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The Sustainable Workforce *Organizational Strategies for Promoting Work–Life Balance and Wellbeing*

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What is it like to be part of a sustainable workforce? Just ask employees. Browsing employee comments about the employers recently identified as the top 25 companies for work–life balance by the online employment and career community of current employees and job seekers Glassdoor.com reveals the following picture:

[The company] respects and values its employees and their families. Work–life balance is very real and everyone is encouraged to take time off and keep their work hours under control. The work environment is much less stressful than the competition.

Professional and personal development are highly encouraged for all employees.

[The company] strongly believes in supporting the local community.

Pros: freedom, autonomy, respect, a real life. When you love your job and the company values your contributions, everything is easy.

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By contrast, employees at companies that rank low on work–life balance describe their workplaces on Glassdoor.com with comments like these:

Twelve- and fourteen-hour days with no lunch breaks, not much flexibility with scheduling and always pressured to work extra days.

The company’s focus on activity metrics and growth expectations over team morale creates a hostile work environment.

The company doesn’t demonstrate that it values employees. [We are] hemorrhaging experience and expertise . . . as formerly loyal employees who no longer feel valued by the company, as a result of increased work-loads, budget cutbacks and pay-cuts, [choose to leave].

As these opening examples suggest, organizations vary in their ability to create, support, and maintain a sustainable workforce. Research is needed to develop an understanding of organizational strategies to foster a sustainable workforce. We argue that a sustainable workforce is created and nurtured via employment practices that link employee work–life balance and wellbeing to employment experiences over the course of employees’ working lives, enabling them to perform well over time while also thriving in their personal and family lives.

Yet work–life balance, wellbeing, and sustainability are not well linked in research and practice, despite the fact they are growing in importance in the scholarly and managerial literatures. This disconnect is a critical problem. Creating stronger connections between these domains in the design of work and workplaces will not only enhance the long-term effectiveness of employees over their working lives but will also enhance the health and resource munificence of institutions and society. Employment practices that sustain work–life balance and wellbeing in workplace experiences are critical pathways to long-term workforce effectiveness.

In this chapter, we briefly define sustainable workforce, work–life balance, and wellbeing, and examine how they are related. Then, in order to make these connections actionable for organizational researchers and practitioners, we identify three organizational strategies that can be employed to improve these linkages: promoting sustainable careers, increasing workplace social support, and safeguarding against work intensification. We close with a research agenda. A main tenet is that enacting human resource strategies to build stronger connections between work–life balance and wellbeing will help promote the development of sustainable workforces in organizations, and will foster long-term social benefits.



*The Sustainable Workforce***Sustainable Workforce, Work–Life Balance, and Wellbeing: Conceptualization and Linkages**

Just as there is growing concern about promoting the sustainability of environmental resources, there should be similar concern for fostering the sustainability of human resources (Pfeffer, 2010). However, the sustainability of people, their work–life balance, and wellbeing has been undervalued relative to other targets of sustainability in the management and organizations literatures (Ehnert, 2009).

Sustainable Workforce

In order to understand what a sustainable workforce is, it is helpful to begin with discussion of what it is not. Many employment settings are designed in ways that do not link support for employee wellbeing and work–life balance to organizational business strategy and performance. As Kalleberg (2009) observes, the employment relationship between workers and employers is in transition in many countries at present. Environmental, social, economic, and political shifts over recent decades nationally and globally have converged to make work experiences more “precarious.” By “precarious work” Kalleberg (2009, p. 2) means employment conditions that are more “uncertain, unpredictable, risky from the perspective of the employee.” He and others (Lambert, 2008; Kossek, Kaillaith, & Kaillaith, 2012) note that precarious working conditions are characterized by weakening attachment between employers and employees, nonstandard and/or unpredictable work schedules, little or no job security, and compensation and benefits systems that transfer risk and shifts in customer and market demands from the organization to the worker (Lambert, 2008). The impact of this shift has been felt in higher levels of stress, and in the overall degradation of employees’ working conditions and their physical and mental health.

Even when employees voice concern about sustaining the wellbeing of the workforces, the discourse often suggests that employers are not responsible for nor benefit from workforce wellbeing. One example is the growing attention to rising employer-based health-care costs in the United States and gaps in coverage of individuals who are not covered by employer-linked health insurance. Health-care costs are seen as a threat to economic competitiveness and are therefore as a target for reduction. Jobs are increasingly offered with no or limited benefits. Employers react by



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slashing benefits, increasing employee co-payments, and/or offering jobs with limited or no benefits, thereby passing on the risk and expenses to employees. Lambert (2008) refers to this approach as “passing the buck.”

