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## **WORK-LIFE BALANCE, HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN TIMES OF AUSTERITY**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter considers the impact of changes in economic factors on wellbeing and work-life balance [WLB]. As yet, little research has explored any direct effects of austerity measures on WLB, although there is some evidence that work-related stress, mental health problems and work-life conflict have increased over time. This chapter reviews research examining the work-related wellbeing of employees in the UK and other countries. More specifically, it considers how features of the economic downturn, such as the intensification of work, increased job insecurity and concerns about financial hardship, can threaten the wellbeing of employees and their families. The implications of flexible working practices and technological change, which have increased during the financial downturn, for recovery processes, work-life balance and health in times of austerity are also considered. The potential for high levels of work involvement and commitment to exacerbate the negative impact of the financial downturn is explored. Of particular concern is the growing evidence

that some employers and employees are deprioritising work-life balance and wellbeing in response to financial pressure and job insecurity in spite of the potentially serious costs for health, personal relationships and job performance over time. Some evidence-based interventions that have the potential to protect work-life balance and wellbeing during times of austerity are highlighted. Priorities for future research in several areas are identified, but a particular need for longitudinal data to establish a firm link between recession-led changes and organisational policies and practices, positive and negative work-life and wellbeing outcomes is emphasised, together with the need to carefully evaluated targeted interventions.

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The notion that the experience of work, or the lack of it, has a profound impact on the wellbeing of individuals and families is not new (Jahoda, 1982). Nonetheless, features of the most recent economic downturn set it apart from previous recessions, requiring a fresh discussion about austerity, work-life balance and wellbeing. This recession was deeper and longer than any experienced since the second World War; it saw the Gross Domestic Product (GPD) in the UK fall by over 6% and the economy is still recovering from its effects. A range of stringent austerity measures has been implemented in the UK that, at the time of writing, remain ongoing. While the impact of the economic downturn on factors such as organisational performance and consumer spending has been debated extensively (Gregg & Wadsworth, 2010), little focus has been placed on how it has affected individuals who have been asked to do “more with less”? The implications of austerity for the working conditions, wellbeing and work-life balance of individuals and their families are the focal points of this chapter. It focuses predominantly on the position within the UK, but draws on relevant research from other contexts and makes international comparisons where relevant data are available. The chapter considers how features of the economic downturn, such as the

intensification of work, increased job insecurity, financial hardship and non-standard or precarious work arrangements can threaten the wellbeing and work-life balance of employees and their families. The implications of flexible working practices and technological change, which have increased during the financial downturn, for recovery processes, work-life balance and health in times of austerity are also considered. Finally, the importance of line manager support for work-life balance is discussed.

### **Wellbeing in times of austerity**

A number of studies have tracked the work-related wellbeing of employees in the UK and other countries before, during and after the recession. Some conclude that levels of stressors and strains remained stable during this period, while others report a steep decline. The findings of the UK Labour Force Survey (HSE, 2015) suggested that the overall rate of self-reported work-related stress, depression and anxiety had not increased in the previous ten years, but features of work intensification, such as overload, tight deadlines and feelings of pressure, were the work-related stressors that were most commonly reported. Other studies, however, have linked the economic crisis to an increase in psychosocial risk factors within the workplace, as well as rising rates of ill health and absenteeism (Buss, 2009; Shoss & Penney, 2012). Longitudinal research within the National Health Service (data obtained yearly from 2009 to 2014) has observed a steady increase in working hours over this period and rising pressure to work overtime (Powell et al. 2014).

Both the Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS, 2011) (discussed in chapter 2 Stokes) and the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS, 2015) have observed a rapid growth in work intensification over the last ten years or so. More specifically, the Skills and Employment Survey (Felstead et al. 2013) reported that the proportion of UK employees who

strongly agreed that their job required them to work “very hard” had increased substantially between 2004 (32%) and 2012 (45%). Perceptions of rising demand were also highlighted in research conducted by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development over the same period, which were generally attributed to rising workloads and escalating pressure to meet targets (CIPD, 2014). Respondents who were experiencing more pressure at work typically blamed the recession for their deteriorating employment conditions. The study found that satisfaction with sense of achievement and the scope for using initiative had increased over time, but the level of satisfaction with job security had fallen. The implications of job insecurity for work-life balance and wellbeing are discussed later in the chapter.

