, but Many Changes were for the "worse"

The 1990's were a decade of change. Work-life conflict has increased markedly (particularly role overload), suggesting that a greater proportion of workers are experiencing greater challenges in balancing their role of employee, parent, spouse, eldercare giver etc. Workers have become more stressed, physical and mental health has declined, and so has satisfaction with life. Employee's attitudes towards their jobs and employers have also changed over the decade. On the whole, jobs have become more stressful and less satisfying, and employees are less committed to their employer and are more likely to be absent from work due to ill health.

Employees are also devoting a greater amount of time to work at the office, often extending their work day by bringing work home.

All three aspects of work-life conflict – role overload, work to family and family to work interference – have increased, and no demographic group appears to have been left unscathed. Role overload has shown the steepest increases. This finding is consistent with anecdotal and media reports illustrating that Canadians are feeling increasingly pressed for time. We attribute this increase to greater work demands, as opposed to the possibility that Canadians are spending more time with their families. Indeed, in both 1991 and 2001, respondents were more likely to meet work demands at the expense of their family than vice versa. Moreover, throughout the decade, increasing numbers of Canadian employees have made work (as opposed to family) a priority.

Parenthood Remains More Difficult for Women than Men

Despite increased awareness and attention to gender issues, motherhood continues to be more stressful than fatherhood, and mothers continue to experience greater conflict between their work and family than do fathers. In both samples, female respondents (regardless of whether they had children) reported higher levels of stress and depression than male respondents, and mothers reported higher levels of stress and depression than women without children. Parental status had little effect on reported stress and depression levels among men.

Parenthood appears to have a different effect on the life satisfaction of mothers vis-à-vis fathers. Whereas being a father appears to be linked to increased life satisfaction, for mothers the reverse seems to be true – mothers appear to be less satisfied with their lives than women without children. These differences were observed in both 1991 and 2001. Similar findings were also observed for depressed mood. In both 1991 and 2001, men and women were more likely to agree that it was the mother, as opposed to the father, who had primary responsibility for childcare in their family.

Despite labour market and social changes of the past decade, working mothers continue to experience greater difficulty balancing work and family than do fathers. Mothers reported the highest levels of role overload and family to work interference and motherhood appears to be associated with increased stress and depression, something that was not found to be the case for fathers. In fact fatherhood appears to be associated with lower levels of stress and depression, suggesting that the role of working mothers is qualitatively different from that of working fathers, and such differences have a negative effect of the former.

Work-life Conflict has a Negative Impact on Organizational Performance and on Employees

The evidence suggests that high levels of role overload and work to family interference affect organization's recruitment and retention efforts, often affecting their "bottom line." Respondents experiencing high role overload and high work to family interference were significantly less

committed to their employer and tended to be less satisfied with their jobs. They also reported much higher levels of job stress, were more frequently absent from work, made more use of employee assistance programs, and more frequently gave serious consideration to quitting their job. These employees were also less likely to rate their organization as an “above average place to work.”

Our research also indicates that employees who are overloaded and who put work ahead of family often experience negative repercussions at home. They report greater negative spillover from work to family, lower family satisfaction, and a greater tendency to miss family activities due to work demands. Moreover, lower fertility levels may be linked to high role overload and high work to family interference as such employees are more likely to say they have had fewer children, or have not started a family, because of work demands. Respondents reporting high levels of work to family conflict were also found to spend significantly less time engaged in activities commonly associated with positive parenting.

Employees with High Work-life Conflict Make More Use of Canada’s Health Care System

Employees who are overloaded, or whose work interferes with family (and vice versa), are more likely to report feeling highly stressed, experience burn-out, express dissatisfaction with life, be in poorer mental and / or physical health, and more likely to forgo leisure to address work demands.

Employees in 2001 who experienced high levels of the three forms of conflict tended to make greater use of the health care system than those who reported low levels of conflict. For instance, individuals who reported high levels of conflict more frequently visited a physician or reported a hospital stay due to ill health. This suggests that the governments can help reduce health care strain and costs by promoting policies that make it easier for employees to achieve better balance between work and family.

Role Overload Increases When Role Demands Accumulate

The evidence indicates that the greater number of roles an employee has, the more likely they are to report high levels of role overload. Married employees who are in the sandwich group (that is, with childcare and eldercare responsibilities) were therefore the most likely to report high role overload. This sandwich group was followed by married employees with just childcare responsibilities and them by those with just eldercare obligations. Those least likely to experience role overload were married employees without children and those who were single and childless.

Finally, not all parents experience the same levels of role overload. High role overload seems to be negatively associated with lifecycle stage. Almost three-quarters of parents with children under the age of five report high role overload. This drops to two-thirds of parents with adolescents, and three in five parents with teenagers. By the time children hit 18, levels of

parental role overload levels are virtually similar to those observed in employees without children.

Work to Family Interference Increases When Role Demands Conflict

Those groups who are at greatest risk for high work to family interference differ from those most at risk for high role overload. Whereas women are more likely than men to report high role overload, men are more likely to report high levels of work to family conflict. This finding is consistent with other research in the area suggesting that for many men, placing family ahead of work continues to be deemed a “career limiting move.”

While married employees are at greater risk of high work to family interference than those who are single, the differences between parents and non-parents is not as marked as the one observed with respect to role overload. While those with preschoolers tend to experience the highest levels of overload, high interference from work to family appears to peak when children are in school but cannot legally be left alone and unattended. Employees with eldercare responsibilities also appear to be at high risk of experiencing high work to family interference.

