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## CIPD Applied Research Conference 2018

The shifting landscape of work and working lives

# Work–life balance supports can improve employee well-being

Conference paper

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## Summary

Work–life balance supports provided by employers, often known as family-friendly practices or flexible working arrangements, are commonly thought to enable employees to better juggle the demands of domestic and other responsibilities, and perhaps reduce job demands. While this research, based on the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (2011 WERS), finds they do improve well-being, its novelty is in showing these are not the reasons why work–life balance supports improve well-being. They do so by increasing the job autonomy of those that use them and enhancing their perception that their management are supportive.

## Introduction

Work–life balance supports provided by employers include flexitime, job-sharing, moving from full-time to part-time working, compressing working hours, home-working, term-time-only working, and paid leave to care for dependants in an emergency. It is an unfortunate term, not least as it implies that work is not part of life. Nonetheless, it is now widely used and I will follow this convention. It has replaced family-friendly terminology as this leads to an overconcentration on reducing the burdens of childcare. Work–non-work supports is perhaps most accurate but rather clunky.

The provision of work–life balance supports can have an effect on all employees, through showing the employer is concerned about their welfare, that is, regardless of their use by employees. Most studies have in fact concentrated on their availability.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the focus of this research is on the users of work–life balance supports and whether their well-being improved by using them. The theoretical lens through which I examine their effects is the job demands–resources theory, according to which employees' well-being and motivation decrease as their demands increase and the resources available to them decrease. Consequently, high demands and low resources, which include job autonomy and support from managers and peers, are associated with stress and ill-being.

Work–life balance supports practices are typically thought to enable employees to better juggle the interface between work and extra-work demands. The focus is thus on the demands element in job demands–resources theory; but their effect on employees' resources, and particularly on their job control and the support they receive, may also be telling. I explore these possible effects on resources, alongside the possible reduction in job demands, as reasons for why work–life balance supports may have positive effects on the well-being of those that use them. I first outline a theory of how each might have these effects, and then report a study aimed at testing this theory. The results show that work–life balance supports have benevolent effects on well-being by first increasing employees' job autonomy and second enhancing their perception that their managers are supportive, but not through reducing job demands.

The objectives of the paper are to:

- 1 Add to the evidence base for decisions about work–life balance supports.
- 2 Introduce some theory of why work–life balance supports might improve well-being.
- 3 Report a study testing the theory.
- 4 Draw out the implications of the results for practice.

## Theoretical background and research questions

Work–life balance supports may, directly or indirectly, provide employees with more temporal flexibility or control over the level of working time. This may mean that employees are better able to manage their family and other obligations and prevent spillover into the work domain, which could otherwise interfere with their work tasks and ability to cope with job demands. Work–life balance supports may lead to optimum time schedules which will have positive effects on employees' well-being.

## Work-life balance supports can improve employee well-being

I thus ask:

*Question 1: Is the use of work–life balance supports directly associated with employee well-being?*

They may also have an effect via reducing work–non-work conflict.

I then ask:

*Question 2: Is the use of work–life balance supports associated with employee well-being through work–non-work conflict?*

Typically the emphasis in policy circles is on this ability of work–life balance supports to aid juggling of work and non-work activities. But utilising job demands–resource theory, we can go beyond this. Applying this to work–life balance supports, if they are good for well-being, this would be explained by reduced demands, increased autonomy and social support. Job demands, autonomy and supports will be intervening factors between work–life balance supports and well-being; in modern social science terminology, they ‘mediate’ the relationship between the use of supports and well-being. I now embellish the theoretical grounds for their playing this mediating role.

First, we might hypothesise that work–life balance supports will reduce job demands through a variety of processes. Having greater control over their time scheduling may mean that employees are less likely to get behind on their work and hence experience time pressures, and they may have fewer unexpected interruptions both from work colleagues and their family and other outside-work relationships. The use of work–life balance supports may also reduce the effects on time pressures and energy levels of extra-work factors, for example homeworking may reduce total time spent commuting. More subtly, the very act of using the supports may encourage a more active coping strategy, and the process of opting to use them may be the starting point in the development of such a strategy, which in job demands–resource theory is a personal resource that may have positive effects on people’s self-esteem and enthusiasm.

Second, work–life balance supports may increase autonomy in a number of ways. In order to accommodate employees’ use of such supports, managers may design the work so employees have more discretion over how they prioritise tasks or the methods of fulfilling them. Supports typically give employees a greater control over their time and this may make employees more conscious of time and the need to use it effectively. This may itself create in employees a sense of increased autonomy, of being more in charge of their lives, and having the energy and time to develop their work roles and having more ‘thinking time’. As is most pronounced in homeworking, employees may also have less contact with their supervisors and this may have often quite subtle effects on employees’ sense of autonomy. For example, as employees on flexitime may not regularly arrive at work at the same time as their supervisor, they are not reminded first thing every day of their controlling presence.

