Work-life Balance

What is this?

The Human Resources Institute of New Zealand describes work-life balance as effectively managing the juggling act between paid work and other activities that are important to us, including; spending time with family, taking part in sport and recreation, volunteering or undertaking further study.[1] The State Services Commission states that work-life balance is about creating a productive work culture where the potential for tension between work and other parts of people's lives is minimised, having the right combination of participation in paid work and other aspects of life.[2]

Why is it important?

Improving the balance between our working lives and our lives outside work can bring real benefits for employers and employees. These include; finding and keeping the right staff, being an employer of choice, improving productivity, ability to manage work and home responsibilities in a more balance way and being part of a supportive workplace.[3]

As noted in the 2016 Social Report[4] it is important that people find a balance between paid work and other aspects of their lives. When this balance is not found, people may suffer from stress or anxiety. Long working hours or non-standard working hours (e.g. night shifts) may compromise work-life balance. Conflict between work demands, leisure, and home life can result in lost productivity and/or employee stress.

An organisation that is supportive of managing work-life balance issues is more likely to have more productive employees, reduced worker stress, improved employee satisfaction and reduced absenteeism.[5]

Data

The New Zealand local government Quality of Life Survey includes questions on satisfaction with work-life balance. Respondents are asked "Overall how satisfied are you with the balance between your work and other aspects of your life such as time with your family or leisure?". Results from the last three surveys (2010[6], 2012[7], & 2014[8]) for Christchurch respondents, are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. New Zealand local government Quality of Life Survey: Satisfaction with balance between work and other aspects of life, 2010, 2012, and 2014 in Christchurch city
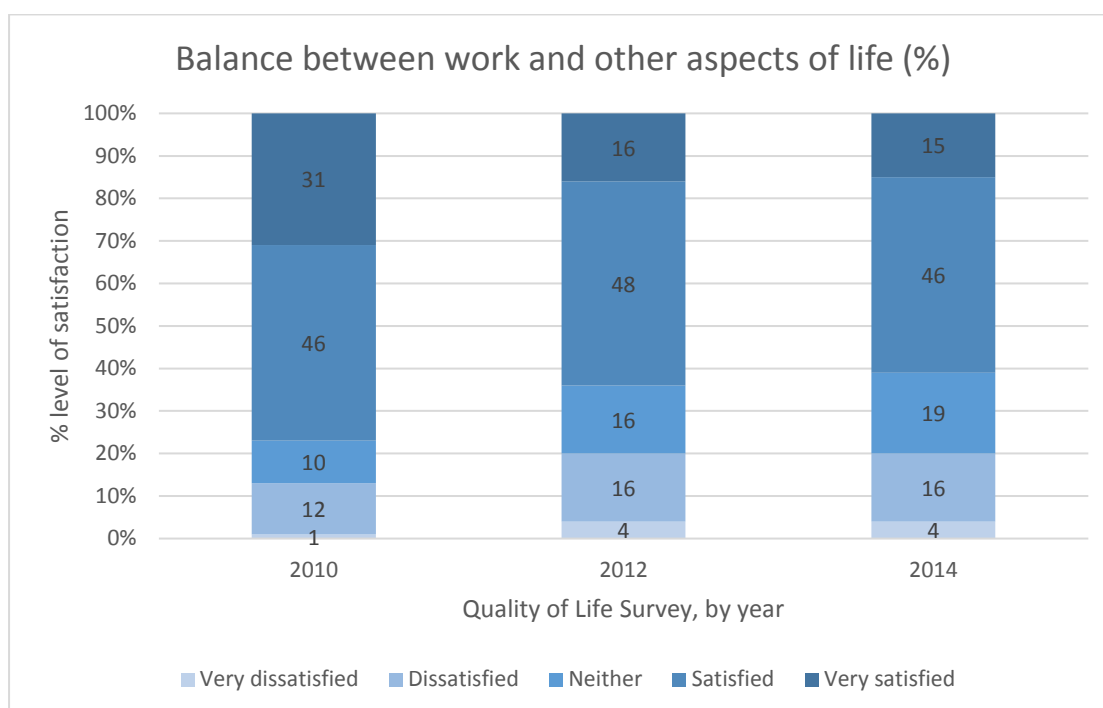
In 2014, in Christchurch city, 18% of the respondents aged between 15-24 years appeared very satisfied with their work-life balance while only 7% of those in the 65+ year age group (7%) were very satisfied. The 2014 Survey also found that people of European/Pakeha ethnicity were most likely to report satisfaction with work-life balance (63%), followed by people of Pacific and Asian descent (48%) (Figure 2). However Māori were the least likely to report high levels of work-life satisfaction (41%).