Large-scale longitudinal surveys of occupational groups, such as civil servants and academics, have documented increased demands and reduced control and rising levels of work-related stress since the start of recession (Houdmont et al. 2012; Kinman & Wray, 2016). Data obtained from more than 3,000 UK workers from different sectors provide further support for the negative effects of recession on wellbeing and the role played by work intensification. Green et al. (2014) found that levels of work-related enthusiasm and contentment remained stable between 2001 and 2006, but declined sharply between 2006 and 2012. Factors related to austerity, such as increased effort, downsizing, job insecurity and accelerated change, made particularly strong contributions to reductions in wellbeing. Analysis of data obtained from 1,000 Americans each day between January 2008 and December 2010 revealed a steep decline in quality of life and positive affect and a substantial increase in worry and stress during this period (Deaton, 2012). Obtaining data on a daily basis from such a large number of individuals must have been onerous for all concerned, but allowed the researcher to capture unfolding hedonic experiences during recession and track responses to specific factors, such as the strength of the stock market.

The research reviewed above suggests that the wellbeing of employees has reduced markedly since the recession and highlights the role of increasing workload and time pressure, Nonetheless, there is some evidence that workers may accommodate challenging working conditions over time. Analysis of data from the Behavioural Risk Factor Surveillance System (that draws on responses from over 800,000 workers across the USA aged 25 to 55) between 2005 and 2011 showed that the association between macro-economic conditions (i.e. the percentage of people employed at the state level) and both health risk behaviours and outcomes had weakened through the recession (Tekin et al. 2013). The importance of interrogating econometric data at an individual as well as an aggregate level was highlighted, as some demographic differences were found. For example, some ethnic minorities were at greater risk of health problems and people who were better educated tended to report poorer mental health, presumably due to the greater opportunity cost of job loss. Analysis of panel data from workforce surveys in the UK, such as the WERS, the Labour Force Survey and the Whitehall Study II, has strong potential to reveal patterns of change (both positive and negative) in psychosocial risk factors and health status and identify priority areas for intervention at the sector and individual level.

### **Work-life balance, boundary management and austerity**

Few studies have focused directly on the implications of recession and austerity measures for work-life outcomes. As much of the available research was conducted during times of economic growth, the extent to which the findings are relevant during times of financial constraints is uncertain. There is, however, some evidence that work-life conflict has increased for some employees. For example, a survey of more than 2,500 UK workers found that the proportion of respondents who reported blurred boundaries between their work and

personal life had risen from 16 percent to 28 percent in the previous 12-month period (ADP, 2014).

When examining the implications of the financial crisis for work-life balance, it is important to consider how the relationships between work and personal life have been conceptualised. Although work can undoubtedly enrich one's personal life, most studies have utilised a conflict paradigm where incompatible pressures are seen to arise from roles in the work and family domains (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Carlson et al. 2009). This approach draws upon resource-drain theory, which maintains that personal resources (such as time and energy) are finite, and fulfilling the demands of one role will deplete those available to meet the demands of other roles (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). In the light of the evidence provided above for the growing intensification of work, a resource-drain perspective seems a particularly appropriate lens through which to explore the implications of austerity for work-life balance and wellbeing more generally.

Conflict between roles within work and personal life can manifest itself in several ways, but time-based conflict (where time spent working reduces the time available to recover from work and to fulfil personal responsibilities) and strain-based conflict (where tiredness or negative emotional states engendered by the job role are transferred into the personal domain) are most commonly examined (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Strong associations have been found between both types of conflict and a range of negative outcomes such as ill health, relationships difficulties and reduced life satisfaction (Byron et al. 2005; Amstad et al. 2011). For several reasons discussed below, there is clear potential for the financial crisis to intensify both time-based and strain-based work-life conflict.

The findings of research conducted with almost 24,000 workers aged between 15 and 60 in 27 European Union countries offers support for the negative impact of work-life conflict on health. It also provides indirect evidence that austerity measures have increased the potential for such conflict (Lunau et al. 2014). In this study, work-life conflict was conceptualised as a lack of 'fit' between working hours and family or social commitments and this variable was correlated with health status. Findings revealed that variations in welfare regimes between countries had strong effects on perceptions of work-life conflict that, in turn, had serious consequences for physical and mental health. Norway and Denmark reported the most favourable balance overall, whereas Spain and Greece (who were hit particularly hard by the financial crisis) had the poorest. The Nordic states are widely recognised for their support for employees with caring roles and their comparatively low levels of work-life conflict (Fernandez-Crehuet et al. 2015). The findings of this study suggest that social democratic regimes may be better equipped to minimise the threat of recession on the personal life of employees, although extent of the recession is also an important factor.

