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By Chris Higgins and Linda Duxbury

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Saying "No" in a culture of hours, money and non-support

Achieving a work-life balance is possible. If only those workers trying to achieve that goal would look to the very same person who is conflicted and unable to manage the stress for the solution: themselves.

By Chris Higgins and Linda Duxbury

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In the mid-to-late 1980s, proponents of telecommuting were telling the world that all of us would soon be working from home or satellite offices, and avoiding the daily trip to work. We would be less stressed, and have both the time and energy to fulfill our work and personal/family responsibilities. Work-family conflict would be a thing of the past, and all of this would happen through the miracle of technology.

The proponents were certainly right about one thing: the miracle of technology did happen. Unfortunately, they were wrong on the other prediction. We now have less time than ever for our personal/family responsibilities, and stress levels are at an all-time high. Work-family conflict is an issue that is not going away.

In this article we reflect on nearly two decades of research we have done in the area of work-life

conflict. First we define what we mean by work-life conflict and discuss some of the consequences we are seeing in the workplace. Next, we discuss root causes of the problems and offer some coping mechanisms. In conclusion, we present a provocative solution that we are sure very few of you will endorse.

The real meaning of work-life conflict

So, what do we mean by work-life conflict? In our lives we all play many roles: employee, boss, subordinate, spouse, parent, child, sibling, friend and community member. Each of these roles imposes demands on us that consume time, energy and commitment. When the cumulative expectations of work and non-work life roles become so great that participation in one role is made more difficult by participation in the other role, we have work-life conflict.

We measure work-life conflict by looking at its three components: role overload, work-to-family interference, and family-to-work interference. Role overload is simply having too much to do in the available time-obviously, a major driver of conflict. Work-to-family interference arises when work demands make it difficult for an individual to fulfill his or her family responsibilities. Preoccupation with the work role prevents an active enjoyment and participation in family life and, consequently, increases conflict at home. Family-to-work interference occurs when family role responsibilities hinder performance at work. Certainly, conflict at home makes concentration at work difficult, and increases the burden of balancing work and family

responsibilities.

Our research on work-life conflict spans nearly two decades. In the period 1989-'90, we surveyed over 25,000 Canadians on issues connected with work-life conflict. From 1990 to 1999, we worked with numerous companies that were concerned about this issue, sharpening our thinking on the subject and exploring root causes and coping mechanisms. In 1999, generously funded by Health Canada, we replicated our 1990 survey, receiving responses from more than 33,000 Canadians. For those of you who think that people won't fill out long surveys, think again -- ours has upward of 300 questions and takes at least 30 minutes to complete. When people are willing to spend that much time on a survey, you know the issue hits home.

What we have learned from our research is summarized in a series of five reports, available on our website, http://groups.ivey.uwo.ca/Duxbury_Higgins. (The sixth report is currently being written and will be published shortly.) Some of our key findings are summarized in this brief article.

Workplace trends

Let's look at current trends in the workplace. Over the decade 1990-2000, the amount of time people spent in work increased dramatically. In 1991 only 11 percent of our sample worked more than 50 hours per week; in 2001 this had climbed to 26 percent of our sample. As time in work increases, the potential for conflict also increases.

In our 1990 study, 27 percent of respondents perceived high levels of role overload. By 2000, this had climbed to an incredible 58 percent. Work-to-family interference, the second component of work-life conflict, did not display the same rapid growth during this period -- it increased from 25 percent in 1990 to 30 percent in 2000. Still, the fact that work-to-family interference affects 30 percent of working Canadians is a concern. Interference in the opposite direction -- from family

to work -- increased by more than five times in the same period, from 2 percent of our survey sample in 1990 to 11 percent in 2000. Based on our recent surveys with individual companies, we know that the three components of work-life conflict are being recorded at even higher levels in 2005. Clearly, the issue is not going away.

Other trends are also occurring in the workplace that are closely correlated with the increased levels of incompatible demands. Consider, for example, employee commitment to organizations. We found that the number of employees with high levels of commitment to their organization has dropped from 66 percent in 1990 to 43 percent in 2000. In other words, less than half the employees of today's organizations are highly committed to their employer. This is a concern for organizations because less committed employees take more days off and change jobs more frequently than do committed employees. Not surprisingly, job stress is also on the increase, rising from 20 percent in 1990 to 33 percent in 2000. Employees with high job stress are much more likely to be absent from work and to have lower productivity than less stressed employees. Job satisfaction has also declined, from 61 percent of the workforce being highly satisfied in 1990 to 43 percent in 2000. Less satisfied employees are less productive, another cause for concern.

