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Work and Family Conflict: A Review of the Theory and Literature

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INSIGHTS TO A CHANGING WORLD

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Abstract

Work and family issues and challenges have substantial changed during that past few decades. One

specific concern is related to the continuous rise in reported work-family conflict. The purpose of

this review is to explore the literature related to work and family conflict and its possible

implications to human resource management theory and practice. It defines work-family conflict

and discusses its relevance to human resources practitioners and researchers. It presents four

existing theoretical frameworks and reviews the literature related to antecedents/determinants and

possible outcomes of work-family conflict. Finally, it provides recommendations and contributions

to management and human resource professionals.

Work and Family Conflict: A Review of the Theory and Literature

In today's constantly changing business environment, an essential component of a strong human resources (HR) department or program is organization development. Swanson (1998) defined organization development as "the process of systematically implementing organizational change for the purpose of improving performance" (p. 1). Sometimes change efforts are focused directly at improving individual effectiveness, but, if successful, the performance of a group or the organization can also be directly or indirectly improved. In addition, interventions focused primarily at improving organizational effectiveness can and should, in most situations, spill over into increased group or individual effectiveness. One broad area that appears to relate to all employees at some level and also exemplifies this possible spillover is that of the work and family relationship. At the foundation of this relationship is the conflict that may occur between work and family domains. Developing a better understanding of work-family conflict (WFC) is important to employees and organizations for a number of reasons. One simple reason is because conflict is a source of stress and, therefore, is associated with numerous negative consequences, both in the workplace and in the home (Hammer, Allen, & Grigsby, 1997).

During the past two decades, research in WFC has expanded beyond the family and psychology fields to business, management, and human resources. As more employees are juggling work and family demands, it continues to be important for researchers to study the consequences and implications that WFC may have on the workplace and in the home (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999). Frone, Yardley, and Martel (1997) stated that understanding the work-family interface is a "pivotal concern of both work and family researchers" (p. 145). Because of the potential of their current and future human and intellectual capital, employees play an essential role in the success of any organization. Assisting employees in contributing their best knowledge and ability has been the topic of an active HR, human resource development (HRD), and management research agenda for

many years. However, improving employee performance by designing interventions to assist in reducing their WFC levels is a new domain for business practitioners and researchers.

Purpose, Research Questions, Design and Data Collection

The purpose of this review is to explore the literature related to work and family conflict and its possible implications to HR and management theory and practice. The following questions were investigated: 1) What are the existing WFC theoretical frameworks? 2) What are antecedents/determinants and possible outcomes of WFC? 3) What does the literature recommend? and 4) How does this information contribute to new knowledge in HR? This review is a content analysis of scholarly literature located in various business, psychology, and family databases. Among the hundreds of articles located, the thirty-three that appeared to have the most applicable management and HR theoretical frameworks and implications were subjectively chosen.

Definitions and Relevance

WFC has been defined as "a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). Recent research has divided WFC into two types of conflict. Aryee, Luk, Leung, and Lo, (1999) explained that WFC stemming from the interference of events in the work role with family role performance is called WIF (work interference with family). FIW (family interferences with work) is when conflict stems from the interference of events in the family role with work role performance. Because of the changes in employee demographic characteristics (e.g., increasing prevalence of dual-earner couples, influx of women into the workforce, nontraditional family arrangements) (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000), societal attitudes about work and family, and even in the changes that are occurring in the structure and processes for accomplishing work--balancing the demands of work and family roles has become a primary daily task for many employed adults

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(Williams & Alliger, 1994). As the demands of roles increase, it is unavoidable that one role will either interrupt or intrude in some way into the activities of the other role. Williams and Alliger (1994) stated that, "for many parents, work and family goals must compete for limited psychological, physical, and temporal resources" (p. 841). There is little doubt that workers today are confronting new and unique challenges in meeting the required demands with the resources available.

Conflict is a normal part of life. Experiencing conflict or strain between various roles is a typical result of being subject to the demands of multiple roles (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). In fact, having multiple roles has actually been linked with certain positive outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, life satisfaction, fulfillment of goals, pride). Understanding the positive and negative linkages between work conflicts, family conflicts, and the interface, is not only important for HR, but also for organizations, families, and society.

