Bringing Work-Life Balance to Extension

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Throughout its one hundred plus years of history, the Cooperative Extension System has experienced many changes. Since its beginning, the Extension System has revolutionized nonformal educational approaches and outreach methods. However, these changes have also created issues such as role ambiguity, work-life conflict, work-life spillover, burnout, stress, and work-life imbalance among Extension professionals. There are very few currently existing publications that identify present day work-life balance issues in Extension. Most of such information is dated and irrelevant to current workings of Extension. To give more in-depth insights on this subject, a number of well-established theories, such as compensation, spillover, inter-role conflict, and role enhancement theories, are discussed in this publication. These theories are selected based on their relatability with Extension. Hence, this article was created with an intent to encourage a dialogue concerning current work-life balance issues within Extension. The article also illustrates a conceptual theoretical perspective–a three-tier approach to work-life balance in Extension. This approach discusses elements, such as individual awareness, environmental factors, and organizational policies, to inculcate positive work-life balance practices. This proposed approach could be a guide to creating a more positive work culture, improving work-life satisfaction among Extension employees, and boosting organizational competence and productivity.

Keywords: work-life, work-life balance, work culture, positive work environment

Introduction

With over a hundred years of heritage, the Cooperative Extension System has created and adopted many modern community outreach methods to effectively educate communities throughout the United States. This evolutionary change has also affected the work environment in Extension. In this new century of technology and information overload, Extension is struggling to keep up with work-life balance. Kutilek, Conklin, and Gunderson (2002) defined Extension job positions as "multidimensional jobs" requiring an employee to balance several projects, volunteers, community stakeholders/partners, grants, and scholarly work. These job responsibilities are not only stretched to a local and state level but also to national and international levels. Self-motivation, readiness to help communities, a flexible work schedule,

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and autonomy are some of the most revered aspects of Extension job positions. However, many times, it can turn into overcommitment and frequent night and weekend programming.

People in autonomous roles often experience work role stress because of the opportunities and demands, leading to role ambiguity (Chambers, Moore, & Bachtel 1998). As Ensle (2005) indicated, Extension employees derive personal satisfaction from educating the clientele served, but the enjoyment of working with the public often is sidelined due to endless paperwork with unrealistic deadlines. An Extension job position requires a person with a high energy level who is extremely well-organized and a good communicator. However, the employee is often either "left on their own with no supervision" or oversupervised. The complexity of this job and the demands it poses to employees is usually the biggest reason for stress and imbalance in work and life (Ensle, 2005).

As we speak about imbalance, one first needs to understand what it means to have "balance" in work and life. Balance does not mean that you spend half of your life working and half of it playing. Instead, it means balancing the two to achieve harmony in physical, emotional, and spiritual health in creating overall wellbeing (Simmons, 2012). Felstead, Jewson, Phizacklea, and Walters (2002) defined work-life balance as a relationship between institutional and cultural times and spaces of work and non-work in societies where the income is predominantly generated and distributed through labor markets. Simmons (2012) simplifies this definition further by stating, "work-life balance means bringing work, whether done on the job or at home and leisure time into balance to live life to its fullest."

Clark (2000) suggested that work-life balance is important for an individual's psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, satisfaction, and overall sense of harmony in life. It can be regarded as an indicator of a successful balance between work and family roles. Hence, in a way, work-life balance is an individual and social responsibility. However, it is getting more difficult to maintain this balance and avoid work-life spillover due to 24/7 accessibility to technology, working from home, and use of smartphones. Balmforth and Gardner (2006) defined "work-life spillover" as what happens when a person's attitudes, emotions, skills, and behaviors produced in one domain (professional or personal) flow into the other. In spite of the extensive employee benefits, more rigorous measures might help Extension professionals achieve balance and avoid "work-life spillover." Individual actions are not adequate to create a culture of wellbeing and balance; more organizational and regulatory changes can help inspire Extension professionals to create more positive life changes and achieve work-life balance.

