Be My Stressed Out Valentine:

Workplace Stress and Its Effects on Relationships

Insights from the WarrenShepell Research Group

WarrenShepell

Marital/Relationship Issues: An EAP's Perspective

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Close, personal relationships are vital for psychological well-being. Thousands of studies attest the impact of relationships on both emotional and physical health and wellness outcomes. Problems in personal relationships can also lead to lower performance at work. In WarrenShepell's EAP, relationship issues account for nearly 30 per cent of all EAP cases. Marital and relationship discord, alone, account for 23 per cent of all EAP presenting issues. This is the single most frequent presenting issue observed in EAP, a pattern that is consistent across the industry. There are even indications that marital/relationship issues are underreported, as other EAP presenting issues, such as personal or workplace stress, often 'mask' marital and relationship discord.

Why should employers care about, or take action to enhance, their employees' personal relationships? The bottom line, for employers, is the bottom line. Personal relationships and conflicts with work/life balance are a leading cause of personal and workplace distress, lack of focus, lower productivity and costs of absenteeism and poor health. The bi-directional nature of work-life (life-work) conflict means that problems in an employee's personal life will be carried into the workplace; vice versa, problems at work spill over into home ... and the cycle goes on.

Employers can help employees maintain intimate relationships by offering alternative work schedules (e.g., flextime, part-time, job sharing), adopting family-responsive policies, and training supervisors to be more sensitive to employee relationship needs. For their part, employees can improve their intimate relationships by setting aside time for communication and making firm commitments and plans for relationship-based activities.

INTRODUCTION

Family, work, and leisure are the major divisions of modern life. But are they equal? Does work make up a third of life's pie? A brief history lesson will show that toil in one form or another has always preoccupied human life. But where does the balance lie now, and where is it going? Consider the following trends:

- The average work week has increased from 42 to 45 hours per week over the past decade.
- Forty percent of employees work more than 50 hours per week, compared to 25% in 1990.
- Fifty-two percent of employees take work home with them, up from 31% in 1990.
- Thirty-eight percent of employers report 'increased overtime work hours' as the single most significant change affecting the greatest number of employees.
- High levels of emotional exhaustion at the end of the workday are the norm for 25% to 30% of the workforce.
- Fifty-nine percent of employees check their voicemail after hours, 30% accept work-related faxes at home, and 29% keep their cellphones on. Forty-six percent consider this work-related contact to be an intrusion on their lives.

- Reports of work-family conflict has increased in all sectors since 1991.
- In the United States, the average work year for prime-age working couples has increased by nearly 700 hours in the last two decades.

Gerry Smith, Vice-President of Organizational Health at WarrenShepell, isn't surprised by these findings. "Recent studies show that Canadians spend 60% of their waking hours either at work or thinking about work. So we're working harder, longer, and with fewer resources. We're spending more time away from home and family, and that's contributing to the breakdowns that we're seeing in marital relationships".

Does this bear out in survey research? Yes. In their recent opus, Work-Life Conflict in Canada in the New Millennium: A Status Report, Linda Duxbury and Chris Higgins claim that 44% of couples report negative spillover from work to family in terms of time spent with their partner. The figure was 41% in terms of quality of relationship with their partner.

"So what?" you may ask. "We're working longer and we see less of our loved ones, but surely we must make up for it in the added income. After all, money is the key to the good life, right?" Wrong. Study after study conducted around the globe shows that riches and material wealth are largely unrelated to wellbeing. While work certainly contributes to our happiness, the quality of our relationships has the single greatest impact on our development, wellbeing, and overall meaning of life. Relationships, including marital and family life, are the best predictors of life satisfaction among the major domains of human activity. Human traits that are 'relationship-enhancing' are among the most strongly related to wellbeing.

With this in mind, we explore the following:

- How do healthy, intimate relationships contribute to our wellbeing?
- How might the changing work world be damaging our relationships at home?
- How do our deteriorating relationships at home impact our performance at work?
- What can employers and employees do to build and maintain healthy relationships in today's work world?

RELATIONSHIPS & WELLBEING: THE VITAL LINK

Good relationships are the lynchpins of physical and mental health. The evidence for this is overwhelming:

- People in relationships tend to be happier than those not in relationships

- People are happier when they're in the midst of friends, and happier still the more friends they have.

- Loneliness is negatively related to positive emotions and life satisfaction.

