Juggling home and work

On a typical weekday, Canadian workers spend 10.5 hours working or commuting to work and 4 hours doing housework and caring for children or other dependants. Add in sleeping, and this leaves the average employee with little time for personal pursuits.[1] These types of demands on people's time can lead to difficulty balancing the pressures of home and working life.

The difficulties faced by employees in balancing home and work life were investigated through a needs assessment conducted as an integral part of the Workplace Health System—a comprehensive approach developed by Health Canada to promote health.

About 50,000 Canadian employees, primarily workers in large companies, completed the needs assessments. Companies involved in the study were actively seeking to improve their workers' health, and for this reason, the data cannot be construed as representative of Canadian employees generally.

Nonetheless, the needs assessments provide valuable insights into the relationships between the demands of employees' work and home environments and their ability to juggle these demands.

The sample includes about equal numbers of men and women. Employees with higher education levels are over-represented compared with the population as a whole, but the relationships found between employee concerns and health and lifestyle practices are consistent with those observed in national surveys.

In the current analysis, balancing the demands of work and home is examined in relation to potential sources of stress in both environments. Personal health practices and resources that can mediate or exacerbate the situation are also explored.
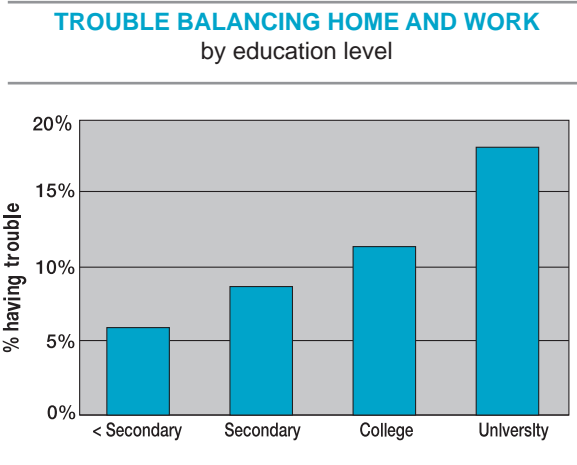
Balancing home and work

While the majority of employees appear able to cope with the demands of work and family life, over one in ten report experiencing excess worry, nerves, or stress because they have "trouble balancing home and work responsibilities." A demographic analysis shows the following groups as particularly vulnerable to the juggling act:

- Women are almost twice as likely as men to experience difficulty (17% versus 10%).

- Employees between 30 and 49 years old are the most likely to have difficulty balancing home and work. This age span represents a time in life when people are typically establishing a career and having a family.

- Difficulty balancing home and work demands increases with education. As shown in Figure 1, employees with university degrees are more than twice as likely to experience stress from home and work as are employees with secondary education or less. In addition, employees in professional jobs are the most likely to have trouble with the juggling act. This higher stress level of people with higher education levels could be explained by the fact that they tend to work longer hours.[1]
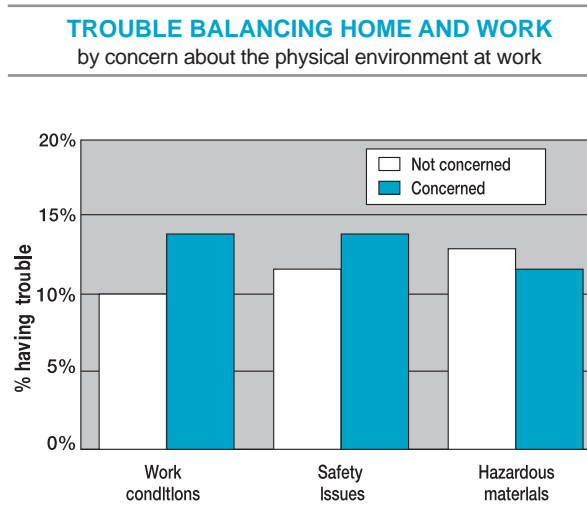
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Figure 1

TROUBLE BALANCING HOME AND WORK
by education level

% having trouble — bar chart with categories: < Secondary, Secondary, College, University

employees who are not concerned with work conditions versus 14% for those who are).

