

What work-life balance means for women

As a first-time mum, I have missed work meetings to take care of baby – and this should be normal.

Chong Sin Hui

I recently went on a work trip to the United States, leaving my baby in the care of my husband, my mother and my domestic helper. As someone who had just completed her maternity leave, this was a monumental first step of integrating my academic career into my new life as a mother.

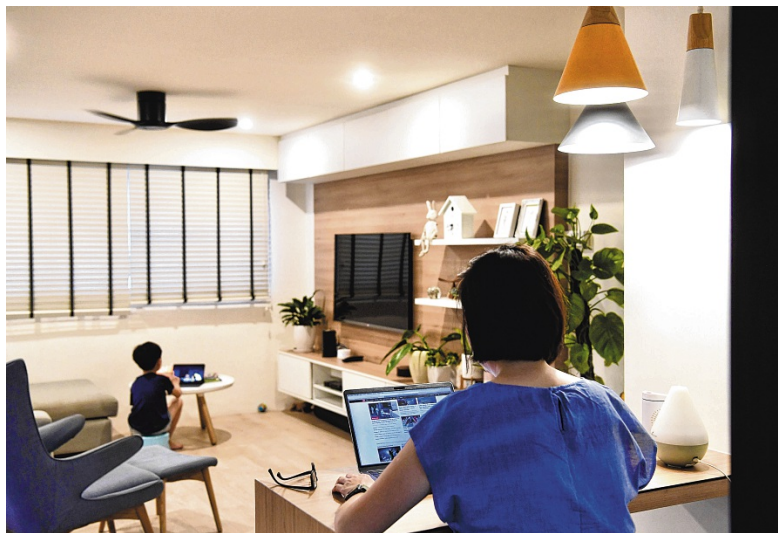
It would not have been possible without the support of my family and even my husband's co-workers, who accommodated his request to call in from home for meetings.

Welcome to my world of work-life "balance". It is one comprising a juggling act that many women will relate to – although the term work-life balance means different things to different people and changes across time.

For example, I am a professor, a researcher, a mother to a young baby, a daughter, a wife, a friend – and more. Many other women might hold these same identities, yet we may attach completely different values to each of these identities.

And our values and priorities can shift over time. Just last year, if someone told me I would bail on work meetings for family matters, I would feel deeply offended by their doubt about my professionalism. But now, in the five months since I became a first-time mum, I have missed a couple of work meetings owing to last-minute, unforeseen personal circumstances, such as my baby being sick and my having no alternative caregiving help at the time.

The topic hit the headlines recently when, in a podcast, DBS chief executive Piyush Gupta described the belief in work-life balance as "baloney". Mr Gupta's suggestion to view work as a



There is no single best equation for work-life balance. Giving ourselves sufficient psychological space to navigate and organise our work and non-work demands will enable us to experience greater satisfaction and motivation to contribute our best to both domains.
ST FILE PHOTO

own research that sampled more than 250 full-time employees in the United States demonstrated the benefits of mentally disconnecting from work during off-work hours. In particular, employees who mindfully engaged in meaningful and relaxing break activities such as social interactions or going for walks felt more recharged and performed better when they returned to work.

Another study conducted on European healthcare employees also found that detaching from work enabled employees to develop more creative solutions for work challenges by bringing in ideas from their non-work experiences.

The good news, especially for time-pressed women who are mums or caregivers to their elderly parents, is that companies are increasingly acknowledging the relevance of work-life balance in implementing policies offering leeway to pursue non-work commitments and passions, such as flexible work hours, remote work, and parental or childcare leave.

My institution, for example, has a Women@NTU initiative that supports female employees' professional and personal endeavours through mentorship and various developmental workshops. Government-paid paternity leave for working fathers will also increase from two weeks to four weeks come 2024, which will hopefully alleviate the traditional asymmetrical caregiving burden on women.

The key is not to endorse a fixed 50-50 split between work and life, but to construct your own optimal equilibrium between work and non-work boundaries. Excuse me as I sign off now to go exercise my work-life balance of feeding my crying baby.

• Chong Sin Hui is an assistant professor of organisational behaviour and human resources at Nanyang Business School at Nanyang Technological University. She conducts research on how individuals optimise their well-being and productivity as they manage their professional and personal identities.

critical part of life is actually sound advice, but when people in influential positions express dissent with the concept of work-life balance, some employees may feel ashamed even for wanting it.

In several online mums' support communities that I am part of, countless working women share their struggles with juggling their work and family after having children. In 2021, I surveyed 17 Singaporean employees over 10 working days and found that working mothers, but not fathers or those without children, experienced greater family-to-work interference on days when they worked from home. When that happened, it evoked rude treatment from their co-workers.

In fact, it is common for employees who are going through life transitions to feel worried and guilty for placing their careers on the back burner because our society traditionally emphasises

the prioritising of collective company goals over individual interests.

Indeed, two years ago, my team conducted focus group discussions with 15 Singaporean managers and employees during the Covid-19 pandemic circuit breaker. All participants said that family or personal matters should not be legitimate excuses for underperforming at work. They believed that for performance appraisals to be objective and fair, managers should disregard the interference from employees' personal lives.

This finding was not surprising to my team as we were well aware that the Singapore economy was founded on values of diligence and a strong work ethic.

However, times are changing. Both employees and managers should recognise that the demand for employees to prioritise work over their personal interests will become obsolete soon, as people experience an expansion of roles

in life. Work-life balance goes both ways. Companies should accommodate employees' core personal or family needs to a reasonable extent too.

WHAT IS THIS 'BALANCE'?

Work-life balance refers to how people engage in their work and non-work domains to minimise conflict between them and optimise the fulfilment that they create for life. It does not entail a clean split between work and other parts of life. Instead, it echoes Mr Gupta's sentiments of calibrating how your job and career fit into the larger scheme, including your family and hobbies.

As such, the desire for work-life balance should be normalised. It is okay not to prioritise work and career at certain or even all stages of your life. There is nothing wrong or shameful about being someone whose work or career does not define you centrally, or

who engages in work merely to obtain an income to sustain your family or other life passions.

Remember, there is no single best equation for work-life balance. Giving ourselves sufficient psychological space to navigate and organise our work and non-work demands will enable us to experience greater satisfaction and motivation to contribute our best to both domains.

Work-life balance does not exist in isolation from our significant others and co-workers. As with raising a baby, it takes a village. Some of us are lucky to have a strong village, while others do not. Take workers who have to take on multiple jobs to make ends meet. They might rather spend time with their family or pets if given a choice. Yet, their family's survival is contingent on their work income.

Work-life balance has very real workplace and non-work benefits for employees and companies. My