

Influences on work/non-work conflict

*Cameron Allan, Rebecca Loudoun and David Peetz
Griffith University*

ABSTRACT

Work/non-work conflict is important because it tells us about the well-being of individuals and more generally of a particular workplace or organisation. Important progress has been made in research literature on the importance of structural policies designed to assist workers to meet competing demands to be at work and at home. More information is needed into the influence of organisational variables on the emotional aspects of work/non-work conflict. Based on a survey of over 900 employees, we use factor, correlation and multiple regression analyses to find that exacerbation in work/non-work conflict is a result of high workload pressure, long working hours, unsupportive management and weak employee control, especially over workload and over when employees can take time off.

Introduction

Ideological, political, economic and social developments have led to changes in the structure of the labour market and the industrial landscape more generally over the last few decades. In turn these changes have resulted in reforms at the workplace level that have long since raised concern amongst individuals, families and researchers. Until recently governments and private and public sector organisations have shown little concern about the impact of changes at the workplace level on employees. The limited interest that has been shown has focussed on relatively objective measures of wage rates, earnings dispersions, employment status changes and institutional protection levels.

Recently, however, assessments of workplace change are being made using broader, more subjective terms of outcomes for workers. In particular the work/home divide is receiving growing attention as a measure of workplace relations although to date attention has largely focussed upon 'family friendly' of workplace changes at the expense of the 'family unfriendliness' of other changes (Pocock, 2001). This paucity is significant as there is a growing body of literature indicating a relationship between work/non-work conflict and diminished physical and psychological health (Duxbury, 2003; Earle, 2003; Loudoun and Bohle, 1997). Research on work/non-work conflict is also particularly timely given the hype about family friendly policies in the recent Federal Election campaigns.

Current research on work/non-work conflict in Australia generally concentrates on traditional, formal work/family policies and benefit packages. Researchers have recognised only recently that the nature of jobs and the workplace environment may be the key variable determining workers' ability to reconcile their work and non-work lives. At present, however although arguments about the influence of organisational variables on work/non-work conflict are compelling, there is limited empirical evidence available to assess their importance (Berg, Kallenberg and Appelbaum, 2003). This paper addresses this shortcoming by using data from a large-scale survey of male and female employees in Queensland to assess the influence of work pressure, management support and control at work on work/non-work conflict.

In this paper we present the results of a preliminary analysis of the question: Do workers with high demand jobs experience high work non-work conflict? Drawing on the commonly accepted demand/control model of ill-health (Karasek & Theorell, 1990), work pressure, support from managers and control at work were used as indicators of work demands. These three variables, measured by self-report, are included in the models. This approach was chosen because it is less invasive than so-called "objective" indices of the variables of interest. Although it is important to recognise that data using self-report measures can be influenced by factors such as personality, researchers have found similar results using self-report and non-self-report measures (see Sparks, Cooper, Fried & Shirom [1997] for a review of these studies).

The paper is divided into three sections. The first reviews the relevant literature and establishes the research question in more detail. A detailed discussion of the method used and results found from the study are then presented. The last section discusses the findings.

Perceptions of work/non-work conflict: Some findings from the literature

Work/non-work conflict is generally defined in the literature as occurring when the emotional and behavioural demands of work and non-work roles are incompatible, such that participation in one role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the other (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). The main model guiding current research on work/non-work conflict is the Spillover Model (Loscocco and Roschelle 1991). In this model, a positive relationship is proposed between work and non-work roles to the extent that satisfaction or dissatisfaction in one role spills over into the other (Bond *et al.*, 1998).

Studies highlighting the link between work/non-work conflict and fatigue, stress, burnout, psychological well-being, depressed mood and physical symptoms are well documented in the research literature (Barton & Folkard, 1991; Bohle & Tilley, 1989; Duxbury, 2003; Earle, 2003; Loudoun & Bohle, 1997). Work/non-work conflict has also been found to influence the health and well-being of workers' family members such as partners and children. For example a recent epidemiological study in Australia found that children of parents who work consistently long hours or come home stressed were more likely to develop psychological problems and physical illness (Earle, 2003). Looking overseas, Duxbury (2003) found that work/non-work conflict affects workers ability to enjoy and nurture their family resulting in lower levels of family well-being and stability.

While ethically these findings alone should be sufficient reason to make work/non-work conflict an important area of investigation, there is another reason researchers are interested in work/non-work conflict. Evidence indicates that policies designed to assist work/non-work conflict can promote employee behaviour that is beneficial to the firm. For example researchers has found that family friendly policies can result in increases in return to work after child birth (Squirchuk and Bourke, 1999), retention rates (Squirchuk and Bourke, 1999), morale and productivity (McCampbell, 1996), and absenteeism (Kossek and Nichol, 1992).

