

Professional Growth vs. Personal Life Focus: Evolving Perspectives on Work-Life Harmony and How Organisations Can Embrace the Empowered Workplace

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Introduction

Harmony between work and personal life is both achievable and an enriching growth endeavour. When a career dominates life choices, the focus quality of personal life may suffer. Conversely, when personal commitments arise, compromises are often made regarding professional growth. We argue that there is value for organisations in harmonising the benefits of both work and life, which can be expanded by empowered choices for employees in programming their work-life balance during their careers. In this article, we explore the perspectives of career-focused employees over the long term as they navigate personal milestones at various stages of life. Further, we suggest that empowered choice workplaces possess a competitive advantage. Organisations applying strategic thinking and meaningful action to facilitate such opportunities will enjoy improved retention and engagement as they redefine enterprise growth as a source of human flourishing. The concept of human flourishing as a holistic evolution of work-life balance is increasingly relevant in the post-COVID workplace for organisations and professionals striving for improved overall wellbeing and career satisfaction.

Legacy Attitudes vs. Modern Grindset

The traditional view of career and personal life choices assumes that the pursuit of both a rewarding career and a rich personal life is a zero-sum game. If the career wins, the personal life loses, and vice versa: two goals seemingly at odds with each other in a [Sisyphian](#) struggle. The ancient Greek myth describes the protagonist as being doomed for eternity to roll a heavy boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down repeatedly. Achieving true work-life balance is similarly difficult due to myriad individual variables and the fact that circumstances evolve over the course of an individual's life. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, making it difficult for organisations to facilitate work-life balance at scale sustainably. Given that this is a complex task for both the organisation and the individual, we argue that sustainable work-life balance can only be achieved when both stakeholders work in harmony. The idea that fulfilling work and personal lives are mutually exclusive objectives should be left in antiquity (with Sisyphus). Instead, we suggest that organisations and individuals should strive to harmonise and synchronise—rather than balance—priorities across all phases of life.

Adopting a sustainable view of work-life harmony goes beyond the equitable allotment of hours between work and life, refocusing instead on the individual and their *perceived feelings of fulfilment*

with their performance in professional and personal domains. We propose an evolved definition of work-life balance: in focusing on personal fulfillment *and* work outcomes in harmony, careers and work output can be managed more effectively and inclusively towards an individual's overall wellbeing. Thus, we seek a holistic redefinition of work-life harmony, believing that reframing this elusive balance in terms of personal fulfilment (rather than hours worked) will generate relevant solutions that are easier to facilitate at scale.

News From the Trenches

In the early stages of an individual's career, achieving work-life harmony for most is simpler and easier. Younger employees exploring their independence often have a high degree of flexibility to meet demanding professional needs. When personal commitments are controllable, reshuffling personal lives has less impact on fewer people in an individual's personal community. In this context, early-life personal milestones can be traded off more easily against broader career goals.

As personal life choices evolve, employees may make longer-term personal commitments. Families are built, and dependant responsibilities change the game. No longer is it easy or simple to reshuffle personal lives to benefit career development and growth—the trade-offs have become too great. For some, the first time this becomes critical is during parenting young children: the nights are long, childhood years are short, and the stakes are high.

The Lens of Working Parents

Parents of all genders report challenges in juggling work and personal commitments. In a recent national survey of more than 6,000 working Australian parents and carers, [74% of working mothers](#) reported stress related to juggling work and life compared to 54% of men. Both these percentages are staggering; however, the data for mothers highlights the need for gender-aware strategies, policies and systems to address the challenges reported by working mothers and their significant impact on mothers' wellbeing. This includes not only the immense physical challenge of caring for another human being but also legacy perceptions of what motherhood and career ambitions should look like. The notions that mothers must sacrifice their careers for the good of their children and that to grow a career, anybody must put any hours in and never say no are fundamentally incompatible.

Thankfully, parenting is increasingly becoming an area of attention and curiosity for leading organisations. [A notable insight from Nordic countries explores the role organisations can play in positive parenting.](#) It takes the meta view that parental support programs and leave policies in the workplace are not policies for the worker but rather an ecosystem structured to support the child. This perspective posits that organisations have not only a legislated responsibility to support working parents but also a moral and societal obligation to raise future citizens well.

