



Tuning in to the rhythm: The role of coping in strategic management of work-life conflicts in the public relations profession



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ABSTRACT

How public relations practitioners cope with work-life conflict was studied through a national survey of a random sample of PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) members. These active practitioners reported strong preferences in using more proactive conflict coping strategies, such as rational action and positive thinking. Women and those with a graduate degree tend to report more coping behaviors than others. Three types of stressors are identified as sources of work-life conflict: behavior-driven, work-driven, and life-driven.

According to our findings, while behavior-driven work-life stressors are associated with proactive coping strategies such as rational action and positive thinking, work-driven stressors tended to trigger more avoidance. Non-work driven stressors seem to predict more passive coping tendencies, such as denial and avoidance.

Organizational factors are found to be important in understanding how practitioners cope with work-life conflict. As organizational demands increased to separate life from work, more instructions seemed necessary for employees to better cope with work-life conflicts. Positive thinking, as a type of cognitive coping, tends to increase when there is more immediate supervisor support and to decrease when an organization's work-life culture is skewed toward promoting work as the sole priority.

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1. Introduction

Work-life balance has been a critically important issue in business management and employee communication. In the past decade, business and communication professionals have discussed this topic and its impact on employee performance and business outcomes from different perspectives. Some perceived it as a constraining factor, as a *The Strategist* (2006) article mentioned, "The overriding factor in [senior executives] choosing not to be CEO is the absence of a positive work/life balance" (p. 19). Some framed it as "a myth" (Gordon, 2012, p. 7) in the sense that many professionals struggle to balance the scales of work and life on a day-to-day basis with little satisfying outcomes. The more constructive view may be "the dance between work and life is more about rhythm than balance" and to compare "the rhythms of work and life with the rhythms of nature" (Gordon, 2012, p. 7).

In the context of the public relations profession, Jin (2010a) pointed out that although public relations practitioners often effectively help organizations handle stressful situations internally and externally, they nevertheless are themselves often

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caught in work-life conflicts. Those conflicts bring stress. If not managed or coped with effectively, these work-life conflicts could negatively affect practitioners' work efficiency and life satisfaction.

Research has been conducted to explore the nature of work-life balance, as well as the determinants and outcomes in different circumstances. For example, Bloom, Kretschner, and van Reenen, (2011) studied the determinants and consequences of a family-friendly workplace, emphasizing human capital as a potential firm resource. They found that family-friendly cultures do not directly affect the workplace, but rather enhance the ability of employees to combine their work and personal life. Wang and Verma (2012) emphasized that different industries vary in the adoption of work-life balance programs, which supports the institutional theory of organizational responsiveness to work-life balance issues.

As Sha (2011a) summarized, the public relations profession has changed greatly over the years in terms of the practice and required professional competencies, which emphasizes the need for "communication skills, knowledge of media and management, problem-solving abilities, motivation, and intellectual curiosity" (Broom, 2009, p. 48). Among the knowledge, skills and professional competencies for public relations practice (see Sha, 2011a), stress coping skills are necessary for practitioners to better manage work-life conflicts (Jin, 2010c). According to Jiang (2012), the significance of work-life conflict and how to manage it has been recognized by increasingly numbers of researchers. However, there is still a scholarship gap when it comes to systematically exploring work-life conflict and how the public relations profession should address it effectively (Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, & Sha, 2008).

One key facet of this scholarship gap is the need to fully understand coping and the role of this complex psychological process in practitioners' effective management of work-life conflicts, in contrast or in addition to the existing predominant theoretical framework based on the institutional theory of organizational responsiveness (see Wang & Verma, 2012). Coping, as a relatively new construct in public relations research, has been integrated and applied primarily to understanding crisis and strategic conflict management (e.g., Jin, 2009, 2010b; Jin & Hong, 2010). In Aldoory et al.'s (2008) pioneering work on work-life conflict, practitioners' coping strategies were studied and examined qualitatively.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining work-life conflict and balance

Work-life conflict, with varied degrees, occurs when the requirements from employees' work and the obligations from their personal life become incompatible (Reynolds, 2005). The definition of work-life conflict is grounded in conflict theory (see ten Brummelhuis & van der Lippe, 2010), which provides a theoretical perspective to assess effectiveness of work-life policies. As ten Brummelhuis and van der Lippe (2010) stated, "Conflict theory proposes that using human time and energy in one role (e.g., family) decreases the time and energy remaining for other roles (e.g., work), thereby undermining performance in that role" (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002, p. 175).

According to Aldoory et al. (2008), work-life conflict and work-life balance "describe efforts by male and female employed persons who juggle various personal, home and work responsibilities" (p. 2). As Aldoory et al. (2008) specified, "While 'balance' is not necessarily the result of this juggling, it is often a desire, and thus, researchers continue to include 'balance' in conceptualizing the intersections between personal and work life" (p. 2). From the view of gendered discourse, Aldoory et al. (2008) advocated that public relations professionals must "negotiate their organizational roles with their personal conflicts between work and life outside of work" (p. 2).

2.2. Institutional vs. psychological approach to work-life conflict management

Organizational support was found to increase organizational commitment and to motivate employees to expend effort in their work (ten Brummelhuis & van der Lippe, 2010). Grounded in organizational communication theories, Jiang (2012) proposed and tested a model of work-life conflict and quality of employee-organization relationships (EORs), examining how work-life conflict types contributed to EOR outcomes. The findings suggested that senior management and constructive supportive initiatives should be incorporated as a constitutional ingredient of organizational strategic planning. Jiang (2012) further suggested two types of institutional support (p. 243): first, non-content based and intangible (transformational leadership and organizational procedural justice); and second, content-based and tangible (family-supportive workplace initiatives). These institutional support types support what ten Brummelhuis and van der Lippe (2010) identified as work-life policies that facilitate work-family balance among employees.

In addition to organizational support, personal engagement in work-life balance strategies is critical for individual employees. Four general types of such strategies were identified qualitatively by Aldoory et al. (2008): resolution strategies, resistance strategies, use of new technologies, and formalized and structured strategies.

Based on Duhachek's (2005) model, Jin (2010c) introduced different coping options in dealing with stress caused by work-life conflict. Coping processes describe the typical routes practitioners can choose, consciously or unconsciously, when they are stressed by work and life. These proposed coping options include: (1) to use more *rational thinking* and *positive thinking* during stressful situations, which are the opposite of other not-so-effective cognitive coping patterns such as *avoidance* and *denial*, which might temporarily relieve stress, but in the long term do not help resolve the problem; (2) to use *emotional*

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