



DUAL-CENTRIC A NEW CONCEPT OF WORK-LIFE

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When I began to conduct research on work and family life almost three decades ago, we were not certain of what aspects of life on- and off- the-job to investigate. Studies either looked at work or at family life, but there was little knowledge of what to look at when you put the two together.



Over the years, we have made great progress in understanding how work spills over into home life and how home life spills over into work life and how all of this affects us. However, conducting this kind of research has remained an adventure story. We are never completely sure what we are looking for (though, of course, we have hypotheses) or what we will find.

That's why a finding in one of our latest studies has been so intriguing. It comes from a study of executive men and women from 10 multi-national companies. This study is called *Leaders in a Global Economy* and was conducted by Families and Work Institute, Catalyst, and Boston College Center for Work & Family. Although this finding is based on a specific group of people—executives—I am quite certain that it has very important relevance for all of us.

In designing this study, we knew not to simply ask **one** question about “balancing” work and family life—as most researchers do—for a number of reasons.

First, the word “balance” implies a scale where if one side is up, the other has to be down. It is an **either/or** concept. In contrast, our studies of nationally representative groups of employees have shown that managing work and personal/family life is not a zero-sum game, where if people give to one aspect of their lives, they necessarily take away from the others. We have found that employees with high quality jobs and more supportive workplace environments are, in fact, more likely to go home in better moods and with more energy to give to the important people in their lives. In other words, work can enhance life off the job, not just detract from it. Furthermore, we have found that managing work and personal life is more than simply an issue of time (which is finite); it also involves energy and mood, which are not constrained in the way time can be.

Second, we have found that the real issue of managing work and personal life boils down to how people assess and decide about priorities, about what's most important for them to do at any given moment and over time.

So to explore this issue in our latest study, we asked two questions:

- “In the past year, how often have you put your job before your personal or family life?”
- “In the past year, how often have you put your personal or family life before your job?”



We asked people to respond about this process over a year, because priorities shift and change moment-to-moment, day-to-day, month-to-month, and we wanted an overall assessment.

This was a study of executives, so not surprisingly we found that most (61%) were what we call “work-centric.”

The intriguing finding, however, had to do with another group of executives—32 percent—who put the *same* priority on their lives on and off the job. We came to call this group “dual-centric,” though as people have subsequently remarked, they could be “tri-centric” (emphasizing their jobs, their personal/family lives, and another significant activity, such as community involvement, for instance) as well. And even more interestingly, this group was equally likely to be made up of men as well as women.

Our first question was, who are these dual-centric people? Perhaps they are people who have fewer responsibilities off the job. But this not the case.

In fact, they are more likely to have children at home (62%) than the general population of executives, 54 percent of whom have children under 18 living with them at least half time.

We also wondered if dual-centric people work less time. And they do—five hours less per week than those who are work-centric.

Then we asked, what difference does it make to be dual-centric? As we explored this question, more intriguing findings began to emerge. For example:

- People who put the same priority on work and their personal/family life—who are dual-centric—have the highest ratings for feeling successful at work.
- Those who fall into the extremes; that is, they put a much higher priority on work than their personal/family life or put a much higher priority on their personal/family life than work feel the least successful at work.

If being dual-centric is linked to **feeling** more successful, what about **objective measures of success** as measured by reporting level, compensation, and the number of staff they supervise? Contrary to expectations, we found few differences, and those we did find suggest that dual-centric women are actually more successful, that is they have reached higher levels. And they also feel the most successful in their personal and home lives.

We next looked at stress, using a standardized measure that has been linked in other research to physical health. We found that people who are dual-centric feel much less stressed (which has important implications for their health):

- 26 percent of dual-centric people experience moderate or high levels of stress, compared with 42 percent of those who are not dual-centric.

We also looked at how those who are dual-centric feel they are managing their work and personal/family lives. We found that executives who place the same priority on their work and personal/family lives have a much easier time managing both sets of responsibilities:

- Significantly fewer (31%) of people who are dual-centric find it *difficult* or *very difficult* to manage both demands than those who are not dual-centric (56%).

As we considered these new findings, we realized that they are not an anomaly. Other studies of people with multiple roles in life are beginning to reveal that maintaining a focus on both work and other aspects of life does *not* detract from success and achievement and may, in fact, lead to higher levels of overall contentment.

So how do people who are dual-centric manage? Personal interviews we conducted for this study provide some clues. We found that people who are dual-centric have many different ways.

Their strategies include setting strict boundaries between the time they are working and not working:

- *I don't carry a briefcase home stuffed with work...Evenings and weekends are for my family and being able to maintain that barrier between my work life and my personal life [works].*

Another strategy is being emotionally present when one is physically present—focusing on the immediate situation:

- *Even though I can't be home every single evening, when I'm here I'm here. I don't have 50 percent of my brain turned on to work.*

Still another strategy is to take time for rest and recovery. For example, one person talked about working very hard, interspersed with periods of rest or a changed focus. Interests that require real focus also are helpful, like photography or a sport or community volunteering.

The major strategy is being clear about priorities—making sure that what is really important to you is not being shortchanged. We call this “being intentional” about the way you want to live.

The findings reported here come from *Leaders in a Global Economy* by Ellen Galinsky, Kimberlee Salmond, and James T. Bond of Families and Work Institute; Marcia Brumit Kropf and Meredith Moore of Catalyst; and Brad Harrington of Boston Center for Work & Family.

This Executive Summary of *Leaders in a Global Economy*, as well as information about the full research report of the study findings, is available online at www.familiesandwork.org, www.catalystwomen.org, and www.bc.edu/cwf.



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