In pursuit of juggling a thriving career and motherhood, mothers may be subject to internal negotiations about [which sacrifices to make](#) under the pressure to be both a good mother and a good employee. A classic challenge faced by most parents is managing absences. When a child starts childcare, they are often sick every other week, but [many parents feel pressure](#) to send their children to childcare anyway to avoid taking time off themselves. These children might take longer to recover,

affecting parents' wellbeing and productivity; further, they may make other children sick, thus affecting other parents' wellbeing and productivity. Thus, trying to adhere to outdated assumptions regarding careers and parenthood has detrimental consequences in both professional and personal domains.

Of course, the struggle for work-life harmony is not the exclusive domain of the working mother—it is a necessary consideration for all workers. For employees at all life stages, it is tempting to lean too far into work at times. Crucially, the choice to lean in can lead to career success; however, it can also lead to workaholism, career obsession and neglect of personal relationships. [The negative consequences for employees can include guilt, anxiety, burnout, poor performance, productivity loss and disengagement.](#) This represents a cautionary tale for all workers, from those experiencing pressure to perform as a career-driven working parent to young employees who set aside personal milestones while striving for career perfection.

Changing Employee Needs Over a Career Lifetime

Examining the situation for organisations in terms of early, mid- and senior career employees highlights the myriad needs of employees, as well as opportunities for organisational growth via encouraging meaningful work-life harmony for all employees. Early career employees often fill entry-level roles within an organisation due to their lack of professional experience. Increasingly, however, they are demanding a [higher purpose](#) and alignment with their employer's mission. [Their energy and enthusiasm](#), as well as their [flexibility and resilience](#), represent key opportunities for the shrewd employer who can meet these needs for purpose and alignment.

Mid-career professionals have increasing demands on their personal lives, due to either being working parents or putting down roots and establishing personal communities. Increasingly, this cohort is made up of millennials, who are [notorious for demanding flexibility](#). This has clear implications for organisations because millennials will comprise 75% of the workforce by 2025. Meeting the needs of this cohort is critical, which includes both the professional needs of the employee and the personal needs of the individual—who will benefit similarly from an organisation responding to their needs.

In the recent survey of Australian parents and carers mentioned above, [50% of respondents](#) felt that their commitment to their job was questioned when they accessed family benefits. When fulfilment and work-life harmony are the goals, accessing family benefits can become a positive support structure and an opportunity for employers to actively encourage attention to personal priorities. Employees working in family-inclusive organisations [report higher wellbeing](#), demonstrating the existence of effective models that can be adopted and expanded upon by organisations going forward.

Senior professionals may have less immediate demands on their personal lives due to their children becoming more independent. However, achieving [work-life balance for this cohort is still a very important goal for organisations](#) since those with many decades of experience often fill the most senior roles in the workplace.

Organisational changes need not be revolutionary to create impact. For example, employers appoint wardens when appropriate for safety and certified officers for first aid (both mental and physical); as an extension of this strategy, 'family captains' could be appointed in the workplace to promote the

value of a 'family friendly certified workplace', as suggested by [industry advocacy bodies that have created relevant work and family standards](#).

Solutions for Organisational Growth

During the pandemic, constraints related to office closures and restricted face-to-face access to stakeholders prompted innovative solutions that enabled businesses to keep trading. Flexibility and working from home enjoyed a global testing bed, and employers were quick to proclaim how agile and attuned to work-life balance they had become by facilitating the work-from-home evolution. However, those innovations were driven by uncontrollable global constraints that forced immediate change with both positive and negative consequences for longer-term work-life harmony. For example, [while flexibility around the venue of work improved, in many situations, the clarity of boundaries between work and personal lives declined and wellbeing outcomes diminished](#). Thus, we advocate for building robust work-life practices in peaceful times, in the absence of a global crisis.

The benefits of promoting work-life harmony at an organisational level are [well documented](#). Leading organisations can differentiate themselves through culture, empowering employees to lead an individual definition and system of work-life harmony breaks new ground in navigating personal and professional milestones effectively.

Organisations with robust work-life harmony policies ([and accompanying supportive culture](#)) enjoy increased employee retention and engagement, as well as [increased profitability](#). Prospective employees can now use publicly available information to read reviews and make discerning decisions about where to work, with websites like Glassdoor offering detailed information regarding '[Best Places to Work](#)' in recent years. Articles and blogs by HR influencers are another source of curated information about companies that offer the [best work-life balance](#) specifically, with many of the world's largest tech companies featuring on such lists.

