

Working to live or living to work?

Work/life balance early in the career

Jane Sturges and David Guest

The Management Centre, King's College London

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This article reports the findings of research that explored relationships between work/life balance, work/non-work conflict, hours worked and organisational commitment among a sample of graduates in the early years of their career. It concludes that, although graduates seek work/life balance, their concern for career success draws them into a situation where they work increasingly long hours and experience an increasingly unsatisfactory relationship between home and work. The article discusses the causes and potential consequences of this predicament and in particular how work/non-work conflict is linked to hours worked, the state of the psychological contract and organisational commitment. It highlights the role of organisations' policy and practice in helping to manage the relationship between work and non-work and the development of organisational commitment through support for younger employees' lives out-of-work and effective management of aspects of the psychological contract.

Contact: Jane Sturges, The Management Centre, King's College London, 150 Stamford Street, London SE1 9NN. Email: jane.sturges@kcl.ac.uk

There has been growing interest among both academics and practitioners in the issue of work/life balance. This is doubtless a consequence of the fact that many UK employees work long hours – men in full-time jobs, in particular, work longer hours than those in any other European country (DTI, 2002). Furthermore, there is evidence from academic research that generational values differ (eg Smola and Sutton, 2002) and that young people today emphasise achievement of work/life balance more than their predecessors (Lewis *et al*, 2002). If this is the case, then organisations need to understand how any perceived 'imbalance' or conflict between work and non-work arises and by what means it might be alleviated if they are to motivate and retain their younger employees.

This article contributes to the work/life balance and work/non-work conflict literature by reporting the findings of two studies, one quantitative and one qualitative, which examine the attitudes and experiences relating to work/life balance among UK graduates in the first 10 years of their careers. Specifically, the analysis explores the extent to which work/life balance matters, the extent to which it is being achieved and the factors that determine perceptions of work/non-work conflict, including the state of the psychological contract between employer and employee, work involvement and organisational support. The potential impact of work/non-work conflict on organisational commitment is examined, and the policy implications for employers considered.

WORK/NON-WORK BALANCE AND CONFLICT

For some time, it has been argued that achieving a 'balance' between home life and work life is increasingly a priority for many people. As long ago as the late 1980s, Scase and Goffee (1989) concluded that UK managers were becoming less interested in career

success as it has been traditionally understood and more interested in a career that enhances personal lifestyles that are separate from, rather than subordinated to, work roles. This is supported by Schein's latest research findings which show that growing numbers of people are endorsing a 'lifestyle' career anchor (Schein, 1996). This implies that their primary career objective is to balance and integrate their personal needs, their family needs and the requirements of their career.

A growing aspiration to balance work with other aspects of life can doubtless be linked to the long hours that many individuals have to devote to work. It is acknowledged that UK organisations have contributed to this by encouraging a long hours culture, to the extent that more than 20 per cent of the total workforce and a considerably higher proportion of managers and professionals work in excess of 48 hours a week (DTI, 2002). This culture is partly perceived to be the result of downsizing and the more demanding workloads with which those who remain in employment must contend (McGovern *et al*, 1998). There is good evidence to indicate that the intensity of work – reflected, among other things, in perceived workload – has increased in recent years, and that this increase in intensity has been greater in the UK than in other European countries (Green, 2001).

It has been suggested that the relationship between work and non-work may be even more important to young employees than it is to other groups of workers. It is argued that, as a cohort, young people wish to develop and manage their careers on their own terms, with an important part of this career individualism being the achievement of balance between the work and non-work aspects of their lives (Loughlin and Barling, 2001). This conclusion is supported by Lewis *et al* (2002) who, in a study of young peoples' values across four European countries including the UK, found evidence of a strong desire to lead a balanced lifestyle. In the USA Smola and Sutton (2002) concluded that younger people were less likely to feel that work should be an important part of life than those of the same age a generation earlier.

Work-life balance has been defined as 'satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict' (Clark, 2000: 751). As such, it is sometimes characterised by 'the absence of unacceptable levels of conflict between work and non-work demands' (Greenblatt, 2002: 179). Thus, when demands from the work and non-work domains are mutually incompatible, conflict may occur. For this reason, a lack of balance between work and non-work is commonly conceptualised as work/family conflict or work/non-work conflict (*eg* Frone *et al*, 1997; Parasuraman *et al*, 1996). Such conflict can occur both when work roles interfere with non-work roles and *vice versa*. The focus of this article is on the former relationship, as it considers work/life balance in the context of the impact of work on non-work.

