

Creating the Sustainable Workplace: An interview with Ellen Kossek
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The current workplace is focused on the short term: increasing work demands on people and creating inflexible organizational structures that focus only on employees' work lives. It is difficult for employees to achieve work-life balance, productivity, and well-being at the same time because organizations currently respond to workers' flexibility needs by requiring the individual to find solutions to meet their own work and family demands. The long-term result is stress, burnout, poor health and workers dropping out of the workplace. Ellen Kossek has spent her career exploring ways to make workplaces sustainable. According to Kossek, sustainable workplaces are organizations that are supportive of and promote employee wellbeing by safeguarding against work intensification, promoting workplace social support and fostering sustainable careers.

Questions:

Kossek and her colleagues have been particularly interested in determining the types of organizational conditions that would help workers attain work-life balance, productivity, and well-being simultaneously.

Approach:

Kossek has conducted many studies over the course of her career using a variety of methodologies to examine the effects of training designed to teach managers workplace practices that promote a sustainable workplace. Her recent work as part of the Work-Family Health Network examined multilevel training that was aimed at changing workplace cultures and teaching managers supportive workplace practices that promote worker health and wellbeing.

Findings:

Kossek and her colleagues found that when managers received training, their employees were less depressed, less likely to leave, and more likely to follow safety protocols. Kossek says the findings suggest, "to create a workforce that creates sustainable lives, you need to have a culture of positive social support by leaders that 'we care about your personal life as well'".

This can be accomplished through customized training for an entire worksite at one time, including all levels of workers. Training is targeted toward leaders in how to be socially supportive and give workers permission to set limits and work in different ways, and to employees in how to exercise more control over boundaries and time/schedule. She asserts that work-life needs to be viewed by all levels of the organization as a central condition, not a "nice to have" available only to certain classes of employees. To achieve a sustainable workplace, organizations must focus on three key areas:

Method	What Is It?	Elements	Benefits
Sustainable Career Management	Policies that enable employee to be involved in career, family <u>and</u> personal roles throughout life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • career breaks • part-time work • part-year work • personal and work development • input on career changes • control over leave (time off, vacations, sabbaticals) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • re-distributes total life resources to promote equilibrium throughout life span • allows career advancement and community/family involvement
Developing a culture of positive workplace social support	How much workers believe their wellbeing is valued by supervisors and the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • design work to foster greater social support for non-work activities (personal/family) • cross-train employees to back each other up • reward helping behavior • teach leaders to care about workers and workers to care about each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive emotions and wellbeing at work • freedom to learn new things without burnout • freedom to handle personal life demands • Positive social support experiences at work impact life at home and vice versa
Limit work “intensification” and promote job control	Reducing demands on workers from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • time pressure (deadlines) • faster pace • work overload 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set realistic deadlines and plan work • streamline procedures (work “smarter”) • set standard for performance that is attainable and sustainable with reasonable effort • value quality over quantity or speed • allow for job control or discretion over one’s work and performance • create culture of healthy work practices (e.g. not “overworking” to compensate for flex schedule) • normalize flexibility (evaluations based on results) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contains workloads so individual and organizational goals can both be achieved • encourages engagement without exploiting work effort; fosters workforce wellbeing • values rest time to counteract work overload • helps employees maintain wellbeing at work and home

Takeaways:

1. Work-life is not a “nice to have,” but a central condition of organizational culture, like performance evaluations. Employees must be trained on Work-life just as they are on anything else.
2. Work-life wellbeing must be a long-term rather than a short-term goal for organizations.
3. The focus on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) must start internally, with how workers are treated.
4. Organizations benefit from creating sustainable workplaces by:
 - attracting top talent
 - increasing productivity
 - reducing turnover
 - paying smaller salaries (i.e. 75%) for reduced workloads
 - retaining retirees, whose pensions they are paying anyway
 - encouraging development and creativity, and giving junior employees growth opportunities
 - allows employees and managers to contain workloads so individual and organizational goals can mutually be achieved
 - tapping into employees’ engagement at work without exploiting work effort fosters workforce wellbeing
5. Individuals benefit from sustainable workplaces through:
 - ability to advance in career and be involved in family and community
 - promotion of positive emotions and wellbeing at work
 - freedom to learn new things on the job and not burn out
 - positive work and nonwork spillover
 - valuing of restorative time counteracts work overload and helps employees maintain wellbeing at work and home

Impact on Public Policy: Kossek recommends:

- Certification of a workplace that creates positive workplace health and wellbeing
- In the U.S. we need to advocate for the legal right to request flexibility, as in Australia and England
- Update U.S. laws: FMLA, FLSA, ERISA, PDA.
- Demonstration projects (like NIH) on how to build sustainable practices.

Future Research Needed:

- Beyond identifying what is wrong with an organization, evaluate change over time and at multiple levels to see how different workers within an organization experience work-life in different ways.
- Every study should look at implications for practice
- Need to support people at all ends of life, because careers are long

Other Researchers/Studies on Sustainability and HR Strategies for Fostering Career Sustainability:

1. Sabine Sonnetag on the need for recovery, and how productivity goes down when there is no break.
2. Leslie Hammer with Ellen Kossek on the need to train leaders as a pathway to workplace health.
3. Kossek, E., Valcour, M., Lirio, P. (2014). The sustainable workforce: Organizational strategies for promoting work-life balance and well-being, in P. Chen and C. Cooper. (Eds.). *Work and Wellbeing: Wellbeing: A Complete Reference Guide*, Volume III. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
4. Hall, D., Lee, M, Kossek, E. & Las Heras, M. 2012. "Pursuing career success while sustaining personal and family well-being: A study of reduced-load professionals over time," *Journal of Social Issues*, Special Issue on Sustainable Careers. Article first published online: 13 DEC 2012 | DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.2012.01774.x . pp. 742-766.
5. Kossek, E., Ollier-Malaterre, A., Lee, M., D., Pichler, S. & Hall, D T. (In press). "Line Managers' Rationales Regarding Reduced-Load Work of Professionals in Embracing and Ambivalent Organizational Contexts," *Human Resource Management Journal*. <http://www.krannert.purdue.edu/directory/publications.asp?id=103032>
6. Marloes L. van Engen, Claartje J. Vinkenburg, and Josje S. E. Dijkers (2012) "Sustainability in combining career and care: Challenging normative beliefs about parenting." *Journal of Social Issues*, Special Issue on Sustainable Careers. Article first published online: 13 DEC 2012 | DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.2012.01774.x . pp.645-664.