

Positive and negative spillover: An intersection of work and personal life

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This chapter aims to:

- discuss how it is impossible to separate our work and personal lives
- explore the health impact that work can have on people
- highlight the opportunity for work to influence healthier societies.

Leave your home life at home, focus on work when you are at work and on home when you're at home. (Employment New Zealand, 2021)

Managing the intersection of personal/whānau life and work life appears to be a challenge for workers, managers and organisations. In business articles you will find differing advice, with some advocating for the sharing personal information between managers and workers, while others suggest managers and workers keep their discussions work-focused (Knight, 2020; O'Hara, 2018; Wulfhart, 2021). The rationale given for sharing information about our personal/whānau lives, or suggesting that it is appropriate for a manager to ask about someone's personal/whānau life, is that demands in a person's personal/whānau life, can negatively affect individual and organisational performance (Ball, 2015; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020; Inam, 2018; Society for Human Resource Management, 2017). However, this message may appear to workers as, 'Keep your personal/whānau life at home unless it affects work. If it affects work, tell us, so we can monitor your performance', which is not the same as a business taking a genuine interest in its workers.

The intersection of work and personal life

Research uses the term “spillover” to define how behaviours in one environment can affect behaviours in other environments in both positive and negative ways. The roles and identities we hold, attitudes and behaviours we engage with, and knowledge and skills we gain transfer to other environments (Galizzi & Whitmarsh, 2019). There are several terms frequently used in research to discuss spillover (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013; Hammer, Cullen, Neal, Sinclair, & Shafiro, 2005; Hanson, Hammer, & Colton, 2006; Wayne, Lemmon, Hoobler, Cheung, & Wilson, 2017). These are:

- Work-to-Family Conflict: work negatively spills over into personal/whānau life
- Family-to-Work Conflict: personal/whānau life negatively spills over into work
- Work-to-Family Enrichment: work positively spills over into personal/whānau life
- Family-to-Work Enrichment: personal/whānau life positively spills over into work.

When research on conflict and enrichment is viewed together, it suggests that work plays a key part in our lives and communities. For the purposes of this chapter, I will refer to ‘spillover’ when discussing the intersection between work and personal/whānau life in either direction with both positive and negative outcomes. I will use the term ‘conflict’ when discussing spillover that has a negative outcome and ‘enrichment’ when discussing spillover that has a positive outcome.

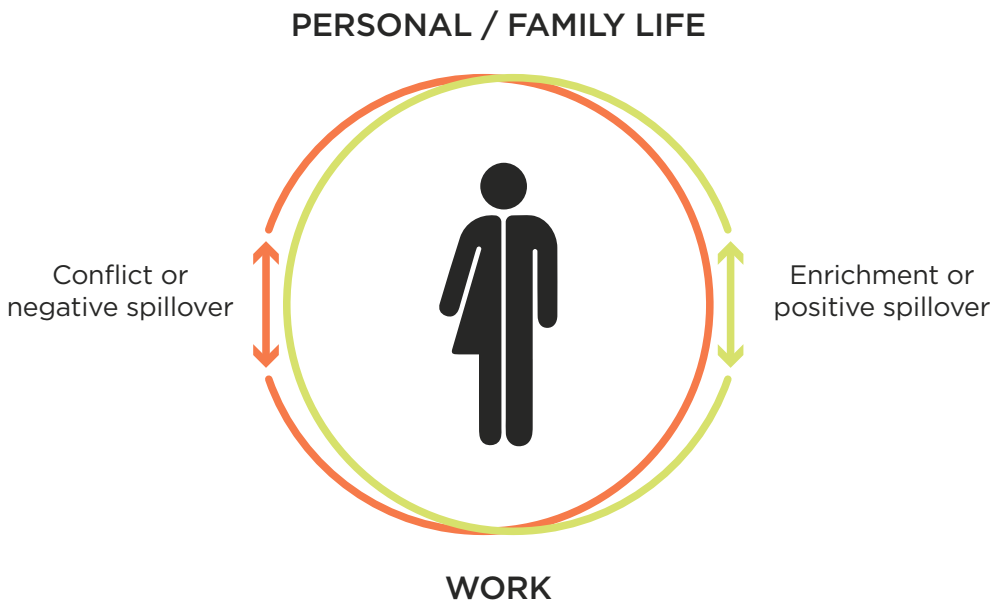
The conservation of resources theory may explain how spillover can be both positive and negative, suggesting people gain and lose resources (social capital) as they interact with their environment. Resources can take many forms such as skills, energy, emotions, cognitive capacity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, values, intelligence, time, economic, social and health assets. Therefore, there are several resources that could be gained or lost from both work and personal/whānau environments. When work or personal/whānau life is demanding, this will deplete the resources available, which may cause conflict. However, when resources are gained or less resources are used, this will leave resources available for interacting in other environments, promoting enrichment (Lapierre, et al., 2018; Wayne, Lemmon, Hoobler, Cheung, & Wilson, 2017). In support of this model it has been found that experiencing challenges at home is associated with reduced job resources available the next morning, increased rumination or thinking about family concerns, increased negative attitudes, and the likelihood that the worker will flourish in the afternoon decreases (Du, Derks, & Bakker, 2018).



