

Couple relationships and work; work and couple relationships

Introduction

This briefing looks at what research tells us about the impact of our working lives on our family lives (including our couple relationships) as well as the impact of our family lives (including our couple relationships) on our working lives.

Such impact, research indicates, can be both negative as well as positive: conflict which stems from work and which spills over into the family as well as conflict which stems from the home and which spills over into work have both been shown to have consequences which include lower job satisfaction, dissatisfaction with the couple relationship, greater likelihood of wanting to find new employment, greater psychological strain, increased somatic/physical symptoms, higher levels of depression, and greater likelihood of burnout (Allen et al., 2000) (Byron, 2005) (Ford et al., 2007) (McNall et al., 2010). While the quality of our couple relationships has also been shown to be associated with the degree to which we are engaged in, and fulfilled by, our work (Burnett et al., 2010); with some employment practices (for example the option to work flexibly coupled with having a supportive supervisor/line-manager) being linked to improved home life.

The Relationships Alliance believes that a solid argument exists for

the research conclusions from the studies highlighted in this briefing being translated by business and Government into action to support relationships; the briefing therefore concludes with a short section presenting what we see as the policy implications of research in this field.

Work and couple relationships

Work-related factors which have a negative impact on couple relationships

Long hours

Working long hours – research suggests that over half of employees (rising to 67% of men) work more than 40 hours a week (Swan and Cooper, 2005) (Kersley et al., 2004) (Isles, 2005) – is associated with a range of problems. Not all couples where one or more partner works long hours report these difficulties; nevertheless many do, and they include:

- increased strain on relationships (CIPD, 1998)
- relationship break-up (CIPD, 1998)
- arguing with their partner (CIPD, 2011)
- guilt about not performing their share of domestic duties (CIPD, 2011)
- negative impact on sex life (CIPD, 2011)

- loss of, or reduced, libido in the last twelve months due to work-related tiredness (CIPD, 2011)
- negative impact on relationship with children of school age or younger (CIPD, 2011) (La Valle, 2002)
- negative impact on relationship with adolescent children (Crouter et al., 2001)
- children's unhappiness with parent working longer hours (CIPD, 2011)
- reduced contact with children i.e. not seeing children before they go to bed; having too little time to help the children with their homework; missing a child's birthday or school event (CIPD, 1998)
- dissatisfaction with work/life balance (CIPD, 2011)
- increased family conflict (Bakker et al., 2009) especially for those with pre-school children (Hill et al., 2001)
- increased depression, stress-related health problems, marital problems, poor job performance, absenteeism, or high staff turnover (Major et al., 2002).

Research suggests that the relationship between marital or relationship dissatisfaction and longer hours may depend on a number of

factors however. These include:

- whether a couple has children and how satisfied the person working long hours is with their job (van Steenbergen et al., 2011)
- the gender of the partner (research on the employment of married women finds that marital quality is negatively affected by the reduced time spent together as a result of working longer hours (Hill, 1998) (Kingston and Nock, 1987) (Spitze and South, 1985), and that married women working longer hours experience increased feelings of role conflict (Voydanoff, 1998) and are more aware of the unequal division of household chores (Booth, 1984) (Spitze and South, 1985). One study however suggests that increases in wives' workload corresponds with increased marital satisfaction (van Steenbergen et al., 2011)
- the structure of work, or how work hours fit in with family life (Barnett et al., 2008) (Gareis and Barnett, 2002) (Davis et al., 2008) (Perry-Jenkins et al., 2007) (Barnett and Gareis, 2006).

Porous work-/home-life boundaries as a result of mobile technology

The impact of using mobile technology (e.g. the use of a Blackberry or similar device for accessing email outside of work hours) on work-life balance and relationships is an increasing area of study, with studies showing that:

- for the family and friends of those who use mobile technology (for work) during non-working hours, "work is now visibly occupying time in the non-work domains that were previously off-limits." (Middleton, 2008)
- the negative spillover from work-related mobile phone use is linked to higher levels of distress and lower levels of family satisfaction (Chesley, 2005)
- flexible working may allow job

demands to penetrate further into the home domain, particularly through technological change that means individuals can work almost anywhere (Schieman et al., 2009).

However, one study, based on data from 281 office workers, has found that maintaining impermeable work and home domains by creating more boundaries around the use of mobile technology for work-related purposes can be beneficial for employees' psychological health (Park and Jex, 2011); however another study indicates that while communication via BlackBerry can result in fewer face-to-face interactions, marital satisfaction can decrease for some couples but increase for others (Czechowsky, 2008).

