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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	STUDY ON EXPLORING ASE EMPLOYEES JOB SATISFACTION <i>CHENG-WEN LEE & TSAI-LUN CHO</i>	1
2.	APPLICABILITY OF INFORMATION SYSTEM TECHNIQUES: A STUDY OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE POWER SECTOR <i>VIJAY PRATAP SINGH & DR. G.S BATRA</i>	7
3.	CONSTRAINTS OF MGNREGA AS A TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICY: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN ASSAM <i>REHANA AHMED & SUBHRANGSHU SHEKHAR SARKAR</i>	12
4.	EFFECT OF ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT ON INTERNATIONAL TOURISM REVENUE: A CO-INTEGRATION APPROACH <i>CHENG-WEN LEE & WEN-CHUAN FU</i>	16
5.	AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF ECOPRENEURIAL ORIENTATION, ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN AND GOVERNMENTAL MEASURES ON ECOPRENEURIAL PRACTICES OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN MALAPPURAM DISTRICT <i>NISHA K.M & DR. MOHD ASIF KHAN</i>	23
6.	SOCIAL ENTERPRISES: INTERPRETATION AND MARKETING STRATEGIES <i>PRAMA VISHNOI & NAMITA PADHY</i>	29
7.	IMPLICATION OF WORK LIFE BALANCE AND JOB STRESS <i>ANURAG MAURYA, GAURAV TALAN & KANCHAN SEHRAWAT</i>	34
8.	TRENDS IN INFORMALITY IN INDIA <i>NIDHI PANDE</i>	39
9.	EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION: ANALYSIS OF SELECT SMALL SCALE UNITS IN MYSURU <i>DIVYACHETHANA S & AASHISH C I</i>	48
10.	A STUDY ON YOUNG ADULT CONSUMER BEHAVIOR TOWARDS ADVENTURE TRAVEL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HYDERABAD <i>DR. ANDAL AMMISETTI</i>	51
11.	PARTICIPATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEMES IN INDIA <i>DR. T. VIJAYARAGAVAN</i>	53
12.	THE GROWTH OF GOLD LOAN NBFCs IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY ON MUTHOOT FINANCE <i>JESWIN D.J & GURUDATT KAMATH B</i>	57
13.	WOMEN'S STATUS IN THE ECONOMY OF INDIA <i>DR. AJAB SINGH & DEEPSHIKHA B.</i>	61
14.	TREND ANALYSIS OF IMPACTS OF CARGO PILFERAGE RISK ON POST CONCESSION CARGO THROUGHPUT PERFORMANCE OF NIGERIAN SEAPORT TERMINALS <i>T. C. NWOKEDI, G. C. EMEGHARA & C. IKEOGU</i>	67
15.	CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF FINANCE IN INDIA DURING THE PAST DECADE <i>K.MADHAVA RAO</i>	71
16.	IMPACT OF CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR <i>NAMITA PADHY & PRAMA VISHNOI</i>	79
17.	TO TAX OR NOT TO TAX: THE DILEMMA OF ABOLISHING INCOME TAXES IN INDIA <i>K SREEHARI NAIR & VIDYA AVADHANI</i>	85
18.	THE ACT NO. 9 OF 1995 ABOUT SMALL SCALE ENTERPRISE: IMPLICATION TOWARDS SMALL SCALE BUSINESS SELF RELIANCE IN STRENGTHEN NATIONAL ECONOMY STRUCTURE (EMPIRICAL STUDY TO SMALL SCALE AGRIBUSINESS INDUSTRY IN SOUTH SUMATERA-INDONESIA) <i>M. SYAHIRMAN YUSI</i>	88
19.	EFFECT OF EDUCATIONAL ON EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITIES IN SELECTED UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA <i>JOHN WEKESA WANJALA, DR. SUSAN WERE & DR. WILLY MUTURI</i>	95
20.	IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME IN JORHAT DISTRICT OF ASSAM <i>PALLABI GOGOI</i>	100
	REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK & DISCLAIMER	105

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IMPLICATION OF WORK LIFE BALANCE AND JOB STRESS

ANURAG MAURYA
ASST. PROFESSOR
BHARATI COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI
DELHI

GAURAV TALAN
ASST. PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES
GURU GOBIND SINGH INDRAPRASTHA UNIVERSITY
DELHI

