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It's been a hard day's night: Work family interface and employee engagement



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Societal and workplace changes over the last few decades have radically altered how employees and managers spend their time — both in and outside the workplace. Technology — the advent of emails, smartphones, and virtual private networks, among others — has substantially shifted the boundaries and created more flexibility in terms of what can be done in the office and what can be taken home. Men's increased involvement in family life coupled with women's greater work force participation has also prompted change: varied benefit packages and work–time demands emerge, and from new quarters, as employees' priorities evolve and the working population diversifies. Shifting demographics and aging populations in developed countries also mean that people are more likely to end up caring for someone at some point in their lives. Indeed, for organizations concerned with employee wellbeing, there is a growing impetus to help individuals manage their dual professional and private life obligations.

Simultaneously, intensified global competition has led companies to find ways to 'do more with less'. Scholars have increasingly noted the need to pay attention to employee 'engagement'. Today's organizations, if they want to be successful, require high levels of employee commitment, contribution, and involvement. Employees are expected to be in a positive psychological state, open to change and responsive to the fast pace of today's operations. A human capital focus — requiring more flexible, more involved, more proactive, and more emotionally involved employees — is predominantly a way to help organizations improve their productivity, and their ability to cope with change. And all this, while preserving employee well-being and respecting their need for 'work life balance'.

In this sense, interest in the work family interface (WFI) and work engagement have grown out of the same fertile soil: the specificity and complexity of contemporary work and life. Family friendly policies (FFPs) help employees and

companies to cope with the demands of contemporary households, while work engagement studies the psychological attachment that individuals have to their job. Yet, debate on the relationship between these two areas is quite sparse, and many questions remain about the relationship between engagement and the work family interface.

In this article we focus on the relationship between the two areas of interest. Looking at the overall issues of work family interface for today's employees, we ask whether and how FFPs in an organization impact work engagement and, in turn, whether and how work engagement influences an individual's management of their work family interface. Drawing on literature that looks at stress and resource drain, we also consider whether a high level of work engagement can be detrimental to a healthy balance between family and work. Could work engagement, a variable considered as positive for employees at work, become toxic for an individual's work family balance? In the remainder of this article, we focus on such questions and aim to enlighten readers on these issues, drawing on both practice and research.

THE WORK–FAMILY INTERFACE (WFI): WHY BOTHER?

Since the advent of the industrialization era in the 18th and 19th centuries, the notion of a clear separation between work and family, where life is understood as being made up of two distinct domains — the public 'work' domain and the private 'family' domain — has pervaded contemporary society. Yet, in reality, many of today's employees simultaneously juggle both paid employment and unpaid family work. In the last few decades, there has been an increase in dual-earner households and single parent families as well as a greater number of working adults caring for elderly relatives. Workplace demands such as travel, commuting,

relocation, presentee-ism, 'ideal worker' norms and pervasive technology can further complicate their quotidian.

Researchers investigating work life balance have tried to model and explain the way in which employees feel and behave in relation to their personal and professional obligations. Initially, scholars modeled relations between these two universes (work and family) as conflictual, focusing on the potential for *role conflict* and *resource drain*. Many workers' daily lives involve a delicate balancing act of fulfilling multiple roles as parent, worker, friend and child. These different roles may result in people experiencing inconsistent or incompatible expectations. In line with this approach, experts explore how and when the work sphere 'invades' an individual's family territory, and vice versa, showing how strain arising from one role makes it difficult to meet the expectations of another role.

A 'resource drain' explanation assumes that people have fixed amounts of psychological and physiological resources to expend, and tradeoffs are needed to distribute and allocate these resources. Time and energy are understood as 'scarce' and finite resources which can be 'depleted' on a daily basis in our various activities. An individual only has a certain number of hours per day, and expendable energy levels. Hence, researchers adhering to a depletion or 'scarcity' perspective, believe that family and work spheres necessarily compete for time and energy as a resource. Often, people do not have enough energy for everyone, or everything, and so compromises need to be made. Indeed this perspective views human beings as 'walking plumbing systems' who have various outlets for their energies, which are said to flow through various channels and finally, down various drains.