Given the strong links found between work/non-work conflict and health of workers and their family members and the links between work/non-work conflict and organisational performance it is likely to be an area of growing interest in the future. Indeed some argue that it is one of most pressing social problem facing most economies today (Zetlin and Whitehouse, 1998). Although much is known about the structural causes of work/non-work conflict for specific groups of workers such as mothers with young children, we argue that more discussion is needed about the impact of work/non-work conflict on more diverse groups of workers using a broader range of organisational variables. We argue this view for three reasons.

First looking at organisational variables, the bulk of research to date on work/family interactions has been completed by psychologists using job stress as an underpinning framework. This means that much of the research has focused on the individual level, at the expense of organisational approaches. This shortcoming is paralleled in stress management research where the focus is predominantly on individual mechanisms and strategies people can develop to cope with stress (see Ashford, 1988; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992; Topf, 1992).

This leaves the responsibility to cope with work/non-work firmly upon the individual worker. It suggests that if the worker shows the appropriate amount of commitment then their problems will be overcome. It assumes that individuals can choose their response to stimuli or change the nature of the stimuli by acting on their environment. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

There is strong evidence indicating that individual coping is difficult and relatively ineffective in dealing with complex stressors (Mechanic, 1977; Menaghan & Mervis, 1984; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Shinn, Rosario, Morch, & Chesnut, 1984). Indeed, Parker and DeCotiis (1983) concluded that, at best, individual differences have a mediating effect on reactions to potentially stressful situations and, consequently, individual differences are not the most appropriate perspective from which to study stress in organisations. They argue that in work settings, the organisational perspective deserves more theoretical and empirical attention. In a similar vein, Kanter (1977) and Menaghan and Mervis, (1984) argue that collective efforts to solve work-related problems are more effective than relying on individual coping strategies.

The lack of information on organisational variables is particularly concerning in Australia, given the trend towards deciding on working conditions at the enterprise level. Roman and Blum (1993) and Quinlan (1993) argue that responsibilities of organisations to acknowledge that characteristics of the work environment exacerbate problems has not been fully explored or reinforced. If workplaces are allowed to decide on work issues, then it is imperative that decisions are made in light of sound empirical knowledge.

Second, looking at the sample populations used in research to date, attention has largely focussed on formal organisational policies designed to assist particular groups of workers such as parents, women or families with children or elderly parents. This is not surprising given that there is considerable evidence indicating that work/non-work conflict is most acute for female workers (Charles and Brown, 1981, Gadbois, 1981) as they usually perform an uneven distribution of family and household duties (Gutek, *et al.*, 1988; Loudoun and Bohle, 1997; Robson and Wedderburn 1990; Leslie *et al.*, 1991). Given the increasing growth in marital separation in Australia (ABS, 2000), however, it is important to know the factors affecting work/non-work conflict for a wider range of workers. More Australian children live in one-parent families than ever before and the majority of children do not have a stay-at-home resident parent (Buchanan and Thornwaite, 2001).

Third, looking at different forms of work/non-work, most studies to date have focussed on structural conflict, which arises from the conflicting demands for time at work and family roles (Voydanoff 1988). Work and family duties usually cannot be performed simultaneously; a problem that is aggravated for many workers because the increasing span of workers hours means that work frequently conflicts with the most valued times for family activities - weekends and evenings (Staines and Pleck 1984). Given this dilemma the structural interventions arising from much of the literature to date on work/non-work conflict provides valuable assistance to workers on policies designed to assist workers to meet their competing demands to be in more than one place at the one time (Berg *et al.*, 2003). These schemes include paid maternity leave, carers leave and the option to 'buy out' work time. At the same time, however, there is a dearth of research on emotional interference, which results from time spent 'recovering' on rest days (Jackson *et al.*, 1985). Evidence suggests that emotional interference reduces both the quantity and quality of family contact time because workers do not feel capable of participating in family activities (Pisarski, Bohle and Callan, 2001).

We argue that high demand jobs (low control, low support and high pressure) can result in lower quality family interactions as the worker is recovering from time spent at work and thus emotionally unavailable for their family. Pocock (2003) provides support for this notion in a detailed study of 163 workers in South Australia. Pocock found that workers who reported work intensification also reported exhaustion, frustration and guilt over their inability to meet parental and spousal expectations. Although Pocock's study provides valuable insight into the changing nature of Australian workplaces and the outcomes for families a more focussed and large-scale study is needed before conclusions can be drawn about emotional aspects of work/non-work conflict.