Theoretical Perspectives on Work-Life Stressors

Addressing and acknowledging work-life conflict is a first step toward acquiring positive work-life balance. Work-life conflict produces a variety of outcomes that are neither good for the organization nor for an individual. It is typically defined as a form of inter-role conflict in which

the role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family role or vice versa (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The work-life conflict can be branched in two directions: work role interference with the family role or family role interference with the work role. For example, an Extension professional working during county/state fairs on the weekends and evenings compromises the time dedicated to self and/or the family. On the other hand, caring for a family member with a long-term illness can compromise time dedicated to work. Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, and Semmer (2011) postulated that role ambiguity and role overload also contribute to work-life conflict.

Role Ambiguity

Role ambiguity implies a lack of information concerning a particular role or lack of clarity which creates uncertainty about the job expectations (Peterson et al., 1995). In other words, role ambiguity arises due to unclear, poorly defined, and vague job responsibilities. This can lead to anxiety, stress, and tension (Bauer & Simmon, 2000). The roles of Extension professionals are significantly autonomous and self-driven in nature. Hence, there are potential chances of newer Extension professionals experiencing role ambiguity and work-life conflict. One of the possible solutions to alleviate work-life conflict can be comprehensive Extension onboarding and mentoring programs to familiarize newer employees with an Extension system. Such formal programs can possibly help reduce job-related stress, boost self-confidence, and increase employee retention.

Role Overload

Role overload is another indicator of work-life conflict. This phenomenon occurs when role expectations are greater than an individual's abilities and motivation to perform a task (Schaubroeck et al., 2012). People who perceive their workloads to be high would often complain about fatigue, tension, body aches, migraine, general headache, and depression (Idris & Dollard, 2011). Such stress can result in procrastination, absenteeism, and can lead to loss of an employee (Murphy & Schoenborn, 1987). Extension professionals struggle with job overload as they manage several job responsibilities, such as program planning and implementation, community outreach, financial procurement, leadership roles, academic roles, community collaboration, and revitalizing efforts. Other common challenges that Extension professionals face are limited administrative support, layoffs, and challenges with funding. Due to these factors, many Extension professionals probably face role overload quite frequently, which in turn leads to work-life conflict.

Theories of Work-Life Balance

Even though there are several established theories in the field of work-life balance, theories discussed in this article were selected due to their relevance to Extension work.

Compensation Theory

Compensation theory refers to efforts intended to counter negative experiences in one domain through increased efforts for positive experiences in another domain (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Compensation theory can be divided into two separate types: supplemental or reactive. Supplemental compensation occurs when positive experiences are inadequate at work and, therefore, are compensated at home. An example would be taking longer personal leaves due to disengagement or lack of motivation at work. Reactive compensation occurs when negative work experiences are compensated by engaging in positive home experiences, such as seeking quality time at home by taking a longer leave of absence due to work-related conflicts/stresses.

The main difference between these two types of compensation is that supplemental compensation is driven by insufficient rewards, and reactive compensation is driven by excessive negative experiences (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). A similar effect can be observed vice versa, where problems in the life domain can lead to spending an extensive amount of time working. Both of these situations can lead to disengaged employees and compromised work productivity. Compensation theory was the first theory that looked at work and life domains as an intermingling system. It acknowledged a crucial fact that there is a connection between both domains. However, compensation theory does not discuss the outcomes of the positive impacts of a specific domain on another, such as how positive experiences at work translate to the life domain (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000).

Spillover Theory

Spillover theory is one of the most popular theories in the area of work-life balance. Spillover theory is defined as a condition under which the spillover between the work microsystem and the family microsystem is positive or negative. This theory truly depicts the effect of one domain on the other, whether it is positive or negative. It also recognizes several other factors, such as time, space, flexibility, and energy. If work-family interactions are rigidly structured in time and space, then spillover in terms of time, energy, and behavior is generally negative. On the other hand, work flexibility enables individuals to integrate work and family in time and space, leading to a positive spillover (Hill, Ferris, & Märtinson, 2003). The autonomy and creativity of work in Extension can provide this flexibility and job satisfaction to enable positive spillover on family life. However, this same autonomy and creativity could also create negative spillover on family life due to role ambiguity, excessive work pressure, stress, and time management concerns.