It is important to note that most previous research has examined a specific conflict between work and family roles. However, it is increasingly accepted that a broader definition of the non-work dimension is required if it is to encompass individuals other than those with 'traditional' family responsibilities, such as caring for children or parents (Kossek and Ozeki, 1998). Therefore, following Wallace (1999), this article conceptualises the relationship as one of work/non-work conflict, not just work/family conflict.

It has been shown that the number of hours worked contributes directly to feelings of work/non-work conflict (*eg* Frone *et al*, 1997; Parasuraman *et al*, 1996). However, other variables are also likely to have an important influence on the degree of conflict that may be experienced. For example, it is probable that the psychological contract – defined as an individual's beliefs, shaped by the organisation, regarding terms of an implicit agreement between the individual and the organisation (Rousseau, 1995) – is linked to experience of

work/non-work conflict. A psychological contract emerges when the employee believes that 'a promise has been made and a consideration offered in exchange for it, binding the parties to some set of reciprocal obligations' (Rousseau, 1989: 123). Part of the employee's expectations that constitute the psychological contract may concern working hours and workload and the anticipated returns that are associated with this. If the psychological contract is breached in this regard, because individuals have to work longer hours than they had expected, then work/non-work conflict may be exacerbated (Guest, 1998).

Some previous studies have indicated that work involvement has a positive relationship with work/family conflict (eg Carlson and Perrewé, 1999; Adams *et al*, 1996). Other research, conversely, suggests that individuals who are highly involved in their work do not necessarily experience work/non-work conflict (eg Guest and Conway, 1998). The degree of work/non-work conflict reported by individuals is also likely to be affected by employers' attitude to employees' out-of-work responsibilities (Greenhaus, 1988). Carlson and Perrewé (1999) have demonstrated that a supportive culture at work can reduce the degree of work/family conflict individuals experience. A supportive culture has also been shown to enhance the perception that an organisation 'cares' about its employees (Lambert, 2000). There is a need for further elucidation of these relationships in the context of experience of work/non-work conflict by younger employees with fewer family responsibilities.

While some negative links have been established between experience of work/non-work conflict and organisational commitment (eg Kirchmeyer, 1995), again this relationship has yet to be fully explored, especially among individuals in the early years of employment. If work/non-work conflict undermines commitment early in the career, this is especially significant because the early years at work are considered to be a crucial time for the establishment of organisational commitment (eg Meyer and Allen, 1988); met expectations – for example, regarding workload – have been shown to be important for its establishment (Wanous *et al*, 1992). In addition, the pressure to demonstrate commitment by working long hours is likely to be strongest in the early stages of the career (Coffey, 1994), at the point when competition to succeed in the promotion tournament is fiercest (Rosenbaum, 1979).

In the light of this analysis, the aim of our study was to explore three main issues. These are:

- the extent to which graduates value and successfully achieve work/life balance
- the extent to which hours worked, work involvement, family responsibilities, the psychological contract and organisational support affect graduates' perceptions of work/non-work conflict
- the impact of work/non-work conflict on graduates' organisational commitment.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data was collected in two complementary research studies of graduate careers and graduate retention. Study A was a quantitative study which investigated the career-related attitudes of graduates in the first 10 years of their career. Study B was a qualitative study which explored issues affecting the organisational commitment of graduates with approximately three years' work experience, with the aim of building on the quantitative results and exploring what lay behind them.

In Study A, data was obtained from a sample of graduates who worked for five large UK organisations, four in the private sector and one in the public sector. Each organisation was asked to distribute questionnaires to up to 50 graduates or former graduate trainees in each of three cohorts. Given the numbers required, some of the

organisations sent questionnaires to all of their graduates in each of the cohorts, whereas others selected 50 from those employed in each of the cohorts. Cohort 1 consisted of new graduates, cohort 2 consisted of graduates with approximately three years' work experience when first surveyed, and graduates in cohort 3 had approximately eight years' work experience when they were first surveyed.

Data was collected at three points in time. Time 1 (T1): questionnaires were distributed to cohort 1 (new graduates) a month before they started work. Time 2 (T2): questionnaires were distributed to all three cohorts six months after T1. Time 3 (T3): questionnaires were sent to all three cohorts 12 months after T2. Organisations 1, 2, 3 and 4 participated in all stages of the study, while organisation 5 participated in stages 2 and 3 only.

A total of 161 usable questionnaires were received at T1, 434 at T2 and 280 at T3. The sample at T2 consisted of 169 graduates in cohort 1 (new graduates), 139 graduates in cohort 2 (three years' experience) and 126 graduates in cohort 3 (eight years' experience). At T3, the sample included 120 graduates in cohort 1, 78 graduates in cohort 2 and 80 graduates in cohort 3. Of this T3 sample, 56 per cent were single, 26 per cent were married and 18 per cent were living with a partner. A total of 14 per cent of the T3 sample had children. The graduates worked in a range of managerial functions, including general management, marketing, sales, finance and technical roles.