"The more that chief executives and HR managers recognise relationship quality as an asset that needs to be maintained, rather than seeing the relationships of their employees as a private realm into which they must not enter, the more that they can do to foster in their employees the skills necessary to maintain strong and stable relationships"

Work-related factors which have a positive impact on couple relationships

Work engagement

OnePlusOne has been at the forefront of research into the impact of couple relationship quality on work engagement (defined as a positive work-related state of fulfilment that is characterised by 'vigour, dedication, and absorption'). Their 2012 research

study found that relationship quality and work engagement are positively associated with high or low levels in either, correlating respectively to high or low levels in the other (Burnett et al., 2012).

Furthermore, work-family conflict has a stronger negative influence on both work engagement and relationship quality than family-work conflict. That is, stress from work exerts a greater negative impact on work performance and family life, compared to stress originating from family-life. However, these researchers warn, "an increase in work pressures may create a negative feedback loop for employers: as heightened work stress will likely have a negative impact on workers' relationships at home, which can, in turn, decrease their levels of work engagement".

This study corroborates findings from one carried out in 2001 which found that psychological engagement (attention and absorption) in work was positively related to positive emotions at work which, in turn, was related to men's psychological engagement in family life (Rothbard, 2001); as well as other research reporting links between work satisfaction and family satisfaction, positive parenting, and positive child outcomes (Barling, 1986) (Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000) (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1999).

Flexible working practices

Due to legislative changes, the range of flexible working practices offered by employers and their uptake has increased since the early 1990s. Flexible working practices comprise working flexible hours (including a compressed week), working from home, working part-time and job-sharing.

Research indicates strongly that there is a positive link between flexible working patterns and improved work-life balance, reduced stress levels, improved performance of employees, improved employee relations, higher levels of employee commitment and

motivation, reduced absenteeism and increased productivity (Swan, 2005) (Gatrell and Cooper, 2008, Burnett et al., 2010) (BIS, 2011).

Other studies have shown that flexible working arrangements (in particular flexible time schedules and compressed work week schedules) can result in increased job satisfaction and reduced staff turnover (McNall et al., 2010) (IOD/UNUM, 2008) (BCC, 2007) (CIPD, 2005) (EHRC, 2009). Other studies, however, suggest that informal work support, such as a supportive supervisor, is more important in reducing work-family conflict than formal provision for flexible working patterns (Behson, 2005) (Cook, 2009). Furthermore, a supervisor supportive of family life has been found, more generally, to be associated with less work-family conflict and an improved home life (Allen et al., 2008).

OnePlusOne's research shows that whereas working flexibly is associated with higher work engagement it is linked to slightly lower levels of relationship quality (possibly on account of working flexibly resulting in higher degrees of conflict between work and family-life as the boundaries become blurred) (Burnett et al., 2012).

Supporting couple relationships: a spectrum of employer approaches

The research highlighted in this briefing strongly supports the view that business and employers can influence the relationship quality and other aspects of the home lives of their employees both positively and negatively. This view is strengthened by OnePlusOne's study (Burnett et al., 2012) which found that work-family conflict (rather than family-work conflict) had the strongest link to work engagement and relationship quality. It seems clear therefore it is employers who are in the best position to address this area, since the conflict stems from work.

Activities which employers can engage in to support employees' relationships range from largely preventative approaches to those which seek to

address relationship problems which are established and/or long-standing. The former comprise activities such as building up strong employee networks, providing parenting support (e.g. providing extra help for new fathers during the period after the birth of a child), helping to identify boundaries between work and home (in order to reduce the risk of these being eroded either by employers or employees), and the provision of flexible working practices which are mutually beneficial to employees and employers; while the latter includes the provision of couple counselling and therapy.

However, although almost 95% of HR managers who responded to a survey conducted by the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships in 2013 either agreed or strongly agreed that employees' couple relationships difficulties affect work performance, relatively few examples of UK employers taking steps to support employees' relationships exist, with the availability of relationship counselling through employers remaining extremely patchy (TCCR, 2013) with the majority of employers referring employees to individual therapy despite evidence suggesting that individual counselling is less effective for relationship difficulties than couple approaches (Beach and O'Leary, 1992) (Emanuel-Zuurveen and Emmelkamp, 1996).

“Relationship skills need therefore to be seen as aptitudes which employers can invest in.”

Conclusion and policy implications

The Relationships Alliance believes that the research highlighted in this briefing presents a strong case as to why it is in the business interests of UK employers to do more to support the relationships of those that they employ.