Theoretical Framework

Grandey and Cropanzano (1999) purported that work-family researchers have not based their predictions on a strong conceptual framework and that often theories are not even mentioned in the literature. To date, there are few theories that make a direct connection between work, family, and conflict. The theories that do, appear to be primarily based in an applied psychology theoretical context. These theories and models include role conflict theory, sensitization theory, spillover theory, and conservation of resources.

Role Conflict Theory

Role conflict theory states that experiencing ambiguity or conflict within a role will result in an undesirable state. Because of conflicting demands among roles (e.g., time, lack of energy, incompatible behaviors), multiple roles lead to personal conflict as it becomes more difficult to

perform each role successfully (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999). According to Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), there are three forms of work-family conflict: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavior-based conflict. Time-based conflict is exhibited when the time demand by one role is seen as an interference with participation in the other role. Strain-based conflict emerges when the strain experienced in one role intrudes into and interferes with another role. Behavior-based conflict is believed to occur when certain behaviors are inappropriately transferred from one role to another (Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996). In addition, Aryee et al. (1999) explained that, to understand WFC, both directions (i.e., work to family, family to work) must be considered. Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams (2000, p. 251) presented a simple table of these forms and directions to create the six dimensions of work-family conflict (see Table 1).

Sensitization Theory

Foley and Powell (1997) reported on Pleck's work that suggests that men's self-esteem and identity have traditionally been connected to their performance of the work role, while women's self-concept has been associated with their performance of the spouse and parenting roles. It appears that some of the gender research in work-family conflict draws upon elements of this theory, whether it is formally acknowledged or not (e.g., Aryee et al., 1999; Frone, Russell, & Barnes, 1996; Kim, 1998).

Spillover Theory

Spillover theory is used to explain how work influences family life. Positive spillover would be exhibited when the satisfaction, energy, happiness, and stimulation an individual has at work would cross over into positive feelings and energy at home. Negative spillover from work to family is demonstrated when the problems, conflicts, or energy at work has strained and preoccupied an individual, making it difficult to participate in family life effectively and positively (Foley &

Powell, 1997). This theory can also be used when considering the effects of family spillover on work.

Conservation of Resources

The conservation of resources model encompasses several stress theories. According to Grandey and Cropanzano (1999), the model proposes that "individuals seek to acquire and maintain resources. Stress is a reaction to an environment in which there is the threat of a loss of resources, an actual loss in resource, or lack of an expected gain in resources" (p. 352). Resources include objects, conditions (e.g., married status, tenure), personal characteristics (i.e., resources that buffer one against stress), and energies (e.g., time, money, knowledge). This model proposes that "interrole conflict leads to stress because resources are lost in the process of juggling both work and family roles" (p. 352). This can lead to a negative state of being, which may include depression, dissatisfaction, anxiety, or physiological tension.

Literature Review

The experience of interrole conflict has been shown to have negative implications for well-being (Aryee et al., 1999). Regardless of the cultural context, it appears that parents are more willing to allow work responsibilities to interfere with family responsibilities than to let family interfere with work. Conflict between work and family often manifests itself in an incompatible schedule, excessive work time demands, and fatigue and irritability caused when an individual attempts to fulfill roles related to work and family (Eagle, Miles, & Icenogle, 1997). If a person is frequently struggling to meet the demands at work because of interference from home, reduced quality of work life is reported, and, if a person is struggling to meet the demands at home because of work interference, reduced quality of home life is reported.

WIF conflict is more prevalent than FIW conflict among both sexes in the United States and

Finland (Eagle et al., 1997; Kinnumen & Mauno, 1998). Yang, Chen, Choi, & Zou (2000) conducted a study that compared WFC between U. S. Americans and Chinese and found that, even though employees in both countries reported WIF, U. S. American employees experienced greater family demand with a correspondingly greater impact on WIF. They reported that the statistical effect of FIW on stress has been shown to be greater than WIF, meaning that family demand is a major source of stress. Kinnumen and Mauno (1998) found that WIF had negative consequences on work well-being and FIW had negative consequences on family well-being. In this sample, FIW had negative effects in the home but not in the workplace, while WIF had negative consequences in both domains.