Hammer and colleagues (2005) found several correlations between worker experiences of conflict and enrichment, suggesting that spillover does not happen in isolation but is associated with further spillover. If a worker experienced family-to-work conflict, they also experienced work-to-family conflict. A similar pattern occurred with enrichment. If a worker experienced work-to-family enrichment, they also experienced family-to-work enrichment. This suggests that while psychological detachment can mitigate the impact of spillover in the short term (Debrot, Siegler, Klumb, & Schoebi, 2018), detaching our lives and completely separating work and personal/whānau life is easier said than done, and not the experience of most people. Research by Xu and colleagues (2019) further supports this conclusion when finding housework is associated with increased work fatigue, which in turn is associated with work-family conflict, lower marital satisfaction and higher rates of depression. Figure 1 illustrates the two-way relationship between work and personal/whānau life for both conflict and enrichment.

Figure 1

Illustrating the two-way relationship between work and personal/whānau life



The two-way relationship between work and personal/whānau life has the potential to create a cycle of conflict or a cycle of enrichment. Due to the connectedness of experiences, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine a single stressor or catalyst for experiences of conflict. If we self-reflect and review our own experiences, or consider the experiences of friends, family/whānau, colleagues or others in our network, there will be numerous examples of where people experienced stressors in both their work and personal/whānau lives at the same time.

To consider an example, the New Zealand Employment Court reviewed a case in 2019 where a doctor was dismissed for prescribing medication to her partner and trying to cover up her actions. Initially the doctor was a high achiever, received university distinction awards, was rated highly by her supervisor, and offered a promotion. Her workload and patient demands increased, and she dealt with violence and challenging situations in the workplace. In response to this, she initiated a project to resolve issues and improve outcomes for patients. At some point her workplace found out that she had split from her partner when she turned up unfit for work and suspected to be using drugs. Next in the story we hear about interpersonal relationship issues with colleagues at work and blurred professional boundaries as she helped colleagues with personal matters. Following this performance monitoring, critique, and management become a core focus of the case until she is dismissed for breaching protocol (Corkill, 2019). The summary of facts in this case discusses both personal/whānau and work factors. These factors are likely to have resulted in the gaining and depletion of resources. Given the complex relationship that developed between personal/whānau and work-related factors, it is likely that the individual was experiencing a cycle of conflict during these times.

Most workers are unlikely to end up in employment court judgments, but all workers are likely to experience cycles of conflict from time to time. It is probable that almost every worker would say that they have thought about work outside of work hours or thought about their personal/whānau life during work times. To name a few examples, it could be dreaming about a work project, asking a friend/whānau member for advice about a work situation, discussing a work challenge, booking or attending personal appointments, experiencing a bereavement, or worrying about a whānau member who is facing physical or mental health issues.