KANCHAN SEHRAWAT
ASST. PROFESSOR
SRCC
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI
DELHI

ABSTRACT

While work-life imbalance and job stress are not new problems, however they have been receiving more attention in recent times than ever before. Together, these two problems pose risks to workers' well-being as well as to organizational performance. To come up with effective solutions, decision-makers need solid evidence on the scope and nature of the problems they face. Also a clear understanding of what employers and employees view as potential solutions will be helpful to formulate successful business strategies. This paper attempts to show the trends which are pressuring employees at work — resulting in stress and imbalance in their lives, and pressuring employers to rethink their human resource programs and practices. To help employers and employees respond effectively to these pressures, this study uses survey evidence to answer a series of key questions and examine the practical implications for employers.

KEYWORDS

work life balance, job stress.

INTRODUCTION

Work-life balance, in its broadest sense, is defined as a satisfactory level of involvement or 'fit' between the multiple roles in a person's life (Hudson, 2005). There is no one accepted definition of what constitutes a work-life balance practice, the term usually refers to one of the following: organizational support for dependent care, flexible work options, and family or personal leave (Estes & Michael, 2005). These practices hence include flexible work hours (e.g., flexitime, which permits workers to vary their start and finish times provided a certain number of hours is worked); compressed work week, (here employees work a full week's worth of hours in four days and take the fifth off), working from home (telework), sharing a full-time job between two employees (job sharing), family leave programs (e.g., parental leave, adoption leave, compassionate leave), on-site childcare facilities, financial and/or informational assistance with childcare and eldercare services etc.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, job stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a random sample of individuals who were either employed, self-employed or unemployed (but who held a job at some point in the past 12 months), and considered to be representative of the workforce. In total the researchers contacted 150 individuals to whom a questionnaire was mailed/Telephone interviews were conducted out of which only 120 were received/responded complete in all respects. Therefore, the exact sample was 120. The work force was divided into the three age groups namely below 30, 30 to 40 and above 40.

WORK LIFE TRENDS IN 21st CENTURY

A convergence of powerful trends like workforce aging, increasingly competitive labour market, information technology, etc. are pressuring employer's to rethink their policies catering to their workforce. These trends give scope to create new possibilities for employers to achieve organisational goals and to meet workers personal aspirations.

At the same time, numerous employees are experiencing a reduced quality of work-life. This is reflected most prominently in work-life imbalance and job stress. With more women employed than ever before and dual-earner families' common, work-life balance problems is a common scenario.

Thus, with both employers and employees under pressure to find ways to improve the quality of work life — and through this, enabling employees to contribute their best efforts—surely there is common ground for action.

People want meaningful work that enhances their overall well-being. Yet for some groups of workers, achieving wellbeing through work is not easy. Managers and professionals, in particular, have experienced increasing work hours while less skilled workers have had a decline.¹

The paradox is that managers and professionals in knowledge intensive industries- whom American analyst Richard Florida calls the 'Creative Class' — may work the longest hours and experience high stress levels, but they are among the best paid and have the most job autonomy of any workers². The success to recruit and retain knowledge workers will increasingly depend on finding the right quality of work life equation.

Many people assume that job stress related to work hours, demands, pace and other pressures is on the rise. While this view may be overstated by the media, research evidence does support the claim that various sources of work pressure increased in the 1990s and the early 2000s. This intensification of work has been

¹Based on data from the workplace and employee survey. M. Drolet and R. Morissette, *Better jobs in the new economy? Perspectives on Labour and income*, 2002.

²R. Florida *The rise of creative class: and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. New York: Basic Books, 2002

linked to rising performance expectations and workloads. Information technology is, for some, the hidden hand of work intensification. Studies in Canada, the United States, and Britain provide evidence that work intensification involves more than longer work hours, highlighting how performance pressures and work effort affect workers³. So even a 37.5-hour week may place different demands and expectations on workers today, compared to 10 or 15 years ago.

Stress and work-life conflict are intertwined, and the latter has been documented as both a cause and an outcome of job stress. Demanding work has been reported as a major source of Job Stress. Job stress has been cited as a determinant of employee health and productivity by many researchers. The experience of chronic stressors (or strain) is used in theoretical models as a predictor of increased risk of mental and physical health problems, including chronic conditions such as heart disease, asthma, migraines and ulcers.