After all, employers can often struggle

to find high calibre employees. Given the wealth of research which establishes links between work stress and lower job satisfaction, greater likelihood of wanting to find new employment, and greater likelihood of burnout, it would seem to be firmly in the interests' of employers (and of course the economy as a whole) to put in place a variety of measures and approaches which will support the couple and family relationships of those they employ.

It is a reasonable supposition however – and certainly the results from TCCR's 2013 survey indicate would support this – that the majority of employers do not see the relationships of their employees as their concern. And yet the more that chief executives and HR managers recognise relationship quality as an asset that needs to be maintained, rather than seeing the relationships of their employees as a private realm into which they must not enter, the more that they can do to foster in their employees the skills necessary to maintain strong and stable relationships – skills which also happen to be extremely useful at work.

Relationship skills need therefore to be seen as aptitudes which employers can invest in. Acting to alleviate pressures at work can help establish a virtuous cycle that benefits both employers and employees. As with the relationship support generally, a spectrum of support should be available ranging from flexible working practices which are of benefit to employer and employee alike, line-management which acknowledges and actively supports the importance of employees' relationships to their working lives; to couple counselling and therapy services available through HR departments/employee assistance programmes which aim to support employees who are encountering difficulties in their couple relationships.

- The Relationships Alliance believes that strong and stable personal and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society.
- Relationship health is an essential part of the UK's economic recovery – relationship breakdown will cost the UK £44 billion this year alone, an unsustainable figure.
- Good quality personal and social relationships are central to our health and well-being.
- Relationships are an important 'social asset' that is often ignored or undermined by public policy.

References

ALLEN, T. D., HERST, D. E., BRUCK, C. S. & SUTTON, M. 2000. Consequences associated with work-to-family conflict: A review and agenda for future research. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 5, 278-308.

ALLEN, T. D., SHOCKLEY, K. M. & POTEAT, L. F. 2008. Work-place factors associated with family dinner behaviors. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 73, 336-342.

BAKKER, A., DEMEROUTI, E. & BURKE, R. 2009. Workaholism and relationship quality: A spillover-crossover perspective. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 14, 23.

BARLING, J. 1986. Inter-role conflict and marital functioning amongst employed fathers. *Journal of Occupational Behavior*, 7, 1-8.

BARNETT, R. C. & GAREIS, K. C. 2006. Parental after-school stress and psychological well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68.

BARNETT, R. C., GAREIS, K. C. & BRENNAN, R. T. 2008. Wives' shift work schedules and husbands' and wives' well-being in dual-earner couples with children: A within-couple analysis. *Journal of Family Issues*, 29.

BCC 2007. *Work and Life: How Business is Striking the Right Balance*. London: British Chamber of Commerce.

BEACH, S. H. R. & O'LEARY, K. 1992. Treating depression in the context of marital discord: Outcome and predictors of response of marital therapy versus cognitive therapy. *Behavior Therapy*, 23, 507-528.

BEHSON, S. J. 2005. The Relative Contribution of Formal and Informal Organizational Work-Family Support. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 66, 487-500.

BIS 2011. *Extending the right to request flexible working to all*.

BOOTH, A. 1984. Women, Outside Employment and Marital Instability. *American Journal of Sociology*, 90.

BURNETT, S., COLEMAN, L., HOULSTON, C. & REYNOLDS, J. 2012. *Happy Home and Productive Workplaces*. London: OnePlusOne and Working Families.

BURNETT, S. B., GATRELL, C. J., COOPER, C. L. & SPARROW, P. R. 2010. Well-balanced families? A gendered analysis of work-life balance policies and work family practices. *Gender in Management*, 25.

BYRON, D. 2005. A meta-analytic review of work-family conflict and its antecedents. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 67, 169-198.

CHESLEY, N. 2005. Blurring Boundaries? Linking Technology Use, Spillover, Individual Distress, and Family Satisfaction. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67.

CIPD 1998. *Living to work?* Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

CIPD 2005. *Flexible Working: Impact and Implementation – An Employment Survey*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

CIPD 2011. *Married to the job?* Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

COOK, A. 2009. Connecting work-family policies to supportive work environments. *Group Organization Management*, 34, 206-240.

CROUTER, A., BUMPUS, M., HEAD, M. & MCHALE, S. 2001. Implications of overwork and overload for the quality of men's family relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63, 404-416.

CZECHOWSKY, J. 2008. *The impact of the BlackBerry on couple relationships*. Wilfrid Laurier University.

DAVIS, K. D., GOODMAN, W. B., PIRRETTI, A. E. & ALMEIDA, D. M. 2008. Nonstandard work schedules, perceived family well-being, and daily stressors. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70.