The notion that work and life are different spheres of operation is common across most theoretical paradigms relevant to work life balance (see Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) and underpins the conflict and resource-drain approaches. Nonetheless, the extent to which individuals prefer their work and home roles to be segmented or integrated, and the behaviours they use to manage the boundaries between these roles, varies considerably (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008). Regardless of whether people prefer to differentiate between work and personal life in general, and the degree to which they seek satisfaction from either or both, opportunities for respite and recovery from work are crucial for wellbeing (Kinnunen et al. 2015; Sonnentag et al. 2010). Ruminating about work problems during leisure time is a well-established risk factor for health (Berset et al. 2011; Querstret & Cropley, 2012).

Confirming its relevance as an explanation for reduced wellbeing during times of austerity via strain-based work-life conflict, there is evidence that perseverative cognitions about work tend to be more frequent under conditions of high workload and unjust treatment (Cromptley & Zijlstra, 2011). Moreover, although sharing problems can benefit health, co-rumination (or excessive discussion with others about work concerns) has the potential to impair rather than improve wellbeing by further restricting opportunities for respite and recovery (Boren, 2013; Sensky et al. 2015). Individual and collective rumination about job insecurity and financial pressures may be particularly likely therefore to impact on work-life balance and health and will be discussed further below.

Evidence has been provided that wellbeing and work-life balance have deteriorated since the recession and that intensification of work is likely to have played a key role. The next section considers the implications of other factors such as reduced job security, economic hardship and an increase of non-standard working arrangements for the health and personal life of employees and their families. Their potential to increase time-based and strain-based conflict will also be examined.

### **The impact of job insecurity**

Rising unemployment rates, job insecurity and an increase in non-standard or 'precarious' employment are defining features of an economic downturn. The most recent UK Skills and Employment survey found a higher level of insecurity among both public and private sector employees than any time in the previous twenty years (Felstead et al, 2013). As noted above, research conducted by the CIPD also revealed that satisfaction with job security had decreased considerably over a similar time-scale. In order to gain insight into the impact of



job insecurity on wellbeing and its relevance to the financial crisis, it is crucial to explore the ways in which it is conceptualised. ‘Objective’ insecurity is an inherent feature of temporary work owing to its limited time span (De Witte, 2005), whereas ‘subjective’ insecurity refers to the perceived threat of job loss and encompasses feelings of powerlessness and a lack of control over the continuity of work (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984). Research findings indicate that both objective and subjective job insecurity have risen substantially in line with the economic downturn (Burke, 2013).

Subjective job insecurity is one of the most damaging work stressors (Burchell, 2011). It has been linked with a wide range of negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, burnout, psychosomatic complaints, as well as decreased job commitment and performance (De Witte, 2005; Burgard et al. 2012; Burke, 2013). Fear of job loss can diminish the quality of personal life in several ways. Employees may engage in extra-role behaviour and work longer and more intensely in an attempt to avoid job loss (Brandes et al. 2008), increasing the potential for time-based work-life conflict and reducing recovery opportunities. Furthermore, ruminating excessively about job insecurity and financial concerns is likely to engender strain-based conflict (Greenglass et al, 2013). Recurring and intrusive negative thoughts about work may also lead to social withdrawal, thus limiting the opportunities to gain support from others – an important buffer of the negative effects of work-related stress on wellbeing (O’Driscoll et al. 2006).

Clearly, labour market conditions will influence employees’ reactions to job insecurity, whereas those who are more ‘employable’ are likely to experience fewer adverse effects. It has been argued that people tend to overestimate the power of the economic situation in influencing their working conditions (Houdmont et al. 2012), but the increasingly robust welfare reforms in the UK and other countries are likely to have compounded any pre-existing fears of unemployment (Graham & McQuaid, 2014; Daly & Kelly, 2015). Indeed,

there is evidence that simply hearing about organisations facing financial challenges, or being exposed to media reports of financial crises at the national or global level, can engender job insecurity and anxiety (Rocha et al. 2006; Greenglass et al. 2013).

