

‘Work-Life Balance’ during ‘Work from Home’ – A daydream or a dream come true

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Abstract: Work-life Balance has always been a topic of discussion in all organizations and each organization strives to maintain it to derive the best out of its employees and enhance its productivity & profitability. The employees also strive to strike the balance between their work & family demands to get peace of mind by meeting the ends. The researchers have tried to comprehend the concept of Work-Life Balance and figure out its essence, issues, and impact and how the Work-from home has emerged as one of the strongest solutions for ensuring a good work-life balance. The researchers have concluded that there are obvious benefits of working from home, but it calls for a paradigm change by all concerned i.e. employer, employees, family, and society. The employees & their families have to realize that working from home doesn't mean they are on paid holiday and employers also have to respect employee's personal space and not disturb the work-life balance any further.

Keywords: *Work-Life Balance, Work from Home, Work from Office, Flexi working hours.*

Introduction:

Work-life balance in the real sense means fulfilling the demands and striking a balance between work, life & private. In pursuit of striving for work-life balance (i.e. WLB), most people end up juggling between work, family, self, friends, and health. All these are equally important facets of life but when we think about having a work-life balance it doesn't mean equally dividing the time for these facets of life. Workaholics and employees with excessive working hours and inflexibility of work schedules get immersed completely in their work and forget everything else including self, family, and social responsibilities. In the same way, individuals experiencing urgent family responsibility also find themselves unable to do justice to their work/job. Inability in striking a balance between work & life creates stress, competition, insecurities, and dissatisfaction. Be it interference of work with personal life or interference of personal life with work, it has a negative influence on job satisfaction.

Individuals, especially women, finding it difficult to strike a balance between work & life had always dreamt of working from home where they can look after their home & social responsibilities and also attend to their work responsibilities. 'Work from home' (i.e. WFH) has always been thought to give more flexibility to workers to combine their work & non-work activities and adjust the working hours so that they can be more productive during their household duties.

The covid-19 pandemic disrupted the world of work at the same time it opened up new ways of working by breaking the cultural and technological barriers that existed and prevented masses to work from home and made structural changes to facilitate the same. The concept was being largely used by software companies around the world for a long time. The same emerged as a viable option for many other sectors during the pandemic due to the then prevailing lockdown situations and traveling restrictions. The work from home concept emerged as a savior when the entire world was put to a halt by the deadly virus. Employers perceived Work from home as resulting in improved productivity, reduced turnover rates, and reduced operating costs. Employees can be hired from a wider talent pool as there is no restriction on geographical boundaries. In case of any natural calamity, unrestricted work can go on from decentralized & dispersed locations. Employees perceived working from home to result in savings in commuting time & costs, lower level of stress, better Work-life Balance, increased autonomy, quality family & leisure time, increase in job satisfaction, and reduction in distraction caused due to co-workers. It also has some inherent benefits to society in terms of mitigation of air pollution, less traffic congestion, less pressure on metropolitan cities, balanced growth, and integration of women and persons with disabilities in the workforce.

Objectives:

The research has been conducted with the objective:

1. To understand the concept, factors, and issues of Work-Life Balance' and its impact on employees & organization.
2. To check the reality of work-life Balance in working from home during the covid-19 pandemic.
3. To suggest solutions for a better 'Work-life Balance' and better productivity from 'Work from home.'

Research Methodology:

Exploratory research has been done by reviewing various literature in the form of articles and books available on records. Only secondary data has been used for analyzing both the concepts of Work-life Balance & work from home and have a reality check to see if the goals are realized.

Literature Review:

The following works of literature were reviewed to understand the concept and issues in work-life balance:

Gibbs, Mengel, & Siemroth, (2021), in their working paper “Work from Home & Productivity: Evidence from Personnel & Analytics Data on IT Professionals” tried to find out the change in productivity in employees working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. They used analytics data of around 10,000 skilled employees of an Asian IT services company. They also tried to find out the determinants of such change in productivity. They found out that employees could just manage to maintain similar or little less output during Work from home with longer working hours and less focus time to perform tasks, which resulted in a drastic drop in productivity.

Aczel, Kovacs, Lippe, & Szaszi, (2021) for their study titled “Researchers working from home: Benefits and challenges” surveyed around 700 academics working from home during the pandemic lockdown and found that their work efficiency decreased in case of half of the researchers surveyed but in case of a quarter of the researchers, the work efficiency had increased compared to pre-pandemic period. The findings indicated that the majority of the researchers preferred to work remotely from home hence it is imperative to study its influencer factors and coping tactics.

