

Work-Life Balance: An MBA Alumni Report

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Introduction

The issue of work-life balance has permeated the business community for decades (Carruthers, 2005; Spinks, 2004; Parsons, 2002), and companies have responded with work-life programs to address the issues raised by their employees (Roberts, 2005). MBA students, as current and future members of the business community, are also aware of the issue. According to The Aspen Institute's Business and Society Program's study (2003) of MBA student attitudes about business and society, over half (52.9%) of the students surveyed in 2002 stated that work-life balance issues are one of three factors most important in their job selection. Additionally, "final year MBA students cited the ability to achieve a balanced lifestyle as the most important factor they would look for in choosing their first employment, as reported in the Coopers & Lybrand 1997 International Student Survey Report (Department of Trade and Industry, 2001)." Business schools are taking notice and beginning to offer courses to assist students with developing habits to balance work and life in their careers (Robertson, 2005).

This paper examines the work-life balance achieved by recent MBA graduates and discusses underlying factors associated with personal perceptions of balance and imbalance. Work-life balance issues are brought to the forefront as a part of the annual MBA Alumni Perspective Survey conducted by the Graduate Management Admission Council[®] (GMAC[®]) in April 2005. Six questions concerning individual perceptions of personal status with regard to work-life balance were scaled and group differences were noted.

Background

Because work-life balance is a combination of interactions among different areas of one's life, the advantages and disadvantages associated with that balance/imbalance can affect multiple levels of society. The disadvantages associated with work-life imbalances are numerous and

impact both employee and employer. For the employee, consequences can have a negative impact on "work and life satisfaction, on well-being, mental health, physical health and on individual performance in organizations," as identified by O'Driscoll in 1996 (Guest, 2001). For employers, "The costs to your business of failing to improve work-life balance include: poor performance, absenteeism and sick leave; and higher staff turnover, recruitment and training costs (Department of Trade and Industry, 2001)." The inverse is true of individuals and employers who are able to achieve balance. Positive work experiences that allow employees to "reach their full potential, be fully engaged, and be able to meet their personal and professional goals and objectives (Spinks, 2004)" promote a balance where "work can enhance life off the job, not just detract from it (Galinsky, n.d.)."

Given the advantages and disadvantages, it is no wonder many companies are offering work-life programs to their employees, but making programs available is only part of the solution. As yet, there appears to be little utilization among those employees (Rodbourne, 1996; Spinks, 2004). The low utilization of work-life balance programs has its probable root in the perception that adopting flexible working arrangements leads to less job security and hinders future career prospects (Rodbourne, 1996; Stevens, Brown, & Lee, 2004). The complex nature of work-life balance requires participation and support from all involved, including the individual and the employer, and there appears to be some indication that employers are not (or are not perceived as) fully supportive of employees who participate. It is shown that employees are afraid to use the programs for fear of negative consequences because the culture of organizations still favor the person who gives their all to the business at hand (Galinski, et. al, n.d.; Rodbourne, 1996; Hansen, 2002). A study by the Center for Work-Life Policy finds that "35% of women and 48% of men say they would be penalized for using work/life options (Henneman,

2005)”. It seems that, though work-life programs are available to employees, individuals and organizations have yet to fully embrace the idea.

Galinski, et. al (n.d.) argue that “although working long and hard is clearly part and parcel of advancing in today’s corporate structure...a one-sided life, where work always comes first, isn’t necessarily beneficial to career development.” Evidence from the Families and Work Institute study suggests that employees stressed in the workplace are depressed and tend to make more mistakes (Robertson, 2005). Career advancement often requires long hours, but satisfaction and feelings of success, which are indicators of a balanced life (Guest, 2001), come from a full and complete life with all its varied experiences, including experiences outside of work.

“The evidence [from the UK CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development)] suggests that the ‘problem [with work-life balance]’ is most serious among those in well-paid management positions who might normally be expected to have high levels of control over their work, including their work hours (Guest, 2001).” MBA graduates are often the individuals intent on achieving those well-paid management positions, as illustrated in a study of prospective MBA students (Edgington, 2003). The desire for a balanced life sought by MBA alumni, which is in conflict with the implications that achieving a well-paid management position is often detrimental to achieving work-life balance, is the impetus to study work-life balance among MBA alumni. This paper explores the work-life balance issue among employed MBA alumni in order to understand work-life balance status among alumni and the underlying factors associated with work-life balance.

