

Reducing Work–Life Conflict: What Works? What Doesn't

Executive Summary

Dr. Chris Higgins

Professor, Richard Ivey School of Business
University of Western Ontario

Dr. Linda Duxbury

Professor, Sprott School of Business
Carleton University

Sean Lyons

Assistant Professor
Gerald Schwartz School of Business and Information Systems
St. Francis Xavier University

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Summary Report

Work–life conflict is defined as a form of inter-role conflict in which work and family demands are mutually incompatible so that meeting demands in one domain makes it difficult to meet demands in the other. In our research we conceptualize work–life conflict broadly to include:

- **Role overload:** Role overload occurs when the total demands on time and energy associated with the prescribed activities of multiple roles are too great to perform the roles adequately or comfortably.
- **Work-to-family interference:** Work-to-family interference occurs when work demands and responsibilities make it more difficult to fulfill family roles.
- **Family-to-work interference:** Family-to-work interference occurs when family demands and responsibilities make it more difficult to fulfill work-role responsibilities.
- **Caregiver strain:** A form of strain that can be attributed to the “burdens” associated with the need to provide care or assistance to an elderly dependent.

To this point, our research initiatives have ascertained:

- Work and life are no longer separate domains for a significant proportion of the Canadian workforce.
- The four components of work–life conflict have differential impacts on the physical and mental health of employees.
- High levels of role overload have become systemic within the population of employees working for Canada's largest employers. The majority of employees in our 2001 sample (58%) reported high levels of role overload.
- The percentage of the workforce with high role overload has increased by 11 percentage points over the past decade.
- Just over one in four (28%) of the Canadians in our 2001 sample report that their work responsibilities interfere with their ability to fulfill their responsibilities at home (i.e. high work-to-family interference). This is the same proportion with high levels of this form of conflict as observed in 1991.
- Family-to-work interference is not common in Canada at this time: Only 10% of the sample reported high levels of family-to-work interference.

- The percentage of working Canadians who give priority to family rather than work has doubled over the past decade. This increase can be attributed to the fact that the number of employees with elder care responsibilities has increased over the same time period.
- Three times as many Canadians give priority to work at the expense of their family as give priority to family at the expense of work.
- The amount of time Canadians spend in work-related activities increased between 1991 and 2001. Whereas one in ten of the Canadians in our 1991 sample worked 50 or more hours per week, one in four does so now. This increase in time in work was observed for all job groups and all sectors.
- The majority of Canada's largest employers cannot be considered to be best practice.
- Conditions within Canadian organizations have declined over time. Three times more employees reported high job stress in 2001 than in 1991. The percentage of the sample with high job satisfaction and commitment was significantly lower in 2001 than in 1991.
- Many individuals working for Canada's largest employers are in poor mental health. Over half of the respondents reported high levels of perceived stress; one in three reported high levels of burnout and depressed mood. Only 41% were satisfied with their lives and one in five was dissatisfied. Almost one in five perceived that their physical health was fair to poor.
- The physical and mental health of Canadian employees has deteriorated over time: 1.5 times more employees reported high depressed mood in 2001 than in 1991. Similarly, 1.4 times more employees reported high levels of perceived stress in 2001 than in 1991.
- Organizational culture and work demands are the two most important predictors of role overload and work-to-family interference.
- Non-work demands, family type and adult role responsibilities are the most important predictors of caregiver strain and family-to-work interference.

Only one important question remains to be answered—what can be done to reduce the various forms of work–life conflict? The answer to this question is the focus of this report. Data¹ from the 2001 National Work–Life Conflict Study were used to answer the following five questions:

¹ The sample consists of 31,571 Canadian employees who work for medium to large (i.e. 500 or more employees) public, private and not-for-profit organizations.

1. How do Canadian employees cope with competing work and family demands?
Specifically:
 - What resources do Canadian organizations provide to help employees cope with work and family conflict?
 - What personal coping strategies are used by Canadian employees?
 - What strategies are used within families?
2. What advice can we offer organizations interested in reducing the levels of role overload, work-to-family interference, family-to-work interference and caregiver strain in their workforce?
3. What advice can we provide to individual employees about how best to cope with role overload, work-to-family interference, family-to-work interference and caregiver strain?
4. What advice can we offer to Canadian families about how best to cope with role overload, work-to-family interference, family-to-work interference and caregiver strain?
5. How do gender, job type and dependent care status affect the use of these different coping strategies and the advice we would offer?

Relevance of This Research

This study provides critical 2001 benchmark data on the strategies Canadian employees and their families use to cope with work–life conflict. It also provides benchmark data on the availability and use of a number of key family-friendly policies and practices in Canadian organizations, including alternative work arrangements, work-time and work-location flexibility (i.e. perceived flexibility), supportive management, and formal benefits and policies. These benchmark data allow employees, organizations, governments and unions to evaluate organizational efforts with respect to this issue. They also allow us to benchmark how Canada is doing in this area compared to other countries.

The data also provide value by examining to what extent the different organizational supports and coping strategies examined in this study actually help employees balance competing work and family demands. Such information is critical to policy makers and practitioners who are seeking advice about what types of work–life policies and practices to implement and how to maximize the benefits they receive given their spending in the area. Such information should also prove valuable to individuals and organizations that have the responsibility of treating individuals with high work life conflict (i.e. counsellors, EAP and health care providers). It will also provide key information to employees and their families on how to best cope with work–life conflict and to academics who are conducting research into this area.

Finally, this research separates work–life conflict into its four component parts and examines how gender, dependent care status and job type influence the effectiveness of the various policies and practices at reducing work–life conflict. Such an examination improves our understanding of how to reduce the various forms of work–life conflict which will, in turn,

enable policy makers and organizations to target their interventions, policies and programs to a particular type of work–life conflict as well as specific groups of employees (i.e. female managers and professionals, women with children).

Q1a: Resources Canadian organizations provide to help employees cope with work and family conflict

The data support the following conclusions with respect to this issue.

1. *The use of alternative work arrangements in Canada is relatively low at this time.* Canadian firms look much like they did a decade ago with respect to the use of alternative work arrangements. Just over half (59%) of the respondents work a “regular” work day (i.e. little to no formal flexibility with respect to arrival and departure times; no work location flexibility). Slightly less than one in four (23%) works flextime, 14% work a compressed work week and 4% work part-time arrangements. Formal job sharing and tele-work programs are rare as only 1.3% of the sample job share while 1% formally work from home.
2. *While some Canadians enjoy high levels of work-time and -location flexibility, many do not.* The data paint a mixed picture with respect to the amount of flexibility Canadian employees perceive they have over their work schedule and work location. While many respondents (39%) have moderate levels of informal flexibility and 33% have high flexibility, a substantial percent of the sample (29%) feel that they have little control over their work time. Closer examination of the flexibility data indicate that while many organizations have introduced progressive programs to help employees with young children with their parenting responsibilities, the majority of companies still see work–life balance issues through a child care lens and have not made substantive progress with respect to the issue of elder care or parenting of older children. Furthermore, the fact that very few employees perceive that they have the flexibility they need with respect to getting time off work to attend work-related training and development opportunities or the ability to tele-work means that Canadian organizations are not addressing the needs of their younger employees—a reality that is likely to be increasingly problematic in a seller’s market for labour. Finally, the fact that almost half of the sample say it is difficult for them to arrange their work schedule to meet personal or family commitments suggests that many Canadian organizations persist in operating under the “myth of separate worlds” – a situation that is simply untenable in a society where both partners work for pay outside the home in the majority of Canadian families.
3. *Approximately half of the employees in this study report to a supportive manager.* Forty-seven percent of the respondents consider that their managers are supportive. On a more challenging note, just over one in three respondents (37%) work for “mixed managers” who are not consistent with respect to the extent to which they engage in supportive behaviours. One in six (16%) works for managers who rarely undertake any of the supportive actions included in the supportive manager measure.
4. *One in ten of the employees in this sample reports to a non-supportive manager.* A majority (57%) of the 32,000 employees in this sample work for managers who rarely display what

employees consider to be non-supportive behaviours. Just over one in ten (13%) work for non-supportive managers who frequently engage in non-supportive actions such as focusing on hours, not output, and working long hours and expecting their employees to do the same. Just under one in three (29% of respondents) works for managers who are not consistent in their behaviour.