Gautam & Jain, (2019), in their research article “A Study of Work-Life Balance: Challenges and Solutions”, aimed to relate work-life balance with various demographic variables and study its impact on family life and also tried to comprehend how it is impacted by compensation factors. The study concluded that the issues of work-life have always existed due to the work environment, policies of companies, compensation packages, etc., Employees in their effort to balance their work and personal life undergo a lot of stress which also influences their performance in both at work and domestic fronts. People are looking for options to balance their personal & professional life. They brought out that compensation factors i.e. salary packages have a strong correlation with work-life balance. The work-life balancing solutions help organizations design & implement the policies and reduce stress & work pressure, increase flexibility, and increase family & personal time. Organizations caring about the welfare, well-being, satisfaction & success of employees need to take up Work-Life Balance seriously.

Delecta (2011), in the article “Work-Life Balance,” has tried to analyze the Work-Life Balance from an organizational context so that the employees can consider their standpoint and the employer gets a perspective to cope with the issues related to Work-Life Balance. He concluded that Life consists of many other aspects besides work. An individual can be construed to achieve Work-Life Balance only if he /she has managed to duly allocate time for every aspect of his/her life and problems in one part of his/her life are not reflected in another. Those who have achieved a balance in all aspects of life has achieved WLB and it removes all imbalances from his/her life.

Kalliath & Brough, (2008), in their article “Work-life balance: A review of the meaning of the balance construct, examined 6 concepts of work-life balance considering various roles and identified a feature that best put the construct of work-life balance in a nutshell. They concluded that Work-life balance to an individual is his / her perception that professional & personal activities are compatible and promote growth consistent with his/her priorities in life.

Baker, Avery, & Crawford (2007), in their article “Satisfaction and perceived productivity when professionals work from home” aimed to find out ways to help employees of 20 Australian companies to work from home. They analyzed various factors like organizational, individual, household, etc. They found out that organizational & work-related factors impacted employees’ satisfaction & productivity compared to that working style and household factors.

Hughes & Bozionelos (2007), in their research article “Work-life balance as a source of job dissatisfaction and withdrawal attitudes: An exploratory study on the views of male workers” aimed to determine the male point of view on Work-life imbalance. They found that the ability to choose one’s shifts is inversely proportional to the perceived work-life imbalance in the case of male workers specifically. However, in the case of women workers, there was no relation between her ability to influence her work schedule with her work-life balance. The women don’t perceive that their personal & professional life is balanced if they can influence their work schedules. They also found out that work-life imbalance is a matter of great concern and a source of dissatisfaction for workers which increases turnover and absenteeism.

Lockwood (2003), in her research article “Work-Life Balance: Challenges and Solutions,” has provided a historical perspective, data, and probable solutions to WLB. She concluded that WLB programs can improve the morale of employees, reduce the rate of absenteeism, and retain organizational knowledge. In current global market conditions, companies make efforts in reducing costs, hence all must understand the criticality of WLB and master such programs. The work-life programs can offer win-win situations to both employers as well as employees. The HR officials can assist their companies and facilitate capitalizing on the prevailing global competition, personal lives & values, and the aging labor force by utilizing work-life initiatives for achieving a competitive advantage.

Need for Work-Life Balance:

The need for work-life balance is rather felt in the organization than discussed. The organization can be diagnosed to be suffering from work-life imbalance when the symptoms surface in the form of declining productivity, increase in overtime, absenteeism, sickness leave, stress level, resignations/staff turnover, or when employees take frequent breaks to attend personal/social obligations/emergencies. Once these symptoms are noticed, the organization needs to take immediate appropriate actions to restore the work-life balance in the organization.