Figure 3 shows that in combination, work conditions, safety issues, and hazardous materials can slightly increase the likelihood that employees experience stress juggling work and home. Concern with even one aspect of the physical work environment seems to increase the difficulty of balancing home and work life to a modest degree (13% for those concerned with one aspect versus 9% for those reporting no concern with any aspect of the physical environment).

Physical environment at work

The majority of employees are either some-what or very concerned with unpleasant working conditions (77%) and safety issues (67%). In addition, substantial numbers are concerned about exposure to dangerous chemicals or hazardous materials (40%) at work.

Concerns about the physical environment at work do not appear to influence the ability of employees to cope with the joint demands of work and home (Figure 2). Indeed, the largest difference is associated with unpleas-ant work conditions—bad air, hot or cold tem-perature, poor workspace, poor lighting, or noise and vibrations—and it is small (10% for
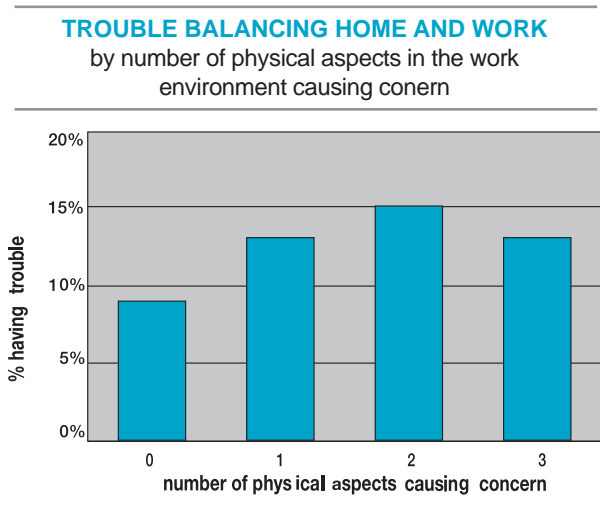
Figure 2

TROUBLE BALANCING HOME AND WORK
by concern about the physical environment at work

% having trouble — bar chart with Not concerned / Concerned legend, categories: Work conditions, Safety Issues, Hazardous materials

Figure 3

TROUBLE BALANCING HOME AND WORK
by number of physical aspects in the work environment causing conern

% having trouble — bar chart with categories: 0, 1, 2, 3 (number of physical aspects causing concern)

Social environment at work

The social environment encompasses aspects of social interactions and corporate culture. The Workplace Health System needs assessment covered topics related to inter-personal relations, management practices, the amount of change inherent in employees' jobs, job demands, and employees' sense of personal control over their jobs.

Three-quarters of employees experience stress due to at least one aspect of the social environment at work. Employees are either somewhat or very concerned with:

- degree of job demands (52%);
- job-related changes (33%);
- management practices (28%);

- lack of job control (25%);
- interpersonal relations (18%); and
- other aspects (29%).

Various aspects of the social environment at work detract from employees' ability to cope with the overall pressures of work and home. Employees experiencing stress from the social environment are more likely to have difficulty balancing home and work demands than are their counterparts who don't face this kind of stress. Job demands appear to pose the greatest challenge to balancing work and home life, as shown in Figure 4. These job demands include time pressures and deadlines, long hours, unclear or conflicting duties, having too much responsibility, or work that is too tiring or boring.

Employees who have trouble juggling home and work are also more likely to cite excess stress due to:

- interpersonal relationships;
- job-related changes; and
- job control.

Employees also had the opportunity to indicate if there were other sources of stress or worry related to work. Almost one-third of employees indicated that some other aspect of work did indeed cause concern. Of those, 23% had trouble balancing home and work, compared with only 9% of others. These other sources include things like, "The work is mentally tiring" and "Difficulty understanding written instructions."

The stress caused by social aspects of work appears to take a cumulative toll on people's ability to balance work and home life. Figure 5 shows that the greater the number of sources of worry, the greater the likelihood that the employee has difficulty coping with the combined pressures of work and home. Indeed, employees experiencing four or more of these stress sources at work have a one-in-five chance of having trouble dealing with the joint pressures of work and family.

