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Moving Toward a Better Understanding of the Work and Nonwork Interface

MATTHEW J. GRAWITCH AND PATRICK W. MALONEY
Saint Louis University

LARISSA K. BARBER
Smith College

CALI YOST
Flex+Strategy Group/Work+Life Fit, Inc.

Given the growing popularity of work–life and work–family issues in organizations and society in general, we were pleased to see Kossek, Baltes, and Matthews (2011) highlight at least two deficiencies that abound in the literature on the interface between work and nonwork demands. Specifically, Kossek et al. indicate that this area of research suffers from misguided assumptions regarding the universality of work and nonwork demands and inadequate framing of the interaction between the work and nonwork interface. Here, we outline some points of agreement with Kossek and colleagues, as well as where our perspectives and conclusions diverge. Finally, we discuss how our interpretation of these issues may lead to a fifth path to facilitate research and practice in the work and nonwork interface.

Universality and Equivalence of Work and Nonwork Issues

We agree that much of the research and practice focusing on ''work–life balance'' implies that work is less desirable than nonwork activities, all people want to devote similar levels of resources to work, and work and nonwork policies are equally effective across all contexts. The popular press regularly publishes on the myth of work–life balance, typically using the equal share definition as the foundation despite a multitude of definitions for this concept (Poelmans, Kalliath, & Brough, 2008).

We avoid the use of ''balance'' in our own research, education, and consulting because of the various interpretations that exist. Rather, we focus on fit between work and nonwork life domains (Yost, 2004). This is consistent with Valcour's (2007) argument that different people can experience similar levels of conflict but possess different levels of satisfaction with the overall work and nonwork interface. In other words, it is one's perception of the interface rather than the actual objective experience of conflict and facilitation that matters.

Assumptions about the proper balance between domains have led to a methodological approach that propagates the use of indexes of practices to assess an organization's flexibility, family-friendly culture, or work–family balance. Unfortunately, this approach fails to address the need for programs tailored to the unique characteristics of the organization (e.g.,

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Matthew J. Grawitch.
E-mail: grawitch@slu.edu
Address: Saint Louis University, School for Professional Studies, 3840 Lindell Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63108

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its industry, structure), its employees (e.g., education, personality), and their constellation of life demands. Thus, the aggregate index approach may signal to employees and employers that all programs and policies have the same underlying purpose and should produce the same outcomes.

However, in our own work, we have provided a theoretical rationale for distinguishing between practices that are geared toward providing autonomy (i.e., work flexibility) for managing work demands versus resources (i.e., nonwork support) for managing nonwork demands (Grawitch & Barber, 2010). Work flexibility practices were proposed to have more direct and inclusive benefits to employees and the organization than nonwork support practices (Table 1) and were shown to be more strongly associated with employee well-being and engagement outcomes. This perspective indicates that the worth and practicality of individual policies need to be evaluated based on their alignment with various characteristics of the organization and employees (e.g., employee life demands, culture, business goals) rather than as an overall aggregate. Failing to tailor policies to be consistent with a particular context is a sure path to disappointment with the outcomes.

Clarifying the Work and Nonwork Nomenclature

We also applaud Kossek et al. for highlighting a wide variety of life domains that have been underserved. However, we find their justification for using the term ''work–family'' to represent the broader field to be unconvincing. Even if we extend the concept, as they did, to include family roles outside of the nuclear family (e.g., adult siblings, elderly parents), we find it a bit of a stretch to define family as friends, volunteerism, hobbies, and other roles unrelated to traditional family activities. In addition, the term family ignores values and personal pursuits not strongly tied to social relationships (e.g., exercise or meditation). More importantly, we are skeptical that study participants' interpretation of family conforms to such a broad conceptualization without sufficient explanation or framing, and there is no evidence to suggest that researchers make a point to appropriately frame such nomenclature in their measures.

Our perspective is in line with other researchers who suggest that confining perceptions to only work and family is an unnecessarily narrow conceptualization (e.g., Casper, Weltman, & Kwesiga, 2007;

Table 1. *Specific Workplace Practices and Their Benefits*

Type of practice or benefit	Direct benefit for employee?	Direct benefit for organization?	Which employees potentially benefit?
Flextime	Yes	Yes	All
Telecommuting	Yes	Yes	All
Part-time options	Yes	Yes	All
Compressed work weeks	Yes	Yes	All
Job sharing	Yes	Yes	All
Childcare benefits	Yes	No	Employee with children
Eldercare benefits	Yes	No	Employees with aging parents
Personal time off[a]	Yes	No	All
Paid leave[b]	Yes	No	Employees who encounter major life events
Life management services[c]	Yes	No	All

