A balancing act! Social workers' experiences of work-life balance while combining work and study

Bridget Roche and Mary Ann Baskerville

Bridget's research was inspired by her experiences of studying towards an MSW (Applied) and working full-time as a social worker at Child, Youth and Family. She has recently taken up a social work position at Challenge 2000 in Wellington.

Mary Ann Baskerville supervised Bridget's research while a Senior Lecturer at Massey University and organised the November 2006 ANZASW Conference on 'Keeping your balance'. She is now working as a private practitioner with an interest in middle management, supervision and community development.

Abstract

Changing demographics and the changing nature of work has lead to pressure at the interface between an individual's work and non-work life roles. As a result there is increasing interest in how to maintain a 'balance' between various life roles. Twenty-two social work practitioners completed a postal questionnaire on the work-life balance experiences of social workers who are combining work and study. This article discusses how the findings relate to previous research and the implications for social workers, and provides suggestions on how balance can be facilitated.

Introduction

The interrelationship between people's work and non-work roles is commonly referred to as work-life balance. The changing nature of work, changing demographics of the workforce, and diverse family structures (Varuhas, Fursman & Jacobsen, 2003) have had an impact on the relationship between work and other life roles. It is increasingly recognised that the issues of work-life balance have implications for individuals and their families, colleagues, and employers.

The research literature identifies two distinct theories about the interaction between work and non-work life roles. Much of the literature on work-life balance focuses on work-life conflict, that is, where a person's work and life roles are incompatible in some way (Todd, 2004). There is increasing evidence of the benefits of combining multiple life roles. This is referred to as work-life facilitation (Frone, 2003, cited in O'Driscoll, Brough & Kalliath, 2006) and evidence suggests that there is the potential to moderate conflict, and to increase the benefits of involvement in multiple roles.

Within a New Zealand context, social work registration, and ANZASW membership, require that social workers engage in ongoing professional development. Undertaking a formal course of study is one aspect of professional development, and it provides a way for social work professionals to stay current with theory and research in their area of practice.

Research design

The objectives of this research were to identify social workers' reasons for formal study, the various work/life roles they have, and how they manage to maintain a balance between these roles. The research was conducted using postal questionnaires. Participants were self-selected by responding to an advertisement in the ANZASW *Social Work Notice Board*. Twenty-two of 24 (92%) questionnaires were completed and returned. Eighty-six percent (19) of the respondents were female, and three were male. The majority of respondents were aged between 31 and 50 years. Respondents reported working in a variety of social work practice settings. Nearly half of all respondents (45.5%) indicated that they had some level of supervisory or management responsibility.

The questionnaire utilised a combination of closed questions, open-ended questions and rating scales. The majority of the information requested was quantitative, but respondents were given an opportunity to include other comments in open-ended questions. The open-ended questions provided a significant amount of qualitative data that was both personal and reflective.

Definitions

The State Services Commission (2005, p iv) defines *work-life balance* as being:

> …about the interaction between paid work and other activities, including unpaid work in families and the community, leisure, and personal development…

Balance is defined as:

> …a state where an individual manages real or potential conflict between different demands on his or her time and energy in a way that satisfies his or her needs for well-being and self-fulfilment' (Clutterbuck, 2003, 8).

Changing demographics of the workforce have included an increasing number of women in work, more diverse family structures and changes in responsibilities within families (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002). As a result of these changes there has been an increased interest in the 'question of balance between people's lives as paid workers and their lives as members of families and of communities' (State Services Commission, 2005, p. 4).

Research on *work-life balance* has focused primarily on the interaction between work and family roles (NZCTU, 2004). However, there is growing evidence that indicates this debate is relevant in a wider context, relating to 'all aspects of balancing work and life' (Russell & Bourke, 1999, cited in Hogarth, Hasluck, Pierre, Winterbotham & Vivian, 2000, p. 3), and allowing for 'training and further education, time for leisure and sport and community responsibilities' (NZCTU, 2004, p. 6).

Work-life conflict is the term used to refer to an imbalance between work and life roles. Work-life conflict occurs when the demands of various roles are incompatible in some way (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, cited in Aryee, Srinivas and Tan, 2005; Todd, 2004). The conflict perspective has been reinforced by observations of individuals struggling with multiple roles, and organisations experiencing high turnover as a result (American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, 1992, cited in Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002).

