Unexpected Connections: Considering Employees' Personal Lives Can Revitalize Your Business

Lotte Bailyn

Joyce K. Fletcher

Doborah Kolb

Unexpected Connections: Considering Employees' Personal Lives Can Revitalize Your Business

Lotte Bailyn • Joyce K. Fletcher • Deborah Kolb

Making an explicit link between people's personal needs and business goals can be a catalyst for changing work practices. In the end, both the company and the employees benefit.

At a corporate retreat on organizational learning, the vice president of finance for a major manufacturer leads a discussion to raise the "real" issues that inhibit learning and growth. He promises to listen and asks his people to talk honestly, to "tell it like it is" instead of telling management what it wants to hear. To his surprise, nearly all the issues raised in each group — regardless of level or function — relate to work and family.

The director of a strategic business unit at a large high-tech company says, "After my heart attack at age thirty-seven, my doctor told me, 'Get a new job or you won't make forty.' I knew the important things in my life were health and family, but I loved my work and I couldn't face the prospect of giving it up. Isn't there any way to have a life and still do what I love to do?"

The president of a financial services company muses that past routes to success seem to be dead-ends. He notes, "We've been tremendously successful, largely because of the hard work, energy, and commitment of our people. But I have the sense that we have pushed about as far as we can. The creative ideas and the energy to work on them seem to be coming from the top, and I know we can't sustain growth this way. We need to re-energize people and get those creative juices flow-

ing from the bottom up if we are going to get to the next level of growth. And I am just not sure how to do that."

What can we make of this? It seems as if corporate America is caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, employees' personal lives are clearly an important issue. Integrating work and personal life is not just something that affects a small group of lower and mid-level workers for a short time but is an issue that affects many people — even at the highest levels in the organization — for a major portion of their lives. On the other hand, future growth depends on "getting more" from these same people. It is no wonder that leaders are bewildered and seem to say one thing and do another. As recent articles and commentaries in the popular press suggest, organizations like to *say* they are "family friendly," but, in fact, their internal workings indicate they don't "care" about family. Is it fair to say companies don't care? Or is it that organizations' current definition of the problem offers few alternatives?

Indeed, traditional thinking tends to pit employee goals and business goals against each other. Obvious responses to either goal seem to make the other worse: If you try to help families by putting in some benefits and special programs, there is a fear that too many people will use the benefits, costs will increase, and productivity will suffer. If you try to help the business by increasing demands for employee commitment and involvement, there is a fear that people will tune

Lotte Bailyn is the T Wilson (1953) Professor of Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Joyce K. Fletcher is an associate professor at Northeastern University and a research fellow at the Asa S. Knowles Office for the Study of Work and Learning. Deborah Kolb is a professor at Simmons College and director of the Simmons Institute for Leadership and Change.

out and do only what is asked rather than bring new energy to their work. They might even leave and take needed skills and expertise with them.

The plethora of articles do little more than describe the situation and call for "fundamental change." Employee advocates long for socially responsible organizations; management longs for committed employees who have the passion and energy to stimulate new growth. Is it a trade-off? Must we choose between the goals of the business and people's needs? We argue that the answer is a resounding *no*. Our research

Must we choose between the goals of the business and people's needs? We argue that the answer is a resounding *no*.

shows that the solution to this dilemma lies in *connecting* the two issues — people's personal lives and strategic business issues — rather than treating them as a trade-off. It may seem strange and counterintuitive. But we have found that there is an untapped source of strategic innovation and growth that comes from making an explicit connection between personal needs and business goals. The payoff, it turns out, comes from refusing an either/or choice and instead connecting the two issues at the concrete level of local, everyday work practices at all organizational levels.

One Company's Experiences

A multiyear action research project, supported by the Ford Foundation, enabled us to work with a company known for its leading-edge employee benefits. Although the company had a full array of policies and procedures for flexible work arrangements, employees were barely using the policies and benefits for two reasons: first, employees assumed that family benefits applied only to a few people for part of their work lives (primarily women with young children), and, second, there were career repercussions for those employees who did take advantage of them. The result was that the benefits were underutilized, particularly by men, single workers, and career-oriented mothers.

We negotiated with the company to try a different approach that was not based on benefits and policies. We wanted to connect work to personal life (broadly defined to include both family and community) and to use this connection as a catalyst for changing work practices. We worked jointly with a corporate team to define:
• A current state — The culture unnecessarily creates conflict between work and personal life, which has negative consequences for the business and for the equitable treatment of employees.
• A desired state — The culture capitalizes on work-personal life issues as an opportunity to create innovative, productive work practices.

