Where Does Work End and Home Life Begin?

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INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, it was a commonly held belief that technology would improve industries and service professions, which means that people could work shorter hours and their employers would make just as much money. Essentially, this is the central myth of modern capitalism. Modern technologies are the shackles that bind today's employees to their jobs long after they get home from work. Beginning in the 1990s, technology made working from home possible for a growing number of people. At first this was perceived as the era of great things to come. At home, many people had personal computers connected to their corporate network. It quickly became clear that telecommuting and the rapidly proliferating "electronic leash" of cell phones made work inescapable in the 24/7, on-demand work accessibility (Curry, 2003).

Today, according to the Families and Work Institute, almost half of America's workforce is using computers, fax machines, e-mail, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and mobile phones during what is supposed to be non-work time (Galinsky, Kim, S.S. & Bond, 2001). Stress is often the result of management's demand on employees to be at their fingertips 24/7. Rapidly sinking under the weight of being connected, people are dealing with increasing family problems because of the blurring line between home and work. When workers are not at home or work, it is not hard to find people working: now armed with their trusty laptops, cell phones, pagers, and PDAs. Even in places of leisure, like bookstores, cafes, and neighborhood stores, Internet availability is easily accessible. Technology has made the world into a connected, global community. In a perfect world, this community is an ideal. But we are in the real world, and technology may be a nuisance that is not easily escaped.

This article addresses the following issues relating to where work ends and home life begins, that is, the work/home life-balance: (1) how increased work demands and job learning expectations in today's 24/7 economy create situations where employees' quality of work, personal and family relations, and health are seriously threatened, (2) how the increasing use of technology is infringing on the personal and family time of employees, (3) why continuing education is presented to employees, and, (4) how corporations respond to their employees' needs. Increased work demands and job learning expectations in today's 24/7 economy create situations where employees' work, personal and family relations, and health are seriously threatened. Former American Labor Secretary Robert Reich stated ". . . the new economy is relentless. It is changing the norm, it is changing values, changing our culture. It is putting enormous pressure on people to work, and to make work the center of their lives"

(Smith, 2003, p. 1). Considering these pressures, some people find themselves challenged to find a workable balance between organizational, employee, and family needs (Tayika, Archbold, & Berge, 2005).

BACKGROUND

Challenges to Home/Work-Life-Balance

Participation in both work and family roles often presents challenges. According to Greenhaus' (2002) study, work-family conflicts occur from:

- The time demands of one role that interferes with participation in the other role.
- The stress originating in one role that spills over into the other role, detracting from the quality of life in that role.
- Behavior that is effective and appropriate in one role, but is ineffective and inappropriate when transferred to the other role (p. 6).

Environmental factors also produce work-family conflict. These include extensive, irregular, or inflexible work hours; extensive travel; work overload and other forms of job stress; interpersonal conflict at work; career transitions, unsupportive supervisor or organizations; training that takes place outside of work hours; presence of young children; primary responsibility for children; elder care responsibilities; and unsupportive family members space (Greenhaus, 2002; Thomas, 2006).

Another area of work-family conflict develops when a company decides to operate nonstop. Increasingly, the focus is on the machines, not the people who use them. The responsibility for this new strategy is economics based (Aeppel, 2001). Often, these companies also go to 12-hour shifts. This means, for most employees, although they get off more days, the increased workday is more demanding. More demanding days may increase worker fatigue, which in turn affects the accident rate and the quality of the product or service. How people react to these continuous hours depends on where they are in life.

Adding to this work-family conflict is the expectation to stay current in job learning. As training evolves into performance Improvement, and as technology allows this training to occur 24/7, the time needed to obtain this training also affects the work-family conflict. If we have incompatible work, training, and family systems, tools are needed to help balance these systems.

MAIN FOCUS: HAVING A HEALTHY WORK/HOME BALANCE

Work has always been part of life. For many of us, it is the primary way in which we interact with others in society. However, new technologies, growing competition, and the intensification of customer demand means that for more workers, life has become work, and while some people are thriving, others are increasingly unhappy.

A work/home life-balance is about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual's right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society (The Work Foundation, 2003)

Time sovereignty is the control an individual has over their work and workload, including when, where, and how they work. The more autonomy individuals have, the less stressed they are likely to be.

What are the consequences of living in imbalance? The more out of balance and out of control one's life is, the longer hours one works (Andronache, 2006; Rosen & Weil, 2003), and the more intense the work experience, the greater the likelihood is that one will pay a physical and emotional price. The individual will probably not eat as well. One may consume more caffeine, more alcohol, more sugar, and more fat. One is less likely to exercise on a regular basis. There is less likelihood of getting enough sleep. The individual is less likely to have a sense of satisfaction or accomplishment and commitment to the organization. One has a greater likelihood of either getting sick, getting sick more often, or being sicker whenever that person becomes sick. One has a greater likelihood of having relationships that are either unhealthy or unstable and that are more prone to breaking apart (Human Resources Development Canada, 2003). The following are examples of organizations that created a healthy balance between their employee's work and home lives (Dex, 2003; Tombari & Spinks, 1999; The Work Foundation n.d.; TUC Online, 2001):

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