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Stephen Dowse
University of Technology Sydney

Jim Underwood
University of Technology Sydney, jim@it.uts.edu.au

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Work Life Balance of IT Managers: Finding Time for a Life

Stephen Dowse and Jim Underwood

Department of Information Systems
University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia
jim@it.uts.edu.au

Abstract

As the IT ship continues its odyssey, we spend a moment to consider the condition of the crew. We interviewed eleven IT managers concerning their working hours, the effects of these hours on their families and their health, and how they dealt with problems of work life balance. These managers are working harder than is healthy, and are aware of the consequent problems, but a combination of industry attitudes, personal ambition and practical difficulties of arranging time off means that they mostly deal with their problems through stress alleviation techniques rather than attempting to bring their life back into balance.

Keywords

IS Culture, Work Life Balance

INTRODUCTION

Increasing work hours and the affects of this on health and family life is becoming a major concern in society, and in the IT industry. The purpose of our study was to gain some insight into the work lives of IT managers, how they feel about work life balance, and what options are available to redress any perceived imbalance. The study is based on in depth interviews with a number of middle level IT managers.

PREVIOUS STUDIES OF WORK LIFE BALANCE

What is work life balance?

The term work life balance refers to how an individual manages their time across the demands of life. The demands that we all need and indeed have to balance in our lives include work, family, leisure, friends, community and personal commitments.

Work life balance is important because an unbalanced life can cause serious and undesired life events such as marriage breakdowns and ill health. The problem has become more critical in recent years as the world has become more competitive and people have responded to competition by working longer and harder to achieve their career and or life goals. Tabakoff (1999) cites a study undertaken by Sheehan and Dunlop that analysed Australian Bureau of Statistics data comparing hours worked in the nineteen-seventies with those worked in the eighties and nineties. The results of this study showed a major increase to people working forty-five hours or more a week.

Effects of Work Life Imbalance

If people allow themselves to slip into a life where work dominates their time and therefore their life there may be serious consequences. Marriages can dissolve if or when a spouse feels less important than work; children can grow up without a parent, resulting in alienation of child and/or parent. Way (1999) discusses Peter Ritchie, the man who brought McDonald's to Australia, who is suffering a badly damaged relationship with his son as a result of his work-dominated life. Vincola (1998) reports that 75% of one thousand workers surveyed ranked the ability to make money lower than spending time with family while Russell and Bowman (1999) report that sixty-eight per cent of fathers felt they did not spend enough time with their children. Way (1999) also acknowledges the need for understanding from spouse, partner and family to allow long working hours and a family life to co-exist. Research cited by Wolcott (1996) uncovers that working long and inflexible hours are the most frequently cited reasons behind difficulties managing family and work. Russell and Bowman (1999) state that working unsociable hours can have an impact on intimate relationships and increases the probability of divorce.

Imbalance can also cause a worker stress in their life. Research cited by Jones (1999) suggests that people working long hours risk poor judgement, bad communication and irritability. According to *Management Services* (1999) 71% of executives say working long hours is damaging their health. Information available from Health-

Center.com (2001) suggests stress can have detrimental affects on the cardio-vascular system and weaken the immune system. Stress is also associated with anxiety and depression, and can lead to burnout, defined by Freudenberger as "a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by a devotion to a cause, a way of life, or a relationship that failed to produce the expected reward" (quoted in Burnout.html, 2001). Burnout is similarly defined by Tabakoff (1999) as a "progressive state of mental and physical exhaustion brought about by unrelieved work stress" and Bermann (1999) points out that a company's productivity will suffer unless people can have balance in their lives and can recognize the signs of burnout.

Contributors to Imbalance

In the IT industry in particular work pressures arise from continually changing technology, and from work roles which are both ambiguous and broad, requiring high levels of both technical and social skills (Fuchs, 2001).