Using an action research method, we worked at a number of sites in the company that represented the major parts of the business. At each site, we collaborated with different groups to see if together we could change aspects of work to meet a double goal: enable employees to better integrate their work with their personal lives *and* help the site meet its business goals. And in each case, we were able to make this productive connection.

Less Stressful On-Time Product Launch

The first group we worked with was a product development team that had a tough task: produce a new product, using new technology, in a much shorter time than they'd ever done, but with no additional resources.[1] The group consisted of engineers, both men and women, single and married, with and without children. The engineers wanted very much to meet the ambitious schedule. They knew that this product was important for the company and that their careers were tied to its success. So they were working hard. In this group, working hard meant working long hours and coming in evenings and weekends. There seemed to be an unquestioned belief that, given the situation they were in and the importance of the product, they had no choice but to work additional hours.

People told us that they needed to put in long hours because they couldn't get their individual work done during the normal workday. Meetings, other engineers' requests for help, schedule checks, and management reviews — all deprived them of continuous, concentrated time needed to produce the systems that the product required. The result was that they were

Customer Administration Center	
Type of work	Routine, clerical
Employees	White-collar; the majority are women.
Business issues	Improve customer service. Move to self-managed, empowered teams.
Personal issue	Rigid schedules
Diagnosis	Culture of control leads to zero-sum view of flexibility and productivity. Culture of conservatism interferes with the risk-taking required to move to self-managed teams.
Experimental intervention	All employees have flexible work arrangements. Teams learn about self-management by taking control of flexible arrangements.
Business results	Absenteeism reduced by 30 percent. Improved customer service from more coverage. Teams learn to work in empowered ways.
Personal results	Less stress and pressure Time to attend to family and community issues More control over work and personal life

cult to integrate with their personal lives, they mentioned the rigidity. For example, despite the expressed need of many employees and an array of flexible policies on the books, very few of them were actually used. Most requests for flexibility were restricted to changing the beginning and end of the workday by a half hour or so. Since managers felt they always had to oversee their employees, they were understandably reluctant to give more leeway. Moreover, employees who wanted to take advantage of the benefits had to submit a plan to management indicating their need and documenting how they would meet business goals. Reluctant to relinquish control, management typically sat on these plans or returned them, requesting more detailed documentation. Few requests were granted, and fewer and fewer requests were made, in a self-reinforcing cycle that systematically disempowered employees.

When we reported our findings to the senior team, it became clear that we had raised aspects of the work culture that not only made the working conditions

difficult for the employees, but also undermined the managers' efforts to improve the unit's effectiveness. Their highly controlled, individualistic way of managing partly explained why they were having difficulty moving toward empowerment and self-managed teams.

In response, senior management proposed a three-month experiment: each employee could establish any schedule that he or she wanted, as long as the work got done. After some confusion about what this meant, some dramatic changes occurred. First, almost everyone asked for different hours, men and women, single and married, managers and front-line workers. Given the various schedules proposed, managers realized they could no longer deal with the requests on an individual basis and had to bring the groups together to decide how to get the work done. Obviously, the groups had to compromise, which gave them their first experience in self-management.

A 30 percent reduction in absenteeism made managers see the value in relinquishing some of the control they had felt was necessary. Customer service improved as service hours were extended due to more liberal employee schedules. The organization was on its way toward the transformation it had sought but had not been able to achieve. And employees now had the flexibility to manage pressing issues in their lives.

What we learned from this example is that using a personal lens to understand working conditions helps to identify ways in which old cultural assumptions undermine new initiatives. In this situation, we found that letting work groups manage their own schedules helped them to develop as self-managed teams and serve their customers better (see the sidebar).

Cross-Functional Synergies and Predictable Schedules

Our work at the third site also produced benefits to both the employees and business goals, but in a different way. In a sales and service district set up to sell and service all the company's products, one product group in particular was consistently below target.[3]

The group was organized as a partnership, but the functions were quite independent. Salespeople, both men and women who were paid on commission, had very difficult selling targets and thus worked long

hours. Service people, primarily blue-collar men, had to respond to service calls at all hours and were beset by uncertainty about their schedules. Neither group had much respect for the other and had had little experience working together.