Todd (2004, p. 9) identifies a variety of work conditions as antecedents for conflict. These include 'heavy workloads, lack of participation in decision-making, health and safety hazards and job insecurity'. The State Services Commission Career Progression and Development Survey (2000), also identified long hours and heavy workloads as risks to workers (State Services Commission, 2005).

Various life issues or crises can also contribute to work-life conflict. These issues include the need for family, community and personal time, managing ongoing family needs, family emergencies, and community involvement (State Services Commission, 2005). Research by Tausig and Fenwick (2001, cited in O'Driscoll et al., 2006, p. 125) suggests the presence of dependants 'has been associated with increased levels of both work-family conflict and psychological strain'.

Negative consequences can occur for individuals, their families, and for employers, when an individual's various life roles are out of balance (UMR Research, 2003, Yasbek, 2004). In the work environment consequences of work-life conflict include deterioration of work relationships, mistakes, decreased quality of work and decreased job satisfaction (UMR Research, 2003), loss of productivity (Comfort, Johnson & Wallace, 2003, cited in Yasbek, 2004), absenteeism, less commitment to the organisation and employees who are 'more likely to intend to leave their job' (Duxbury & Higgins, 2001, cited in Todd, 2004, p. 9).

Other consequences include fatigue that 'reduces people's cognitive ability' (Yasbek, 2004, p. 19), relationship problems with their partner and children; mental and physical health problems; experiences of pressure and stress; and less time for social activities and other community involvement (UMR Research, 2003; Todd, 2004).

Research on the benefits of combining multiple life roles is much less extensive but has been defined as *work-life facilitation* (Frone, 2003, cited in O'Driscoll et al., 2006) or *integration* (Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000, cited in Varuhas et al., 2003, p. 122). Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) suggest that work-life facilitation occurs as a result of resources (for example money, flexibility, self-esteem and information) gained in one role positively affecting another role. Facilitation may also occur when negative experiences in one role are able to be moderated by positive experiences in another role (Barnett & Hyde, 2001, cited in Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003).

The consequences of work-life facilitation are identified as being improved physical health, better relationships, greater occupational commitment, and increased productivity and job satisfaction (Grzywacz, 2002, cited in O'Driscoll et al., 2006).

Whose responsibility?

Research suggests that work-life balance is primarily an individual responsibility (UMR Research, 2003, Work-life Balance Project, 2004). This is supported by evidence that most coping strategies used by individuals are based outside the workplace (UMR Research, 2003). However, while individual coping strategies may be of some assistance, work-life conflict also needs to be dealt with 'at one of the sources of the problem – at the workplace level' (Todd, 2004, p. 9). The State Services Commission (2005) suggests that work-life balance is about creating a work culture, where the potential for tension between work and other parts of people's lives is minimised. They identify employment provisions and organisational systems as necessary to achieving this balance. The primary responsibility of employers should be providing a 'good working environment' (UMR Research, 2003, p. 15). The benefits for employers were identified as:

- recruiting and retaining staff, reduced absenteeism, reduced stress and improved job satisfaction (Yasbek, 2004),
- increased productivity, happier workplaces and more motivated staff (UMR Research 2003),
- a safer and healthier workplace by combating fatigue and minimising stress (Yasbek, 2004).

The State Services Commission (2005) acknowledges the importance of a partnership approach to achieving work-life balance, and suggests that:

> …staff are responsible for advising managers of changes to their life circumstances that may impact on work, and both are responsible for developing solutions (State Services Commission, 2005, p. 14).

Respondents

Respondents identified a number of reasons for undertaking study. Sixty-three percent (14) of respondents wanted to gain an advanced qualification, 36% to gain a professional qualification, 22% (5) studied for personal reasons, 22% (5) for organisational reasons and several indicated 'other' influences, such as to enhance practice and to facilitate career opportunities and overseas employment.

Most respondents anticipated multiple benefits for themselves from undertaking study. Their most common perceptions of the benefit of study were 'increased professional knowledge' to 'enhance practice' (81.8%), 'promotion/career opportunities' (77.3%), and personal satisfaction (68.2%).

