Work-life interface and Self-control

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The main purpose of work-life balance practices is to reduce work-life conflict and thus increase organizational performance. However, research has not been able to prove univocally that work-balance practices reduce conflict (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). As argued by these authors, literature shows that work-life balance does indeed increase performance, but this might be due to other parallel effects such as reduced overheads or productivity increases due to employees working at their peak hour, not reduced conflict.

Why do work-life policies sometimes fail to reduce intra-role conflict? According to Beauregard & Henry, there are two main reasons. Firstly, workers have different preferences for the integration or segmentation of work and family, but organizational policies are not able to adjust to these individual preferences. As Kossek & Lautsch (2012) put it, employees are asymmetrical regarding their preference of the work role interrupting the family role or vice versa. Secondly, sometimes employees do not use these practices because they fear it might hinder their career development. Thus, it can be seen that failure of work-life policies shall be analyzed from two different perspectives: on one hand, it can be caused by a wrong implementation of the interface which does not help to reduce intra-role conflict. On the other hand, it can be caused by a negative social climate that does not put flexible workers on an equal foot to regular workers.
This essay is going to focus on the first issue, arguing that research has failed to take into account the individual psychological processes (both of employees and supervisors) that explain why work-life policies fail to reduce conflict. It would be shown that research on self-control, which is highly experimental and has focused on internal psychological processes of decision making, might be helpful to understand the behaviors that impeach the successful navigation between work and home environments. The second issue, the relation between career advancement and work-life policies, will not be treated. This is a complex issue due to the competitive nature of the business arena. In a world where high level managerial positions are scarce and skilled labor supply abundant, twenty-four hour availability is a good selection procedure. For instance, any work-life flexibility policy would be difficult to justify in a position that requires a client oriented role (Nord et al, 2002).

As mentioned, the weakness of current work-life interface research is that it has focused on attitudes but has not been able to capture the internal psychological consequences derived from the implementation of work-life policies. The main research methods have been quantitative surveys (Den Dulk & De Ruijter, 2008), qualitative interviews (McDonald et al, 2007), observation (Nord et al, 2002) and theoretical analysis (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). Consider this quote, which comes from an employee using a flexible arrangement, taken from the study undertaken by Blair-Loy & Wharton (2002) who analyze the use of work-family policies in a financial services corporation:

“I am bombarded with new emergencies that force me to put aside all else to deal with this new one. So, everything else must be done after hours or not done at all. If it isn't done after hours, then the next day's emergency cannot be managed” (p. 827)
And this other quote, also from an employee, extracted from Nord et al (2002):

“But it’s psychological, in that you don’t have to work that fifth day if you don’t want to. If the work has to get done, you get it done…the work gets done because of employee commitment” (p. 233)

Two separate behaviors are creating the problem, which are at the core of flexible policies’ implementation failure: the manager that “bombards” his subordinate and the employee that decides to “put everything aside” and “get it done”. The supervisor cannot refrain himself from delegating on the employee, while the employee cannot control himself, enjoy his free time and stick to the agreed schedule. These quotes tell us what is happening: the flexible policy is failing to reduce the stress of the employee. However current research on work-life balance fails to explain why this is happening. Research on self-control, characterized by being of experimental nature, may address work-life literature limitations and better explain the behaviors of the actors involved. First, it will be discussed how self-control may explain the lack of commitment of supervisors. Secondly, it will be applied to the behavior of employees.

In the case of the supervisors, their lack of engagement with work-life policies has been shown to be one of the main causes of dissatisfaction for employees. For example, McDonald et al (2007) reported that employees frequently had the sensation that their supervisors were calling them just for checking on them. This lack of commitment is not only reported by employees, but has also been shown in observational studies (Nord et al, 2002). Why do supervisors act in a manner that seems to be driven by lack of self-control?

Carlson et al (2011) have shown that when supervisors themselves experience work-to-family enrichment, they can more easily empathize with the subordinates and
become more supportive. Still, Carlson et al recognize that further research is needed to better understand the emotional process that takes place when enrichment is experienced. According to the self-regulation strength model (Baumeister et al, 1998; Baumeister, 2001; Baumeister et al, 2006; Baumeister et al, 2007), the energy needed for self-control is limited and gets depleted after a performing a task which requires volitive effort, which negatively affects performance in subsequent tasks. This could explain why supervisors which employ considerable effort in managing their work-family environment might afterwards hinder the implementation of the policies to their subordinates. In addition, if they are suffering from work-life conflict, this might have consequences such as sleep deprivation, for example, which has been related with reduced levels of self-control and increased hostility (Christian & Ellis, 2011). Christian and Ellis conducted laboratory monitoring of sleeping patterns to prove their results. Similar experimental techniques could be applied to monitor supervisors which are not correctly complying with work-life policies, to better analyze which factors might be contributing to their hostility towards flexible arrangements.