More research is required from a psychological perspective on the impact of objective and subjective job insecurity during times of austerity in order to inform the development of guidance on how to sustain wellbeing. It has been suggested that incorporating multi-level economic pressures and employees' perceptions of their employability into existing models of work-related stress can provide more insight into the long-term impact of the recession (Giorgi et al. 2015). The job-demands resources model and the conservation of resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Hobfoll, 1989) may be particularly appropriate frameworks through which to examine these effects. The extent to which perceptions of job insecurity persevere when employment rates are subsequently rising should be examined, together with the mechanisms underlying these effects. Future studies should also explore the impact of perceptions of economic threat from different sources, such as co-ruminating with colleagues and family and engaging with media reports, on the wellbeing and personal life of employees and their families.

### **Economic hardship**

Concerns about future financial deprivation (characterised by feelings of job insecurity) can seriously threaten physical and mental health, but the negative effects of actual, rather than anticipated, economic hardship have also been highlighted (Malach-Pines & Zaidman, 2013). One potential mechanism for these effects are maladaptive health behaviours which have clear implications for long-term health (Macy et al. 2013). In terms of recession, EU studies

have found strong links between changes in unemployment levels and health status and mortality rates, including suicide (Stuckler et al. 2011; Evans-Lacko et al. 2013). Although few studies have explored the impact of financial concerns on the work-home interface, there is some evidence that they can engender work-life conflict - especially among men (Schieman & Young, 2011), presumably due to the role expectations and pressures of being a 'good provider' (p. 56). Financial concerns may also be particularly threatening to the wellbeing of carers due to feelings of responsibility for the wellbeing of others. For example, a study of women who worked full-time alongside significant elder care-giving responsibilities found that the association between work interfering with the caring role and distress was strengthened in those who were experiencing more financial strain (Kim & Gordon, 2014).

Economic hardship can not only affect individual employees, but also influence the wellbeing of their family members. This could be explained by the shared environment but, supporting the negative impact of co-rumination discussed above, a study conducted by Afifi et al (2015) found that discussing financial concerns increased biological markers of stress across partners. These effects were particularly pronounced in women who, prior to the stressful conversation with their spouse, felt more financially secure. It should be acknowledged, however, that failing to discuss serious issues with partners that would affect the family unit, such as financial problems and feelings of job insecurity, is likely to have an adverse impact on wellbeing and on the quality of the relationship itself. There is evidence that setting guidelines and boundaries for financial decision making is a key component of a successful relationship (Washburn & Christensen, 2008).

In terms of the impact of financial stress on the family unit, a particularly well-designed study of over 500 Finnish mother-father-child triads found strong associations between economic pressure and mental health and parenting styles (Leinonen et al, 2002). The outcomes were also gender specific: for fathers, financial hardship was associated with anxiety and social dysfunction that, in turn, was linked to hostile marital interactions, low marital support and punitive, non-involved fathering; for mothers, it was related to anxiety leading to more authoritative mothering styles. Instrumental and emotional support from the mother, however, tended to compensate for the negative impact of financial pressure on parenting. Later research with the same triads found that a subsequent reduction in family income further threatened the children's wellbeing via impairments in parental mental health, marital relationships and parenting styles (Solantaus et al. 2004). Cohort studies have strong potential to identify the negative influence of financial hardship on the next generation on outcomes such as achievement orientations, work values and health status over time as well as the factors that intensify and minimise the risks (Das-Munshi et al. 2013; Mortimer et al. 2014; Johnson & Mortimer, 2015).