To know how employers view quality of work life issues as human resource challenges. The respondents (usually senior managers) were asked if their organization has experienced 15 HR challenges (for list see table A) in the past 12 months. It was found that 30 percent employers surveyed had experienced none of these difficulties. The most common difficulties were workload/work-life balance and employee stress, experienced by 35 percent and 33 percent respectively. Recruitment and retention came third. All other difficulties were experienced by around 18 percent or less employers.

Respondents were asked if they had taken any action to redress any of these challenges. Less than one-third reported any actions to address any issues. Among the most common action cited are focused on safety issues.

For insights in the changes in work-life balance in view of employees a series of questions were asked:-

Whether it has become harder to achieve work-life balance, the survey found considerable variation in workers' personal experience of work-life balance, offering a more muted interpretation of changes in work-life balance. 37 percent of the 120 workers surveyed reported that it had become harder for them to achieve work-life balance over the past 12 months, while 29 percent had found it easier to achieve and 34 percent experienced no change.

For those who found it harder to balance work-life, 62 percent attributed this to work-related factors. 27 percent attributed the increased imbalance to family or personal factors and 11 percent to both the factors combined.

Of all age groups, workers aged 30 to 40 were most likely to report that work-life balance had become more difficult to achieve. In other respects, workers who have experienced more difficulty in this regard fit the profile of the knowledge workers, more likely to be managers or professionals, university graduates, and high income earners. Workers who are not compensated for overtime are most likely to say that the work-life balance has become harder to achieve over the past few years. In contrast, the groups most likely to be finding it easier to balance work and personal life are older workers, the self-employed and those working no overtime.

We also examined the magnitude of work-life conflict. The survey asked workers to rate 22 specific job and workplace characteristics in terms of how important each characteristic is to them — or in other words, how highly valued each is. Later in the survey, respondents were asked to rate their current job on the same characteristics, in order to determine to what extent they were meeting their expectations. By comparing the difference between these two sets of measures, we can calculate an 'expectations gap.'

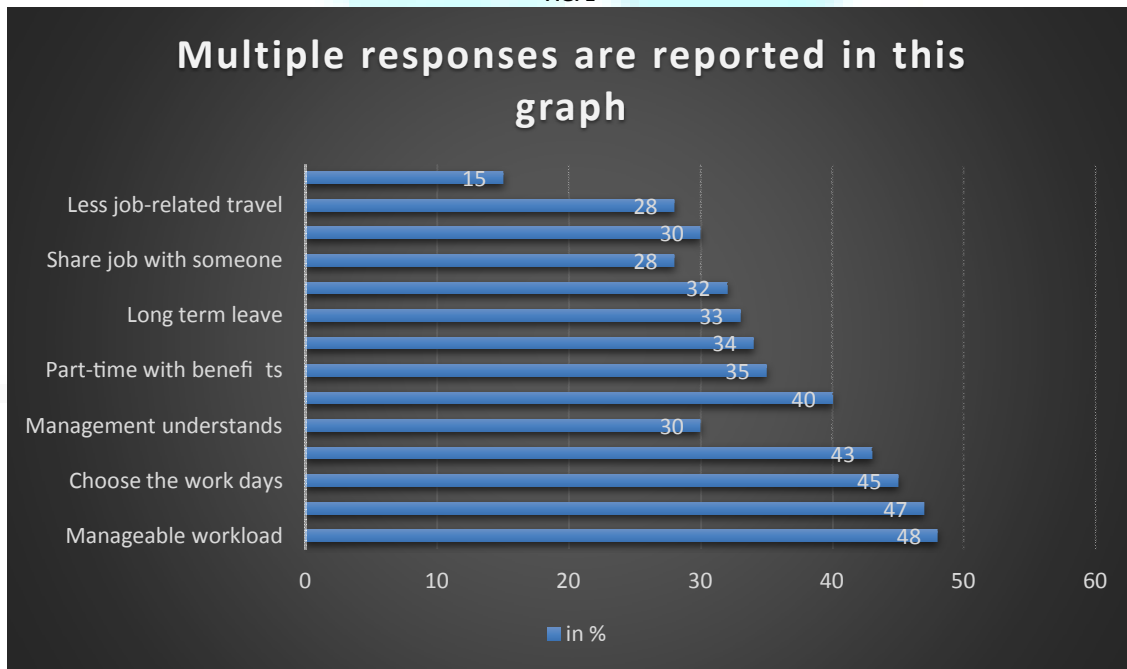
There is a gap of 29 percentage points between the importance workers place on work-life balance, and the extent to which they actually achieve good balance in their current job. That is, while 63 percent of survey respondents placed high importance on being able to achieve work-life balance, only 34 percent had achieved 'good' balance in their job. The gaps on three other characteristics were slightly larger: pay, job training, and a healthy and safe workplace.

