RESEARCH PAPER

At Our Best at Work and Home: A Qualitative Investigation to Guide Post Pandemic Work-Life

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Abstract

Background/Aims/Objectives: The quest for "work-life balance" has been sought after for decades yet remains elusive, and some individuals even describe it as a myth. Other practitioners have suggested that employees should instead strive for "work-life integration", but the pandemic has highlighted major concerns with the blurring of work and personal roles. We explored what employees said (in their own words) about navigating valued work and nonwork roles before and one year into the pandemic. We then offer recommendations for ways to combine valued work and non-work roles as we move towards a post-pandemic world of work.

Method: Using an inductive, qualitative approach, we surveyed 28 working professionals (Sample 1) in December 2019 (pre-pandemic) and 28 participants (Sample 2) in February 2021 (late-pandemic). Participants were asked about the experience of when they felt they were at their best and worst with managing their work and personal life.

Results: Using thematic analysis, we found evidence for several themes (time management, boundary management, accomplishment, relationships, well-being) across both time points and offered illustrative quotes. However, some differences emerged for employees one year into the pandemic.

Discussion: Generally speaking, participants perceived they were at their best when they had time to plan, to be fully present in one role, when they experienced accomplishments and high quality relationships, and when they felt higher levels of well-being, which aligns with several of the major tenets of Self-Determination Theory.

Conclusions: Practically speaking, this research offers strategies for individuals and leaders that will result in greater thriving across multiple life roles.

Keywords: *work-life balance, work-life integration, work-life thriving*

For years, the popular press has touted the quest for "work-life balance." A simple Google Search reveals hundreds of articles, books, and blogs offering solutions for achieving the dream of being equally satisfied and effective in all life roles. Yet, a majority of Americans report that work-life balance is a problem (e.g., Gurchiek, 2010; Kelly et al., 2014). While the notion of maintaining balance is often perceived as overwhelming, some organizational leaders believe it does not

really exist (Bosker, 2012). For instance, Huffington and Fisher (2019) argue that "work and life, well-being and productivity, are not on opposite sides needing to be balanced" (p. 1). Instead, work-life integration describes a more holistic work experience that emphasizes the connection between work and personal life. Rather than focusing on how resources need to be dispersed and shared to achieve balance, integration focuses on how various life domains blend or coalesce.

While this sounds like a promising approach, we now know the consequences of extreme work-life integration due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of people have been forced into working and learning at home during an unprecedented crisis where integrating work and personal life is unavoidable and any sort of boundaries are lost (Fischer et al., 2020). Even before the pandemic, we knew that integration could "seduce people into losing themselves in the bottomless pit of work tasks and electronic devices" (Robinson, 2018, p. 2), but this is even more pronounced today. Regardless of what term we use, balance or integration, it is clear that individuals are struggling with how to juggle multiple roles. With such dramatic changes to the landscape of work, it is critical for researchers and practitioners to focus on how employees can be at their best, or thrive. Even though a wide body of literature highlights the importance of the work-life interface (e.g., Ford et al., 2007; McNall et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2018), conceptual confusion remains about work-life balance (Wayne et al., 2017). This, coupled with the blurred boundaries between work and home due to the pandemic, points to a need for further research on how to help individuals thrive. Spreitzer et al. (2005) defined thriving at work as the experience of vitality and learning, which can be extended to feeling energized by multiple roles and continually improving how one handles work and personal domains. As such, the purpose of this paper is to explore what working professionals say (in their own words) about being at their best and worst at work and in their personal life, both before and one-year into the pandemic. Our study contributes to the literature by clarifying employee work-life experiences, without imposing terminology like balance or integration. In doing so, we answer the call for more qualitative research in the work-family literature (Beigi & Shirmohammadi, 2017) and in the field of organizational psychology (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016). Importantly, the themes that emerge can provide key insights on work-life phenomena for both individuals and employers. These strategies can pave the way towards a reimagined world of work where more employees thrive.