Methodology

The MBA Alumni Perspective Survey is a biannual survey of MBA Alumni conducted by GMAC[®]. The focus of this longitudinal study is to assess the performance of graduate management educational institutions, monitor alumni educational needs, measure job placement, satisfaction, and turnover, and track changes in responsibility, promotion, and salary¹. The survey provides

a follow up to the Global MBA[®] Graduate Survey in which GMAC[®] studies the opinions of students who are currently enrolled in graduate management education programs.

The sample frame for the MBA Alumni Perspectives Survey was formed from respondents to the GMAC[®] Global MBA[®] Graduate Survey—an annual survey of graduating MBA students first launched in 2000—who volunteered to participate in follow-up research. For the April 2005 MBA Alumni Perspective Survey, 10,937 e-mail invitations were sent to potential respondents from the MBA graduating classes of 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004. Two weeks after the initial invitation, respondents who had not yet completed the survey at that time were sent a reminder. The online questionnaire was active for four weeks. When the survey closed, 2,209 alumni responded and completed the survey—a 20% response rate. Ninety-four percent of the respondents to the April 2005 survey were employed (N = 2,087). These respondents were asked a series of questions to elicit their perceptions of their current circumstances with regard to work-life balance.

There are five main descriptive models attempting to conceptualize work-life balance (Zedeck and Mosier, 1990; O’Driscoll, 1996; Guest, 2001). The *segmentation model* states that work and life outside of work are mutually exclusive such that one sphere does not impact the other. The *spillover model* is the reciprocal of the *segmentation model*, where work and life are interdependent and therefore influence each other.

The next three models are more specific versions of the *spillover model*. The *compensation model* states that one sphere makes up for something lacking in the other sphere. The *instrumental model* states that one sphere accentuates the other sphere, and the *conflict model* states that each sphere has multiple demands, thus requiring individuals to prioritize and make choices that can lead to conflict.

¹ For more information about survey results and methodology, please visit <http://www.gmac.com/gmac/ResearchandTrends/SurveyResearch/MBAAlumniPerspectivesSurvey.htm>

The MBA Alumni Perspective Survey asks six core questions that seek to reveal the level of work-life balance achieved by employed respondents. Respondents were asked to state how true each of the statements is for them on a 4-point scale, “very true,” “somewhat true,” “not very true,” or “not at all true.” The six statements are as follows:

- I am able to balance my work and personal life;
- My personal and work demands are overwhelming;
- I have the time to reach my personal and career goals satisfactorily;
- Personal issues do not hinder my ability to perform effectively at work;
- I need to make many adjustments to fit into my work environment; and
- Careers in business are incompatible with work-life balance.

Three of the statements are framed in a positive direction, such as “I am able to balance my work and personal life,” and three are framed in the negative, such as “My personal and work demands are overwhelming.” The purpose of reversing the direction of statements is to control for *satisficing*, a respondent artifact where the individual strives to be agreeable. Additionally, the question order was randomized for each respondent to control for order bias.

The subjective definition of work-life balance is used in the current study—“a perceived balance between work and the rest of life (Guest, 2001).” Additionally, all statements are expressions of the *spillover model* of understanding work-life balance. The assumption that one’s personal life and professional life intermingle and have an effect on the other, whether positive or negative, is the basic premise for each question. Although it is argued that the *spillover* model is too general to be useful (Guest, 2001), the general nature of the model provides the flexibility to identify a state of work-life balance, which is the scope of this project, rather than a full delineation of the work-life balance concept.

Basic frequencies, shown in Graph I, of the six questions suggest that the majority of employed MBA Alumni have achieved some semblance of work-life balance. This is indicated by the affirmative responses to the positively construed statements, such as “I am able to balance my work and personal life,” and the negative responses to the negatively construed statements, such as “My personal and work demands are overwhelming.” Additionally, a correlation analysis shows that each question is correlated in the correct direction with the other questions. For example, the higher the truthfulness of the statement “I am able to balance my work and personal life,” the higher the truthfulness the statement “I have the time to reach my personal and career goals satisfactorily” is, and the lower the truthfulness of the statement “My personal and work demands are overwhelming.” Table I presents the correlation coefficients for each of the six statements.

