

**WORK LIFE BALANCE IN COVID -19 SITUATION****RM Vageesh**

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Abstract

As thousands of people work from home across Canada to prevent the spread of COVID-19, one expert says work-life balance is vital to ensuring well-being. Individuals that create and maintain boundaries between work and family have increased work-life balance. They have improved performance within each of the work and family activities as well as fewer distractions and disruptions when they're performing those duties.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has pushed the world into a mass experiment in working from home. For some companies, self-quarantine for the public good has meant finding new ways to collaborate while navigating spotty internet connections, video conferencing etiquette, new apps and even newer security woes. That's a no-brainer for Silicon Valley, where companies build apps and technologies to help power services used by hundreds of millions of people each day.

But with schools and day care centers closed around the country, tech companies, from Apple to Facebook to Google to LinkedIn to Uber, are facing a more challenging test: family. Even Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg acknowledged in a March conference call with the press that caring for his two young daughters at home with his wife, Priscilla, a pediatrician, is "a big change."

The nonstop 24-hour work culture that led many tech companies to hire high-end chefs for free food cafeterias, offer onsite car oil changes and, in some cases, do free dry cleaning is running up against the realities of child care and other family care in self-quarantine at home. The unspoken agreement that all those benefits came in exchange for long and grueling work hours is falling apart at home.

Day care centers and schools around the country have closed, while nursing homes are sending some residents to live with family. That's all put extra demand on working parents, who now have to split their attention between work, homeschooling, child care and family needs throughout the day.

Zoom said it's tallied a 700% increase in weekday evening meetings on its platform since February, and a 2,000% increase in meetings on the weekend. While users have flocked to the service and social Zoom calls are now du jour, the numbers could also hint at an overburdened work force pushing meetings to out-of-hours when kids have gone to bed.

"The notion of the overwork culture in Silicon Valley happens because innovation is really hard," said Silicon Valley futurist Paul Saffo, an adjunct professor at Stanford University. "But now that the climate has changed, we have a whole new set of issues."

For decades, Silicon Valley sold itself as a worker's utopia. The promise that if you work hard, you'll succeed -- with big salaries, employee perks and a stock option payoff that could make you a millionaire -- is the driving force behind the always-connected work culture. But for families stuck at home, with no caretaker backups to speak of, many employees are being left to choose between caring for loved ones and doing their daily work. In California, home to Apple, Airbnb, Facebook, Google, HP, LinkedIn, Twitter, Uber and an endless list of startups, most schools won't reopen until the fall. Meanwhile, nursing homes have been among the places hardest hit by the novel coronavirus, forcing some residents to move in with family members instead.

Though tech companies are known for their generous leave policies, offering much more than the 12 weeks of unpaid job-protected family and medical leave mandated by US law, some Silicon Valley parents say the pressure has intensified since being stuck at home -- and not just from their bosses. A parent working at LinkedIn, writing last month on the anonymous employee messaging app Blind, said that while their manager was compassionate about handling work and kids, "I fear losing my job if I reduce my work hours."

Most responding co-workers were supportive and some shared similar feelings. But others told the author to "stop whining like an entitled baby" and that "having kids is not an excuse to work less."

LinkedIn, known in Silicon Valley for its employee-focused work culture, said it doesn't tolerate retaliation against anyone for taking advantage of benefits it offers, or for bringing forward concerns. It also offers employees a way to anonymously report any issues. Employees at Apple and Uber who spoke to me also said they felt overworked without much leeway to take care of kids. And they aren't alone. More than half of the 6,163 working parents surveyed by Blind earlier this month said they felt their work wasn't being fairly compared to that of their colleagues during the crisis. As a result, 61% of them, including employees from Google and Facebook, said they're putting in at least three extra hours each day to complete their work.

"For people who have a family, you feel that you have to operate as if you don't," said Carolina Milanesi, an analyst at Creative Strategies. She's faced many of these struggles firsthand, sharing online about navigating life in the tech world while homeschooling her daughter. It's likely this crisis will change how we all prioritize life and family, she said. It may also change the culture at companies that have historically bristled at remote work, such as Google, Apple and Facebook.

"I'm hoping this is going to help us afterward to be more flexible," Milanesi said. "I'm hoping it will humanize workers more."

Some companies are already rethinking how they treat staff with families. On April 16, Google extended a special paid family leave plan during the crisis, giving up to 14 weeks paid time off (or 28 weeks of half time off) to help its more than 103,000 employees care for loved ones. A company spokesperson said almost 1,000 employees signed an internal letter thanking Google for helping them juggle family and work responsibilities.

Facebook followed a similar model for its roughly 45,000 employees, announcing in March that it will provide up to four weeks paid leave while schools are closed. It also encouraged managers to offer their staff flexible work hours or even additional time off to help manage family life in the midst of the crisis.

Work-life balancing act

This isn't just a Silicon Valley problem. Most employers seem to recognize that their workers are "experiencing challenges unique to their situation and that this evolving situation calls for more flexibility," said Amelia Green-Vamos, a career trends expert at employer rating site Glassdoor.