DEFINITIONAL ISSUES IN THE WORK-LIFE LITERATURE

Despite the popularity of work-life balance and integration in the popular press, they are relatively new terms within the scholarly literature. Instead, researchers have studied work-family conflict, which focuses on the incompatibility of work and family roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and work-family enrichment, which focuses on the benefits that can be applied from one role to another (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). A wide body of evidence suggests that both conflict and enrichment have important implications for a variety of work, family, and health-related outcomes (e.g., Ford et al. 2007; McNall et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2018). However, newer research on work-life balance has resulted in a variety of definitions. For example, some researchers define balance as the absence of conflict with high levels of enrichment, whereas others have defined balance as effectiveness and satisfaction with work and family (Wayne et al., 2017). Casper et al. (2018) argued for an urgent need to better understand work-life balance, and conducted a comprehensive review by consulting with scholars, employees, and even the dictionary. They found that balance reflected the individual's own view (rather than the perceptions of others) and included multiple meanings, such as "satisfaction, involvement, effectiveness, and fit" (p. 197).

What is notably absent from this definition of balance is the idea of equality. As Casper et al. (2018) note, "employees do not require equal affect, involvement, and effectiveness in work and nonwork roles to experience balance" (p. 198). In other words, the notion of a scale, with work on one side and the rest of life on the other side, is inaccurate and misleading. Balance is not about achieving equal time and energy in multiple domains but more about the evaluations employees make about combining work and non-work roles, and whether this is compatible with their values (Casper et al., 2018). Unfortunately, many individuals and leaders still equate balance with equilibrium, and have dubbed it as a "corporate dirty word" (Robinson, 2018).

Due to the connotations associated with balance, some organizational leaders have suggested we replace "balance" with another noun, such as "fit", "blend", "harmony", or "synergy" (Cohen, 2014). However, "work-life integration has emerged as the term du jour" (Alton, 2018, p. 1) in the corporate world. For scholars, integration has been studied as an individual's personal preference in defining boundaries between work and family domains (Kossek et al., 2005), ranging on a continuum from *integration* (the allowance of overlap between work and non-work

roles) to *segmentation* (the separation of work and non-work roles; Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Kossek and colleagues (2005) note that "everyone has a preferred, even if implicit, approach for meshing work and family roles to reflect his or her values and the realities of his or her lives" (p. 255). However, not all workers have the flexibility to integrate multiple domains, and even if they do, many employees are pulled in the direction of work at the expense of family, health, and personal pursuits (Robinson, 2018). Indeed, Wepfer et al. (2018) found that employees high in work-to-life integration reported less recovery activity, and in turn were more exhausted and had lower work-life balance.

Unfortunately, we might be better at integrating work into our lives but not integrating life into our workday, and this seems particularly evident during the pandemic. For example, Davis and Green (2020) reported that the pandemic workday was three hours longer than before lockdown for U.S. workers. This is even more pronounced for women, who shoulder more of the childcare and homeschooling responsibilities (Gupta, 2020) and make up more COVID-related job losses (Madgavkar et al., 2020). Thus, the quest for integration may no longer feel desired or optimal. Moreover, concern over the terminology and definitions distract us from practical solutions to help working professionals handle the challenges and complexities of work-life phenomenon. On the other hand, focusing on actual lived experiences can offer recommendations for thriving post-pandemic.

THE CURRENT STUDY – WHEN ARE EMPLOYEES AT THEIR BEST AND WORST?

To learn about people's perceived experiences with managing work and life, we conducted a qualitative study in December 2019, a few months before the start of the pandemic, and in February 2021, nearly one year into the pandemic. A qualitative approach allows us to better understand the mindset of employees managing multiple roles, and then translate that understanding to an audience (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016). Lee et al. (2011) noted that qualitative studies offer "a different and enriching window" that "can be invaluable for providing a different perspective on a topic in need of renovation and creative new thinking" (p. 82). Indeed, Beigi and Shirmohammadi (2017) remind us that qualitative findings highlight the complexities of work-life realities and offer a better explanation of work-life phenomenon.

Our interest is in better understanding how individuals can ultimately thrive while combining valued roles instead of getting bogged down with the "correct" work-life label. Therefore, we offer no formal hypotheses due to the inductive nature of our study. Pratt and Bonaccio (2016) asserted that "inductive qualitative research is ideally positioned to understand changes that are affecting organizations" (p. 696). This research comes at a crucial juncture due to dramatic changes in how work is done during the pandemic, but also as we look ahead to a post pandemic world.