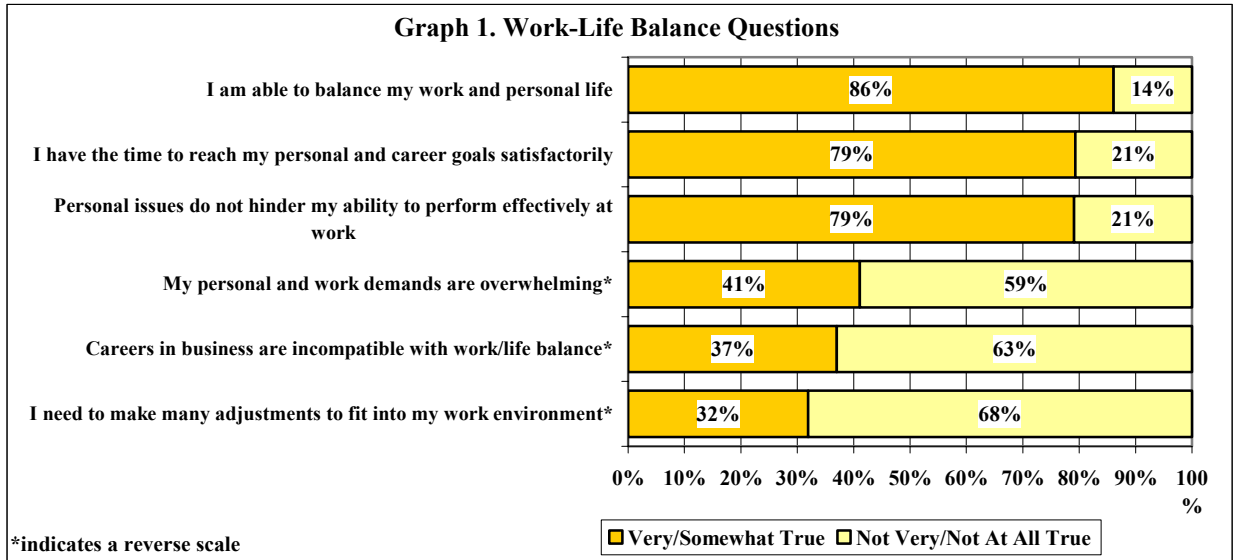


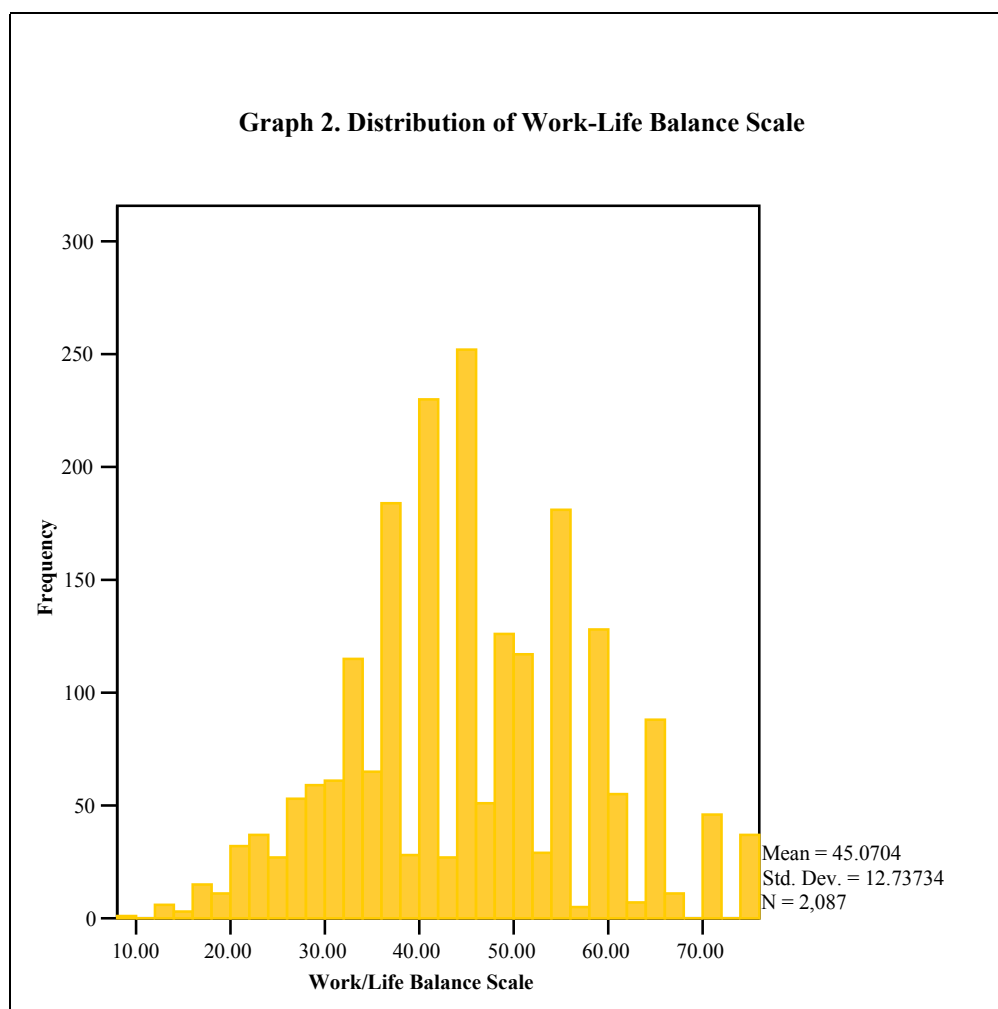
Table I. Work-Life Balance Questions: Correlation Analysis