Study B was conducted in five different large organisations that recruit considerable numbers of graduates each year, chosen to mirror those in which the quantitative research was conducted: a public-sector organisation, a food manufacturer, a financial services company, a technical services company and a service organisation. The strategy of using different organisations for Study B was chosen in order to broaden the scope of the research and test the quantitative findings in different but related research settings. Each organisation was asked to select 12 graduates with around three years' experience to participate in the research. This cohort of graduates was chosen because most graduate training programmes last for between two and three years, and the period shortly after the end of a graduate training programme has been shown to be one when graduates' commitment to their employer may be particularly vulnerable (Perryman and Jagger, 1998).

The selection of the sample for Study B was made by the participating organisations, with the brief that it should be representative of the graduate intake for the year in which they were recruited in terms of sex, race and the type of work they did. In the event, a total of 50 graduates participated in the research. One of the organisations found it difficult to provide graduates to take part in the research, given their diverse geographic locations and their patterns of shift work, and only five of its graduates were interviewed. Twelve graduates were interviewed from one of the organisations, and 11 graduates from each of the other three. The sample consisted of 32 men and 18 women aged between 23 and 35. The graduates selected to take part in the research had all joined the graduate training programme that their organisation offered, and were still employed there three years after joining. When they were interviewed, most had finished their graduate training, although there were a few exceptions.

Measures

The items used in Study A included a number of conventional scales, plus a few single-item measures. Responses to all items were provided on five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 ('Strongly disagree') to 5 ('Strongly agree'), with the exception of organisational commitment, which was measured on a seven-point scale. The content of the questionnaire at each time point differed to some extent, but a number of items were common across two of the time points. Relevant background biographical data,

including age, gender and functional area of work, was collected at each time point. Information about marital status and children was collected at T3. At T1 and T2 a single item on a five-point scale asked about the importance of maintaining a balanced lifestyle (with 1 being 'Not at all important' and 5 being 'Highly important'). At T2 and T3 the graduates were asked to rate their agreement with the statement that they were satisfied with the work/life balance they had achieved. At T1, T2 and T3 the graduates were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement that they only worked 'standard office hours'. At T3 the graduates were asked to state their average hours worked each week.

At T3 a two-item scale was developed within a set of items exploring psychological contract fulfilment to measure the extent to which the graduates felt that their employer had kept promises and expectations regarding workload and working hours. Work/non-work conflict was measured at T3 using a six-item scale adapted from a measure developed by Frone and Yardley (1996). This measure was chosen because it reflects a range of out-of-work interests, not just those related to family responsibilities. Sample items included, 'After work, I come home too tired to do some of the things I'd like to do', 'My work takes up time I'd like to spend with family/friends' and 'On the job I have so much work that it detracts from my personal interests'.

At T3 work involvement was measured using Kanungo's (1982) six-item Work Involvement Questionnaire. Organisation support for out-of-work responsibilities was measured using a four-item scale developed by Kirchmeyer (1995). Organisational commitment was measured using Cook and Wall's (1980) nine-item scale. Responses for this measure were on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 ('Strongly disagree') to 7 ('Strongly agree').

Analysis

Means, standard deviations and correlations were calculated for the study variables used at T1, T2 and T3. One-way Anovas were used where appropriate to analyse the differences in the means obtained for the three cohorts at each time point. Paired sample t-tests were used to calculate the differences between the means obtained at the time points at which data was collected for each of the three cohorts. A multiple regression analysis was conducted on T3 data to determine the extent to which (after controlling for background individual and organisational factors) hours worked, fulfilment of the psychological contract relating to hours and workload, work involvement, family responsibilities and organisation support for out-of-work responsibilities were associated with work/non-work conflict. A second multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which these same factors as well as work/non-work conflict were associated with organisational commitment.

In both regression analyses the variables were entered in three blocks: first, biographical control variables (gender, age, marital status and parenthood); secondly, organisational control variables (organisation and functional area of work); and, thirdly, the variables related to work/non-work conflict. This enabled the particular impact of each group of variables to be determined more accurately. Dummy variables were used for the control variables of marital status, organisation and functional area. The status of living with a partner was used as a referent for single status and married status in the analysis. The category of 'Other' was used as the referent variable for functional area of work and organisation 5 (whose graduates reported the highest levels of work/non-work conflict) for organisation.