These results are consistent with those of the 1994 National Population Health Survey,[2] which found that perceptions of life stress increased with the number of sources of job stress arising from the social and cultural environment at work. The social stressors probed in that survey were tight deadlines, conflicts with others, lack of feedback, unclear duties, and lack of influence. Almost 60% of Canadian workers reported experiencing at least one of these stressors.
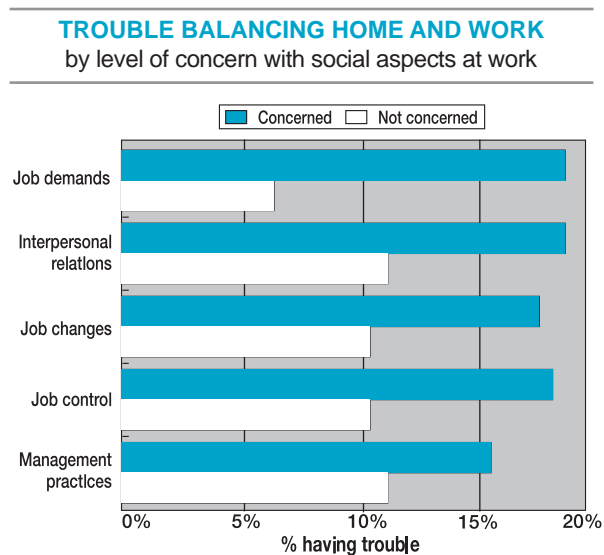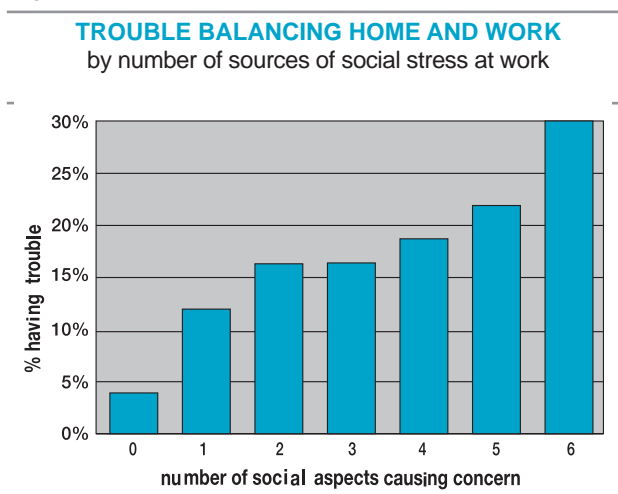
Figure 4

TROUBLE BALANCING HOME AND WORK
by level of concern with social aspects at work

Figure 5

TROUBLE BALANCING HOME AND WORK
by number of sources of social stress at work

As in the Workplace Health System needs assessment, employees who faced more sources of job stress in the social environment at work also experienced a higher overall degree of life stress. As shown in Figure 6, Canadians citing at least three sources of stress from their job were more than twice as likely to have very stressful lives compared with those reporting no job stress. Similar dif-

Figure 6

PERCEIVED LIFE STRESS[2]
by number of social stressors at work
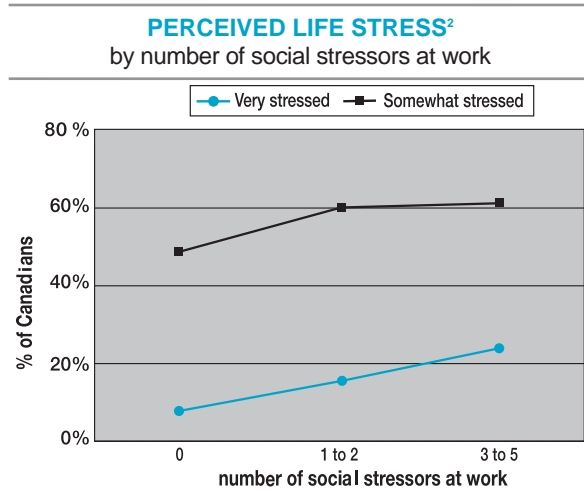
1990 Health Promotion Survey

ferences hold for those categorized as having somewhat stressful lives. The relationship was similar for both men and women.