5. *Most Canadian organizations treat work–life issues in a reactive way and download the costs of dealing with this issue to employees.* Five benefits are widely available in Canada’s larger firms (unpaid leave of absence (LOA, 84%), psychological/health counselling (EAP, 83%), the ability to take an unpaid emergency day off work (76%), the ability to take time off work instead of overtime pay (75%), and the ability to take short-term personal/family leave without pay (66%). These benefits tend to be reactive in nature and low “cost” to the organization as the employee is not paid when they have to take time off work to deal with personal/family issues
6. *Very few Canadian organizations can be considered best practice with respect to the provision of key work–life benefits.* Only a minority of the respondents had access to progressive work–life benefits such as flexible work arrangements (49%), part-time work with pro-rated benefits (45%), supportive relocation policies (44%), personal days off with pay (42%), and tele-work (20%). Furthermore, virtually none of Canada’s larger employers provides benefits that help employees deal with dependent care obligations (i.e. only 8% of the sample had access to employer-provided on-site day care while 7% were offered child care referral services and 6% were given elder care referral).

Q1b: Personal coping strategies used by Canadian employees

The data from this study indicate that many Canadian employees do not deal effectively with stress. The following conclusions are made with respect to this issue:

1. *Canadian employees use a myriad of strategies to cope with stress.* Coping strategies used by the Canadians in this study include social support (i.e. talk to colleagues and/or family, seek help from colleagues and family), active coping techniques aimed at the reduction or elimination of the sources of conflict (i.e. prioritize, schedule, organize and plan, delegate), avoidance (i.e. try to forget about it, find another activity to take one’s mind of things), and reactive coping techniques that focus on alleviating the symptoms of stress (i.e. have an alcoholic drink, take prescription drugs, work harder, reduce the quality of things one does).
2. *The majority of Canadians use active coping strategies* such as prioritizing, scheduling, organizing and planning to cope with stress. Unfortunately, most of those who implement these strategies give a higher priority to work than to family, a strategy that is not sustainable in the long term.
3. *Very few Canadians cope by delegating tasks to others.* While it is hard to determine why the use of delegation is low (only 27% of the sample cope by delegating), it may be that Canadians have no one to delegate to in the time-crunched workplace or at home.

4. *The majority of employed Canadians do not rely on social support networks for help.* A majority of employed Canadians try to deal with stress on their own—they do not rely on social support networks for help. They rarely turn to either their colleagues at work or their family and friends for support or help.
5. *A substantive number of Canadian employees rely on escapist coping strategies.* One in three of our respondents frequently seeks out other activities to try to take their mind off the stressor, while one in five frequently “just tries to forget about it.” Escapist strategies are typically less effective as the stressor typically remains unchanged and hence problematic.
6. *One in ten Canadian employees uses reactive coping strategies.* A substantive number of Canadians cope with stress by having an alcoholic drink (12%) and using prescription, over-the-counter or illegal drugs (11%) several times a week or daily. These strategies are reactive ways of dealing with the emotions aroused by stress and problematic both socially (i.e. linked to greater physical illness and costs to the health care system as well as family dysfunction) and economically (i.e. related to reduced productivity and increased absenteeism).
7. *Many Canadians cope by “just trying to do it all.”* Of particular concern is that approximately half of the respondents coped by “just trying to do it all/working harder.” This finding is consistent with the fact that few Canadians ask for help and reinforces our contention that the active coping strategies discussed earlier are directed toward getting more things done rather than eliminating an activity or role.
8. *Employed Canadians cope by limiting their family size.* Just over half of the sample used family planning strategies to cope with work–life conflict. One in four respondents indicated that they had had fewer children because of demands at work. A further 28% indicated that they had delayed starting a family/decided not to have a family because they could not balance the demands of their career with a family. These findings imply that governments that wish to increase their birth rates need to deal with the issue of work–life conflict.
9. *One in three employed Canadians copes by working different hours than their spouse.* These individuals “off-shifted” with their partner to reduce their reliance on, or need for, formal child care and/or elder care.

Q1c: Personal coping strategies used within Canadian families

The data from this study indicate that many Canadian employees do not deal effectively with stress. The following conclusions are presented with respect to this issue.

1. *Canadian families use five different sets of coping strategies in their attempt to deal with work–life conflict.* They restructure and redefine family roles (i.e. encourage children to help each other, get children to help with household tasks, cover household responsibilities for each other, try to be flexible, plan family time together), put family first (i.e. limit job involvement to allow time for family, modify work schedule, plan work changes around family needs, identify one partner as responsible for family, leave work problems at work),

sacrifice personal needs and standards (i.e. leave things undone around the house, get by on less sleep, cut down on outside activities, buy more goods and services), seek social support (i.e. rely on extended family for help, rely on friends for help), and procure outside help (i.e. hire help to care for the children, hire help to care for elderly dependents).

2. *The majority of Canadian employees cope by re-structuring family-role expectations.* Canadian families cope by trying to be flexible (76%), covering household responsibilities for each other (72%), encouraging their children to help each other (71%), getting children to help with household tasks (53%) and planning family time together (48%).
3. *The majority of Canadian employees cope with work–life issues by sacrificing their personal needs:* They do this by leaving things undone around the house (77%), cutting down on outside activities (56%) and getting by on less sleep (54%). These findings suggest that the first line of defence against high levels of work–life conflict is to put work first—to meet work demands at the expense of family and/or personal life.
4. *Many Canadian families try to buy work–life balance.* A substantive number of Canadians try to cope by purchasing support for family-role responsibilities from outside the family. They hire help from outside to care for their children (42%) and their elderly dependents (26%) and buy more goods and services (45%). It is interesting to note that Canadians are more likely to try to “buy” balance than they are to ask extended family (30%) or friends (17%) for help. These data reinforce the need for governments and businesses to provide the services needed by Canadians who are trying to cope with competing demands.
5. *One in three Canadian employees copes by putting family first.* A substantive minority of respondents seem to buck the trend of expecting family members to adapt to their work situation and instead use coping strategies that put family first. They do this by trying to leave work problems at work (i.e. 50% try to psychologically separate their work and non-work domains), limiting their job involvement to give time to the family (37%), planning work changes around family needs (36%), identifying one partner as being responsible for household tasks (31%) and modifying their work schedule to accommodate their family schedule (24%). While laudable, these strategies may limit the employee’s promotion opportunities as they run counter to the dominant cultural norms in Canada.

Q2a: Advice to organizations interested in reducing role overload

This study offers the following four pieces of advice to organizations who wish to reduce role overload within their workforce.