Another example is from a study of 27 public sector organizations in the United Kingdom (Lewis & Anderson, 2013). These organizations are cutting work–life balance policies. They are also trying to model high performance work system practices and are moving toward lean production approaches to work organization. Employees are increasingly expected to work, harder, faster, and smarter (Lewis & Anderson, 2013). The interviews manifested a growing employer expectation that individuals should take more responsibility to ensure their own health and wellbeing rather than relying on supportive organizational initiatives.

A final example comes from the recent tragedy of Hurricane Sandy in the eastern United States. Low-wage workers are hardest hit economically by disasters, as they are most likely to have to forego pay if they cannot get to work (Shapiro, 2012). Many New York area employees in lower economic jobs (e.g., hairdressers, restaurant workers, health-care aides) risked life and limb to go to work. Rather than jeopardize employment, pay, or benefits, employees showed up despite school closings, fallen electrical lines, flooded homes, and disrupted public transportation systems (Rohde, 2012).

In contrast to the preceding discussion, a sustainable workforce is one where the work environment is caring and supports employee wellbeing. Employees are not seen as primarily resources that can be deployed (and depleted) to serve employers’ economic ends. Their skills, talent, and energies are not overused or overly depleted. They are not faced with excessive workload nor with an unrelentless pace of work for weeks or years on end. During times of crisis (e.g., natural disasters, sickness), employees are given time to recover or seek the extra resources they need to be able to perform in the future. Burnout is avoided and workers are given time for renewal.

When human resources are used in a sustainable way, employees are not only able to perform in-role or requisite job demands, but also to flourish, be creative, and innovate. Sustainable human resource management practices develop positive social relationships at work, which enhances business performance (Cooperider & Fry, 2012), including greater cohesion among organizational members, commitment to common purpose, hope for success, resilience, knowledge sharing, and collaborative capacity. Enrichment and synergies from nonwork roles can improve performance at work (Demerouti, Bakker, & Voydanoff, 2010). For example, employees





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who have happy personal lives and are active and contributing members of their communities bring skills and positive energies from home to work (Ruderman, Ohlett, Panzer, & King, 2002).

Pfeffer (2010, p. 35) argues that human sustainability considers:

how organizational activities affect people's physical and mental health and well-being—the stress of work practices on the human system—as well as effects of management practices such as work hours and behaviors that produce workplace stress on groups and group cohesion and also the richness of social life, as exemplified by participation in civic, voluntary, and community organizations.

Van Engen, Vinkenbunrg, and Dikkers (2012) argue that a focus on human sustainability “requires that employers take the present and future well-being and performance of their employees into account.”

Building on the preceding discussion, we define a sustainable workforce as one whose employees have the positive energy, capabilities, vitality, and resources to meet current and future organizational performance demands while sustaining their economic and mental health on and off the job. We argue that organizational facilitation of employee work–life balance and wellbeing are the pillars needed to support sustainable careers, sustainable families, and a sustainable workforce.

Work–Life Balance

Scholars have debated the meaning of the term “work–life balance” in the literature for a number of years. Some authors prefer to use the more traditional label of “work–family” in recognition of the fact that for many people, the job and the nuclear family constitute the role domains that demand the greatest amount of time, attention, and energy and are most likely to come into conflict with one another. These scholars note that the term work–family grew out of early policy efforts in industrialized nations to countervail gender discrimination and ensure that care for young children did not deter female labor market participation (Kossek, Baltes, & Mathews, 2011). Yet the term “work–family” can oversimplify people's work and nonwork roles; some scholars (Valcour, 2007) believe it fails to do justice to the diversity of work and life circumstances of working people, such as single individuals and those in nontraditional family structures. Recently, increasing numbers of authors have adopted the term “work–life” out of conviction that it recognizes the numerous social roles people occupy



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in both the work (e.g., subordinate, supervisor, coworker, mentor) and nonwork (e.g., parent, child, spouse, friend, community member) domains as well as the diversity of role configurations represented by members of the workforce. However, we recognize the term “work–life” is not ideal, as work is part of life (Kossek, Baltes, et al., 2011). Further, the term work–life has sometimes been used by large employers as a public relations tool to lessen backlash from employees without current family demands or reduce beliefs of employer responsibility for supporting the family demands of employees (Kossek, Kaillaith, & Kaillaith, 2012). Despite these challenges, consistent with recent trends in the literature, we adopt the more inclusive term “work–life.”