Note. Partially adapted from Grawitch and Barber (2010).
[a]Includes vacation time, sick time, and other scheduled absences
[b]Includes maternity, paternity, funeral, or adoption leave
[c]Include such benefits as concierge services, relocation services, and gym memberships

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Frone, 2003). Kossek et al. concede the importance of these other domains and even call for concerted efforts to represent each of these domains in research and practice. Recently, there has been a push to move beyond the work–family distinction to a broader work–life conceptualization (Poelmans et al., 2008). Because life roles include work domains as well as family, friends, and personal pursuits, we agree with Kossek et al. that the work–life nomenclature is also inherently flawed. That is to say, using the work–life terminology necessitates immediately reframing the term to explain that work–life really means *work roles* within one's life and *nonwork roles* within one's life. Thus, we think ''work–nonwork'' is a much more inclusive term to use.

Focusing on specific domain interactions can be justified in some circumstances (e.g., determining return on investment of dependent care programs), but more often, researchers and practitioners have broader goals (e.g., reducing interdomain conflict). Adopting a myopic focus on the work and family domains has implications for the criterion-related validity of our measures (Huffman, Youngcourt, Payne, & Castro, 2008) and can breed a schism between single employees and married employees (Casper et al., 2007). It is unwise to risk alienating large groups of people simply because their salient nonwork roles are not tied to family (either narrowly or broadly defined). We should also avoid marginalizing the importance of demands (e.g., exercise, volunteerism) simply because they fail to fit neatly into a specific life role.

The Fifth Path Forward

As Kossek et al. emphasize, advancing this domain of research and practice will require us to improve policies, understand the role of technological change, empower employees, and advocate for more collaboration. These four interrelated paths provided are a good start, but we believe there is at least one additional path forward that can help to guide future research. The fifth path involves creating a more holistic perspective to address the work and nonwork interface. It emphasizes theories and methodologies suited for studying both within-person variation and between-person variation to better illuminate the relationship between demands, resources, and outcomes. Although Kossek et al. emphasize the need for more interdisciplinary work (which we agree with), we believe that an interdisciplinary perspective is only one element necessary for the fifth path.

Much of the theoretical and conceptual work to date perpetuates artificial distinctions between demands that inherently stem from other people (e.g., children, spouse) and demands that are more intrapsychic in nature (e.g., driven by interest or personal goals, such as hobbies or exercise). Two exceptions to this are the work by Maertz and Boyar (2011) and the work by Grawitch, Barber, and Justice (2010). Drawing on role theory, theoretical advancements in boundary spanning, and literature on coping, Maertz and Boyar provided a model that addresses the interplay between the work role, the nonwork role, and an individual's sense of self-concept. Alternatively, in Grawitch et al. we discussed the work and nonwork interface from a ''holistic personal resource allocation approach'' (p. 128). We argued that a holistic approach considers all life demands as a potential drain on resources. Well-being and performance outcomes stem from alignment between the level of resources people expect or prefer to expend on given demands and the amount of resources actually required by those demands. This approach provides a novel integration of previous literature on stress, self-regulation, and fit.

A more holistic approach has been recommended by work and nonwork practitioners (Friedman, 2008) and employed in other areas of research but has yet to permeate the work and nonwork research domain. For example, personal projects analysis (e.g., Emmons & King, 1988; Little, 2006) and the methodology associated with

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it could be a useful way of framing work and nonwork research in the future. The methodology allows for assessment of personal strivings across all life domains and has even been adapted for use in work settings (e.g., Grawitch, Granda, & Barber, 2008). Researchers could assess workers' personal pursuits across the life domain, specifically looking at demands related to work, proximal family (e.g., spouse and dependents), distal family (e.g., siblings and extended family), community (e.g., religious, volunteering, social organizations), and personal growth (e.g., exercise and continuing education). Such an approach could be an effective way of determining the domains in which employees expend their resources and possible points of intervention.

Hence, a more nuanced treatment of life demands may increase the substantive effect that work and nonwork research have on employees' lives. Rather than giving employees artificial or researcher-specified demands to evaluate, we should allow participants to tell researchers what demands are most salient to them, leading to more actionable information to improve policies, more detailed information to ascertain the effects of technological change, and more meaningful feedback to empower individuals to manage their unique life demands. This approach draws on multilevel theoretical perspectives bridging the macro (e.g., role theory), meso (e.g., social identity theory), and micro (appraisal theory) levels, which should produce more comprehensive results that can be used to make important policy decisions. As such, it will help to draw attention to the commonalities across disparate disciplines (e.g., economics, psychology, sociology), as well as subdisciplines within psychology itself (organizational, personality, social). Keeping in the spirit of the other paths provided by Kossek et al., the ideal holistic approach should be developed using a scientist–practitioner philosophy. It should yield strong scientific support but also create value for organizations striving to assist employees in managing the work and nonwork interface.

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