

When Two Worlds Collide: The Ethics of Enabling Better Home-  
Work Balance

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No one on their deathbed has said: “I wish I spent more time at the office.”

-- Anonymous

### INTRODUCTION

In his critique of capital more than a hundred and thirty years ago, Marx noted that it had a built-in tendency to dissolve all social barriers to the working day or night, its main aim being to extract the maximum amount of surplus labour from workers (Marx 1967). Capital’s interests, it would seem lie in the prolongation of work time to the greatest possible extent (Burkett 2000), “reckless of the health or length of life of the labourer, unless under compulsion from society” (Marx 1967: v. 1, 270).

In our time, the “myth of separate worlds” (Kanter 1977) – between public duties and private obligations, work and home, production and reproduction – continues to hold both employers and employees in its grip, characterized by one of ever-longer working hours, particularly for the skilled professional. This bifurcated social contract meant that organizations chose for a long time to ignore employees’ lives or interests outside of the workplace, especially in the case of the working mother (Boris 1994), while the latter was strongly advised to keep personal matters ‘away from work’.

In recent years, however, organizations appear to be making genuine attempts to narrow the dichotomy between work and home, amidst reports of the alarming pressures on employees as a result of globalization, employment insecurity, and concern about the impact of work-related stress disorders on worker productivity (Putnam 2000). For workers, too, their job and off-the-job lives are no longer separable; indeed, the two realms are increasingly porous due to the changing nature of work, the proliferation of new workplace technologies and changing expectations. In the process, there has been a significant shift in the dynamics of the workplace and the psychological contract between employers and employees. Developing a coherent, humanistic work-home policy has become an urgent issue for organizations, workers, government and researchers alike.

Let me clarify the context of what I mean by “work-home balance” at this point. Like the popularly-used “work-life balance” or ‘work-life strategy’, the term arose out of a tension between individuals’ and companies’ needs. While employees worry about juggling career and home life, companies had to find ways of retaining professionals (particularly females) who could not easily be replaced and of motivating them to take on increased workloads that were a result of cost-cutting measures (Dex and Schiebl 1999; Scheibl and Dex 1998; Holt and Thaulow 1996). In the U.K., political pressures resulted in a number of statutory measures such as the protection of rights for part-time workers, legal maternity rights and parental leave provisions (Wise and Bond 2003). In this context, the *business* case for implementing work-home strategies is clear. Quite apart from ethical considerations, companies have found that giving workers some measure of flexibility in

the way they handle their work and non-work commitments is vital for the sustainability of labour and profit.

We should think of work-home balance as a rather more inclusive concept, however, in order to enable greater success at the project. Kofodimos defines balance as “a satisfying, healthy and productive life that includes, work, play and love; that integrates a range of life activities with attention to self and to personal and spiritual development; and that expresses a person’s unique wishes, interests and values” (Kofodimos 1993, xiii).

For some time now, work-home balance strategies were premised on the assumption that individuals had conflicting roles to play in his or her life and that if the ‘right’ policies were put into place, they would help the employee to ‘balance’ work and non-work responsibilities. Hence, codes of practice, job-sharing, time-based flexible work and leave arrangements and so on were implemented to solve the conflicts between the “roles” that people play. The *utilitarian* approach (Lobel 1991), for instance, explained that life is a matter of struggling to balance competing roles in terms of differential cost:reward ratios. Other writers have called this the *rational* view because the individual has to work with finite resources and allocate time and energy between conflicting domains (Gutek, Searle and Klepa 1991). Rational views, however, do not fully acknowledge individuals as complex and multi-faceted participants of society.

This paper attempts to redress this kind of thinking by exploring two (related) approaches to the question of how organizations can better enable work-home balance. Firstly, I explore some ethics-based philosophies on the work-home divide as part of a broader movement of modernity/post-modernity, or dualism and binarism in Western orthodoxy. Secondly, by relating these philosophies to organizational practice, I aim to show how transcending dualistic thinking can allow both workers and companies to embrace innovative visions in the area of work-home balance. Throughout, I shall weave philosophical theory with my discussion of social and organizational practice because the question of how organizations can enable home-work balance is as much based upon unexamined assumptions and beliefs as upon social and political pressures.

#### **AN ETHICS OF TRANSCENDENCE: “BUSINESS AS USUAL” OR “LIFE AS USUAL”?**

It has become commonplace to accuse Western orthodoxy of thinking in binary terms (Derrida 1979), of fragmenting social reality into incommensurable bits and pieces (Pirsig 1976; Senge 1990; Mishler 1986), and of (mis)-applying the rational and ordered principles of the natural sciences to the realms of emotion and feeling, thereby crushing cultural diversity and epistemological alternativity (Castaneda 1970, Capra 1983).

