WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Flexibility’s high demands

An excessive workload can erode our well-being. writes Natalie Skinner.

It’s the economy, stupid” was the famous catchphrase of Bill Clinton’s successful 1992 United States presidential campaign. Although probably an overly simplistic account of how to address complex social and economic issues in a nation state, this catchphrase does highlight the importance of recognising the root cause or set of causes at the origin of complex problems. This principle makes sense in my research, which is to understand workplaces, which can be like mini nation states, and the conditions that support workers’ well-being and work-life balance, as well as their performance and productivity.

We have been doing research on work-life balance for decades, with seminal work in the 1970s stimulated by women’s increasing participation in paid work, and the changes and challenges of juggling work and family commitments that were becoming the typical experience of many households. In recent times in Australia, much of the focus has been on employee-centred flexibility, such as working part time, telecommuting and flexible start and finish times. This is particularly the case with the introduction of right to request flexible work arrangements introduced in the Fair Work Act (2009).

Early research on these types of flexible work practices proclaimed their necessity for our modern and diverse workforce, in which the male breadwinner is becoming the exception rather than the rule. However, more dissonant voices in more recent research, observing that in some cases flexibility seems to have mixed and not always positive effects on work-life balance and stress. This is both an encouraging and puzzling for work-life balance researchers, given that there is also a strong body of evidence that shows how working flexibly can have significant and valued benefits in reducing work-life conflict and supporting well-being.

We can learn something here from the Zen masters who use koans, short paradoxical statements, as a device to trigger a student’s capacity to see the true nature of reality. The zen koan of work-life research is how flexible work-life research is how employee-centred flexibility can sometimes have no effect or, under some circumstances, a negative effect on work-life balance.

The answer is it’s the workload. The evidence is compelling. Very large studies, meta-analyses which combine results from research across the world, have concluded that workload is one of the strongest predictors of work-life conflict, even when hours, flexible work practices and care responsibilities are also included as predictive factors in the analysis.

A telling example comes from a US study conducted by Melissa Mazmanian and colleagues, published in the journal Organization Science. The study looked at knowledge professionals’ use of devices such as Blackberrys, which provided these people with the flexibility to work anywhere, any time, but it ended up facilitating a collective working style of working everywhere, all the time.

Sound familiar? How did this flexibility turn bad? It’s the workload. The flexibility this technology provided, when combined with high workloads, transformed into an enabler of long hours and an erosion of personal, family and leisure time. Another example is part-time work. In research we conducted at the University of South Australia Centre for Work + Life, study participants working long part-time hours (e.g. four days a week) often say they have a full-time workload – they just do it in fewer hours by working more intensively. Many compensate by working extra time on their non-work day or in the evenings or at weekends to catch up.

The flexibility of reduced hours without an accompanying reduction in workload offers little relief from the demands of work, or the struggle to juggle.

The triple bottom line of looking after profit, people and planet is an aspiration of many organisations. The research is clear about how to make these aspirations a reality. To be more than smoke and mirrors that disguise unreasonable working conditions, policies and practices for well-being and work-life balance must match workloads.

Natalie Skinner is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia.

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Tools of the Trade

The phone

Name: Odile Faludi
Job: Cold calling specialist
Where: salesdrive.com.au
Why is it important? You can only grow a business so much from its existing customer base. Once that is exhausted, you need to widen the net and look for prospective clients. The best way is with the phone. I’ve been cold calling for 12 years; when you do it repetitively, you get better at it. What do your colleagues think? People think I’m fearless because I have approached C-suite executives from the top 200 companies in Australia and got appointments; from one of my introductions to a large financial organisation, a team of boutique consultants secured a million-dollar piece of work. I do a lot of work with real estate agents who say they are shy. In fact, an introverted person, once trained, is better than an extroverted person. Someone a bit introverted is empathetic, they’re good listeners.

Unusual moment? I take my job really seriously, but I have made cold calls in my pyjamas – thank god there’s not a screen. However, I do the job with a lot of pride – I do enormous preparation prior to each call.


Using a phone for business? “I’m on an unlimited plan of $50 a month, I’m getting a massive return on my investment.”

SUE WHITE

Cold caller: Odile Faludi.