

# Work-Life Balance: Prospects and Retrospects

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## Abstract

Work-life balance is the state of equilibrium in which personal life and professional life are balanced equally, without being detrimental to each other. It consists of flexible work arrangements which make room for other life programs and practices. The term is of recent origin, used in UK in late 1970s and in the USA in late 1980s. It describes the balance needed by a working individual between his working time and personal time. Besides his job, one has to fulfill one's personal interests, family obligations and leisurely activities. As the saying goes, all work and no play makes jack dull. Similarly, all play and no work too is dangerous.

In recent times, technology enables men and women discharge their duties with ease, by the help of smart phones, emails, video, chat and others. They need not confine themselves to a 9 to 5 time schedule, as the previous generations had to. But balancing work and life is not as easy as it is advocated to be. There are a lot of dos and don'ts in this process.

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The United States of America recently granted paid parental leave to the new parents, to look after the new-born babies. It received a mixed response. Some new parents expressed their fear that it would lead to negative consequences in their profession. They would receive less training; forgo promotions and even future opportunities of being hired. It would lead to interpersonal conflicts, after they resume to work after leave. But analysts like Heyman (2017) aimed that it would reduce the chances of negative mental health outcomes and indicate a "long term attachment to the labor force".

The level of absence from employment responsibilities is to be decided with meticulous care. Additional and unfair workloads may lead to unsatisfactory work-life balance. When motherhood is the determining factor, the employers may discriminate against hiring women of child-rearing age. Work in modern times is more intense than it was a decade ago. Hence work-life balance is needed now. Over-work, long working hours, and extreme work environment will certainly affect the overall physical and psychological health of the employees, resulting in the deterioration of family life. The UK government, taking this factor into consideration, made some provision for the employees to make use of portable electronic equipment to do their jobs from a virtual office, or to 'work from home'.

16% of the workers in the USA mostly in the age group of 30-44 years reported difficulty in balancing their work and family, as per the findings of National Health Interview Survey, occupational Health supplement data 2010. This following table shows in detail how different sections of employees face difficulties in maintaining work life balance.

Sr. No.	Section	Percentage
1	Graduates and higher qualifications	18%
2	School final, diploma holders	16%
3	Below school final	15%
4	Workers in agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting	9%
5	Adult employees	16%
6	Legal occupations	26%
7	Office administrative jobs	14%

Employees working in an organisation naturally identify themselves with it. They consider themselves as part and parcel of it. Consequently, they incorporate within themselves the organisational values, norms and interests. But we should not fail to see the other side of the coin. The employees also identify themselves with their outer life, which they regard as their true self. They identify their roles as parents, members of certain social, religious and political groups, with certain values and morals. They interact with other employees, management, customers and others. This process reinforces their identification with the organisation. At the same time they have to manage their true self identification. Thus they possess the 'dual self', fragmenting and constructing their identity through a number of interactions within and outside the organisation. Most employees identify themselves with other facets of their life too, such as family, children, religion. Sometimes these identities are in conflict, resulting in the imbalance of work and life. Hence they should align themselves with the area of performance to avoid stress and conflict.

### Why this Imbalance?

Gender, working hours and family life are the three moderators which are co-related with work-life imbalance. Because of the distinct perception of role identity, gender bias is likely to lead to work life imbalance. As per a survey, men give upper hand to their work over their family duties where as women give importance to their family life. But this cannot be considered to be 100% correct.

Long working hours i.e. inflexibility, shifting in work requirements, overtime or late night duties can lead to a lack of equilibrium between work and life. Studies reveal that time spent at work positively correlate with both work interference with family and family interference with work. But however, it is not related to cross domain satisfaction, which is partly subjective. Then it can be presumed that those long duty hours can be interpreted positively or negatively, on the basis of individual temperament. Though long working hours affect the family duties, incentives and similar financial benefits may nullify this aspect, as financial support sometimes may dominant.

## **Gender and Family**

Work-life conflict does not vary according to one's gender. The centre for American progress reported that majority of working mothers and fathers suffer from work-family conflict. But men and women handle it differently. Social norms and organisational attitude determine this factor. Some companies have taken welcoming steps by providing programs and initiatives to help their employees overcome work-life balance.

It is observed that parents suffering from work-life conflict will either reduce their working hours or will increase the same, to run away from family life. The KRI (Kenexa Reserve Institute) revealed its findings that men and women perceive work-life balance with different attitudes. Women, they observed, are more positive than men in responding to the efforts of their company to help them to balance between their work and life. Their report is based on the analysis of data drawn from a representative sample of 10,000 USA workers, surveyed through work trends. As per the results, there has been a considerable shift in women's perceptions. In past they would find it difficult to maintain balance due to the completing pressures at work and demands at home. But now they can maintain equilibrium between work and life. Eminent sociologist Jiping Zuo says

The past two decades have witnessed a sharp decline in men's provider role, caused in part by growing female labor participating and in part by the weakening of men's absolute power due to the increased rates of unemployment and underemployment.