There is also little consensus among scholars about what is meant by the word “balance.” Many authors do not explicitly state their definition of the concept, leaving the measurement instrument to stand in for a proper definition. For instance, measures of work–life conflict are often used to operationalize work–life balance, reflecting an assumption that these two concepts are opposite ends of a continuum and that people with low conflict between work and life roles necessarily experience good work–life balance. Although work–life conflict and balance are inversely related, empirical research does not support the assumption that they are opposite sides of the same coin, nor that low work–life conflict fully captures the construct of work–life balance. Furthermore, work–life balance is unique among work–life constructs in referring to a global experience of combining multiple roles, rather than to a strictly cross-domain process such as the transfer of strain generated in the work domain to a nonwork domain.

Some authors implicitly adopt the metaphor of a physical balance or scale, emphasizing an equal allocation of one’s time and attention to the different roles in one’s life. For instance, Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) define work–family balance as equal engagement (both in terms of time and psychological involvement) in and equal satisfaction derived from work and family roles. This definition is unusually prescriptive in that it specifies an equal division of time, involvement, and satisfaction between the work and nonwork domains as the ideal scenario. By contrast, other authors favor definitions that refer to the fit of individuals’ work–life demands and resources to their own values, goals, and needs as well to their external work and life circumstances. For example, Kofodimos (1993, p. 8) wrote that balance consists of “finding the allocation of time and energy that fits your values and needs, making conscious choices about how to structure your life and integrating inner needs and





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outer demands and . . . honoring and living by your deepest personal qualities, values and goals.” This definition exemplifies what Reiter (2007) characterizes as a situationalist definition (i.e., one that seeks an optimum outcome for each worker, regardless of his or her work and life circumstances).

We agree with Reiter’s (2007) argument that the way in which work–life balance is defined influences the development and implementation of organizational work–life initiatives, with important consequences for employees and organizations. We further assert that organizations must approach work–life balance initiatives broadly and creatively enough to develop a suite of approaches that support positive, high-quality integration of work and nonwork roles for all of their employees over the long term, regardless of age, life or career stage, family circumstances, occupation, or socioeconomic status. In particular, organizations must foster workplace cultures and structures that not only support diversity in values that align work and personal life, but enable employees to exert schedule and boundary control in order to synthesize work–life demands in alignment with needs and preferences (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012).

Building on these perspectives, we define work–life balance as satisfaction and perceptions of success in meeting work and nonwork role demands, low levels of conflict among roles, and opportunity for inter-role enrichment, meaning that experiences in one role can improve performance and satisfaction in other roles as well (Frone, 2003; Greenhaus & Allen, 2010; Valcour, 2007). Our use of the term “balance” is not intended to prescribe an equal division of time and attention to each of the roles in a person’s role system, but to support the pattern of role investment that is appropriate to each individual at any given time. That is, work–life balancing can mean different things to different people depending on the demands and values of their work and the personal identities that are most salient and meaningful (Kossek, Ruderman, et al., 2012). We emphasize that work–life balance is a broad issue with relevance for all working people, because it is fundamentally about being able to do well at things we care about. There is no single ideal model of work–life balance; it depends upon people’s values, priorities, the demands they face in the different areas of their lives, and the resources they can access and use to meet those demands. The picture of work–life balance looks different from one person to another, as well as at different points in a person’s career and life. Since work–life balance is highly valued by nearly all employees and linked to important performance-related outcomes, yet also challenging to achieve, it also has broad applicability to employers.





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Employing organizations who seek to foster overall workforce sustainability must approach work–life balance broadly. While not overlooking the needs of working mothers with young children, employers should support involvement of all employees’ needs for work–life balance. Examples might include support of fathers who want to take an active role in child care or shared care (where fathers and mothers are involved in parent care), elder care, and involvement in community, regular exercise, education, and social and religious involvement. Those firms that take a very narrow view of who is entitled to work–life balance facilitation and do not seek ways to enhance positive linkages between all employees’ involvement in multiple roles performance and wellbeing over their working lives miss out on opportunities to fully engage and develop their workforce. They also deplete the organization of resources for sustainability, as workers with family demands may resent the lack of support, while those without visible family demands feel overworked or that they are always carrying the workload (whether this reflects reality or not) by picking up the slack (Rothausen, Gonzalez, Clarke, & O’Dell, 1998).

