

# **Work-Life Balance in the Modern Workplace**

## **Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Work-Family Research, Law and Policy**

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Wolters Kluwer

*Published by:*

Kluwer Law International B.V.  
PO Box 316  
2400 AH Alphen aan den Rijn  
The Netherlands  
Website: [www.wolterskluwerlr.com](http://www.wolterskluwerlr.com)

*Sold and distributed in North, Central and South America by:*

Wolters Kluwer Legal & Regulatory U.S.  
7201 McKinney Circle  
Frederick, MD 21704  
United States of America  
Email: [customer.service@wolterskluwer.com](mailto:customer.service@wolterskluwer.com)

*Sold and distributed in all other countries by:*

Quadrant  
Rockwood House  
Haywards Heath  
West Sussex  
RH16 3DH  
United Kingdom  
Email: [international-customerservice@wolterskluwer.com](mailto:international-customerservice@wolterskluwer.com)

*Printed on acid-free paper.*

ISBN 978-90-411-8630-0

e-Book: ISBN 978-90-411-8648-5  
web-PDF: ISBN 978-90-411-8649-2

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Printed in the United Kingdom.

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## Foreword

Work-life balance has always been a complex field of study, and it involves researchers from many different disciplines. It is hard enough even to get agreement on the correct term to use, much less how to apply it in practice. Although the term ‘work-life balance’ is widely used in both academic circles and policy discussions, there are many other terms in use as well. For example, some scholars feel that work-life balance is an unattainable state of being, and thus prefer ‘work-life integration’, ‘work-life fit’, or some similar construction. Other authors don’t use the term ‘life’ at all, but rather prefer to focus on the ‘family’, as in the terms ‘work-family balance’, ‘work and family reconciliation’, and similar constructs. Still others prefer more negative terms, such as work-life or work-family ‘conflict’, ‘interference’, and ‘spillover’, among others. Regardless of the terminology used, however, most scholars are still talking about the same fundamental phenomenon – the relationship between paid work in all of its various forms and personal life, which includes family but is not limited to it. And of course, gender permeates nearly every aspect of research in this wide-ranging field.

Traditionally, work-life balance research has tended to focus on time – and with good reason. A large body of research from many different disciplines has shown that excessively long hours of work have negative effects on work-life balance, work-family conflict, and even more fundamentally, human health, well-being, and even life itself – such as *karōshi*, which is the Japanese word for death from overwork. Clearly, however, there are other important issues as well. One need look no further than the rise of various forms of ‘marginal’ part-time work with very short working hours and ‘on call’ work, such as ‘zero-hours’ contracts, that have no guaranteed hours at all. These developments have reinforced and expanded longstanding concerns regarding the adequacy of workers’ earnings – including those working in various forms of casual work and in the informal economies of many developing countries – and they have obvious implications for their ability to achieve any kind of meaningful work-life balance. On top of that, we have also seen a rise in highly variable and unpredictable work schedules, so-called ‘just-in-time scheduling’, in many developed countries. Such schedules obviously wreak havoc on workers’ ability to plan even the most basic aspects of their personal lives.

As if work-life balance wasn't already complex enough, the boundary between paid work and personal life is becoming more and more blurred. New Information and Communications Technologies (New ICTs), such as smartphones and tablet computers, have revolutionized everyday work and life in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, they enable constant connection with friends and family, as well as with work colleagues and supervisors; on the other hand, paid work may increasingly intrude into the time periods and physical spaces normally reserved for personal life. Crucial to this development is the detachment of work from traditional office spaces. Twenty-first century work is often supported by internet connections, and thus can be done from basically anywhere and at any time. This new independence of work from place changes the role of technology in the work environment dramatically. Scholars are increasingly concerned with the advantages and disadvantages of New ICTs for a variety of different aspects of working conditions, including work-life balance.

Work-life balance is also a complex domain for policymaking as well. Of course, as with many areas of research, most policymakers simply don't have the time to get up to speed regarding the latest developments in work-life balance research. Also, many researchers don't have the inclination to focus very much on the policy implications of their research. And even if policymakers are inclined towards legal and regulatory solutions – which are increasingly difficult to enact in a world dominated by a neoliberal discourse – there are many aspects of work-life balance policies that simply can't be addressed through national legislation. For example, one can enact a law providing paid leave, but such a law can't require colleagues to be supportive of workers taking such leave. Rather, effective work-life balance policies may require social dialogue at national, sectoral and enterprise levels to provide frameworks for action, and then policies at the workplace level to create concrete actions that are adapted to the needs and preferences of workers and the particular circumstances of each organization.

This volume brings together a wide range of scholars from a number of different academic disciplines, presenting their research findings regarding various aspects of work-life balance and the implications of those findings for policies at all levels (national, sectoral, enterprise, workplace) to improve the balance between paid work and personal life. It is my sincere hope that it can make an important contribution to a better work-life balance for workers in various jobs and occupations and with different personal circumstances, needs, and preferences.

*Jon C. Messenger\**  
*International Labour Office*  
*Geneva*

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\* The opinions shared in this foreword represent the personal views of the author and does not constitute an endorsement of these opinions by the ILO.



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