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Creating a Working Life

By Ellen Ernst Kossek

National statistics indicate that American employees, whatever their background, age, or marital status, are experiencing increased stress and conflict in work, family, and life.



One reason for this is the explosive growth in the use of portable electronic devices, including tablets and cell phones. Now our boss and our co-workers can contact us at all hours at home via email, while our families and friends in turn can easily text us at work.

As a university professor and an organizational consultant and leadership development expert, I have led training and change efforts for leaders and teams. Members consciously work to change

the culture and structure of work to give employees more boundary control and have clear times they are on and off line. Employees also work to back each other up so that the work gets done. Taking a team approach makes it more possible for individuals to set boundaries and share preferences as part of team-structured dialogue. Think about how your workplace can develop processes for groups and individuals to discuss personal needs for support and control over how to best synthesize work and nonwork for positive dual engagement on and off the job.

I have developed several evidence-based leadership tool including one called “flexstyles” that promotes inclusion by increasing boundary control to support diversity in work-life preferences. Flexstyles are the different ways individuals manage work-life boundaries and interruptions from use of cell phones, e-mails, texts, social media, and other electronic communications Based on a book I co-authored, *CEO of Me: Creating a Life that Works in the Flexible Job Age*, this assessment measures an individual’s perceptions of their work life identity fit and control. It builds an individual’s capabilities for increasing self-regulation to control work-life boundaries. Feedback is given on varying preferences in boundary management styles and differential work/engagement patterns.

Whether integrating work and family throughout the day; separating work and private life as much as possible; or cycling back and forth between work focus and an emphasis on home life, the strategies for how to achieve work-life balance are diverse as today’s workforce.

Diversity expectations for segmentation, integration, and having the ability to shift patterns of control to more or less integration at different times of the week or year can be linked to sexual identity, cultural values, gender, immigrant status, or generational cohort.

For example, an individual who is gay and who is not “out” in the workplace or wishes to keep his or her personal life private may choose to segment work and personal life.

An immigrant employee who works for a university during the school year, may desire to do his job remotely in his native land during the summer months when not teaching, and work remotely while living with elderly parents. Diversity of work-life balance may simply be a function of day-to-day values and sleeping patterns shaping when one works best. A Gen-X employee may wish to integrate work and personal life by taking a long lunch hour to exercise and might be a night owl who arrives to work at 10 a.m. instead of 8 a.m. and work until 7 p.m. instead of 5 p.m.

Your organization will likely reduce turnover and increase engagement by training leaders how to support diversity in work-life working time and availability needs, and giving employees greater flexibility, to increase positive control over where, when, and how work is done. My research demonstrates the importance of job control and schedule control for employee well-being. When individuals perceive high work-life control, they report greater time adequacy to be engaged at work and home, have higher well-being, and experience lower work-family conflict.

Dialogue between leaders and employees; employees and co-workers and teams; and employees and family members is increasingly needed to ensure shared values regarding individual work-life boundary management needs. I have conducted work life training with employees in many occupations: doctors, faculty, scientists, business leaders, and full-time students. More research and practitioner collaborations are needed on how to design, implement and evaluate positive

workplace change efforts to reduce work-life conflicts in ways that reflect the growing diversity of employee preferences for work-life support and control. The workplace has a powerful impact on societal health and well-being. Think about how you can help your workplace implement initiatives and promote leader action to foster inclusion for all members to enable individuals to thrive in joint participation in employment and family and personal roles.

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