Enhancing work-life balance through physical and recreational activities

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Abstract: The interplay between professional and personal life significantly impacts individual well-being, making work-life balance an essential topic of study. This research investigates how individuals maintain equilibrium between these domains, with a focus on physical and recreational activities as balancing strategies. Using a qualitative exploratory design, semi-structured interviews with 12 respondents in Bihor, Romania, revealed diverse attitudes, behaviors, and strategies for achieving work-life balance. Participants highlighted the pivotal role of physical activity, mindfulness, and clear boundaries between work and family life. Barriers to balance included limited time, stress, and professional demands, which adversely affect physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, and job performance. Respondents reported using strategies such as outdoor activities, exercise, and mindfulness to mitigate stress, enhance energy, and foster well-being. The findings underscore the necessity of individual and organizational initiatives to support work-life balance, suggesting that physical and recreational activities are not only stress alleviators but also boosters of productivity and quality of life. Future research should expand on the sample size and explore organizational interventions to enrich our understanding of effective work-life balance strategies.

Keywords: work-life balance, physical activity, recreational practices, stress management, well-being

Introduction

Professional and personal life represent two major and interconnected domains in an adult's life (Zhang et al., 2012). Work provides personal fulfillment and serves as a critical social component for building relationships, receiving support, and

achieving professional goals. Simultaneously, individuals establish families, creating another area requiring active engagement, which is family life. In cases where children are present, individuals must also participate in their education and upbringing. Within these domains, through various roles, responsibilities, and commitments in a constantly changing society, individuals must strive to find balance.

The conceptualization of the term "work-family balance" is varied across the literature (Brough et al., 2020) and reflects the integrative perspective of this relationship (Buliga & Turliuc, 2012). The term is defined as the extent to which a person can effectively manage the time, emotions, and behaviors required by both professional tasks and family responsibilities at the same time (Kirchmeyer, 2000; Collins & Shaw, 2003; Greenhaus et al., 2018; Brough et al., 2020). Definitions emphasize the equal distribution of resources across work and personal life (Greenhaus et al., 2003). Work-family balance is often associated with the absence of role conflicts or a minimal conflict between work and nonwork roles (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Clark, 2000; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Sirgy & Lee, 2018). As the definitions show, the output generated from this positive balance is the high level of satisfaction felt by individuals engaging in performing their roles (Greenhaus et al., 2003; Rusu, 2018; Sirgy & Lee, 2018)

Conversely, conflict between personal and professional life is considered a hallmark of modern society, particularly in developed countries characterized by fast-paced lifestyles and heightened work and family pressures. The definition of the term work-family conflict encompasses the mutually incompatible responsibilities and role requirements emerging from both areas of work and family (Mihelič & Tekavčič, 2014). Individuals may struggle to meet stringent and numerous work requirements while allocating sufficient time to family responsibilities. The combined pressures of work and overlapping family role demands can negatively impact individual well-being and interpersonal relationships (Mihelič & Tekavčič, 2014), affect marital and family satisfaction because of poor communication between partners (Wu et al., 2010; Clark & May, 2013), and are negatively associated with life satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2012). Furthermore, higher level of such conflict lowers individuals` organizational commitment (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998), and affects behavior within the work setting (Mihelič & Tekavčič, 2014).

Studies have shown that an imbalanced work-life relationship is a stress factor for individuals and leads to poor physical health (Frone, 2000; Lunau et al., 2014). Research has highlighted various effects in individuals experiencing this work-family imbalance, such as increased blood pressure, headaches and fatigue (Frone et al., 1997). Also, individuals tend to become obese because they lack time and energy to exercise (Grzywacz, 2000). Work-family conflict causes also psychological consequences at individual level, such as mood disorder (Frone, 2000), emotional exhaustion (Zhang et al., 2012), or burnout (Blanch & Aluja, 2012). Burnout differs by manifesting as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Best et al., 2005 quoted by Capotescu, 2006).

Lack of balance between work and family determines individuals to feel inadequate or unfulfilled in different life aspects, or with life in general (Netemeyer et al., 1996). Therefore, this imbalance hinders individuals` ability to achieve goals

and feel accomplished in life, and impacts both personal and professional spheres, with effects ranging from physical and mental health to productivity and interpersonal relationships. Thus, achieving work-family balance is essential for overall well-being and a fulfilling life.