In summary, work non-work conflict is important because it tells us about the well-being of individuals and more generally of a particular workplace or organisation. Important progress has been made to date about the importance of structural policies designed to assist workers to meet competing demands to be at work and at home. More research is needed, however, about the influence of organisational variables on the emotional aspects of work/non-work conflict. If these work process variables influence workers' health or if the labour market and workplace relations system more broadly allow or even encourage work practices that inhibit the ability of workers to balance their work/non-work lives then it is an area that should concern both researchers and those involved in policy development.

Method

The data reported in this article is drawn from a broader study into work-time in Queensland. The aim of the study was to examine the types and effects of work-time change in Queensland. The broader study comprised case studies in 17 organisations and a survey of 15 organisations. The survey research was conducted in a wide range of organisations including a retail outlet, a theme park, a public utility, a construction firm, a public sector department, two manufacturing firms, a mine, a hospital, a law firm, a community organisation, a bank, a repair company, an educational institution and a public-sector, enforcement agency. While the sample was not intended to be fully representative of the Queensland population, it was designed to include organisations in most of the key sectors of Queensland industry. The study was also designed to include a balance of female-dominated, male-dominated and mixed gender workplaces and a mixture of strongly-, weakly- and non-unionised workplaces. While the study included a blend of small, medium and large organisations, the latter were over-represented in the sample.

We selected case study organisations in a number of ways. First, we selected some case studies from a database of enterprise agreements involving work time change in Queensland, commissioned from Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT). Only some of the firms we selected from this database agreed to participate in our study. Second, we approached organisations that were known to be experimenting with work-time change. We found out about these organisations by approaching personal contacts in industry, unions, employers bodies and the Queensland Government and asking them to recommend to us organisations they knew to be experimenting with work-time change. We also made contact directly with some organisations at conferences and industry functions. Third, after exhausting these two methods, we examined the composition of our cases and identified that segments of the Queensland economy were under-represented. We then elected to specific recruit organisations in nominated industry sectors. We directly contacted prominent organisations in these sectors and asked them to participate in our study.

The survey was administered between March and May 2002. The study site usually corresponded to either a whole workplace or the entire organisation. However, in a small number of cases, a division of an organisation was surveyed rather than a single workplace. In one organisation, only a particular occupation was surveyed. At study sites with less than 200 employees, all workers were surveyed. At study sites with more than 200 employees, a sample of 200 employees was selected using systematic random sampling. In total, 963 usable questionnaires were returned, an overall response rate of 42 percent. For this particular article, we draw on the responses of a sample of some 582 respondents that includes only those persons who answered all the questions used for this analysis of work/non-work conflict. The data are unweighted.

We provide details about the demographic characteristics of our sample in Table 1. As can be seen, the bulk of respondent were in the age range 20 to 49. Our case study firms included a considerable number of large organisations and several of them were professional organisations - a public sector department, a hospital, a law firm and an educational institution and a public-sector, enforcement agency. As a result, our sample included a high proportion of professionals and associate professionals and a relatively low proportion of blue-collar workers. This distribution of occupations is likely to have arisen due to case selection and the greater preparedness of white-collar workers to participate in research of this type. As can also be seen in Table 1, we captured few casual workers in our study with the overwhelming majority of respondents being employment on a permanent basis. Casual employment comprises about a third of employment in Queensland and as such, our sample clearly under-represents this important segment of the labour market. Our sample also includes a high proportion of trade union members: about double the national average. Again, this is due to our selection of large organisations where union density is high than smaller workplace.

In addition to the questions about the demographic characteristics of respondents, the survey instrument also contained questions to elicit respondent views about a range of workplace matters such as work-time arrangements, work/non-work conflict, perceptions of management, work culture, workload issues and other features of work. We used some of these questions to construct scales of work/life conflict, employee control, supportive management and workload pressure.

TABLE 1

Demographic
features of the
Total Sample
(n=963)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>
<i>Age</i>	
<=19	3
20-29	21
30-39	31
40-49	28
50-59	15
60+	2
<i>Occupation</i>	
Manager	7
Professional	27
Associate Professionals	14
Tradespersons	15
Clerical Sales and Service	31
Intermediate Transport and Production	4
Labourers and Related Workers	2
<i>Employment Status</i>	
Permanent	88
Casual	7
Fixed-term Contract	5
Total	100
<i>Gender</i>	
Men	50
Women	50
<i>Union Membership</i>	
Yes	50
No	50

Factor analysis

We used exploratory factor analysis to delineate the four main constructs in this study: work/life conflict, employee control, supportive management, and workload pressure. As we included the dependent and independent variables in our factor analysis, we expected the constructs to be correlated. Accordingly, we used oblique rotation with principle axis factoring. We commenced the factor analysis using 27 items we considered were components of the main constructs. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.89 indicating that the items were factorable. We checked the sampling adequacy of the individual variables.

