



TenStep Supplemental Paper

10 March 2007

Put Your Foot Down!

Balancing work and life

Key Learnings

- What work-life conflict is all about
- Some consequences
- The root causes
- Some suggestions to avoid work-life conflict

Does a secret mantra to work-life balance exist? Well, every professional is in the search of it, immaterial of its existence. A reality check reveals that the real problem lies within the worker. The conflict surfaces as they choose to take on extra work and hours themselves.

A couple of decades ago, telecommuting was considered to be the solution for all work-life conflicts. Working from home or from satellite offices seemed the norm. It was expected to save the stress and energy resulting from commuting. However, that did not happen. Technology has developed as predicted but the implications are at the other end of the spectrum.

The pervasiveness of technology has only pushed conflict levels further. To deal with this issue, it is important to first of all define the term 'work-life conflict'. Next, identify the root causes. Not to be ignored are the rather unfavorable consequences. Finally, some probable solutions will be worked out.

Life demands multiple roles from every individual, both work and personal. Be it parent, spouse, child, sibling, friend, employee, boss, subordinate, or superior, these roles and the expectations from each are sometimes mutually exclusive. Sometimes participation in family role impinges on involvement in work role and vice-versa. This results in work-life conflict.

A survey identified three main components of the conflict. Incidentally, participants responded with absolute sincerity to the fairly time-consuming questionnaire. That's a sure sign of the gravity of the conflict in the lives of professionals these days. The first component is role overload – perceived levels of role overload have climbed speedily over the past couple of years. The second is work-to-family interference. This is on an increase an incredibly high of 30 percent. The third is family-to-work interference – which has climbed to 11 percent as against ignorable figures a few years ago.

Other trends are plummeting, such as employee commitment. Research indicates that employee commitment to organizations has dipped really low with just about half of the employed lot being highly committed to their employer now-a-days. This is definitely



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something to worry about. The fear is that less-committed employees are more likely to take off and change jobs.

Another factor on the rise is job stress. Higher stress levels imply lowered productivity and more offs. An employee who is less stressed out is far more likely to be efficient and regular at work. Job satisfaction on the other hand has dwindled to an abysmal low. Less than half the employees today declare being highly satisfied with their work. Once again this spells trouble in the form of work-life imbalance.

Five core reasons for work-life conflict have been identified.

Downsizing: The effect is overworked employees who work against time to meet the irrational expectations anticipated from them.

Organizational culture: A culture of 'hours' and 'money' – the principle encompasses all business houses. It considers that the number of hours of work is an index of efficiency. Consequently, every worker clocks in long hours to succeed.

Disconnected culture: Most companies have progressive policies to apparently help in work-family balance; however management thinks otherwise and rarely provides opportunities to use them.

Culture of money: Budget is prioritized over people. As a result, people are pushed beyond their limits and forced to habitually forgo personal/family commitments for the sake of the organization. Employees are perceived as detached entities. Organizations make plans for weekends, relocation and others for the employees, ignoring the fact that there is perhaps a spouse/children who will also be affected by such changes.

Dynamics of co-parenting: With more and more women at the workplace, we have women sharing financial responsibility of the family as well as the household and child-care responsibilities. Men are chipping in but not as much as to be stressed out by it. Research shows that the sense of responsibility is extremely stressful and can very well be a cause for conflict.

Employees with child-care responsibilities and/or elderly care are bound to feel a lot more stressed. Home pressures are high leaving them hardly any time and space for relaxation.

Not enough support: The association between a supportive manager and better commitment levels, higher job satisfaction and improved work-life balance has proved to be intense. A supportive manager can make a world of difference in the employee's perception of the workplace.

A supportive manager is a good communicator. He listens to the employees, takes feedback from them on important issues, keeps subordinates informed of the state of things, encourages and offers constructive criticism, supports employee decisions and provides opportunities for their professional growth. Unfortunately, they come in small numbers and this again leads to imbalanced lifestyles.

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The bane called technology: The all-pervasiveness of technology has not helped simplify problems. On the contrary, it has complicated them. Technology has invaded our homes especially in the form of cell phones – calls and messages, the Internet and e-mails. Along with technology, the workplace and work now freely barge into our private space.

Getting an emergency call in the middle of your child's birthday and rushing off guiltily is not at all uncommon. Clearing e-mails before going to bed is another trend. There is another side to the coin no doubt, but the fact is that the 'connectivity' provided by technology also disconnects people from their family/personal space.

Surviving work-life conflict

The answers were plenty to queries on how people dealt with the stress of the conflict. A majority said they simply pulled up their socks and worked harder. However, this is no solution at all and only serves to aggravate the issue. Others stated better time management and buying support services and goods such as day care, pre-cooked food and the like. The disconcerting option chosen by those especially in managerial positions was of delaying starting a family, and having fewer or no children. This was not only the case with women but also with a reasonable chunk of the male workers.

Pervasive technology, patriarchal society, and unsupportive managers are some of the culprits for the work-life conflict. The real culprit though is the employee. The employee decides to allow technology to impinge on his private space, take on more work, worry about home responsibilities, and complain about unsupportive managers who do not implement family-friendly policies.

Businesses will not miraculously stop making their ridiculous demands on the worker. Neither will technology return to non-pervasive days. So, once home, the worker has to decide to:

- Switch off his cell/lap-top
- Firmly refuse regular doses of extra work efficiently
- Avoid long work hours
- Make time exclusively for the family
- Consciously avoid mulling over workplace worries

The idea might sound provocative but can be reality. It is an ideal solution to a life where work and family life need balance. Modern age mantra - put your foot down against irrational workplace demands and rediscover peace and balance!