The work-life imbalance

So what are some of the causes of our inability to balance work and family demands? Our research has identified five root causes: (1) organizational downsizing, (2) organizational culture, (3) changing demographics, (4) non-supportive managers and (5) technology.

1. Downsizing

Over the past decade, companies have downsized to be more competitive and to increase shareholder value. Downsizing has resulted in overworked staff with unreasonable workloads and low levels of job

security. Just because a company downsizes does not mean that the work has gone away: it is there to be spread around the remaining employees, and they often do not say no to more work because they are insecure about their jobs. The result: less personal and family time, and more conflict between the domains.

2. A culture of "hours" and "money"

Organization cultures are also behind many of our problems. We have identified four cultures, some co-existing, that make it difficult for employees to balance their work and family demands. The first is the culture of hours -- the belief that one has to work long hours to succeed -- which is pervasive in our business environment. It is easy to know if your company has a culture of hours: do you feel guilty if you leave the office early? If the answer is yes, you probably suffer from the culture of hours. Do you cope by leaving a hot cup of coffee on your desk (like the Bud Light commercial) and your office door open -- leading others to believe you are still around, even though you left to take care of some family or personal demands?

In a disconnected culture, progressive work-family policies *are* in place, but people don't feel they can take advantage of them because management doesn't encourage their use. In essence, the policies are disconnected from practice. For example, our research shows very little use of family-friendly policies such as flexible hours or compressed workweeks despite their wide availability. When asked, employees simply say their manager was not supportive of the idea.

A third culture, labelled the culture of money, occurs

when budgets -- not people -- count. Many public companies have this mindset because they are always working frantically to make each quarter's numbers exceed stock analysts' expectations. The result is that employees are pushed to achieve short-term targets at the expense of personal/family demands.

While women have now assumed greater responsibility for the financial health of the family, men do not appear to have assumed a concomitant shared responsibility for the care of children. This is important, because research shows that responsibility for a role has a stronger correlation with stress than has time spent in role-related activities.

Finally, there is the myth of separate worlds, in which management operates as if employees' work and family lives are separate. They assume that employees will forgo personal plans for last-minute organizational needs; will travel on weekends to get to business meetings first thing Monday morning; and will relocate if offered another job within the

organization. They forget, however, that employees have spouses with their own careers, and that these demands create huge conflict at home.

3. Changing demographics

A third root cause of work-family conflict is changing demographics. Thirty years ago, men worked while women tended the home and children. Now both parents work, and there is less time for home chores and childcare responsibilities. Women especially are burdened with greater challenges at home. While women have now assumed greater responsibility for the financial health of the family, men do not appear to have assumed a concomitant shared responsibility for the care of children. This is important, because research shows that responsibility for a role has a stronger correlation with stress than has time spent in role-related activities.

Looming on the horizon is eldercare, which is more of an issue in 2000 than it was in 1990, when only 5

percent of the sample spent more than an hour a week on eldercare. For comparison purposes, almost 31 percent of respondents to the 2000 survey spent at least one hour per week in eldercare. As baby boomers move through the retirement years into old age, eldercare responsibilities will take centre stage. Canada will also see a significant increase in the proportion of its workforce in the sandwich generation (i.e., both childcare and eldercare responsibilities). Such employees typically experience extremely high levels of work-family conflict, especially with incapacitated elders.

4. A lack of support

The dearth of supportive managers is a fourth root cause of our problems. Our research has found that the presence of a supportive manager is critical to employees' perceptions of their ability to balance work and family demands. From our work with scores of companies, we have developed our own measure of a supportive manager. These are managers who (1) give recognition for a job well done, (2) provide constructive feedback on work and performance, (3) listen to employee concerns, (4) support employee decisions, (5) share information with subordinates, (5) ask for input before making decisions concerning an employee's work, and (6) provide employees with challenging opportunities.