Pearson Correlation	My personal and work demands are overwhelming	I am able to balance my work and personal life	I have the time to reach my personal and career goals satisfactorily	Personal issues do not hinder my ability to perform effectively at work	I need to make many adjustments to fit into my work environment	Careers in business are incompatible with work/life balance
My personal and work demands are overwhelming	1.000	-0.468	-0.363	-0.144	0.312	0.311
I am able to balance my work and personal life	-0.468	1.000	0.527	0.218	-0.312	-0.369
I have the time to reach my personal and career goals satisfactorily	-0.363	0.527	1.000	0.181	-0.280	-0.307
Personal issues do not hinder my ability to perform effectively at work	-0.144	0.218	0.181	1.000	-0.145	-0.119
I need to make many adjustments to fit into my work environment	0.312	-0.312	-0.280	-0.145	1.000	0.269
Careers in business are incompatible with work/life balance	0.311	-0.369	-0.307	-0.119	0.269	1.000

All correlations in Table I are significantly different than zero at $p < .01$.

Creation of a single indicator variable, namely the work-life balance scale, is premised on the high level of intercorrelations (multicollinearity) and the conceptual relatedness of the work-life balance variables. (Lewis-Beck, 1980). To develop the work-life balance scale, a Cronbach's α with a Tukey's Test for Nonadditivity was computed initially (Gliem and Gliem, 2003). Since Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.700$, the items can be considered a scale, but because Tukey's Test for Nonadditivity ($\text{sig.}(\text{nonadditivity}) < 0.001$) is statistically significant, a transformation of the raw variables is required (Garson, n.d.). Based on the Test for Nonadditivity, each raw score

was raised to 1.824 power—Tukey's estimate of power to achieve additivity as calculated by SPSS. After the transformation, Cronbach's α and Tukey's Test for Nonadditivity were rerun. The results are Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.704$ and Tukey's Test for Nonadditivity ($\text{sig.}(\text{nonadditivity}) = 0.519$). The scale was developed by adding the transformed scores, which results in a possible range from 6.00 to 75.22—a score of 75.22 indicates an individual who responded in a positive direction to each question and 6.00 for answering in a negative direction to each question. Graph 2 shows the distribution of work-life balance scale scores among MBA Alumni.



Several variables, including demographic, employment characteristics and employer work-life programs, are used in this report to make comparisons of the work-life balance scale. Comparisons of the work-life balance scale are made using analysis of variance (ANOVA) where the

significance level is set to $p < .05$ to determine a statistically significant result. Correlation analysis (Pearson's r) is used to determine the relatedness between two continuous variables—the significance level is set to $p < .05$ to determine a statistically significant result. Chi-

square tests are used to determine if a relationship exists between two categorical variables—the significance level is set to $p < .05$ to determine a statistically significant result.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics and Work-Life Balance

Are there differences in the degree of balance between work and life by demographic characteristics?