Work-Life Balance: Issues & Impact

Some of the key issues/challenges generally faced by individuals that disturb the balance in work & life situations are as under:

- a. **Unreasonable Demands:** An individual goes to work to earn a living and meet life goals. But sometimes the demands that life or work throws at him/her cross all limits. The excessive demands at work may eat into the personal time or demands of personal & social life may eat into the work time. In both ways, a lot of stress is mounting up.
- b. **Out of control:** Anything or any situation that can be controlled should be controlled and employees do take suitable measures to keep their professional/personal issues under control. But sometimes things get out of proportion and it becomes very difficult to deal with situations when it is out of control completely disturbing one's work-life balance.
- c. **Toxic relationships:** When relationships at work are unsupportive and an employee is dealing with adverse behavior or is demotivated it creates an unproductive negative work environment and he/she feels isolated. Similarly, he/she feels frustrated, devastated, and unhappy dealing with unsupportive relationships at home.
- d. **Paucity of Resources:** Each individual requires a certain amount of resources to perform his / her tasks both on a personal & professional front. When he/she does not get those resources in the desired amount, it affects his / her life and leaves him / her unorganized, and adversely affects his performance and efficiency in the completion of tasks.
- e. **Lack of resilient attitude:** Due to different challenges, sometimes it gets hard to be resilient to cope with the challenges and move forward.
- f. **Lack of required professional & life skills:** When the employee lacks the skills required to survive and manage the changes it mounts a lot of pressure and stress in his / her life.
- g. **Stress Level:** Inability to handle stress disturbs the work-life balance. One has to learn the skills which can help in taking control of his / her stress.
- h. **Communication barriers:** Many times what one individual wants to communicate is not understood by the recipient in the same manner and form as it is communicated which in turn leads to an imbalance in relationships and a strained office environment.
- i. **Incongruence of goals:** In a situation where an individual conflict with the group goals or way of thinking, stress is bound to happen and this will surely lead to diversion in efforts to attain goals. Many times this situation is also experienced at home but at a diluted level and there it is resolved through a win-win or a loose-loose strategy which is difficult to attain in an office environment leading to an imbalance in work life.
- j. **Failure to set limits:** Work-life imbalance occurs when a working professional either becomes too ambitious or is not at all ambitious. When one space trespasses the boundaries of the other, imbalance is bound to occur, and for an individual who doesn't know how to demarcate boundaries, managing such a situation is almost impossible leading to huge levels of work-life imbalance.
- k. **The rat race:** The corporate culture envisages a feeling of competition amongst peers. Each individual is in a constant effort to prove his superiority or to downgrade the efforts put in by others. Many times in such an environment, the feelings become so much intense that either you substantiate your actions or you give up, the latter being a distant possibility leading to a highly stressed work-life balance.

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Role of Employer contribution to a positive Work-Life balance:

Maintaining a positive work-life balance is not only the responsibility of the employer alone or the employee coupled with family efforts but it is a concerted effort on part of everyone to improve the living standards by fulfilling the aspirations of all the stakeholders giving due recognition and care to the less advantageous. However, the employer can impact a positive work-life balance to a great extent through the following measures:

- a. **Employee assistance programs (EAP)** maybe conducted periodically to keep stress at bay and counsel employees on how to maintain good working relations both at work and at home. The counseling can be done to achieve a win-win

situation wherein the employee manages to complete his office work in time, delivering desired output and at the same time taking full care of family needs and aspirations.

- b. **Health and wellness programs (HWP)** maybe carried out to keep employees satisfied and family members happy, resulting in highly motivated & satisfied employees and at peace on both fronts. This will surely increase return on investment as whatever is invested in employees, will get reflected in enhanced productivity.
- c. **Flexi working hours** may be allowed to display care of the employees on a rotational basis accompanied with policies for family and elderly care. A compressed work schedule can help maintain a positive WLB as employees can get a holiday extra per week by working a few hours extra per day which means a week which is 4 + 3. Flexi working hours can be beneficial more for working women as they have to take care of both the fronts simultaneously.
- d. **Role reversal and role expectation techniques** may be adopted to minimize the stress associated with some jobs as compared to others on the same pay band having similar responsibilities coupled with adequate authority. A team handling a particular job can be replaced with another team and then results can be compared on similar parameters.
- e. **Sensitivity training policy** for supervisors must be in place to help them empathize with employees to help them attain a positive WLB and not to push hard for achieving targets which can disbalance their health and WLB.
- f. **Women-centric policies** to enable them to perform to their maximum ability if for some time they are relieved of their family commitments and elderly care. For this purpose, child care rooms can be built-in organizations where proper food and care are given to dependents. Such measures are bound to increase employee loyalty and commitment and will go a long way in developing a caring culture and will surely attract talent.
- g. **Job sharing techniques** may be adopted to balance job demands amongst a pool of efficient workers. This will also help to build synergy and team spirit by combining different skill sets with knowledge and expertise.
- h. **Reward programs** may be linked to output and not on how much working hours are being put in, on how the work is done rather than what is done and by judging an employee on both the fronts that is an office and home and the best employee to be the best balanced.
- i. **Work-life balance audit** may be undertaken through external agencies and employees topping the charts can be taken up for challenging roles with a company-paid leave to a destination which will, in turn, motivate the other employees to follow in their footsteps. Later on, these topper employees can be considered for supervisor/ mentorship roles.