Physical and recreational activities – Strategies for ensuring work-family balance

Literature still lacks studies focusing on individual-level strategies for achieving work-life balance and satisfaction. However, recent studies addressed this issue and explains how individuals can achieve both work and family goals by applying four action strategies: allocating resources, changing resources and barriers, sequencing goals, and revising goals (Hirschi & Shockely, 2019). Sometimes, individual strategies for achieving work-family balance are largely related to self-care. The notion of self-care often promoted in the media typically involves indulgent moments, such as enjoying a dessert or a drink, going out, getting a massage, or visiting a beauty salon. However, specialized literature suggests that this popular understanding of self-care is misleading. While such activities can be part of a routine, true self-care should involve a deeper dimension, focusing on introspection. When imbalances are identified in various areas of life, necessary changes must be made to restore balance, meaning, purpose, and fulfillment (Gobin, 2022).

In today's fast-paced society, individuals often neglect their physical well-being, prioritizing other responsibilities and roles over their physical needs. Coupled with increasing consumerism, this leads to worsening physical and mental health (Pemberton, 2016; Papp et al., 2019; Erdely et al., 2020; Giurgiu et al., 2024). Among various ways individuals can manage the dynamics between work and family in order to achieve balance, literature highlights also practice related to maintaining and increasing physical and mental health. Specialists recommend adults should engage in 2.5 to 5 hours of moderate exercise per week to accelerate heart rate (Gobin, 2022). Examples include cycling, swimming, brisk walking, gardening, running, boxing, hiking, and tennis. These activities particularly improve cardiovascular health. Recent studies show that physical activity enhances work-life balance (Bhatti & Alnehabi, 2023), and has positive effects on work ability (Arvidson et al., 2013). Establishing healthy exercise habits is crucial. Researcher has shown that health-related habits typically require 2–5 months to develop, but depends on the individual (Singh et al., 2024). New habits are easier to implement when attached to existing routines. For instance, cycling to work, parking farther from the destination, or replacing coffee meetings with activities like swimming or tennis can integrate physical activity into daily life.

In addition to physical exercise, mental health strategies, such as mindfulness, play a critical role in balancing work and personal life among employees (Michel et al., 2014; Brough et al., 2020; Trombeta et al., 2024). Mindfulness helps regulate attention and calm the mind, reducing the impact of negative experiences and stressors. The nervous system adapts based on individual experiences, a concept known as experience-dependent neuroplasticity (Hanson & Hanson, 2018). To practice mindfulness, individuals should consciously redirect attention to the

present, using routines like walking to work and observing the surroundings, which also aids brain oxygenation. These individual-level practices, combined with a balanced diet and proper hydration, lead to self-control, a sense of mastery over life, and a healthier relationship between professional and personal life.

Moreover, organizations can and must implement policies to enhance employees` work-life balance, because a balanced employee is also a productive one. Both employees and employers can benefit from these practices. Organizational practices may include adjusting breaks and rest periods, avoiding excessively long work hours, facilitating the fulfillment of family responsibilities (International Labour Organization, 2016) and offering non-material benefits that promote physical and mental well-being, such as free gym memberships or psychological counseling. Therefore, among others, organizational leisure benefits can enhance employees` work-life balance (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020; Strassburger et al., 2023).

Methodology

The study aims to investigate the behaviors, attitudes, and strategies employed by individuals active in the labor market to achieve a balance between personal and professional life. This topic is essential for better understanding the factors influencing employees' physical and mental well-being and for developing effective interventions to promote balance in daily life.

The primary objective of the research is to identify and describe the strategies individuals adopt to balance their professional and personal lives. To this end, the study explores individuals' opinions, behaviors, and attitudes regarding the creation and implementation of strategies for personal balance in both family and professional contexts.

Secondary research objectives are as follows:

Objective 1: Describe the personal and professional situation and the dynamics of the work-family relationship.

Objective 2: Identify and describe the factors influencing work-life balance.

Objective 3: Identify the strategies implemented at the individual level to ensure work-family balance.

Objective 4: Describe the effects of work-family balance strategies on physical and mental well-being.