Inter-Role Conflict Theory

Inter-role conflict occurs when meeting demands in one domain make it difficult to meet demands in the other domain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). One experiences inter-role conflict when the expectations of one role interfere with fulfilling expectations of the other. This recurring trend not only brings about feelings of being unproductive but also burnout and lower self-esteem (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This trend might be relevant to Extension where extensive traveling and prolonged program commitments could lead to inter-role conflict with personal or family engagement.

Role Enhancement Theory

Role enhancement theory reflects how positive influences created by one domain (work or family) that affect another domain (Lavassani & Movahedi, 2014). According to the role enhancement theory, multiple roles bring rewards such as income, heightened self-esteem, opportunities for social relationships, and experience of success (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). For instance, community engagement, social relationships, stewardship, leadership, and service are some of the positive influences experienced in the work domain that could potentially affect the life domain of the Extension professional. The central focus of this perspective is mainly on both enriching of and the positive effects of work and family relationships, such as resource enhancement, work-family success or balance, improved self-esteem, and positive spillover (Lavassani & Movahedi, 2014).

Three-Tier Approach to Work-Life Balance

Figure 1 is the author's representation of the Three-Tier Approach described in this article. The Three-Tier Approach includes the three main elements of *Individual Awareness and Education*, *Environmental Factors*, and *Organizational Policies*. Within each of these elements are several sub-elements that are discussed in more detail below.

Figure 1. A Visual Representation of Three-Tiered Approaches to Work-Life Balance
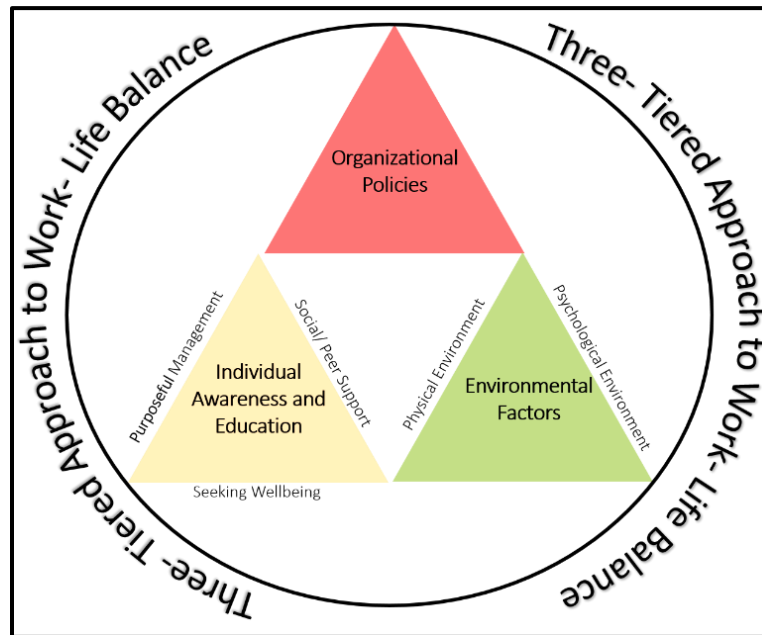
Individual Awareness and Education

Dev and Raj (2017) said that, *"*An individual is the most important determinant of work-life balance.*"* Self-awareness is the first key to creating work-life balance. Self-awareness helps in acknowledging some of the personal hurdles we face in our life that prevent us from gaining balance (Boertje & Ferron, 2013). Being an educational entity, Extension employees may potentially focus their efforts outward while overlooking self-care, self-development and self-education. On the other hand, Extension professionals spend more time towards professional development, ignoring aspects that relate to personal growth. The multidimensionality of the Extension job responsibilities can sometimes lead to a compromised personal and social life. Investing time in personal development and education brings about an overall sense of wellbeing and fulfillment, which helps to create a sense of balance (Dev & Raj, 2017).

Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, and McFarlane (2013) suggested that fulfillment of work-life balance for individual results from three factors: purposeful management, social/peer support, and seeking wellbeing. These three factors, when used efficiently, can improve work-life balance and prevent burn-out experienced due to chronic stress.

Purposeful management. Purposeful management is a key to achieving the best outcomes in a given time. It can be achieved by prioritizing and self-examining overarching goals. Prioritizing can be a great tool in leading more intentful work and personal life. It is very common for an Extension professional to constantly manage several tasks such as community education, program implementation and outreach, and other scholarly work. Doing these multiple tasks at

once could lead to poor attention and focus affecting the quality of work, leading to dissatisfaction in work and life (Just & Buchweitz, 2017). This concept is explained by Just et al. (2001) who indicated that the total amount of brain activity present when two tasks are attempted simultaneously seems to be less than the sum of brain activation that occurs when each task is completed in isolation. Multitasking not only compromises the quality of work but also extends the time required to finish a task. This prolonged process leads to increases in work pressure and feelings of frustration. Prioritizing helps in achieving focus and streamlines the essential task that prevents multitasking and results in total focus while doing an activity. The best way to prioritize is to create "to-do list," starting with short- and long-term goals. Then, list all activities that will help fulfill those goals and categorize those activities as "Urgent," "Important," and "Can wait" (Brough & Pears, 2004). Another way to be efficient at prioritizing work is assessing the value of a task and strategically planning daily, weekly, monthly and yearly calendars (Walker, Wysocki, Kepner, Farnsworth, & Clark, 2015). During this process, it is also essential to be flexible and sensitive to the urgency of the unforeseen tasks/activities. By implementing such practical methods, prioritizing tasks can help attain a more productive and satisfying work life.

Social/peer support. Social/peer support refers to the availability of helping relationships and increasing the quality of those relationships (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Zivnuska 2009). Deelstra et al. (2003) stated that interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, empathetic behavior towards others, and self-regulation are vital in creating a safer and supportive social environment. With reference to work-life balance, social/peer support can be separated into either organizational support or family-related social support.

Organizational support comes from peers, supervisors, mentors, community collaborators, and county and regional work groups where an individual engages in his or her work-based activities. House, Umberson, and Landis (1988) noted that interpersonal relationships at work can provide emotional, informational, and appraisal support. Supervisory support is a crucial support system that can help to promote positive work-life balance among employees (Deelstra et al., 2003; Yildirim & Yildirim, 2007). Supervisors can alleviate most work-related tension and strain and can potentially provide energy and confidence to create work-life balance (Bhatti, Hashmi, Raza, & Shafique, 2011).

Family-related support comes from an individual's parents, spouse, children, faith-based organizations, and friends. Carlson and Perrewe (1999) indicated that spousal support has been found to reduce role strain through its impact on perceived stressors and general wellbeing. A spouse can contribute in areas such as financial goals and management, family-home responsibilities, career support, and interpersonal support that can improve work-life balance. The family also plays a very significant role in reducing work-life conflict by providing

feedback, support, validation, recuperation, and self-esteem that can help alleviate some of the significant stresses experienced at work (Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975).

Seeking wellbeing. Seeking wellbeing is the third important factor that contributes to personal growth, resulting in improved work-life satisfaction. By dedicating time towards personal wellbeing, one can help boost work performance and healthier relationships with self and others, leading to improved work-life balance (Bell, Rajendran, & Theiler, 2012). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA; 2017) states that wellness/wellbeing is a result of a combination of good physical and mental health. These two facets are unarguably linked with each other. Regular physical activity, healthy eating habits, and managing stress are prime ways to self-care (Boertje & Ferron, 2013; Martinez et al., 2013). Job demand-related stressors have been shown to increase physical symptoms of ill-being and psychological distress, such as anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, migraines, recurrent viral infections, and stomach ulcers (Kinman & Jones, 2008). Job demand-related stressors have also shown to increase the urge of leaving a job or taking a long absence from work (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998). Therefore, it is important to take some time to focus inward and create a healthier regimen for self that can lead to creating a sense of harmony and wellbeing.