If adopting all the above options fails to give the desired results, a last and effective option is to give those employees a ‘**Work from Home**’ facility till they stabilize their attitude and outlook towards life. It is only peace that people long for in the workspace and carrying out the tasks they have to perform in quite uncomfortable attire and likewise environment. Now the clothes don’t matter nor do your working style and patterns. Only what matters is the quality of work done at the end of the day and how well the work is taken up by the indenter.

Benefits of ‘Work from Home’:

- a. **Benefit to Organization:** The organization benefits in the form of savings in rent for premises, electricity costs cut, very less furniture and fittings required, no need to make up canteen and catering arrangements, no contracts for housekeeping, transport and peripheral services and no need to maintain huge IT infrastructures for a pool of employees to work on a single server and to save their work on.
- b. **Benefit to Employees:** Flexi working hours, a component of ‘Work from Home’ gave working employees a much breather. Employees can work on their predetermined criteria which are amendable according to the condition of a worker and he gives himself the freedom to choose the workspace that best suits him, whether it can be a living room or a discarded desk in any corner. The point of the matter is that convenience in choosing the work station and work timings lies with the employee and he is free to decide in this regard. The employer has no say in this arrangement and is only concerned with the quantum and quality of work. But on the contrary in office establishments allocation of workspace depends on HR, their rule book, and the proximity principle. Independent working, timings, ergonomics, and ease of posture and attire play a very important role in getting the best out of an individual, this may be the primary reason that during ‘Work from Home’, office timings got stretched to an extent where the family but not the individual felt the burden, rather he enjoyed working as his comfort level and environment granted the same. This kind of peaceful working lead to greater job satisfaction and motivation as the work control lies in your own hands and peer-to-peer interactions and resultant pressure were minimal or absent leading to the development of a healthy and congenial working environment.

- c. **Benefit to the family:** The family benefits as now the house becomes a home, where you can see your mom and dad all-round the day, sometimes talking to you and sometimes busy but at least they are visible unlike in pre-pandemic days where the children used to meet their parents only on weekends, rest of the time parents leave the home before they get up and arrive after they would have gone to bed. Personal relations improve as now you have more time for your family and now you can take care of their basic needs. Parents can also help children in their studies and can play games with them to take away their boredom. Hot home-cooked food is served on demand and the luxury of eating together makes family bonding stronger. Less stress creeps in as when you see your children in the vicinity, half of your tension just vanishes away.
- d. **Benefit to Children:** Children also benefited during pandemic days as schools were physically shut and virtual classes played the role of a teacher. Some took them seriously, the rest were either sleeping while the teacher was lecturing or was playing games after marking their presence in the google classroom. Actual learning was adversely affected but childhood got to bloom as there was no pressure on them to impede their growth. Surely reduction in the outdoor activity made them slaves to the gadgets but rather they are being inside saved them from the evils of the pandemic.
- e. **Benefit to Society:** The society benefits as there is no more cutting of trees for furniture, no land clearing for infrastructures, less pollution caused to vehicular movement, less plastic waste generated in Work from Home mode, and less need to make up arrangements for centralized cooling and heating solutions. The social costs of all these arrangements are gigantic. When we work from home, we put less pressure on the environment and its components. As a consequence, the environment was given a chance to clean itself through a process of replenishment and the results were picturesque. Rivers got cleaned, the clear sky became visible, the chirping of birds gave a kick start to our day, the feeling of freshness in the air was felt and plants and trees bloomed on their own. It felt like nature was giving a big thank you to the pandemic (Covid 19).