Study B used semi-structured interviews in order to gain an 'authentic' understanding of the graduates' attitudes and experiences (Silverman, 1993). Each

graduate was interviewed for approximately one-and-a-half hours. The structure of the interviews was designed to enable them to reflect at length on what might influence their commitment – past, present and future – to the organisation that had recruited them when they graduated. Where issues of work/life balance were salient, there was an opportunity for these to be discussed.

The interviews were taped and transcribed in full, and the data analysed with the aim of building theory inductively in a manner informed by Glaser and Strauss's concept of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Content analysis was used to identify themes and issues that emerged from the data. The coding process that this entailed was informed by earlier research, previously cited, into antecedents of graduates' organisational commitment. The data analysis was conducted primarily by the lead researcher, but with input from the second researcher to corroborate emerging themes and thereby ensure reliability.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the presentation of the results, we integrate the findings from the two studies by using the quantitative survey to provide the core data and the qualitative interviews to shed light on what the results mean to graduates and on what lies behind them.

1 Extent to which graduates value and achieve work/life balance

At T1 and T2 the quantitative sample was asked to rate how important maintaining a balanced lifestyle was to them. The means and standard deviations obtained for this item are shown in Table 1. The average scores are all near the top of the range, indicating – perhaps not surprisingly – that achieving a balanced lifestyle is very important to the graduate sample both before they start work (T1) and once they are at work (T2). Once the graduates are at work (T2), well over 80 per cent in each of the three cohorts rate maintenance of a balanced lifestyle as being important or extremely important. It becomes significantly more important to the graduates in cohort 1 once they start work ($t = -2.38$; $p < .05$).

In the survey, the importance of achieving work/life balance, while very high across all groups, was lower for those at the three-year point in their careers than for those with six months' or eight years' experience. The difference in means between cohort 1 and cohort 2 was significant ($.17$; $p < .05$). Nevertheless, the importance of work/life balance emerged strongly from the qualitative interviews – indeed, ability to achieve what they considered to be the right balance between home and work was frequently cited as one of the key influences on future decisions to stay with or leave their current employer. Some of the graduates said that, whatever their circumstances, if the balance between work life and home life became out of kilter, they would consider leaving their organisation. This was commonly expressed as having personal values based on a desire to 'work to live', not 'live to work':

I work to live, I don't live to work. I won't be happy at work unless I'm happy in my social life.

I want to do something that fits in with my domestic life. My family and my outside interests are very important, and I want to find a balance between hard work and family life.

The graduates anticipated that the desire to lead a balanced life would become more pronounced as their family responsibilities increased. This was acknowledged by many

TABLE 1 Means and standard deviations at T1, T2 and T3

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
T1 Importance of balance	4.40 (0.74)	–	–
T2 Importance of balance	4.54 (0.67)	4.37 (0.75)	4.53 (0.66)
T1 Only work standard hours	2.65 (1.05)	–	–
T2 Only work standard hours	1.89 (1.24)	1.53 (0.95)	1.46 (0.92)
T3 Only work standard hours	1.61 (1.03)	1.56 (0.93)	1.53 (1.01)
T2 Satisfaction with balance	3.71 (1.24)	3.38 (1.24)	3.22 (1.31)
T3 Satisfaction with balance	3.46 (1.25)	3.13 (1.21)	2.84 (1.28)
T3 Work/non-work conflict	2.75 (0.86)	3.07 (0.84)	3.40 (0.87)
T3 Hours worked	45.73 (5.67)	46.71 (6.26)	49.79 (8.33)
T3 Promises met	3.55 (0.99)	3.23 (1.05)	2.88 (1.06)

All items scored on a range from 1 ('Strongly disagree') to 5 ('Strongly agree') except importance of balance (1 = 'Not at all important', 5 = 'Highly important') and hours worked which reflects total average weekly hours.
T1 = Time 1: questionnaires were distributed to cohort 1 (new graduates) a month before they started work.
T2 = Time 2: questionnaires were distributed to all three cohorts six months after T1.
T3 = Time 3: questionnaires were sent to all three cohorts 12 months after T2.
Cohort 1 consisted of new graduates, cohort 2 consisted of graduates with approximately three years' work experience when first surveyed, and cohort 3 consisted of graduates with approximately eight years' work experience when first surveyed.

of those interviewed, both men and women, who perceived that it could pose insuperable problems for them once they had children:

I would think of leaving if I was at a point in my life where I had to choose between family and career.

In summary, achieving work/life balance was a high priority for the great majority of graduates, and comments suggested that this was perceived in terms of giving sufficient time to their life outside work. The next issue is how far they believe they are achieving this balance.

