

# Making Your Life Work

## A New Approach to Increasing Your Effectiveness On and Off the Job

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# Introduction

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The effort it takes to combine work and the rest of life is often described as balancing, blending, juggling, or just getting by. **While some people and organizations have found successful strategies for meeting a full range of work and life needs, many struggle to find effective and satisfying solutions.** Technology has made people increasingly accessible, allowing (or forcing) us to attend to multiple areas of life at any given time. At work, the pressure to perform is great, and on the home front, family support systems are often limited. As a result, we race to keep up with today's information, activities, and priorities. All this equals chronic stress—and we are less productive on all fronts.

The way through the confusion and stress, we believe, is to understand your personal work/life patterns and preferences. **By considering three factors—behavior, identity, and control—you can identify new strategies and small changes that will make you more effective both on and off the job.**<sup>1</sup>

Organizations, too, have a role to play in supporting employees' work/life choices. Company leaders and managers must recognize that current structures, policies, and norms may not be working. They also should avoid taking a single, one-size-fits-all approach to developing productive employees and efficient processes.

# The New Work/Life Reality

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The challenge of satisfying both work and personal needs is not new, but in recent years, new solutions have emerged. The new choices are largely tied to advances in technology. Just as the industrial age introduced a significant change (the separation between work and family time), the modern digital revolution has given us the technology to attend to work and family across place and time. The length of the work day is no longer tightly bound to the sun, clock, or factory. These changes require individuals and organizations to structure work (and how we manage our multiple roles and responsibilities) differently.

The movement towards constant connectivity creates problems, too. Time that was once dedicated or limited to one domain is now porous and malleable. Smart phones, tablet PCs, and laptops make us instantly accessible, keeping us tethered to both work and home obligations. When we are with family and friends, we monitor e-mails from work. When we are at work, we monitor e-mails from family

members. In an effort not to miss anyone or anything, we are on alert for the next text, call, or e-mail. **Our attention is fragmented, as we are pulled in multiple directions.** We think about the people and situations that are in our electronic space, making it hard to focus on the situation we are in at the moment. The brain never really shuts off. Linda Stone, visionary thinker and former Microsoft executive, has described the modern state as continuous partial attention.<sup>2</sup>

The recent economic recession intensifies this desire to attend to everything at once. Reductions in force and downsizing initiatives have created more work per job in many organizations. Part-time work has become full-time work, and full-time jobs are consuming. People across industries and job levels face intense pressure to perform well. They worry that they may lose their job and ability to provide for themselves and others if someone else seems to be working harder or better.

## Speaking of Work and Life . . .

Working in this field, we realize that many people use different phrases to describe the relationship between work and nonwork time. Some people call it work/life and others call it work/family. We talk about work/life in the broadest sense to cover all the roles people invest in outside of the work role.

While many experts advise us to disconnect, say “no” more often, and manage our time differently, most people don’t feel they have the choice. There does not appear to be a way to avoid doing more and always being “on.” At the same time, the stress this causes results in burnout and reduces effectiveness and productivity. **The irony is that the expectation that we will always be available and able to do one more thing can result in being less productive rather than more productive.** We need new ways to think about the work we do and how we do it.

The structure of modern families adds an additional complication. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 58.1% of married couples with children both work. Being “on call” for family matters contributes to the experience of continuous partial attention. Families are also smaller and more isolated. Living near extended family is no longer common, making it difficult for family members to provide one another with support and caregiving. If either work or personal demands increase, we have little room to maneuver. Physical, mental, and emotional resources are easily tapped out—and time is limited.

**The combination of increased accessibility, the pressure to perform, and declining family support adds up to chronic stress.** When people feel stressed by something in their lives, the human body releases cortisol. Cortisol is the hormone secreted in response to the “fight or flight” response and can provide a quick burst of energy and strength. This is good if the stressor is a physical danger and we need to find safety quickly. When this kind of episodic stress is over, the cortisol dissipates and the body relaxes and returns to normal. However, when danger signals are caused by internal or ongoing stressors, we have no obvious outlet for the energy. When stress is chronic, levels of cortisol in the bloodstream tend to be higher and remain in the body for a prolonged time. Such cortisol overload can lead to a variety of health problems such as hypertension and hyperglycemia. In addition, prolonged stress can be associated with impaired cognitive function and lowered levels of energy. Making the situation even more serious, the demands of the modern world limit the opportunity to have “rebound” time. It is challenging to be resilient in a world that has very little time for rest, relaxation, and being in the moment.