Cultural issues can be problematic for those who want to balance their lives. Petre (1998), Milne (1999), Flynn (1997) and others discuss the cultural problem of people being labelled soft or uncommitted or described as having "lost it" if they take advantage of workplace arrangements designed to empower people and allow them to better balance their lives. Russell and Bowman (1999) also suggest men are reluctant to access work family benefits fearing use of any such option may be seen as having a lack of commitment. People who are driven to succeed believe that working hard and for long hours will help them to achieve their goals. Way (1999) identifies competition in the workforce as a driver for people to sacrifice the idea of balancing their lives.

Techniques to Redress Imbalance

Vincola and Farren (1998) suggest that companies that form career partnerships and promote work life balance with their employees can improve job satisfaction. Productivity gains realised from developing a work life balance strategy can improve a company's bottom line. Flynn (1997) reports that the First Tennessee Bank realised a profit gain over two years of USD 106 million through the introduction of a work life strategy. The bank's customers had identified a failure in bank service directly related to staff turnover, as customers did not like constantly seeing new faces behind the counter. The bank developed and implemented a work life balance strategy designed to address the issues identified by staff, primarily lack of work place flexibility, resulting in higher staff and customer retention rates. The bank now has a customer retention rate of 96% compared to an industry average of 87%.

McDougall (1999) reports that employer introduction of programs that focus on employee well being such as stress management, time management, childcare and counselling services can reduce stress levels and absenteeism, and that having a supervisor who is sensitive to personal and family needs raises job satisfaction levels. Flynn (1997) also found that supervisors considered supportive of work life balance by their subordinates retain employees twice as long as average. *Employee Plan Review* (1998) also states the support of supervisors is an important factor of employees' acceptance and use of work family benefits.

According to Hill et al (1998) telecommuters at IBM were perceived to have greater productivity, higher morale, increased flexibility and longer working hours, but the influence on work life balance was equivocal. The ability to telecommute has the potential to blur the boundary between work place and home, and may actually have a negative affect on an individual's work life balance due to an inability to disengage from work. Vincola and Farren (1999) report that the secret to making virtual offices, flextime policies and other work life initiatives effective and productive is managing performance in relation to pre-established goals. Hill et al (1998) identify productivity measures as vital in ensuring that flexible work options such as telecommuting are used productively.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 11 middle level IT managers. McCracken (1988) discusses how interviews can draw on the past as well as the present to extract a deeper understanding of an issue than a simple survey type inquiry. Erlandson (1993) states that the use of semi-structured interviews allows the investigator to ask respondents for facts as well as gathering opinions.

Our subjects were solicited through an email sent to students of an IT management graduate course at the University of Technology, Sydney. This is a part-time course where all students have considerable experience in the IT industry. Of the 18 volunteers, 11 interviewees were chosen on the basis of availability, suitable employment and gender balance. Erlandson (1993) suggests that this technique of "purposive sampling" is preferred to random or representative sampling because the major concern of the researcher is to maximise discovery of the problem and the heterogenous patterns that occur within the context of the particular study. Semi-structured interviews conducted at the interviewer's office lasted about 40 minutes. The interviews were

based on a prepared list of issues derived from existing literature. These issues included: working hours, health, family life, social activities, industry expectations, flexible work practices and telecommuting. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Follow up phone calls were made to six respondents where clarification or further investigation was required.

RESULTS

Details of the interview subjects are shown in the following table:

Subject	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Children	Week Hours Worked	Industry
A	F	30	Single	0	50	Financial services
B	M	46	Married	3	50	Manufacturing
C	M	33	Married	0	50	Pharmaceutical
D	M	40	Married	2	50	Telecommunications
E	F	37	Single	0	45-50	IT
F	F	50	Married	3	40	Public Broadcasting
G	F	38	Single	0	50-60	Financial services
H	M	40	Married	2	50	Non-Profit
I	F	38	De Facto	0	60	Law
J	M	44	Married	0	60-80	Financial services
K	M	32	Married	2	40-45	Food and Beverage

Table 1 – Subject Details

Working Hours

The average working week of the subjects (not counting weekend work) was between fifty and fifty-three hours per week. There were, however, often "non-average" weeks. Subject A supplemented her statement, explaining "there was a period of time where I was hitting easy seventy hours a week over an extended period of time". Subject B also added "In the last three weeks ... we've been starting about seven and finishing about ten". This was preceded by the observation that "the nature of IT is that one week you could do the standard thirty-five hours week and the next you could do an eighty hour week". On top of these long working hours and high peaks, weekend work is a regular occurrence for all but one of the respondents. In some cases every second weekend is occupied with some amount of work; for others weekend work is only required perhaps once every three months. The length of time spent at work on these weekends was usually half to one day.