Antecedents and Determinants of Work-Family Conflict

Much research has been conducted attempting to identify the antecedents or determinants of WFC and to analyze the possible relationships involved. By the identification of these antecedents, it is hoped that interventions can be designed and implemented to assist individuals in preventing or managing WFC more effectively, thus decreasing the negative, and sometimes detrimental, outcomes for the individual, family, and organization.

One of the most common antecedents of WFC is that of multiple-role conflict. The more roles or positions a person acquires and is expected to engage in, the more complex it becomes to fulfill the responsibilities of each role (Aaron-Corbin, 1999). Role demands may "originate from expectations expressed by work and family role senders, as well as from values held by the person regarding his or her own work and family role behavior" (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000, p. 182). It is not simply the number of roles that is most critical in WFC, but how one perceives each role and the interactions between them. Carlson (1999) researched situational determinants (i.e., role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload), dispositional determinants (i.e., Type A, negative affectivity), and

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various demographic variables on the three forms of WFC described earlier (i.e., time-, strain-, behavior-based). She found that negative affectivity and the number of children in a family were both significant determinants of all three forms of WFC. The relationship between work role conflict and strain-based conflict was significant, and work role conflict, family role conflict, and Type A personality were significantly related to behavior-based conflict. Interestingly however, the significant relationship between WFC and Type A personality was negative, suggesting that Type A individuals in this study may be compartmentalizing their conflict into the separate domains. She also noted that, overall, the greater the role conflict, the higher the level of reported WFC. Eagle et al. (1997) also found that, as the number of children in a family increased, so did the level of FIW conflict.

Numerous studies have been conducted in the United States researching gender as a possible determinant in WFC. Maupin (1993) examined family and career orientation differences between men and women accounting students in the United States. Even though there is a movement toward gender equality, it was concluded that there were still numerous differences and potential conflict between genders in combining work and family. In studying a sample at the Department of Social Services in New York State, Kim (1998) observed marked gender differences in terms of work-family. It was reported that WFC was higher in the women sampled, which supports the sensitization theory. Eagle et al. (1997) found, however, that there were no gender differences with regard to the permeability of work and family boundaries in their sample, yet the Hammer et al. (1997) study showed significant gender differences in the antecedent discussed earlier. In this study men reported lower WFC, higher career priority, and higher perceived work schedule flexibility than women. These are just a few of the many reported studies related to gender and WFC in the U. S. Even though the research findings vary, it appears that many U. S. women continue to perceive greater levels of WFC than do men.

WFC gender research can also be found for other countries. Kinnumen and Mauno (1998) studied employees in Finland and found that there were no gender differences in the overall levels of conflict. Results concluded, however, that WIF had negative consequences on work well-being, FIW had negative consequences on family well-being, and, as the educational level of the male increased, so did the level of WFC. Aryee and Luk (1996) studied WFC in Hong Kong and found that there were no significant gender differences related to overall career satisfaction and more specifically to certain determinants (i.e., child-care arrangements, supervisor support, skill utilization, and organization-based self-esteem). There are many variables (e.g., smaller family size, more domestic help) that can be identified to explain the difference between these studies and the U. S. studies described. The purpose of this limited gender review, however, is just to note a few international differences.

Other determinants of WFC include the level of childcare arrangement satisfaction, job insecurity, work involvement, perceived flexibility, partners' WFC, perceived control and goal progress. Consistent with the role conflict theory, the lack of satisfaction with childcare arrangements for young children was shown to increase significantly a woman's FIW (e.g., Aryee & Luk, 1996). It was found that, when a woman was satisfied with these arrangements, she experienced better balance between parental demands and satisfaction in life. Kinnumen & Mauno (1998) investigated the effect that job insecurity had on FIW in a Finnish population. Results suggested that this relationship is significant for both sexes. Hammer et al. (1997) studied personal and partners' work and family involvement, career salience, perceived flexibility of work schedule, and partners' WFC. The researchers reported a significant relationship between these variables and the individuals' WFC. In addition, Williams and Alliger (1994) found that personal control and perceived goal progress may be important regulators of daily mood which can affect WFC. They reported that "juggling work and family roles throughout the day is related to both concurrent mood

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and reported end-of-day work-family conflict" (p. 859). These results generally support the spillover theory. The researchers concluded that spillover of unpleasant moods occurred both from work to family and from family to work, while positive mood spillover were weak.