Work-life issues were once considered primarily a woman’s issue, but today more men are confronted with work-life conflict (Roberts, 2005). Comparing the mean work-life balance score by gender shows that although the difference in the means (men = 44.75; women = 45.97) is slight, the difference is statistically significant ($F = 3.934$; $df = 1, 2067$; $p < 0.05$). Women appear to have accomplished a greater sense of work-life balance than their male counterparts. A possible explanation for the difference may be a function of duration the issue has been in the forefront—women have had more time to develop balancing mechanisms compared with men.

Based on the writings of Tulgan in 1996, as reported by Guest (2001), Generation X gives more weight to work-life balance than other groups. Respondents who were 27 or younger at the time they graduated from their MBA program are significantly more likely to have a higher work-life balance score compared to older respondents. Table 2 shows the average work-life balance score by age of the respondents at the time of graduation. When controlling for gender, age continues to play an important role in perceptions of work-life balance, where younger men and women have higher scores than older men and women respectively. Age, however, may be an intervening variable—a variable that links independent variables, such as increased responsibilities from marriage, children, and elder care often accompanying individuals as they grow older, to the dependent variable, work-life balance. Additional research that includes these other variables can help in determining whether age is the true predictor variable or if the increased responsibilities that are often associated with older individuals are the predictor variables.

Table 2. Average Work-Life Balance Score, by Age at Time of Graduation*		
Age	Number	Mean
27 and younger	542	47.21
28 to 34	1,193	44.75
35 and older	331	42.95
*ANOVA with Bonferroni Test ($F = 12.754$; $df = 2, 2063$; $p < .05$)		

When looking at citizenship of the respondents (Table 3), citizens of the United States consider themselves to have more balance in their work and life compared to Asians, Europeans, and respondents from Latin America. Canadians feel that they have more balance compared to Asians. Interestingly, women do not differ significantly in

their work-life score by citizenship, but men do—U.S. men have higher work-life scores than men in Asia, Latin America and Europe ($F = 9.076$; $df = 4, 1373$; $p \leq .001$). Additionally, differences in work-life balance between world regions persist when controlling for age.

Table 3. Average Work-Life Balance Score, by World Region*		
Region	Number	Mean
Asia	232	41.69
United States	1,210	46.36
Canada	144	46.20
Latin America	116	42.63
Europe	266	43.87
*ANOVA with Bonferroni Test (F = 9.073; df = 4, 1963; p < .05)		

Length of Employment

MBA students are eager to find and embrace jobs that yield a balance between work and life. A study by Sturges, Guest, and Mackenzie Davey in 2000 suggests that at the beginning of a career work-life balance issues are important, but as careers advance dissatisfaction with work-life balance increases (Guest, 2001). As shown previously, younger MBA Alumni report higher work-life balance scores compared to older respondents.

An ANOVA is run with the year of graduation as the factor and the work-life balance score as the dependent variable. The outcome of this analysis implies that the preceding statement is true—as one progresses in their career the more dissatisfied they are with their work-life balance. Table 4 shows the average work-life balance score for employed MBA Alumni by the year they graduated from graduate business school.

Table 4. Average Work-Life Balance Score, by Year of Graduation*		
Year	Number	Mean
2000	176	43.06
2001	308	44.01
2002	312	44.14
2003	416	45.64
2004	875	45.91
*ANOVA with Bonferroni Test (F = 3.22; df = 4, 2082 ; p < .05)		

An analysis of length of time in the respondent's current job by their work-life balance score further bolsters the case for a decline in work-life balance as a career progresses. Table 5 shows the average work-life balance score by the number of years the respondent has worked

for their current employer. Respondents with less than two years of employment with their current employer are significantly more likely to have a higher work-life balance score compare to respondents with more years of experience.

Table 5. Average Work-Life Balance Score, by Number of Years Working For Current Employer*		
Years with Employer	Number	Mean
Less than 2 years	1,218	45.94
2 years, but less than 6 years	596	44.22
6 or more years	273	43.04
*ANOVA with Bonferroni Test (F = 7.671; df = 2, 2084; p < .05)		

Location of Employment

Respondents who work in their country of citizenship (45.42) have a higher work-life balance score compared to respondents who work outside their country of citizenship (43.51)—a statistically significant difference (F = 7.004; df = 1, 2085; p < .05). As shown previously, there are differences in the work-life balance score by the respondent’s citizenship.