Our analysis indicated that there were unrealized synergies between the two groups. Not only could they help each other be more productive, but they could support each other in ways that would ease the stresses in their lives. In collaboration with the district leadership, we decided to experiment with a cross-functional team. The team met for nine months and made a dramatic turnaround.

At first, all the old antagonisms surfaced, and the members did not understand how they could help each other. But when one service manager reported that three of his people were planning to retire, the salespeople realized that this would adversely affect their own ability to plan installations. Thus began a slow realization that working together could improve their performance. They discovered further synergies when the service people did the groundwork so the salespeople could close a big sale.

As a result, the group, which had not been able to meet its sales targets for some time, was among the highest revenue-producing units in the district. Further, the members found ways to support each other that led to more control and predictability in their lives.

What we learned from this site was that creativity and commitment are best mobilized in response to people's personal needs. This became clear when we discovered that management had once before tried to form a cross-functional team around this same product group, without positive results. What, the managers wondered, was different about what we had done? The significant difference was that we *began* by looking at the stresses in people's *personal* lives. We brought the members together to consider how they could ease their work situation to make their lives more livable, which motivated them to engage the issues more creatively (see the sidebar).

Since this initial project, we have worked with many other work teams, at many different levels, and in many different organizations. The results are similar. Whether the situation involves scientists, purchasing agents, loan processors, line workers, or researchers,

Sales and Service District	
Type of work	Sales — individual, based on commission Service — individual, driven by calls
Employees	Sales — equal number of men and women Service — the majority are men.
Business issue	Increase revenues for poorly performing product group.
Personal issues	Sales — long hours driven by ever-increasing stretch goals in bad economic climate. Service — unpredictability of hours driven by promised fast response time.
Diagnosis	Sales and service work at cross-purposes. Failure to realize synergies in working with the same customers.
Experimental intervention	Cross-functional product team
Business results	Highest revenues in district Synergies recognized (service can help sell and sales can help on routine service).
Personal results	More control over hours More mutual support

connecting the two seemingly incompatible aims of better integrating personal lives and more effectively meeting business goals leads to a win all around. When we reexamine work practices and organizational cultures through the lens of employees' personal lives, not only do formerly invisible inefficiencies and dysfunctional work practices surface, but creative, unforeseen solutions emerge. Making this unexpected connection is a powerful way to engage employee involvement and creativity. By adding personal payoff to organizational changes, employees are energized and motivated to undertake them. The bottom line is that implementing these innovations not only helps employees integrate work and personal life, but also leads to increases in productivity and effectiveness.

How to Capture the Benefits of Connection: A Dual Agenda

To capture the benefits of connection, managers need to develop a dual agenda: identify and change work practices that have unintended negative consequences both for employees' personal lives *and* for the busi-

ness. The approach has three major phases: viewing work through the lens of personal life, identifying leverage points for change, and designing and implementing work-practice interventions that meet the dual agenda of productivity benefits to the business and personal benefits to employees.

Viewing Work through the Lens of Personal Life
People tend to see their work and personal lives as separate spheres. While they recognize the conflicts between these spheres, they usually see them as their private responsibility to manage and contain. The purpose of the first phase is to challenge this tendency by making an explicit connection between work

T he first step is to think expansively about how changing particular work practices would help the business and help employees.

and personal life. We accomplish this by asking people to consider the impact of their work and how it is performed on their personal lives. One useful question is "What is it about how work is done in your area that makes it difficult for you to integrate your work and personal life?" The question applies to individuals and to work groups from the lowest to highest levels of the organization.

Starting from the perspective of personal life generates a different kind of response from asking the same question with only a work redesign perspective. Typically, people focus on work practices they personally find unnecessary or inefficient — constant interruptions, rigid and inflexible rules, competitive approaches that lead to duplicated efforts, emergency meetings called late in the day, and so on. In probing deeper, people begin to discuss why they think the work continues to get done this way, despite the inefficiencies. At this point, some of the cultural assumptions that drive the work begin to surface, and people start to talk about how emergencies are glorified and the people who respond to them are seen as heroes, how staying late is a way to show you care about the work, how solving crises is rewarded while preventing

them is not, or how a willingness to sacrifice personal time signals commitment.

As people explore how work interferes with personal life, the strategic benefits of changing these practices become obvious. As the group probes for underlying causes, it becomes apparent that the very same assumptions and work practices that make integrating work and personal life difficult are also a problem in meeting business goals.