If someone is going through a challenging time and experiencing conflict, either work-to-family, or family-to-work, it is important to acknowledge that this will likely result in that person experiencing further challenges. Individual, family/whānau, and organisational responses to a person experiencing challenges has the potential to create additional stressors that create a cycle of conflict. The little things make a difference. Zhou and colleagues found that when team members experienced acts of incivility at work, defined as low intensity, rude behaviours that violate norms for mutual respect, from either internal or external stakeholders, they were more likely to experience increased emotional demands, burnout, and work-to-family conflict (Zhou, Meier, & Spector, 2019). Businesses have an opportunity to positively influence their worker experiences by changing how they respond to conflict, especially family-to-work conflict. Asking how someone is, altering work demands, or offering practical and emotional support could be enough to stop a cycle of conflict, and instead promote enrichment.

While conflict is easier to recognise, hopefully everyone can identify examples of cycles of enrichment in their own experiences or the experiences of their friends, family/whānau, colleagues, or others in their network. If you were to self-reflect on your best day at work, or a time in your life where you felt like you were flourishing, you may have had resources remaining at the end of the workday; possibly more energy, motivation or time for the activities that are important in your personal/whānau life. Experiences of enrichment are correlated with supervisor perceptions of worker engagement, higher performance ratings and increased promotions and salary increases (Wayne, Lemmon, Hoobler, Cheung, & Wilson, 2017). When workers experience positive workplace cultures, that is, they can say their supervisor cares about their wellbeing, they are supported to influence their work schedule, they are offered development opportunities and feel confident that they can handle the demands of their job, they are more likely to say that work enriches their personal/whānau life (Carlson, Thompson, Crawford, & Kacmar, 2019; Lapierre et al., 2018).

Conflict and the impact for health and communities

Both work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict are stressors that increase psychological, behavioural, and physiological strain resulting in a higher risk of negative outcomes for workers (French, 2017). Conflict is associated with unhealthy behaviours such as substance abuse, extensive use of medication, alcohol use, smoking, limited exercise, poor food choices, and counterproductive work behaviour. While in the short term these behaviours may act as coping mechanisms, they may also contribute to mental and physical health problems. People who experience conflict are at higher risk of mental health issues such as depressive mood, clinical depression, anxiety, life distress, psychological strain, burnout, lower life satisfaction, and emotional strain. They are also at higher risk of poor sleep quality, fatigue, higher diastolic blood pressure, higher cholesterol, higher cortisol reactivity and neuroendocrine stress, and a cardiovascular stress response (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011; Barber, Taylor, Burton, & Bailey, 2017; French, 2017; Greenhaus, Allen, & Spector, 2006; Hammer, Cullen, Neal, Sinclair, & Shafiro, 2005; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2006; Zhou, Meier, & Spector, 2019).

French (2017) found after people experienced one episode of work-to-family conflict, unhealthy eating behaviours increased later in the day. Unhealthy eating was measured because it is a well-established predictor of societal health issues such as diabetes, obesity, cancer, and cardiovascular disease. Unhealthy eating occurred some hours after the conflict, suggesting conflict has the potential to have other long-term health effects for workers.

Conflict also affects our interactions with others. When workers experience conflict, negative family-related outcomes are common. Conflict is associated with lower marital satisfaction, negative marital functioning, lower family/whānau satisfaction, and reduced family-related performance. (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011; Lavner & Clark, 2017; Tuttle, Giano, & Merten, 2018). One example of this is a finding by Tuttle and colleagues (2018) that the work demands and emotional stress that police officers experience negatively impacts the police officer's family/whānau. They recommended businesses consider how their systems address the interplay between work and personal/whānau life. A range of initiatives such as wellness programmes, clinical engagements with families, and promoting activities that strengthen family functioning were recommended to assist police officers in managing their work/life balance.

