Tell us about your journey into the field. What inspired you to start researching work-life issues?
I was in graduate school at Yale, completing my PhD in organisational behaviour, when two key events occurred. First of all, I did a study on human resource boundaries in ways that highlighted organisational acceptance of eight new policies. I found that the policy that employees liked most, and were least cynical about, was flextime. It seemed to truly empower them and helped them manage the competing demands of their work and their personal life. This showed me the importance of work-life balance to the quality of life of employees. Secondly, I had my first child when I was at graduate school. If I had taken parental leave, I would have lost my fellowship and have to reapply for funding a year later. My personal experience showed me that organisations need to provide more support for working parents and be less rigid about career and work and family regimes.

You mention that employees like flexibility. Do you think that the introduction of flexible working options is always beneficial in enhancing work-life balance?
Work-life flexibility is helpful as long as (a) different types of flexibility are available that fit the needs of different employees – research conducted by myself and others clearly indicates that a ‘one size fits all’ approach does not work; (b) there are times that workers can log off and have a reprieve from work and work-related electronic communication; and (c) employees learn to manage work-life boundaries in ways that are congruent with their preferences and needs and the needs of their organisation. This is the theme of my book CEO of Me: Creating a Life in the Flexible Job Age.

There are many self-help books on WLB. How is your book different?
Firstly, it highlights the importance of gaining control over work-life boundaries. This is particularly important as new information communication technologies allow people to work anywhere and at any time. The book also does not advocate one ‘ideal’ way of managing work-life issues: essentially, it promotes what Myers-Briggs type of approach that highlights different work-life boundary styles and the role of context. Different employees want to manage their work lives in different ways depending on their salient career and family identities, their personal preferences for managing work-to-family and family-to-work interruptions, and their ability to control the boundaries between their personal life and their work.

Most studies tend to rate people as ‘high’ or ‘low’ on one aspect of work life (such as the strength of the boundary between work and home), but we have found that identities, preferences for managing work-home boundaries and boundary control are linked. My research indicates that there are three main styles – Separators, Integrators and Cylers. Each style has a positive and a negative aspect, where people in one category feel in control of their situation and satisfied with their work-life balance fit, whereas those in the other category feel out of control and are dissatisfied with it. For example, some Separators are Firsters, who make a conscious decision to prioritise work or non-work life to support a key identity role, while others are Captives who are ‘forced’ to focus on one aspect of their life to the detriment of the other. Some Integrators are Fusions. Lovers, who genuinely enjoy almost total integration of their work and home lives, while others are Reactors who are forced to do so. Some Cylers are Quality Timers, who have alternating periods of higher or lower separation between work and family, while others are Job Warriors who have little control over when they switch between integration and separation. This is a very different way of focusing on work-life balance issues and has clear implications for helping people increase the fit between the work-life balance they have and their ideal situation. It’s also important that the typology is based on a validated psychological assessment of how people really engage in work and life.

Telecommuting has become more common in the UK and the USA. In June 2013 the new CEO of Yahoo banned telecommuting, telling employees to get back to their desk or leave the company. This has sparked many conversations about double standards operating in a cutting-edge communication company. What are the implications of Yahoo’s decision?
I was invited to write an editorial on this issue for CNN. Yahoo’s decision to ban telework is like cancelling the punch bowl. Nonetheless, I can understand the reasons for their decision. In itself, teleworking isn’t a bad thing – it can help employees balance their work demands with their family needs and ensure a healthy work-life balance. The way that Yahoo implemented teleworking was faulty, as the work just wasn’t getting done. Getting employees to come into the office was a wake-up call, but mandating face-time will not necessarily build team-working and enhance creativity and organisational performance. For teleworking to be successful, it must be implemented properly; there needs to be a partnership between employees and organisations that recognises, respects and supports their respective needs. This requires an inherent culture change toward accountability and results-oriented working. Supervisors, employees and teams need to reorient themselves to this new way of working.