People earning between NZ$40,000 and NZ$70,000 (18%) were most likely to report a high level of satisfaction with work-life balance. [9]

Impact on inequalities

It has been argued that those who are relatively powerless in the market and need work-life balance policies most are least likely to get them.[9] While highly paid workers may choose to work long hours to achieve career goals, low paid workers often need to work long hours to generate enough income to support themselves and their families. People who are in insecure employment, seasonal workers, and self-employed people also have limited choices in relation to work-life balance.
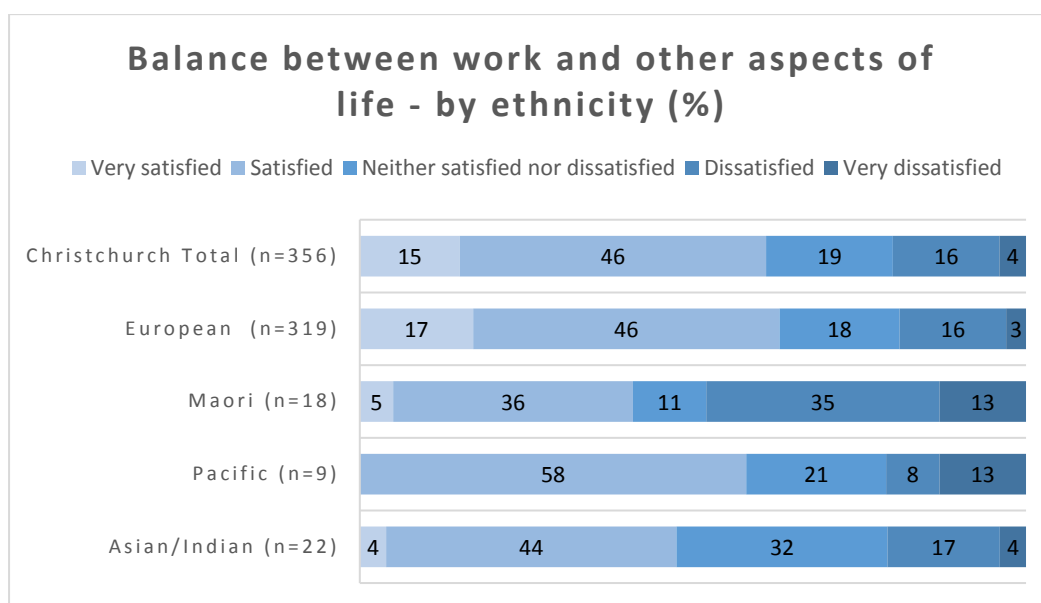
Transport infrastructure has been highlighted as a key barrier to achieving work-life balance for people, particularly in rural areas because of the extra time and distance that is needed to travel to and from work and between family activities.[10] Urban design and planning attempt to address this issue.
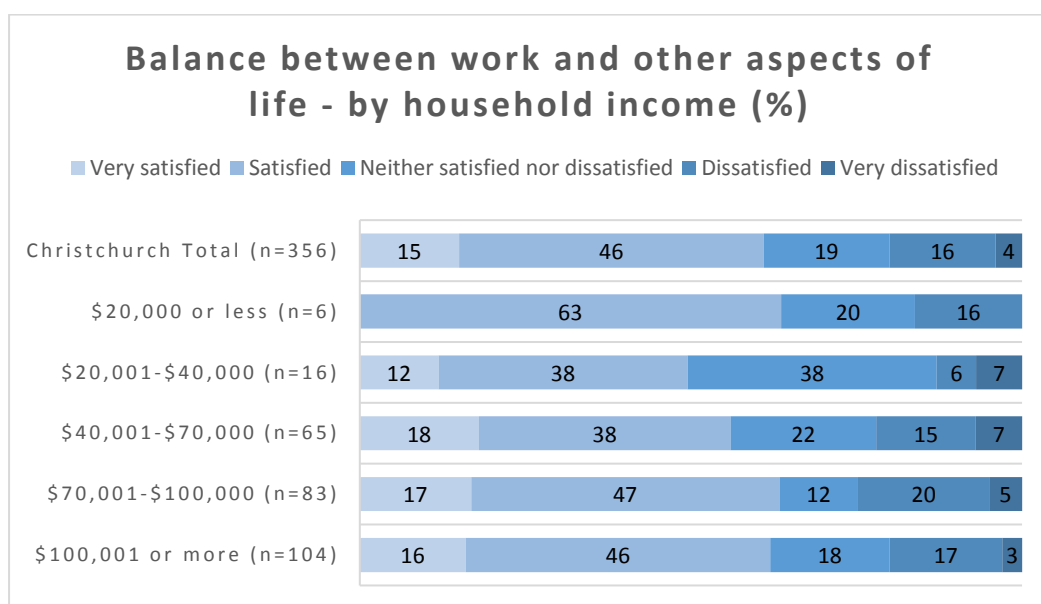
Little is known about the impact of culture on the relationship between work-life balance and individual outcomes. One study[11] sought to test whether two cultural dimensions, individualism/collectivism and gender egalitarianism, had any influence on job satisfaction, life satisfaction, anxiety and depression. Researchers found that work-life balance was more positively associated with job and life satisfaction for people in individualistic cultures that in collectivist cultures but that there are beneficial outcomes for people across cultures.