Since both the 1990 Health Promotion Survey and the current needs assessment arrive at similar conclusions, the current findings can probably be generalized to the population as a whole. Increasing employees' feelings that they can influence what happens to them at work can mediate the effects of uncontrollable events and conditions.[3] Ensuring employee participation in decisions affecting deadlines, scheduling of work, and delineation of duties can increase their sense of personal control, thereby reducing stress.

All workers face demands specific to their life stage. It is important, when aiming to increase health, to increase the opportunities for employees to control the demands placed on them. Research shows that employees with higher demands have better health if they also have high control.[3] Consequently, the source of stress need not be a source of poor performance.

Home life

When asked about various aspects of home life that might cause worry and stress, three-quarters of employees report facing excess worry, nerves, or stress from one or more aspects of their home life, including issues related to

- finances (reported by 40% of employees);
- illness and death in the family (23%);
- general demands (21%);
- living arrangements (14%);
- children (10%);
- relationships (34%); and
- high-risk behaviours (7%).

As Figure 7 shows, three of these issues distinguish those having difficulty in balancing work and home life and those who don't. Employees who report stress from trying to juggle home and work demands are more likely than others to also report being stressed as a result of

- demands, or having too much to do at home;
- concerns related to children; and
- relationships.

Figure 7

TROUBLE BALANCING HOME AND WORK
by source of home stress
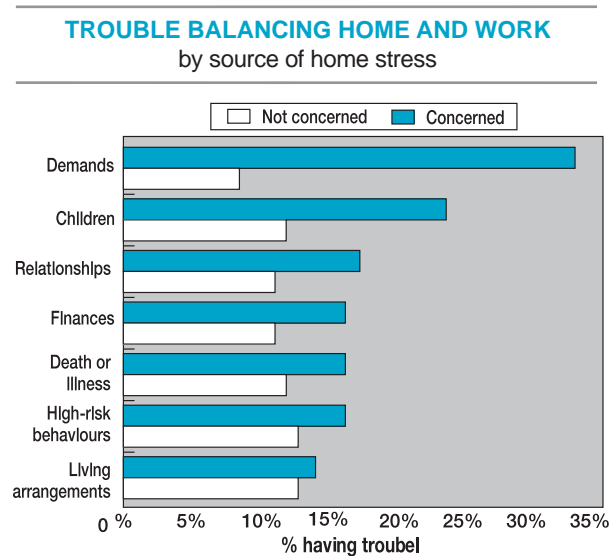
Among employees reporting too much to do at home, 30- to 49-year-olds are more likely than other age groups to have trouble balancing home and work. Likewise, among employees experiencing concerns related to children, those aged 40–49 are the most likely to have trouble with the juggling act, followed by 30- to 39-year-olds. Women having concerns related to children are more likely than men to report trouble balancing the two domains.

In addition, employees who have difficulty balancing the demands of home and work report a greater number of sources of stress arising from their home lives. Indeed, as shown in Figure 8, employees concerned with five or more aspects of home life are six times as likely as those reporting no concern to have difficulty juggling home and work. In addition, people who have more stress sources at home tend to have more and
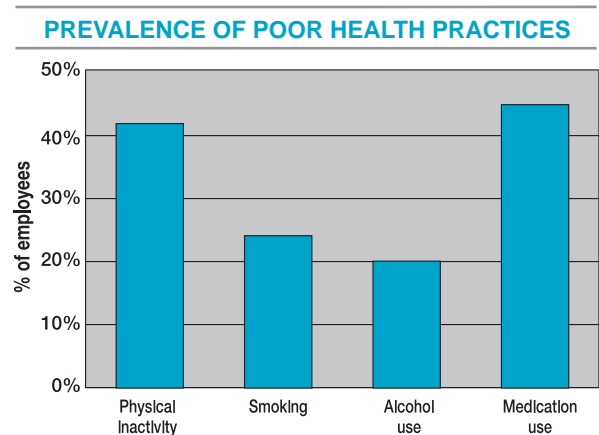
Figure 8