Other antecedents of WFC related to social support (e.g., supervisor, co-worker, family, spouse) and organizational culture. Aryee and Luk (1996) found that supervisor support of work-family issues influenced career satisfaction in both genders. Boles, Johnston, and Hair (1997) reported that low social support from co-workers lead to dissatisfaction. Adams, King, and King (1996) found that higher levels of work interfering with family predicted lower levels of family emotional and instrumental support and that higher levels of this support were associated with lower levels of family interfering with work. Hammer et al. (1997) observed both in females' and males' WFC that a partner's WFC accounted for a significant amount of variance. Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) purported that, when there is a work-family supportive organizational culture, employees are able to manage WFC more effectively, loyalty and commitment to the organization is increased, and retention is higher.

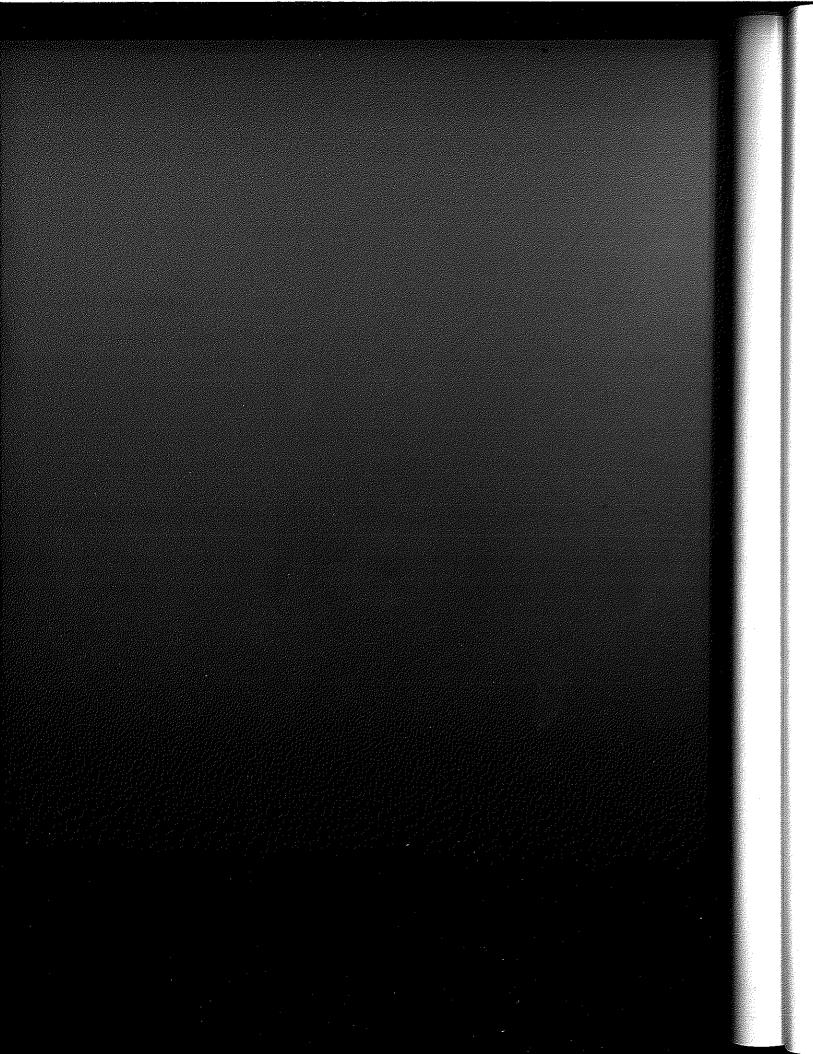## Possible Outcomes of Work-Family Conflict

There has also been much research conducted linking WFC to possible outcomes in the home and workplace. Many of these researched outcomes appear to be directly or indirectly linked to either a decrease in individual performance in the home and workplace or to the lack of potential performance improvements for the individual, group, or organization.