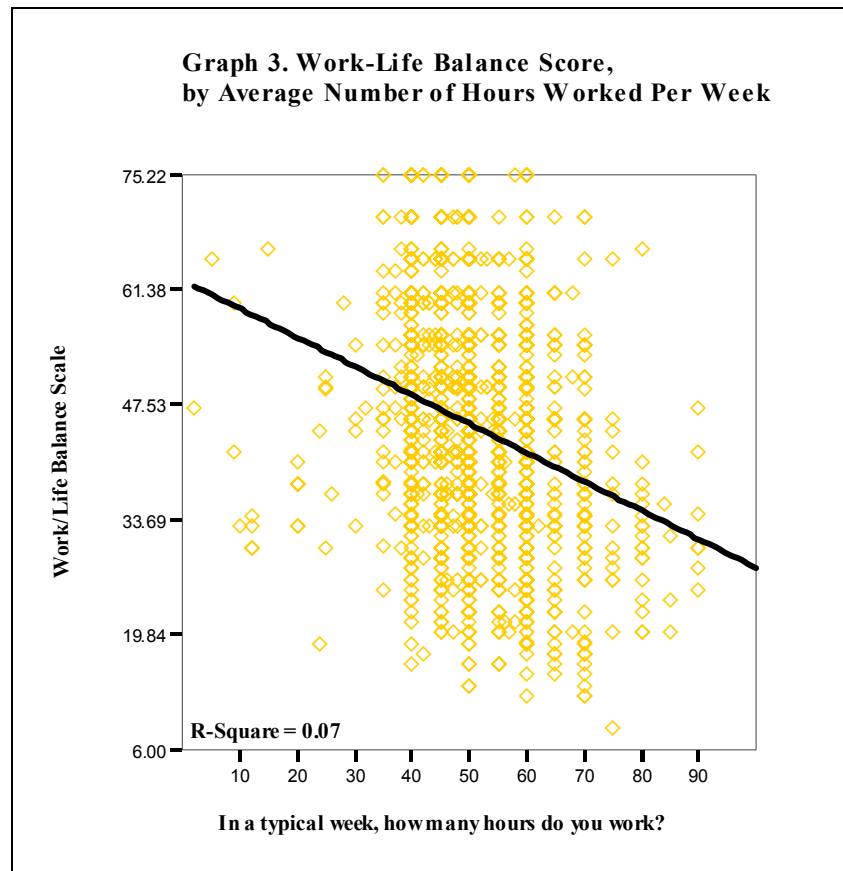
When controlling for whether an individual works in their country of citizenship, there is no significant difference in the work-life balance score among respondents of the various world regions not working in their country of citizenship. However, among respondents working in their country of citizenship, U.S. citizens, Europeans, and Canadians have a higher score compared with Asians (F = 11.405; df = 4, 1625; p < .05). Additionally, U.S. citizens and Canadians working in their country of citizenship report a higher score compared to respondents from Latin America. MBA Alumni who choose international careers report more imbalance compared to respondents who choose to work in their country of citizenship.

There are no differences between genders by location of employment, but age continues to persist as a factor in the

work-life balance score when controlling for the location of a respondent’s job (work in country of citizenship [F = 11.687; df = 2, 1688; p < .05]; work outside country of citizenship [F = 3.425; df = 2, 372; p < .05]).

Work Hours

Guest (2001) states that the number of hours worked are an objective indicator of work-life balance. Undeniably, rationality would dictate that the more time an individual puts into one sphere of life, the less time the individual will have for all other spheres. A correlation analysis is conducted to determine the relationship between the average number of hours a respondent works per week and the work-life balance score. Based on the data (r = -0.265; p ≤ .001), there is a low level, but significant, negative correlation between average hours worked and work-life balance score. The negative correlation is interpreted to mean that as hours increase, work-life balance score decreases. Graph 3 shows the relationship between these variables—the line drawn, also showing a negative relationship, is based on a regression analysis, which explains 7% of the variance in the work-life balance score (r² = 0.07). This data provides support to a study (Guest, 2001) that shows that although work-life balance correlates with work hours, the correlation is not strong.