The initial examination of the scree plot suggested a four or five factor solution. The four factor solution was chosen because of theoretical interpretability and because it had a more clearly defined simple structure. We eliminated items that loaded at below .04.

The analysis included some 866 cases although the n was reduced due to missing values. As a cross-check, a separate factor analysis was run using means instead of missing values. The same four factor solution loading on identical variables was derived indicating that the missing data, due to missing values, did not affect the outcome of the factor analysis.

The four factors accounted for some 51 percent of the total variance and 43 percent of the common variance. The mean, standard deviation and Chronbach's alpha for each factor and factor intercorrelations for each factor are presented in Table 2. The final items used in the four derived factors are shown in the factor loading table (Table 3).

TABLE 2

Means, Standard
Deviations,
Chronbach's
Alpha and factor
intercorrelations
for main factors

<i>Factor</i>	M	SD	Alpha	1	2	3	4
Work/life conflict	3.10	0.86	0.65	1	.217	.456	.510
Employee Control	2.37	0.78	0.82		1	.251	.043
Management Support	2.88	0.86	0.81			1	.113
Workload Pressure	2.92	0.82	0.84				1

Regression analysis

To explore the relationship between work/life conflict and other variables, we conducted multiple regression. Our principal method of analysis was ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. We devised the following equation:

$$\text{WORK/NON-WORK CONFLICT} = b_0 + \text{WORKLOAD PRESSURE} + \text{SUPPORTIVE MANAGEMENT} + \text{EMPLOYEE CONTROL} + \text{HOURS WORKED IN WEEK} + \text{CASUAL EMPLOYMENT} + \text{FIXED-TERM CONTRACT} + \text{AGE} + \text{OCCUPATION} + \text{SEX} + \text{TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP} + e$$

Work/non-work conflict was the dependent variable. The independent variables included the three scales we constructed using factor analysis: workload pressure, supportive management and employee control. Only items with a loading above a threshold of 0.4 (shown in the shaded sections of table 3) were included in the factors. To control for other variables, we included in the equation dummy variables for casual employment, fixed-terms contract, age, occupation, sex and trade union membership. We also included in the equation a continuous variable for hours worked per week. The results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 3
Factor Loadings

Item ^a	Factor ^b			
	Work/life conflict	Employee control	Managem. support	Workload pressure
	1	2	3	4
I leave on time most days. (reversed)	0.142	0.004	-0.043	0.494
Long hours is taken for granted.	-0.176	0.031	-0.129	-0.421
I often take work home.	-0.030	0.127	0.233	-0.614
If you take time off or get sick, your work just builds up while you're away	-0.026	-0.149	-0.022	-0.544
Performance targets set by management are reasonable.	-0.015	-0.149	0.462	0.127
Employees are treated with equal fairness.	0.098	-0.028	0.589	0.034
Management can be trusted to tell things the way they are.	0.006	0.067	0.817	-0.082
Management tries to co-operate with employees.	0.020	0.022	0.834	-0.075
Employees here have enough say if a problem arises with management.	0.011	-0.038	0.696	0.080
How much say over how many hours you work a week.	-0.058	0.643	0.010	-0.047
How much say over your starting and finishing times.	0.002	0.785	0.043	-0.192
How much say over when you have a meal break.	-0.027	0.753	0.000	0.011
How much say over when you take time off (eg; holidays, appointments).	0.013	0.710	-0.098	0.150
How much say over your workload	0.071	0.525	0.123	0.035
I work more hours each week than I would like.	-0.650	-0.083	0.043	-0.034
Satisfaction with balance between your work and personal life (reversed)	0.797	-0.014	0.089	-0.097
I get told at home that I am working too much.	-0.560	-0.015	0.086	-0.284
My work responsibilities interfere with my social life more than they should	-0.783	-0.047	0.031	-0.076
I am often too tired to properly enjoy my time away from work	-0.638	0.017	-0.099	-0.016

Note: (a) The wording on some questions has been changed slightly for readability.

(b) Factor 1 = Work/life conflict; Factor 2 = Employee control; Factor 3 = Management support; Factor 4 = Workload pressure.

Consistent with our expectations, the results of the regression analysis indicated that work/non-work conflict was negatively correlated with supportive management and employee control and negatively correlated with workload pressure. The results also showed a statistically significant relationship between hours worked and work/non-work conflict, although the strength of the relationship was very weak. There were no other statistically significant relation between the dependent and the dummy variables.n.