Working hours The quantitative study participants were asked at all three stages of the research to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement that they worked (or, for T1, expected to work) standard office hours. The means and standard deviations obtained for this item are shown in Table 1. While most graduates placed some importance on a balanced lifestyle, the low mean score on this item indicates that they disagreed that they worked standard office hours. By T3, only about 10 per cent in each cohort said they were working standard office hours. The proportion agreeing they worked standard office hours declined over time for cohort 1: this was an issue on which there were firm views, and the proportion who strongly disagreed that they were working standard office hours rose from 13 per cent expecting to do so prior to starting work to 56 per cent after six months and to 65 per cent after 18 months. Differences over time as well as differences between cohorts were measured with t-tests using matched samples of graduates who completed the questionnaire at both times. For cohort 1 notably, there is a significant decline in agreement with this statement between T1 and

T2 ($t = 5.89$; $p < .01$), followed by a smaller but still significant decline between T2 and T3 ($t = 1.94$; $p < .05$). However, as graduates spend more time with the organisations, they become more like their longer-serving counterparts. Thus, the difference between cohort 1 and cohorts 2 and 3 is significant at T2 but ceases to be significant by T3. In effect, by T3, when the new graduates in cohort 1 have had about 18 months' experience, the proportion working standard hours is uniformly low across all three cohorts.

Satisfaction with work/life balance Working beyond standard hours may only become a cause for concern if it is associated with dissatisfaction with the balance between home and work. We explored this by asking all graduates who participated in the quantitative study at T2 and T3 about satisfaction with the balance they had achieved between home and work. At T3 those expressing positive satisfaction with their work/life balance ranged from 57 per cent in cohort 1 to 55 per cent in cohort 2 and 39 per cent in cohort 3. The means and standard deviations for this item are shown in Table 1. At T2 there are significant differences between cohorts 1 and 2 ($.33$; $p < .05$) and between cohorts 1 and 3 ($.49$; $p < .01$). At T3 the significant difference between cohorts 1 and 3 remains ($.62$; $p < .01$). One explanation for the persisting differences (notably between cohorts 1 and 3) is that although by T3 graduates in cohort 1 were typically working more than the standard working hours, the actual hours they worked remained much lower than those reported by graduates in cohort 3. This is borne out by the average weekly hours worked at T3 that are shown for each cohort in Table 1.

Psychological contract fulfilment As part of a broader assessment of the psychological contract, a two-item sub-scale was used to measure the extent to which the graduates who participated in the quantitative study felt that their employer had kept promises and expectations regarding workload and working hours. The T3 findings shown in Table 1 illustrate how, as working hours increase with tenure, the extent to which graduates feel that promises regarding working hours and workload are kept declines. Graduates in cohort 2 work significantly longer hours than graduates in cohort 1 (difference in means = $.98$; $p < .01$), while graduates in cohort 3 work significantly longer than those in both cohort 1 (difference in means = 4.06 ; $p < .01$) and cohort 2 (difference in means = 3.08 ; $p < .01$). There is a parallel significant decline in the proportion who believe promises and commitments concerning working hours and workload have been met between cohorts 1 and 2 (difference in means = $.32$; $p < .05$) and between cohorts 2 and 3 (difference in means = $.35$; $p < .05$) as well as between cohorts 1 and 3 (difference in means = $.67$; $p < .01$).

Work/non-work conflict In addition to evidence of increased breach of the psychological contract as working hours increase, we might also expect to see an increase in work/non-work conflict. Interestingly, the quantitative study graduates in cohort 1 do not appear to be experiencing particularly high levels of work/non-work conflict (mean = 2.75 after 18 months' employment). However, there are significant increases in reported conflict between cohorts 1 and 2 (difference in means = $.32$; $p < .01$), cohorts 2 and 3 (difference in means = $.33$; $p < .05$) and cohorts 1 and 3 (difference in means = $.65$; $p < .01$). In short, the pressures on work/life balance increase steadily as graduates become more embedded in the organisation. At the same time, they become more likely to feel that the organisation has failed to keep its promises concerning hours and workload.

The tension between working long hours and a desire for work/life balance is supported by the findings of the qualitative study. Many of the graduates interviewed appeared to be happy to devote a great deal of energy towards work and reported

working long hours, despite an expressed desire for balance between home and work. This may indicate either that a balance between home life and work life is an ideal graduates strive for but rarely obtain or they believe that it is something they ought to endorse, regardless of their actual behaviour. What is also likely is that graduates often believe that it is necessary for them to work long hours at the start of their career in order to progress within their organisation, regardless of their own desire to combine success at work with success in their personal lives. This conclusion is borne out by the fact that many of the graduates said they saw working long hours as a short-term option. While they were happy to devote large amounts of time and energy to work at present, they believed that they would not tolerate working long hours and experiencing work/non-work conflict in the longer term, especially once they had family responsibilities:

I want the time and means to do what I want to do outside work. I don't want to work long hours routinely in six or seven years' time.