1. *Perceived flexibility is the key to reducing role overload.* This study has identified a very strong association between higher levels of perceived flexibility and lower levels of role overload. Two forms of flexibility, in particular, seem to be fundamental to the ability to cope with role overload: the ability to arrange one’s work schedule to meet personal or family commitments, and the ability to interrupt one’s work day to deal with a personal or family matter and then return to work. Several other forms of flexibility (ranked in the list below from most effective to least effective) were also associated with an increased ability

to cope with role overload, including the ability to take holidays when they want, the ability to get home from work in time to have meals with their family, paid days off for employees who need to care for elderly dependents or a sick child, the ability to be home when children get home from school, and work-time flexibility.

2. *Employees who report to a non-supportive manager report higher levels of role overload.* How can organizations reduce role overload? A focus on management behaviour in general, and on reducing non-supportive management, in particular, should yield substantial reductions in employee role overload. The data point to one management behaviour that is strongly associated with increased role overload: having a manager who has unrealistic expectations with respect to work. Other problematic management behaviours in terms of role overload include working long hours and expecting employees to do the same, making employees feel guilty about time off work for personal or family reasons, and focusing on hours of work not output. Decreasing the extent to which these behaviours occur within the organization should, therefore, be a high priority in organizations wishing to address role overload.
3. *Employees who report to a supportive manager report lower levels of role overload.* Organizations that wish to reduce role overload could also achieve their goals by increasing the number of supportive managers within their organization. Specifically, they need to increase the extent to which their managers are effective at planning the work to be done, are available to answer their employees' questions, make expectations clear, listen to their employees' concerns, and give recognition for a job well done.
4. *Flexible work arrangements and family-friendly benefits, on their own, do little to help employees cope with role overload.* These findings indicate that companies that implement flexible work arrangement policies or introduce progressive family-friendly benefit packages will not see a reduction in role overload if they do not address issues associated with the use of such policies and benefits.

Q2b: Advice to organizations interested in reducing work-to-family interference

The advice we gave employers with respect to helping employees cope with work-to-family interference is virtually identical to that provided for role overload: increase perceived flexibility and focus on the behaviour of your managers. Specifically, organizations that wish to reduce this form of work–life conflict should consider the following.

1. *Perceived flexibility is the key to reducing work-to-family interference.* This research has identified a very strong association between higher levels of perceived flexibility and lower levels of work-to-family interference. The following six forms of flexibility, in particular, appear to be very effective in helping all employees cope with this form of work–life conflict: arrange one's work schedule to meet personal or family commitments, get home from work in time to have meals with their family, interrupt one's work day to deal with personal or family matters and then return to work, take paid time off work to attend a course or a conference, take a paid day off to care for a sick child, and take a paid day off to care for an elderly dependent. All of these forms of flexibility give employees greater

control over the work–family interface by helping them deal with family or personal issues (both scheduled and unanticipated) during work hours. Given the high costs of this form of work–life conflict, it would appear that allowing employees greater freedom to deal with personal issues during work hours makes good business sense.

2. *Who you work for and how they behave is key to coping with work-to-family interference.* The findings on work-to-family interference support our contention that work–life conflict depends more on who you report to within the organization than the organization you work for. The importance of developing strategies to reduce non-supportive management behaviours within the organization can be illustrated by noting the very strong association between increased work-to-family interference and working for a manager who has unrealistic expectations with respect to the work to be done, and works long hours and expects employees to do the same. Interference also increases when employees report to a manager who makes the employee feel guilty about time off work for personal or family reasons, focuses on hours of work not output, puts the employee down in front of others, and only talks to the employee when they make a mistake. Decreasing the extent to which these behaviours occur should be a high priority in organizations that wish to address this form of work–life conflict. A focus on increasing the number of supportive managers within the organization should also help employees cope with work-to-family interference. Specifically, organizations need to increase the extent to which their managers listen to employees’ concerns, effectively plan the work to be done, make themselves available to answer their employees’ questions, ask for input before making decisions that affect employees’ work, make expectations clear, give recognition for a job well done, support their employees’ decisions, provide constructive feedback and share information with employees.
3. *Shift work is associated with higher work-to-family interference.* The evidence from this study is unequivocal—employees who perform shift work are significantly more likely to report higher work-to-family interference than their counterparts who do not perform shift work. This work arrangement appears to be more problematic for women in other positions within the organization.
4. *Flexible work arrangements and family-friendly benefits, on their own, do little to help employees cope with work-to-family interference.* These findings are virtually identical to what was observed for role overload and reinforce our contention that companies cannot reduce work–life conflict by implementing flexible work policies or providing progressive family-friendly benefit packages.

Q2c: Advice to organizations interested in reducing family-to-work interference

While organizations can do a lot to help their employees cope with role overload and work-to-family interference, their options are much more limited when it comes to helping reduce family-to-work interference. Interventions such as perceived flexibility and management support, which were effective at alleviating role overload and work-to-family interference, had little (i.e.

perceived flexibility) to no (i.e. supportive manager) impact on family-to-work interference. That being said, some insights into how organizations can help their employees cope with family-to-work interference are summarized below.

1. *The ability to arrange one's work schedule to meet personal/family commitments can help employees cope with family-to-work interference.* Organizations wishing to help employees with dependent care cope with family-to-work interference should make it easier for these employees to arrange their work schedule to meet personal and family commitments, vary their work hours and take holidays when they want. Organizations do, however, need to appreciate that to be effective, employees must perceive that this form of flexibility is present at all times as employees with only moderate flexibility in these areas realized no increased ability to cope with family-to-work interference.
2. *Non-supportive management increases family-to-work interference.* Reporting to a non-supportive manager who makes employees feel guilty about time off work for personal or family reasons and focuses on hours of work not output was found to exacerbate family-to-work interference. As such, efforts to reduce non-supportive management within the organization will also yield positive returns with respect to this form of work–life conflict.
3. *Working a regular work day reduces family-to-work interference.* Employees who work a fixed work day report substantially lower levels of family-to-work interference while employees who work flextime report the highest levels of this form of conflict. It would appear that knowing the exact hours of work helps an employee plan family activities so that they do not interfere with their work duties.
4. *Child care referral and part-time work help employees cope with family-to-work interference.* The use of two of the family-friendly benefits examined in this study, child care referral and part-time work do, in fact, help employees with child and/or elder care cope with family demands that interfere with work.
5. *Employees with higher levels of family-to-work interference are more likely to use family-friendly benefits.* Employees with higher levels of this form of work–life conflict were more likely to use the following benefits: personal day off with pay, EAP, family/emergency days off work and short-term personal leave. Since it is unlikely that the benefit itself would cause an increase in work–life conflict, these findings suggest that employees use these organizational benefits when they are experiencing greater interference. The data also indicate that virtually everyone in this sample who used these benefits indicated that they had helped them cope with work–life conflict.

Q2d: Advice to organizations interested in reducing caregiver strain

There are relatively few things that the organization can do to help employees cope with caregiver strain. Information on the organizational strategies that were effective at reducing caregiver strain is summarized below.

1. *Elder care referral key to coping with caregiver strain.* This study identified only one high-impact strategy available to organizations wishing to reduce the levels of caregiver strain in

their workforce: provide elder care referral services. Employees with higher strain are more likely to seek such assistance than those who have less caregiver strain. They also perceive that this benefit helps them cope with the strains associated with elder care.