Impact of Work Hours

In a household where two parents are working there does not seem to be enough time to work, take care of the house and take care of children. The subjects of this study had a number of methods to deal with family issues.

Subject B and his wife reached the decision to take the wife out of the workforce to tend to family and household matters. The reason given was "we were no longer able to juggle uni, my work and her work". This was a conscious decision designed to help the family unit balance their lives. The second income was sacrificed for the overall benefit of the family. Subject D's wife works part time, two nights a week and all day Saturday. On the two weekdays his wife works the subjects leaves work early to pick up the children from school. He spends the evening on those two nights taking care of the children as he does all day Saturday. Sunday is family day, which the family spends together. Weekend work, while occasionally required, was not generally acceptable in this case.

In one case the relationship with the spouse had required adjustment early in the marriage and in fact, the subject could not remember how it was the relationship had been affected but was sure the relationship had changed as a result. "He works and he works long hours and so we sorted that out, how we handle that, many years ago. So in this sense there's been impact in that we've had to adapt our relationship"

Subject H had the fortune to work within five minutes from the family home and actually went home to have lunch with his wife, who does not work, each day. In this case working fifty hours a week had little impact on the spousal relationship. Proximity to the family home was extremely valuable not only in the sense of saving on travel costs and time but also in the sense of being able to keep one's family life well balanced.

Subject E identified her extended family as a support system. She reported that while on assignment overseas and without the family for an extended period that included long hours dealing with demanding clients her health suffered. "... my family is a huge support system; as soon as I was out of that and working very long hours with incredibly demanding clients I got sick a number of times ...".

Working long hours has an impact on the parent-child relationship. Subject K's response when asked what impact long working hours had on the relationship with his children was "... the way she responds to me is directly proportional to the amount of time I spend with her". Subject B felt that the age of the child had a bearing on how long hours were perceived. He felt that younger children would not understand that a parent might have to be away in order to provide for the family. On the other hand he felt working hard was a good example for his oldest child, an eleven year old boy, illustrating that things do not come for free and that to satisfy wants and needs you have to work for them.

Whether or not children were involved, long working hours affected relationships if remedial steps were not taken. A regular theme was that partners felt resentful and irritated by long hours, but tolerance from partners was the commonly reported requirement. Subject I felt that partners could "become resentful" because of long working hours. On one occasion she had worked through the night. Upon arriving at home the following morning her partner asked accusingly where had she been all night. Subject E also suggested that a past partner had become irritated with the amount of time spent at work. In one case working long hours was cited as a reason for not having enough time for a relationship. When asked about the impact hours had on relationships, Subject A told how her working hours made establishing new relationships difficult, "Ah, I don't have time for you. I don't think I can put as much into this relationship as you are, so let's not worry about it". This may be, as suggested by the subject, an excuse for not getting involved in a relationship.

As the literature showed, long working hours and stressful conditions can lead to health complications. Subject I felt that work frustrations led to her experiencing anxiety problems. The subject's anxiety levels are at a point where medication is required on a daily basis and as a result she was seriously questioning whether it was worthwhile to continue working in the IT industry. Subject D also reported having suffered from anxiety attacks in a previous position, one of which resulted in a collapse at work. Since then he has monitored his anxiety and stress levels and when he feels the need takes action and goes for a surf to relax. Subject E uses walking as a life balancing exercise. When working in London recently she found that, because it was not as pleasant an environment as Sydney, she did not walk each day. Missing this regular exercise had an adverse affect on her demeanour. "I walk every day and if I don't I get really stressy because of the hours".

