

Work/Life (Im)balance

Results from two longitudinal studies

This Research Briefing summarises the findings of research by Ten Brummelhuis (2014) on how family life can affect performance at work. The study, which examines possible negative and positive effects, gives suggestions for how employees and employers can prevent demanding aspects of family life from interfering with work.

Summary

Work-family researchers agree that family life can both conflict with and enrich work outcomes. It is unknown, however, what the “net effect” is of family life on work performance. In the study currently summarized, the author compares negative influences of family demands (e.g., juggling many tasks at home) on work performance to positive influences of family resources (e.g., receiving support from the spouse) on work performance. Moreover, the author investigates in detail how family life affects work performance (e.g., lack in concentration, shortage in energy).

The results, drawn from both a short-term and a long-term study, only provide support for negative family-to-work processes. In the short-term study, employees reported that they performed worse on days with high family demands because they lacked energy and attention at work. In the long-term study, family demands reduced work performance because employees were less able to concentrate at work. The findings indicate that demanding aspects of family may have a stronger impact on work than rewarding family aspects. Several suggestions for how to cope with the negative impact of family life on work are discussed.

Background

With the introduction of the married “office girl” in the ‘50s (Costa, 2000a), employers started to worry about the possible negative effect of family responsibilities on work outcomes (Campbell, Campbell, & Kennard, 1994). While researchers have confirmed that family can indeed interfere with work, nowadays work-family researchers also acknowledge that, besides such negative influences, family life has the potential to benefit work.

Historical Research

Since the mid 1990s there have been numerous work-family studies (for an overview, see Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, Brinley, 2005) showing that family demands can indeed conflict with work, leading to more stress complaints and lower job satisfaction.

Research on the negative consequences of family life for work was later complemented with studies on work-family enrichment, which argued that family life can enrich the work role leading to higher performance and skills at work (Graves, Ohlott, & Ruderman, 2007; Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002).

After countless studies reporting the harmful effect of family life on work outcomes (Eby et al., 2004), the idea that family can also be beneficial for work is hopeful. Yet, because research on work-family enrichment is still in an early stage, we don't know how strong the beneficial effect from family to work are, and if such enriching effects are able to outweigh the negative effects of family life on work.

Therefore, the current studies aim to compare the relative importance of negative family-to-work processes (conflict) to positive family-to-work processes (enrichment).

To further increase our understanding of how family life exactly affects work

performance, the author examines the "messengers" through which family influences enter the work domain. According to work-family theories (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), people have a certain amount of personal resources (e.g., energy, skills, mood) which they can use to fulfill their work and family roles. If demands in one domain are too high, those personal resources get depleted, leaving insufficient personal resources to perform optimally in the other role. Rewarding aspects of family life, however, can augment personal resources (e.g., getting in a good mood after a family activity). Extra personal resources can consequently be used to achieve higher work performance. The author examines if decreases and increases in personal resources (e.g. energy, mood, skills) indeed explain why family demands and family resources respectively impede versus improve work performance.

Results

In the first study 64 participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire twice a day on five consecutive days. In the morning before going to work, participants reported family demands and resources they had experienced that morning. At the end of the workday, respondents reported their cognitive energy, attention, and positive mood during the workday, and evaluated their own performance for that day.

The results showed that on days on which respondents reported high family demands, they assessed their own performance as lower, because they had lower cognitive energy and were less able to focus at work. On days on which they had ample family resources, respondents indicated that they were in a better mood at work. However, this better mood did not help them attain higher work performance.

"Family Life" Categorized

Family Demands: Tasks like cleaning, house maintenance, cooking, care giving of children, elders or individuals with special needs. Also included are the emotional demands of the family. While many have demands, the line in which the demands become an overload varies by individual.

Family Resources: Support mechanisms available ranging from people to help with family tasks to personal growth opportunities available at home.

In the second study, 144 participants from an accounting firm filled in a questionnaire twice, with a time interval of six months. They reported on their family demands, family resources, personal resources at work (job knowledge, ability to concentrate and resilience) and evaluated their job performance. The findings indicate that, even after six months, family demands decreased performance because respondents were less able to concentrate at work. Family resources increased job knowledge and resilience after six months, but this increase in personal resources did not contribute to higher work performance.

Implications for HR and Business Leaders

The findings of this study reveal important insights for employees who juggle work and family roles as well as managers aiming to support work-family jugglers. The results from two studies consistently point at the possible drawback of heavy family demands. Employees who have more tasks at home, need to coordinate family tasks, experience emotional issues at home, or worry a lot about family life, seem to be less able to fully concentrate at work. As a result, their work performance suffers. Employees could look for ways to diminish their burden at home.

Previous studies show that household chores and the breakdown of childcare are the main causes of worry and stress (Galinsky & Stein, 1994; Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2010). It may therefore be worthwhile to facilitate employees who wish to outsource household chores and care tasks. For instance, companies could make outsourcing financially viable, and help employees finding reliable childcare, as well as alternatives in case the first option breaks down.

In addition, organizations could implement family-supportive policies, such as onsite daycare, that may relieve some of the employees' family burden. Other options are to intervene in the "messengers" between family and work by boosting energy at work and building concentration skills. For instance, organizations could offer courses on mindfulness and concentration providing

employees with tools to better manage their energy and attention at work, while diminishing ruminative thoughts (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009).

Finally, another strategy is to focus more on the positive aspects of family life. Previous studies showed (e.g., Bono et al., 2013) that employees had lower stress levels and could better detach from work when they reflected during the workday on three positive things that had happened to them. Building on these insights, the author is currently developing a study with a similar reflection exercise, whereby employees will be asked to focus on three positive aspects of family life during the workday. The aim of the new study is to check if a relatively simple intervention could replace negative thoughts about family for more positive ones, helping employees to reap the benefit of their family life, whereby concentration and performance at work improve.

Final Thoughts

This study challenges the assumption that people are able to separate home and work life demands. Stressors at home appear to be brought to work and have a negative impact on productivity, but positive family experiences do not have an equal and opposing effect on workplace output. This distinction is critical for HR and OH&S practitioners in a variety of areas from workplace engagement initiatives to wellness programs.

It is clear that a productive and engaged employee must first be focused and relaxed. Furthermore, the debate around and return on investment of 'wellness' programs continues within organizations of all sizes. While costs continue to rise, HR professionals are increasingly asked to demonstrate returns from the costs of these initiatives. A number of the recommendations resulting from this study suggest that a focus on simpler initiatives could be more cost effective, e.g. coaching and reflection time on positive aspects of family life, coaching on mindfulness and concentration techniques may go a long way in mitigating the negative implications on workplace productivity. It is an important reminder that employees are an important driver of their own engagement.

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This briefing was written in collaboration with:



We'd like to hear from you!

Tell us how the insights from this study could affect change in your organization.
Contact us at research@bchrma.org.