There is always a silver lining in the dark cloud and the matter above just vindicates this argument. But no decision or situation is without shortcomings, a benefit for one may be a loss for the other. While many of the educated class enjoyed 'Work from Home' during the pandemic, many lost their jobs as an aftereffect. Daily workers, street vendors, small shopkeepers, service providers, transporters and even domestic helps found it hard to manage two square meals a day. A no better explanation for all this can be that "It was destined to happen and so it did".

Challenges of 'Work from Home' in the organized sector:

- a. **Lack of controls:** Employers lack control over their employees as control through technology is quite different from physical control. Also, performance management was not done systematically as half of the workforce was in 'Work from Home' mode and measuring the performance from home was a difficult task. Some employees lost interest in their job and started taking interest in other household chores. A lack of teamwork and synergy was observed in individuals of the same working group.
- b. **Communication barriers:** Many times what gets communicated face to face is more effective than what is communicated in writing as in the first instance you can very well explain your point of view and can also ascertain the point of view of the incumbent.
- c. **Lack of socialization:** When the dedicated workplace becomes a room for 24 X 7, the craving for socialization becomes paramount and man being a social animal can easily get into huddle in its absence. When you meet people, you generate new ideas, your thinking is channelized and your body starts to produce good hormones which eventually leads to a feeling of satisfaction and happiness. But unfortunately, all these were absent in 'Work from Home'. The Work from Office promotes a greater bonding amongst teams but 'Work from Home' promotes focused attention to work and there is a limit to everything and work cannot escape this limit.
- d. **Barriers for housewives:** Generally housewives are in a tendency to take a rest after all working and studying lot is gone but now, as everybody was at home, creeping into their personal space, the London bridge started falling upon them. Adding to their nightmares, maids were forbidden in the pandemic and all the household chores were to be taken care of by them willingly or unwillingly. Then the next was to provide the working and studying lot with regular intermittent meals/ beverages and take care of everybody's tastes and preferences. Summing up, the 'Work from Home' was a cacophony for the housewives. But on the contrary 'Work from Home' proved to be a blessing in disguise for the working women. They got the extra hours they needed to set everything into motion and they worked very well during those difficult days. Already habituated to working both ways, working women took it up as a challenge and managed both office and home very well. In some cases, domestic violence was reported but on the whole 'Work from Home' was a pleasant experience for working couples. They worked during the day with staggered timings and enjoyed their leisure time taking care of the family and giving full time to their children and elderly care. During 'Work from Home' times, women-maintained fitness owing to huge physical labor whereas men gained weight as their physical activity was reduced to a very low level. Also, men failed to draw a line of demarcation between work and home time and carried on long hours of work whereas women were able to demarcate the same with ease.

Drawbacks for working employees:

At the start of the pandemic, every employee enjoyed but with time, the pleasure got faded away. A feeling of solitude and boredom started to set in and lack of socialization drove some individuals into depression. Output fell even after working for longer hours than usual, validating the theory of diminishing returns. Some employees reported blurred vision after the day's work and some complained of headaches and fatigue. Most of them saw an increase in the waste line and complained of concentric work schedules. Some supervisors reported their subordinates to be unresponsive and vice versa.

Conclusion:

Every problem is a solution in itself but every solution is another problem in itself. 'Work from Home' is one's top solutions for many problems of Work-life Balance listed a few pages back. But as you can see that 'Work from Home' on one hand presents us with solutions to many problems but at the same time, generates some of its own. It is really difficult to conclude that one single solution exists to any problem and adopting it will get rid of all other associated ones. The following models can limit the drawbacks of 'Work from Home':

- Temporal Segmentation: Don't do household chores in-office time and vice versa.
- Physical segmentation: Always close your door while working from home.
- Behavioral Segmentation: Don't read work emails during weekends and don't behave like a domestic help during office hours.
- Communicative segmentation: Negotiate strict boundary rules with family members.

There are many positive points of the concept of working from home, but to realize its true benefits a paradigm change is required by all i.e. employer, employees, family, and society. The employees & their families need to understand that working from home doesn't mean they are on paid holiday and free to do anything they want. Employers need to understand that their employees working from home are not available at any point in time just because they are at home. They need to understand that the work has encroached into the family space, hence the same discipline & decorum is to be maintained by the work relationships while dealing with the employees working from home so that it doesn't disturb the work-life balance any further. While assigning work from home schedule, care must be taken so that adequate workload is given to employees so that the fruits of Work from Home can be reaped both ways and harmony in relations is maintained throughout.

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