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is important for both organizational effectiveness and individual mental and physical health (Diener, 2000). Fisher’s review of wellbeing at work (Chapter 2 in this volume) defines wellbeing as being multidimensional, comprising subjective wellbeing (positive affect), social wellbeing (friends at work), and feelings of engagement and involvement toward self-actualization. Employees may come to work with different personality proclivities, but once there they are nested in organizational environments that can foster or deplete wellbeing. The structure of work has consequences for employees both on and off the job. Of the five life domains comprising general wellbeing, career wellbeing is the most important for the wellbeing of most individuals (Rath & Harter, 2010).

Related to the growth in research on wellbeing is an exploding redeveloping interest in positive approaches to the psychology of work, and particularly in promoting wellbeing. Wellbeing at work has received renewed attention as a vehicle for organizational effectiveness, social change, and a managerial lever for ensuring performance (cf. Golden-Biddle & Dutton, 2012). Managerial awareness of the importance of employee wellbeing is growing, along with human resource programs designed to foster it, such as employee assistance, flexible work arrangements, and





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fitness initiatives. Best-selling books with titles like *Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements* (Rath & Harter, 2010), *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (Burns, 1999), and *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) provide evidence of popular interest in cultivating wellbeing. Even some governments have begun to put stock in measures of gross national happiness along with more traditional social and economic indicators of the wellbeing of their citizens (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2011).

Employers have jumped on the bandwagon to promote engagement and wellbeing by measuring engagement via the Gallup surveys. This survey, called the Gallup Q-12, includes items measuring whether an employee “has a close friend at work” or “feel involved in their jobs” (<http://www.well-beingindex.com/>), which are indicators that map closely to the definitions of wellbeing at work noted above. Some companies link their leaders’ compensation to employee engagement based on research that has shown that engagement is associated with quality, turnover, and customer service (Towers Watson, 2012).

Summary of Linkages

Table 14.1. summarizes the definitions and highlights where there are convergence and divergence in concepts. Work–life balance, wellbeing, and sustainability all include notions of positive appraisals of energy at work. Wellbeing also includes satisfaction with work and nonwork roles. Both work–life balance and workforce sustainability include notions of maintaining resources and having an equilibrium. Regarding differences, wellbeing and work–life balance are momentary states. In contrast, sustainability involves short-term action to use human resources in ways that do not deplete resources and also facilitate capabilities to perform in the future.

Organizational Strategies to Foster a Sustainable Workforce

Organizational strategies designed to foster a sustainable workforce include safeguarding against work intensification, promoting workplace social support, and fostering sustainable careers. Table 14.2. gives an overview of activities and outcomes related to these organizational strategies. Highlights of the table are discussed below.

Table 14.1. Comparison of Work–Life Balance, Wellbeing, and Sustainability.

Construct	Definition	Similarity (conceptual connections)	Distinctiveness (examples of temporal and content differences)
Work–life balance	Satisfaction and perceptions of success in meeting work and nonwork role demands, low levels of conflict among roles, opportunity for inter-role enrichment	Includes positive emotions and appraisals of wellbeing at work Includes notions of positive energy	Momentary state Linkage between multiple roles as positive and having multiple roles is seen as synergistic
Work well-being	Subjective and social wellbeing at work, work involvement towards self-actualization	Wellbeing is a term that reflects not only one's health but also satisfaction with work and life	Momentary state Summative concept deriving from state of health and quality of working life. Known to be related to productivity levels among individuals, organizations, and societies
Workforce sustain-ability	Positive energy, capabilities, vitality, and resources to meet current and future organizational performance demands without harming economic and mental health on and off the job.	Resource stance: Like the notion of work–life balance, resources are used in equilibrium and not depleted Involves positive work–nonwork relationships Involves health (like wellbeing)	Time frame differences: Unlike balance and wellbeing, which seem to be states, sustainability takes more of a long-term perspective Energy, and notion of maintaining and restoring resources and capabilities

Table 14.2. Organizational Strategies for Enhancing Work–Life Balance and Wellbeing to enhance a Sustainable Workforce.