METHOD

Participants

Sample 1 (Time 1: December 2019, pre-pandemic). In order to capture experiences related to managing work and life, we emailed a questionnaire to 20 working professionals whom we knew professionally and asked if they would be willing to take the survey and share with others in their professional network. This method of snowball sampling is common in qualitative research (e.g., Noy, 2009) and resulted in 37 responses. Of the 37 initial responses, nine were removed for only answering the demographic questions and not the main prompts. Of the 28 responses, the majority were female (75%), married (82%), and had at least one child under 18 living at home (86%). The average age of the sample was 39.75 (SD = 7.79, range: 24-52) and the average number of work hours per week was 46.50 (SD = 10.91, range 24-74). The sample included an array of professional jobs, including, but not limited to: Professor, Vice President, HR Manager, Guidance Counselor, Sales Manager, and Registered Nurse.

Sample 2 (Time 2: February 2021, late-pandemic). To assess if responses changed as a function of the pandemic, we surveyed a different sample of working professionals using the same survey. In this case, we emailed a survey link to members of one author's personal network, which included working professionals whose children attend the same daycare, as well as posting the survey information to one author's social media page. Like Sample 1, we asked them to take the survey and share with others in their professional networks. This resulted in 41 initial responses. One respondent was removed for indicating she was presently unemployed, and 12 were removed for only answering the demographic questions. The demographics of these 28 participants mirrored that of Sample 1, with the majority being female (61%), married (89%), and had at least one child under

Table 1:

Comparison of Time 1 and Time 2 samples

	Time 1. Pre-Pandemic (Dec 2019)	Time 2. One Year into Pandemic (Feb 2021)
Sample size	N = 28	N = 28
% Female	75%	61%
% married	82%	89%
% children under 18 living at home	86%	100%
Average age	39.75	36.21
Average work hours per week	46.50	43.50

18 living at home (100%). The mean age was 36.21 (SD = 3.13, range: 28-44) and the average work hours per week was 43.50 (SD = 5.26, range: 38-50). See Table 1 for a comparison of the two samples across key characteristics.

Procedure and Materials

The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board and collected through SurveyMonkey. After reading an informed consent, participants were asked to answer five demographic questions (gender, age, marital status, number of children, and work hours). Next, they were asked to answer two questions in respect to managing their work and personal life. We were intentional not to prime them to think about "balance" or any term related to "balance" in order to avoid leading questions. This allowed participants to teach us more about how they see the world (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016). Specifically, the instructions read:

> *This section will ask you to describe your best and work experiences when managing your work and personal life. Please be as honest as possible. There are no right or wrong responses. Feel free to describe specific instances or examples, or use any information you think is relevant when describing you at your best and worst.*

Participants were also encouraged to be broad in their definition of personal life. They were invited to include whatever roles were important to them, such as family, friends, relatives, school, or hobbies. The two questions were framed as such:

> *When you think of managing your work and personal life, describe the experience of what is happening when you feel like you are at your best in your roles.*
> *When you think of managing your work and personal life, describe the experience of what is happening when you feel like you are at your worst in your roles.*

A text box was available and participants could write as much as desired. There was also a space available at the end for any additional comments they wanted to share.

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to analyze participants' open-ended responses. This started with both authors reading through the responses to Time 1 data to get an overall sense for the ideas expressed by the respondents. Next, one author generated some initial codes and organized the responses that were relevant to each code. In the third step, the same author collated codes into potential themes. Both authors then met to review the responses and themes. This resulted in collapsing some of the initial categories, which generated our thematic "map" of the analysis. We then defined each theme and selected illustrative examples. We then followed the same procedure for Time 2 data. To be thorough, we reviewed the themes and quotes together a final time for both studies, which led to additional refinement of our definitions and themes.

RESULTS

Several themes emerged from the data. Given the qualitative and inductive nature of our research, we do not provide frequencies because our data do not lend themselves to statistical generalization (McMullan et al., 2018; Pratt, 2009). Instead, we explain each theme below along with a few illustrative quotes from participants from Time 1 and Time 2. Table 2 and 3 provide a further listing of at your 'best' and at your 'worst' representative quotes, respectively, across both time points.