2. *Short-term personal leave helps employees cope with the strains associated with the care of an elderly dependent.*
3. *Employees with high caregiver strain are more likely to take paid personal/family days off work.* Organizations that provide this benefit should note, however, that all of the employees in the sample who used this provision felt that it had made a real difference to their ability to cope.
4. *Flextime arrangements associated with lower levels of caregiver strain.* Employees who use flextime arrangements report substantially lower levels of caregiver strain. Employees who work a fixed schedule, on the other hand, report the highest levels of this form of work–life conflict. Unfortunately, when considered in the light of the findings obtained earlier with role interference, it appears that organizational actions that minimize caregiver strain will maximize family-to-work interference and vice versa.
5. *Increasing perceived flexibility helps employees cope with caregiver strain.* Specifically, the ability to be home in time for dinner with the family, vary one’s work hours, interrupt one’s work day and return, and arrange one’s work day to meet family or personal needs all seem to help employees cope with caregiver strain.
6. *Employees who report to a non-supportive manager find it more difficult to cope with caregiver strain.* One way that organizations can help their employees with dependent care responsibilities cope with caregiver strain is to reduce the number of non-supportive managers in their organizations. The following management behaviours are associated with higher levels of this form of work–life conflict: making employees feel guilty about time off for personal/family reasons, focusing on hours of work not output, and having unrealistic expectations around workloads.

Q3a: Advice to individual employees on how to cope with role overload

The majority of the individual coping strategies examined in this study do little to help employees cope with role overload. Social support does not help individuals deal with role overload. Nor does trying to find another activity to take one’s mind off things, scheduling, planning and organizing, having an alcoholic drink or off-shifting work with a partner. So what does appear to make a difference? The answer to this question is given below.

1. *Employees with higher levels of role overload cope by working harder.* Almost half of the employees in this sample cope with stress by just working harder. Unfortunately, the results from this study attest to the futility of such an approach as levels of role overload increase concomitant with the use of this strategy for all respondents. The results may reflect the fact that people who are overloaded cope by working harder to get things done. Alternatively, they may mean that people who attempt to cope by working harder experience diminishing

returns in productivity at higher hours of work (i.e. make more mistakes, work less effectively and efficiently). Regardless of the underlying etiology, it should be noted that this strategy is not an effective way to cope with role overload.

2. *Employees with higher levels of role overload cope by reducing the quality of their work.* Just over one in four of the respondents cope with stress by reducing the quality of the things that they do. While the causality of this finding is difficult to ascertain (i.e. people who are overloaded may reduce quality in an attempt to cope and/or people who cope by reducing quality experience an increase in role overload as they have to re-do some tasks), the conclusion one arrives at in either case is the same: this strategy does not help employees deal with role overload. These findings imply that organizations that overload their employees in an attempt to “do more with less” will not realize significant productivity gains. Interestingly enough, the data do indicate that reducing the quality of one’s role performance does provide employees with dependent care responsibilities some ability to cope with role overload. Unfortunately, their relief occurs when individuals with child and/or elder care cope by lowering their standards at home.
3. *Just trying to forget about things does not help employees cope with role overload.* The fact that overload increases with greater use of this strategy suggests it is not effective at alleviating overload.
4. *Prioritizing appears to be an effective way for women and men with child and/or elder care responsibilities to cope with role overload.* Lower levels of overload can be explained by the fact that employees with dependent care responsibilities are giving priority to work tasks and delegating family-role responsibilities to others. This strategy does provide some relief from this form of work–life conflict.
5. *Daily use of prescription drugs helps employees cope with role overload.* Daily use of prescription medicine is associated with lower levels of role overload. It should be noted, however, that this strategy comes at a cost and is not sustainable over time.
6. *Employees with higher levels of overload cope by deciding not to have children.* Employees who are overloaded are more likely to decide to have fewer children because of work demands, and to decide to delay having children/not to have children at all because of career demands. These findings imply that some of the decline in Canada’s birth rate over the past several decades may be attributed to the increases in role overload and workloads we have seen during this same period. This suggests that one way to address declining fertility is to identify ways to reduce role overload, either by reducing expectations at the work end, and/or by providing supports within the community that reduce demands at home associated with child and/or elder care.

Q3b: Advice to individual employees on how to cope with work-to-family interference

The findings with respect to the effectiveness of various individual coping strategies at easing work-to-family interference are virtually the same as noted for role overload. Again, we conclude that the majority of the individual coping strategies examined in this study do little to

help employees cope with work-to-family interference. Neither social support (i.e. talked with family or friends, talked with colleagues at work, sought help from family or friends, sought help from colleagues at work) nor active coping (i.e. prioritize, delegate, schedule, plan and organize) strategies were found to help individuals deal with work-to-family interference. Trying to find another activity to take one's mind off things, having an alcoholic drink or off-shifting work with a partner did not seem to help.

So what does appear to make a difference? Working harder, reducing the quality of things one does, having fewer children, and delaying starting a family/deciding not to have a family—the same strategies that were significantly linked to role overload. Again, we note that the relationship between the use of each of these strategies and work-to-family interference is strong and positive, which reinforces our idea that these strategies, especially working harder and reducing the quality of things one does, do not help employees cope with work–life conflict, but rather exacerbate the situation.

Q3c: Advice to individual employees on how to cope with family-to-work interference

Individual coping strategies are not effective at helping employed Canadians deal with family-to-work interference for several reasons. First, employees cannot reduce this form of work–life conflict through the use of social support, off-shifting work with their spouse or active coping (i.e. prioritize, and schedule, plan and organize). Nor can they reduce family-to-work interference by the use of alcohol, prescription drugs or finding another activity to take their mind off things. That being said, several individual coping strategies do have a modest association with family-to-work interference if gender and dependent care status are taken into account. Key findings with respect to each of these strategies are as follows.

1. *Reducing the quality of work does not help employees cope with family-to-work interference.* There is a positive relationship between reducing the quality of things one does and family-to-work interference for employees with child and/or elder care responsibilities. The greater the strain, the more the employee attempts to cope by reducing the quality of work. These findings suggest that men and women with dependent care cope with stress at home by lowering their standards at work (i.e. let family interfere with work). The implication of this is that employers interested in quality of work need to implement strategies to reduce family-to-work interference.
2. *Working harder seems to help employees without dependent care cope with family-to-work interference.* Working harder seems to help men and women without dependent care responsibilities cope with family-to-work interference. The same cannot be said for men and women with dependent care responsibilities, who report a strong positive relationship between use of this strategy and family-to-work interference. It may be that those without child care and/or elder care are able to reduce this form of interference by increasing their efforts at home—a strategy that becomes less effective as demands outside of work increase.
3. *Delegating work to others does not help women cope with family-to-work interference.* Delegating appears to be a more effective coping strategy for men than women. There is no association between the frequency with which one delegates work to others and family-to-work interference for women, regardless of their dependent care status. For men, on the other

hand, family-to-work interference decreases as delegation increases. Gender role theory suggests that these findings may be because women have difficulty giving up responsibility for the family role (i.e. child care, elder care, home chores). While the tasks themselves might be delegated to others, the responsibility for the task remains with the women.