A manager doesn't need to be a rocket scientist to meet these criteria, but less than half of all managers score highly on our scale. Our research has shown a very high correlation between the presence of a supportive manager and higher job satisfaction, higher organizational commitment, lower stress, lower intent to change jobs and, most importantly, lower levels of work-family conflict. Employees with non-supportive managers have high levels of stress and are more likely to be absent from work, or to have high intentions of changing employers. Interestingly, employees with supportive managers have a more positive perception of the organization's work-family policies than do employees with non-supportive managers. This is true even though the

policies are the same for both sets of employees.

5. The curse of technology

The final cause of our problems is technology. For example, e-mail is widely used as the primary method of communication for employees at all levels. Nowadays, there is a universal expectation that everyone reads and responds to e-mails on a constant basis. It is not uncommon for colleagues to exchange e-mails late in the evening, and many individuals are now in the habit of clearing out their e-mails before going to bed at night. BlackBerrys are ubiquitous, even on the golf course. Just look up next time you are putting-one of your foursome will likely be checking his or her messages. Technology is not helping us achieve work-life balance: 68 percent of our respondents say technology has increased their levels of stress; 70 percent say it has increased their workload. So, while technology does increase productivity, it comes at a cost.

Coping mechanisms

Let us now turn our attention to the coping mechanisms that employees use to help them balance work and family demands. The findings here are cause for concern. When asked how they cope with their challenges, 78 percent of our sample responded that they "just work harder"-which of course sets conflict levels spiralling out of control. Closely related to "just working harder," 60 percent of our respondents indicated they cut down on outside activities, while 55 percent got less sleep. These, of course, are very poor ways to cope. On the more positive side, 47 percent of our sample stated they planned their time more carefully, while 45 percent bought more goods and services (e.g., lawn care, daycare). The most disturbing finding relates to individuals in managerial and professional roles: 26 percent of women in these roles noted they have had fewer children because of work demands; 15 percent of men noted this was also true for them. Forty-two percent of professional women stated they had not yet started a family because of work

demands; 30 percent of men concurred. This suggests that many women managers and professionals find that motherhood and career advancement are not compatible goals.

The facts are very clear: most of us have a problem balancing our work and family demands. However, not everyone suffers from work-family conflict. Empty nesters have it made: they have time and disposable income, and are more likely to have fond memories of their child-raising years, if not the time they spent at work. Then again, they are not reading this article, so let's not waste any more words on them. Young, single people are also not reading this article. Perhaps they should, because then they will realize that getting married and having kids is not conducive to a stress-free life.

The solution: Just say "No"

So, is there a solution to these problems? In our reports we recommend many solutions, such as government policies to limit work hours, better work-family policies, increased family-friendly training, etc. But are these ideas realistic? Sure, they will help, but is the government likely to enact legislation to solve our problems? Is big business going to exchange a culture of long hours and bottom-line results for a family-friendly environment where employees fit their work schedules around their family schedules? Will men and women ignore their upbringing and begin sharing equally in all of the home chores and childcare responsibilities? Will technology slow down, and will organizations stop buying enhanced communication tools that keep you connected 24/7. In sum, there is no one solution.

But perhaps there is -- perhaps "we have found the enemy: it is us." We allow work to impinge on our family. We willingly allow the organization into our home, through the internet and portable computers. We willingly take work home, skip family meals to work late, travel on weekends, and so on. Recently, we interviewed a senior employee of a large, worldwide consulting group. He said work-

family balance was a huge problem for his organization, and wanted to know how we could help. Later he mentioned how no one in his organization takes weekends off -- it's basically a six- to seven-day week if a person wants to get ahead. "No kidding," we said. "You have a work-family problem."

Yes, we have found the enemy -- it is us. Look in the mirror at the enemy -- it is you. Leave your BlackBerry in the car; don't take it into your home. Turn off the wireless network in the evening; don't turn it on again until the next morning. Find time to relax, as this is by far the best coping mechanism. Play golf without a cellphone or BlackBerry in your golf bag. Talk to your spouse without feeling like you have hundreds of other priorities (and all you want to do is get at them.) Plan downtime and shoot any enemy (including yourself) that tries to take it away.

This will be hard to do. I say this because I'm speaking from experience: I made my deadline for this article at 11:57 p.m. It's okay, though, we're empty nesters! ■