So, how can you find new ways to manage the boundaries between work and home in a way that encourages good health and productivity?

## 3 Factors

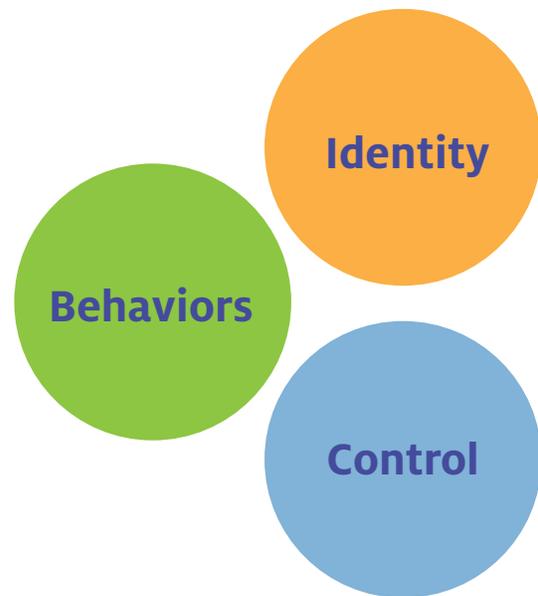
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The first step is to identify your patterns of blending work with the other areas of life. Once you have a clear picture of your current work/life parameters, you can try different techniques and make new choices to help you be more effective and reduce stress. You'll probably find you have more control over these boundaries than you thought.

Working with Michigan State University Distinguished Professor Ellen Ernst Kossek, CCL identified three factors that affect the boundaries between work and personal life. These factors are: your behavior regarding interruptions, the centrality of your identities, and control over your work/life boundaries.

### Ellen Ernst Kossek: Managing Work & Life Boundaries

CCL partnered with Dr. Ellen Kossek to develop the WorkLife Indicator, a tool that builds on Kossek's previous research. The WorkLife Indicator is designed to help people understand the factors that come into play when managing work/life boundaries. Using this insight, we can learn how boundaries can flex and change to one's advantage. With coauthor Brenda Lautsch, Ellen Kossek wrote the book *The CEO of Me*, which looks at how busy people can take back their lives and shape the various points of contact between work and personal needs.



## 1. Behaviors: Do you separate your roles or allow constant interruptions?

Understanding your work/life patterns begins with understanding the degree to which you allow interruptions from one role to another. We have identified five types, or approaches, along a continuum of behaviors from keeping work and nonwork roles purely separate to full integration where work and nonwork roles are often combined.



**Integrators** blend work and personal tasks and commitments throughout the day. They allow work to interrupt family time and family time to interrupt work time and do not differentiate between the two domains. For example, they may keep up with business calls and e-mails at a child's sporting event or on vacation. They may also schedule family, personal, or childcare related events during traditional working hours.



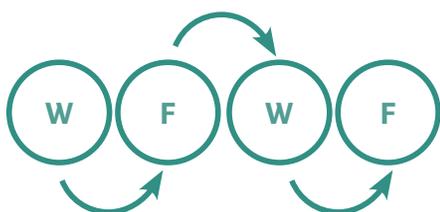
**Separators** block off time for work and personal tasks. They like to focus on work when on work time, and family when on family time. If they have to attend to a personal matter during the workday, they are likely to schedule it at a defined time. Separators use physical space, their schedules, and their mind-set to keep aspects of their life separated. They have clearly established boundaries protecting both work and family time.



**Work Firsters** allow work to interrupt family and personal time, but not the other way around. They focus on work when on work time, permit work to overrun family time, and routinely use technology to keep them connected to work. Work Firsters clearly establish boundaries protecting work time but do not do the same for family time.



**Family Firsters** have firm boundaries protecting family time, but allow work time to be interrupted. They stay in touch with family or take care of personal business as needed while at work. For example, Family Firsters may use e-mail to help a child with homework or schedule a doctor's appointment while at work. In addition, they schedule meetings and other work commitments so that they don't encroach on family time.



**Cyclers** switch back and forth between cycles of either highly integrating family and work followed by periods of intentionally separating them. They follow established, ongoing rhythms of mixing work and family followed by distinct separating of work and personal life to enable focus. People with seasonal work, like the tax accountant who focuses intensely on work from January through April, or those whose jobs require periodic travel or key deadlines, are likely to be cyclers. After a period of intense focus on work, the cycler will create extra time for personal or family events, or simply to catch up with all that has piled up on the home front.