On a more positive note, some scholars have argued that the relationship between work and family is not simply a conflictual one, and that both spheres could potentially enrich one another. Again, focusing on multiple roles and resources, researchers adhering to this perspective point out that an individual's positive experiences in one role can yield energy and positive emotions, which then enhance his or her performance in other roles. As such, engaging in multiple roles may be beneficial, with a potential positive spillover of emotions, attitudes, and behaviors.

This approach concedes that while certain resources like 'time' may be a fixed quantity, other resources such as employees' intrinsic motivation are less constrained. Rather than taking a scarcity perspective on energy — which assumes energy is a 'finite' expendable resource, an 'expansionary' perspective contends that new energy can be generated from multiple roles. This enrichment perspective not only suggests the benefits of multiple roles for individuals but also for organizations as a whole. Organizations where managers pay more attention to preventing work home tensions among their staff reap the rewards of increased commitment and creativity.

FAMILY FRIENDLY POLICIES: A TOOL FOR ENGAGEMENT?

Behavioral scientists suggest that as today's employees become increasingly disillusioned with work and fatigued by the constant demand for change and flexibility in

response to organizational needs, managers need to pay more attention to the meaning and emotional aspects of employees' work. Organizations need to move towards creating an energized, fulfilled and *engaged* workforce. An emotional attachment to the job is something that ultimately helps an employee mobilize energy while maintaining a positive emotional response to one's work.

Yet, when considering employee engagement, we need to look beyond the individual and consider the broader household context in which the individual lives and works. Taking a work family interface lens, we acknowledge the cognitive (absorption, attention) and physical (energy) aspects of work engagement and consider how one's family life may interact with them. Engagement requires cognitive energy — it is an active state. When considering the impact of work on family from a 'scarcity perspective', it is assumed that people have a limited amount of resources to spend during the day, and so they will have less to dedicate at home. Similarly, if an individual has domestic duties or family obligations to attend to (i.e., a working mother getting up repeatedly in the night to soothe a crying baby), these may deplete an employee's cognitive and physical reserves, thus negatively affecting engagement at work (i.e., the sleep deprived mother finds her concentration levels in work are severely impacted the next day).

An 'expansionary' perspective has a more optimistic outlook: work engagement is a resource. Engaged employees bring home more resources to expend on their family. Similarly, individuals who are heavily invested in family roles transfer positive energy from their home experiences to the workplace. Indeed, experiencing a fulfilling family role (e.g., motherhood or fatherhood) can expand individuals' energy levels and hence positively affect their engagement at work. For example, in our research, a seasoned academic (and new Dad) confided how he now has a revitalized approach to teaching his students since becoming a father.

Regardless of whether one ascribes to an 'expansionary' perspective (where multiple roles and multiple resource levels have an enriching impact on work and family), or a 'scarcity' perspective (where one's role capacity in either domain is limited by finite resources), there is growing consensus on two main areas. First, organizations pay a steep price when workers are over-worked, stressed and disengaged, whether their stress stems from a professional or personal cause. Work home tensions are undesirable at both an individual and the organizational level. Difficulties in balancing work and home life is a cause of absenteeism, lower productivity, stress, burnout, missed deadlines and unhappy customers.

Second, happiness is a major source of positive outcomes in the workplace. Organizations whose staff exhibit higher than average levels of happiness report stronger financial performance and higher levels of customer satisfaction. Happy workers are more open, more motivated to invest time and effort, and are prepared to overcome obstacles when pursuing their career goals. Thus, it is in an organization's interest to create and maintain work environments that contribute to employee happiness. In sum, paying attention to factors *outside* the work domain, that is, family and how changes can be made to make an employee's life easier in this regard, can have a positive and beneficial impact on activities *inside* the organization.

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