While work-family conflict can be thought of as a result of work stressors, it also has been studied as a stressor since the 1970s. Theoretical models examine how the work-family interface affects individual health and well-being, and in turn how this affects a person's performance in work and family roles⁴. The similarity to job stress research is illustrated by the emphasis in both areas on how role demands, and control over these demands, affect workers' health and productivity.

The pattern of relationship between work-life balance and job stress is clear from the survey: workers who have experienced difficulties balancing work and personal life also are likely to report chronic job stress, compared with those experiencing no change or a reduction in work-life balance difficulties. Indeed, the 55 percent of survey respondents who found it harder to balance work-life reported often or always being under stress in their job, compared with 26 percent of those who found work-life balance easier to achieve.

We asked respondents for their views on various options to reduce work-life conflict. Among those individuals finding it harder to balance work and family, the single most important change that would help them achieve a better balance is manageable workload (cited by 48 percent), followed by flexible work hours (47 percent) and being able to choose the days they work (45 percent).

FIG. 1



³L. Duxbury and C. Higgins. *Work-life Balance in the New Millennium: Where Are We? Where Do We Need To Go?* Ottawa:Canadian Policy Research Networks, Discussion Paper No. W-12, 2001. B. Burchell, D. Ladipo and F. Wilkinson, eds. *JobInsecurity and Work Intensification*. Routledge, 2002. F. Green, *Demanding Work: The Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Economy*, Princeton University Press, 2006. J. Barling, E.K. Kelloway and M.R. Frone, eds. *Handbook of Work Stress*. Sage, 2005

⁴L.T. Eby, W.J. Casper, A. Lockwood, et al. Work and family research in IO/OB: Content analysis and review of the literature (1980–2002). *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. 66 (1): 124–97, 2005

Preferred solutions vary by specific workforce groups. For example, women (compared with men) are more inclined to prefer choosing their own work hours and days, and working a compressed workweek. The most highly educated workers, as well as those who are not compensated for overtime hours they work, give higher priority to a manageable workload.

Choosing one's work hours is considered particularly helpful by those 30 to 40 years of age, compared to other age groups. Workers reporting the lowest annual incomes, and people who do not work overtime, are more likely than others surveyed to think that being able to choose the days when they work would help them balance their personal and professional life. Younger workers (under age 30) view having an understanding manager as especially helpful in achieving work-life balance.

However, employers and policy-makers will need to be creative when crafting work-life balance solutions. The worker survey found little support, even among those who said it was harder to balance work and life, to make tradeoffs to achieve job flexibility now.

Just over 1 in 4 were 'very willing' to make up hours over the course of the year in return for greater flexibility now, 16 percent were 'very willing' to make up the time in future years, 12 percent were 'very willing' if it meant limiting their career advancement, and 1 in 10 were willing to forego an equivalent portion of their wages. Survey respondents who have found it harder to balance their work and personal lives are even less willing to make up the hours or take a cut in pay to gain flexibility.

According to the survey, most employees see their supervisors as moderately to very effective. However, the lowest ratings are for work-life balance. Specifically, close to 9 in 10 respondents rated their supervisors as moderately or very effective on creating a work environment free of harassment or discrimination and encouraging teamwork. Over 80 percent rated their supervisors as effective in terms of encouraging innovation, sharing information, following through on commitments, and listening to and acting on suggestions. More than three-quarters also rated their supervisors as effective at providing feedback on job performance and helping them achieve work-life balance. However, 22 percent of employees considered their supervisor to be ineffective in helping them to achieve work-life balance.

Employees with higher ratings of supervisor support for career development, encouragement of innovation, and listening to and acting on ideas, are considerably more likely than employees with lower ratings for supervisors on these issues to report high levels of job satisfaction. In other words, these areas are more strongly associated with job satisfaction than other areas of supervisor effectiveness measured.