Organizational strategy	Definition	Examples of activities	Effects on increasing work–life balance and wellbeing linkages
Sustainable career management	Practices and policies enabling employees to maintain positive involvement in career, family and personal roles over the life course	Career breaks Part-time work Part-year work On-going personal and work development Employee say over career changes without penalty Leave control for time off work, vacations, sabbaticals	Allows total life resources to be adapted to promote equilibrium in total life space over time Promotes positive synergies Ability to be advanced in career and be involved in community and family
Culture of positive workplace social support	The degree to which individuals perceive that their wellbeing is valued by workplace sources, such as supervisors, supervisors, and the broader organization in which individuals are embedded (Kossek, Pichler, et al., 2011)	Designing work to foster high social support Cross-train employees to back each other up Reward helping behavior Develop leaders to care about workers and workers to care about each other	Positive emotions and wellbeing at work Workers are freed up to learn new things on the job and are not burnt out Workers' personal time is freed up to handle personal life demands Positive work and nonwork social support spillover

(Continued overleaf)

Table 14.2. (Continued)

Organizational strategy	Definition	Examples of activities	Effects on increasing work–life balance and wellbeing linkages
Safeguarding against work intensification to promote job control	Striving to prevent the heightened focus and engagement demanded of employees at work, usually experienced as: time pressure (e.g., tightening of deadlines), increased pace (speeding up the rate at which work is performed), and/or work overload (trying to accomplish more work in same amount of time)	<p>Setting realistic deadlines and planning work activities accordingly</p> <p>Striving for synergies in the work process by streamlining necessary procedural steps (e.g., working “smarter”)</p> <p>Establishing a standard range for employee performance that is attainable and sustainable with reasonable engagement and effort</p> <p>Valuing quality over quantity or speed and allowing employees to perform to the best of their abilities</p> <p>Allowing for a measure of job control or discretion over one’s work and performance</p> <p>Creating and fostering a culture of healthy work practices (e.g., teleworkers not “overworking” to compensate for unique work arrangement) and normalizing the use of flexibility (e.g., evaluations based on results not “face time”)</p>	<p>Allows employees and managers to contain workloads so individual and organizational goals can be achieved in harmony</p> <p>Tapping into employees’ engagement at work without exploiting their work effort fosters workforce wellbeing</p> <p>Permits valuing of restorative time to counteract possible work overload and assist employees in maintaining overall wellbeing at work and home</p>



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Preventing Work Intensification

One important aspect of work design that promotes wellbeing in the workplace is related to sources of employee stress stemming from a required output at work, or job demands (Karasek, 1979). In settings where decision latitude or job control (discretion) over job demands is largely absent, the wellbeing of employees is adversely affected. An example of this would be when employees work in a high-strain job which has high demands–low control conditions. The Job Demand–Control (JDC) model has been widely accepted and tested within the stress and coping literature (Doef & Maes, 1999) and has now expanded into the work and family literature as well (Gronlund, 2007; Joudrey & Wallace, 2009).

Lack of control or discretion at work, is stress-provoking for employees regardless of the specific job demands (Berset, Semmer, Elfering, Amstad, & Jacobshagen, 2009). Berset et al. (2009) confirmed this by testing the levels of participants' stress hormones during workdays and during weekends. They found that the level of control participants enjoyed at work alleviated their stress levels and enabled them to recover better on their days off and return to work less stressed. Recently, Chiang, Birtch, and Kwan (2010) found that the additional presence of work–life practices in the workplace along with high job control alleviated stress among employees working in high demand jobs. However, employers' interests in wellbeing may be largely self-serving. Ortega (2009) found in his study of Western European employees that organizations permitted employees to have discretion over their work as a mechanism to improve performance in the workplace, rather than as a result of a desire to assist employees in improving their work–life balance. As the boundaries between work and personal life become increasingly blurred through the use of mobile technology and flexible work practices, researchers are beginning to find that total discretion to self-regulate the work–life interface can be harmful if organizational norms encourage employees to remain continuously connected and responsive to work. The phenomenon of constant connection to work has increasingly been linked to attention deficit disorder, stress, and depletion of resources (Kossek & Lautsch, 2007; Turkle, 2011).

Increased workload can be examined in terms of amount of time spent at work (or “work hours”), which is largely where the work and family literature has focused to date (cf. Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006; Valcour, 2007). Control at work has been more readily interpreted within the literature in relation to executing individual discretion in where, when, and how work





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is done (e.g., teleworking) and not in how much work is done, given the job duties. Some researchers have approached this issue from a perspective of “psychological job control” over how and when their work gets done (Kossek et al., 2006), whereas other researchers have examined the quantity of work accomplished (i.e., amount of work or “workload”) and the qualities by which work is done in terms of the focus and engagement demanded at work (i.e., “work intensification”).

