Work and life in the balance

Remote working during the pandemic provided the perfect natural experiment to observe the work-family interface in real time.

4 evidence-based strategies to survive – and thrive – in the new normal.



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Navigating the porous edges of work, family and personal domains is a complex task in the

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best of times, but the outbreak of COVID-19 took things to a new level. Overnight, governments around the world adopted drastic measures to slow its spread, which had major consequences for the working population. Almost everyone had to work from home, social lives were put on hold, and parents had to help with their children's schooling. Suddenly, we were forced to conduct all our activities online and to figure out our own work schedules.

The challenges of remote working became instantly apparent: blurred boundaries between work and non-work domains; increased home demands, particularly for those with young children; lack of social interaction and diminished social support from colleagues and supervisors; greater job demands due to changed work procedures and more screen time.

For some – primarily women – these challenges proved insurmountable. Many opted out of the labor force. In the United States alone, approximately 3.5 million women with school-age children left the workforce in the spring of 2020 after losing their jobs or deciding to take leaves of absence, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Of those, 1.8 million have yet to return.

Creating wellbeing and maintaining work-life balance

All this served as a wake-up call, as well as a natural testing ground for my years of research on job strategies, occupational wellbeing and work-life balance.

Starting in May 2020, I asked colleagues at the Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) to take part in an experiment. Subjects were randomized into control and intervention groups. Each week, those in the latter group were asked to perform an exercise and then to reflect on their experience. I wanted to measure their reported levels of fatigue severity, happiness, motivation and performance in relation to a goal they had set for themselves. Throughout the time of the experiment, I suggested different strategies or behavioral interventions they could try, in order to help them become more attuned to their emotions and feelings as they went about their daily tasks.

This article presents four strategies that were found to be effective in helping people cope with work-family demands during an extraordinary time. As we enter a third year of pandemic-disrupted lives, I commend these strategies to readers. Practicing them may help you to remain healthy, function more effectively, and regain a sense of balance during and after the pandemic.

Juggling growing job demands and dwindling resources

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At root, work-life balance is about regulating external and internal demands and resources. "Demands" are things that require effort and are associated with costs. An external demand would be the workload you're under, while an internal demand could be perfectionism. "Resources" are things that help you fulfill the demands with reduced costs. If your organization grants you a lot of autonomy to get your work done, that would be an external resource; an internal resource would be personal resilience.

Due to the pandemic, job and home demands have increased as resources at work and home have become scarcer. When there is an imbalance between demands and resources, such that the resources are insufficient for the number or extent of demands, the result is emotional exhaustion and even burnout, coupled with a sense of reduced accomplishment and a loss of personal identity and agency.

Such adverse feelings and reactions can lead to contagion and trigger an adverse ripple effect. Just as professional demands can seep into our personal lives, so, too, can personal issues affect workplace performance.

In normal times, there were various things that organizations could do to regulate demands and resources. To combat fatigue for employees sitting in front of a computer all day, companies might design ergonomic workspaces; supervisors might check in more frequently and offer additional support, whether practical (reassigning workload, hiring extra staff) or moral (holding regular townhall meetings to give pep talks and receive feedback, organizing social get-togethers). These top-down, organization-wide approaches are important because they help improve the situation for all.

However, what we are facing today is different. The workplace has become atomized and socially distanced, with individuals finding themselves juggling their own unique set of professional and personal demands and resources on their own. As such, restoring the balance requires personal interventions specific to each individual. And as individuals know their own situations best, they may be better able to improve them — if they are equipped with the right strategies to do so.

Certainly, organizational interventions still have a role to play. But as remote work seems to be here to stay, empowering individuals with strategies that fit their own personal circumstances seems at the very least a necessary complement to traditional organizational approaches. Let's look at four evidence-based strategies that emerged from our study.

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