Two subjects highlighted weight gain as a health concern citing non-activity on the job and a lack of exercise due to time constraints as reasons. Subject B also highlighted the value of the family as a support where health is concerned. "I'm getting fat. I think you, especially in IT, although you are quite mentally active it's a reasonable sedentary job so your waistline suffers for that. You end up eating a lot of junk food and you get on that mill. So I have no doubt that long term it would have an effect on my health if it wasn't for things like my wife getting on my back and saying 'You're getting a bit fat you need to go on a diet'. If I was just by myself I reckon I'd be 20 stone." Subject A reported suffering from skin blemishes as a result of an extended period of long hours during an organisational change. In this case she could not get an answer from medical practitioners as to the cause of the rash, and in an effort to relax during this period undertook yoga classes and made use of floatation tanks. This effort helped clear the mind and after a period of time the rash went away. The rash still appears during times of over work and stress and is now used as a warning signal for the subject that relaxation is required.

Culture of the IT Industry

It is apparent that the general attitude of the IT industry is that if you work in the industry you will have to work long and unsociable hours. There was not one person interviewed that thought otherwise. Some did not think they were working particularly long or unsociable hours; however all of the subjects interviewed confirmed the expectations of the IT industry. When asked how the IT industry looks upon long and unsociable hours the majority of responses were similar to "I think it's a given and expected in the industry" (Subject A). The responses, and Table 1, show that the hours expected of IT workers are similar irrespective of the core business of the employer.

What makes IT managers accept such working hours? No doubt financial reward is one motivator. As Subject I put it "I make a fairly good living so that enables us to live a fairly good lifestyle". The lifestyle being referred to was a mortgage on a nice house in a fashionable area. Subject B also thought the hours worked were justified by

the financial rewards: "if you want the money you've gotta put in the hours". Subject F put it a little more bluntly; "We're all greedy, we're all material, we all want those things".

Another motivation is that these managers actually enjoy their jobs. Subject K states that satisfaction for him comes from "achieving and delivering useful things to the business"; subject J derives job satisfaction from leading "talented teams to deliver solutions", which are appreciated by the business users, being involved in business deals and having an influence on the business. Subject A said the most pleasing thing about previous and current roles was the end results, specifically, managing a project from beginning to completion, then being able to say it is finished. Others derived their job satisfaction from the technology they work with and the opportunities that changes in technology bring. Subject D loves learning and playing with computers but the main driver is the look of his resume. As he learns more skills then his resume becomes more impressive. This resume building was this subject's career security made necessary by a perceived lack of c security in the industry.

Feedback from the business is another way IT Managers get job satisfaction. Sometimes feedback comes in the form of no news is good news which is fairly typical for those people working in IT. As subject A says: "... if the business doesn't know anything went on after hours or on the weekend then you have done your job." Perhaps the main reason IT Managers have to work long unsociable hours and weekends is because the businesses they work for are reliant on the computer systems under their control. Subject B, working for a manufacturing company says, "If it was say our PRP system, if its down they can't work." Subject D, working for a telecommunications company, says "you just work until the damn thing is fixed", suggesting managerial involvement in crisis situations that have potential to impact business continuity.

Attitudes to Telecommuting

The literature reveals differing attitudes to the impact of home-based technology that allows access to workplace systems. Technology at home can be considered invasive with the capacity to blur the boundary between home and the work place; on the other hand, home-based technology is seen as an invaluable tool in the battle to balance work and home life. The subjects' answers were similarly split into four different groups. Three found the technology intrusive, three did not accept the technology, for three technology was not an issue and only two found the technology actually helpful.

In the first group subject A had, since changing employer approximately two years ago, resisted the offer of remote access as a result of the invasive nature of previously having the home-based technology. "I seemed to always be working no matter where I was" Subject I reported similar and quite shocking problems with home access to systems. In this case she could take over a desktop PC in the office from home and attend to users problems. The subject was entertaining guests at home and interrupted cooking the meal for her guests to attend to a desktop support call she received using the dial-in access. When pressed on why the call for help had not been denied due to the situation at home the answer was that it didn't matter because clients were waiting and it simply had to be fixed. Subject J spends fifteen to twenty hours per week dialled in to office computer resources. When asked how the subject's spouse looked upon this he answered by saying it was tolerated.