### **Non-standard work arrangements**

Non-standard or precarious work arrangements, such as temporary contracts and casual (or zero-hours) working, increased substantially in the UK and most other EU countries since the recession (Eurofound, 2015). Fixed-term contracts can be beneficial for organisations by helping them adjust employment levels to fluctuations in demand, whereby staff can be hired during periods of economic growth and laid off during stagnation. Nonetheless, there are disadvantages for employees as temporary jobs tend to be of poorer quality than their permanent equivalents in that they are lower paid and less secure and are typically characterised by higher demands, lower control and fewer training opportunities (Benach &

Muntaner, 2007; Cutuli & Guetto, 2012). There is also evidence that temporary workers are at greater risk of illness and injury than those in permanent jobs, but are more likely to continue to work while sick (Inoue et al. 2011; Wagenaar et al. 2013). Taking sick leave may be considered a sign of weakness under conditions of job insecurity, that make employees more vulnerable to job loss. For this reason, it has been recognised that ‘presenteeism’ may be partially responsible for the decline in sickness absence figures recently observed in the UK (CIPD, 2014b). Nonetheless, ‘presenteeism’ can be considerably more costly for organisations than absenteeism as working while sick can not only delay recovery, but also reduce productivity and increase the risk of sickness absence over the longer term (Kivimaki et al. 2005; Johns, 2011).

While frameworks such as Warr’s Vitamin model (1987) highlight the potential benefits of work for mental health, there is evidence that precarious and poor quality work can be more damaging than no work at all. For example, a study of middle-aged workers conducted by Broom et al (2006) found that unemployed people reported worse health and more general medical practitioner visits than those who were working. Nonetheless, the health status of people in low quality jobs (characterised by insecurity, job strain, and low employability) were typically poorer than those whose jobs involved fewer or no stressors, whereas the health of those in jobs with three or more of these stressors was similar to those who were unemployed. The analysis of seven waves of Australian panel data (>7,000 participants) also found that the health benefits of gaining employment were dependent upon the quality of the job, with the transition from unemployment to poor quality work being more detrimental to mental health than remaining jobless (Butterworth et al. 2011).

Although the negative effects of temporary and poor quality work on the wellbeing of employees have been highlighted, little research has directly explored the implications for work-life balance. As outlined above, the insecurity and financial worries inherent in non-standard working arrangements have clear potential to increase time-based and strain-based conflict. The uncertainty inherent in such work may be particularly challenging for people with caring responsibilities who lack domestic support (Mauno & Ruokolainen, 2015).

Casual workers, in particular, are likely to work highly irregular hours (often across multiple jobs) and are often required to engage in “diverse and complex negotiations and strategies” to balance paid work with their caring responsibilities (Dyer et al. 2011, p. 685). When considering the impact of temporary work on wellbeing and work-life balance, however, it is crucial to acknowledge its heterogeneous nature; salary, holiday entitlement and sick pay, and the extent to which this mode of working is by choice rather than circumstance, will moderate its impact (De Cuyper & de Witte, 2007). The extent to which employees are able to accommodate the demands of their non-working lives when workload and working hours are unpredictable will also be a key factor in determining work-life outcomes.

Flexible working, facilitated by the use of information communication technology (ICT), has increased substantially during the economic downturn. Although having the potential to help employees manage the competing demands of work and personal life more effectively, there is evidence that flexible working practices may not necessarily be beneficial for work-life balance and wellbeing. This issue is explored in the next section.

### **Flexibility and work-life balance in times of recession**

Flexible working is defined as “a way of working that suits an employee's needs: e.g. having flexible start and finish times, or working from home” (GOVUK, 2014). Flexible arrangements are typically categorised under four headings: variable hours (such as flexi-time and zero hours contracts); restructured hours (such as job sharing); reduced hours (such as working part-time); and leave options (to fulfil caring responsibilities or take career breaks). While the majority of industrialised countries have legislation to facilitate working time adjustments, many restrict these opportunities to workers with caring responsibilities (Hegewisch, 2009). From 2014, all UK employees who had worked for their employer for at least 26 weeks became eligible to request flexible working. Employers are required to consider such requests, but can refuse them if there are valid business reasons to do so.

The extension of the right to request flexible working arrangements is predicated on the notion that flexibility has wide-ranging benefits for employers and employees, such as more successful adaptation to volatile market conditions and the ability to attract a wider talent pool, together with enhanced productivity, reduced absenteeism and lower turnover of employees (Reilly, 1998; Kalleberg, 2001; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Employees’ attitudes towards flexible working are also typically positive (ADP, 2014; CIPD, 2014a). Indeed, a survey conducted before the UK Government extended the right to request flexible working from parents of young children to all employees in 2014 reported that approximately half of the sample intended to take this up given the opportunity, and around one-third believed that their productivity and work-life balance would improve if they worked flexibly (CIPD, 2012). Some reviews of the literature highlight some benefits of workplace flexibility on work-life integration (Hill et al., 2010). Nonetheless, despite these positive views, a robust systematic review shows that the benefits of flexibility are modest, and only apparent if employees have control over flexible work options (Joyce et al., 2010). Another systematic

