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Integration or Collision?: Middle Managers' Concerns for Work-Life Balance

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Abstract

As increased work demands and longer working hours become the reality for many employees, the concept of work-life balance has received increasing attention. This paper presents findings from an exploratory study of Australian middle managers, which investigated the impact of middle managers' daily organisational experiences on their lives both in and beyond the workplace. We focus on respondents' concerns for the encroachment of work on their personal lives, both through the advent of new technologies and the introduction of flexibility initiatives in the workplace. The unwelcome effects of frustration, stress and fatigue highlight the need for organisations to gain a better understanding of employees' experiences related to work-life balance.

Keywords: Flexibility, middle managers, work-life balance

Introduction

When considering how the requirements of both organisations and their employees can be met in today's global marketplace, the concept of work-life balance has received increasing attention (Hardill et al. 1997). The current organisational landscape, with its calls for flexibility, innovation and rapid response to change, has resulted in increased work demands and longer working hours for many employees. This is reflected in the higher degree of intrusion of paid work into both non-work time (eg. Hochschild 1997) and space (eg. Wilson et al. 2004).

This concern for intensified work regimes is of particular relevance for middle managers. The flattening of organisational structures over the past twenty years has resulted in middle managers having both wider spans of control (Klagge 1998) and enlarged roles (Balogun 2003). Increased responsibility for such areas as decision-making (eg. Balogun 2003), people-management (eg. Currie & Proctor 2001) and directing organisational change (eg. Fenton-O'Creevy 2001) has contributed to growing difficulty in maintaining a balance between work and non-work activities. This paper discusses findings from an exploratory study of Australian middle managers, which investigated both the daily organisational experiences of middle managers, and the personal impacts of these both in and beyond the workplace. The research focus on individuals' personal experiences revealed many stories related to the issue of work-life balance.

We note, however, that the customary use of the word "balance" may be something of a misnomer, with its inference that equal weight is given to work and non-work activities. It has been argued that the notion of striving for balance between work and personal life is problematic and could be further adding to the pressure felt by organisational employees (Rapoport et al. 2002). Our discussion considers instead the term 'work-personal life

integration' (Lewis et al. 2003, p. 829), with its recognition of how different areas of life necessarily interact with, and impact on, each other. It is middle managers' stories of the impact of *work* on aspects of their personal lives which are highlighted in this paper. As respondents spoke of their endeavours to manage these two areas of their lives, the notion of integration was not always evident. Instead, there was often little ability to contain the intrusiveness of work, resulting in an uncontrollable collision between work and personal life.

Understanding the Middle Management Experience

Guided by the exploratory nature of this study, an interpretive phenomenological methodology was chosen, with its focus on revealing the richness of individual experience (Baker et al. 1992). The aim was to both gain a description of respondents' lived experiences (Oiler 1982), and learn the meaning that experience held for them (Drew 1989). Purposive sampling was used to access participants who had experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell 1998). The criterion for participation was that respondents were currently working as a middle manager within an Australian private sector organisation. The respondents came from a wide range of industries and varying levels of middle management.

The research study was undertaken in two stages. The first stage involved data collection through the method of data generation by correspondence (Kralik et al. 2000), which entailed a process of written correspondence between the researcher and each respondent over time periods of three to six months' duration. This correspondence was conducted through the medium of electronic mail (email), and fifteen middle managers participated in the process. The second stage involved semi-structured in-depth interviews, lasting between one and two hours, with a further six middle managers. In both stages, initial focus areas were developed, with the aim to consider the experience of being a middle manager and the personal impacts for the respondents. As the research continued, issues and concerns raised by the respondents were further explored.

Thematic analysis was conducted, looking for patterns in the data collected (Taylor & Bogdan 1998). The purpose of the analysis was to understand the shared experiences of these middle managers, and to reveal the meaning and understanding of these experiences for the study's participants (Benner 1994). The following discussion presents some of these middle managers' concerns for the difficulties in controlling the intrusiveness of their work on their personal lives. Direct quotations are identified as either email or interview responses. Respondents have all been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Work and Personal Life: Integration or Collision?

In presenting middle managers' stories at the nexus of work and personal life, it is pertinent to briefly consider these respondents' beliefs about how separate or connected work and the rest of their lives should be. There were quite polarised views on this issue. One group of respondents were of the opinion that work and the rest of life cannot be separated, that there is something fluid in the interaction between the two. Conversely, the second group of respondents spoke very definitely about maintaining a separation between work and home.

These respondents expressed their intent to compartmentalise work, as Victor noted: 'My policy is: what happens at work stays at work.'