According to Stevens, Brown, and Lee (2004), “43% of employees considered that working fewer hours would have a negative impact on their job security.” Although working fewer hours has a positive impact on work-life balance, as shown above, respondents who indicated that the statement “the job security is good” is very or somewhat true (50 hours) worked fewer hours than those who indicated the statement is not very or not at all true (52 hours)—a statistically significant difference ($F = 19.230$; $df = 1, 1930$; $p < .05$). Based on this data, it appears that the perceptions of the impact of working fewer hours on job security are based on unfounded evidence.

Additionally, Stevens, Brown, and Lee (2004) find that over half (51%) of employees felt that their job prospects would be hindered if they worked fewer hours. Findings from the current study suggest that this perception is verified. Respondents were asked to indicate the truthfulness of the following statements, “My chances for promotion are good,” and “I have an equal opportunity in promotions.” Respondents who felt that these statements

were true worked longer hours than respondents who did not feel these statements were true for them—a statistically significant difference (My chances for promotion are good [$F = 40.933$; $df = 1, 1930$; $p < .05$]; I have an equal opportunity in promotions [$F = 20.427$; $df = 1, 1930$; $p < .05$]). Furthermore, respondents who have received a promotion (51 hours) work more hours than respondents who did not earn a promotion with their current employer (49 hours)—a statistically significant difference ($F = 15.757$; $df = 1, 1930$; $p < .05$).

Based on these findings, the number of hours worked have varying effects on the individual’s career. It is in these instances that an individual’s priorities and values are most important in weighing options, such as work-life balance verses promotability.

Earning and Work Hours

As reported in the CIPD study, problems with work-life balance are elevated among “well-paid management positions (Guest, 2001).” There is a significant

correlation between the average number of hours worked per week and annual salary ($r = 0.261$; $p \leq .001$), and as mentioned previously, there is a correlation between work hours and work-life balance. However, there isn't a significant correlation between annual salary and work-life balance ($r = -0.040$; $p = .102$). Also, there is not a significant correlation between the job position of the respondent, whether the respondent is a manager or not, and work-life balance score ($r = -0.028$; $p = .212$).

Satisfaction with Job

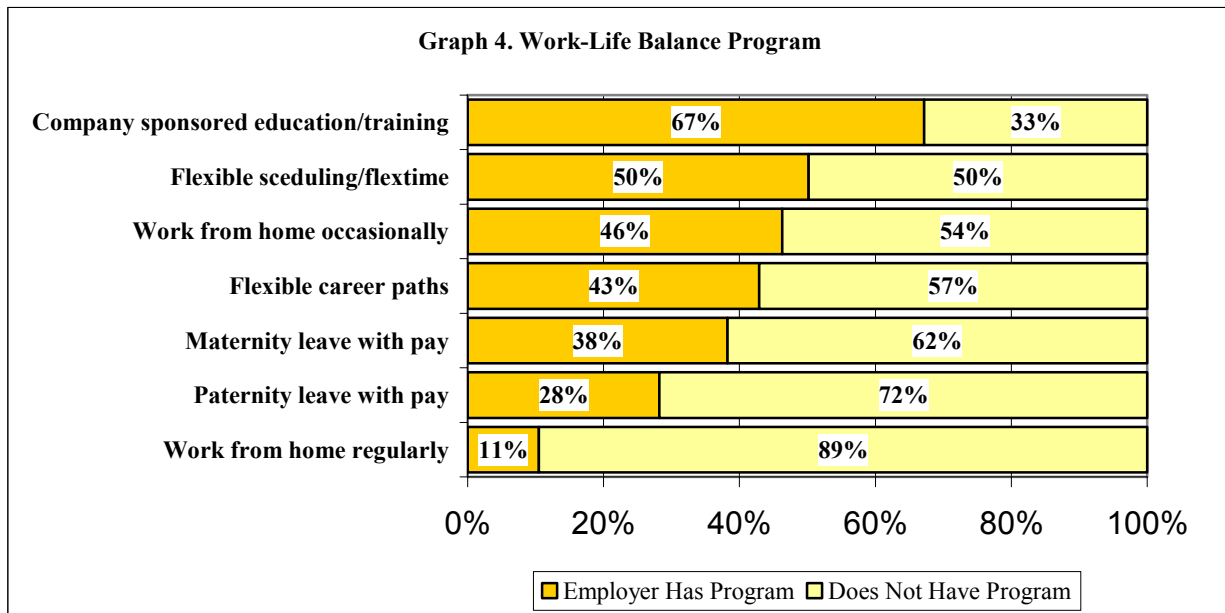
Achieving work-life balance yields benefits for both the employee and the employer. "Exceptional organizations have leaders that create work environments where people can achieve work-life balance and well being as they define it for themselves (Spinks, 2004)." Almost three-quarters (73%) of employed MBA Alumni feel that the statement, "My employer really cares about individuals and wants them to succeed," is very or somewhat true. Those individuals who feel the statement is true have higher work-life balance scores than the respondents who do not feel the statement is true ($F = 62.974$; $df = 1, 1930$; $p < .05$).