When a worker experiences conflict, it can also affect their spouse or partner. Xu and colleagues (2019) found if a husband experienced work-to-family conflict, his wife was also likely to experience work-to-family conflict. How couples share experiences about their day may result in unhealthy stress transmitting to the partner as part of whānau life interactions (Amstad & Semmer, 2011; Carlson, Thompson, & Kacmar, 2019). Given that work-to-family conflict is associated with family-to-work conflict, it appears that one worker's experience could create a cycle of conflict for themselves and their spouse. While there are slight variations between married and cohabitating couples and gender differences, spouses or partners can experience lower job satisfaction, lower relationship satisfaction and poorer mental health when a worker experiences conflict (Yucel & Latshaw, 2020).

Longitudinal research on job displacement (losing your job through redundancy or restructure) shows it is associated with negative health outcomes for both workers and their spouses. Workers who lost their job due to a plant closing were more likely to be hospitalised for issues related to alcohol and mental illness up to a year after losing their job. The effects were still felt twenty years later where workers had higher rates of mortality due to heart-related issues, and male workers had a higher rate of suicide regardless of the other roles they held during those twenty years. Furthermore, spouses of workers who lost their job also had a higher risk for being hospitalised for alcohol-related issues, mental illness and cancer during the twenty-year period after the worker lost their role (Gathmann, Huttunen, Jenstrom, Sääksvuori, & Stitzing, 2020).

Research conducted in the 1990s found the emotional lives and behaviour of children, the unseen stakeholders of work, were affected by their parents' careers. The specific examples found in research are related to work-to-family conflict. Children experienced more behavioural issues when their fathers were distracted by work tasks at home, parents were physically present but noticeably on a work device, and fathers were overly invested psychologically in their careers (Friedman, 2018). Matias and colleagues (2017) found work-to-family conflict reduced parents' psychological availability to their children. If a parent experienced work-to-family conflict, their child was more likely to find it difficult to express and manage their own emotions. While everyone's personal and whānau situation is different, it appears that the physical and mental health of the people a worker cares about can be negatively affected by experiences of conflict.

From a business perspective, the workplace is also impacted. Conflict can negatively affect performance, citizenship behaviours, satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career satisfaction, as well as increase turnover intentions and rates of absenteeism (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011). Given studies have found that work colleagues have similar experiences of emotions and burnout (Amstad & Semmer, 2011), and workers who experience high-demand cultures experience more conflict (Abendroth & Reimann, 2018), groups of workers may experience cycles of conflict at a similar time. Regardless of the source, or if conflict affects one worker or the whole organisation, businesses should take an interest. Work may further exacerbate the issue and increase the risks to workers. While some of the health issues mentioned are recognised as risks to physical and mental health, the other health behaviours have indirect impacts for fitness for work, performance, and engagement.



Enrichment and the impact for health and communities

Having a job reduces the risk of health issues, and work is generally good for health and wellbeing (The Royal Australasian College of Physicians, 2011). New Zealand research shows that on average people report better wellbeing if they are employed versus if they are unemployed (Stats NZ, 2020). Medical practitioners are encouraged to help people experiencing health issues to get back to work as work can promote physical activity, provide a sense of community and social inclusion, allow workers to contribute to their society and family, provide a routine and structure, give financial security and reduce the risk that people engage in other risky behaviours (The Royal Australasian College of Physicians, 2011).

Hammer and colleagues (2005) found if a worker experiences either work-to-family or family-to-work enrichment, their spouse was also likely to experience enrichment and reduce their risk of depression. Imagine what our communities would look like if every person that went to work could say “my involvement in work makes me feel happy and this helps me to be a better family member”. Research suggests that when a worker can say this, their spouse is more likely to have positive things to say about the worker’s job such as “I frequently feel my spouse’s job positively impacts the wellbeing of our family”, “I frequently feel my spouse/partner brings work home (either physical or emotional) in a way that positively impacts our family”, “I frequently feel my spouse’s job provides benefits to our family” and “I hope my spouse will work for his/her current organisation for a long time’. Not surprisingly, enrichment is also associated with higher marital satisfaction for both parties (Carlson, Thompson, Crawford, & Kacmar, 2019).