Once I get married and have kids I don't know what I will want from my career...if my organisation doesn't change with the times to acknowledge the need for balance, I might leave; it should be getting more normal to be able to work flexibly.

In summary, there is clear evidence that most graduates work beyond their standard hours, that hours increase with tenure, and that as tenure and hours increase so does the perception of conflict between work and life outside work and the perception that their organisation has failed to keep its promises concerning working hours and workload.

2 Factors influencing perceptions of work/non-work conflict

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach alphas and correlations for the quantitative measures and control variables used at T3 are shown in Table 2. The table confirms that all the Cronbach alpha scores are satisfactory. (Just two organisations, 5 and 1, and two functions, sales and IT, are included in the table for reference. These pairs were chosen for inclusion because they respectively reported the highest and lowest levels of work/non-work conflict within their group.) Mean scores reveal fairly high levels of organisational commitment but surprisingly low levels of work involvement. The findings also show that hours worked are significantly and positively correlated with work involvement (.24) and with work/non-work conflict (.50), and significantly negatively correlated with promises and expectations about hours and workload being met (-.49). This suggests that the graduates work long hours both because they are involved in their work and because they feel they need to, despite the fact that employers do not seem to have created realistic expectations of working hours and workload. Organisation support for out-of-work activities shows a significant negative relationship with hours worked (-.24) and work/non-work conflict (-.35), and a significant positive relationship with organisational commitment (.33) and promises and expectations about workload and hours being met (.37). This implies that this kind of support may have important benefits beyond mitigating the impact of work/non-work conflict. Finally, although it is not shown in the table, there is an extremely strong negative correlation (-.75) between satisfaction with work/life balance and work/non-work conflict, confirming that balance does appear to be the inverse of work/non-work conflict.

The regression analysis conducted with work/non-work conflict as the dependent variable is presented in the first column of Table 3. The results show that after entering all three blocks of variables, none of the background individual or organisational

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, Cronbach alphas and correlations among study variables at T3

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Gender	1.41	0.49	-													
2. Age	27.72	3.56	-.23**	-												
3. Status – married	-	-	-.19**	.49**	-											
4. Children	1.86	0.35	-.17**	.43**	.64**	-										
5. Organisation 1	-	-	-.22**	.12	.13*	.21**	-									
6. Organisation 5	-	-	.15*	-.06	-.09	-.15*	-	-								
7. Sales	-	-	-.05	.02	.04	.05	-.12	-.21**	-							
8. IT	-	-	-.22**	-.03	-.01	.05	.50**	-.23**	-	-						
9. Hours worked	47.16	6.88	.01	.24**	.10	.09	-.18**	-.01	.18**	-.21**	-					
10. Work involvement	2.28	0.71	-.05	-.10	-.18**	-.19**	-.13*	-.04	.11	-.03	.24**	(.77)				
11. Conflict	3.00	0.90	-.03	.28**	.23**	.21**	-.09	.13*	.09	-.12*	.50**	.02	(.84)			
12. Met promises	3.26	1.06	-.03	-.25**	-.13*	-.10	.11	-.19**	-.07	.11	-.49**	.02	-.61**	(.90)		
13. Organisation support	3.43	0.87	-.04	-.05	-.01	.01	.24**	-.08	-.14*	.20**	-.24**	.01	-.35**	.36**	(.70)	
14. Commitment	5.16	0.85	.06	-.08	-.02	-.03	.01	-.03	-.14*	-.02	.01	.10	-.09	.13*	.33**	(.76)

n = 280

Alphas are in parenthesis

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

factors – including gender, age and marital status or dependent children – has a significant association with reported levels of conflict between work and life outside work. Instead, it is the experience of work that has the major effect. Specifically, working longer hours ($\beta = .23$; $p < .01$) and the belief that an employer has failed to keep promises and expectations concerning hours and workload ($\beta = -.40$; $p < .01$) contribute to experience of work/non-work conflict, while organisation support for out-of-work activities and responsibilities mitigates work/non-work conflict ($\beta = -.16$; $p < .01$). Work involvement was not related to work/non-work conflict.