The idea that self-control might be involved in supervisors’ behavior is reinforced by symptoms of short-termism in their decision making. According to Den Dulk & De Ruijter (2008), supervisors consider two main criteria while evaluating their position towards a flexible arrangement: disruption of the workflow and dependency on the employee. Their research shows that the disruption argument is significantly more prominent, and thus managers can face severe long-term consequences (such as losing a valuable employee) for not respecting a flexible work arrangement with a subordinate. Nevertheless, the authors recognized that in their study they were not able to examine deeper psychological reasons to this attitude. It could be defended that the short-termism exhibited is a typical characteristic of an action not guided by self-
control. Therefore, Baumeister’s strength model could be helpful for reducing this behavior and improving the decision making of supervisors towards their subordinates. For instance, these managerial decisions should not be undertaken after suffering an episode of depletion (such as a task that required significant volition). Alternatively, intake of glucose or financial incentives might counterbalance the effects of depletion (Baumeister et al, 2007) and could be used on exhausted supervisors. Nevertheless, as Hagger et al (2010) argue, the strength model might not explain the whole behavior, because motivations and affects might still play a role even in a depleted individual. Thoughtful deliberation about long-term consequences of their decisions could help supervisors to control their impulses and focus on long-term goals. The development of techniques to increase motivation and the regular practice of self-control tasks might improve their self-control capacity over time (Hagger et al, 2010)

Now shifting to the perspective of the employees, research has shown that flexible work practices can lead to work intensification (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). According to these authors, the intensification might be imposed (due to the reduction of working hours with no equivalent reduction in workload), enabled (new flexible arrangements allow working more intensively) or as an act of reciprocation (employees feel they owe something to the company, based on social exchange theory). Kelliher & Anderson argue that intensification might generate stress in the long term and thus work-life policies become counterproductive, as this quote from an employee in a telework arrangement shows:

“Drawbacks are that you never really leave it behind... because I'm working from home and then I've got my PC on and it's in my study, I probably have to walk past my study probably thirty times in the evening
and so you’re always glancing at the screen because it, I don’t know, somehow it’s there isn’t it” (p. 94)

While imposed intensification is a consequence of the poor design of the family-work policy, it can be argued that both enabled and reciprocation intensification might be in part a consequence of lack of self-control from the part of the employee. The issue is even more intricate due to the advancements of technology (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012), as it becomes easier to respond to personal texts and calls at the workplace, or to work emails during personal time on weekends. As Baumeister (2001) has argued, self-control can have serious consequences in work-life balance. Interaction between family and work might generate ego depletion and thus burnout. Family problems might be carried over to the work environment, and reduce the performance in tasks that require volition. Similarly, depletion from work activities can also be imported to the home environment. The fact is that longitudinal studies would be needed to better understand the on-going effects of flexible work on employees, something that is lacking in the field of work-life interface research (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Yet, longitudinal experimental research undertaken for measuring self-control improvements (Baumeister, 2001; Baumeister et al, 2006) could be transferred and be valuable for improving employee use of work-life arrangements in their home and work environments. Physical exercise routines and keeping track of potential episodes of lack of control (in the field of self-control, financial monitoring exercises were used), have been successful in improving self-control capabilities. Therefore, they could be useful as well for improving employee work-life balance.
Finally, one could suggest that the very essence of flexible polices could be put into question by research on self-control. Kossek & Lautsch (2012) consider that an understudied moderator between life-work practices and possible conflict is individual boundary control, defined as the degree to which an employee feels in control of how he or she manages the boundaries between work and family life. According to their research, employees report that the higher the perceived control, the lower the conflict. However, from a psychological point of view, the fact of exerting this control might be a cause of depletion and reduce self-regulation, which might lead to conflict. As Baumeister (2001) has shown, the same resource of energy is used in all volitional activities that require choice or initiative, not just in self-regulation. Negotiating with supervisors and with the wife or husband the weekly schedules might require a considerable amount of energy and volition. On the contrary, an employee who just follows the regular company schedule saves energy by avoiding this control and falling in a routine. Ultimately, routines might be an effective method of preserving energy (Baumeister et al, 1998). In conclusion, the very fact of organizing the schedule can reduce one’s self-control through depletion, which increases the risk of experimenting stress and conflict. Hence, companies should be careful when designing work-life programs, because allowing too much flexibility (in particular day-to-day flexibility) could be counter-productive.

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References


