



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H052YC  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
AUGUST 09, 2019

## **ARTICLE** **WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

# Better Work-Life Balance Starts with Managers

*by Marcello Russo and Gabriele Morandin*

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

# Better Work-Life Balance Starts with Managers

by Marcello Russo and Gabriele Morandin  
AUGUST 09, 2019



PETER DAZELEY/GETTY IMAGES

We all want to live rich and meaningful lives — at work and at home — without sacrificing aspects of either. Around the world, more and more employees are seeking flexible work arrangements as a result, and companies looking to meet these expectations are increasingly offering a variety of family-friendly policies. In Europe, remote work, flextime, [compressed work weeks](#), (paid or unpaid) leaves of absence, and sabbaticals are the most common. Yet, as great as these policies sound on paper, many have [unintended consequences](#) on workers:

**Flexibility does not always translate into better work-life balance.** Remote workers often experience high [work intensity](#) and [reduced autonomy](#) due to their ability to communicate with colleagues through their devices at any time. This constant connectivity can [blur](#) the boundaries between work and non-work activities.

**Paid family leaves and/or childcare support can raise perceptions of unfairness in the workforce.** Such policies are typically reserved for workers [with caregiving responsibilities](#), and are much less accessible to workers who desire the same level of work-life balance but lack urgent family responsibilities.

**The majority of employees who do have access to flexible work arrangements are reluctant to use them.** Many fear that doing so shows [low work commitment](#) and will have a [negative impact on their career](#).

To figure out how organizations can overcome these drawbacks, we conducted a study examining the experiences of over 400 working parents in Italy — 58% men and 42% women at an average age of 43 years old. We asked participants to rate their work environment, direct supervisor, and organizational culture on a scale of one to five, with five being the most family supportive and one being the least. We also asked them how often they use family-friendly policies available at work (if any) as well as the number of hours they work per week.

Through [our research](#) we discovered that companies need to focus their efforts in two main areas if they wish to create a healthy work-life balance for their teams:

### 1. Train Supervisors

[Employees who work with a supportive supervisor](#) — someone who offers emotional and practical support, who acts as a positive role model, and who is a creative problem-solver — experience reduced work-life conflict, improved [health](#), and increased fulfillment [on the job](#) and at home.

This is because [supervisors](#) — regardless of how close they are to the C-suite — represent the organization at large in the eyes of their teams. They have the power to encourage (or discourage) employees from using family-friendly policies through [their attitudes and behaviors](#), which can signal (or not signal) that there will be [consequences](#) for those who prioritize or provide equal importance to family and work responsibilities. A supervisor who has expectations that are at odds with the personal goals of their employee can have a detrimental impact on their work-life balance. (Research has shown the impact of the supervisor is especially great among [younger generations](#).)

Take, for example, the case of John: a business school graduate who values both his career and personal life. Due to his heavy workload, John struggles to find the time to actively participate in his community. Technically, he can take advantage of work policies that will allow him to be more involved (like flexible work hours) and still do his job effectively. But his supervisor expects him to be

on call 24/7. Because John likes his job and hopes one day to get a promotion, he chooses to forgo the policies in order to make himself more available at work and impress his supervisor.

Unfortunately, this scenario is not unique. In fact, it is common. Around 63% of the participants in our study rated their supervisor moderately-low (a score below or equal to 3.25 out of five) when asked how family supportive they were.

Based on our findings, we believe that companies that educate their leaders on the organizational benefits of providing employees with a healthy work-life balance will see better results than those that focus solely on designing formal policies. Organizations can start by training supervisors on how to provide their teams with performance, family, and personal support, and informing them why it is important to do so: nonwork activities allow employees to broaden their network, [build new skills](#), and gain a [greater sense of purpose](#) (in both their personal lives and their work roles).

## 2. Seek to Have a More Supportive Company Culture

Training supervisors to become more supportive of family-friendly policies indirectly impacts organizational culture. The predominant culture in most Italian companies is built upon something called the “[ideal worker framework](#),” which depicts the ideal worker as someone who is physically present in the office, who is available to work 24/7, and who is ready to sacrifice personal life in favor of work when needed — i.e. the classic corporate warrior. Although this model may fit both men and women, in Italy, the “ideal worker” is often expected to be a man with a stay-at-home partner, or in rare cases, a single woman.

Therefore, it is not surprising that our research reveals companies are much more supportive of women who request family leave than men. [Fathers](#) of young children often prefer to take an anonymous day off over a longer family leave — even when they are entitled to do so — in order to avoid negative consequences. In fact, 81% of our subjects rated their organizational culture as unsupportive of their personal life (with a score below or equal to 3.25 out of 5).

In contrast, we found that employees who work at organizations that support, as opposed to penalize, workers who do not fit into the traditional framework tend to have better work-life balance and reduced work-family conflict. These employees also are more likely to take advantage of flexible work arrangements, and if they have a supportive supervisor, work less hours. As a result, they tend to be more satisfied in their roles and more loyal to their organizations.

Given these findings, we believe that, in addition to training supervisors to set the tone of the larger company culture, creating [Employee Resource Groups](#) (ERGs) is a valuable way for organizations to offer support and resources to those workers who may feel underrepresented within it.

How to take the first step

Though these changes seem simple enough to make, many companies — and workers themselves — struggle to do so. This is largely because they require both parties to change their mindsets and redefine what it means to be an “ideal worker,” regardless of how many flexible work policies and trainings their company offers.

Today, many of us have [an innate desire](#) to protect the “happy” workaholic identities we have construed for ourselves over the years and to avoid our fear of what a novel and more balanced professional identity looks like. This fear is largely born out of the fact that many of us do not know what to do when we are not working. [Scholars argue](#) that because we give significantly less consideration to how we spend our free time than how we spend our work time, we have begun to think of free time as a waste of energy, when, in fact, [data](#) shows the opposite. Another [study](#) suggests that our overworked culture is, in part, caused by modern organizations that are crowded with insecure workers who still require objective data, like the number of hours worked per week, to demonstrate their value, contribution, and performance.

The real first step towards achieving work-life balance, then, needs to happen at the individual level. We believe that it is important for us as workers and leaders to cultivate broader professional identities, ones that leave space for family, community, and that find meaning in activities beyond work. Once we begin to value our leisure time, we will more easily be able to find balance between — and separate — who we are at work and who we are outside of the office. We need to start viewing free time as time for rest, recharge, and the cultivation of new skills and interests, some of which may eventually [benefit our work roles as well](#). Once we make this change, the flexible work policies, trainings, and EGRs put into place may actually make the impact they were designed to.

---

**Marcello Russo** is Director of the Global MBA at Bologna Business School in Italy. He is also co-director of the Master of Human Resource Management and Organization at Bologna Business School, Italy. He is an expert on work-life balance, with a focus on what individual strategies and organizational factors can help individuals accomplish their ideal model of work-life balance.

---

---

**Gabriele Morandin** is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Department of Management, University of Bologna. He is also Associate Dean at Bologna Business School, Italy. His research is focused on sustainable relationships at work and off-work and the conditions that allow them to flourish within organizational contexts.

---