4. *Just trying to forget about it can help those without dependents cope with family-to-work interference.* This strategy appears to help men and women without caregiving responsibilities cope with family-to-work interference. Unfortunately, the opposite effect is observed for those with child care and elder care. These findings indicate that it is easier for those without caregiving responsibilities to successfully separate family from work and “forget about” family challenges than it is for those with children and elderly dependents.
5. *The decision to delay or not have children reduces family-to-work interference for women.* The findings with respect to the relationship between deciding to delay or not have children and family-to-work interference reinforces our contention that women who do not have caregiving responsibilities are more able to separate family from work. The women who have made the decision not to have children because of work report significantly lower levels of family-to-work interference than their counterparts who have not made such a decision. This finding is not surprising since this group of women has fewer constraints to deal with at home. While the findings from this study validate the decision (it is easier to focus on your career if you do not have children), the use of this coping strategy is not good for Canada. Again, these data point to the need for Canadian policy makers and organizations to address the issue of work–life balance.

Q3d: Advice to individual employees on how to cope with caregiver strain

The relationships between the use of the various personal coping strategies and caregiver strain are very similar to those observed for family-to-work interference. In both cases, individual coping strategies do little to help employed Canadians deal with the form of work–life conflict under consideration. Individual strategies such as the use of social support, off-shifting work with one’s spouse and active coping strategies (i.e. prioritize, schedule, plan and organize, delegate) do not help employees cope with either caregiver strain or family-to-work interference. Nor can employees reduce caregiver strain by drinking alcohol or finding another activity to take their mind off things.

Six coping strategies were significantly associated with caregiver strain when gender and dependent care status are taken into account: delay starting a family/decide not to have a family, have fewer children, just work harder, reduce the quality of things one does, just try to forget about things and use prescription medicine.

With two exceptions (i.e. decide not to have children, use prescription medicine), the relationship between the use of the strategy and caregiver strain is straightforward and similar to that discussed in the section on family-to-work interference: higher use of the strategy is associated with higher levels of strain. The data with respect to the decision to have children are similar to that observed with the other forms of work–life conflict: women with high levels of

caregiver strain are more likely to decide not to have children than their counterparts with lower levels of strain. This suggests that the solution to increasing Canada's birth rate is to help employees deal with caregiver strain, perhaps by providing elder care support mechanisms within the community. Finally, the relationship between prescription drug use and caregiver strain is similar to that observed with both role overload and work-to-family interference: prescription medicine helps employees cope with strain if used on a daily basis.

Q4a: Advice to Canadian families on how to cope with role overload

There is no relationship between role overload and attempting to cope by strengthening or restructuring family roles or seeking social support. Other family coping strategies used by Canadian employees to no avail (i.e. are not associated with role overload) include hiring help to care for elderly dependents, identifying one partner as responsible for household chores and limiting one's job involvement.

How do Canadian families cope with role overload? They generally use three sets of strategies: sacrifice their personal needs (i.e. get by on less sleep, leave things undone around the house, cut down on outside activities), put their family first (i.e. leave work problems at work, modify their work schedules) and procure help from outside the family (i.e. hire help to care for the children). They also cover family responsibilities for each other. Our assessment of each of these strategies is given below.

1. *Employees who cope by sacrificing their personal needs report higher levels of role overload.* The use of this coping strategy increases at higher levels of role overload. While it is difficult to determine the direction of causality of this finding (i.e. do overloaded individuals attempt to cope by cutting back on sleep and outside activities or do strategies such as sacrificing sleep and leaving things undone around the house increase rather than decrease overload in the long run), the conclusion from this study is the same. These strategies do not help employees or their families deal with role overload.
2. *Employees who put family first are better able to cope with role overload.* Employees who cope by putting family first (i.e. leave work-related problems at work, modify work schedules) report lower levels of role overload than their counterparts who use such strategies sparingly, if at all.
3. *Moderate use of hired help to care for children helps employees cope with role overload.* The findings with respect to the relationship between the use of hired help to care for children and role overload are very interesting as they suggest that this strategy helps employees cope with role overload, but only when used in moderation. Employees who do not hire help to care for their children as well as employees who use help on a daily basis both report higher levels of overload, while those who employ help once or twice a week report significantly lower levels of overload. These findings raise the question: Why is daily use of child care associated with higher levels of role overload? While our data cannot answer this question specifically, we can suggest a number of reasons for these findings, including that employees with a high reliance on day care are overloaded by the tasks

associated with delivering and picking up children, and that employees with a moderate reliance on daycare tend to either work part time or off-shift care with their spouse.

4. *Employees in egalitarian families are more able to cope with role overload.* Men and women with dependent care responsibilities who live in families where partners or spouses are willing to cover family responsibilities for each other (i.e. egalitarian families) are more able to cope with role overload than their counterparts who are not able to count on such assistance. These findings make sense and suggest that one can meet heavy expectations at work when someone is available to help out at home. Unfortunately, many families are time crunched today—and such assistance may come at a cost to the obliging partner.

Q4b: Advice to Canadian families on how to cope with work-to-family interference

Canadian families use a number of strategies to cope with work-to-family interference. Some of these are effective, others are not. Key details and advice to families are given below.

1. *Cutting back on your sleep is associated with increased levels of work-to-family interference.* Individuals who cope with work-to-family interference by getting by on less sleep are apt to make their situation worse, not better. These findings are similar to what was observed for role overload and are likely to have the same etiology.
2. *Employees with increased levels of work-to-family interference are more likely to attempt to cope by purchasing goods and services.* Employees with high levels of work-to-family interference are more likely to spend money purchasing goods and services to meet demands at home (i.e. fast food, cleaning services, etc). The fact that increased spending is not associated with a decline in interference suggests that this strategy is not that successful. This may be explained by the fact that such spending does not lessen the psychological dimensions of strain (i.e. guilt) and that the use of this strategy is inconsistent with how women have been socialized.
3. *Occasionally leaving things undone around the house helps women cope with work-to-family interference.* Moderate use of this strategy (i.e. once a week) is associated with an increased ability to cope with work-to-family interference for women. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of this strategy at alleviating work-to-family interference disappears with overuse, and women who leave things undone around the house on a daily basis report significantly higher levels of interference. The etiology of this relationship is likely the same as that reported for buying goods and services. This coping strategy is not effective for men, regardless of how often it is used.
4. *Employees who from time to time cut down on outside activities are more able to cope with work-to-family interference.* A similar relationship can be observed regarding the use of cutting down on outside activities as a coping strategy and work-to-family interference. Moderate use of this strategy is associated with lower levels of interference while daily use is associated with greater interference.

5. *Employees who put family first are more able to cope with work-to-family interference.* The data from this study are unequivocal: employees who wish to reduce the amount of interference they experience between work and family should make a conscious effort to leave work problems at work and modify their work schedules. The results imply that employees who make an effort to separate work time from non-work time by leaving work problems at work will realize significant declines in work-to-family interference

Q4c: Advice to Canadian families on how to cope with family-to-work interference

Virtually none of the family coping strategies examined in this study were associated with family-to-work interference. There is only one strategy that was substantively associated: hire help to care for children. In both cases, family-to-work interference increased concomitant to the use of hired help to care for children, suggesting that family is more likely to interfere with work when one has to purchase paid child care. One additional strategy was significant in the analysis which took dependent care status into account: getting by on less sleep. Again, increased use of this strategy is associated with greater family-to-work interference. These findings lead to the following conclusion: family coping strategies are ineffective at reducing family-to-work interference

Q4d: Advice to Canadian families on how to cope with caregiver strain

The findings with respect to the ability of the various family coping strategies explored in this study to help employees cope with caregiver strain are, with one exception (i.e. employees hire help to care for elderly dependents rather than their children), virtually identical to those observed for family-to-work interference.