This exploratory-descriptive study employed a qualitative research strategy, using individual sociological interviews as the primary method of data collection. Qualitative research methods are commonly used in social and human sciences to deeply explore and understand social phenomena, behaviors, experiences, and perspectives. This approach focuses on collecting and analyzing non-numeric data, such as texts, interviews, observations, and visual materials, allowing for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the analyzed subjects (Mărginean, 2004).

The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide. In semi-structured interviews, "*only the discussion themes are pre-established and listed in a summary interview guide*" (Krausz & Stegar, 2007, p. 140). The guide was structured around three main thematic dimensions related to work-life balance among employees. These dimensions are crucial for understanding how individuals perceive

and manage work-life balance and the factors influencing it. The three thematic dimensions are:

1. Work-family dynamics and perceptions of work-life balance.
2. Determinants of work-family balance.
3. Strategies for ensuring work-family balance and their effects.

The research universe consists of active individuals in the labor market, specifically those aged 18 to 65 residing in Bihor County, Romania. From this population, 12 participants were randomly selected using the snowball sampling method. This method involves initially selecting a few known individuals, applying the interview guide, and then asking these individuals to identify others who meet the research criteria and are willing to participate (Babbie, 2010).

Data analysis

The research included 12 participants, of whom 8 were females and 4 males. Most respondents came from urban areas, had higher education, were employed in diverse sectors, and ranged in age from 21 to 53. Table 1 provides a detailed socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of respondents

Profession	Age	Gender	Education	Rural/Urban
R1: Commercial worker	45 years old	female	General school	Urban
R2: Professor	27 years old	female	Master	Urban
R3: Automotive wiring operator	34 years old	female	Highschool, 10 grades	Rural
R4: Socrates coordinator	28 years old	female	Master	Urban
R5: Assistant manager	21 years old	female	Bachelor	Urban
R6: Forestry engineer	31 years old	male	Master	Urban
R7: Radio announcer	27 years old	female	Master	Urban
R8: Forestry engineer	34 years old	male	Master	Urban
R9: Warehouse operator	30 years old	male	Highschool	Urban
R10: Service woman, trams	53 years old	female	Highschool, 10 grades	Urban
R11: Computer programming engineer	29 years old	male	Bachelor	Rural
R12: Sales and logistics department coordinator	32 years old	female	Master	Urban

The data obtained in the research were analyzed narratively, following the thematic dimensions based on which the interview guide was developed. The main results of the research are presented below.

Results
Work-family dynamics and perception of work-life balance

Regarding how individuals view their professional and family situation, as well as personal balance, the responses varied, but it is notable that most respondents could not provide a concrete meaning for the concept of work-family balance or personal balance. From most responses, it emerges that personal balance refers to having clearly defined boundaries between work and personal life.

"*As a state or way of life that allows me to achieve a balance between working and having a life outside of work*" (warehouse operator).

Respondents were also asked to assess their level of satisfaction with their personal life. The data indicates a variety of perceptions and levels of satisfaction, with different degrees and nuances observed in this regard.

"*It could be better, but I can say that I am satisfied with my personal life and the relationship I have with my children*" (commercial worker).

"*Family life fulfills me*" (teacher).

"*I am very satisfied in all aspects*" (assistant manager).

"*If you asked me to rate it on a scale from 1 to 10, I would say somewhere around 8 or 9. I don't know if anyone can say they have a perfect 10 family or personal life. But we strive every day to get as high as possible*" (warehouse operator).

"*On a scale from 1 to 10, I would say even 10*" (logistics coordinator, sales).

The responses reflect, on one hand, a real awareness of the current level of satisfaction with family life, and on the other hand, there is also a desire from respondents to continue contributing to increasing their satisfaction in this regard. Synthesizing the responses, we observe that most respondents have a relatively high level of satisfaction with their personal life/family life.

Regarding respondents' satisfaction with their professional life, a variety of perceptions stand out, reflecting both satisfaction and dissatisfaction at the workplace and in professional life. Various levels of satisfaction related to working conditions and the professional context were identified.

A general trend observed is the expression of moderate satisfaction or a desire for improvement in professional life. Some respondents expressed strong dissatisfaction with the professional context. Certain respondents mentioned frustrations related to the high workload and constant pressure felt in the work environment. One respondent state that they are not at all satisfied at work due to "too many tasks, short breaks, and too low of a salary" (auto wiring operator), highlighting the perceived discrepancy between effort expended and financial reward.