## 2. Identity: How do you see yourself?

Work/life patterns are also driven by the intensity you feel around the different roles you play. The term “identity centrality” refers to the degree to which you protect and invest in one of your roles. It indicates how you will prioritize the different aspects of your life when they need to be combined or juggled. Most people actively make decisions to protect a central identity from threats or disruptions. When decisions are to be made about how to spend time or where to put one’s attention, the most strongly valued identity is likely to win out. People differ in terms of how central a given role is to them. We’ve found four patterns regarding work and family identities.



**Work Focused** individuals identify with and invest themselves primarily in their career and work roles. They structure their lives to give their best energy to their work.



**Family Focused** individuals identify with and invest themselves primarily in their family roles. They structure their lives to give their best energy to their family.



**Dual Focused** individuals identify with and invest themselves equally in both their work and their family roles. They give their energy equally to work and family.



**Other Focused** individuals have a primary identity and investment in life interests that do not necessarily pertain directly to work or family, such as athletics, community, a side job, a hobby, or volunteering. They may invest a lot in family, work, or both roles, but are careful to protect time and energy to devote to an important interest outside the family or work domain.

### 3. Control: How much say do you have over your work/life boundary?

The stress we experience is closely related to a lack of control over job and life demands. The degree to which the timing, location, permeability of different roles can be controlled makes a huge difference to the identification of options for handling life's responsibilities. There are three different patterns of boundary control:



**High Boundary Control.** Individuals feel that they can make decisions about how they divide their time and attention between work and family. They decide when to focus on work, when to focus on family, or when to blend the two. They have the authority and ability to make decisions about how to spend their time and can manage any resulting trade-offs. An example of someone with high boundary control might be a tenured university professor with grown children who has substantial freedom about how to spend his or her time.



**Mid-level Boundary Control.** Individuals feel somewhat in control of how they divide their time and attention between work and family. At times they can choose when to focus on work, when to focus on family, or when to blend the two, but there are many situations where they feel they have no choice. For example, a graphic designer can often schedule appointments, send personal e-mails, or attend a school function during work hours. But a new project or tight deadline can easily change her schedule, leading to cancelled plans and late night work. She would like to use another approach but cannot.



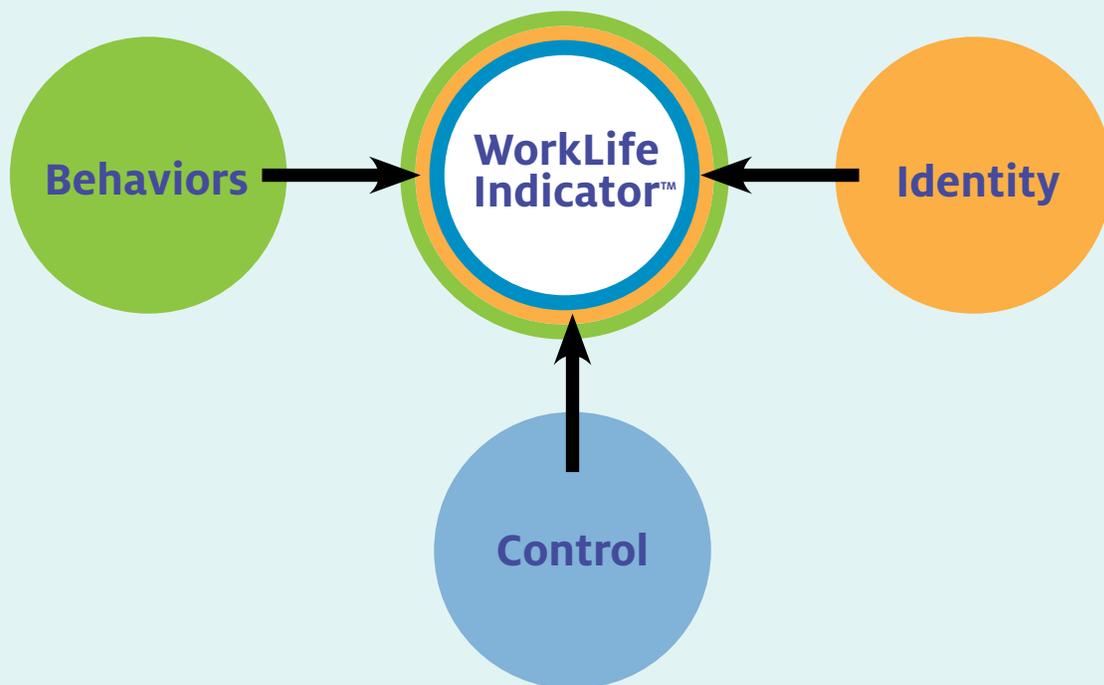
**Low Boundary Control.** Individuals experience little flexibility over how their time is allocated to work and family. Schedules are defined, rigid, and difficult to change. In most cases, time limitations are established by the type of job assignment, personal circumstances, or both. A toll collector, for example, has a set shift and rigid break times. A retail sales manager with young children has both fixed schedule and childcare arrangements that do not allow for exceptions or changes. Both people have very low boundary control. Control over the boundary is determined by external circumstances rather than by the individual.