People begin to see these issues as systemic. They realize that what they are experiencing — stress, overcommitment, family conflict — is not an individual problem that they can solve by themselves. Instead, they begin to appreciate how the structure of work contributes to those dilemmas. The frustrations they feel at being unable to deal with their own problems now are seen in a different context. People also realize that their issues are not unique; others in the work group or management team experience similar problems. Recognizing that identifiable features of the work contribute to these personal concerns increases the team's commitment to move to the next step and consider the leverage points for change.

Identifying Leverage Points
In the second phase, the group considers ways of changing work practices to meet the dual agenda of improving effectiveness and enhancing the integration of work and personal life. The kinds of connections that a group makes depends on many factors — the type of work the team does; the team's size, composition, and level; and the specific pressures, opportunities, and resource constraints that the team is experiencing. Whatever leverage points the team considers, it is important that the members evaluate them in terms of the dual agenda. If a certain change is made, how will it improve the group's ability to meet a key strategic challenge? How will it enhance the group's ability to integrate work and personal lives?

Identifying leverage points for change is not easy. It requires looking at unexamined practices and assumptions about how work is done, where it is done, when it is done, and who does it. The first step is to think expansively about how changing particular work practices would help the business and help employees. The purpose at this stage is to brainstorm and, for the

moment, not let questions about feasibility overwhelm the discussion. Thinking out of the box on work issues is difficult because we tend to accept that there is no other way to do things. It is important to let ideas flow.

For example, in a purchasing organization, when the members looked at their work through the lens of personal life, they realized that they were operating in a continual state of crisis, leading to extremely long hours and unpredictability. With the business goal to cut costs, delays in getting supplies to the line organization were a big problem. Crises exacerbated the problem. Probing deeper, they began to understand the underlying causes of the crises. They saw that how they worked with suppliers contributed to the very crises that created business and personal life problems. Some of the negative practices included giving bonuses to managers who solved crises and ignoring suppliers who warned about problems because the group feared the suppliers would routinely ask for extensions. New understanding allowed the group to design a process to distinguish among suppliers, detect and respond to

> Some team members may fear they will seem less committed or dependable if they suggest a change that would make it easier to integrate their work and personal life.

early warning signals, and map out a reward system based on the absence of crises.

Considering the possibility that there are other ways of working leads naturally to thinking about experiments. We found some critical factors to think about when designing experiments that will achieve the benefits we've described:

1. The experiments must focus on organizational, not individual, issues. It is not enough to hold the work as a constant and find a way to give certain individuals more time or flexibility to meet current demands. The work itself — and the organizational assumptions driving the way the work gets done — must be the focus.

2. The experiments must meet the dual agenda of business and personal life. It is not enough to find

obvious solutions that favor one over the other. An onsite day care facility might help some people meet work demands. A reduction in head count might meet a cost-cutting goal. But an experiment that meets the dual agenda must move to nonobvious solutions that affect both personal and business goals.

3. The experiments must be connected to the deeper issues they are addressing. It is not enough to say, "Let's reduce the number of meetings," without understanding how norms governing meetings are connected to broader issues such as reward systems, idealized behavior, promotion policies, or other organizational norms.

4. The group needs to define evaluation criteria for both parts of the agenda. If the change is implemented, what business measures should be affected? What personal life issues?

Implementing Work-Practice Interventions

In the third phase, the group tries to implement different ways of working. Invariably, some kinks need to be ironed out as the intervention runs into obstacles. While many interventions can seem simple and straightforward, in fact, they are by definition violating some basic assumptions and taken-for-granted norms. Had they been truly simple, they probably would have been implemented already! While this approach unleashes energy, creativity, and innovation, it can seem risky to those involved. It is important to deal with these risks to protect the intervention and enhance its chances for success.

Some team members may fear they will seem less committed or dependable if they suggest a change that would make it easier to integrate their work and personal life. They may have been unable to discuss problems in this area, so sharing them is difficult. At the same time, managers may fear that any suggested change is likely to incur productivity losses. Therefore, senior management must indicate that it is willing to suspend, if only temporarily, some of the operating procedures that were identified as barriers to the dual agenda.