Additionally, one respondent provides a perspective on the impact of the economic and professional context on personal satisfaction:

"*I was affected by the wave of layoffs in the IT sector. Because the market is such that no hiring is taking place, I had to temporarily change fields and accept a lower salary in a field completely different from what I was used to*" (warehouse operator).

However, there were also responses that highlighted positive aspects of the work environment, with a higher level of professional satisfaction being noted. For example, one respondent mentions that they are "*satisfied with the workplace, although sometimes it can be very exhausting*" (teacher). This suggests that, despite challenges, respondents recognize and emphasize the benefits present at the workplace, indicating a high level of satisfaction related to the professional environment.

Determinants of work-family balance

The responses from the participants reflect that it is difficult to admit there are issues in managing professional stress and that family life suffers as a result. A small number of respondents, four people, stated that work-related issues do not affect how

they perform their household and family duties, but the majority declared that workplace problems negatively influence their family life. These primarily manifest as tensions in the family, high levels of nervousness and irritability, as well as fatigue, which hinder the completion of household tasks.

"*Yes, well, if I have to finish a project or there is pressure from my employer, these things end up affecting my family life and I become more stressed and snap much more easily*" (radio announcer).

Regarding the interference of family problems in carrying out work tasks, the responses were equally split; half of the respondents said that family issues do not influence how they perform their tasks at work, while the other six respondents stated that family problems interfere with how they carry out their professional activities.

Synthesizing the responses, it became clear that the relationship with the partner and, in cases where couples have children, with the children is essential for personal balance. The responses reflected that personal balance, support, and understanding from the partner, as well as a lack of conflict, determine the adequate completion of tasks at work. Additionally, the research data highlighted the importance of relationships with friends, which positively influence personal balance and contribute to reducing stress and improving mood. Furthermore, advice and support from friends can provide the confidence needed to overcome professional challenges.

In contrast, the perception of relationships with colleagues at work is varied. While some respondents report positive relationships with colleagues that contribute to a pleasant and cooperative work environment, others describe negative experiences, mentioning stress caused by perceived inequalities at work and interpersonal conflicts. These strained relationships with colleagues can undermine the desired balance between professional and personal life. An interesting aspect is how respondents manage relationships that do not positively contribute to their personal balance: many choose to end relationships that could be detrimental to their balance, emphasizing the importance of selectivity in maintaining mental and emotional health.

One of the factors that significantly influence work-family balance and the management of these two important life domains is time. The lack of time emerged as a major difficulty, negatively affecting family relationships and the respondents' ability to handle personal and professional tasks. The analysis of the responses indicates that respondents desire more free time for personal activities, but without indicating major difficulties in this regard in their current situation.

On the other hand, both physical and mental fatigue, directly related to accumulated stress at work, is another significant barrier. The heavy workload and deadlines contribute to increased stress levels and hinder relaxation. Specific work-related issues, such as frequent travel and communication difficulties within the family, also influence maintaining the balance between professional and personal life.

The analysis of the data shows that the main difficulties in maintaining work-family balance are related to insufficient time, accumulated fatigue, and professional

stress. These factors highlight the need for effective time and stress management strategies to improve the balance between professional and personal life.

Strategies implemented for ensuring work-family balance

Respondents were asked to describe the methods they use to ensure and maintain a balance between work and personal life. The most common methods adopted by the subjects for maintaining work-family balance were: "nature walks," "prayer," "music," "vacations," and "exercise," reflecting the importance of physical and recreational activities in managing the stress that may arise from the imbalance between professional and personal life.

A considerable number of respondents (8) emphasized the importance of physical activities and time spent outdoors. Nature outings, walks, physical exercises, and recreational activities are considered essential for reducing stress and recharging. Spiritual practices are other frequently mentioned methods for maintaining balance. Respondents view prayer as an effective way to find inner peace and calm down. Additionally, music is a popular method for creating a sense of well-being and relaxing. Listening to music is described as an activity that gives respondents a good feeling, indicating the positive impact of music on their mood.

These responses reflect a variety of strategies for maintaining work-life balance, ranging from physical and recreational activities to spiritual practices and a clear separation of the two life domains. Adopting these methods is driven by the need to reduce stress and increase individual well-being both physically and mentally, highlighting the diversity of individual approaches to managing the balance between professional and personal life.