She further explains that women are more committed to work and their earning power is growing. At the same time men's social mobility is being stagnated and they are inclined to become more dependent financially on women, resulting in the erosion of male dominance.

## **Consequence of Work-life Imbalance Occupational Stress**

Problems caused by stress have become a major concern to both employers and employees. The symptoms of stress are manifested both mentally and physically. If stress continues, it shows its evil effect through cardiovascular problems, sexual disorders, and lack of immunity. It also leads to poor coping skills, irritability, insecurity, exhaustion and lack of concentration. Most of the stress is caused by long work hours, which make people deprived of sufficient time to spend with family, friends and community and to grow personally and spiritually. To quote:

To get ahead, a seventy-hour work week is the new standard. What little time is left is often divided up among relationships, kids, wife and rest.

## **Uncertainty**

In the post modern society, uncertainty as the dominant attitude to life has been diagnosed by psychoanalysts. People suffer from uncertain attitude due to the heavy pressure exerted by the society on them. It is the uncertainty to fail, but also the fear of their own limitations that they may not achieve what the society expects. Every walk of life is dominated by competition, in occupation, livelihood, education of children etc. Something which is average is not all tolerated. It is observed that those who are subjected to burn out are affected badly, due to their passionate attitude for

perfection. The hard workers, perfectionists, loners, grim tempered usually maintain a lack of healthy distance from work and suffer from burn out, leading to work-life imbalance.

### **Role of Technology & Work From Home**

There have been changes in the work place in recent times, by dint of technological changes. Devices like laptops and smart phones have made it possible for employees to work beyond the confinement of their physical office space. They can send their work output through email, while not officially on the jobs. Thus, doing the office work, they can spend their free time with their family. It is suggested that the vague boundary of work and life is a result of technological control which unfolds from the physical technology provided by the company. But this type of control replaces the more direct and authoritarian control by bosses. Consequently, communication technologies in the temporal and structural aspects of work have changed, with 'a new work-place' emergency, in which employees are more connected to jobs, beyond the boundaries of the traditional workday and work place. Work from home is an initiative that arose from the efforts of improving the work life balance. The idea started in the UK work from home is also known as telecommuting. In 2017, it was reported that 5% of the entire USA work force is working from home. This is because of the demand for more flexibility in work environments. It allowing employees to work from home decreases employee turnover and increases employee productivity. Those who work from home are from finance, design, computer scientists and other high skill professionals.

### **Role of the Employer**

**When people are given work beyond their capacity, companies pay the price.**

**-Texas quick**

The above opinion reveals that it is the responsibility of the management to reduce the stress among its employees. Though the traditional stress management programs lay stress on the individual rather than on the organisation, a dysfunctional system cause burn out among them. Work-life balance causes job satisfaction, sense of job security and better physical and mental health. Even the organisation is benefitted by less absenteeism and staff turnover. Valuable employees will be retained, remain loyal and committed. As a result productivity is increased and organisational image is enhanced. Work-life balance can be facilitated by the organisations through work-life practices and family-friendly policies such as flexible working hours, job sharing, part-time duties, compressed work-weeks, parental leave, telecommuting, and on-site child care facility etc. These practices are part of a company's corporate social responsibility for its stake holders. They can be divided into three categories, policies, benefits and services.

Companies like Star bucks, Google and Boston consulting group who have incorporated these practices have been recognised in "Fortune" 100 best companies to work for. The world's best performing organisations proved that creating a work life balance is a key factor for great business performance outcomes. It is a strategic initiative for engaged employees that produce business growth.

Religion and spirituality play a major role in work life balance as they are part of diversity management. Ours are religion based societies and religious accommodations create a secure feeling among the employees that their religious beliefs are safeguarded by the organisation. This develops a sense of gratitude among them and makes them work better. Almost every religion preaches that fulfillment in life is to be found in finishing each assigned task in time with perfection. No occupation is great or small in itself. Everything gains the value of the love with which it is done. When we love fulfilling our work, then there is work-life balance and stress is reduced. Companies like 3M have introduced free stress management programs in the work place to help the employees with their busy schedules, Google, face book and sales force have put areas to be physically active in the work place as well as providing free food and snacks to the workers, granting sick and maternity leave.

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