'Professionally qualified staff' (86.4%) and 'knowledge sharing amongst employees' (81.8%) were seen to be the primary benefits of study for the respondents' organisations. Other perceived organisational benefits were: increased productivity and job satisfaction (45% each), improved staff retention (27%) and improved service delivery (14%).

In addition to work and study, respondents identified a variety of other life roles. Ninety-five percent (21) of respondents indicated that they have a partner or spouse. Other roles included; being a parent (77.3%), having extended family commitments (81.8%), social networks (81.8%) and involvement in voluntary work (50%).

Results and discussion

There were similarities between the experiences described by respondents in this research, and the findings from research on work-life balance more generally. These similarities relate to the causes and consequences of conflict, the potential for facilitation as a result of combining multiple roles, and the strategies used to assist with achieving work-life balance.

Conflict and facilitation

Respondents identified that both work and non-work roles contribute to, and are affected by, the negative consequences of conflict. Regular workload, family commitments and fatigue were identified as the most likely factors to prevent respondents from studying on a daily basis. These findings are consistent with research on work-life balance that identifies various work and personal factors as contributing to work-life conflict, and additionally that both work and personal lives suffer as a result of conflict between various life roles (State Services Commission, 2005; UMR Research, 2003; Yasbek, 2004).

This research found that respondents experienced the benefits of combining work and study through being able to use the learning from one role in their other roles, and in the use of financial resources from paid work to employ a housecleaner, for childcare and for self care items. This is consistent with research on work-life facilitation, which suggests that positive experiences and resources gained in one role can enhance experiences in other roles (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000, cited in Varuhas et al., 2003).

One particular area of conflict identified in this research is the time-related and emotional conflict experienced by those who have dependant children. One respondent noted that:

> The workload created with study and working full-time causes restraints on my time, conflicting with my desire to spend time with my family.

The findings of this research suggest that the demands inherent in parenting can cause both practical (time-related) and emotional conflict. Wallace (1999, cited in O'Driscoll et al., 2006, p. 125) suggests that it is not the presence of children in itself that predicts conflict, but it is the 'absence of effective external services providing childcare and household assistance'.

Supports

Most respondents in this research identified multiple supports and strategies they use to assist them achieve a healthy work-life balance. The use of time management strategies, and the presence of social support from family, friends and colleagues are possible moderators of work-life conflict (O'Driscoll et al., 2006). Respondents in this research identified that, among other things, practical and emotional support from family and friends and the use of time management strategies were important factors in enabling them to manage the demands of their various roles

Responsibility for work-life balance

Respondents in this research identified that the majority of strategies they use to balance work and study roles are their own personal supports and initiatives. This is consistent with evidence from the literature (UMR Research, 2003).

Todd (2004) suggests that workplace initiatives are also necessary for moderating experiences of conflict, and respondents in this research have identified specific organisational supports that they believe would be beneficial.

The majority of respondents felt that the support they receive from their organisation is 'moderately effective'. Paid study leave and payment for their course were the two most common organisational supports received by respondents. Half of respondents identified that there were factors that prevented them from taking up the organisational supports being offered. These factors included workload, and conditions attached to the support, such as being bonded to the agency or a passing grade in their course before their organisation would reimburse course fees. Respondents were strongly in favour of other types of support, such as flexible hours, a reduced workload and various types of 'moral' or 'emotional' support, such as mentoring and organisational 'interest and encouragement'.

Implications for social work

The findings from this research can assist with understanding some of the relevant issues for those combining multiple life roles. There are also specific implications for the social work profession.

There are parallels between the experiences of respondents in this research, and those identified in the research on social workers in the United Kingdom who have combined work and study. The UK research indicated that social workers perceived more advantages than disadvantages to combining work and study (Bourn & Bootle, 2005). This research was in agreement and the primary benefits respondents identified were being able to link theory with practice, using work experiences to inform study, and discussing their learning with colleagues.