review of 148 published studies also found no clear business case for flexibility (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). The papers reviewed considered relationships between different flexible arrangements (e.g. schedule, remote working and reduced hours), organisational outcomes (e.g. financial performance, productivity, absence and employee turnover), individual performance outcomes (e.g. productivity and ratings of work quality) and attitudinal, health and wellbeing outcomes (e.g. stress, role conflict, job satisfaction and commitment). The findings differed according to flexibility type and many contradictions emerged: for example, individual studies found positive, negative and non-significant relationships between flexible working and outcomes such as job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation. Moreover, evidence emerged that employees' perceptions of improved productivity due to flexible working were not necessarily shared by their managers.

The findings of other studies suggest that some types of flexibility have the potential to intensify rather than reduce stress and enhance rather than decrease work-life conflict (Ashford et al. 2000; Kelliher & Anderson, 2008; Glavin & Schieman, 2011). Remote working, for example, may reduce organisational costs and remove the stress of commuting, but can increase the risk of social isolation, role stress and family-to-work conflict (Golden et al. 2006). A study of 24,436 workers in 75 countries conducted by Hill and colleagues (2010) found evidence that flexible workers may actually work longer hours, highlighting an increased risk of time-based conflict. Moreover, analysis of data from the US based National Survey of the Changing Workforce indicated that employees with more schedule control tended to bring work home more frequently and perceive more, rather than less, conflict between their work and home roles (Schieman & Glavin, 2008). These findings support those of studies suggesting that a combination of high work demands and schedule flexibility can lead to enabled intensification, where employees use flexibility to work longer and harder



rather than to facilitate adequate recovery and improve their work-life balance (Kelliher & Anderson, 2008).

Due to the extension to the right to request flexible working mentioned above, the relevance of research that has examined the utilisation and impact of flexible working initiatives prior to 2014 is questionable under current conditions. A systematic evaluation of the implications of the extended right to request flexible working for individuals and organisations is therefore urgently required. Managers' attitudes and practices will be crucial in influencing the uptake and effectiveness of flexible options and commitment to ensuring their success is required (Cooper & Baird, 2015). As discussed in Chapter 2 (Stokes), the finding that the proportion of managers who believe that work-life balance is a 'private' concern has grown significantly since 2004 (WERS, 2014) is therefore a potential cause for concern. Such views were also expressed in an interview study of HR managers in UK public sector (Lewis et al. in press; also see chapter 4 Lyonette et al.) and may reflect perceptions that their organisation already provides sufficient work-life balance opportunities. Alternatively, they may highlight a tendency to allow business needs to take precedence over initiatives to improve employees' experiences of work during times of financial constraint. These issues are considered further later in the chapter.

Organisations and individuals appear to have very high expectations of flexibility in improving wellbeing and ensuring organisational success. Nonetheless, mere access to flexible working arrangements is not in itself a panacea; its effectiveness depends upon the type of flexibility offered and the extent to which uptake is encouraged and supported, as well as other factors such as work and family role centrality and boundary management

preferences (Kossek et al. 2005; Schieman & Glavin, 2008). There is evidence that organisations are increasingly ‘imposing’ remote working, as a way of managing financial pressures rather than an initiative to improve work-life balance (Lewis et al. in press; also see chapter 4 Lyonette et al). It should also be recognised that not all employees may wish to work flexibly: indeed, some may prefer the more predictable working patterns that are typically present in blue-collar working environments (Poppleton et al. 2008). Introducing flexible working without providing choice or without a careful consideration of its appropriateness and potential effectiveness is likely to be costly, especially during times of financial constraints.

A wide range of work-life balance initiatives is available but, although the right to request flexible working has been extended, there is evidence that the economic downturn has constrained the development of further initiatives requiring financial investment (Lewis et al. in press). Nonetheless, barriers to taking up the work-life balance initiatives that are available have been identified. Employees may be reluctant to request flexible working or to take their full entitlement due to concerns about job insecurity and future advancement in the organisation – worries that may be compounded during times of financial constraints. Research findings demonstrate that flexible working may be equally stigmatised by employers and employees and by younger as well as older workers. A longitudinal study of seven companies conducted by Kelliher and Anderson (2008) found that flexible workers were generally considered less motivated and less worthy of promotion than those who had fixed hours of work.