In summary, reducing work-life conflict depends on fostering a workplace culture that values and supports balance. Getting the right mix of policies and programs that meet the needs of the workforce is part of this, with Employee and Family Assistance Programs playing a pivotal role. But to be fully effective, these programs also must address the closely related problem of job stress.

JOB STRESS

A prominent theme in workplace research is that workers' perceptions of the quality of their work environment are critical for outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, absenteeism and performance⁵. An extensive body of research on work-life conflict documents how the relationship between work and non-work affects an individual's health, as well as their performance in work and family roles⁶. These studies corroborate one of the key findings from job stress research: work-role demands, and control over these demands, affect workers' health and wellbeing.

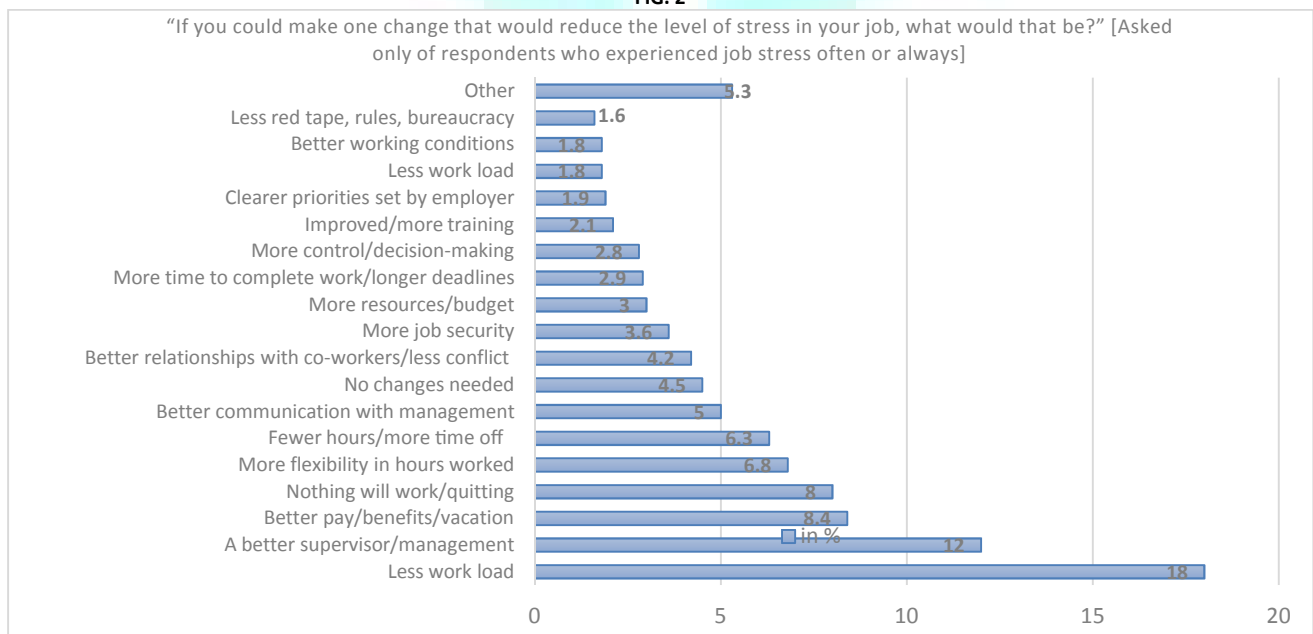
Turning now to job stress, findings from the survey reveals that a stress-free work environment is a rare thing in workplaces, according to respondents surveyed. Indeed, 75 per cent of workers reported that they had experienced stress in their job either "always" or "sometimes" over the past 12 months. Only about 4 per cent said they "rarely" experienced stress in their job. Those more likely to have "always" experienced stress on the job over the past 12 months include: workers reporting a higher (compared with lower) level of education and income; full-time workers; individuals in households where both people work full-time (compared with other households); those in professional occupations (compared with nonprofessionals); workers who work unpaid overtime.

Furthermore, many workers find that their job is a significant source of the overall stress they experience in life. While 46 per cent say that their job causes only a "little" of the stress they experience in their life, 22 per cent say that it causes "some" stress and an additional 32 per cent say it is the source for a "large amount" of the stress they experience.