A further indication that the organizational culture affects individuals is shown in a chi-squared analysis between organizational culture and satisfaction with the job. Organizational culture variables are coded into two

categories, very or somewhat true, and not very or not at all true. Satisfaction with the job is coded into three categories, very or somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and somewhat or very dissatisfied. The analysis indicates that individuals who work for an organization that they feel cares about them and wants them to succeed are significantly more satisfied with their job than those who don't agree that their company cares for them or wants them to succeed ($X^2 = 356$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$). Additionally, individuals who are satisfied with their job have significantly higher work-life balance scores compared to individuals who are not satisfied with their job ($F = 45.186$; $df = 2, 2084$; $p < .05$).

Work-Life Balance Programs

"Employers are recognizing the need to offer a package of benefits to their staff, securing loyalty and commitment in a partnership approach to work-life balance, with consequent benefits in the workplace (Department of Trade and Industry, 2001)." Graph 4 presents the types of programs MBA Alumni have the opportunity to use in their current job. As shown, two-thirds (67%) have access to company-sponsored education/training and half (50%) have access to flexible scheduling. One-in-ten (10%) MBA Alumni respondents state that their company does not have any of the listed work-life programs available (not shown in graph).



According to the CIPD study, “from a policy perspective, it is interesting to note that the presence of family-friendly practices was not associated with a reported work-life balance (Guest, 2001).” However, according to the current study, respondents who indicated that their companies did not offer any of the listed programs had significantly lower work-life balance scores compared with respondents whose company offered at least one of the programs listed ($F = 17.595$; $df = 1, 1930$; $p < .05$).

Conclusion

Work-life balance remains an issue that requires considerable attention from society. The changing nature of the global economy, where organizations often operate on a 24/7 schedule and technological advances have made it possible for an employee to be connected at all times, has ushered the work-life balance issue into the forefront of the minds of many, including MBA students. Employers have realized that a “burnt-out” employee is nearly useless, and that a satisfied employee is the key to the future success of an organization. To this end, many organizations have developed work-life programs to assist employees in handling the conflicts that may arise between work and the rest of life (Roberts, 2005). As shown in the findings, employees that have access to work-life programs have a significantly higher work-life balance score compared with employees that do not have access to these programs.

The work-life programs incorporated at organizations provide the flexibility and support that help individuals navigate through the increasing complexities of modern

life that encompass various priorities, including dual-earning families, childcare, and elder care to name a few. However, there is an apparent under-utilization of these programs (Rodbourne, 1996; Spinks, 2004). It is up to the employer and the employee to work together to facilitate the acculturation of work-life balance into the organization. As shown, working longer hours does not necessarily contribute to decreased job security, but does contribute to decreased work-life balance. Additionally, lower work-life balance is correlated with increased dissatisfaction at work. The disadvantages of having dissatisfied employees should be a motivating factor behind the acculturation process.

Although work-life balance may be viewed as a utopian dream, society must not fail to respond to the needs of individuals when dealing with complex issues arising from work and the rest of life, especially among individuals further along in their lives and careers. With the many problems associated with stress, including issues of health and well-being and decreased productivity, society would be wise to foster an environment that proactively engages individuals to reflect on their choices and priorities. Individuals who seek balance to maintain health and harmony may lead fuller and more productive lives, which could potentially benefit all aspects of society and business.

Contact Information

For questions or comments regarding study findings, methodology or data, please contact the GMAC Research and Development department at research@gmac.com.

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