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The reference for understanding government action

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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Work-life balance (or work-family balance) refers to the idea of linking or combining the professional responsibilities related to employment on the one hand, and family or personal responsibilities and activities on the other.

Originally, the term work-family conflict was used – mainly by psychologists – to refer to role conflicts. Research has brought out three main types of conflict: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behaviour-based conflict. Time-based conflicts result from role overload and the difficulty of balancing the competing requirements of multiple roles. Strain-based conflicts are the result of stress experienced in a role that affects and interferes with participation in another role (e.g., a job interferes with family life, or the reverse). Behaviour conflicts occur whenever the behaviour specific to one role proves incompatible with the behaviour expected in another role, and the person concerned does not make the adjustments required to avoid spillover.

Research has shed light on the influence of job or career on different spheres of personal and family life, either due to the interconnections between these two worlds or the influence of other factors in conflict with work, such as recreation, family relations and spouse. After identifying the sources of this conflict, researchers became more interested in the elements that make it possible to solve or reduce it. Together with businesses, they then considered measures and programs that organizations could implement to make it easier to achieve balance between roles.

Subsequently, researchers began to speak more about the reconciliation of work and family life to express the idea of a movement or effort toward the harmonious organization of all roles (family, professional, etc.) or social times (family time, work time, recreation time, the time required to care for dependents, etc.). More recently, the term work-life balance (or work-family balance) has become the preferred way of expressing the idea of articulating and reconciling social roles and times. It is important to keep in mind that the ‘work’ component refers to paid employment or self-employment even though, obviously, work is a valued, valuable part of household, parental or family duties, as representatives of the feminist movements have made clear.

To reflect the reality of all individuals, it would be more accurate or inclusive to speak in terms of “balancing personal life and job/career” or “balancing professional and family-personal responsibilities.” For one, people who do not have family responsibilities still have personal

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responsibilities or activities (e.g., personal care, health and recreation) that they must reconcile with their job. Furthermore, few people have no family, but even when there are no children living at home, most people probably have parents. As it so happens, responsibility for ageing or sick parents is increasingly recognized as one of the major components of work-family balance, since the family can be understood in this case to include both ascendants (one's own parents) and descendants (one's children).

Today's challenges essentially involve the modalities that must be implemented in order to foster the balance of social times. Various actors are responsible for these conditions. Parents and individuals do have a role to play, but businesses also have one, as do governments through their public policies. Indeed, problems surrounding work-life balance can have adverse effects, not only on employees but on employers too. For employees, these effects can be problems in family or close personal relationships, dissatisfaction at work, or health or stress-related problems. For employers, the disadvantages are the economic cost of absenteeism, losses related to lower motivation and performance, resistance to mobility and promotions, high employee turnover and difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled staff.

Due in part to problems relating to workforce attraction and retention, interest has grown in this issue, which has become a major challenge for businesses and governments. To date, some of the measures identified to improve balance include flexible work schedules, compressed or four-day work weeks, home teleworking and career paths adapted to the requirements of family life. To a steadily increasing extent, research has been showing that it is not enough to simply implement measures but that it is also necessary to secure the support of organizations (Fusulier, Tremblay and Di Loreto, 2008; Tremblay et Genin, 2010). This means that organizations must foster an environment where open discussion about balance-related problems can take place and where superiors and coworkers are sufficiently aware of them so that real support can be offered to those who need it. Accordingly, managers should not penalize the careers of those who, for reasons of work-life balance, want to reduce their work schedule, work at home for a few years or take a parental leave.

The problem of work-life balance cannot be solved with a single strategy. Daycare services and parental leaves are important measures, but workplaces must also be part of the solution. The needs of parents not only vary according to the type of family and job but they also change over time. In fact, one of the most important variables explaining the decrease in work-life balance problems is the age of children. As children grow older, conflict becomes smaller, except in cases involving particular disabilities or illnesses. However, ageing or ailing parents can also make it difficult to achieve a good work-family balance. Here again, the support of superiors and coworkers will prove critical.

Working time management (including flex time or reduced working hours) is a part of the solution, since the two greatest work-life balance needs are daycare services followed by flexible work schedules, designed for parents with young children and people who care for their elderly or sick parents. Therefore, work-life balance is a major issue in society and public administration since it concerns both the measures proposed by governments (daycare services and parental leaves) and the incentives offered by businesses in the form of working time management – and teleworking in particular.

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