TROUBLE BALANCING HOME AND WORK
by degree of stress arising from home life
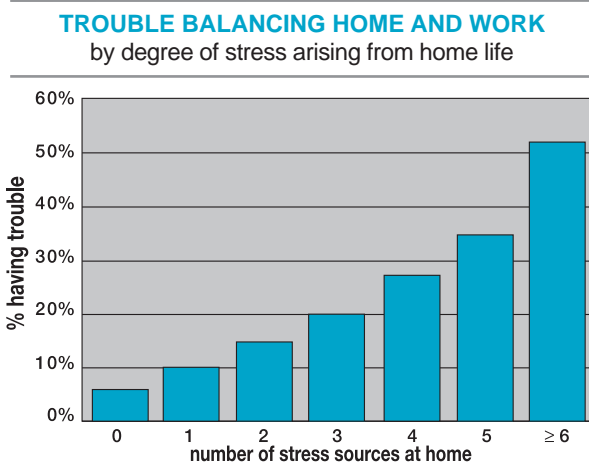
more trouble balancing home and work with advancing age.

Health practices

Four personal health practices were probed in the needs assessment: participation in physical activity, tobacco use, alcohol use, and medical and non-medical use of drugs. Results, plotted in Figure 9, show that

- over 40% of employees participate irregularly in physical activity, or not at all;
- 24% currently smoke;
- 20 % report heavy alcohol usage;

Figure 9

PREVALENCE OF POOR HEALTH PRACTICES

- 45% take medication, mostly for pain relief.

There is evidence that regular physical activity can help individuals cope with stress.[4] The relationship depicted in Figure 10 between regular physical activity and coping with the demands of home and work is consistent with this evidence. Those who are active regularly are less likely to report excess worry or stress arising from juggling work and home life.

Figure 10

TROUBLE BALANCING HOME AND WORK
by individual health practices
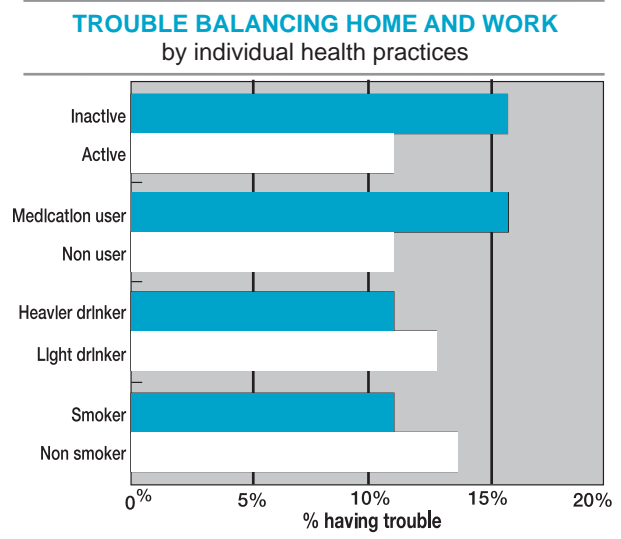
Likewise, employees who use medication tend to have more trouble balancing home and work. This may be due in part to the fact that over 10% of employees take medication to help them sleep and 5%, to calm down. Medication usage is likely a reflection of the worry and stress reported by employees.

Smoking and heavy alcohol usage do not appear to introduce additional difficulty in balancing home and family life. The differences shown in Figure 10 between smoking and non smoking and between heavier drinking and light drinking are negligible (<5 percentage points).

Personal resources

Social support and self-efficacy (confidence in personal ability) over work and over health help to reduce employee stress derived from their social environment at work, and can be considered important personal resources. As noted earlier, stress arising from the joint demands of work and home life is associated primarily with the social work environment rather than the physical work environment. Therefore, personal resources are expected to play an important mediating role in reducing employee stress due to balancing the demands of home and work.

Indeed, the needs assessment results show that experiencing stress from the demands of home and work occurs less frequently among employees who feel in control of their health than among those who do not. Among employees without support networks, women are more likely than men to have trouble balancing home and work.