Going deeper, we sought to analyze how these strategies influence respondents' personal lives and professional performance. Several recurring themes and ideas can be observed. Many respondents emphasize that the methods they use give them more energy, increase their motivation to work, and create an overall sense of well-being. This energy gained through the above-mentioned methods and strategies contributes to better workplace performance, eliminating apathy and increasing productivity.

Respondents claim that physical and recreational activities, such as sports, walks in nature, playing with children, and listening to music, have a positive effect on their well-being and professional performance. These activities not only offer relaxation but also stimulate positive thinking, a relaxed mindset, and a higher energy level, thereby facilitating the completion of work tasks.

"*They helped me have a positive, relaxed mindset, and then, if I have this state, I can more easily accomplish my tasks at work*" (Socrates coordinator).

The research data indicates clear positive effects of the practices and strategies implemented, highlighting various individual benefits achieved through the separation of professional life from personal life and engaging in recreational activities. The practice of these strategies is reflected in the respondents' improved personal relationships. The majority of respondents emphasize the positive impact of work-family balance on their physical health and overall well-being. Terms like "positive" and "better" are frequently used to describe the beneficial effects, increased energy, and overall well-being.

However, two respondents highlighted specific health issues that make it difficult for them to maintain a balance between professional and personal life. One respondent describes a "*fragile health condition*" (forestry engineer) that complicates the process of balancing work with family life and maintaining personal balance. Due to the demanding nature of the work, physical wear and tear have occurred, with the respondent mentioning knee problems that require surgery. Another respondent stated that, due to not maintaining a balance between work and personal life, they faced health issues but now try to prioritize their health and ensure a healthier dynamic between professional and family life.

Discussions and conclusions

The imbalance between professional and personal life can have a strongly negative impact on an individual's physical and mental health. In this regard, the results of our research are consistent with other studies that detail the effects of the lack of such balance, especially when maintained for a longer period, on individual health and well-being (Frone, 2000; Lunau et al., 2014; Mihelič & Tekavčič, 2014). The study highlighted that challenges generated by professional stress can disrupt personal balance, emphasizing the need for effective stress management strategies. There is always room for improvement, even if certain aspects of professional life may interfere with personal life, or vice versa, situations that may affect the maintenance of the work-life balance. Therefore, the strategies that individuals adopt are essential.

The strategies for ensuring and maintaining a balance between work and personal life, identified through the study, reflect the diversity of individual needs and preferences. Physical and recreational activities, such as nature walks and exercise, are considered crucial for reducing stress and restoring physical and mental energy. An active lifestyle is highlighted as an essential element in maintaining work-family balance in the literature (Bhatti & Alnehabi, 2023). Additionally, spiritual and mindfulness practices and music are effective in creating a sense of well-being at an individual level (Trombeta et al., 2024). Therefore, the diversity of strategies used contributes significantly to individual well-being. Moreover, consistency in applying these strategies is crucial for maintaining these positive effects, while deviations may temporarily affect the quality of personal life. Furthermore, the clear separation between personal and professional life is seen as an essential practice for maintaining work-family balance. The benefits observed from implementing these strategies at an individual level include improved interpersonal relationships, a general sense of calm, lower stress levels, and improved workplace performance. Maintaining the balance between professional and personal life is a complex challenge, often involving sacrifices and considerable efforts from individuals. The fatigue associated with managing this balance is often inevitable, but ensuring the balance is essential for maintaining health and harmony in both spheres of life. An active lifestyle can significantly contribute to ensuring work-family balance, which has long-term beneficial effects and enhances general individual well-being. Therefore, frequent engagement in physical and recreational activities can be an appropriate strategy for each individual's personal balance.

Interviewing a larger number of respondents, and selecting respondents only

from Bihor County, are some of the limitations of this study. However, these current limitations can serve as starting points for future research directions. Among these, a quantitative approach to this topic could bring new data and results that could contribute to a broader understanding of the phenomenon studied. Another research direction could be the analysis of the effectiveness of work-family balance strategies adopted at the organizational level. In an organizational context, investigating the effects of stimulating employees by offering more opportunities to be involved in physical and recreational activities on their work-family dynamics could be a relevant research objective.

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