Workload relief

The issue of workload relief in social work is complex. None of the respondents in this research identified a reduced workload as a support they received. The nature of social work is such that a reduced workload may not be realistic or sustainable. As Postle, Edwards, Moon, Rumsey & Thomas (2002, p. 166) found in their research 'at the end of the course less than a quarter of all candidates felt they had a protected caseload'. In light of the difficulties with offering workload relief, further consideration needs to be given to implementing strategies to assist with moderating the effects of workplace demands such as heavy workloads.

Experiences of fatigue

Eighty-six percent (19) of respondents identified that fatigue was a difficulty they experienced in combining work and study. Fatigue was also the most common reason respondents identified as preventing them from studying. Literature on work-life balance identifies that fatigue can lead to 'reduced cognitive ability' (Yasbek, 2004, p. 19), and that this can be caused by 'inadequate recuperation from previous over-activity, either mental, emotional or physical' (Darby & Walls, 1998, p. 18). If social workers who are combining work and study are experiencing fatigue, there will be an impact on their ability to make sound practice decisions. It is therefore in the interests of the individual social worker, their organisation, and their clients that these issues are managed.

Supervision

In this research, supervision was identified as a personal self-care strategy to assist with balancing work and study demands. Fifty-nine percent of respondents identified that when difficulties arise they discuss these with their supervisor or employer. An extension of the discussion on supervision is the suggestion from respondents about mentoring or 'buddy' support for those who are studying. One respondent said: 'A buddy or mentor would be useful, even just for discussion/critique of theory and practice.'

Bourn & Bootle (2005, p. 357) suggest that the 'line manager/supervisor has a critical role in supporting new learning and its transfer to the workplace.' However, they also acknowledge that pressures in the workplace may prevent this from occurring. This highlights the possibility that mentoring for those who are studying may need to be separate from line management supervision (Cooper & Rixon, 2001). It would seem therefore, that there is a distinct role for a buddy or mentor in supporting the integration of learning from work and study.

Partnership

Respondents in this research have endorsed the benefit of a partnership approach to work-life balance. O'Driscoll et al. (2006, p. 137) suggest that it is 'important for individuals and organisations to develop mechanisms that encourage and support the enhancement of both work and family life.'

Conclusion and recommendations

The experiences described by respondents in this research have strong links with previous research findings on work-life balance. These consistencies are in relation to the causes and consequences of work-life conflict, the potential for balance or facilitation to occur, the importance of engaging various supports and strategies to moderate conflict, and the particular role that organisations have to play in further enhancing work-life balance experiences.

Individuals are not likely to look at work-life balance issues until some crisis or event occurs (UMR Research, 2003). Rather than waiting for a crisis to happen this research has identified strategies that could be implemented to minimise conflict, and to increase the likelihood of work-life balance and facilitation.

Strategies to facilitate work-life balance

Social workers

- Time management – have a study plan for the year including time to complete assignments.
- Have a weekly plan and be disciplined with your time. Include time for family, social activities and self-care.
- Discuss plans with family and your employer.
- Engage supports – organisational and personal – to assist you.
- Use supervision as a forum for reflection, prioritising and planning.
- Be realistic about what you can manage in terms of academic workload and grades.
- Consider what you can offer your organisation as a result of your study.
- Be organised! The more organised you are the better.

- Consider a four day working week.

Organisations

- Have a current policy on study support including financial, practical and moral support.
  - Financial assistance – payment for course fees and costs.
  - Practical – flexible working hours, study leave.
  - Moral support – encouragement and interest, 'buddy' or mentor, supervision.
- Recognise the benefit of study to the organisation.
- Ensure that supervision occurs, and that supervisors have knowledge about how to support students.
- Encourage staff to undertake professional development but assist with choice of course given work demands.
- Consider workload management.
- Provide training or seminars on time management and self care.

Partnership

- Be committed to ongoing conversations about experiences of professional development.
- Plan together for training and professional development that will benefit both the individual and the organisation.
- Consider how learning from work and study can be transferable.
- Consider what learning from study can contribute to the workplace, e.g. training materials, share study resources, ability to 'buddy' or mentor others.

Self care

- Exercise and healthy diet.
- Time out – weekends at the beach, doing 'nothing constructive', tramping.
- Socialising – coffee with friends, movies.

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