

Assessing Impact: The Effectiveness of Workplace Work-Life Balance Programmes

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Introduction

Many working adults must balance work with non-work domains, such as family, personal life and community – and this work-life balance is increasingly recognized. A recent Gallup survey¹ of 10,000 US employees found it to be the top factor when choosing a new job.

Research over the past 40 years in organizational psychology and behaviour, management and human resource management has documented the benefits of positive work-life experiences. For employees, these benefits include better physical and mental health, lower burnout and greater life satisfaction.² ³ For organizations, benefits include improved employee performance, stronger commitment, better workplace relationships and lower turnover intent.

Given these benefits, interest in promoting employee work-life balance has grown among researchers and practitioners, leading to the development of numerous workplace programmes designed to support it. For organizations and leaders, it is important to understand which programmes have been implemented and evaluated, what tends to be effective, and what many fall short before pursuing adoption. (The term “workplace programmes” refers to any interventions, programmes, or changes implemented in the workplace.)

This executive briefing is the first in a series developed to support of the World Economic Forum’s Healthy Workforces initiative – a collaboration between the Forum, its partners and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. It

introduces examples of workplace programmes implemented at the organizational, team and employee levels, and reviews evidence on their effectiveness.

Work-life balance defined

Before examining workplace work-life balance programmes evaluated in research, let’s explain how *work-life balance* is defined. Over the past 40 years, researchers have extensively studied various aspects of workers’ experiences as indicators of work-life balance. Yet, several notable differences exist.

While the *work* domain is well-defined, studies vary in how they frame the *non-work* domain – most commonly focusing on *family* as the specific life or non-work domain (e.g. work-family balance). The concept of *balance* is also defined in multiple ways: as a *lack of work-family conflict*, as a *combination of low work-family conflict and high work-family enrichment*, or as an *overall evaluation of compatibility between work and life domains*.

To address these inconsistencies in how work-life balance is defined, Casper and colleagues⁴ reviewed multiple conceptualizations of work-life balance, and proposed a new definition “employees’ evaluation of the favourability of their combination of work and non-work roles, arising from the degree to which their affective experiences and their perceived involvement and effectiveness in work and non-work roles are commensurate with the value they attach to these roles”(p.197). While this definition can help address the

inconsistencies in defining or operationalizing work-life balance for future research and practice, in this brief, the term work-life balance refers to all relevant constructs that concern the interface between work and important life domains (e.g. family, personal life and community).

Workplace work-life balance programmes

Work-life balance programmes may be developed and implemented at different levels in the workplace, including the organizational level, supervisor and employee levels. At the organization-level, programmes may involve reducing employee working days or hours (e.g. switching from a five-day to a four-day workweek, or reducing weekly working hours from 40 to 30 hours), or offering flexible work arrangements, such as allowing workers to choose their work hours or location.

At the team level, programmes may focus on training supervisors to support employees' non-work/life needs, fostering more work-life balance. At the employee level, programmes often provide employees with resources – such as mindfulness or coping skills) – to help them manage work and non-work demands more effectively.

Effectiveness of work-life balance programmes

A recent meta-analysis by von Allmen and colleagues⁵ – which evaluated 26 work-life balance intervention studies comparing intervention groups and control groups with pre-post evaluations – found that work-life balance programmes have a positive overall effect. This suggests promising potential for organizations and stakeholders to consider implementing effective programmes. However, the analysis excluded some findings that may offer additional insights, such as those lacking control groups, but still comparing pre- and post-programme outcomes.

Additionally, some studies included interventions that took place in the non-work domain instead of the workplace. To provide a broader perspective, this section highlights examples workplace work-life balance programmes evaluated both within von Allmen's review and beyond it.

Organization-level programmes

Most studies on organization-level work-life balance programmes focus on changes to working hours, work schedule, or other flexible work arrangements. Conducted mainly in Europe and the US, these studies show promising, though mixed, results regarding effectiveness.

For example, a study in Finland⁶ found that reducing work shifts from eight to six hours significantly lowered work-family conflict, especially for employees with children and among manual and lower-level white-collar workers. A Danish study of healthcare workers in a psychiatric hospital showed that allowing staff to set shift preferences within an open rotation system improved work-life balance after 20 months. In contrast, another Finnish study⁷ found no significant impact of participatory shift-

scheduling software on reducing workers' work-life conflict.

