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ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT AND EMPOWERMENT OF DIVERSITY IN WORK–LIFE IDENTITIES

Ellen Ernst Kossek

Prologue: Three Vignettes of Work–Life Diversity

The Integrator. “My son has some learning issues. I spend time taking him to the occupational . . . and the group therapist; and I spend a lot more time overseeing him in a way that I didn’t have to do with my older kids when they were nine . . . Right now that’s probably the main thing that I don’t have any control over that makes my work–life balance more difficult because it adds more things to my day . . . I have too many things that I need to deal with throughout the day . . . you know, e-mails that come in. Some of them are school-related and some of them are work-related and they all come to my work account so . . . I’m reading them and registering things . . . so I’m pretty integrated right now. I would say other years when I have had less . . . to handle, I tended to be more separated. I would want to go home, not think about work and just focus on home, for . . . the evening and . . . That’s less and less possible because even once I go home I still check the [smart phone]. I still usually have something to read that somebody’s given me as I’m walking out the door. I may not get all the way through it, but at least I get started on it in the evening and then finish it up the next morning when I’m on the exercise bike.”

—“Mary,” a director at a financial services firm
with a child with special learning needs¹

The Separator. “My manager would frequently call me at home asking questions on things that could have waited till the morning. These were not urgent matters and I felt that he was demanding too much of my time. I spend 10 hours to 11 hours at the plant, try to sleep seven hours a night,

spend an hour getting ready, and an hour driving. I try to make my personal time free from nonessential work demands.”

—“Sam,” an unmarried human resources manager
who supports a 24–7 plant

The Cyclier. “I normally travel . . . two weeks out of the month . . . and (if) I’m in a hotel room, I don’t mind working until ten o’clock at night . . . because I can get caught up. And then on the weeks I’m back . . . I want to be home . . . and I want to be with [my children] and so I kind of just give myself some boundaries about that.”

—“Sandy,” a director in a health care company with two children

Integrating work and family throughout the day; *separating* work and private life as much as possible; or *cycling* with wildly divergent work and home boundary patterns from week to week. Employees’ work–life demands and boundary management styles—the ways in which individuals synthesize work and non-work identities are diverse, and so are the expectations for how organizations can best support individuals to enable greater control over and engagement in both work and personal life (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008, 2012). Unfortunately, research has shown that work–life policies generally have not had a major impact in ways that support diversity in work–life identities. Why does a gap persist between the rhetoric of work–life research and the implementation of positive work–life programs into practice (Kossek, Baltes, & Mathews, 2011)? Why have positive gains for employees and employers not been fully realized given all the available work–life programs (Kossek, 2005)? My research suggests that organizational work–life programs would be more effective if they were implemented as positive workplace initiatives designed to support diversity in work–life inclusion. By work–life inclusion, I mean having a workplace culture and structure (e.g., HR policies and practices) that support and empower employees to synthesize personal identities (e.g., wife, mother, daughter, friend) with work demands in ways that enable them to fully contribute to and participate in organizational life.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will: (1) identify issues that must be addressed to more effectively implement work–life initiatives by incorporating a diversity perspective on work–life identities into positive organizing; (2) describe indicators of a work–life inclusive organization, and 3) discuss positive organizational strategies to support and empower employees with diverse work–life identities.

Incorporating a Diversity Perspective into Work–Life Initiatives

Evidence is growing that most employees working today, regardless of personal background, value positive organizational support to help synthesize work–life

identities. With the rise of 24–7 connectivity, many people are working longer due to increased life expectancy, and the rise of women and dual career families in the workforce, most managers and scholars would agree that there is a growing need for employers to improve effectiveness of organizational support of positive work–life programs for their work force. National studies show that employees of all backgrounds—single and married; old and young; those who care for elders, children, both (sandwiched) or neither; heterosexuals and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ); active in the community or not—value employer support of work–life demands. Survey data from the National Study of the Changing Workforce (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2009) highlights transforming workforce trends that suggest that for the first time in the United States, women and men (age 29 and under) equally value challenging jobs. Further, around the globe, men and women of all generations increasingly report growing levels of work–life conflict regardless of national culture or career stage (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Yet there is a workforce workplace mismatch: Employers have lagged in viewing diversity in work–life identities as an inclusion challenge.

Toward a Work–Life Inclusive Organization

A work–life inclusive organization has four cultural attributes (Ryan and Kossek, 2008): (1) it values individual and intergroup differences in the primacy of work and other life roles; (2) it supports variation in domestic background and blending of work and nonwork roles; (3) it does not view differing nonwork or caregiving identities as barriers to contributing fully to work and nonwork roles and fulfilling one’s potential at work; and (4) it promotes organizational involvement of all employees regardless of their nonwork demands and preferences. Thus, a work–life inclusive organization takes a broad perspective on what a work–life issue is, to include the nonwork needs of all employees—not just individuals with salient work–life needs (e.g., a baby or an elderly parent). It moves away from a one-size-fits-all approach to work–life support and offers a menu of options. It sees employees as “whole people” and values positive involvement in both work and personal life; being successful in personal life balance is not seen as a detriment to success at work. A work–life inclusive organization strives to enable all workers to fully participate contribute to the organization’s effectiveness to the maximum of their potential.