The relationship between hiring help to care for elderly dependents and caregiver strain is complex and depends on both the gender and the job type of the individual. For men, the greater the strain, the greater the tendency to procure assistance from outside the family. For women, moderate use of this coping strategy is associated with an increased ability to cope with caregiver strain. This is particularly true for women in managerial and professional positions. Daily use of hired help to care for elderly dependents, on the other hand, is associated with higher levels of caregiver strain. This suggests that when caregiver strain is acute, outside support does little to alleviate it.

One additional strategy was significant in the analysis that took dependent care status into account: get by on less sleep. Again, we note that the use of this strategy increases at higher levels of strain and conclude that this strategy exacerbates, rather than alleviates, work-life conflict.

Q5. How do gender, job type and dependent care status affect the use of these different coping strategies as well as the type of advice we would offer?

In many cases, the use of the various organizational, individual and family coping strategies is associated with gender and/or job type and/or dependent care status. Furthermore, in many cases the effectiveness of these strategies or practices at reducing work-life conflict also depends on

these contextual variables. Given the complexity of many of these relationships, it is advised that the interested reader consult the full report. Key summaries of this material are provided in the final chapter of the report as well as Appendices H to K. Relevant details are mentioned in the recommendations below.

Conclusions

The following key themes sum up this phase of the research:

1. There is no-one-size-fits-all solution to the issue of work–life conflict. The study shows quite clearly that different policies, practices and strategies will be needed to reduce each of the four components of work–life conflict examined in this study. The workforce is not homogeneous, and gender, dependent care status and job type are significant moderators of the relationship between many of the coping strategies examined and work–life conflict. Social role expectations and organizational culture will also influence the effectiveness of the various organizational interventions. Policy planning should take these differences into account.
2. The dominant organizational view of work–life issues in Canada at this time is reactive rather than proactive, employer- versus employee-centric, built on the “myth of separate worlds” and focuses on reducing the symptoms associated with high work–life conflict rather than the identification and elimination of the underlying causes of the stress. Furthermore, many work–life policies seem to be designed to manage the “abuser”—the employee who takes advantage of supportive policies and programs—rather than the vast majority of employees who are “solid citizens” and can be trusted to use the policies when appropriate.
3. The study identified several strategies at the organizational level (i.e. supportive management and perceived flexibility) and the individual level (i.e. have fewer children, do not have children, get enough sleep) that are associated with an increased ability to cope with all four forms of work–life conflict.
4. Employees who experience high levels of work–life conflict are, regardless of the form of conflict, less likely to have children. This finding has very important social implications as it links issues such as labour force shortages and pension plan collapse to work–life conflict. Our research suggests that one way to increase Canada’s birth rate would be to implement policies and programs to help Canadians cope with work–life conflict in general, and role overload and work-to-family interference in particular. Suggestions on how this can be done are given below.
5. Organizations can do a lot to help employees cope with work–life conflict in general, and role overload and work-to-family interference with family in particular. Virtually all of the strong and substantive associations identified in this study originate from the organizational

domain. With a few exceptions, such as reducing family size and not having children, the ability of personal and family coping strategies to reduce work–life conflict pales in comparison to the effectiveness of actions that can be taken by the organization.

6. The same organizational interventions and personal coping strategies that reduce role overload also reduce work-to-family interference—but more effectively.
7. Perceived flexibility helps employees cope with work–life conflict: flexible work arrangements, per se, do not.
8. Work–life conflict depends more on who you report to within the organization than the organization you work for. Family-friendly benefits and alternative work arrangements, on their own, have little to no impact on an employee’s work–life conflict. The behaviour of the employee’s immediate manager (i.e. extent to which they engage in supportive and non-supportive behaviours), on the other hand, is a key predictor of work–life conflict in general, and role overload and work-to-family interference in particular. Who you work for is also a key predictor of how much flexibility employees perceive they have with respect to hours of work and work schedules.
9. While work–life policies and programs are a necessary first step to addressing this issue, organizations need to recognize that they will not be implemented effectively or used if an employee’s manager is non-supportive of work–life issues.
10. While employers often point with pride to the many “programs” available in their organization to help employees meet family obligations, these programs or options do not diminish the fact that most people simply have more work to do than can be accomplished by one person in a standard work week. This study indicates that many of the ways employees attempt to cope with workload issues do not benefit employees, their families, employers or Canadian society in general. These findings are consistent with those noted in previous reports and reinforce our contention that employers and governments need to recognize that the issue of work–life conflict cannot be addressed without addressing the issue of workload.
11. The majority of Canadians do not cope effectively with work–life conflict. Most Canadians attempt to cope by sacrificing their personal life, cutting back on their social life, not having children, working harder and getting less sleep—strategies that this research shows are associated with increased rather than decreased conflict between work and home. Relatively few Canadians cope by putting family first (i.e. modify work schedule, leave work problems at work), seeking social support, and using active coping strategies such as prioritizing, delegating and planning.
12. Many of the individual and family coping strategies that the research literature links with an increased ability to deal with stress do not appear to be effective means of coping with work–life conflict. This would point to a need to consider a much broader set of coping responses than are typically studied.

13. Caregiver strain has a different form than the other three types of work–life conflict. Coping strategies and organizational interventions that help employees cope with role overload and work-to-family interference, in particular, have little to no impact on caregiver strain. In this case, it would appear that policies and community supports (i.e. elder care referral, purchasing help from outside the family) are fundamental to an employee’s ability to deal with caregiver strain. This indicates that governments have a great role to play with respect to helping Canadians deal with caregiver strain.

Recommendations

This study has identified a number of strategies that employers, employees and families can use to reduce role overload, work-to-family interference, family-to-work interference and caregiver strain. Recommendations targeted at each of these groups are given below. An additional set of recommendations aimed at unions and governments are presented at the end.

What Can Employers Do to Reduce Work–Life Conflict?

This study identified two concrete things that employers can do to reduce work–life conflict: increase perceived flexibility and increase the number of supportive managers/decrease the number of non-supportive managers within their organization. These two strategies must be implemented hand in hand, as our data show that managers are, through their behaviours, the ones who make employees believe that they are able to exert some degree of control over their work schedule. Employers that focus on these two areas should realize significant reductions in employee role overload and work-to-family interference, moderate reductions in family-to-work interference and some increased ability for employees to cope with caregiver strain. Furthermore, increased levels of flexibility and supportive management help all employees cope with these forms of work–life conflict, so progress in these areas should produce the maximum return on investment. Details on ways forward are given below.

Increase perceived flexibility

1. Employers need to provide employees with a greater sense of control over their hours of work and their work schedule.

Specifically, to help employees cope with work–life conflict, organizations need to make it possible for jobholders to arrange their work schedule to meet personal/family commitments, interrupt their work day for personal/family reasons and return to work, take holidays when they want to, be home in time to have meals with their family, and vary their hours of work.

The criteria under which flexibility in each of these areas can be used should be mutually agreed upon and transparent. There should also be mutual accountability around their use (i.e. employees need to meet job demands but organizations should be flexible with respect to how work is arranged). The process for changing hours of work, location of work, vacation time should, wherever possible, be flexible.

2. Employers should give employees paid time off work to attend relevant training sessions, courses and conferences.

The strong association between an inability to participate in career development opportunities outside of work hours and both role overload and work-to-family interference indicates that employees with dependent care responsibility who try to maintain their professional credentials or increase their learning on their own time pay a price—increased work–life conflict. Of course, those who do not engage in learning activities pay a different price—a lack of career mobility and reduced economic benefits and job insecurity. These findings give organizations another incentive to deal with the issue of role overload: an increased ability to recruit and retain talent.