Unseen stakeholders of work can also be positively affected by work. Children’s emotional health appears to be better when their parents experience enrichment. The specific examples cited as being associated with children’s emotional health are parents seeing work a source of challenge, creativity and enjoyment, fathers rating their job performance and job satisfaction highly, mothers having authority, discretion and control at work, parents believing family should come first, and parents being physically available to their children (Friedman, 2018).

Several societal systems interact to affect health outcomes and research is limited on what interventions will effectively tackle the social detriments of health and health equalities. However, the work environment shows promise for being an effective medium for interventions focused on improving health, especially for disadvantaged groups (Bambra et al., 2010). Hochli and colleagues (2019) researched a bike-to-work campaign, where participants had to bike to work at least twice per week. Biking to work was associated with more cycling or physical activity in leisure time, and healthier eating habits as participants ate more fruits and vegetables. Interventions that focus on the psychosocial work environment by considering work design, work hours, work rotations, job control and job autonomy appear to enhance work-life balance and show potential for improving general health and impacting health inequalities amongst workers (Bambra et al., 2009). By taking a holistic approach that considers the individual health of the worker and the environment they work in, workplaces can be leveraged to influence work-related and non-work-related attitudes and behaviours to promote healthier societies (Carmichael, Fenton, Roncarancio, Sadhra, & Sing, 2016; Kindig & Isham, 2014).

Business or organisation roles in creating change

Engaging in activities that promote enrichment and decrease conflict can have a significant return on investment for organisations. Enrichment has been associated with increases in revenue, productivity, engagement, performance, organisational commitment, and discretionary effort. In contrast, conflict is associated with increases in financial costs, turnover intentions, and higher rates of absenteeism (Kelly et al., 2008). A business or organisation cannot control what a worker experiences outside of the workplace. However, they can influence it by creating work environments that promote enrichment as well offering practical and emotional support to minimise the risk impact of conflict. Workplace wellbeing interventions can vary in their success and workplace policies vary in their ability to have a positive impact (Kelly et al., 2008). However, when they focus on how workers interact with their work environment, they can promote wellbeing, reduce rates of health harm and reduce the impact of intense workloads and stress (Chillakuri & Vanka, 2020; Donald, Johnson, & Nguyen, 2019; Milllear, Liossis, Shochet, Biggs, & Donald, 2008; Spence, 2015).

Leadership and culture play a key role in promoting enrichment and minimising conflict. A culture that is innovative, supportive or promotes mastery is associated with more enrichment and reduced conflict, but a performance-driven culture is likely to promote both enrichment and conflict (Kopperud, Nerstad, & Dysvik, 2020). This suggests that a system that provides flexibility for an individualised approach is more effective. This aligns with research that has found correlations between spillover and work demands, work scheduling, supervisor support and social support (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011; Lapierre et al., 2018; Lott, 2020; Sok, Blomme, & Tromp, 2014; Wayne, Lemmon, Hoobler, Cheung, & Wilson, 2017). Insightful and informed leaders who can empower individuals, provide autonomy, and offer practical and emotional support appear to be crucial in effectively managing spillover.

Spillover and the effects of spillover can be measured through qualitative and quantitative measurements (Galizzi & Whitmarsh, 2019; Hanson, Hammer, & Colton, 2006). However, perhaps a place to start is by facilitating conversations with workers, and asking questions like:

- What impact does work have on your personal/whānau life? Does it help or hinder other activities?
- What challenges do you face managing your work and personal/whānau life?
- What can we do at work to support you in your personal/whānau life?
- How can we give you more autonomy when scheduling your work?

Taking an interest and genuinely caring about workers has the potential to promote the health of workers, families, workplaces, and reduce the health inequities in society.

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