Organizational Strategies for Work–Life Inclusion: Support and Control

Work–life initiatives are more likely to promote a culture of inclusion if they are implemented in ways that increase employee perceptions of positive control and social support to reveal diversity in work–life identities without stigmatization. Organizational strategies for increasing work–life inclusion that take two forms which are not necessarily mutually exclusive: (1) initiatives that increase

work-life control and (2) those that increase *positive social support* for a wide diversity of employee backgrounds that impact the work-home boundary. These strategies are successful to the extent to which they increase employee perceptions that they have the organizational support to be able carry out their job demands in ways that do not harm and even enrich personal and family well-being.

When employees have work-life control, they perceive that they are empowered through job resources to have control over where, when, or how work is done in ways that are compatible with personal lives (Kossek, Lautsch & Eaton, 2006). This can be achieved through either (1) autonomy in job design or (2) formal or informal work-life flexibility. An example of autonomous job design is where job characteristics allow for a lot of independence and daily choice to decide the timing and location of work. Formal flexibility refers to organizational policies such as telework or flextime where an employee has some predictable control to restructure and customize work arrangements. Informal flexibility may come from the ability to use informal practices such as having the ability to decide to telecommute at the last minute instead of getting snarled in a messy commute during a snow day.

It is important to note that work-life control may look different for different types of jobs or employee backgrounds. A professional may want to have a “no e-mail” vacation to get away from electronic communication and recover. A person working in a plant may want the ability to trade shifts without penalty to be able to take a child to the doctor at the last minute. The goal is to provide some schedule control for all jobs in whatever form is possible given job demands.

Social support refers to employees’ feeling they are supported by peers, managers, or coworkers to live their lives in ways that fit their most salient personal identities (e.g., wife, mother, leader, LGBTQ) without having to sacrifice one for the other. Social support involves access to social resources from peers or managers that affirm an individual’s ability to enact nonwork identities in relation to their professional persona without feeling stigmatized. Sometimes it can involve *not pointing out* that someone is working in different ways from the majority. For example, a manager or coworker *doesn’t* make remarks about a lack of face time should a colleague leave the office “early” to pick up a child and decide to work at home at night to finish up the day. Or a supervisor doesn’t judge an individual’s performance by how much he or she is seen sitting at a desk in the office (known as “presenteeism”) rather than the results achieved. The research I conducted as part of a study called the Work Family Health Network referred to this kind of unsupportive talk that focuses on diversity in face time over results “sludge.”

In sum, organizations need to develop flexible processes and norms regarding the social construction of “ideal workers” that address variation in employee needs for support and abilities to control work-life demands across a wide range of personal life and job contexts. By “ideal workers” (cf. Williams, 2000), I mean that many organizations have preferred norms and career and human resource systems for how to enact work and nonwork roles, often in standardized ways. My research shows it is the customization of work-life interventions that allows capture of

working needs for social support or job and family/personal life control for many

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different types of workers who are nested in diverse nonwork and employment contexts (Kossek, Hammer, Kelly, & Moen, 2014). By customization, I mean that the principles of control and support are the same in terms of change targets but how they are designed must be tailored to organizational context and employee job and demographic groups and at different levels of analysis. Organizations need evidence-based tools such as validated leader behavior support (Hammer, Kossek, Bodner, Anger, & Zimmerman, 2011) and boundary management training (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012) to implement change in ways that address the work–life implementation gaps across multiple levels (individual, leader and team, organizational).

Confronting the Barriers to Work–Life Initiatives

What’s keeping work–life initiatives from moving from the margins to the mainstream of organizational life (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010)? Key obstacles relate to an implementation gap in how they are viewed, designed, and put into practice. Work–life policies aren’t viewed as mainstreamed resources for positive organizing in an increasingly diverse and volatile world. What can be done?

First, we must first close the gap to address how most work–life initiatives are disconnected from organizational goals related to business strategy and performance—or worse yet, seen as the economic scapegoat. An illustration is Yahoo! executive Marissa Mayer’s recent banning of telework, viewing work–life flexibility as the poster child for productivity problems. Instead, a positive perspective on organizing would view flexibility as a lever for improving employee engagement and performance (Kossek, 2013).

Second, we must stop viewing work–life initiatives as reactive “special” programs to accommodate work–family conflict from “specific” problems (e.g., childbirth recovery; disability after a heart attack; assisting a declining elderly parent; child-rearing), but rather a broad diversity initiative to support a plethora of work–life identities. We must recognize that employees’ work–life identities are a mainstreamed issue: Individuals prefer and need to manage work–life boundaries over the life course, whether separator, integrator, cyler, or any other type of work–life balance. How one works is less important than the ability to provide sustained results. Why not refocus work–life initiatives on providing long-term work force sustainability that supports *all* workers to be productive on and off the job over the course of their working lives (Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2014)?