Still, 28% of US adults from a variety of industries said their employer "has done nothing in response to concerns of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak," according to a survey by The Harris Poll for Glassdoor. And only 16% of respondents said companies offered additional paid or unpaid sick leave.

Surveys by email client maker Superhuman found peak email time has crept up an hour to 9 a.m.. People are working later too. Surfshark, a privacy app maker, found spikes in usage between midnight and 3 a.m. that didn't exist before the crisis.

"While it's still too early to say what the long-term effect will be, this new way of working is an interesting test for Silicon Valley," Green-Vamos added. Once the pandemic subsides and we return to whatever new normal we'll be living, analysts and companies I spoke to say their work environments will be different.

Texas-based tech giant Dell estimates that more than half its 134,000 employees will be working remotely. To lay the groundwork, the computer maker increased communication from the executive team to staff.

That includes regularly telling co-workers on conference calls when they're also taking care of their kids or family. This gets them more comfortable with this new life-work balance. It also means that a wayward child or pet popping up in the background isn't jarring.

"Work will not return to how it was," said Jennifer Davis, Dell's senior vice president of global communications. "We need to advertise the need for flexibility and that it's OK to have a work and home life.

Work-life balance. It's an oft-thrown-around phrase, and its meaning is open to interpretation. But for the most part, it refers to some semblance of being able to separate work life from one's personal life and carving out a reasonable amount of time for the latter.

Many people struggle with work-life balance, in general. But the COVID-19 crisis could be making an existing problem even worse. With Americans being told to socially distance themselves in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19, many companies have shifted employees to remote work arrangements. At first glance, that seems like a good thing. Workers can continue doing their jobs and getting paid without dealing with the hassle of commuting. And with all the time saved not sitting in traffic or riding a bus, it stands to reason that working folks should have more time on their hands for household maintenance, exercise, and hobbies. But many Americans are working longer hours now than ever before. The reason? There's no excuse not to.

Prior to COVID-19, it was easier to pack up and unplug at the end of a long workday. Back then, people had dinner plans, appointments, or other obligations.

Now, there are no plans to be made or kept and nowhere to go other than the supermarket for an occasional stock up. There's nothing compelling workers to shut down their laptops and walk away from their desks because they're not running to beat traffic or make the next bus. So a lot of people are instead working longer and harder -- and are teetering on the edge of burnout because of it.

Of course, with talks that COVID-19 could spur a full-blown economic recession, many workers are putting in longer hours as a matter of strategy. The logic may be that if widespread layoffs occur, they're less likely to land on the chopping block if they knock deadlines out of the park and answer email at all hours. But this willingness to please, coupled with a sheer obligation to always be available since there's no excuse not to be, may be hurting Americans from a mental- and physical-health perspective.

Reclaim your right to work-life balance

Maybe you feel that since you're being given the flexibility to work from home and you're not spending hours commuting, you should make up for it by working longer hours and being perpetually available. But actually, that's a lot of pressure to put on yourself, especially at a time when COVID-19 worries may be occupying more of your brain space than you'd like. While work may be, to some extent, a nice distraction, you shouldn't be pushing yourself to work so much that there's little-to-no time to catch up with friends and family by phone, bust out a good book, or binge-watch a TV series that brings you joy.

Chances are, at least some of that pressure to succeed on the job is coming from you, not your employer, so recognize that and get your own potentially unreasonable expectations in check. Now's a time to function in survival mode, and there's nothing wrong with not going beyond, so if your work-life balance has been nonexistent since this whole crisis began, set some boundaries and stick to them. Right now, more so than ever, we all deserve a break.

Work-Life Balance After the Pandemic

As if being a working parent didn't already include enough moving pieces to manage, even toddlers are now having standing teleconferences. For the two of us, our daughters' virtual



morning preschool meeting is one more item to be juggled as we attempt to work full-time from home without childcare. Our own conference calls are scheduled for naptime and occasionally interrupted by a request for potty. We attempt to wedge the rest of the workday into the early mornings and post-bedtime.

The Covid-19 crisis has shoved work and home lives under the same roof for many families like ours, and the struggle to manage it all is now visible to peers and bosses. As people postulate how the country may be forever changed by the pandemic, we can hope that one major shift will be a move away from the harmful assumption that a 24/7 work culture is working well for anyone.

For decades, scholars have described how organizations were built upon the implicit model of an “ideal worker”: one who is wholly devoted to their job and is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, every year of their career. This was always an unrealistic archetype, one that presumed a full-time caretaker in the background. Yet today, over two-thirds of American families are headed by single parents or two working parents. With schools and daycares closed, work cannot continue as normal simply because working remotely is technologically possible.

Employees are disproportionately well-compensated for being ideal workers. “Time greedy” professions like finance, consulting, and law — where 80- or 100-hour weeks may be typical — compensate their workers per hour more than professions with a regular 40-hour week. Flexible-work arrangements come with severe penalties; many who leave the workforce for a period or shift to part-time never recover their professional standing or compensation. When individuals push back — asking for less travel or requesting part-time or flexible hours — their performance reviews suffer and they are less likely to be promoted, studies find. Simply asking for workplace flexibility engenders professional stigma.