Third, using work–life balance supports may strengthen employees’ perceptions that their employer is supportive, fair and cares for them for two main reasons. Work–life balance supports have a symbolic effect on all employees, signalling that their employer cares for them and that management is supportive of them, but this tends to be greater amongst those that use the supports. Through the use of work–life balance supports, the symbolic effect becomes less of a substitute for real knowledge of the employer’s intentions and more a concrete appreciation of management’s commitment. It gives greater credence to judgements about whether the employer is returning the employee’s commitment and hence adhering to their part of the psychological contract. In addition, since work–life balance supports act as a signal to managers that the organisation values helping workers to cope with their obligations, managers whose subordinates or peers use work–life balance supports may be more inclined to allow or develop informal arrangements with their staff to aid the integration of work and non-work obligations and cope with emergencies.

The third research question is thus:

*Question 3: Is the use of work–life balance supports associated with employee well-being through (a) job demands, (b) job autonomy, and (c) perceptions of supportive management?*

Additionally, the three factors – job demands, job control and perceptions of supportive management – having a direct impact on well-being may also have an effect through reducing the extent to which work interferes with family and other non-work activities. For example, the increase in job autonomy may enable employees to work more effectively – they can solve problems when they occur and without having to refer to a supervisor – and this means they may not bring unsolved problems home or be stressed by them.

The final research question is thus:

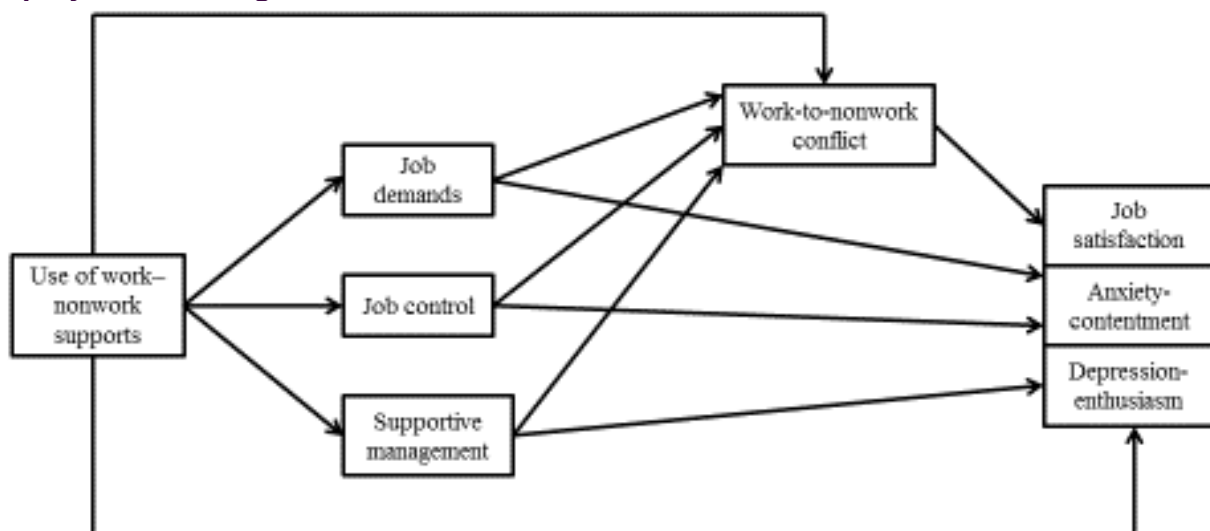
*Question 4: Is the use of work–life balance supports associated with employee well-being through (a) job demands, (b) job autonomy, and (c) perceptions of supportive management, which in turn each reduce work-to-non-work conflict?*

## Research methods

The data used are from 2011 WERS: the self-completion questionnaire survey of employees. The sample was 21,981 employees with a response rate of 50% covering private and public workplaces in all industry sectors. The data set is unique in being a nationally representative sample of employees that includes data on both the availability and use of work–life balance supports (normally the focus is on availability).

Work–life balance supports were measured by an index of the total use of a set of seven supports. Three measures of well-being were used: job-related anxiety–contentment, job-related depression–enthusiasm, job satisfaction. The items for the first two measures were taken from Warr’s scales<sup>2</sup> (for example, ‘in the past few weeks, how much of the time has your job made you feel depressed’ or ‘feel tense’. The job satisfaction items covered a range of intrinsic (for example, satisfaction with the work itself or the amount of influence over the job), and extrinsic factors (for example, satisfaction with the amount of pay or job security).