At Your Best/Worst Themes

Time Management. In both samples, participants perceived being at their best when they had *time to manage each of their life roles (e.g., planning, preparing, organizing).* This was apparent before and during the pandemic (T1 e.g., "I am at my best when I have a time management plan in place. I try to review my week each Sunday and figure out what activities we have and what to eat for dinner each night"; T2 e.g., "I am well organized and well-planned every day and have contingencies in place"). On the other hand, when participants were at their worst, unexpected changes cropped up that were not planned and wreaked havoc on their lives (T1 e.g., "Too many things are changed at once and I need to re-arrange my schedule. A child is sick, an unexpected meeting, forgot to defrost something, etc."; T2 e.g., "When I haven't had a chance to plan my week, I feel like I'm constantly playing catch-up and putting out fires").

Boundary Management. Across both samples, participants felt they were at their best when they could focus and be fully present in one role (e.g., T1 e.g., "I can focus all or most of my attention on one role at a time rather than juggling both simultaneously"; T2 e.g., "I am able to set good boundaries between work and home, giving my family the attention they need and doing my part to run the run the home and parent well"). On the other hand, participants were at their worst when the boundaries were blurred (e.g., T1 e.g.,"One part starts to infringe on the demands of the other, causing tension and lack of time to adequately address the demands of both"; T2 e.g., "Feeling distracted both at work and at home and feeling like there are not clear boundaries between work and personal life").

Accomplishment. Across time points, participants stated that they were at their best when they *feel a sense of accomplishment in their various life domains* (T1 e.g., "I have checked things off my to-do list at work and solved problems", "In the "zone" doing things that accomplish something"; T2 e.g., "When I get all those things accomplished in my day, I feel like it's been a good day and I'm at my best", "I feel like I'm firing on all cylinders and everything is a smoothly running machine") and at times extended this beyond personal competence to family competence (T1 e.g., "My children are happy, healthy, and doing well in school"). Yet, when participants were at their worst when they felt ineffective at work and/or family (T1 e.g., "We miss deadlines that are important for family-related matters and I let the ball drop on important tasks at work", "I feel like I am spinning my wheels and disappointing everyone"; T2 e.g., "Feeing like nothing getting done in either"). For both samples, accomplishment related responses were more prevalent when describing "at one's best" versus a lack of accomplishment for "at one's worst."

Relationships. Before the pandemic, participants frequently indicated they were at their best when *their relationships are going well* (T1 e.g., "My ex-husband and I are co-parenting well", "My boss is supportive", "My co-workers and I work are working well together as a team") and at their worst when personal and work relationships sour (T1 e.g., "nothing feels worse than to turn around and realize no one has your back", "My husband is not acting as a partner, co-workers are being condescending, disrespectful, unappreciative, and not respecting personal time, "I don't feel respected or valued. I don't need accolades, praise, or affirmation, but I do need to feel my work is important and valued by my colleagues"). While some participants mentioned relationships one-year into the pandemic (e.g., "When my workplace and colleagues do not understand or respect my need for flexibility. Sometimes it feels like people forget what it can be like with little kids at home and how difficult it is to juggle that, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic"), it was a less commonly mentioned theme than in Time 1.

Well-Being. Not surprisingly, our participants described better overall health both before and during the pandemic when perceived at their best (T1 e.g., "well-rested", "more energy", "sleep better, take on more, and try to do it again!"; T2 e.g., "alert and enthusiastic when working with the kids", "eating well and sleeping well"). Yet, on their worst days, there was a marked difference in terms of poorer health and negative emotions for both samples (T1 e.g., "stressed and overwhelmed", "less sleep is occurring", "it feels like a downward spiral"; T2 e.g., "fatigued", "skipping meals", "I'm often defensive").

Childcare. During the pandemic, a new theme emerged where participants described their worst as a lack of childcare (T2: "It's hard when there is a disruption to the childcare situation, whether that being a grandparent is sick, or daycare is closed due to snow/covid"; "Childcare is unavailable (i.e. part-time sitters have to cancel or daycare is unexpectedly closed), and one or both of us (my husband or I) are unable to log off from work

Table 2:

Higher-order At Our Best Themes with a Definition and Representative Quotes

Time 1. Pre-Pandemic (Dec 2019)	Time 2. One Year into Pandemic (Feb 2021)
Time Management: Time to manage multiple roles (e.g., planning, preparing, organizing)	
• "I have planned, prepared, and arranged for the needs of both roles to be met." • "When I feel organized and have time to commit to family, friends, work and community involvement."	• "Had time to plan or prepare family meals, and have my planner all filled in so I know what to expect and what's due when." • "I have adequate time to devote to both work and personal life. This includes having enough time during the work day to complete work tasks, managing time well to devote to other tasks at home, and devoting time to self-care and things I enjoy."
Boundary Management: Time to focus and be fully present in one role	
• "I have time to be 'present' in each role." • "Time for the demands of work and personal life, without one detracting or taking priority over the other." • "I am able to juggle work obligations without having to work at night and also spend my free time with my kids."	• "When I am able to focus fully at work or able to focus completely on my family." • "I'm able to stay focused. When I'm being a parent I don't want my work getting in the way, and similarly when I'm at work I perform best when I can fully focus on that role."
Accomplishment: Not only getting things done at work and home, but also doing them well	
• "Creating things that I'm good at, with just enough challenge to be making something new." • "I'm accomplishing goals and helping people." • "I am getting things done, helping others and making a difference." • "Meet all work expectations and fully contribute to the family."	• "When I am able to be productive at work (caught up on e-mail, attend meetings without distraction, and on time with assignments). While also caught up on chores at home (not behind on laundry or cleaning), effectively meal planning, grocery shopping and cooking healthy meals, and spending quality time with my children." • "I feel flow when I'm working - like the time just disappears because I'm so productive."
Relationships: High quality, supportive relationships	
• "Marriage strong." • "Hold others accountable to keep up in ways they can help." • "I'm a more in-tuned listener and more effective communicator."	• "I have a good support system set up, which has been very difficult to do in the past year."
Well-Being: Good health and positive emotionality	
• "I am getting at least 6 hours of sleep at night." • "When I get plenty of rest." • "It's even better if I'm not feeling completely exhausted too."	• "Eating well, sleeping well." • "Alert and enthusiastic when working with the kids." • "Working out."

Table 3:

Higher-order At Our Worst Themes with a Definition and Representative Quotes

Time 1. Pre-Pandemic (Dec 2019)	Time 2. One Year into Pandemic (Feb 2021)
Lack of Time Management: Not enough time to manage multiple roles (e.g., planning, preparing, organizing)	
• "Running late, not planning well, not having a 3rd back up plan." • "Calendar and schedule gets thrown out of whack."	
Lack of Boundary Management: Not enough time to focus and be fully present in one role	
• "When I am forced to give attention and effort to my personal role and professional role at the same time. When the demands of my professional role interfere with the attention I can give to my personal role and the reverse." • "I am not able to be fully engaged in either work or home life." • "When my other roles spill over. Answering emails while feeding the kids or wrangling kids while I'm on a conference call."	• "Being the caretaker while working is difficult to do either one adequately."
Low Accomplishment: Not getting things done at work and home	
• "Responsibilities are not met." • "I'm missing deadlines and miserable at work, and likely letting that affect me personally. If something personal is going on, then it probably will affect me at work."	• "When I cannot get work done because my child needs more help with his school work than usual. Then I need to work late and that ruins my whole day and make me at my worst."
Poor Relationships: Low quality, unsupportive relationships	
• "My ex-husband and I aren't getting along and aren't co-parenting well. My coworkers and I aren't working well together." • "Having a partner turn sour on you or not want to be around is certainly the worst feeling."	• "When my wife hates me." • "I feel as though I am letting other people down."
Poor Well-Being: Bad health and negative emotionality	
• "Less sleeping is occurring." • "Tired, no motivation, urge to eat more." • " Alone." • "No peace of mind at work or home." • "It feels like a downward spiral."	• "Overwhelmed by work and obligations at home." • "I expend almost all of my energy and patience at work and have none left for my family when I get home. I hate it." • "I have a bad attitude the rest of the day."
Lack of Childcare	
	• "Having to attempt to juggle both work at home and child care at the same time." • "When we have no childcare and we are trying to manage our household, our son, and our job all while working in the same space."

at a reasonable hour due to deadlines or have to log back in to finish work after putting our child to bed"). However, this was not mentioned from the Time 1 sample.