The great modernist writers of our time -- Woolf, Joyce, Musil, Kafka and Beckett – have celebrated the fundamental schisms in our personalities as an antidote to the crushing weight of conformity and conditional existence. Human beings are multiple, heterogeneous, gloriously expectant and yet painfully self-aware of limitation -- such were the hallmarks of much of the modernist movement. These divisions in the psyche (most famously explored by Freud, of course) were to manifest themselves at the

workplace at the end of the nineteenth century and up to World War 1 as a mighty wedge in the lives of working men and women everywhere in Europe.

Weber has located the schism between self and society with extraordinary precision. For him, the modernity began with the *separation* between the family household and the business enterprise (Bauman 1995, original italics). This separation is the turn in the screw for organizations and workers alike:

...- a divorce which could in principle stave off the danger of the mutually contradictory criteria of efficiency and profitability (which are right and proper for business) and moral standards of sharing and caring (which are right and proper for emotionally charged family life) *ever meeting on the same territory and thus casting the decision-maker in a hopelessly ambivalent position* (Weber 1993, my italics).

I argue that organizational decision-makers need to accept the moral ambivalence of the work-home divide before they can resolve it equitably and even creatively. Our current debate over work-home balance is a quintessentially *modern* predicament marked by its ambivalent attitude toward the individual and, more than that, a persistent aspiration that this ambivalence may be overcome by some solution based on what Bauman has called “the orderly and systematic rule of reason” (Bauman 1993, 32). Modern organizations work on the binary model of self-versus-roles and even role-versus-role, in effect crafting policies that split the individual into parts. The focus on roles, rather than on the selves of individuals, has led to the work-home issue to be “couched in class-neutral terms of economic efficiency and competitiveness” (Burkett 2000, 155). These initiatives, argues Burkett, ‘are unlikely to achieve lasting successes or to resonate with other progressive struggles both within and across countries’ (Burkett 2000), a belief borne out by several empirical studies in this area (e.g. Wise and Bond 2003; Sennett 1998). Can we transcend this schism by recognizing that we are inherently multiple *selves*, not just entities with multiple roles to play?

Worse, a calculative approach degrades work-home balance issues to by narrowing it down to the manipulation of time itself. Thus, all the popular representations of work-home balance all seem to revolve around strategies which commodify time itself as a series of finite dots or spaces on a schedule or time sheet, the “compressed work week” being the most salient example. While these initiatives may seem obvious or even helpful, the problem with commodifying time as a solution to the problem of balance is that it often fails to take into account the different stakeholders within the organization. To give just one example, many unmarried, “childfree” workers feel excluded from family-leave initiatives (or ‘family-friendly’ policies), while parents (mostly female) suffered from the negative perception that they ‘took advantage’ of parental leave provisions or that they were the sole beneficiaries of worklife policies. As a result, this group tended to avoid asking for the days off that they were entitled to in the first place, for fear of being viewed as slackers by their co-workers (see Crompton and Birkelund 2000; Webster 2001). Manipulating time did not fail to correct the long-held assumption by managers and directors that commitment to the job was best measured by

the hours put in, a particularly punishing *diktat* for mothers and mothers-to-be who were often made to feel that “the body and the realm of the domestic (were) obstacles to reason, cognitive achievement and, indeed, equality” (Alcoff 1996). Research has shown that workers are well aware of the conflict between flexible work policies and managerial culture:

*It is the attitude of directors and senior managers which makes it difficult to take advantage or press for more flexible working patterns. You will be seen as not committed to your job and may suffer in terms of potential promotion and salary...(interview with an accountant, Wise and Bond 2003).*

Clearly, the current focus on time as a commodity to be parceled out *devalues* time rather than privileging it as a resource which is given to all to enhance the quality of life. When philosophers of ethics celebrate “time” as finite and fragile, they gave it quite a different meaning. One does not rush to fill time with as much work as possible; rather, since “time is the profound relationship that humans have with God”, in the words of Levinas (1969), one shows regard for the Other by giving the other the gift of time. Both Levinas and Heidegger emphasized the importance of time for human understanding. Heideggerian ethics, for instance, teaches us that the quality of life is founded upon time as its essence. We must understand and appreciate the limited time of our lives and give each other the gift of time.

Thus, neither the fragmentation of the self nor the fragmentation of time is the answer to achieving sustainable work-home balance. We will need to transcend fragmentation to move this debate further and to translate an understanding of the philosophical issues involved into practical action and knowledge.

