

The Business Brain

## The real cost of upsetting the work-life balance

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If your eyes glaze over when you hear the phrase "work-life balance," you can't be blamed for being an insensitive brute – at least, not at first. In many workplaces, this overused expression is second only to "thinking outside the box" in meaning anything you want. But I bet you'd snap to attention if you saw twice as many employees taking disability leave since the arrival of a new manager obsessed with benchmarks.

A connection between bad bosses and bad health has long been suspected but has been hard to confirm. Now, new research shows that a manager's approach to work-life balance predicts just how likely his or her employees are to have a heart attack or a stroke – catastrophic events that cost \$25-billion a year, according to the Conference Board of Canada.

That sum includes disability benefits, hospital care and drugs, but doesn't come close to measuring the human costs – the family relationships, expertise, and human capital lost when an employee burns out or, worse, dies prematurely.

Ratios of two to six times the likelihood of multiple cardiovascular risk factors were found in workers whose managers were rigid about work-family conflicts, according to the study, published by Lisa Berkman, a professor of epidemiology at Harvard University; Orfeu Buxton, a neuroscientist at Harvard Medical School; and their colleagues.

The study of almost 400 health-care workers and their managers found that inflexible managerial practices predicted – with startling accuracy – the cardiovascular status and sleep patterns of staff.

"Managers who think that work is work and home is home, and that employees must leave family issues at home when they come to work," are the ones most likely to put employees at risk, Dr. Buxton said. "We think that inflexible managers are causing them [the employees] to sleep less, and that also increases their cardiovascular risk."

Workers who were supervised by inflexible managers were twice as likely to accumulate multiple risk factors as other employees, and the odds increased to six times the risk for those working directly with patients. The manager and employees worked in nursing homes, which Dr. Buxton calls a "boom industry" that is sure to grow in size and in the range of demands placed on staff in coming years.

Other research also links workplace pressures to heart disease. A 15-year Danish study of 12,000 nurses found that the more the nurses struggled with inflexible schedules and managers, the more likely they were to have a heart attack. Interestingly, the danger was most acute for nurses under 50.

The question is what to do with this volatile information, especially at a time when many people –workers and employers alike –feel it's a privilege simply to be employed. Given the massive costs involved, doing nothing is riskier than teaching managers how to help their employees. And training programs need not be expensive.

In a 2008 issue of the Harvard Business Review, for example, Ellen Ernst Kossek, a professor of organizational behaviour at Michigan State University, described training supermarket managers on how to provide support to staff. She found that a 30-minute computer tutorial followed by a 75-minute, face-to-face discussion with managers was all it took to improve blood pressure levels, heart rates, quality of sleep and job attitudes in their employees.

Some might call that thinking outside the box. I call it a good idea.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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