3. Impact of work/non-work conflict on organisational commitment

The specific interest in this section is the relationship between work/non-work conflict and organisational commitment. Regression analysis with organisational commitment as the dependent variable is presented in the second column of Table 3. When all three blocks of items are included, none of the background biographical factors is significantly associated with organisational commitment. Those graduates who work for organisation 2 are significantly more committed than those in organisation 5, the default category, and presumably also than those in organisation 3. There are also differences between those in certain types of job. Among the areas of organisational policy and practice in block 3, only organisation support for out-of-work responsibilities is significantly associated with organisational commitment ($\beta = .26$; $p < .001$). The number of hours worked, any breach of promises and most notably level of work/non-work conflict showed no significant association with commitment. Furthermore, the organisational variables account for more of the variance in the graduates' levels of commitment (change in $R^2 = .15$) than the work/life balance variables (change in $R^2 = .06$). In short, and contrary to expectations, there is no association between greater work/non-work conflict and lower organisational commitment.

The qualitative research findings indicate that the relationship between work/life balance and organisational commitment may be more complex than the quantitative analysis in Study A suggests. As discussed above, those interviewed indicated that, although they were willing to work long hours in the early years of their career, they believed that they would not be prepared to tolerate doing so forever. If excessive workloads meant it was necessary to work unrealistically long hours for a protracted period, causing an unacceptable lack of balance between work and life outside work, they felt that their commitment to their employer would be undermined:

I would think of leaving if I had a job that was so stressful that I just couldn't manage it and wasn't able to change it, because I wouldn't destroy my life outside work.

The biggest thing that frustrates me at the moment is the expectations the business has of the amount of work people can realistically get through... When you look at the legislation coming in about working hours, I don't think there is any realistic chance of the company recognising that we've got people who are massively working hours over and above the legal guidelines. I think it will be a source of frustration to a lot of people, because they just lose motivation. One of the reasons people will look outside is because work is seriously affecting their ability to do the other things that are important to them...they're living to work, not working to live.

In summary, the results indicate that organisational experiences are strongly associated with reported levels of work/non-work conflict. However, only levels of organisation support – among various organisational experiences – have a significant

TABLE 3 Multiple regression analysis with work/family conflict and organisational commitment as the dependent variables: standardised betas and R² values after all three blocks entered

	Work/non-work conflict	Organisational commitment
<i>Block 1</i>		
Gender	-.02	.03
Age	.03	.08
Married	.02	.13
Single	-.05	.05
Children	-.12	.03
R²	.095	.01
Change in R²	.095**	.01
<i>Block 2</i>		
Organisation 1	-.01	.19
Organisation 2	-.04	.19*
Organisation 3	-.12	-.03
Organisation 4	-.07	.11
Production	.05	.03
General management	.04	-.06
Scientific research	-.04	-.24**
Sales	.04	-.17
Marketing	.03	-.18
Engineering	.01	.05
HR	-.01	-.02
Finance	.01	-.11
IT	.00	-.25**
R²	.15	.16
Change in R²	.06	.15**
<i>Block 3</i>		
Hours worked	.23**	.08
Work involvement	.01	.09
Organisation support	-.16**	.26**
PC fulfilment	-.40**	.00
Work/non-work conflict	–	-.01
Adjusted R²	.48	.22
Change in R²	.33**	.06**
* p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01		

association with organisational commitment. Somewhat surprisingly, therefore, there is no association between greater work/non-work conflict or perception that promises concerning hours and workload have been breached and lower organisational commitment. Furthermore, and contrary to expectations, once organisational, job and work experience factors are taken into account, none of the background biographical

factors (including marital status and children) have a significant association with either work/non-work conflict or organisational commitment.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that graduates are drawn into a situation where they work increasingly long hours and experience an increasingly unsatisfactory balance between home and work. This is despite the fact that they claim they value this balance highly, aptly expressed in terms of a focus on 'working to live, not living to work'. The number of hours the graduates work increases with tenure; and tenure in turn is associated with greater work/non-work conflict and a stronger belief that employers are not keeping the promises and meeting the expectations of graduates regarding working hours and workload. The graduates intimate that this is not a situation they are prepared to tolerate forever, and the findings suggest that the longer they do so the greater the lack of work/life balance they experience.

The findings provide some insight into why the graduates are prepared to work long hours, despite their interest in achieving a balanced life. First, the number of hours worked is associated with greater involvement in work. Secondly, long hours also appear to reflect the belief that, in order to succeed in the corporate environment, one must demonstrate commitment in terms of hours spent at work – at least during the early years of a career (Coffey, 1994). Yet the findings also highlight the potential dissonance between a desire for work/life balance and working long hours, in that the graduates argue that this is a purely short-term option. The lack of impact of work/non-work conflict on organisational commitment suggests that, at this stage of the graduates' careers at least, it may not cause them to think about changing jobs or career direction. However, the findings of the qualitative study sound a warning note, in that the graduates view balance (or lack of it) as a factor that may have an impact on their future commitment, as opposed to their current commitment.