Family type is also a predictor of high work to family interference. While being in a “traditional” family (i.e. homemaker spouse) seems to partially protect the male breadwinner from high levels of role overload, the data suggests that those in this family situation are at greater risk of experiencing high work to family interference. Other family types, such as those where male and female partners are not “equally” employed, are also likely to report high work to family conflict. It may be that in these families, there is less appreciation (or understanding) of what the other partner does and / or the types of support they need. Moreover, men in these families may feel extra pressure to address their family responsibilities by being successful at work.

Finally, dual-earner employees (with or without children) experience lower levels of work to family interference than those families where one or both partners are in professional positions. This finding suggests that the psychological demands associated with professional positions, and perhaps the greater desire to “get ahead,” may contribute to work being placed ahead of family.

Recommendations

This study shows that different policies, practices and strategies are needed to reduce all three aspects of work-life interference. While there is no “magic bullet” solution, the evidence suggests that there are a number of ways to reduce this conflict. This report makes 27 recommendations that employers, employees and families, and government ought to pursue.

Recommendations for Employers

1. Devote more resources to improving “people management” practices within the workplace. Employees who work for a supportive manager – one who is a good communicator, focuses on output as opposed to hours – report a greater ability to balance work and family than those who have a non-supportive manager.
2. Provide employees with increased control and flexibility regarding when and where they work. Employees who enjoy such control tend to report lower levels of role overload, work to family and family to work interference.
3. Create more supportive work environments by:
 - Working with employees to identify and implement the types of support they say they need, and better inform them about policies that may currently be available to them.
 - Encouraging employees to use the supports that are readily available and ensure that employees who could make use of such assistance do not feel that their career prospects would be jeopardized by doing so.
4. Give employees the explicit right to refuse overtime work. Providing employees with the ability to refuse overtime hours appears to be quite effective in reducing high role overload. This may reflect the increased ability of such employees to more easily schedule time with family or run errands.
5. Provide a limited number of annual paid leave days for personal reasons such as childcare, eldercare etc.
6. Make it easier for employees to transfer from full-time to part-time work and vice versa. Introduce pro-rated benefits for part-time workers, guarantee a return to full-time status for those who elect to work part-time, and protect employee seniority when shifting from full to part-time work, and vice-versa.
7. Provide appropriate support for employees who work rotating shifts. Such support should be determined by consulting with those who perform shift-work. Policies that have been found to be effective include limiting split shifts, providing advanced notice of shift changes, and permitting employees to trade shifts amongst themselves.
8. Introduce initiatives to increase an employee’s sense of control, perhaps through increased use of self-directed work teams, promoting meaningful employee participation in decision making and increasing and improving information sharing between management and employees.
9. Examine employee workload concerns.
10. Consider offering Employee and Family Assistance Programs.

Recommendations for Employees and Their Families

While the options for employees and families are more limited (in our opinion many families are using all available options with respect to coping), we do offer the following recommendations to individuals:

11. Take full advantage of what support policies exist within your organization.
12. Raise work-life balance issues in workplace discussions and within the community.
13. Educate yourself on how to deal effectively with stress.

Recommendations for Unions

Unions also have an important role to play in establishing family-friendly workplaces. We recommend that unions:

14. Become advocates of employee work-life balance issues by spearheading campaigns to raise public awareness of work-life issues and suggest ways in which the situation can be improved. Such advocacy should be done outside the collective bargaining process.
15. Within the collective bargaining process, unions should push for the inclusion of stronger work-life provisions with the objective of gaining new ground and benefits in this area for their membership.
16. Set up educational campaigns to:
 - increase individual worker's knowledge of work-life balance issues, and
 - give employees the tools they need to effectively deal with situations as they arise.

Recommendations for Governments

There is a need for consistency with respect to labour standards pertaining to work-life balance. Common standards would provide a starting point for organizations in developing workplace policies and practices that address work-life balance issues. We therefore suggest that governments implement legislation:

17. That clearly states that management rights do not include the implicit right to demand overtime of their employees, except in exceptional circumstances.
18. That gives employees the right to time off in lieu of overtime pay.
19. That entitles employees to a limited number of paid days off for personal leave year. This leave should be available to them upon short notice, and employees should not be obliged justify why they need time off.

The government can provide assistance outside of legislation. We also recommend that governments:

20. Strive to be model employers. As the largest employer in the country, the federal government (and provincial and municipal counterparts) should set a positive example in the area of work-life balance. Being seen as a model employer will give governments the moral high ground to expect, and request, changes in this area from other employers.
21. Develop and implement a national child care program that addresses the needs of children of all ages.
22. Develop and implement a national elder care program.
23. Implement labour legislation that includes specific language around long-term unpaid leave for the care of a parent.

24. Make it easier for family members who wish to stay home to care for their children or elderly dependents. As it currently stands, such a choice often has negative tax implications for the family.
25. Establish and financially support community based Employee Family Assistance Programs.
26. Contribute to work-life balance initiatives by: funding research in the area, disseminating relevant information to key stakeholders, developing and offering appropriate educational programs that illustrate the bottom line impact of imbalance, and educating employees and families on how to cope with conflict.
27. Given that families who have greater financial resources are generally better able to cope, work-life conflict may be reduced by “making work pay.” This could involve the use of tax credits or changes to provincial minimum wages.