

Chapter 3.14

Assessing the Impact of Mobile Technologies on Work–Life Balance

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INTRODUCTION

Mobile technologies such as laptops and mobile phones enable work to be conducted remotely, away from the normal working environment. Removing the geographical boundaries between work life and home life poses new challenges within the context of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. This article proposes a multidimensional model for assessing the impact of mobile technologies on work-life balance considering

social, organizational, legal, technological, and ethical issues to inform the development of human resource strategies.

BACKGROUND

‘Work’ and ‘life’ are traditionally viewed as separate spheres which need to balance such that one does not adversely affect the other (MacInnes, 2005). Stress occurs when the spheres are out of balance (Rotondo, Carlson, & Kincaid, 2003). Improving work-life balance can help:

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- Organizations to work effectively and efficiently; and
- Individuals manage their time and reduce pressures that encroach on their life outside the workplace.

The notion of balance implies the need to establish clear boundaries between work and home lives. This is expressed as “being able to come to work and not worry about my life outside of work and going home without having to worry about work.” Work-family interference (WFI) occurs when work issues adversely impact family life and family-work interference (FWI) occurs when the pressures from non-work issues adversely impact the work sphere (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The employers for work-life balance (EfWLB) define work-life balance as being about giving people control of when, where, and how they work such that they can be fulfilled and enjoy an optimum quality of life, whilst being respected in the workplace (McIntosh, 2003). It should not be assumed that work-life balance policies are only of interest to employees with children; having time for taking part in learning, the community, and social activities are important factors for a healthy lifestyle (MacInnes, 2005).

Traditionally, studies focus on the tension of needing to be in two places at the same time: the workplace and the home. This has led to a central theme in work-life balance being that of control; control is often expressed in terms of ‘flexibility,’ the ability to make choices and having the freedom to prioritize in accordance with personal values and maintain an equilibrium between multiple roles.

Mobile technologies, such as wireless Internet access, laptop computers, mobile telephones, PDAs (personal data assistants), and other hand-held devices, increasingly enable ease of access to data, applications, and people that was previously restricted to the workplace. This provides the opportunity for employees to work away from a regular workplace and changes the significance of the location factor in the work-life dyad. How-

ever, easing the ability to ‘bring work home’ also introduces tension by enabling work to (further) encroach on family life.

Work-life is now recognized as being bi-directional and multidimensional (Rotondo et al., 2003). This is supported by Warren (2004) who suggests that discussion should be repositioned as work-life integration. It includes time-based conflict where time in one role affects participation in the other; strain-based conflict where the demands of one role affect participation in the other and behavior-based conflict where behavior appropriate in one role is used in the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The following sections discuss the impact of mobile technologies on work-life balance.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON WORK-LIFE BALANCE

The impact of technology can be seen both as positive and negative (Berg, Mörtberg, & Jansson, 2005). Technology facilitates working arrangements such as teleworking (Tietze, 2005) and mobile working (Prasopoulou, Pouloudi, & Panteli, 2006) which can benefit both employers and employees. These benefits are summarized in Table 1. Technology can make communication easier but it can also be an intrusion.

Addressing location issues resolves some problems in work-life balance, for example, being able to work at home to be with a poorly child, but blurs the boundary between work and home (Prasopoulou et al., 2006) making it harder to balance work and home life. Flexible working can become abused when the normal expectation is that someone can be contacted anywhere anytime about work related issues. The work-life battle moves from location-based issues to demands for attention; reflected in the need to be available to respond to work issues at home.

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