3. Employers need to give employees the opportunity to take a fixed number of paid days off work per year (we suggest five) to care for sick children or elderly dependents.

This study determined that greater flexibility in both these areas was associated with an increased ability to cope with role overload and work-to-family interference. Implementation of these benefits should also produce additional advantages for employers outside the work–life arena, as they concretely demonstrate to employees that their employer trusts them, is listening to them and recognizes their demands outside of work. Our data also indicate that such policies are positively associated with increased levels of commitment and engagement.

4. Organizations need to introduce new performance measures that focus on objectives, results and output (i.e. move away from a focus on hours to a focus on output).

It is very difficult (if not impossible) to increase perceived flexibility in organizations where the focus is on hours rather than output and presence rather than performance. To do this, employees need to reward output not hours and reward what is done, not where it is done. They also need to reward people who have successfully combined work and non-work domains and not promote those who work long hours and expect others to do the same.

Increase the number of supportive managers within the organization

5. Employers need to increase the number of supportive managers within their organizations while simultaneously reducing the number of managers who are seen to be non-supportive. Specifically they need to increase the number of managers within their organization who consistently display the following behaviours:
 - make work expectations clear
 - listen to their employees
 - are effective at planning the work to be done
 - give employees recognition when they do their job well
 - make themselves available to answer their employee’s questions
 - ask for employee’s input before making decisions that affect their work
 - have realistic expectations with respect to the amount of work that can be done in a given amount of time

- do not expect their employees to put in long hours, just because they themselves do
- do not make employees feel guilty if they need to take time off work because of personal or family issues

While all employees who work for a supportive manager are substantially more able to cope with role overload, work-to-family interference and family-to-work interference, men and women in other positions in the organization benefit the most from such managers. Similarly, while all employees who work for a non-supportive manager are significantly less able to cope with role overload, work-to-family interference, family-to-work interference and caregiver strain, this type of manager is particularly problematic for employees with dependent care responsibilities, female managers and professionals, and men and women who work in other positions within the organization.

How should organizations proceed with respect to this issue? Specifically, we would recommend that:

6. Organizations commit resources to improving “people management” practices within their organization. They can increase the number of supportive managers within the organization by giving managers at all levels:
 - a. *the skills* they need to manage the “people” part of their job (i.e. communication skills, conflict resolution, time management, project planning, how to give and receive feedback)
 - b. *the tools* they need to manage people (i.e. appropriate policies, the business case for support, training on how to implement alternative work arrangements, websites and other resources on how to handle different human resource problems, referral services to help employees deal with specific problems such as child care and elder care)
 - c. *the time* they need to manage this part of their job (people management has to be seen as a fundamental part of a manager’s role, not just an “add on” that can be done in one’s spare time—an overworked manager finds it difficult, if not impossible, to be a supportive manager)
 - d. *incentives* to focus on the “people part” of their jobs (i.e. measurement and accountability around the people piece of the job, 360 feedback, rewards focused on recognition of good people skills, that performance of the “people” part of the job be part of promotion decisions, hiring decisions, etc., that public recognition of supportive supervisors, measurement of management support and non-support be tied into the manager’s performance appraisal system)

Introduce cafeteria-style benefits packages

As noted earlier, it is clear from this study, that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the issue of work–life conflict. To accommodate the diversity in their workforce (in terms of gender, job type, lifecycle stage and ethnicity):

7. Employers should implement cafeteria benefits packages that allow employees to select those benefits most appropriate to their personal situation, on a yearly basis.

The data collected in this study allow us to give additional advice on what types of benefits organizations concerned with the various types of work–life conflict should implement.

8. Organizations that wish to help employees cope with:
 - a. *role overload and work-to-family interference and family-to-work interference* should provide employees with child care referral services
 - b. *work-to-family interference* should provide all employees who are being moved to a new location by their organization with services to support their relocation
 - c. *role overload and family-to-work interference* should provide employees with EAP services
 - d. *family-to-work interference and caregiver strain* should provide employees with elder care referral and short-term personal/family leave that entitles employees to up to five days of paid personal leave per year. This leave should be available on short notice and the employee should not be required to provide a reason for his or her absence. Such stipulations would give employees the flexibility to deal with personal/family matters with a large degree of confidentiality.
 - e. *family-to-work interference* should provide employees with personal paid days off work and family/emergency days off work

Facilitate the use of part-time work, job sharing and reduced work week arrangements

9. Employers that wish to help employees cope with role overload, work-to-family interference and family-to-work interference should implement part-time/reduced week work arrangements with pro-rated benefits.

The rise in number of dual-income families, coupled with high levels of role overload and work-to-family interference, lower fertility and the appeal of part-time work, job sharing and reduced work weeks arrangements suggest that organizations should redesign the part-time job to ensure that people who engage in part-time work for a limited period of time do not suffer economic or career penalties. Introduction of part-time work, if made legitimate and detached from the traditional definition of part-time jobs as jobs requiring low skills and having low potential for upward

mobility, could make it easier for men and women with dependent care responsibilities (especially those in other positions within the organization) to handle work and family requirements more effectively.

What else can employers do to reduce role overload?

10. Employees that wish to help employees (especially those with dependent care responsibilities) cope with role overload should implement a tele-work program within their organization.

Organizations and employees should, however, recognize that this reduction in role overload comes at a cost—increased work-to-family interference.

What else can employers do to reduce work-to-family interference?

11. Employers concerned with work-to-family interference should provide appropriate support for their employees who work rotating shifts. What is an appropriate support should be determined by consulting with employees who work rotating shifts. Policies that have been found to be effective in this regard include limits to split shifts, advanced notice of shift changes and permitting shift trades (i.e. allowing employees to change shift times with one another).

What else can employers do to reduce caregiver strain?

12. Employers that wish to help employees cope with caregiver strain should implement flextime work arrangements in their organization.

Organizations and employees should, however, recognize that this reduction in caregiver strain comes at a cost—increased family-to-work interference. Employees who are worried about family interfering with their work are better off working a fixed 9-to-5 work schedule.

What Can Employees Do to Reduce Work–Life Conflict?

While the options in this regard are more limited than what employers can do (the data would suggest that many employees are using all available options to cope), we offer the following recommendations to employees:

1. Employees should *not* attempt to cope with work–life conflict by “just working harder and trying to do it all” or by reducing the quality of things that they do, especially at home.

These two coping strategies, which are used by the majority of employed Canadians in this sample, are positively associated with all four forms of work–life conflict examined. These strategies are particularly problematic for men and women in managerial and professional positions where the reward for doing a good job and exceeding work expectations is often more work!

Seek help from your family physician

2. Daily use of prescription medicine is associated with an increased ability to cope with role overload, work-to-family interference and caregiver strain.

These findings suggest that rather than just “tough it out” and try to do it all, employees who have experienced high levels of work–life conflict for a sustained period of time would benefit from a visit to their doctor and prescription of appropriate medication. Such a strategy, as we have noted in previous reports, does however come at a cost: increased demand on Canada’s health care system, increased spending on prescription medication, and the potential of negative side effects from continual use of such medication. In other words, we make this recommendation knowing that this is a “band-aid solution,” which will do little to alleviate work–life conflict over the long run. As such, we recommend that it be used in conjunction with a number of the other strategies included in this report.