Employers can play a significant role in creating personal growth by providing professional and personal development opportunities, such as workshops, webinars, web resources, county-specific and state-specific worksite wellness initiatives, and expert assistance.

Environmental Factors

A work environment involves the physical location, immediate surroundings, behavioral procedures, policies, rules, culture, resources, working relationships, and work location. Samson, Waiganjo, and Koima (2015) illustrated that the quality of a work environment affects an employee's performance and job satisfaction, and hence, organizational competence. Even though individual preferences and work ethics are shaped by an individual's values, job responsibilities dictate the majority of those preferences (Gregory & Milner, 2009). Extension professionals have unique work environments. They are constantly working in different environments, such as school systems, agricultural communities, the Land-Grant campus community, healthcare systems, etc. In spite of these everyday changes in the working environments of its employees, the Extension environment is driven by its very own mission of creating knowledge and change through non-formal education. As rewarding as this work can be, it can also bring excessive time commitments and responsibility, leading to stress and "burnout" among Extension professionals (Fetsch & Kennington, 1997).

The nature of work environments is also changing in current times. Our work culture is more diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and race. This is also the first time that different

generations of employees, such as baby boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials are sharing the same work environment (Tolbize, 2008). Diversity and mix of generations share defining moments along with economic, societal, and sociological conditions in workplace (Farthing, 2013).

Even though environmental change is supported by organizational policies and guidelines, in Extension, there are still small changes that can be implemented at the county or regional level to create a more positive and inclusive work environment. These environmental changes can be implemented by altering the physical environment and/or the psychological environment of the workplace (Samson, Waiganjo, & Koima, 2015).

Physical environment. The physical environment includes the component of a tangible workplace environment that is comprised of the spatial layout and functionality of the surroundings. As per Naharuddin and Sadegi (2013), the physical environment can also be known as an ergonomic workplace where employees may feel like they either fit or do not fit. Physical factors, such as lighting, ventilation, noise, office layout, and décor, play very significant roles in creating a positive work environment (Samson et al., 2015). While these are obvious physical elements, most times, they might get ignored in a workplace.

The physical environment is not just limited to the physical factors listed above. Creating a wellness culture in Extension offices is another way to create a positive work environment. The aim of this approach is to make employees feel empowered and engaged (Samson et al., 2015). Some ways to implement a positive work culture include having walking breaks, walking meetings, group exercises, standing desks, housing portable exercise equipment (e.g., dumbbells, yoga mats, resistance belts), offering healthier snack options in vending machines and cafeterias, allowing pets/plants in an office space, and using ergonomic furniture. Taking such small intentful measures in Extension offices can dramatically help improve both the physical environment and employee morale.

Psychological environment. Psychological environment is considered as one of the most important issues when discussing work-life balance (Samson et al., 2015). Psychological factors are the interactions that happen between working conditions, organizational mission, the purpose of work, and the employee's efforts and individual characteristics (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2007). A disparity in the psychological environment tends to develop depression, low energy, pessimism, fatigue sleep disorders, and disengagement (Keller, 1975). The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2012) indicated six issues affecting mental health in a workplace: stigma discrimination, demand/control and effort/reward relationships, presentism, job burnout, harassment, violence, bullying, and substance abuse at work. Hence, in order to enhance work-life balance, employees must improve their psychological environments and identify and deal with some of these critical issues.

Caramela (2017) recommended in-house needs assessments, staff meetings, and anonymous surveys to gain knowledge on current issues can also result in a more positive psychological environment. Another step to improving the psychological environment of a workplace is by creating a plan of action to achieve effective outcomes in a reasonable time using expert help. Simple ways to create a positive psychological environment at work include keeping the workplace clean, relaxing, and comforting; allowing pets and plants; personalizing an employee's workspace; eating together; holding group activities or festivities; having transparency; training opportunities; and providing constructive feedback (Caramela, 2017). These small changes in a work environment can help in creating more a positive, trusting, and healthier work environment in an Extension office, or any office.