Regardless of whether people prefer separation or integration interruption styles and regardless of their primary identity, high boundary control is related to more positive experiences. So it is important to identify what you have control over and what you don't—and change what you can. That greater feeling of control goes a long way toward improved productivity and work/life satisfaction.

Behavior, identity, and control set the stage for how we manage boundaries between work and life. CCL has looked at the different patterns of behaviors, identity, and control and has identified important considerations for each pattern. For instance, Pat is an integrator with a dual focus and high boundary control. Pat is a business owner, with his office just five minutes from home. His wife also has her own business and her office is in the same building. In addition to his primary office, Pat has a desk at home in the den where he works on his laptop while his kids play. Pat likes to exercise, and he keeps fitness equipment at both the office and at home so he can work out whenever he has a chance. Pat also coaches his daughter's soccer team with one of his employees assisting.

Pat sees himself as a role model and is very open with his employees as he attends to both work and family activities throughout the day. He tells people that it is okay to remind him to do things and to contact him any time of day or night. The kids do freely interrupt Pat, and he quickly responds to e-mail, texts, and calls from employees and clients. He has sticky notes all over the office, house, and car with reminders and to-do lists.

As an integrator, Pat is reacting to a lot of different demands all the time. While he values his flexibility, he wonders if he makes the best possible decisions at work and at home. When he first got his smart phone, Pat felt liberated but now it is a constant reminder of all he has to do. Pat's biggest complaint is that he often feels overwhelmed by all the chaos of his many to-do lists. He sometimes feels that he wastes a lot of energy as he goes back and forth switching between different activities. Pat's coworkers see him as a firefighter, always on the move. He is always in a hurry and sometimes overlooks very important issues in the rush to do something else.



In contrast, Jordan is predominantly work-focused and prefers to separate his work and his personal life. He has a wife, three children, and a job in the construction industry that requires weekly travel. While he does have some control over how he arranges his travel, his work is somewhat customized and he can't always anticipate how long a particular project will last.

When Jordan is on the road, he stays in "work mode." Home is home and work is work, he likes to say. Jordan gives his travel itinerary to his family so they always know where he is, but only checks in with them sporadically while he's out of town. He keeps a separate e-mail account for personal messages.

Jordan jokes that he's married to his Blackberry during the week. However, when he is at home, the Blackberry is off and family time is treasured. His colleagues at work know that Jordan is not available to work on weekends and keep all requests for Monday through Friday.

Jordan has set ground rules at home and at work, which helps him respond to different demands. He does regret the missed nights with his children and knows his wife would like him to be more connected to the routine and needs at home. But his wife is happy to have the primary childcare role and she gets lots of support from her own parents.

Jordan's pattern of managing work and family life has worked well for several years, but recently he has been struggling. His oldest daughter is struggling in school. When his widowed mother took ill, Jordan's wife dealt with it while he was thousands of miles away. Worry about his mother's deteriorating health and his daughter's difficulties is interrupting Jordan's sleep, making him less efficient.

Both Pat and Jordan would benefit from a clear understanding of their style of managing boundaries and how it impacts their levels of stress. Pat has a high level of control over his life and Jordan has moderate control. They are both fortunate that they are in a position to make a change.

Taking time to reflect (using a tool such as the WorkLife Indicator is a helpful way to get to the heart of the work/life issues), Pat might realize that he is multitasking all the time, switching from one task to another in a rush. He is exhausted by the many demands on his time and unable to attend to the most important business issues when he's always responding and reacting to others. One suggestion for Pat might be to set some strategies to help his family be more aware of his work demands so that he can carve out more dedicated work time. He might also benefit from having some time to transition from one activity to the next so he isn't so rushed. It seems Pat's children are not the only ones who need to be reminded that he will finish work tasks more efficiently if he isn't constantly interrupted.