These two extremes have been identified in other research considering work-life balance. The view articulated by the first group has been labelled integration, where individuals move readily and easily between work and non-work domains (Nippert-Eng 1996; Clark 2000). The second group indicated segmentation of these activities, with a clear delineation between work and non-work (Ashforth et al. 2000; Wilson et al. 2004). However, regardless of their views on the necessary separation (or otherwise) of work and non-work, all respondents expressed concern for the intrusion of work on other areas of life. For those who believed work and home should be separate, there was an ongoing battle to achieve this. And even those who saw work and home as more fluid spheres of activity spoke about the unwelcome encroachment of work on their personal life. Respondents' stories revealed two particular areas where this encroachment was apparent. The first area was the advent of new technologies, and how this had impacted the meaning of work. The second area related to the use of flexibility initiatives, and who was actually benefiting from their introduction.

Technological impacts

The intrusion of paid work into non-work time and space has been particularly accelerated by the development of new technology, such as mobile phones and laptop computers, potentially making people available twenty-four hours a day. Most respondents told of taking work home with them at least some of the time, and a number were also on-call to be reached if problems arose when they were not in the workplace. Peter spoke about this intrusion:

> There is a grey blur, especially with the advent of mobile phones and home PCs, etc. I have a client who regularly calls me at 6.30 am or earlier. The same person started calling my wife at 7.30 pm on weekdays because he couldn't instantly track me down in the office (I may have been driving home or away from my desk). – *Peter (email)*

Peter's story revealed that, despite his efforts to keep work and the rest of life separate, there was an intrusion of work into both his personal time and space. This invasion of work into other areas of life was evident in many of these middle managers' stories, and beyond the applicability of technology. However, while respondents expressed frustration at the intrusions, there appeared to be little or no moves to alleviate them. There appeared to be acceptance that these were "part and parcel" of their managerial role.

Ivan and Lionel were both on-call as part of the managerial staff in their manufacturing organisations, while Jeremy had to be constantly available for problem-solving in his role within the IT industry. Ivan spoke of the interruption of social occasions and commented that 'at certain times of the year this occurs quite regularly' (email). Lionel discussed a similar issue. He explained that there was a roster of managers for after-hour calls, as his company had twenty-four hour operations. This meant he could be called at any time of the day or night, often interrupting his sleep. When asked how regularly this occurred, Lionel responded:

> **Lionel:** Oh, not that regularly. [slight pause] Once every two weeks, or something like that.

MP: That's a little bit.
Lionel: Yes, that's reasonably regularly, isn't it? - *Lionel (interview)*

We note that Lionel later commented: 'Once every two weeks, I don't consider that very often'. However, the nature of this intrusion of work into his home life did not only impact Lionel. His wife and children could also be woken by the telephone ringing in the middle of the night. Although Lionel said his family were 'good about it' with 'not too much whinging and complaining', we wonder if they also considered this interruption once every two weeks to be not very often. Furthermore, Lionel revealed that while these queries from the factory floor did not always require him to go into the office, at times he stayed awake mentally ticking off the things he would need to address when he did go into work. While receiving a telephone call every couple of weeks may not seem a major interruption, the potential for broken sleep highlights the degree of intrusion.

There were other aspects of the middle manager role which were taken as a given by organisations, but were frequently not acknowledged as work. Peter commented:

> Then there is the whole issue of the pressure to be at work social events in your own free or family time, dinners with clients, parties, golf, etc. It can be quite irritating and steals your free time away (or more accurately the time you need to keep up with the demands of running a house and looking after a family). And of course the one we love most; the holiday that isn't really a holiday, because someone contacts you from work!!! – *Peter (email)*

On first reading these comments, we saw them as intrusions on people's non-work time, that is, they were effectively working longer hours. However, the use of language is telling. Peter spoke about these social events being *in his own time*. Irene used the exact same words when talking of trying to reduce this intrusion: 'I do less now in my own time where possible' (email). This could be a slight nuance, but it was a distinction that was present among some of these respondents' stories – there was "work" time in the office (and often from early in the morning until late in the evening) and work "done in their own time". When asking young lawyers and management consultants about their work and non-work time, Wilson et al (2004) made a similar finding. Many of their respondents, all of whom conducted a large part of their work via telephone and computer, did not consider themselves to be "working" when outside their normal working environment, even when they were undertaking identical tasks (Wilson et al. 2004, p. 192). This mirrored the stories of a number of these middle managers. The very meaning of work was impacted as work and personal life became unavoidably enmeshed.

Flexibility issues

We believe this distinction in the meaning of work has implications for these middle managers' use of flexibility initiatives. While the idea of flexibility with respect to working hours sounded good in practice to these middle managers, few appeared to take advantage of it. Many of the tasks and activities undertaken outside the workplace (but which were still *work*) were peripheral to their main job, and this still needed to be completed. Lionel spoke about times when he was called away from home in the evenings and on weekends. The opportunity was ostensibly available to "make up" this time, but he did not often utilise it:

Lionel: And you think, 'Well, I'm going to balance that off by going early one day', and that sort of thing. I think you have to think that way. OK, somebody's imposed on me to do something, but I'm going to do what *I* want to do when the time comes. And I think you feel better when you go, 'Right, I'm going to borrow some time off the organisation to do it.'