Although these suggestions are relevant to improving the general work environment, they are not specific enough to address county, district, or state-specific needs. Each county, district, regional, and off-campus Extension workplace possesses a unique work environment. Therefore, more specialized assessments and inquiries should be implemented to help identify key areas of improvement that are highly focused on the geography and demographics of a specific workplace.

Organizational Policies

Mathieu and Zajac (1990) suggested that employees who are committed to the organization show heightened performance, reduced absenteeism, and lower employee turnover, leading to improved employee and organizational competence. This norm of reciprocity may allow employees and employers to reconcile these distinctive orientations.

The Cooperative Extension System has been forthcoming in creating programs and policies, such as flextime, childcare, and eldercare support, to help create work-life balance in the everyday life of Extension professionals. However, access to these programs is significantly inconsistent between on-campus and off-campus faculty and staff (Ensle, 2005). Boudreau, Boswell, Judge, & Bretz, (1998) stated that the lack of access to work-life balance practices predicts turnover intentions of offshore employees. Hence, dissemination of a university's campus-based work-life balance practices, programs, and policies should also be implemented for the Extension professionals housed in off-campus locations.

A strong work culture has stronger values, mission, and code of conduct for its employees, all of which should help them accomplish their mission and goals. Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, and Calarco (2011) suggested six qualities that create a positive workplace: integrity, empathy, caring, meaning, conscientiousness, and inspiration.

A positive work culture in Extension can help establish a norm of reciprocity that not only benefits employees by improving their work-life balance but also could benefit Extension by enhancing organizational competence, loyalty, and productivity and reducing turnover.

Limitations

A lack of prior research and more recent studies in the field of Extension makes it difficult to draw specific conclusions and make specific recommendations for areas such as work-life satisfaction, stress, professional–personal training needs, and happiness/satisfaction. Even though this article does not provide quantitative data on work-life balance within the Cooperative Extension System, it identifies and discusses well-known models related to work-life issues and presents possible solutions to present-day problems facing Extension professionals.

Conclusions and Implications

Through over one hundred years of evolution and change, Extension has taken pride in its mission to educate communities and community members to lead more prosperous and healthier lives. In this process of service and education, looking inwards and helping "self" has become a lesser priority for Extension professionals. Working during evenings and weekends has become a new norm for leading a successful Extension career, and overcommitting to a multitude of tasks is now normal practice for Extension professionals.

This trend is bound to create negative repercussions affecting personal happiness, work productivity, wellbeing, and compromised social lives. These norms need to be re-evaluated from both an individual and an organizational level to help Extension professionals lead healthier and productive life.

Most of the Extension-specific studies related to work-life balance issues are older and do not fit well with the current Extension environment. More studies in the area of work-life balance within Extension are needed to help identify key issues employees experience in the present time. Comprehensive studies in the areas of role ambiguity, role overload, and individual Extension workplace assessment can be a good starting point to study current challenges. The gathered information can help guide Extension organizations and leadership to develop an effective approach to creating more positive, productive, and thriving Extension workplaces.

Research-based information in this article can provide a platform for conversation among administrators, research scholars, and Extension professionals on creatively addressing work-life balance issues. It can also encourage specific research deliberations on topics such as the culture of statewide Extension organizations, diversity, establishing better on-campus and off-campus resource connections, and a positive work environment.

Compensation, spillover, inter-role conflict, and, role enhancement theories are some of the many theories that can be studied and adapted to create more meaningful conclusions for the Extension world. These theories can help develop meaningful assessments, focused discussions, and forums to identify key issues that are preventing Extension employees from achieving optimum work-life satisfaction. The three-tier approach proposed and discussed in this article can also be used as a tool to assess and strengthen these efforts on multiple levels (from individual to organizational policies). Following such a multidimensional approach has the potential to ensure consistent and sustainable enhancement of the Extension culture.

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