The “ideal worker” expectation is particularly punitive for working mothers, who also typically put in more hours of caregiving work at home than their spouses. Furthermore, men are more likely to “fake it” and pass as ideal workers, while women make clear that they cannot meet these expectations, including by negotiating flexible-work arrangements. Many organizations are not amenable to adjustments, leading to the perception that women are opting out of the workforce — although research suggests women are actually “pushed out.”

In our world of laptops, cellphones, and teleconferences, the intellectual and analytical tasks of “knowledge workers” can continue at home. But low-wage workers increasingly are subject to similar expectations of responsiveness, even as they have less job security and even less flexibility than higher paid workers. In the midst of this pandemic, store clerks, delivery drivers, and warehouse workers are now forced to be “ideal workers” too, risking exposure to the virus in public with little support for the families they leave to go to work.

There have been many calls for restructuring how work is done, including making more room for our families and questioning the real value of the eight-hour (or more) workday. Now is a time for companies to step back and reexamine which traditional ways of working exist because of convention, not necessity.

Executives and managers have the opportunity to choose quality work over quantity of work. They can value the creative ideas that emerge after a midday hike or meditation session, rather than putting in face time at the office. They can stop rewarding the faster response over the better response, or the longer workday over a more productive workday. They can rethink highly competitive career tracks where you make it or wash out — such as giving tenure-track scholars and partner-track lawyers the choice of a longer clock before their evaluation.

During this pandemic, employers are seeing that workers can't function well without accommodation for their family responsibilities. Will that lesson last after the crisis is over?

American families want greater choices in determining how their work and their families fit together. Post-pandemic, can we create a system that fits real workers, not just idealized ones? If so, we have the opportunity to emerge from this crisis with both healthier employees and better performing organizations.

6 Ways to Improve Your Work-Life Balance During COVID-19

Strive for a realistic work-life balance

Let's admit it, we all are guilty of cooking up a fairytale concept of work-life balance. Hence, the first step is to get a reality check.

Remember, every job demands a different amount of attention.

Also, now that everyone is confined within their homes, you can work as per your convenient timing.

So, identify these basic nitty-gritties and then design how you want to balance your work and personal life.

Prioritize your tasks correctly

It is very easy to be at a loss when prioritizing your tasks. Even more so, when you're at home without any domestic help.

So, identifying at what time during the day you are most productive is your best option.

Keep that slot separate and dedicate it completely to your office work.

This leaves the rest of the hours free to help your partners, flatmates or family with household chores and also other activities.

Define your work hours

Now that you have sorted your best hours of completing work, ensure you stick to it.

Also, make it a habit to clock in when you sign in and sign out of work.

This will give you clarity on the number of hours you are working thereby helping you to make a calendar based on it.

Adding to it, this habit will also ensure that you can draw a line between work and personal life without any guilt.

Draw a boundary

There are times when work pops up way past the usual hours, disrupting your personal time. But if it becomes a habit, that's the red signal for you.

Make it a point to log out of all your work accounts when you end your day.

This habit will ensure that your work-life doesn't barge its way into your personal sphere.

Work and family both are equally important and one must not encroach upon the other and disturb the equilibrium.

Opt for social detox

We all are guilty of wasting time scrolling through social media pages, even more so since lockdown.

Not only so, unknowingly we get burdened by the social media pressure, bringing in negativity.

Therefore, it's alright to take a break from all social media channels once in a while.

This will not only make you realize the amount of time that is wasted but will also leave a lot of extra time to utilize it correctly.

Take care of yourself

When the shutdown of fitness centers and house arrest are teamed together, the result can be quite a disaster.

Why? Because being forced to stay indoors 24X7 can lead to a negative impact on both the mind and body.

Your body is the only machine that allows you to produce great work. So, taking care of it is extremely important.

Try to begin your day with some home workouts. There are so many fitness applications and even YouTube videos that have made working out at home really easy.

Eat healthy. It's understandable how our mind's trickery can make us reach out to those unhealthy junk foods.

It's best to avoid it since what we eat has a greater impact on our health and mind.

So, drop that sack of excuses and take charge of your health!



Take this time to dedicate an equal amount of attention to your near and dear ones and your work.

If managed properly, there will be enough time to keep aside even for yourself, your personal and professional goals.

Hopefully, with these few tips and advice, you will be able to bring your work-life balance back in form.

Stay safe, stay healthy and definitely stay indoors!

Conclusion

Working individuals often find themselves juggling between their work and social lives, aiming for the ever-elusive work-life balance. This course focuses on the context in which work-life balance has grown, comparing the key theories of work-life conflict, work-life integration and enrichment, and boundary management.

It also investigates the future of work, evaluating how technology allows individuals to work more flexibly, but in the meantime risking less time to switch off and recover from work

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