Just “trying to forget” about it does not solve anything

3. Employees need to educate themselves on how to deal effectively with work–life conflict.

A number of respondents indicated that they coped with work–life conflict by “just trying to forget about it.” Unfortunately, the use of this strategy is associated with increases in role overload, family-to-work interference and caregiver strain for employees in general and men and women with dependent care responsibilities in particular. Family problems and challenges at home do not go away just because we ignore them—employees have to personally take the appropriate actions needed to reduce work–life conflict. A number of these actions are summarized in the recommendations below.

Active coping (i.e. delegation and prioritization) does help some employees cope with role overload and family-to-work interference

4. Employees with dependent care responsibilities, especially women, can reduce their levels of role overload by prioritizing and delegating work to others.
5. Employees with dependent care responsibilities, especially men, can reduce their levels of family-to-work interference by delegating work to others.

Other recommendations to employees, also offered in previous reports, deserve to be mentioned again, and include:

6. Take advantage of the supportive policies and flexible work arrangements available within your organization.
7. Raise work–life balance issues in your discussions within the workplace and within the community.

8. Say “no” to overtime hours if work expectations are unreasonable.
9. Try to limit the amount of work you take home to complete in the evenings. Employees who do take work home should make every effort to separate time in work from family time (i.e. do work after the children go to bed, have a home office).
10. Educate yourself on how to deal effectively with the issue of elder care. Things such as financial planning courses and nurturing an awareness of what types of community resources are available for those with elder care issues are likely to help employees increase the amount of control they have over these issues.

What Can Families Do to Reduce Work–Life Conflict?

Family members need to work together to deal with the issue of work–life conflict. This research initiative has identified a number of strategies that employees and families can use to cope with work life conflict.

Family members need to make sure that they get enough sleep

1. Employees need to get enough sleep each night.

As work and non-work demands increase, employees often attempt to cope by working harder, trying to do it all, and getting by on less sleep. This strategy is strongly and positively associated with increases in all four of the forms of work–life conflict.

Family members should not try to cope by sacrificing personal needs

2. Employees need to maintain a healthy social life.
3. Employees need to maintain personal standards at home.

A substantive number of the employees in this sample attempted to cope with work–life conflict by leaving things undone around the house and cutting down on outside activities. On a positive note, moderate (i.e. weekly) use of these strategies was associated with a reduction in role overload and work-to-family interference for employees with dependent care responsibilities and women in managerial and professional positions. On a negative note, both of these strategies were associated with increased levels of role overload and work-to-family interference when used several times a week or more. Employees, therefore, need to use both these strategies in moderation.

Employees should make a concerted effort to leave work problems at work

This study did identify two strategies that were very effective at reducing role overload and work-to-family interference. These findings lead us to make the following recommendations:

4. Employees need to make a concerted effort to leave work problems at work—both physically and mentally.

5. Employees should modify their work schedule (i.e. reduce the number of hours they spend in work, work different hours than they do) as necessary to manage role demands at home.

The negative association between leave work problems at work and both role overload and work-to-family interference was very strong. While this strategy is effective for all employees, it was more effective for men than women

Employees should modify their work schedule as necessary to manage demands at home

This study indicated that modification of one's work schedule to accommodate demands at home is a very effective coping strategy for men and women in managerial and professional positions. It also provides some relief from role overload and work-to-family interference for men in other positions within the organization. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the data show that weekly modification of one's work schedule is all that is needed to experience the benefits of reduced work-to-family interference. Women in other positions within the organization, on the other hand, need to recognize that in their case daily use of this strategy is associated with a sharp increase in work-to-family interference so they should try to limit their use of this strategy to once or twice a week to gain the most benefits from its use.

You cannot buy balance

Many employees buy supports from outside the family in an attempt to increase their work-life balance. Unfortunately, our results indicate that employees who cope by buying goods and services report higher levels of role overload and work-to-family interference than those who are able to get such support within the family. The data are much more positive with respect to the relationship between hiring help to care for children and role overload. This strategy is very effective when used once or twice a week. Overload and family-to-work interference are, however, substantially higher when reliance on paid child care is high. Similarly, hiring help to care for elderly dependents is associated with lower levels of caregiver strain for women when used moderately often. Caregiver strain is, however, substantially higher when reliance on paid elder care is high. Women in other positions within the organization benefit the most from hiring support for elder care.

Specific recommendations with respect to support of child care and elder care are given below in the section on advice to governments.

Employees should cover family responsibilities for each other

6. Employees with dependent care should cover family responsibilities for each other at home.

Men and women both benefit if they have a spouse who will cover for them at home. Higher use of this strategy is associated with lower levels of role overload for both genders. This suggests that employees can cope with extra demands at work—if they have a partner to count on to pick up the slack and if they are willing to help out when the situation is reversed.

What Can Governments Do to Reduce Work–Life Conflict?

In our previous reports, we offered a number of suggestions to governments on how they could address the issue of work–life conflict. The findings from this study provide an additional reason why governments should put these recommendations and others into practice immediately. Our findings are clear: employees who are overloaded, experience interference between work and non-work roles and have high levels of caregiver strain cope by having fewer children, delaying the start of their family and deciding not to have any children. The fact that these strategies are associated with greater work–life balance for employees in general and female managers and professionals in particular, indicate that governments need to take action so that men and women in Canada can have a meaningful career as well as a fulfilling family life. Research from Europe (Sweden in particular)² has found that social policies designed to help working mothers (including universal child care) are associated with increased fertility rates. Accordingly, we recommend that governments consider the following actions:

- i. Take the lead with respect to the issue of child care. In particular, governments need to determine how to best help employed Canadians deal with child care issues (i.e. develop appropriate policies for parents of children of various ages, identify and implement relevant supports in the community, provide more high quality day care). There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the issue of child care. Some women want to work, some women need to work, and some women want to stay home when their children are young. Government policy should be designed to offer choice to Canadian families—so that they can select the option that works best for their family.
- ii. Governments need to take the lead with respect to the issue of elder care. In particular, they need to determine how to best help employed Canadians deal with elder care issues (i.e. develop appropriate policies, identify and implement relevant supports in the community).
- iii. Governments need to “lead by example” with respect to the availability and accessibility of flexible work arrangements. It is not enough to just offer alternative work arrangements; employees must feel that they can use such arrangements without penalty.
- iv. Governments need to investigate ways to increase Canadians’ awareness of how social roles and responsibilities have changed over the past several decades, what changes still need to happen, and why (i.e. social marketing campaign, education programs in schools, advertisements). Such changes are necessary to address the issues identified for female managers and professionals in this report.
- v. Governments need to examine how they can reduce the “financial penalties” associated with parenthood and elder care (i.e. determine how to concretely recognize that these employees have higher costs). Suggestions here include identifying ways to make it financially feasible

² See Gardner, D. The mother of all issues. *The Ottawa Citizen*. June 14, 2006, p. A17.

for one partner to stay home during the time period when family demands are particularly high (i.e. when children are young, when a parent is dying), implementing universal day care programs and increasing the number of homes for the aged.

What Can Unions Do to Reduce Work–Life Conflict?

Unions have an important role to play in the establishment of family-friendly practices in the workplace. We recommend that unions:

1. Become advocates of employee work–life balance by undertaking public campaigns to raise awareness of work–life issues and suggest ways in which the situation can be improved. This advocacy should be done outside the collective bargaining process.
2. Include work–life provisions (e.g. flexible work arrangements, family-friendly benefits) in negotiations during the collective bargaining process.
3. Support the implementation of cafeteria benefits packages.