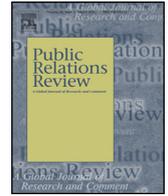


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Practitioners' work-life conflict: A PRSA survey

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ABSTRACT

This study examined public relations practitioners' experiences with work-life conflict and their coping mechanisms. Survey results of a national random sample of members of the Public Relations Society of America ($N=565$) added another layer to the work-life conflict literature by demonstrating the impact of the larger organizational environment and professional association on practitioners' conflict experiences. In short, a negative work environment could increase practitioners' self-reported levels of work-life conflict, yet a strong identification with the public relations profession and with the larger professional community could help mitigate such conflict. More alarmingly, a heightened level of work-life conflict would discourage practitioners' proactive coping mechanisms. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Work-life balance for public relations professionals has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, in today's 24/7 work environment. Work-life balance continues to surface in the trade media that questions the role of organizations in resolving this issue (e.g., Doerer, 2015). Yet only a few public relations studies have addressed work-life conflict management (e.g., Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, & Sha, 2008; Jiang & Shen, 2013). Practitioners find themselves asking: Why am I so stressed out? What shall I do?

One possible culprit in the lack of work-life balance is workplace environment. Central to most recent organizational communication research on this topic is the recognition that a negative or unsupportive work environment can lead to high levels of work-life conflict (Greenhaus, Ziegert, & Allen, 2012). Meta-analyses have also confirmed this finding (Allen & Shockley, 2009; Byron, 2005). However, the focus of existing research is still on accounting for individual employees' experiences of work and life, rather than uncovering solutions on the organizational level.

On the other hand, the employing organization is only one community to which practitioners belong. Another community they are part of is the professional association. Although voluntary in nature, membership in professional associations can positively impact workers' challenges between work and life, or at least help workers recognize that they are not alone in facing those challenges (Ashforth, 2001; Bartel, 2001). Thus, a secondary focus of this study was to investigate the potentially positive impact of professional communities on public relations practitioners' experienced work-life conflict.

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Work-life conflict gives rise to stress. Thus, a natural question to ask is how practitioners cope with such stress. Our study accordingly examined the complex psychological coping process that practitioners employed, specifically their choices of proactive coping strategies in work-life conflict situations and the influence of these conflicts on such choices.

Taken together, using a nationally representative sample of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) membership, this study is one of the first to shed light into the process of work-life conflict management by organizational members in one of the most stressful professions—public relations (see [Toscano, 2011](#)). We particularly explored how professional identification and unsupportive work environment relate to work-life conflict, and how levels of perceived work-life conflict influence public relations professionals' proactive coping. By identifying the influencers of and coping mechanisms with work-life conflict, we hope to not only theorize an important problem that profoundly concerns our profession, but also bring about meaningful changes to public relations professionals' work-life experiences on the individual, organizational, and societal levels.

2. Literature review

2.1. Work-life conflict

Work-life conflict is regarded as a form of inter-role conflict in which the accomplishment of role demands from work interferes with the fulfillment of role expectations in nonwork domains (e.g., home and personal activities) ([Kinman & Jones, 2008](#)). Previous literature has consistently conceived of work-life conflict as time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based. Time-based work-life conflict develops when excessive work hours hinder employees to perform nonwork-related responsibilities ([Chaudhry, Malik, & Ahmad, 2011](#)). For instance, much time demanded for job assignments may prevent employees from taking care of their aging parents and young children ([Ramasundaram & Ramasundaram, 2011](#)). Strain-based work-life conflict arises when the pressure from the work role spills over and affects employees' interactions within their life domain ([Favero & Heath, 2012](#)). For example, it would be hard to expect a stressed-out husband to give his full attention to his wife and family after getting off work ([Engle & Dimitriadis, 2007](#)). Behavior-based conflict appears when certain patterns of behaviors the work role prescribes (e.g., managerial styles) are incompatible with behavioral rules that the nonwork role lays down (e.g., parenting styles) ([Favero & Heath, 2012](#)). For instance, a manager who is supposed to be aggressive and authoritative at work may find it difficult to adjust into the role of a caring parent and supportive spouse at home.

Only a handful of studies have investigated work-life conflict issues in public relations (see [Aldoory et al., 2008](#); [Jiang & Shen, 2013](#)). Yet the public relations profession continues to rank as one of the most stressful professions ([Toscano, 2011](#)). Given the limited published empirical data on how public relations practitioners and educators deal with work and life stressors, this study begins to build a body of knowledge on work-life conflict management.

2.2. Negative work environment: a contributor to work-life conflict

When excessive hours are expected at the workplace, employees enjoy less flexibility in their work schedules ([Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009](#)). Consequently they are deprived of much needed resources to exert control over their jobs, to combat work stressors, and to model effective coping strategies ([Greenhaus et al., 2012](#)). A plethora of empirical studies have found a significant positive relationship between long work hours and work-life conflict (e.g., [Jacob, Allen, Hill, & Mead, 2008](#)). Several recent meta-analytic reviews ([Allen & Shockley, 2009](#); [Byron, 2005](#); [Hughes & Parkes, 2007](#)) have drawn the same conclusion.

[Allen \(2001\)](#) defined family-supportive organizational perceptions (FSOP) as “global perceptions that employees form regarding the extent the organization is family-supportive” (p. 416). Within a supportive work-life culture, the target of FSOP is the whole organization as a supportive environment rather than merely a particular supportive supervisor and/or a specific family friendly policy ([Greenhaus et al., 2012](#)). Conversely, a negative work environment may expect employees to consistently prioritize work over life and make a clear distinction between work and life arenas. Using a sample of 170 business professionals, [Greenhaus et al. \(2012\)](#) found a positive link between family unfriendly organizational values (e.g., prioritization of work over life and complete separation of work and life) and work interference with life.

Applying this into public relations profession, we anticipated a positive relationship between negative work environment and work-life conflict of practitioners. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H1. Negative work environment is positively related to public relations practitioners' work-life conflict.

2.3. Professional identity and identification: relieving work-life conflict

In addition to organizational environment, the larger professional environment has been identified as another critical influencer of work-life conflict. According to [Sha and Schmitz Weiss \(2010\)](#), *professional identity* “may be defined as an identity that individuals avow in relation to their professional field” (p. 6). Closely related to identity, *identification* is the process by which people come to avow or to assert their belonging to a specific group ([Sha, 2009](#)), whether that group is an employing organization, a voluntary association, or a profession itself. As [Mael and Ashforth \(1992\)](#) put it, “Organizational

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