**Figure 1: Model of direct and indirect paths from use of work–non-work supports to employee well-being**



Up to 25 employees from each workplace could be included in 2011 WERS; the median number of employees completing the question was 13. Multi-level structural equation modelling, which allows for this clustering of individual participants in workplaces, was thus used to test the hypotheses. The model tested, which allows one to test the hypotheses simultaneously, is displayed in Figure 1. The hypotheses imply that the relationship entails concurrent measures and is consistent with the use of a cross-sectional research design.

## Empirical study

I will report the results of the analysis in terms of the questions they answer.

**Question 1:** There was no direct effect of the use of work–life balance supports on well-being.

**Question 2:** There was no relationship between the use of work–life balance supports and work–non-work conflict, so it cannot play a role in explaining any relationship between work–life balance supports and well-being.

**Question 3:** A positive relationship between the use of work–life balance supports and well-being, regardless of which of the three measures used, is explained by job autonomy and perceptions of supportive management. In technical terms, they fully mediate the link between the use of work–life balance supports and well-being, which is thus indirect.

Job demands played no role in explaining the impact of the use of work–life balance supports and, contrary to expectations, the use of work–life supports increased job demands. This may reflect the fact that while work–life supports may enable employees to develop more consistent patterns in their lives, they will not necessarily eliminate the unexpected events that create some work demands. A higher level of demands may also reflect a feeling amongst users of work–life supports that they need to reciprocate the support that the organisation has provided them by ensuring that they perform at a high level, and this may be reflected in their perception of qualitative demands they face. Quantitative demands may also increase as users, for example, may take work home more frequently than they would without this usage. It is important to stress that the increased demands did not decrease well-being, nor through a greater sense of achievement did they increase well-being.

The results imply that work–life balance supports have a positive effect on employee well-being. But the traditional reasoning behind them – that they improve the time scheduling of those that use them – is not supported by evidence. Rather, they have a positive effect through increasing employees' job control and perceptions of supportive management.

## Implications for practice

The study provides an evidence base for justifying the provision and use of work–life balance supports. They are a readily implementable means by which an employer can support – and be seen to be supportive of – employees' needs. The research confirms that work–non-work supports have significant effects for users, but the novelty of the research lies in the result that these are indirect, being transmitted through enhancements to the experience of job control and supportive management, rather than improved time scheduling. Discovering these mediators provides the basis for managers to identify if their supports are working as expected; and diagnose what is going wrong if work–life balance supports are not producing high levels of job satisfaction or well-being amongst the users.

The research suggests that work–life balance supports are included in 'best practice HRM'. It is important that the result that their use does not reduce job demands is not used to dismiss them as potentially inconsequential for employees or employers.

The results illustrate that job characteristics are not fixed structural phenomena and suggest that job-crafting can result from the enactment of formal policies and is not just part of the informal organisation. The role of job autonomy reinforces the value of good job design, and encouraging a more conscious attention to it. While the role of supportive management re-emphasises the significance of human relations theory, that supportive management is crucial and claims to be caring must be matched by deeds.

I also observed strong independent effects of both job autonomy and supportive management on work-to-non-work conflict, which suggests that they should be treated in policy as work–non-work supports in their own right.

That work–non-work supports may increase job demands needs consideration, through redesigning jobs or training managers to be more knowledgeable about the circumstances their employees face.

## Conclusion

I have outlined a theory, based on the job demands–resources theory, of why work–life supports may have positive effects on employees that take advantage of them. It involves usage reducing job demands, increasing job autonomy and strengthening perceptions of how supportive management is. The empirical test of this theory using data from 2011 WERS’s employee survey offered some support for the theory. The users of work–life supports had, on average, higher levels of job autonomy and perceptions of supportive management and this explained the positive effect the supports had on their well-being. However, their level of job demands was not higher and this played no role in explaining the well-being effects of the use of work–life supports. The results, however, show that we should not undervalue these supports on the grounds that the demands on employees are unchanged or may, as in this study, even increase. The implication of the findings for employers is that work–life balance supports should be applied where appropriate. They can be vital means of supporting employees’ needs and improving the support and job autonomy experienced by those that use them.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> O’Driscoll, M.P., Poelmans, S., Spector, P.E., Kalliath, T., Allen, T.D., Cooper, C.L. and Sanchez, J.I. (2003) Family-responsive interventions, perceived organizational and supervisor support, work-family conflict, and psychological strain. *International Journal of Stress Management*. Vol 10. pp326–44;

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Wood, S. and De Menezes, L. (2010) Family-friendly management, organizational performance and social legitimacy. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Vol 21. pp1575–97.

<sup>2</sup> Warr, P. (1990) The measurement of well-being and other aspects of mental health. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*. Vol 63. pp193–210.