Despite widespread attempts to highlight its benefits to all workers, flexible working is still typically viewed as the “mommy track” and the “essence” of responsible fatherhood continues to be full employment (Norman et al. 2014). There is evidence that men who wish to work

flexibly are subject to particularly negative perceptions. A scenario-based study conducted by Rudman and Mescher (2013) found that hypothetical male employees who requested family leave were believed to possess more of the weak, “feminine” qualities (such as uncertainty) and fewer agentic “masculine” traits (such as dominance and ambition). Perceptions of weakness in these men were directly related to the extent to which participants considered they should be rewarded (e.g. recommended for promotion) or penalised (e.g. given a salary reduction, or fewer responsibilities at work). Interestingly, female participants were just as likely as males to stigmatise men who requested family leave, but women tended to express stronger views that such men were “poor workers”. While participants in this study were young adults who may not have had much work experience, other research findings highlight the potential career penalties for requests for flexible working for caring purposes. For example, Leslie et al. (2012) found flexible work requests were viewed favourably if they were made for business reasons, but seen as synonymous with poor performance if made for family reasons.

### **ICT use and organisational support**

Two key issues require further consideration in the debate on flexible working during austerity. These are (a) the role of technology and (b) the importance of direct supervisory support. The deployment of information communication technology (ICT) has considerable advantages for business during a financial downturn by offering greater flexibility in the location and modality of work. The potential for ICTs to help employees manage the demands of multiple roles is also recognised (Gozu et al. 2015). Nonetheless, technological acceleration has been a key driver of work intensification (Demerouti et al. 2014) which, as discussed above, can threaten wellbeing and work-life balance. ICT use can enhance time-based conflict by enabling employees to work longer hours and increasing employers’ expectations of their availability (Major & Germano, 2006; Towers et al. 2006). The

‘switching costs’ of multi-tasking (Spink et al. 2008) will also extend the time required to complete work tasks with strong potential to extend working hours. Mobile technologies can also increase strain-based conflict by making the work role more psychologically salient outside contracted working hours, allowing emotional reactions to work to spill over to personal life (Park et al, 2011). Habitual use of ICT for work purposes “out of hours” can engender resentment in family members and feelings of guilt in employees (Middleton, 2008). The increasing evidence that a high level of engagement with ICT can increase the occurrence of cognitive failures (Hadlington, 2015), also raises concerns for job performance.

Research exploring the relationship between technology use and work-life outcomes is still in its infancy. ICTs have strong potential to improve work-life balance, but it is crucial to provide organisations and individuals with evidence-based guidance on how it can be used in a healthy and sustainable manner. Such information is vital under current working conditions where financial constraints, work intensification, and expectations to demonstrate high commitment may encourage employees to increase their availability for work. The finding that employees commonly engage with technology for work purposes autonomously, rather than in response to external demands, poses a further challenge for interventions (Schlachter et al. 2016). There is evidence that the use of different devices can strengthen boundaries between work and personal life, but the implications for wellbeing are as yet unclear (Fleck et al, 2014). Moreover, the use of ICTs for leisure purposes, such as digital gaming, may help employees detach themselves from work concerns quickly and effectively (Collins & Cox, 2014). It should be emphasised, however, that individual differences, such as preference for separation or integration between work and home roles and segmentation norms within organisations and families, appear to be crucial in determining the impact of ICT use on work-life outcomes (Park et al. 2011). This suggests that interventions to manage ICT use

should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate individuals' preferences and practices. Line managers have some responsibility for providing their employees with evidence-based guidance to help them engage with ICT in a healthy and effective way.

### **Support for work-life balance during austerity**

The important role played by managers in protecting the wellbeing and work-life balance of staff has long been highlighted. Supervisors can be a powerful source of support for people with caring responsibilities: indeed, they are the 'linking pins' between formal work-life balance policies and how these are enacted. Research conducted by Hammer and colleagues (2007) identified several supportive line manager behaviours, such as emotional support (learning about personal work-life balance needs and listening to problems); instrumental support (helping employees avoid work-to-home conflict and vice versa); role modelling (demonstrating effective personal work-life balance behaviours) and creative work-life balance management (using innovative options to reduce work-life conflict). Supervisor behaviours that are 'work-life balance specific' can have wide-ranging benefits for the personal life of employees (Kossek et al. 2011). This is in line with other robust research outlining the crucial role played by line managers in preventing work-related stress (Donaldson-Feilder et al. 2011).