Whether the graduates ever act on any dissonance between their alleged desire for balance and the demands of their job may depend on the extent to which they are able to pursue the kind of career to which they aspire. A further reason for the absence of an association between work/non-work conflict and a lower degree of organisational commitment is likely to be that the graduates in these studies have all chosen to work for large organisations where traditional careers are still feasible. The findings also doubtless reflect the culture of the business sectors in which the research was conducted. Furthermore, the research participants are the graduates who have stayed rather than left and, as such, are likely to be the most committed to a career in their present organisation. Therefore, despite any differences in generational values, it appears that a significant proportion of the current cohort of graduates working in large organisations are prepared to tolerate long hours and work/non-work conflict in return for traditional career success.

The absence of a clear association between work/non-work conflict and a lower degree of organisational commitment does not mean that organisations can neglect this issue. In fact, the research findings suggest that work/life balance is an issue that organisations have to manage carefully. In particular, as graduates gain more experience, they become increasingly disillusioned with the extent to which employers' promises and employee expectations regarding workload and working hours are met. Thus, organisations are breaching the psychological contract that exists between them and their employees in this regard. As managers themselves are aware, this is likely to have potentially damaging consequences, since there is strong evidence

to suggest that unmet expectations can undermine organisational commitment (Wanous *et al*, 1992). An 'expectations gap' – a discrepancy between what a person encounters on the job in the way of positive and negative experiences and what he or she expected to encounter (Porter and Steers, 1973) – is frequently linked to retention problems. It is therefore important for organisations to be honest and clear about the workloads and hours they expect graduates to encounter, both at the beginning of their career and during its early years.

In addition, the level of employer support for out-of-work responsibilities and activities has a crucial impact on the extent to which graduates experience conflict between work and home. It is negatively linked to experience of work conflict, and has a close positive relationship with organisational commitment. This indicates that individuals may be less likely to feel that their lives are out of balance if they know that their employer has some consideration for their lives outside work. This confirms the findings of previous studies (*eg* Carlson and Perrewé, 1999). Significantly, however, the findings suggest that this is an issue for all graduates and is not only important for parents. It is noteworthy that, in the regression analysis, individual background and personal circumstances – including marital status and children – had no association with either work/life conflict or organisational commitment. This adds support to the argument that work/life balance matters to young professionals, regardless of their life circumstances, and that the perception that an organisation 'cares' about its staff can affect whether they feel they have the right balance between home and work or not. In the past, helping staff to balance work with home lives has generally meant offering a range of 'family-friendly' policies. The findings of this research suggest that employers need to adopt a broader perspective on policy regarding work/life balance in order to include those without conventional family responsibilities. Such a perspective may require organisations to attempt to combat a long-hours culture and increase the possibility of flexible working for all staff.

The findings confirm and extend existing research on work/life balance and work/non-work conflict in a number of ways. First, they confirm the findings of Lewis *et al* (2002) and Smola and Sutton (2002) that young workers place a high value on work/life balance, irrespective of any family responsibilities. They also show that the hours graduates work undermine the possibility of achieving it. Secondly, related to this, they show that it is important to adopt frameworks that consider work/non-work conflict, rather than the more restricted notion of work/family conflict, thereby exploring the issue with workers of all ages and at all stages of their career and personal life. Thirdly, they highlight the important roles organisations can play in ameliorating work/non-work conflict for younger employees, both through support for out-of-work responsibilities and through the psychological contract, while also confirming the role of organisational support in maintaining organisational commitment (Eisenberger *et al*, 1990).

Finally, the results show that while, as Schein (1996) notes, the 'lifestyle' career anchor has increased in prominence in recent years, the more traditional 'general managerial competence' anchor associated with a managerial career remains powerful for graduates entering large organisations. Where values relating to these career anchors come into conflict, it appears that many graduates decide in favour of emphasising the managerial career anchor, at least for a while and for as long as the rewards of career advancement are available and attainable. At the same time, they keep their competing priorities under review, and while they maintain their organisational commitment in the face of work/non-work conflict this appears to be very much a conditional commitment.

Further longitudinal research is needed to confirm and explore in more detail the findings presented here. In particular, more detailed research that explores what the

notion of work/life balance means to different groups of employees, especially younger people and those without 'traditional' family responsibilities, will be especially valuable in the development of theory about work/non-work balance.

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