EHRC 2009. *Working Better: Meeting the Changing Needs of Families, Workers and Employers in the 21st Century*. London: Equality and Human Rights Commission.

EMANUELS-ZUURVEEN, L. & EMMELKAMP, P. M. G. 1996. Individual behavioural-cognitive therapy v marital therapy for depression in maritally distressed couples. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 169, 181-188.

FORD, M., HEINEN, B. & LANGKAMER, K. 2007. Work and family satisfaction and conflict: A meta-analysis of cross-domain relations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92, 57-80.

FRIEDMAN, S. D. & GREENHAUS, J. H. 2000. *Allies or enemies? What happens when business professionals confront life choices*, New York, Oxford University Press.

GAREIS, K. C. & BARNETT, R. C. 2002. Under what conditions do long work hours affect psychological distress? A study of full-time and reduced hours female doctors. *Work and Occupations*, 29.

GATRELL, C. J. & COOPER, C. L. 2008. Work-life balance: Working for whom? *European Journal of International Management*, 2, 71-86.

GREENHAUS, J. H. & PARASURAMAN, S. 1999. Research on work, family, and gender: Current status and future directions. In: POWELL, G. N. (ed.) *Handbook of gender and work*. Newbury Park, CA, USA: Sage.

HILL, J., HAWKINS, A., FERRIS, M. & WEITZMAN, M. 2001. Finding an Extra Day a Week: The Positive Influence of Perceived Job Flexibility on Work and Family Life Balance. *Family Relations* 50, 49-58.

HILL, M. 1998. Marital Stability and Spouses' Shared Time: A Multidisciplinary Hypothesis. *Journal of Family Issues*, 9, 427-451.

IOD/UNUM 2008. *Flexible Working – The New World of Work*. London: Institute of Directors/UNUM.

ISLES, N. 2005. *The Joy of Work?* London: The Work Foundation.

KERSLEY, B., ALPIN, C., FORTH, J., BRYSON, A., BEWLEY, H., DIX, G. & OXENBRIDGE, S. 2004. *Inside the workplace: First findings from the 2004 Workplace Employment*

Relations Survey (WERS). London: Department of Trade and Industry.

KINGSTON, P. & NOCK, S. 1987. Time together among dual-earner couples. *American Sociological Review* 52.

LA VALLE, I. 2002. *Happy families? Atypical work and its influence on family life*.

MAJOR, V., KLEIN, K. & EHRHART, M. 2002. Work time, work interference with family, and psychological distress. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 427-436.

MCNALL, L., NICKLIN, J. & MASUDA, A. 2010. A meta-analytic review of the consequences associated with work-family enrichment. *Journal of Business Psychology*, 25, 381-396.

MIDDLETON, C. 2008. Do mobile technologies enable work-life balance? Dual perspective on Blackberry usage for supplemental worked. In: HISLOP, D. (ed.) *Mobility and Technology in the Work-place*. Routledge.

PARK, Y. & JEX, S. 2011. Work-home boundary management using communication and information technology. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 18, 133-152.

PERRY-JENKINS, M., GOLDBERG, A. E., PIERCE, C. P. & SAYER, A. G. 2007. Shift work, role overload, and the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69.

ROTHBARD, N. P. 2001. Enriching or depleting? The dynamics of engagement in work and family roles. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 46.

SCHIEMAN, S., MILKIE, M. A. & GLAVIN, P. 2009. When work interferes with life: The social distribution of work-nonwork interference and the influence of work-related demands and resources. *American Sociological Review*, 74.

SPITZE, G. & SOUTH, S. 1985. Women's Employment, Time Expenditure, and Divorce. *Journal of Family Issues*, 6, 307-329.

SWAN, J. 2005. *Is Less More? Productivity, flexible working and management*. London: Working Families.

SWAN, J. & COOPER, C. L. 2005. *Time, Health and the Family: What Working Families Want*. London: Working Families.

TCCR 2013. *Engaging business to support relationships*. Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships.

VAN STEENBERGEN, E., KLUWER, E. & KARNEY, B. 2011. Workload and the trajectory of marital satisfaction in newlyweds: Job satisfaction, gender, and parental status as moderators. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25, 345-355.

VOYDANOFF, P. 1998. Work Role Characteristics, Family Structure Demands, and Work/Family Conflict. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 50.

This briefing was produced by the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships on behalf of the Relationships Alliance. The Relationships Alliance, a consortium comprising of Relate, Marriage Care, One Plus One and the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, exists to ensure that good quality personal and social relationships are more widely acknowledged as central to our health and wellbeing.