The 2014 Quality of Life Survey showed some differences of reported satisfaction with work-life balance by ethnicity and household income in Christchurch. Notably, sample sizes were small for some ethnic and income groups.

Figure 2. New Zealand local government Quality of Life Survey: Balance between work and other aspects of life in Christchurch city by ethnicity.

Balance between work and other aspects of life - by ethnicity (%)

Very satisfied · Satisfied · Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied · Dissatisfied · Very dissatisfied

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Christchurch Total (n=356)	15	46	19	16	4
European (n=319)	17	46	18	16	3
Maori (n=18)	5	36	11	35	13
Pacific (n=9)		58	21	8	13
Asian/Indian (n=22)	4	44	32	17	4

Figure 3. New Zealand local government Quality of Life Survey: Balance between work and other aspects of life in Christchurch city by household income

Balance between work and other aspects of life - by household income (%)

Very satisfied · Satisfied · Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied · Dissatisfied · Very dissatisfied

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Christchurch Total (n=356)	15	46	19	16	4
$20,000 or less (n=6)		63	20	16	
$20,001-$40,000 (n=16)	12	38	38	6	7
$40,001-$70,000 (n=65)	18	38	22	15	7
$70,001-$100,000 (n=83)	17	47	12	20	5
$100,001 or more (n=104)	16	46	18	17	3

It has been suggested that in current New Zealand employment legislation, the onus is on the individual employee to negotiate flexible arrangements with their manager or supervisor. Manager / supervisor support, perceived career damage, and time demands all play a role in enabling employees to access flexible working arrangements to achieve better work-life balance. Although the legislation applies to all workers, the most favourable conditions may be offered only to valued staff, in whom the company has invested time and money. The size of the organisation also has an effect on what is feasible for employers to offer, as small businesses may find it much more difficult and expensive to offer flexible arrangements.[14]

Solutions

Information for employers on how to be more flexible with work arrangement and the legal requirements regarding staff returning to work is available through groups such as the Human Resources Institute of New Zealand[12], the Chamber of Commerce[13] and the State Services Commission.[14]

An amendment to the Employment Relations Act in 2007[15] (Flexible Working Arrangements) provides a mechanism (for those that have to care for others) to negotiate more balanced working arrangements. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment has dedicated a section of its employment website to exploring the benefits to both the individual and business of a good work life balance.[3]

A 2012 study of employee preferences for work-life balance in a large construction company in New Zealand[16] noted that dual earner households have become the norm and the aging population has resulted in an increased demand for care of elderly relatives. Therefore, many workers are requiring and expecting more flexible working practices. Study results showed that provision of a wide variety of benefits that employees can choose from to suit the demands of different stages of life and career would be the ideal. The study also noted that employers benefit from these policies too, which attract and retain higher qualified staff, decrease turnover costs, and improve organisational performance.

Data limitations

Quality of Life Survey data on work-life balance provides data for Christchurch City but not greater Canterbury.

Connections with other issues

Satisfaction with Leisure Time, Activity Levels/Exercise, Income, Community and Volunteer Sector, Employment.

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Read about the Te Pae Mahutonga Māori Health Model at
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