Looking at the employee’s ability to “push back” on work demands or have discretion in deciding the amount of work they do remains underresearched. However, this becomes important to consider with globalization and technology speeding up and intensifying the pace of business due to continual connectivity across spatial and temporal boundaries (Ladner, 2008). And in the era of managers staying connected to work (Towers, Duxbury, Higgins, & Thomas, 2006), it becomes increasingly important to examine *work overload* and *work intensification*. This is particularly important given that managers can often avail themselves of flexibility to accommodate personal or family needs more readily than most staff employees (e.g., by shifting their work schedules as needed or ad hoc working from home). Managers do not, however, as easily reduce their workload as a means of coping with work–family conflict or stress, although research on professionals and managers with reduced-load work arrangements has shown some evidence of this (Lee, MacDermid, & Buck, 2002).

Moreover, Skinner and Pocock (2008) see the problem of containing work in terms of assessing work overload. There are three dimensions of demands experienced at work, namely: (1) time pressure (e.g., deadlines), (2) high speeds (e.g., pace), and (3) overload (e.g., quantity). Typically, both the number of hours of work and the amount of work to be completed are related to work–life conflict (here, measured in terms of negative spillover and conflict from work to nonwork aspects of life); however, work overload has been shown to be more strongly related (Allan, Loudoun, & Peetz, 2007; Wallace, 1997). Along this vein, Macky and Boxall (2008) advocate working smarter, not longer or more intensely. They found that being more *engaged* in work does not necessarily lead to increased stress and lower balance between work and nonwork activities (based on family, friends, and other aspects of personal life). Yet, in an environment where pressure exists to work longer and harder, and personal time is infringed upon in the name of work, employees report less job satisfaction, higher stress, and lower work–life balance. Recently, Parker, Jimmieson, and Amiot (2010) found that job control can be effective in stress management for those who are



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highly engaged in their work (meaning that they are working intensely and are highly motivated).

Kelliher and Anderson (2010) investigated the notion of “work intensification” among those who are working differently through remote and reduced-load work flexible work arrangements to manage work and family demands. Here, work intensification is conceptualized as energy and effort that is put forth in doing work, typically in a concentrated manner (e.g., having too much work to do in the time normally allotted for work). The authors identify three ways by which work intensification arises: (1) it can be *imposed*, due to organizational change such as downsizing and other resource cutbacks, (2) it can be *enabled*, when employees work harder during work time because they have fewer distractions when remote working, and (3) through an *exchange*, which stems from employees working harder to reward the organization for allowing them certain flexibilities. What can be problematic here among flexworkers is that although they may report high job satisfaction for having the flexibility they desire, they may experience a more intense work setting which over time could be detrimental to their overall wellbeing.

Examples of work-intensification reduction activities and outcomes.

As Table 14.2. shows, managers can increase job control and prevent work intensification by setting realistic deadlines and planning work activities accordingly. They can also strive for synergies in the work process by identifying ways to get rid of low-value work that does not help productivity and is unnecessary, such as poorly run meetings. They can have a range for employee performance that looks at productivity that is maintained on outcomes and quality and is assessed over a period of time. Overworking, such as teleworkers trying to be available 24/7, in order to have access to flexibility is not rewarded. Taking breaks, vacations, and time for recovery from work is valued.

Sustainable Careers

Sustainable careers allow individuals to have positive career experiences over the long term in ways that promote organizational and individual effectiveness. We define a sustainable career as providing: (1) security to meet economic needs; (2) fit with one’s core career and life values; (3) flexible and capable of evolving to suit one’s changing needs and interests; and (4) renewable so that individuals have regular opportunities for rejuvenation.





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Thus, a sustainable career is dynamic and flexible; it features continuous learning, periodic renewal, the security that comes from employability, and a harmonious fit with the individual's skills, interests and values (Newman, 2011; Valcour, 2013). Sustainable career strategies help individuals to maintain an evolving sequence of work experiences over time (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989) in ways that allow an employee to have positive career experiences in the present and over the long term. This avoids burnout and allows positive emotions (wellbeing) to be linked to career success over time. Sustainable careers can sometimes involve reduced-load work strategies to prevent intensification and overload. A longitudinal study by Hall, Lee, Kossek, and Las Heras (2012) examined the objective and subjective career success of 73 managers and high-level professionals who decided to reduce their workloads to support higher involvement in family and other personal activities. What they found was that taking time out to reduce career demands did not necessarily harm long-term economic and social success, with one exception: individuals who remained part time for more than 7 years were less likely to be promoted than individuals who returned to full-time employment over the period. The study also found very little relationship between objective and subjective success. Comparing extreme cases of individuals who were higher or lower on perceptions of career success was also informative. The use of flexible work-life arrangements such as reduced-load work was not a panacea in and of itself for sustainable careers. Rather it was the psychological meaning of wellbeing and the ability to remain involved in family life while having a career and vice versa that allowed these high-talent individuals to craft lives that work for them, fostering cross-domain success.