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this inductive, qualitative study was to learn more about workers' perceptions of being at their best and worst as they manage multiple roles. In doing so, we aimed to provide a window into employee experiences before and during the pandemic without imposing various work-life terminology (and its different meanings). This is consistent with Beigi and Shirmohammadi (2017), who argued that "a holistic theory free from presuppositions about the nature of work and family interdependencies…can provide an improved explanation of the work–family phenomenon" (p. 401). Our analyses yielded several important themes. Before the pandemic, individuals reported they were at their best when they had a) time to plan, prepare and organize, b) effective boundaries that allowed for focus on one role, c) a sense of accomplishment, d) high quality relationships, and e) more positive well-being. Many of these same themes emerged during the pandemic, except for less emphasis on relationships and more focus on the lack of childcare.

Our findings support the recent work of Casper et al. (2018), who argued that employees evaluate their combination of work and nonwork roles based on one affective and two cognitive factors. That is, employees perceive *affective balance* when their work and nonwork roles provide positive emotions, which corresponds to our well-being theme. *Effectiveness balance* is when workers perceive a sense of effectiveness in their roles, which supports our themes related to personal and professional accomplishments as well as high quality relationships. Lastly, *involvement balance* is when employees perceive high levels of engagement in their roles, which fits with our category of boundary management.

Our results also align with Deci and Ryan's (1985; 2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which argues that all individuals have an innate need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Our themes of accomplishment and relationships parallel Deci and Ryan's need for competence (psychological need to feel effective in one's environment and to have the opportunity to demonstrate and improve one's abilities) and relatedness (need to feel valued, respected, and important, and have meaningful relationships), respectively. The need for autonomy, defined as the need for self-determination and to endorse the cause of one's behavior as one's own (e.g., Deci & Ryan,

1987), emerged in a few comments for Time 1 but there were not enough to warrant a theme, nor did they replicate for Time 2. For example, during Time 1, one participant mentioned the importance of control (e.g., "I feel like I have control over my work life and am able to dictate what tasks will be completed") and another mentioned flexibility (e.g., "Flexibility to attend to children or personal health needs as they arise"). However, it is possible that parents had less autonomy when they mentioned the lack of childcare, which was readily apparent in Time 2 comments.

Self-Determination Theory argues that people thrive when psychological needs are supported and met. On the other hand, when psychological needs are frustrated and threatened, this negatively impacts well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It therefore makes sense that when people felt at their best and worst they mention conditions that support (accomplishment and relationships) and thwart (lack of accomplishment and relationships) their psychological needs (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2017). This also explains why well-being related factors arose as common sentiments related to best and worst experiences. When psychological needs are fostered and supported, individuals can thrive both personally and professionally. Consistent with SDT, we believe that perceptions of autonomy are important, but were not prevalent enough to emerge as a theme across our samples. At times, comments around autonomy were alluded to but given the inductive nature of the study, we did not force a theme to align with theory.

Similarities and differences in the themes between the two samples are telling. When thinking of their best and work experiences, time related sentiments (e.g., time management, boundary management) were consistently prevalent, and this is not surprising given that time is our most limited and precious resource (Roeckelein, 2000). It also makes sense that accomplishment arose as common both pre- and during the pandemic because effectiveness and mastery are critical regardless of the circumstances (Vansteenkiste, Ryan, & Soenens, 2020). The pandemic introduced new challenges that allowed professionals to exercise and exhibit new skills and abilities, which promoted the need for competence. Yet, for the late-pandemic sample, relationships were not as salient. One explanation could be the change in relationships due to social distancing measures, which made the opportunity to see family and friends outside of work limited or impossible. Certainly the demands associated with school and daycare closures due to COVID and the stressors this placed on working parents were evident in the second sample.

Practical Implications

Participants' key insights can be used to guide recommendations for work-life thriving, and are backed by a plethora of work-life research as well as self-determination theory (see Ryan & Deci, 2017). As mentioned earlier, a major and overarching theme both before and during the pandemic was the importance of time and boundary management. Thinking of one's career as part of life rather than a separate activity (integration) may seem appealing, yet respondents before and during the pandemic reported that they are at their worst when one role creeps into another role and they feel forced to choose work at the expense of their other roles. This is further exacerbated by the ability to do work anytime and anywhere. Therefore, as the pandemic ends, individuals should reflect on their boundary preferences and make adjustments, and managers should support these efforts. For some employees, this could mean moving closer towards segmentation where they can leave work at work, but this can only be effective if the larger organizational culture supports healthy work practices. Other employees may prefer more of the integration side of the continuum that allows them to work from home permanently or in some type of hybrid model. This suggests that one size does not fit all, and each person needs to decide how to set boundaries in the way that helps them meet their work and life goals (Riordan, 2013).