Kossek and Ozeki (1998) examined the relationship among work-family conflict, policies, and satisfaction and found that there was a consistent negative relationship among all forms of WFC and job-life satisfaction. Boles et al. (1997) surveyed a sample of shift work employees and found that greater work/non-work conflict was associated with dissatisfaction in work after six and

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eighteen months. Other studies found that WFC was significantly related to and has an important effect on job and life satisfaction (e.g., Adams et al., 1996; Yang, 1998). Thomas and Ganster (1995) reported that job satisfaction is increased and WFC is decreased when employees perceive control over work and family.

The various repercussions of turnover in the workplace is a topic of great interest and concern for practitioners and researchers. Abbott, De Cieri, and Iverson (1998) studied the cost-of-turnover implications of WFC at management levels in Australia. They found that the total costs (e.g., reparation, replacement, training) associated with the exit of high-performing women at management level was about $75,000 per employee. Even though various financial turnover costs have been reported, it appears that researchers agree that it is expensive and difficult for many employers. Abbott et al. (1998) reported that implementation of family-friendly policies, where they are lacking, can assist in reducing this turnover. Boles and Babin (1996) found that emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction were significantly related to WFC which, in turn, was related to a salesperson's propensity to leave employment.

Another growing body of research that appears to support the conservation of resources model (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999), relates to the health and wellness outcomes of various forms of WFC. The negative health effects of stress in general have been researched for many years. A number of studies (e.g., Aryee, 1992; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) supported a positive relationship between perceived job stress and WFC. It has been suggested that WFC represent a potent stress that can negatively influence an employee's health (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997). A substantial body of research (e.g., Aryee, 1992) provides evidence that family and work role tension can lead to psychological and physical problems of workers. Other researchers have explained that the subjective quality of an individual's work and family roles, not the actual employment and family status, are the most important elements of psychological well-being (e.g., Williams & Alliger,

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1994). Results from the Frone, Russell, and Cooper (1997) four-year longitudinal study suggested that FIW conflict is related to poor physical health, incidence of hypertension, and elevated levels of depression. They concluded that FIW may be causally antecedent to employee health outcomes. Other research studies link WFC and role conflict to emotional exhaustion (Boles & Babin, 1996) and higher alcohol consumption (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1993). The negative effects of WFC on organizations have been found to include high health insurance claims, lost work days, and reduced productivity which contributes to high economic costs for organizations and families (Yang, 1998). The good news is that perceptions of supportive workplace practices were found to be associated with lower levels of depression, somatic complaints, and blood cholesterol (Thomas & Ganster, 1995).

Organizational commitment is another area of research in both the management and HR fields. Various commitment forms have been shown to predict work outcomes, such as tardiness, absenteeism, turnover, turnover intentions, and performance (Cohen, 1995). Cohen (1995) purported that "it is the way in which organizations react toward nonwork domains of their employees, and not the effective management of work-nonwork domains by employees, which can increase work commitment" (p. 257). In her study of three types of organizational responses to work and family challenges, Kirchmeyer (1995) found that increasing boundary flexibility through respect practices (i.e., practices that provide workers with the support and consideration to accomplish nonwork responsibilities themselves) was associated with higher organizational commitment. Cohen (1995) examined the relationship between various commitment forms and nonwork domains with a sample of nurses from two hospitals. The findings showed that "nonwork domains affect all work commitment forms examined in this study, especially organizational commitment" (p. 239) This leads to the conclusion that the way people feel toward their nonwork domains has an important effect on their work attitudes.

As is clear, there are numerous possible determinants and outcomes of WFC (see Table 2). Understanding these can assist practitioners in assessing and evaluating individuals and organizations so that appropriate WFC-reducing interventions can be designed and implemented. Much of the reviewed literature provides suggestions for these types of interventions.