Studies such as this remind us how important it is to look at the nonwork side of the work-nonwork equation to see how restorative time helps experiences in the work or nonwork domains. Leisure time is crucial for employee wellbeing and performance (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006; Fritz, Sonnentag, Spector, & McInroe, 2010), and especially for those working in intense and stressful environments, such as the lawyers Joudrey and Wallace (2009) study. Having the ability to control working time affects a person's ability to restore his- or herself over a career. Like work intensification, job control is also important for the enactment of sustainable careers. Having control not only over the number and scheduling of work hours (i.e., flextime), but also over the overall amount of work expected is important for a sustainable career (Geurts, Beckers, Taris, Kompier, & Smulders, 2009) because control over the prevention of work overload allows individuals





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to maintain the resources needed for career success (Grebner, Elfering, & Semmer, 2010) and to have a life outside of work.

This leads us to another emergent strategy for sustainable careers: “leave control.” Enabling adequate time off and respecting vacation time improves employee work–life balance. Leave control has the effect of taking workload “off of one’s plate” or freeing one’s agenda. In their study, Geurts et al. (2009) found that leave control in particular contributed to a lower incidence of work interfering with family and fostered employee wellbeing.

Leave control is needed not only to sustain involvement in caregiving over career, but also to give time for continual lifelong learning and education. Having time to make friends, have hobbies, and be involved in one’s community while developing a career enables a successful retirement (Newman, 2011). Leave control promotes economic wellbeing because people do not feel forced to retire, a consideration that is particularly important for the millions of older workers who lack adequate financial resources for retirement. It also enhances social wellbeing because individuals do not perceive their careers as hurting their health or their ability to be successful parents, spouses, children, and community members. In a sustainable workforce, taking care of health and engaging in community and other important roles is not devalued relative to work demands.

Examples of activities and outcomes.

As Table 14.2. shows, examples of sustainable career activities are permitting career breaks without losing one’s job, part-time and part-year work, regular time off for personal and professional development, and giving employees the ability to ramp up or ramp down their career intensity without penalty. With the growth in electronic communication making it more difficult for employees to take a break from 24/7 availability, increasing leave control to have time off work, vacations, and sabbaticals is increasingly important to prevent burnout and exhaustion and the rise of health problems (Fritz, Yankelevich, Zarubin, & Barger, 2010). The benefits of these strategies are that they allow total life resources to be adapted to promote equilibrium in total life space over time. Synergies and positive energies are promoted between work and nonwork. Individuals also have greater positive wellbeing as they feel they are able to advance in their careers and be involved in community and family without sacrificing their values or health.





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Workplace social support.

Creating organizational cultures that foster positive workplace social support as an ongoing aspect of the work environment is a key element of building a sustainable workforce. A recent meta-analysis (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011) defines “workplace social support” as the degree to which employees perceive that supervisors, coworkers, or employers care about their global wellbeing on the job through providing positive social interaction or resources. The authors note that workplace social support can be content-general or content-specific. General support is defined as overall communication of concern, such as emotional support or instrumental support to ensure the wellbeing of an employee. Most organizational research has focused on the benefits of general social support for job performance. Research on positive relational interactions on work is growing and suggests that when employees feel their wellbeing is cared for by others at work, they are more likely to care about the recipients of their work tasks. Some scholars go as far as to argue that jobs can actually be designed to increase workplace social support and the act of caring (Grant, 2007).

Workplace social support can also be content-specific, pertaining to individual perceptions of receiving care to carry out a specific role demand (e.g., dependent care, healthy behaviors such as exercise) (Kossek, Hammer, et al., 2012). For example, a randomized study by Hammer, Kossek, Bodner, Anger, and Zimmerman (2011) found leaders and coworkers can be trained to demonstrate these behaviors and increase positive social interaction and resources to be able to carry out family demands. The authors showed that depressive symptoms were reduced, job satisfaction increased, and work–family conflict decreased. A multilevel study of the group dynamics of having leaders who are seen as more supportive of personal life shows that individuals in workgroups with more supportive leaders are more likely to follow safety procedures, have higher sleep quality, and perform better.

Examples of workplace social support activities and outcomes.

As shown in Table 14.2., examples of workplace social support activities include relational task design to foster high social support on the job (Grant, 2007). Employees are motivated to voluntarily cross-train and back each other up. Helping behavior is rewarded. Leaders are trained, rewarded, and developed to care about workers’ lives on and off the jobs. Leaders themselves are cared for so they do not burn out and are able to care for workers. This role modeling facilitates workers to care more about each other as they build a culture of care and bench strength for future leaders.