The second group refused to use such technology, because home was not the office and the office was not welcome there. Subject G said it best, "You want to have a little haven to come home to."

The third group did not think that having technology that gave them system access at home had any impact on their life, mainly because they did not to use it very often. They did see the potential impact this kind of technology could have if over used.

In the last group subject B saw the technology as something he could use for either personal internet access or company business. He saw the situation as one of give and take and felt that overall it balanced out. Subject K actually used the technology to actively balance his family life. Having dial-in technology at home removes the requirement to be in the office to work, allowing him to leave the office during the day to attend to family matters. Once the family business at hand has been dealt with the he can dial in and finish any work remaining for the day from home.

Taking Time Off

IT Managers all made use of time in lieu to compensate their staff for weekends and extra hours worked. Some managers gave time in lieu on a one hour worked one hour off basis. Others were more frugal with giving time back to their staff where the ratio was most definitely not one to one. For example, subject G said "It's one for one and essentially if they have worked a whole Saturday they get a day in lieu but it's not like cumulative hours", one week day in return for a full days weekend work. For subject D "it's not a one for one; they might work two late nights and have one day off or an afternoon off or something like that." Other subjects run more

relaxed time in lieu policies that rely on flexibility with time when the workload is "slack", and not recording days taken off as official leave.

On the other hand the IT Managers do not make use of flexible work options such as time in lieu for themselves. There is a sense of responsibility that prohibits the individuals from taking advantage of the options available to them. For example subject H generally "just wears" the personal cost of giving up his time when working weekends, citing the responsibility of his position as a reason for this behaviour. Similarly, subject E feels those in management positions should accept that there is a need for extra hours although she has used time in lieu on occasion - "... if you're about to collapse then perhaps you should take a day or two off." Subject I thought an example could be set for her staff by working harder than they do. She also felt that there was a risk that her workload could be worse if she spent time away from the office. Subject C said that a manager on a package owed it to their employer not to take days in lieu. Similarly, Subject D said "As a manager there's no such thing as time in lieu". However, the most common reason given for the difference was that the managers got paid more than the juniors and therefore should be working harder. Only one of the subjects, subject J felt that any use or request for time in lieu on their behalf could be potentially damaging in the eyes of senior management. He felt that while his manager would grant permission, a request for time in lieu would be poorly received.

Annual leave is highly valued by the managers, but again work pressure prevents this break from being fully utilised. Holidays are used by some IT Managers as "sanity checks" if and when workload drops off into a trough. Subject G was aware of the need to take some time off work to relax and unwind and stated that she would be taking holidays during a quiet period. Subjects A and E also referred to the need to take holidays as sanity checks and reported that workload often impinged on their ability to take time off. Subject J reported having had only two weeks holiday in three years as a result of work pressures and subject I reported having to cancel recent planned holidays for the same reason. The importance of holidays is magnified for those with children because as subject H said "... holidays would be a time where I got to know my kids again".

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Our research was designed to develop an understanding from a group of IT managers of their work life balance. Our results are based on a small sample but indicate a strong pattern. IT Managers do have problems balancing their work and their personal lives. The IT industry and the role IT plays in business places excessive demands on personal time. After hours and weekend work is expected within the industry and although people are remunerated accordingly their work life balance suffers in the name of professional service. Barriers to addressing this problem are the belief that excessive hours are just an inevitable part of IT culture and the feeling among IT managers that their "privileged" position precludes them from taking measures to control their own work hours. Problems with family life and health were experienced by most of the interviewees.

While IT managers are aware of the problems caused by excessive work, and many companies officially provide some support and practise flexible working policies, most of the IT managers interviewed in fact found it extremely difficult to take even their minimum leave allowances. This may be due as much to attitudes of the managers themselves as to expectations of their superiors and clients. It would be worth conducting further research to see whether others see IT managers to be as indispensable as they see themselves, and whether in fact some managers work long hours because their work is the most interesting part of their lives.

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