Discussion

The most important factor influencing work/non-work conflict in Table 4 is workload pressure. When employees are in organisations where working long hours are taken for granted, they do not leave on time, they often take work home and work builds up while they are away, they are likely to show the signs of work/non-work conflict: they are more dissatisfied with the balance between their work and personal lives, are often too tired to properly enjoy their time away from work, get told at home they are working too much, find their work responsibilities interfering with their social life, and would prefer to be working fewer hours.

TABLE 4
Regression of
Work/Non-work
conflict

	<i>Unstandardised Coefficients B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Sig</i>
(Constant)	3.332	0.281	0.001
Workload Pressure	0.465	0.032	0.001
Supportive Management	-0.186	0.029	0.001
Employee Control	-0.142	0.032	0.001
Trade Union Status	-0.064	0.047	0.179
Casual Employment	-0.154	0.109	0.157
Fixed-Term Contract	-0.019	0.106	0.857
Sex	-0.070	0.054	0.200
Hours Worked in Week	-0.016	0.002	0.001
Age 20-24	0.290	0.160	0.071
Age 25-29	0.285	0.154	0.065
Age 30-34	0.210	0.153	0.171
Age 35-39	0.173	0.153	0.261
Age 40-44	0.128	0.153	0.403
Age 45-49	0.089	0.158	0.573
Age 50-54	0.257	0.160	0.109
Age 55-59	0.248	0.171	0.148
Age 60+	0.276	0.204	0.176
Professionals	-0.054	0.096	0.574
Assoc Professionals	0.111	0.101	0.271
Tradespersons	-0.057	0.107	0.591
Advanced clerical & service	0.181	0.126	0.150
Intermediate clerical, sales & service	-0.011	0.105	0.919
Intermediate transport & production	-0.325	0.171	0.058
Elementary clerical, sales & service	0.132	0.163	0.419
Labourers & related workers	-0.289	0.170	0.090

R² = 0.43; N = 886.

Omitted categories are aged 19 and under, and managers and administrators.

The more hours people work, the more likely they are to experience work/non-work conflict. However, the indicators of workload pressure mentioned above are, in total, more important in explaining variations in work/non-work conflict than the number of hours worked. Supportive management was also important: workers were less likely to experience work/non-work conflict if management could be trusted, tried to get on with employees, set reasonable performance targets, and treated all groups of employees with equal fairness.

Work/non-work conflict is also related to employee control, but on this issue the relationship is more complex. Our index of employee control revealed by the factor analysis regresses significantly against the dependent variable, but when we look inside it we find that some of its five components do not significantly correlate with work/non-work conflict or with most of its components. Certainly, employee control over workload, and over when they can take time off, significantly reduces work/non-work conflict. However, employee control over the number of hours worked each week does not significantly correlate with work/non-work conflict or with most of its components. Employee control over start and finishing times, and over when they can take meal breaks, have significant bivariate correlations with the dependent variable but these diminish and mostly disappear in partial correlations that control for ability to control workload or when employees can take leave. Employee control matters for containing the work/non-work conflict, but what particularly matters is the issues over which employees have control. Having some control over working hours, or starting and finishing times, is of little value if employees have no control over their workload or they cannot control when they can take time off for holidays or appointments.

Finally, the non-significance of most of the control variables showed that what we see is not simply a series of occupational or age effects.

Conclusion

High demand jobs with low employee control, low support and high workload pressure can result in lower quality family interactions. Emotional interference reduces both the quantity and quality of family contact time because workers do not feel capable of participating in family activities. Workers are recovering from time spent at work and thus emotionally unavailable for their family. It is not just an issue of long hours – it is also an issue of the stress employees endure at work, and the emotional baggage they bring home.

Reversing the deterioration in the work-life balance requires employees to have supportive management, the genuine capacity to take time off work, and control over the central source of the problem –the workload they endure. Yet obtaining control over workload is what has become increasingly difficult over the past decade. Downsizing has led to management seeking the same total production out of fewer and fewer employees. The weakening of labour market regulation has given employees less control over the hours they work, despite the rhetoric of family-friendly workplaces that have featured in popular discourse. Part of the solution may come in management recognising that it is not in their interests to put continual pressure on employees, but so far that recognition has been slow coming. Through public expenditure on health, social security and other services, governments (or more precisely, taxpayers) eventually pay no small part of the cost of work/non-work conflict, but so far there is little sign of an effective state response. If it is not willing to return some regulation to the workplace, then it will be up to the representatives of employees to do so themselves.

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