MP: And you are able to do that?

Lionel: Not very often, no – *Lionel (interview)*

Lionel's situation was a little different to most of the other respondents in that he was solely responsible for a number of technical aspects of his job, rather than having a team of people working on them. However, many respondents also had elements of their work which they could not pass on to others, not least of which were direct staff management issues. In a study of work-life balance among both managers and executives in Hungary, Toth (2005) found that executives reported less work-life imbalance than managers. One of the directors in her study stated that this was assisted by having both more freedom in determining the content of her work and a greater opportunity to delegate work than lower-level managers (Toth 2005, p. 367). These findings are of interest when considered alongside the experiences of middle managers in the current study. These middle managers often had work passed down to them, but were not always able to delegate other tasks on to their staff. This was reflected in Lionel's comments. He could not (or would not) take the opportunity to make up time lost because there was work he had to complete.

In this consideration of flexibility for middle managers with respect to time, Meredith's story stands out. She was the only respondent who had attempted to take advantage of flexibility practices. Meredith had worked for her organisation for fifteen years and, after the birth of her second child, requested to work part-time. Her main reason for this was a desire to spend time with her family and try to decrease the invasiveness of work, as she shared:

> My daily experiences have also allowed me to observe others in similar positions and the impacts on their home and family lives. These experiences have helped me decide that I do not wish to work five days a week, particularly at the expense of my family and friends. … Currently I work three days in the office, and one from home. If I am forced at any stage to permanently work five days in the office, I will most likely resign. - *Meredith (email)*

I (Parris) must confess that during my correspondence with Meredith, even as I asked more questions about her experience, I locked in to her description of herself as working *part-time*. She was, in reality, working a full-time load. She described working ten- to twelve-hour days on the three days she was in the office, as well as the workday at home. Interestingly, her comments regarding this indicated a similar view to that previously discussed, that this was somehow *less* work:

> Working three days in the office provides me an excellent balance between work and family. Although I do about 10-12 hours over three days, it is worth it to have the remaining time at home. - *Meredith (email)*

Here again, Meredith differentiated between work done in the workplace and work done in her home. This was despite telling us how her workday at home was kept busy both reading

and writing reports and preparing presentations. Furthermore, she was available to her staff on the fifth weekday as well: 'I have access to email at home and a mobile phone, so I am contactable at all times.' Despite all this, she had to endure comments from her colleagues:

> There is often comment made about my 'long weekends' and how lucky I am. And innuendo such as 'Where did you go for lunch/coffee/playgroups, etc yesterday?' Also at times I have not been involved in some projects because 'You only work three days'. … Some upper level managers (old school) do not agree with part time workers at all. One in particular is a personal friend, and has regularly told me (on a social level) that he thinks part-time managers are a joke and that they can't possibly be as committed as full-time. – *Meredith (email)*

The comments of Meredith's "friend" regarding her commitment to the organisation reveal an underlying assumption that working longer hours is associated with loyalty and dedication. Furthermore, for Meredith to be seen as dedicated, this working time apparently needed to be undertaken in the workplace where she was visible to others. This definition of commitment is a traditional and gendered one, where the committed worker is seen as someone for whom work is primary and the demands of family and other non-work areas are secondary (Lewis 1997; Perlow 1998). Lewis (2003) argued that this definition serves the needs of neither women nor men. Certainly, while Meredith persisted despite the daily battle with these perceptions, it raises the question of how many men would have asked for this option in the first place. The gendered nature of these assumptions would almost definitely lead to questions about a man's commitment both to the organisation and his career.

Meredith definitely felt that her commitment was being questioned, even if this was unspoken by some in the organisation. As with the introduction of other workplace policies, the importance of managerial support has been identified for those using flexible working arrangements (Perlow 1995; Thompson et al. 1999). Although Meredith had this support from her immediate manager, the continual barbs from her colleagues made her work life more difficult. There was a focus in her actions in the workplace on proving others were wrong. She spoke about rarely having sick leave and not taking long lunches when at work, using these as a demonstration of her dedication to her job. It is questionable, however, whether these particular behaviours would have any effect on others' perceptions of her commitment. By persisting in this way, she may just be making her life more difficult – and negating the benefits of work-life balance she was trying to achieve.

Conclusion

Amidst discussion of balancing issues of organisational competitiveness with employee rights and wellbeing, the stories of these middle managers warrant attention. The collision of work and personal life brought with it frustration, stress and fatigue, as respondents were often unable to adequately separate their workplace experiences from their personal lives. Technological advances such as laptop computers and mobile phones, in conjunction with increased organisational expectations, meant that these middle managers were seeing more and more of their "own time" being engulfed by work. If a balance between organisational and employee needs is truly sought, we must continue to explore employees' concerns for the unwelcome intrusion of work into other areas of their lives.
References available upon request.