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The outcomes of such activities are enhancement of positive emotions and wellbeing at work. Positive spillover from work to home occurs. Workers feel empowered to learn new things on the job and are not burnt out. Employee's personal time is freed up to handle personal life demands so less negative spillover from personal life to work occurs.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Examining wellbeing and work–life balance as levers for creating a sustainable workforce are an important vein of inquiry warranting further investigation. Countervailing the growing trends toward work intensification, reducing career sustainability over the life course, and the depletion of workplace social support on and off the job is critical to ensure the long-term health of workers and society. We have also demonstrated in our discussion of these concepts how much they are overlapping yet potentially synergistic.

Future research should build on recent studies suggesting that measurement of employee influence over how work gets accomplished is important to consider in mitigating strain from work and family demands (cf. Berset et al., 2009). Research is also needed to better understand how not only total work hours relate to employee wellbeing, but also the sustainability of work hours, that is, the amount and intensity of the work experienced during working time as well. What is also not clearly understood, however, are the absolute standards and the role of individual agency in containing the scope of jobs. This entails a study of increasing employee ability to have greater choice to determine what should reasonably be expected of them to accomplish in their work role, within an acceptable amount of time. This could be relevant, for instance, for those who travel as part of their job duties, with varying degrees of input as to when and for how long they are away from home. Similarly, it would be beneficial for individuals with night work, which has been shown to be deleterious to health, to be able to place limits on the amount of night working time without jeopardizing their jobs.

As the preceding paragraph suggests, workforce sustainability demands greater attention to and respect for the individual's voice in determining the intensity with which work is approached. In an era of global competition and economic crises, needing to do more work with less organizational resources is not uncommon. The availability of 24/7 connectivity via technology creates a society where employees are less able to release themselves from the ongoing demands of the workplace. Increasingly, work may creep into





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evenings or weekend time formerly reserved for the family, as well as other restorative periods such as vacations and sabbaticals. So what remains unclear is what mechanisms may facilitate an employee's ability to contain or control the demanding nature of their work. For example, can norms around technology use or supportive work–family cultures help in these instances?

Studies might examine journals or time diary research to see how employees spend their time and on what activities. For each activity, employees could record their physical state and/or emotions as well as their overall feeling of wellbeing in the moment. This would help scholars to better understand the connection between work activities and nonwork activities (e.g., duration, intensity) and the effects on wellbeing while on and off the job over time.

Longitudinal studies could be conducted with employees over time to identify peak moments of positive career experience and examine if higher periods of job control and reduced-load work preceded such experiences and were linked to overall wellbeing through periods of work and nonwork. A control group might include other professionals where work was not contained to be more sustainable but had constant crunch times and/or cycles of intensity.

Workplace intervention studies might set up a workload “bank” within a team of employees doing similar kind of work or working on a project together. Employees of a similar skill set could be socialized to increase social support for each other and trade-off workload and hours. Employees could log when they estimate having a window of time/energy free (creating credits in the system) and others can request their time (help) if they are overloaded at the moment, or log that they need help. Those that return the favor of sharing are rewarded as role models in the cultural system.

Lastly, we urge scholars to work with organizations to investigate how to use internal social media platforms to post success stories and best practices that optimize workflow, wellbeing, and work–life balance to help their employees “work smarter.” Job analysis and scoping work to determine reasonable timeframes or energy targets for task performance in different work roles could be a continuous improvement target that is evaluated on a regular basis. Work intensification could be tracked and measured in terms of work performance (and then measured against the guidelines set by HR, in consultation with employees who know the job). Similarly, sustainable career development could also be examined and refined by tracking how wellbeing and work–life balance over time, taking breaks when needed,





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slowing down and speeding up career progression in order to accommodate the needs of other life roles, are linked to long-term career success, and to overall effectiveness and satisfaction on and off the job.

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Abstract: Employment practices that support work–life balance and well-being in workplace experiences are critical pathways to long-term workforce effectiveness, or cultivating a “sustainable workforce.” In this chapter, we discuss the notion of a sustainable workforce and examine how it relates to work–life balance, and wellbeing. We then identify three organizational strategies that can be employed by researchers and practitioners to improve these linkages: promoting sustainable careers, increasing workplace social support, and safeguarding against work intensification. Finally, we present a research agenda which centers on developing sustainable workforces in organizations and fostering long-term social benefits.