While the study did not include a direct workload measure, it did ask workers if "work is assigned fairly and equitably" in their organization. Workers who agreed with this statement had significantly lower levels of job stress than those who disagreed, taking other factors into account. Furthermore, workers who agreed that they have a good balance between their work and personal or family life experience less stress than workers who lack this balance, regardless of other factors. The importance a worker places on achieving a good work-life balance also appears to influence the experience of job stress: the more personal importance placed on balance, the higher the perceived level of job stress, taking other factors into account.

When given the opportunity to make suggestions about changes that could reduce the level of stress in their job, survey respondents provided a long list of potential changes (shown in Figure).

FIG. 2



⁵G.S. Lowe. *The Quality of Work: A People Centered Agenda*. Oxford University Press, 2000. G. Lowe and G. Schellenberg, *What's a Good Job? The Importance of Employment Relationships*, Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2001.

⁶Bellavia and Frone. *Work-family conflict*. In: *Handbook of Work Stress*, 2005

Probing the suggestion to reduce workloads as a way to reduce job stress, specific groups of workers were more likely to mention this action: workers reporting a higher level of education and income, individuals in households where both people work full-time, professionals, technicians, individuals working in social services (health, education and social assistance), those in the largest organizations and people who work unpaid overtime. What is the likelihood of employers acting on these suggestions? We already established that about one in three employers are addressing job stress, although the study does not document the actions being taken. However, the employer survey did ask respondents to indicate the human resource management or workplace issues they expected to have the greatest impact on the success of their organization in the next five years. The answers to this question are presented in Figure below.

FIG. 3



Perhaps not surprisingly, recruitment and retention is at the top of the list of future challenges. Interestingly, 19 percent of employers surveyed do not anticipate any significant human resource or workplace issues — suggesting perhaps that everything is under control or that they have not planned for the future. Another 13 percent did not know or did not respond to the question. Only about 4 percent expected quality of work life issues, such as stress or employee satisfaction, to affect organizational success.

THE FUTURE WORKPLACE

Creating the ideal future workplace requires, above all, positive and proactive responses to the work pressures workers experience, and the host of human resource pressures employer's face. These are one and the same: what workers experience as work pressure — mostly as work-life imbalance or job stress — are the early warning signals of future human resource problems for employers. That's why a long-term, proactive approach to people issues is so essential.

Recognition of a problem is a pre-requisite for taking action. So the fact that 33 percent of employers reported work-life balance and (35 percent) workload to be the area where they are seeing increasing difficulties in the recent past — and are doing something about it — is grounds for optimism. We need to know more about what exactly they are doing, and how effective it is.

From the perspective of workers who are finding it more difficult to balance work and non-work, a manageable workload and flexibility in work hours and schedules are desirable changes. Those workers who already have these and are able to balance work and life to their advantage. And for other workers, changes in their personal and family life may be making it easier, or harder, to achieve this goal in coming years.

So in future, employers need to open up employee communication channels, including regular surveys, in order to fully understand the changing needs of different groups in their workforce.

Imagining a future high-quality workplace, it would be one in which all workers have more personal control over their work demands and in which workloads are more efficiently and equitably distributed. This could be the key to unlocking greater productivity, given diminishing returns often associated with long work hours and heavy workloads. One of the most helpful tools in this regard is more rigorous planning, scheduling and prioritizing of work. Using this basic approach, it will be possible to get at the root causes of the stress and imbalance experienced by sizeable numbers of workers today. This is the direction that any quality of work-life interventions and programs must take.

In summary, reducing work-life conflict depends on fostering a workplace culture that values and supports balance.

Getting the right mix of policies and programs that meet the needs of the workforce is part of this, with Employee and Family Assistance Programs playing a pivotal role. But to be fully effective, these programs also must address the closely related problem of job stress.

TABLE A: LIST OF HR CHALLENGES

S.No	HR Challenge
1	Workload/work-life balance
2	Employee Stress
3	Recruitment/ Retention
4	Employee satisfaction/ morale
5	Employee Engagement
6	Pride and Commitment
7	Employee Trust
8	Training/Career Development
9	Absenteeism
10	Employee Health
11	Workplace Diversity
12	Quality of Supervision
13	Respect and Fairness
14	Harassment/Discrimination
15	Safety

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