#### **THE IMPLICATIONS FOR WORK-HOME BALANCE : GETTING INVOLVED**

*We learn again to respect ambiguity, to feel regard for human emotions, to appreciate actions without purpose and calculable rewards.*

-- Bauman 1993

To summarize our argument thus far: the ethical basis for a workable, and sustainable work-home strategy for organizations lies, firstly, in understanding the self as multiple and complex. Workers are never just mothers, or fathers, or singles, or because human beings are not just a confused bundle of roles. People, to paraphrase Whitman’s famous declaration, “contain multitudes.” Even the most dedicated employee will have “off-days” based on emotion alone, or after a period of stress. Policies that are role-based or based on static conceptions of the individual, therefore, are likely to fail purely on philosophical grounds alone.

Accepting multiplicity also means that people are never going to reap the benefits of work-home programs which are based on time-systems alone, nor performance evaluations based on ‘putting in the hours’. People are many selves at one and the same time. To talk about the self at work and the self at home as separate is specious, as I have

tried to show. Instead, both individuals and organizations need to begin a dialogue to break away from preconceptions about the gap between personal and organizational goals. Achieving long-term work-home balance “requires changes in both individuals and organizations” (Burke and Nelson 2001). Such an approach means that

*...individuals change their approach to living, and organizations review and change their norms, values and practices. Individuals need to identify the allocation of time and energy that fits their values and needs. Organizations that support balance need to examine and redefine effective performance at work (more than hours worked per week) as well as to redefine the notions of a career and career success (Burke and Nelson 2001, 242).*

In my view, here are some ways to operationalize this kind of thinking, along lines of diversity, multiplicity and individuality:

**Acknowledge emotion as part of corporate life.** If we understand that individuals are ambivalent and complex, we are much more likely to accept emotional periods in their lives. Some heartening examples exist and we should have more of them. Seagate, for instance, has formally initiated what they call “exempt days”, where employees can take three to five days off every year without having to give an “official” reason or explanation whatsoever. Far from mistrusting employees, the senior management at Seagate have decided that everyone is entitled to times when they just cannot face the thought of going to work that day, a sentiment that most of us can empathize with! Such a move – based on nothing more “scientific” than the corporate gut instinct about people’s non-rational selves -- should set an example to other organizations thinking of enabling work-home balance.

**Include multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes.** Companies should be aware of the external environment they operate in and the sources of help that exist ‘out there’. In many cases, a multi-agency or multi-stakeholder approach, can be a powerful catalyst for change. If a firm participates actively in community development – whether in the arts or education or the community at large – the opportunities for employees to participate in non-work activities increase enormously. The *creation of new spaces to fit multiple needs*, rather than the compression of time, can greatly reduce the stress of managing simple tasks of life, which is why companies can introduce a range of mundane, but essential, services such as exercise rooms, postal services, photo kiosks, grocery-buying services and the like into the workplace. Civic opportunities and activities can equally be brought into the workplace. In every case, knowledge-sharing on good practices that work for diverse groups are a powerful way to involve companies and employees in creating and nurturing credible, sustainable work-home initiatives.

**Deepen organizational insight and cross-cultural competence.** Internally, firms must recognize their knowledge gaps about their employees’ personal goals and life needs and strive to increase their understanding of such goals. While companies do incorporate

career planning assessments for their staff, many have realized that these measures are virtually useless unless they incorporate the individuals' own needs and desires (Burke and Greenglass 1987). Implementing such a vision, again, calls for changes in internal reorganization of resources and even the establishment of new departments specifically tasked with enabling work-home balance for their colleagues. These functional areas need to deploy skilled professionals with cross-cultural competence and intercultural skills who can deal effectively with employees from diverse ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds.

### **Train Many and Often**

Too many work-home initiatives fail because managers leave it to *one* person to know what to do and somehow communicate that to the whole company. Instead of training many people in many different ways to understand the issues, senior managers perceive it as a waste of time to send the experts out to train others. In the words of the HR manager of a large bank:

*I put it to the senior managers that I personally should go out and train managers on the family-friendly suite of policies but they did not go for that because it would take up too much of my time. Instead I had to train a couple of people who would then go out into the departments and train one person there...I am not convinced it was done thoroughly because I have not had feedback from all the departments (from Wise and Bond 2003: 25-26).*

As an alternative, *worklife units or departments* should be set up as key links to the HR and training departments to boost the capabilities of the organization. This unit should be staffed by multidisciplinary individuals who understand complexity, who understand that people have widely differing needs and desires and then tap into research findings on good practices developed at institutes or consultancies, broaden performance appraisal metrics to account for work done outside the workplace and gather information and feedback on workable schemes. More importantly, work-home unit leaders and managers can act as valuable correctives to the stubborn value that 'time' equals 'commitment' and add, instead, focus on other innovations (such as e-Learning) to measure progress.

Successful work-home strategies will be based upon nothing less than a new partnership between the firm and its employees, one that is based upon mutual give-and-take. Both employees and employers can help empower each other shape and influence the new corporate landscape (Lobel and Googins 1999) if both accept multiple approaches and a deeper understanding of the complex selves we are.

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