In addition, employees with more personal resources tend to cope better with the demands of work and family life. As shown in Figure 11, the fewer resources employees

Figure 11

TROUBLE BALANCING HOME AND WORK
by number of personal resources
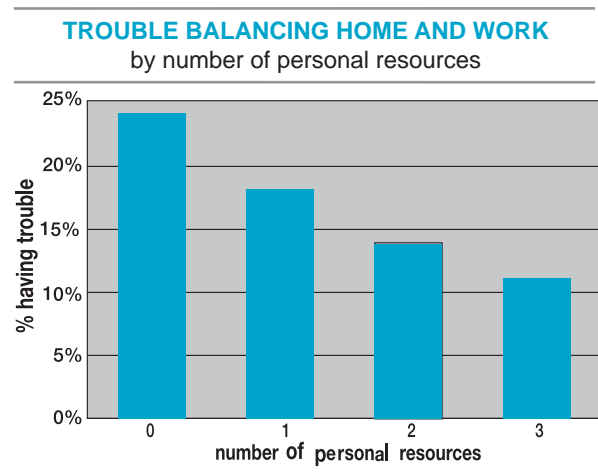
report, the more likely they are to have trouble juggling home and work.

To help employees balance these demands, social support and building a sense of employee empowerment should be part of a comprehensive approach to employee wellness. Organizational policies and programs should be developed in conjunction with employees to increase their sense of control over things that happen to them at work. Strategies should also be geared to increase social support, which has been shown to increase employees' sense of control over work and, in turn, feeling of control over things that affect their health.[3]

Balancing the "achieving self" with the "nurturing self"

Difficulty juggling home and work increases with the degree of stress in the social environment at work, particularly job demands and interpersonal relations, as well as with stress at home. Worksites can help employees to reduce these sources of stress by increasing their sense of control over their situation, building social support, and encouraging regular physical activity to help them cope with stress. Ways to achieve this include:

Building flexibility

- Build flexibility into programs and policies to permit employees to juggle family responsibilities like child care with work demands like tight deadlines. Flexible work hours are related to higher organizational commitment and job satisfaction.[5]

- Allow employees to pursue flexible career paths that enable them to progress at a pace more compatible with their values and life situations and that provide alternative ways of contributing to the organization.[6]

Implementing family-responsive policies

- Explore alternative work arrangements like telecommuting and job sharing. Institute family-responsive policies such as daycare, elder care, reduced work weeks, and working from the home. Adjust policies to allow more flexibility in work and family roles, thus developing a culture that is more supportive of workers in dual-earner relationships.[7]

- Reinvent the organization's culture to understand employee situations and needs and minimize the impact of work on family life. A fundamental re-thinking of the organization is required along with training of managers and supervisors in preventing

and reducing stress due to work–home conflicts.[8]

- Change the work environment to make it easier for women to pursue a productive and challenging career and for men to contribute more fully to their families' development.[9] Research shows that "husbands of working wives do not spend significantly more time in family work compared with husbands of nonworking wives."[7]

Increasing control over work

- Increase the influence and sense of empowerment that employees have over their work situation by involving them in decisions related to their work as well as working conditions that could affect their health.[6]

- Reassess employee workloads. Job demands appear to pose the greatest challenge to balancing work and home life.

Fostering healthy coping mechanisms

- Foster favourable health practices while building social support. For instance, start a walking club at lunch to promote regular physical activity while building social support.

- Integrate physical activity into the corporate culture through team-building exercises and signage to cue and reinforce taking the stairs. Whenever possible, open programs to family members.

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Caveats for the reader

1. The results presented in this bulletin apply to the Workplace Health System sample only.
Although the sample is made up of about 50,000 employees nationwide, it is not a random sample. Only companies interested in implementing Health Canada's Workplace Health System took part in the needs assessment, so we can't generalize the findings to the general working population. The results may however provide useful insights and an indication of what may be in store for the rest of the workforce.

2. No significance testing can be done on these data.
Because the data are not random, we can't do significance tests, only discuss relationships where substantial differences (i.e., 5 percentage points) appear.

3. This type of study cannot yield cause-and-effect relationships.
If we say, for example, that employees with a higher degree of home stress are more likely to report more difficulty balancing home and work, we may *not* conclude that home stress causes the difficulty (or that the difficulty causes home stress), simply that the two appear together *more often than by chance alone*. To prove cause and effect, a strong theoretical framework supported by the weight of empirical evidence is needed. When you see these words:
• associated with;
• related to;
• linked to;
• more likely to;
do not replace them with "caused by"!