In addition, employers should focus on ways to help employees feel a sense of accomplishment in their life domains. Amabile and Kramer (2011) showed that making progress was the single most important ingredient for motivation, and it is likely because progress creates a perception of making headway. Organizational leaders should look to remove barriers to progress, and even small wins can be helpful in supporting perceptions of competence. On days when employees do not feel progress, managers should foster a failure tolerant environment that normalizes failure as part of life. Furthermore, employees can also be encouraged to practice self-compassion (Neff, 2003) by being present in the moment without judgment, offering the same level of kindness that they would extend to a loved one (i.e., it is okay that I didn't get everything done on my to-do list today), and remembering our common humanity (i.e., none of us lived up to our ideal performance of parent, spouse, or employee during the pandemic).

Employees underscored the importance of relationships before the pandemic, which fits with research that work-life balance support from colleagues is critically important (Forsyth & Polzer-Debruyne, 2007). Indeed, a culture of support goes farther than specific policies (Wayne, 2019), so managers should not ignore the importance of small-scale, subtle (yet crucial) efforts like day-to-day support from supervisors and coworkers to meet relatedness needs. Organizations should help employees re-establish social bonds with their colleagues as they re-enter the workplace. Given the well-being theme from both samples, organizational leaders should also be trained on how to show emotional support for their employees, and should model healthy work habits, like talking (within reason) about their personal life while at work, leaving work at a reasonable time for personal pursuits, taking vacation and parental leave and encouraging team members to do so, and avoiding email after hours (or at least making it explicit that a returned emails is not expected).

Even though flexibility and control did not garner enough comments to emerge as their own theme in this study, organizations should consider flexible options that provide greater control over how and when their work is accomplished. Some employers showed resistance to remote work before the pandemic, but the fear of lower productivity is often unsupported (e.g., Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), even during a global pandemic (Green et al., 2020). Furthermore, research shows that just the mere availability of remote work, not whether or not employees use it, is critically important (Masuda et al., 2017). Thus, leaders should get input from employees about reopening plans and the availability of flexible work arrangements. In addition, if organizations can provide greater decision-making authority to their employees regarding their schedules, then perceptions of autonomy are enhanced. This will allow employees to take ownership over their myriad of responsibilities at work and beyond, including healthy practices like exercise and sleep hygiene mentioned by participants both before and during the pandemic.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any study, there are important limitations to consider. First, this study used two different samples before and one year into the pandemic, so we cannot make a direct comparison across time given that different participants were used. However, sample characteristics and results were very similar, even in spite of the dramatic changes to the world of work due to the pandemic. Next, this qualitative study was not intended to be an empirical test of work-life balance but instead could be used to guide future quantitative, deductively driven research. For example, while the themes identified by our participants offer support

for the definition of work-life balance proposed by Casper et al. (2018), we agree that more work is needed to understand global work-nonwork balance and its facets (affect, involvement, effectiveness), especially over time with longitudinal designs. In addition, our sample is limited to mostly married females with children under 18, as well as white collar, professional level jobs that probably allow for much greater flexibility than other types of jobs. We suspect that different themes would emerge for other types of workers (e.g., essential workers, single parents) with less flexibility. Finally, our sample sizes were relatively small, but were in line with recommendations for qualitative research. Some scholars suggest that sample sizes as small as 12 are appropriate for practical qualitative research (Boddy, 2016). The objective in qualitative research is not about sample size, but reducing saturation, therefore, samples around 30 participants are typical (e.g., Mason, 2010).

CONCLUSION

In this study, we depended on "the researched to share their understanding of the world" (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016, p. 695) rather than imposing various definitions of work-life balance on the researched. Regardless of whether employees are working during a global pandemic or during "normal" times, individuals' priorities are much the same. This research demonstrates that individuals feel they are at their best when they have time to plan and be present in their valued roles, and experience accomplishments and effective relationships; thereby creating a greater sense of well-being. These results can guide employees, researchers, and practitioners alike to create more opportunities for thriving as we move into the post-COVID world. ■

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