For example, at one manufacturing site, a work group identified an inflexible operations review procedure as one factor that made it difficult for them to meet business and personal goals. The vice president's willingness to suspend some of the procedure's requirements for the duration of the experiment was

important for many reasons. Not only did it help people see that management was serious about giving them authority to control significant conditions that affected their productivity, but it also helped them realize that change was possible and worth the effort. In addition, it protected the work group manager from bearing all the risks of innovation. In another organization, senior managers, who had previously insisted on unreachable stretch goals to motivate researchers, allowed them to establish and work toward "realistic" targets. At still another site, management agreed to modify some aspects of a short-term productivity measure. Senior management's willingness to create the conditions for success is important to this approach. Without support, even the best ideas that come from the dual agenda are unlikely to succeed.

As the group implements work-practice improvements and the benefits to the business become evident, a company may be tempted to keep the benefits for itself by increasing workloads or reducing head count. For example, one unit proposed realigning work responsibilities between on-site and remote personnel to reduce excessive travel demands on scientists. However, as the proposal moved forward, the company was tempted to increase the number of projects assigned to each scientist, thereby replicating both the business problem (missed opportunities from lack of time for reflection and analysis) and the personal issue (no time for nonwork activities). Only by evaluating the proposed change against the dual criteria did the company reexamine the indiscriminate increase in workload and preserve the dual goals. All experiments are fragile; without tangible benefits to employees and the visible support of key decision makers, they are likely to be only transitory.

Conclusion

The dual agenda makes it possible to increase productivity and effectiveness in the business, while enabling employees to better integrate their work and personal lives. But it is not easy to achieve. Connecting these issues is not the typical response. Faced with the business issues in our examples, most managers would try to reengineer work processes, throw more time at the problem, or reduce the workforce to cut costs. Faced with the personal life issues, most human resource personnel would ask for additional benefits — like bringing in evening meals or giving extra vouchers for child care — to help people cope. But these accommodations might leave both the workplace and families and communities worse off. When firms develop

Only by connecting work and personal lives through a dual agenda can companies reframe the conflict into an opportunity for innovation and change.

family-friendly policies and benefits that leave existing work practices and cultural assumptions about work and good workers intact, the conflict between the demands of the new workplace and the needs of families and communities is exacerbated. Only by connecting work and personal lives through a dual agenda can companies reframe the conflict into an opportunity for innovation and change.

How can an organization determine if it would benefit from a dual agenda approach? First and most obvious is to find out whether people are having difficulty juggling their work and personal lives. Signs of stress and fatigue, complaints about work demands and time, and dissatisfaction with work and family policies may emerge in satisfaction surveys, exit interviews, and off-line retreats. More critical may be the loss of valued employees or the sudden change in the performance of people who seemed to have great potential.

Such indicators may suggest that a company is ready for the dual agenda approach. They may explain why creative ideas are coming only from the top of the organization, or why repeated new initiatives show great promise but then disappoint. If companies' undertake new initiatives to increase productivity, revenues, and general performance without looking at them through the lens of personal life, the very goals of the initiatives may be undermined.

Some typical work practices and assumptions are dysfunctional for both business and personal goals:

more time necessarily leads to greater productivity; time is an unlimited resource; the most committed workers are those who work the longest hours; individual competition and heroics are the best way to get the most out of people. When work is performed in an atmosphere of continual crisis or when the response to problems is to do the same thing, only harder, there are clear opportunities for innovation and change that can meet the criteria of the dual agenda.

Linking personal lives with strategic issues is an unexpected connection. But if we continue to deal with each area separately, in the long run, both individuals and organizations — if not society — will suffer. What we have outlined, however, is not a one-time fix. Rather, it describes a process of continually looking at the intersection of work and personal lives and using the connection as a lever to challenge work practices on an ongoing basis. The solution to one set of issues raises other issues that a company can subject to the same analysis and experimentation. Such an ongoing process results in changed mind-sets and, ultimately, in the culture change that most companies seek but find so difficult to achieve.

This unexpected connection can revitalize your business.◆

References

1. For a full description of the work at this site, see:

L. Perlow, "The Time Famine: An Unintended Consequence of the Way Time Is Used at Work" (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Sloan School of Management, Ph.D. dissertation, 1995).

2. For a full description of this site, see:

R. Johnson, "Where's the Power in Empowerment? Definition, Difference, and Dilemmas of Empowerment in the Context of Work-Family Management" (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School, Ph.D. dissertation, 1994).

3. For a full description of this case, see:

the appendix by S. Eaton and M. Harvey, in "Re-linking Work and Family: A Catalyst for Organizational Change" (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Sloan School of Management, working paper #3892-96, 1996).

Reprint 3841