Atlassian, one of Australia's most globally known and successful companies, which employs over 10,000 people and serves more than 250,000 clients globally, presents an excellent exemplar. Winning Glassdoor's 'Best Place to Work' multiple times (as rated by Glassdoor review ratings), Atlassian regularly engages in this conversation about empowerment and fulfilment, suggesting that employees can—and should take accountability to [empower themselves](#). They offer that employees can define work-life balance for themselves to reach equilibrium and fulfillment, favouring either balance or higher investment of time depending on employees' current needs. They also support regular digital detoxing and emphasise progress over perfection (a focus on long-term improvement to an individual's work-life balance rather than striving for a perfect balance at all times) as other ways employees can take ownership of their own work-life fulfillment.

Which company has the [best work-life balance in Australia](#)? We suggest that this depends on your definition, further cementing the individual employee as the centre of the debate. Further, these varied definitions highlight the need for organisations to redefine themselves as communities of individuals, each with unique, skills, capabilities and, of course, personal preferences.

Common pandemic-era solutions to the issue of work-life balance, such as flexibility regarding working location, have attracted most of the media attention. However, relatively simple innovations to traditional leave policies are also being innovated, to go the extra mile regarding individualising

conditions and independence—these offer an exciting and contemporary way forward. One specific example of leave policies evolving to drive this agenda forward is presented by Bounteous, which offers a [‘take what you need’](#) paid leave policy. This provides unlimited leave throughout the year, as long as the employee discusses each instance of leave with their direct leader and obtains sign off. Further, there are many [examples of global companies](#) using paid leave policies to promote work-life harmony. One consulting senior partner has written about encouraging employees to [‘live life their way’](#), with their global firm paying their employees every time they take a week off as part of their overall investment in employee wellbeing and belonging.

Four-day working weeks have been trialled by some organisations as a new way to both enhance work-life balance and refocus employee productivity and engagement more deeply on work days. For example, Unilever has articulated the specifics of its approach in an interesting [‘myth-busting’](#) article. Whether you name this policy a four-day work week or a three-day weekend, successful organisations like Unilever are defining such policies in explicit detail, transparently sharing their intentions for how these policies are intended to provide benefits and who will reap the rewards.

The companies discussed above leverage the stability of policy with a flexible modern perspective on empowering employees.

Work-life Harmony: A Vision for an Empowered Future

Beyond the role organisations play in this vital issue, we suggest that individuals are the ultimate executive leaders of their own careers and work-life balance. Employees can self-select where, how and when they wish to work. Career-driven employees of the future can take accountability for defining, exploring and supporting their own work-life balance. Having both career and personal life existing in harmony may mean different things to different employees and change multiple times over a career lifetime. We urge organisations to actually encourage employees to flexibly prioritise one focus over the other, depending on the time, role and conditions. This goal-oriented process will not be easy: work deadline vs. personal event, parenting duties vs. opportunities to perform at work. However, the process represents a simple but crucial change to who is in charge of defining success in work-life harmony. The most important element is the individual employee's agency over the definition of conditions and system supporting their work-life harmony.

Fundamentally, we advocate for greater individual agency to achieve personal fulfilment. Although it may face resistance from organisations currently relying on established norms and an inferior culture of control, rigid execution and top-down decision-making, the meta objective—to raise the bar for work-life harmony—contains a broad set of benefits for all who embrace it, including organisations and the stakeholders to whom they are accountable. Our simple definition of individually defined work-life harmony can stimulate organisational growth without surrendering personal wellbeing. This occurs by investing in the employee over time, who will become a more well-rounded and experienced member of the organisational community. A flourishing human enjoying a rich and fulfilling life will generate value for everyone around them, including organisations that have embraced the empowered workplace.



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As the Founder and CEO of Eagle Origins, entrepreneur, advisor and executive coach, Micah is leading the shift beyond organisational transformation to redefine markets through antifragile organisations with societal relevance. Accelerating venture and leadership growth with his proven performance as an entrepreneur and intrapreneur and courageous compassion as an executive leader, Micah has scaled multiple Australian companies to their growth potential, achieving exponential market value.



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Megan is a driven professional dedicated to cross-functional team support and leadership through making genuine connections. A devotee to intentional personal growth, Megan navigates her accelerating career from the perspective of a neurodivergent full-time working mother juggling roles with a high functional demand. Through her unique personal experience, Megan aims to support working women everywhere—because there is no woman who does not work.

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