Recommendations and Contributions

After reviewing ideas for possible interventions (see Table 2), some may mistakenly think that this author is recommending that all organizations implement numerous programs and initiatives to assist employees. This list, however, provides ideas of interventions that may be effective for certain organizations if a thorough assessment by an experienced practitioner deems them to be of strategic value to the organization. May, Lau, and Johnson (1999) explained that

> The effects of numerous human resource development factors on business performance have been reported in business research literature in recent years. After years of organizational restructuring and work reengineering, management recognizes that a productive workforce is increasingly important to attain sustainable competitive advantages for business organizations on a global basis. (p. 1)

Why should organizations implement WFC initiatives? The literature has shown that employees can be more productive and effective workers if WFC is managed appropriately. Many employees cannot do this without the assistance of their employers. Bond, Galinsky, and Swanberg, (1997) stated that "the quality of workers' jobs and the supportiveness of their workplaces" (i.e. flexibility in work arrangements, supervisor support, supportive workplace culture, positive coworkers relations, absence of discrimination, respect in the workplace, and equal opportunity for workers of all backgrounds) "are the most powerful predictors of productivity--job satisfaction,

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commitment to their employers, and retention. Job and workplace characteristics are far more important predictors than pay and benefits" (p. 1).

The literature has revealed numerous suggestions that may be helpful to practitioners in designing and implementing WFC interventions. First, organizations should identify the sources of work-family conflict that are most relevant to their employees and start with the domain that poses the most problems. This includes assessing the form of conflict (i.e., time-, strain-, and behavior-based), as well as the direction (i.e., WIF, FIW) so that tailored assistance strategies or career programs can be successfully designed and implemented. Careful analysis of the employee's tasks and responsibilities should also be considered when designing work-family programs or opportunities (e.g., flextime, teleworking) that may assist in reducing conflict. Assessing employee's job requirements can also help to ensure that jobs are conducive to meeting both work and family needs and requirements. Enormous hour requirements limit time with partners and children, restrict time for exercise and recreation, and discourage community and service involvement. An overall analysis of organizational culture should also be included in a thorough assessment (Thompson et al., 1999).

Second, with the increasing effort of many companies to implement work-family initiatives and programs, managers will need to become more flexible. Quality management training is important so mixed messages between the overall organization and managers are not given. Organizational leaders and managers should be trained to encourage strong social support networks among supervisors, subordinates, and coworkers.

Third, consider interventions that assist employees in reducing work-family juggling and conflict during working hours and beyond. To assist, provide training and/or mentoring for all employees on coping strategies for work-family conflict, consider assisting employees with childcare options, design interventions that encourage health and wellness, and make social and

political changes which include attention to the specific needs of dual-earner couples, single parents and others.

Lastly, remember that organizational responses to nonwork domains affect employees' commitment and attitude toward an organization. The most effective response is for the organization to implement respect practices as defined previously (Kirchmeyer, 1995). In addition, programs and initiatives will not be successful in the long-term if they are not aligned strategically with the organization's goals and endorsed by the top management. Link work-family interventions with the benefits to the organization (e.g., increased retention and recruitment, reduced absenteeism, increased productivity). In addition, the use of financial forecasting should be used to link WFC interventions to the financial bottom-line.

WFC research provides management and HR practitioners with a new domain to consider in assessing, designing, and implementing performance improvement interventions in the workplace. In addition, the success of other management and HR change efforts will be enhanced as employees and organizations are able to benefit from reduced WFC and focus more attentively on the work at hand. To impact positively the work and personal lives of employees, organizations must stop viewing work/life benefits as an accommodation and start looking at the benefits as strategic business initiatives that propel organizational culture change. The performance of people at work remains a critical factor for the success of the organization and for the well-being of its employees. Employees are the human resources, the human capital, and the intellectual capital essential for success in organizations present and future. Work and family conflict is a fact of life. There are no quick formulas for avoiding or managing it. As we look to the future, it is our responsibility as business professionals to consider various WFC interventions (e.g., organization development, training and development, career development) that have been shown to lead to both short-term and long-term performance improvement at the individual, group, and organizational level.

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