

The Key to Work-Life Balance is Really Work-Life Harmony

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Should you leave now to make it on time to a family dinner, or stay late at work to finish up that last minute project? At some point, most of us have probably had to choose between the demands of work and our personal lives.

Research has consistently shown that a healthy “work-life balance” is vital for maintaining job satisfaction and avoiding burnout. However, a new study suggests that the idea of “work-life balance” itself may be a problem.

The standard concept of work-life balance is often seen as a zero-sum game, where work and life are completely separate domains that are constantly competing for time and energy.

In contrast, the concept of “work-life harmony” visualizes work and life roles as being interconnected and dependent on each other, rather than separate and in competition.

In a recent study, psychological scientists He Lu Calvin Ong (Nanyang Technological University) and Senthur Jeyaraj looked at the effects of work-life balance and work-life harmony styles on worker productivity. The researchers used measures of creativity as indicators of employee productivity and cognitive dissonance as a measure that employees were suffering from work-life stress.

For the study, 100 participants filled out a series of online questionnaires. Participants were presented with a typical work-life problem — asking the boss for time off to take care of a sick family member. The results showed that participants who received a response from the “manager” that took a work-vs-life approach (along the lines of work-life balance) reported higher levels of cognitive dissonance. The researchers hypothesized that this resulted from the stress of having to decide between work and home. This group also experienced a drop in creativity after responding to the work-life problem.

On the other hand, participants who received a response that reflected a more integrated work-life approach (along the lines of work-life harmony) did not report changes in their levels of creativity or cognitive dissonance.

However, the researchers caution that more evidence will be needed to substantiate whether there are significant differences between the two approaches to dealing with the demands of life inside and outside the office.

“These findings bear practical significance to organizations adopting the practice of work–life initiatives,” they write in the journal *Sage Open*. “Through enhanced understanding of these approaches, HR professionals can more effectively develop strategic work–life interventions targeted at alleviating work–life stressors.”

Reference

Ong, H. L., Jeyaraj, S. (2014). Work-Life Interventions: Differences Between Work-Life Balance and Work-Life Harmony and Its Impact on Creativity at Work. *Sage Open*. DOI: 10.1177/2158244014544289