Although their role is crucial, research that explores the nature and impact of supportive supervisor behaviours during austerity is extremely limited. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that support for work-life balance from line managers may be particularly beneficial when employees are experiencing economic strain (Lauzun et al. 2012). However, as discussed above, there is also evidence that UK managers are increasingly viewing work-life balance as an individual responsibility. The factors that underpin such attitudes should be explored, together with their implications for the success of work-life balance initiatives that operate

under challenging financial conditions. Whether the negative views of managers compound the existing stigmatisation of the uptake of work-life balance initiatives should also be considered. Supportive manager behaviours cannot work in isolation, however, and should be firmly embedded within an organisational culture where all employees are helped to achieve an effective work-life balance and the benefits for all stakeholders are recognised.

While there is little doubt that organisations need to offer adequate support, employees also have responsibility for maintaining a healthy balance between their work and their personal lives. Initiatives that emphasise a dual responsibility for work-life balance are likely to be more effective than those that place the onus on the individual employee or the organisation (Kossek et al. 2011; see also chapter \*: Kim et al ). For example, Kim et al. discuss action research which involves collaboration between workers, managers and researchers and can engender interventions that support individual workers as well as workplace effectiveness. Competency frameworks, that identify the behaviours of employees and employers that are helpful in managing work-life balance in different occupational contexts, can also be particularly helpful in raising awareness and informing interventions (Kinman & Grant, 2014; McDowall & Lindsay, 2014). The emphasis on facilitating behaviours that help employees manage the interface between work and personal life are likely to be more cost effective than those that require structural change or other major investment (see also Donaldson-Feilder et al. 2011).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that the link between financial constraints, the work-home interface and wellbeing is complex. Job insecurity may encourage employers and employees to ‘trade’ work-life balance for organisational success and continued employment over the

short term, without recognising the potentially serious consequences for health, personal relationships and job performance over the longer term. Although there is firm evidence to the contrary, employers and employees still consider long working hours to be a fundamental requirement for career success, but the detrimental effects on work-life balance are acknowledged (Burke & Cooper, 2008). Nonetheless, it should be recognised that the risks to wellbeing during austerity are likely to stem as much from work intensification as long working hours – with serious risks for recovery and work-life balance. The role played by technology in enabling intensification as well as facilitating flexibility is also evident. Evidence has been provided that organisations may see flexible working as a panacea for work-life balance and wellbeing but, to be effective, employees need choice and control over their working patterns. How the stigmatisation of alternative ways of working, especially for caring purposes, can impact on the uptake of flexible initiatives and the evident carer risks should be recognised and steps taken to increase their acceptability. Supervisor support is another crucial consideration as this can buffer detrimental health outcomes, but is more effective when targeted specifically at work-life balance issues and where employees are encouraged to share this responsibility.

More research is clearly needed to examine the long-term impact of the recession and its legacy on the wellbeing and work-life balance of employees. Although some insight has been gained, studies have focused predominantly on the implications of austerity measures on business outcomes rather than individuals. It seems crucial to identify the features of organisation and employees that help them manage the financial downturn more effectively and those that place them at greater risk. As these factors are likely to be context specific, “one-size fits all” interventions are unlikely to be effective. There is a need to develop more creative and inclusive initiatives to improve work-life outcomes, bearing in mind the key role of control and choice in determining their effectiveness. Focus should also be placed on how

organisations and employees can work together to craft and develop a work-life balance that suits their own preferences and their family's needs, while at the same time benefiting organizations.

Finally, this chapter draws upon research conducted in different national contexts. The extent to which the findings of research conducted in one country or region can be validly applied to another should be carefully considered, as experiences of recession and its aftermath will differ according to labour market conditions, employment practices and culture. It is clear, however, that macro-economic factors influence health and wellbeing and work-life balance. Future organisational practice and policy therefore needs to be guided by more robust evidence-based national and international policy directives.

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