Third, let’s tackle the problem that work–life policies generally do not address the “big” work–life issues today such as the increasing “precariousness” of the workplace (Kalleberg, 2009), evident in loosening ties and a weakening social contract of mutual caring between employees and employers. Why not refocus work–life initiatives to provide stability, predictability, and a better buffer for employees from “life spillovers” (Ragins, Lyness, Williams, & Winkel, 2014)? For example, combating the cascading effects of the mortgage and financial crisis (Ragins et al.,

2014) or the transferring of market risk from unpredictable labor demand, costs, and schedules onto workers (Lambert, 2008).

Fourth, let's redesign initiatives to solve the problem that many do not address—unequal access and distribution of work–life programs across the workforce. We need to address the problem of “organizational stratification” (Waxman & Lambert, 2005); that is, the persistent silos in employee opportunities to use work–life policies. If you are lucky enough to have a supportive supervisor, you likely have greater access to work–life supports. But if you are assigned a supervisor who does not value work–life inclusion, you are out of luck. What about addressing unequal access in job type, which is often correlated with socioeconomic class, gender, and ethnicity? Highly educated professionals are more likely to be in jobs designed with greater autonomy or that regularly use computers, which facilitates telecommuting. These individuals, right from the starting gate, have greater access to work–life resources and control over where, when and how they work than employees with contrasting job characteristics. My research suggests that a way to begin to address the gaps of unequal access is to learn from the disciplinary approach taken in occupational health psychology and safety, which strives to protect workers from occupational risk exposures on the job. Working as a founding investigator on the National Work, Family and Health Network, I have found that a helpful strategy to increase the effectiveness of work–life initiatives is to implement them as part of an entire worksite-based change effort that is integrated into the work environment to *prevent* work–family conflict from occurring by focusing on how jobs are designed and managed (Kossek, Hammer, Kelly & Moen, 2014).

Fifth, let's close the career usability gap (Eaton, 2003) between the availability of policies and their actual use to countervail stigma or backlash. Most work–life flexibility policies are discretionary, allowing employees to request to telework, work part-time, use flextime, or take leaves of absence for personal and family needs (Kossek, 2005; Kossek & Thompson, 2015). But when these options are actually used, employees can sometimes face negative repercussions related to such things as pay, promotion, and job loss (Williams & Segal, 2003). Career-oriented employees underuse policies that appear on the corporate books for fear of not looking like a dedicated professional and experiencing backlash.

Let's put it out in the open that using work–life policies has potential risk because it visibly challenges corporate social structures reifying work as the primary role identity. Research shows that if managers think you are using flexibility for personal and not performance reasons, you are more likely to be seen negatively by them (Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012). Why not educate managers on the research showing that all employees increasingly “want a life,” and that there is growing diversity in work–life needs to reduce fear of using work–life supports? Why not normalize the use of work–life policies by everyone? It starts with educating others on what a work–life inclusive organization looks like.

Future research and practice can build on existing management development and organizational interventions designed based on the Positive Organizational

Scholarship principles to evaluate their effectiveness in creating an inclusive culture. Studies might build on research with the National Work Family Health Network that shows that training leaders to increase family social supportive behaviors (e.g., emotional and instrumental support, role modeling and creative problem-solving) (Kossek & Hammer, 2008) not only increases employee perceptions that their organizations are seen as supportive (Kossek et al., 2011), but also results in lower work–family conflict, lower turnover, and higher satisfaction (Kossek & Hammer, 2008). Similarly, research might build on whether training employees and teams on how to increase boundary control to better align their work–life identities with their jobs could lead to a more inclusive workplace (Kossek et al., 2012).

For Practitioners: Are You Work–Life Inclusive?

- What is your own work–life boundary management style, and has it been supported effectively by your manager or organization?
- Do you know which employees are Integrators, Separators, and Cyclers and the different ways leaders might adjust styles to support each boundary style?
- How does diversity in work–life identities and preferences for boundary management styles affect your work group’s effectiveness in meeting objectives?
- What are examples of current cultural assumptions in your organization about “ideal workers” that are barriers to work–life inclusion of different types of workers?
- What are examples of policies or practices or leadership actions that could be implemented to increase work–life control and social support of employees in your organization?
- What are strategies leaders and organizations can take to increase support to close the gap in how lower paid workers are supported in meeting their work–life needs compared to higher-paid employees?
- What actions could be taken to move your organization to support different employees’ needs to have time to separate or detach from work to be able to give focused energy and time to meaningful nonwork identities?

Note

1. The quotations and information come from case studies written by Dana Henessey in 2010 as part of a graduate assistantship with Ellen Ernst Kossek at Michigan State University.

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