

OPINION PIECE

Taking a new approach to work-life balance amid COVID-19 – UP prof offers employees and employers pointers

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While the challenge of maintaining a work-life balance is not a novel concept for many employees and employers alike – over the years, a rise in the usage of technology has blurred the boundary between work and family – working from home during COVID-19 has come with a new set of challenges that demand a new approach to remote working.

Extensive research has been done with regard to work-life balance. The prevalent notion is that employees find that demands of family life and work life to be in conflict. As a result, employees could experience an overall decrease in their wellbeing. Employers have therefore introduced various strategies, such as working flexible hours or working from home. Overall, research indicates that such strategies are highly effective and can help employees juggle the demands of work and home, thereby maintaining a better work-life balance.

But organisations are currently facing an unprecedented situation, having to do business amid the COVID-19 crisis. While many employees are familiar with working from home, enforced lockdown is a unique situation that needs an entirely different kind of insight and approach. Working from home during lockdown and COVID-19 can be described as highly unique and stressful, due to various factors that influence employees' ability to work as they did before.

Before lockdown, with the support of domestic workers or child-minders, employees could give undivided attention to their work while being at home during the day. They were able to structure their workday because various role players gave them dedicated support that was fixed and predictable. For instance, employed parents knew they had most of the morning to focus on work, and so were prepared for interruptions in the afternoons when their children came home from school. Furthermore, working from home meant they had uninterrupted work time, without colleagues dropping in for a chat, or having to attend ad-hoc meetings. Even those employees who did not have domestic support were able to plan their house chores and work times. They had only their own schedule to consider when operating from home, and could structure their daily house chores according to their timetables and work demands, which often created fixed daily routines in and around the house.

However, in the current work-from-home scenario during lockdown, employees lack such flexibility, control and support. House chores are piling up as many domestic workers have left or are unable to work. Daily fixed routines for chores are something of the past, as employees are not the only individual at home during the day any longer. Many are also experiencing an increase in parental responsibilities: parents are confronted 24/7 with the demands of their children and have to take on the role of teacher.

Pointers for employers

Employers need to be sensitive to such a novel situation. Working from home requires new work-family negotiations and boundaries to be established. When supporting the workforce in maintaining a work-life balance during lockdown, employers should do the following:

1. Acknowledge that your employees' work-home situation has changed. Such an understanding will require a more personal and individual-based approach to employee management. Be more attentive to each employee's situation and how it is changing and influencing his/her ability to work. In this sense, personal relationships between supervisors and colleagues should be encouraged. Through relation-building interventions, employees will be able to offer and receive support from one another. Furthermore, it is important to train supervisors to help employees manage their schedules and conflicts, and redesign their work responsibilities to support the new work-life demands.
2. Understand that employees are finding it more challenging than before to establish boundaries between their work and personal spheres. Be aware that employees currently live and work within the same physical *and* emotional space. This means they are dealing with various emotional demands from children and/or spouses, which exceed the demands of colleagues during a normal workday. Ignoring or postponing these demands during working hours is not always possible, and could result in unplanned interruptions of their schedules and work outputs. The key here is to manage expectations.
3. There is fluidity in employees' work schedules due to unforeseen home/child responsibilities and demands. Be prepared to renegotiate more realistic work goals and schedules, leaving room for alterations. The keyword here is "negotiate". Also remember to take an individual approach – every employee has unique home circumstances and demands. Take these into account when negotiating the new terms for working from home.
4. Providing emotional support by showing appreciation and understanding will go a long way. This means respecting the time of your employees. Avoid scheduling unnecessary Zoom meetings if the matter can be communicated as effectively via email. Meetings should not run past the scheduled time. The mere fact that employees are online and can continue with the meeting does not imply they do not have other commitments.

Pointers for employees

As an employee, you also have a duty to understand your new role and responsibilities.

1. Acknowledge that matters are different at home, so alleviate pressure by not expecting the same type of productivity or outputs as before. It is crucial to comprehend your additional responsibilities at home, which are beyond your control. Also acknowledge that the continuity of work might be compromised at times. The key is to manage your expectations by avoiding pressure on yourself to maintain similar or higher outputs. It is, however, as important to keep your employer informed of any changed circumstances and possible delays in work outputs.
2. The way in which you scheduled your workday at home before will not necessarily apply in these new circumstances. You need for a more fluid work schedule. Consider your circumstances and additional responsibilities, then try to establish a schedule that will accommodate your work needs and that of your household and family members. Developing a schedule will provide a form of security and structure for yourself and your family. Furthermore, be open to the idea that even this more fluid work schedule will not be the same each day – a schedule that worked on a specific day or week might not be suitable the next day or week. Remain resilient and adjust your schedule as necessary.
3. You are only as effective as you allow yourself to be – so stop pressurising yourself to do and achieve more. Be true to your abilities, given your unique circumstances. That way, you will be able to find a new way of working that suits you. Although your employers do not always want to hear this, your own wellbeing and that of your family takes priority.

4. When you do find allocated time to work, do the work as effectively as possible and avoid postponing any task. Optimise the time you have to work. Likewise, when you engage in parental activities, such as helping the kids with their schoolwork, do so without feeling guilty or thinking about work. It can also be helpful to utilise recovery strategies, such as exercising or mastering new skills such as painting.

Establishing a “new normal” and reconceptualising working from home amid change is crucial. Role players must find a structure and a manner of working that is beneficial to both employee and employers. Such restructuring will be key to managing the work-life balance from both sides.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa’s research-intensive universities, UP launched the Future Africa Campus in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of ‘science for transformation’.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za