New ways of working have certainly had an impact how work-life balance is managed. The global recession has also affected many employees in the US and the UK. What implications has this had for work-life balance issues? There is evidence that the recession has made some employees fearful of using the flexibility policies that are offered by their organisation, as they worry they will lose their job if they don’t put in enough face-time. This fear has been translated into longer working hours for many people,
with clear implications for employees’ well-being and job performance, as well as family life. The recession has also increased under-employment, whereby people are more likely to take jobs that under-utilise their skills in order to provide for themselves and their family. It has also increased work-related stress and the resulting health implications because of worries over job loss with little prospect of re-employment.

You have been very successful in forging productive research relationships with large organisations – we know this isn’t an easy task. How do you do it?

The best way to get organisations involved in research is to let them know what they will get out of it. For example, my research has identified specific supportive line manager behaviours, such as emotional support (learning about personal work–life balance needs and listening to problems); instrumental support (helping employees avoid work-to-home conflict and vice versa); role modelling (demonstrating effective personal work–life balance behaviours) and creative work–life balance management (using novel options for reducing conflict between work and home demands, and emphasising that there can be benefits in both domains). Although supportive manager behaviours cannot work in isolation and a supportive organisational culture is clearly required, this research has led to tangible benefits for employees and organisations including reduced turnover, increased job satisfaction, improved mental health, and increased attention to safety climate. These are results that speak to people. Researchers must make sure to speak the language of business and engage with their needs to achieve such tangible outcomes.

Your research on supportive line-manager behaviours has had considerable impact. You are starting to examine the role of work colleagues in helping develop creative work–life balance solutions. Are there any findings from this research that you could share with us?

The most important things that work colleagues can do are (a) not judge the performance of colleagues by ‘face-time’ and ‘water-cooler behaviour’, but what they actually contribute and (b) develop a culture of caring, providing back-up and cross-training to help each other out when personal difficulties mean that work needs to be covered. We also can implement flexibility as a team-based solution to improve work processes through promoting cross-training and getting suggestions at the team level on how to support work–life balance, while at the same time ensuring that work processes are improved. For example, an employee who is able to telework one day a week at home will be able to attend a meeting at their child’s school for an hour yet, because they are saving two hours on commuting time, they actually end up working an extra hour for their employer.

We have both been surprised at how the working conditions in the USA differ from the UK in terms of annual leave and entitlement to maternity/paternity leave, as well as the extent to which people are prepared to take these entitlements. In the USA there is greater acceptance of people overworking by choice in order to advance their career. These attitudes are shifting, however, as more and more workers have expressed the need for greater organisational and governmental support to help them manage their work and family responsibilities. Employers play a larger role in supporting work–life balance in the USA, as government policies are not strong and employers are left to fill the gap. In the UK the government plays a larger role in supporting work–life balance, with a minimum entitlement to paid maternity, and more recently, paternity leave, and the introduction of policies that give employees the right to request a flexible working schedule.

What is common across countries is that workers need and expect positive institutional support for family life. Nations must place a higher value on positive work and family relationships and provide increased support, as this will have long-term benefits for fertility rates, as well as healthcare costs and improve the quality of the current and future workforce.

A lot of research has been published on work–life balance in the UK and the USA. Why do so many people still struggle to manage the competing demands of work and home life?

What do you think is holding back progress? We are increasingly become a ‘time famine’ society with increasing globalisation and the ability to work 24/7. Unfortunately, trying to provide the best work systems to support work–life balance is becoming less valued by policy makers and society in general, as is the need to take a long-term perspective on the cost of work–life conflict on well-being and elder and child dependents. We must develop global standards for work and family support, just as we have tried to do with global child labour laws.

Psychologists do not necessarily practise what they preach. To what extent do people expect you to have an exemplary work–life balance because you are an expert in the field? You have brought up four children, developed an internationally renowned academic career and travel extensively, despite there being little formal entitlement to support from your employers. How did you get it right?

Getting it right has been a lifelong journey. I have started taking my children to international meetings, so they can benefit from my multicultural experiences. I am learning to say ‘no’ and avoid over-committing myself and recognise that it is important to try and enjoy the journey. Nonetheless, I tend to work too long and too hard – I think one reason I study these issues is that I have first-hand experience of the need to identify what matters most in life.

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