



Developing Work-Life-Management Competence

Overview

To conclude the first section of this book, looking at how employee experience can be enhanced even before an organisation recruits an individual, we consider the role of Work-Life-Management skills in employee experience.

Many employees' experience at work is negatively impacted by their inability to establish a satisfactory balance between work and non-work activities. And, although most organisations would acknowledge that their employees work has become increasingly demanding, few have found meaningful ways to address this issue in the workforce.

In this research study we learn how a person-centred intervention, aimed at developing individuals' Work-Life-Management skills, showed that employees may identify more significantly with their work when these skills are developed.

Challenge

Managing work and non-work demands and activities has become increasingly challenging as affluence, accessibility and social exposure have increased.

In recent decades, the pace of work has increased. The automation or outsourcing of many less-demanding tasks has resulted in many young professionals experiencing a higher level of cognitive and emotional demand at work. Increased remote working and organisations' globalisation have increased the requirement for individuals to show flexibility and cultural sensitivity. And lengthening working hours adds to the strain individuals experience when managing their work.

Collectively these demands have made it more difficult for individuals to establish a good work-life balance, that is, to manage work and non-work activities effectively and to achieve personal satisfaction.

Organisations have a vested interest in improving this situation, because individuals who feel ineffective in managing work and non-work activities experience negative impacts on their health and wellbeing. This affects organisations in the form of increased absenteeism, increased turnover, reduced job satisfaction and engagement and lower job performance.

Nevertheless, the diversity of any workforce is likely to make an organisational response challenging. Every employee is embedded in a unique context in their specific job roles and outside of work. Thus, general organisation-wide changes may not help all individuals improve their Work-Life-Management skills. For example, some employees may benefit from flexible working arrangements while others will be more productive and comfortable with a structured working day in the office.

And, ultimately, changes required to improve individuals' Work-Life-Management skills are personal. So, whilst organisations may provide individuals with specific ideas and skills for

improving their Work-Life-Management abilities, their own motivation and ability to make improvements will impact the results.

For this reason, one Business Psychologist defined a **person-centred approach** to improving individuals' Work-Life-Management skills. Working with young professionals, she allowed individuals to work on their personal Work-Life-Management needs – whilst providing them with specific behavioural examples and ideas, skills to learn and practice, and encouragement to develop.

The primary goal was to demonstrate the value of Work-Life-Management skills; supporting individuals in reducing the conflict they experienced between work and non-work activities and increasing positive synergies between these activities.

Approach

A Work-Life-Management Model

A Work-Life-Management framework was used as a basis for this project. It included specific, practical behaviours and skills (competencies) indicated to improve individuals' Work-Life-Management. Specifically:

- Keeping perspective
- Boundary management
- Being organised
- Proactively prioritising balance
- Managing flexibility
- Lifestyle changes
- Cooperation and coordination
- Managing expectations

These competencies collectively aimed to help reduce conflict between individuals' work and non-work domains and enhance positive effects of work on the non-work domain, or vice versa, to attain higher overall effectiveness and satisfaction.

The Research Study

Participants were recruited to support a research study applying this model.

Participants were all young professionals (aged between 22 and 32 years' old) with less than five years of professional work experience. They worked in different industries including teaching, consultancy, and engineering. A few less than half of the group undertook to Participate as Subjects for this research, whilst a few more than half participated as a Control Group.

Subjects participated in a mixed-method process to support evaluation:

- Prior to the intervention, Subjects received training materials which introduced the Work-Life-Management framework, including:
 - a definition and behaviours/skills for each competency
 - examples of their potential applications
 - probing questions to encourage reflection on the competency's usefulness in Work-Life-Management

- Work-Life-Management related measures of conflict, enrichment, self-efficacy and boundary control were taken at the beginning of the intervention, after two weeks and after four weeks, along with measures of work and non-work identity centrality and positive and negative effect (completed by all participants, including Subjects and members of the Control Group)
- Subjects completed a 'scale of conflict caused through work,' on a daily basis during the second and third intervention weeks
- They shared their experiences of juggling work and non-work activities, by employing competencies from the framework, in free form diary entries on a weekly basis
- During the intervention period, participants were contacted via email on a weekly basis to provide support with their Work-Life-Management and diary entries, and reminded of upcoming steps
- After the intervention, participants were contacted for one-to-one interviews on their experience

The weekly diary entries were important in supporting Subjects' reflective learning and change. Each week they made notes in response to questions about their Work-Life-Management during the past week. Participants were asked to consider how they employed relevant competencies, what they had learned from their experiences and how they evaluated their work-life balance.