Conversely, Jordan might benefit from being less rigid. He could discuss with his family his need to separate and how he is better able to deal with family issues after getting his work done. But he can also clarify with his wife and mother that he does want to be notified of emergencies and can change his schedule if needed. Small changes, like giving back-up contact information on both his personal and professional voicemail numbers, would also build a bit more flexibility into his roles, easing some tension.



## 5 Steps

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Once we understand our individual patterns of boundary management, we have a practical framework for thinking about how to reduce stress and improve effectiveness. We've found that awareness of styles helps people clarify problems, discuss tough issues, and come up with possible solutions. Kossek and Lautsch (2008) have identified strategies we've adapted to develop a five-step process that can create a structure for effectively addressing work/life challenges:

## 1. Identify what is not working for you.

This sounds easy, but it can be difficult to identify your core boundary management problems. Sometimes one key problem will trigger other challenges or frustrations, creating the sense that nothing is working right or that the problems are too complex to fix without making dramatic change. One way to start sorting this out is to monitor yourself for a week. Write down how you spend your time, when interruptions occur, what gets accomplished and what doesn't. Just as important, jot down how you feel. Is the text from your teenager reassuring or frustrating? Does the flood of predawn e-mails from your boss energize you or create anxiety as you start your day? At the end of the work day, do you feel satisfied or disappointed about how much you accomplished?

As you think about what works well and what doesn't, consider four areas:

**Boundary control.** Many people do not think they can change their situation. Chances are, you can improve your productivity by adjusting the thickness of your work and life boundaries. Consider whether and when you would prefer stronger boundaries and in what situations you would do better if you could blur the lines.

**Time management.** Unexpected things happen, we occasionally misjudge the time it takes to do something, and there is always more you could be doing. Even so, there are only 168 hours in a week. Are you paying attention to how you spend your time, being realistic about what you can accomplish, and making conscious choices to take care of what is most important?

**Expectations.** Unrealistic expectations create unnecessary stress. As you review your work/life boundaries, consider the expectations you have of yourself and the expectations others have of you. Are unrealistic expectations a problem?

**Transitions.** Conflict and stress can also arise as we move in and out of our various roles. Not having enough time to switch from one role to another can leave us feeling rushed or frustrated or ineffective. Some people find it very hard to turn off the work role and turn on the parenting one, for example.

Boundary control, time management, expectations, and transitions are areas of challenge for many people, but they hold the clues to the strategies for change that will work best for you.

## 2. Learn boundary management techniques.

Good ideas are out there. Read articles about how to address the issues frustrating to you. Talk to coworkers and friends about what works for them (bearing in mind different tactics work effectively for different people).

Brainstorm ideas for new approaches to use—think differently. You might rethink how you use technology, for example. If you prefer to separate work from home, use separate mobile devices or e-mail addresses for each role or turn off devices at key times. Decide how often you check e-mails, rather than responding as they come in.

If you are always accessible, first one in the office, and the super-parent on the weekend, maybe you'll want to talk to family members and coworkers about priorities and expectations.

Also think about time and space. Commit to personal time or time for your interests. Set up your work space so it supports your productivity rather than drains it. Change your schedule—maybe you would be more effective if you rearrange your time. Would you be more efficient if you worked from home one day a week, knowing you can do the laundry while writing reports or planning a project?

Other tactics include finding substitutes—trade dinner responsibility, hire some help, or delegate tasks at work—and build in a bit of extra time between tasks and roles to ease the stress that comes from transitions. Small habits or rituals, such as listening to music on the drive to pick up children, can also help you transition to what's next.

Once you decide some changes you'd like to make, communicate your preferences and ideas to key people. Use the language of boundary management if it helps to make conversations easier. You might say, "When you call me at work, I get distracted. Could you call only if there is an emergency or if a decision absolutely must be made before I get home?" Be open to ideas for creating solutions together—ask for help.

## 3. Clarify your goals for a better life.

There are benefits and trade-offs with any approach to managing your work and life. You will be able to weather the stressful times more successfully if you are clear on your larger goals and priorities. Why are you taking on extra hours (pay off debt, gain more experience)? Why are you constantly connected via your smart phone? (I like the security of knowing what's up at work and at home.) What is your vision for the way boundaries between work and home life should be? Do you know what you want or how you want to manage your time? What would a more sustainable version of your life look like? Are you taking sufficient care of yourself?