While studies have generally linked the *availability or usage* of organizational flexible working arrangements – including flexible work time, flexible work location, or both – with better employee well-being and higher work-life balance in observational studies,⁸ studies evaluating the effectiveness of implementing organizational flexible working arrangement programmes have shown inconsistent findings.

For example, a US study⁹ evaluated the Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE) initiative at Best Buy's corporate headquarters, which aimed to shift organizational culture towards greater flexibility in when and where employees work. After six months, participants reported significantly reduced employee work-family conflict. Meanwhile, a Dutch financial firm¹⁰ found that a similar flexibility-focused intervention, New Ways of Working (NWW), did not reduce work-family conflict. These inconsistent findings regarding similar interventions highlight the importance of considering contextual factors that may affect the effectiveness of work-life balance programmes.

Team-level programmes

Team-level programmes that train supervisors to provide more emotional and instrumental support for employees' work and non-work demands have gained attention in recent years. These interventions often yield positive outcomes such as improved employee mental health, but their effects on work-life balance are mixed.

For example, in a large-scale study with 30 healthcare facilities using a group-randomized trial,¹¹ Hammer and colleagues tested a programme called STAR (Support. Transform. Achieve. Results.), which combined supervisor training with efforts to give employees more control over their schedules. While the study's findings showed that employees in the intervention group (in which the supervisors received the training) reported higher safety compliance at six-month follow-up than employees in the control group (in which the supervisors did not receive the training), the programme did not significantly reduce work-family conflict.

In contrast, the STAR programme showed promising results in a study conducted in the corporate IT sector.¹² In this study, Kelly and colleagues found that employees in the intervention group reported lower levels of both work-to-family and family-to-work conflict than those in the control group. Notably, employees with heavy family responsibilities and limited resources benefited the most.

Employee-level programmes

Most workplace work-life balance programmes are developed and tested at the employee level. These programmes aim to help employees better manage the competing demands of their work and non-work lives by building mindfulness, coping skills, or practical strategies for balancing work and nonwork roles. Unlike organization- or team-level programmes that focus on changing the contextual work-related experiences for employees, employee-level programmes focus on changing workers' behaviours or perceptions directly.

Mindfulness training is among the most popular employee-level work-life balance programmes, and most studies show positive

impacts on work-life balance. Example programmes include one evaluated by Michel and colleagues in Germany¹³ and one evaluated by Kiburz and colleagues in the US,¹⁴ both of which showed positive impacts in reducing employees' work-family conflict.

Programs focusing on improving employees' skills in coping with work-related demands also have the potential to improve work-life balance. For example, Althammer and colleagues evaluated the impact of a training programme in which employees learned self-regulation strategies to meet the challenges associated with flexible work designs.¹⁵ Through a randomized trial, they found that the training programme improved employees' psychological detachment from work, well-being and work-life balance.

Training employees' practical strategies to manage their work and non-work roles can also contribute to improved work-life balance. For example, a study evaluated an online self-training intervention designed to help remote employees better structure their workdays, establish healthy boundaries, proactively shape their roles and restore energy after work.¹⁶ Their results showed that the intervention significantly improved employees' ability to reduce work-family conflict while increasing work-family facilitation.

Another study evaluated a training resource transfer training programme that taught participants to intentionally transfer knowledge, skills, values and positive emotions gained at work into their family roles.¹⁷ Findings from this randomized, longitudinal study showed that the training programme increased workers' work-family enrichment.

Conclusion and recommendations

As today's workforce places greater value on work-life balance, organizations and leaders face both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity lies in attracting and retaining top talent while boosting the productivity, engagement and commitment of these workers. The challenge is identifying and implementing the right workplace work-life balance programmes at the organization, team, or employee level.

The evidence in this brief demonstrates that well-designed interventions – at the organization, team, or employee level – can improve work-life balance. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution; a programme effective in one context may not work for another. Therefore, it is essential for organizations and leaders to assess their workforce's needs and available resources before deciding which level to target, what type of programme to implement, how best to deliver it, and how to meet the needs of the more vulnerable employees.

Additionally, careful review of evidence and recommendations from existing work may allow organizations and leaders to achieve more desirable outcomes. Ultimately, promoting work-life balance through evidence-based work-life programmes is more likely to build a productive, healthy and resilient workforce to meet the challenges of the modern world.

Endnotes

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