

Work-Family Conflict

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Individuals will take on many different roles throughout their lives. Three of the largest roles an individual can take on – employee, spouse, parent – often come into conflict with each other. Work-family conflict occurs when demands at work and demands in the family are incompatible. The term “family” can mean different things to different people. Although we often think of family members as individuals tied to us through blood or marriage, families can also be comprised of other loved ones, close friends, and even pets.

It is common to specify which *direction* the conflict is going. Work-to-family conflict occurs when aspects of the work role impede family responsibilities, such as a parent missing an important soccer match due to a work meeting. Family-to-work conflict occurs when aspects of the family role impede work responsibilities. An example of family-to-work-conflict is a parent having to miss an important work meeting to take a sick child to the doctor.

It is also common to describe *how* work and family roles are conflicting. Time-based conflict occurs when an individual cannot give the needed time to one role because the other role is occupying that time. For example, if parents are working from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., they cannot pick their child up from school at 4 p.m. Strain-based conflict occurs when emotions or stress generated in one role make it difficult to carry out the other role. If parents are worried about their child’s behavior issues, they may not be able to concentrate at work. Behavior-based

conflict occurs when one role requires behaviors that do not align with behaviors required in the other role. For example, if an individual needs to be strict at work, this same behavior may not be appropriate in interactions with a spouse.

Since many individuals in the United States are employed at some point during their lives, work-family conflict is fairly prevalent. Heavy or less than ideal work duties often lead to work-to-family conflict. Jobs that require frequent travel, long hours each week or day, or have work schedules that change often, are likely to cause conflict. On the family side, more caregiving responsibilities often lead to more family-to-work conflict.

As individuals grow and develop, their work-family conflict experience changes. By observing how their parents experience work-family conflicts, children and adolescents begin to plan how they will manage these roles when they are grown (for example, desiring a job that does not require them to work weekends). Upon entering young adulthood, they begin to act on their plans and try to minimize potential conflicts. Some may choose to postpone or forgo marriage and parenthood, or decide to have fewer children. Others may select jobs that are less demanding. As new work or family roles are added (e.g. becoming a parent, spouse, daughter- or son-in-law, or picking up a second job) or these roles change (e.g. job promotion, a parent's child begins primary school), the potential for work-family conflict increases until the person figures out a successful strategy for reducing it.

Some groups experience work-family conflict more than others. Because women tend to do a greater share of household and caregiving tasks than men, irrespective of how many hours they are employed, women often report feeling more family-to-work conflict than men. Family-to-work conflict is also higher among households that have only one parent, young children, or among households that have a combination of eldercare and childcare responsibilities.

Supports provided by the nation, state, community, and/or employer temper conflict perceptions. If an individual has work or family resources available (such as a high income, a supportive supervisor, or access to paid time off), they tend to experience less conflict. Thus, situational factors influence how much conflict emerges, and what shape it takes in households.

Further reading:

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