## 4. Get support.

Everyone needs support to achieve goals, especially those as complicated as work and family goals. The support may be from work or from home. Some people might help you figure out how to best manage your time and energy, or agree to take some tasks off your plate. Others can provide encouragement or empathy as you try to adjust your work/life patterns. Cognitive or political support can come from a coach or mentor, who can help you navigate the options at work. Help with improving your physical health may also be important for increasing energy and resilience. Your support network is also invaluable when dealing with a crisis such as helping a chronically ill family member.

## 5. Track your progress.

Change requires focus and commitment. Make a plan and track your progress. This keeps you accountable to yourself and your work/life stakeholders. It allows you to see what is working and where the pitfalls lie. With this information, you'll have a better handle on what else you can do to find greater productivity and satisfaction in your various life roles.



# Who Has Responsibility For Change?

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Many of the suggestions we offer rest on the idea that you have some control over your environment. But sometimes the control just isn't there, and self-directed change isn't possible. Many jobs require specific shifts, physical presence, and have immutable deadlines. School teachers, medical personnel, and manufacturing employees are usually tied to fixed schedules. Such jobs don't lend themselves to individual adjustments in terms of when and where the work takes place. In these cases, there are still some changes you can make. Furthermore, the responsibility isn't just on the individual. Human resource practitioners, managers, and the workforce can contribute to making the workplace more effective for everyone.

## Individuals

- Reassess how work gets done. Maybe the “when” and “where” cannot change, but even very defined jobs can be pliable. Talk to coworkers, team members, and your boss. Be clear about what would work better for you, and see what's possible. Are there tasks or times that could be swapped or adjusted or rotated in a different way? Could some routine tasks be eliminated, freeing up time and energy for new work or special projects? Could travel schedules or service territories or production teams be better coordinated? Even if you are putting in the same hours, a small improvement in your sense of control over your work can boost your energy, focus, and productivity. With less workday stress, the demands of your home and personal life may be easier to manage.
- Focus on the home front. The reverse is also true. If you can reduce stress tied to your roles and responsibilities outside of work, work could feel less stressful. Find new ways to share care or household chores. Try a new routine; wake up earlier in the morning or put off a weekday task until the weekend. Set aside even a little bit of time to take care of yourself. Turn off television, electronics, and telephones when they are distractions. Make clear choices about where, when, and with whom you spend your time when you are not on the job. For all that can and should be managed by individuals, some responsibility for effectively adjusting to greater accessibility, increased work pressure to perform, and declining family support does fall to others.

## Human Resource Practitioners

HR has a role in changing a work environment where individuals don't have latitude to make changes. Are systems or policies outdated or habitual rather than necessary? HR departments can institute new policies and change practices to give workers more control. This can include flextime or telecommuting policies, but also open the door to quality of life discussions. Support managers and employees in trying new processes or making changes that could help meet both work and life demands. Regardless of the official policies, Human Resource practitioners can make a significant difference by ensuring that the environment is supportive of individuals' needs to accommodate both work and life. Organizations benefit when individuals feel supported, engaged and effective.

## Managers

Managers help employees feel supported by having open discussions about how to manage the interface between work and life. This sends the message that the juggle of employees' different roles and obligations are valid concerns. As managers look at productivity and work load, they should factor in employee patterns and preferences. Instead of thinking of employee flexibility as something that undermines work, managers should figure out how to maximize flexibility for the organization's advantage.

## The Workforce

Much workplace change has come from social protest. In the past, social protest has resulted in shorter work weeks, annual paid leave, and maternity benefits. It may take some type of social movement for people to feel they can take back control over their time, without jeopardizing their jobs. Perhaps it is time for a new movement to confront the system-wide challenges that leave individuals, families, and communities overwhelmed and uninspired.

# Work/Life In Transition

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With helpful information and tools, individuals can reconsider how they invest their time and energy for a more satisfying and productive life. **Family members, the organization, and society have a part in this as well; preventing overload is not simply an issue for the individual.** We hope this paper and the WorkLife Indicator can be used to foster individual reflection on how to make improvements in current work/life relationships. Work groups can also use these resources to understand different ways of managing work/life patterns in the work place in order to develop productive working relationships that enhance effectiveness on and off the job.

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