Participants' diaries provided space for personal reflections which supported them in gaining a deeper understanding about their Work-Life-Management needs. They could consider these in context of the tools provided to address these successfully based on their experiences, following principles of adult learning.

(For more on 'adult learning,' see Editor's Observations at the end of this chapter.) - Clodagh O'Reilly, Founder of the ABP Awards

Contacting Subjects on a weekly basis seemed to help maintain commitment; subjects consistently replied in a positive and engaged manner when contacted, even offering additional feedback.

The approach necessarily allowed significant flexibility for the Participants. It was person-centred in that Participants were free to choose the competencies they believed to be effective and which they wished to develop, so that they could improve their Work-Life-Management skills at their own pace.

Outcome

The learning from this intervention was interesting, albeit not exactly what was expected.

Signs of Success

Analysing data collected from the surveys revealed no significant reductions in experiences of conflict, nor increases in positive synergies between work and non-work, nor increases in controlling boundaries between the domains.

However, Subjects who were initially significantly lower in their self-efficacy to manage work and non-work activities, increased in self-efficacy during the intervention compared to the control group, indicating a positive outcome from the intervention.

Further, results indicated that Subjects improved their Work-Life-Management through employing the Framework. Results from the daily measures of conflict over two weeks showed a pattern of high conflict levels on working days and low levels on weekends and

holidays, with an overall decreasing trend. The results showed that balancing demands was dynamic, subject to change, whilst following a weekly pattern.

The Person-Centred Experience

The Subjects' diaries reflected that employing Work-Life-Management competencies made them feel more effective, proud and satisfied in juggling work and non-work, especially after a week in which they had anticipated conflicts between work and non-work.

A lack in employing competencies such as being organised or ring-fencing time for non-work activities made Subjects feel frustrated. However, less satisfactory experiences made Subjects reflect more on possible ideas for Work-Life-Management improvements for the following week.

Considerations for Organisations

Unexpectedly, Participants identified more strongly with their work throughout the intervention period. Results from the diary data confirmed that Participants described why they still enjoyed their work despite conflicts. This may have contributed to Participants' higher identification with their work roles towards the end of the study.

Participants described that reflecting on personal values and priorities was essential for defining and establishing the level of Work-Life balance they personally found desirable. This was the case, even when they found that their high involvement in work affected their balance negatively but came with feelings of pride and success.

Continuous reflection may thus be essential for establishing long-term Work-Life-Management. Nevertheless, this outcome shows how a person-centred approach can offer improvements in Work-Life-Management, in a way that an organisation-level intervention would be unlikely to achieve.

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Editor's Observations

The personal reflection process applied in this case study was described as following principles of adult learning. The method and practice of teaching adult learners, termed **Andragogy**, was developed by Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s (Knowles, 1980).

He suggested six principles for consideration in approaches to adult learning:

- Adults are internally motivated and self-directed; they prefer to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction
- Adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences; they will connect past experiences with current knowledge and activities and learn better from experience, even if they make mistakes
- Adults are goal oriented; outcomes should be clearly identified
- Adults are relevancy oriented; they are most interested in learning things that have immediate relevance, ideally aligned to a personal goal
- Adults are practical; they favour a pragmatic approach and prefer to be able to apply learning to solve a specific problem

- Adult learners like to be respected; they prefer collaborative relationships with their educators and are more effective when their contributions are acknowledged

Coincidentally, the Business Psychologist responsible for the preceding case study, regarding Accenture's Analyst Onboarding (Eliot Tom), published a book on Work-Life-Management coaching titled, "Coaching and Mentoring for Work-Life Balance - Routledge EMCC Masters in Coaching and Mentoring," co-Authored with Dr Julie Haddock-Millar. It is described as a practical and evidence-based resource, offering a wide range of tools and techniques which are supported with real-life case studies illustrating how they can be employed. Readers are also supported with reflective questions to enhance understanding and a series of downloadable worksheets for practical use.