Although the topic of marriage has been a treasure chest of jokes for comedians over the years, marriage helps us live happier lives. Three in four people report that their spouse is their best friend. Wellbeing psychologists David Myers and Ed Diener state that "throughout the Western world, married people of both sexes report more happiness than those never married, divorced, or separated."

Relationships not only make us feel good, but positive relationships lead to healthier and longer lives. Many studies have shown that having strong social support networks are important for coping with physical or emotional problems. For example:

- Close ties to other people, including friends, family, and other social support groups, makes one less vulnerable to ill health and premature death.
- Conversely, low social support predicts future deterioration in mental health.
- People with leukemia or heart disease who also have high social support have higher survival rates.
- When social ties break (e.g., divorce, death of spouse),

immune defenses weaken and rates of disease and death rise.
- Social support influences mortality through our cardiovascular, endocrine, and autoimmune systems.
- When faced with psychological loss or other difficulties, those with close relationships are better able to cope.

The relationship between social support and both physical and emotional health has been observed in literally thousands of studies. Psychologists, sociologists and others believe that many, if not all emotional problems are 'interpersonal' in origin, deriving from faulty relationships with parents, siblings, and peers. For example, interpersonal styles such as excessive autonomy and neediness are believed to cause depression.

Evolutionary thinkers believe that romantic relationships or 'pair-bonding' evolved to ensure that parents stuck together long enough to raise their helpless offspring to maturity, and ensure survival of their genes. Thus, our need for intimate relationships may have been woven into our psyche as a product of natural selection. Many psychologists also believe that our unique sense of 'self' emerges from our relationships with others, whether from our parents during infancy or our peers during adolescence. What it means to be a person, then, is inextricably linked to our social relationships. Seen in this light, it is no wonder that our relationships continue to have an impressionable effect on our day-to-day wellbeing.

WORK & RELATIONSHIPS: A DELICATE BALANCE

Work-to-Relationship Conflict

We know that intimate relationships are the key to wellbeing, so we probably spend most of our time building and cultivating them, right? On the contrary. Researchers with the Canadian Policy Research Networks found that employees spend only about 17 hours a week in non-work-related activities, including time with a partner. The world of work is changing. The global economy, removal of trade barriers, deregulation, technology, and increased customer focus have all led to intense competition in many sectors. Companies have gone 'lean' in order to maintain profit margins. The result has been flatter, smaller workforces and longer hours. The trends cited earlier say it all. Intimate relationships at home are getting squeezed out.

The longer and harder we work, the lower the quality of our relationships at home. This is the heart of the spillover model of work-life balance. Because jobs consume a large part of life, feelings about your job affect feelings about life in general. Feelings about your life in general then spill over into feelings about your marital and home life. In his book *Employment, Stress and Family Functioning* (1990), respected work psychologist Julian Barling concluded that there is strong empirical evidence that work experiences affect marital functioning. In particular, longitudinal studies have shown that work stress affects general wellbeing (such as depression and anxiety), which in turn impacts both marital functioning and satisfaction.

Relationship-to-Work Conflict

It comes full circle. If employers do not take action to create relationship-friendly work structures, it may come back to bite them in the bottom line. The negative effects of work-life imbalance make their way back to the workplace and impede both employee and organizational performance. Consider:

- The cycle of work-life and life-work conflict is related to absenteeism, turnover, lateness and performance.
- Employees with high work-life conflict miss more than twice as many workdays as those with low conflict.
- Work-life conflict in Canada cost organizations roughly $2.7 billion in lost time due to work absences.

Gerry Smith concurs. "People don't live compartmental-ized lives. If they have relationship problems at home, it's bound to transfer over to their performance at work. Also, if they're unable to sustain healthy relationships at home, those problems may affect their ability to build and maintain relationships at work, such as functioning well in a team, or supporting their subordinates."

Managers are especially hard hit by imbalance. "I was speaking to a manager the other day", says Smith. "She works until 9 or 10 p.m. every night. She rarely sees her husband and children. They now call her the 'absent parent,' and the kids are beginning to say things like 'Mommy, you don't care about us anymore.' That has to hurt."

Indeed, managers are one of several occupations that work the longest hours and struggle with the most work-life/life-work balance issues. Graham Lowe of the University of Alberta, who studies healthy workplaces, has identified managers, transport/equipment operators, and contractors in trades/transport as occupations with the highest proportion of people working over 50 hours per week. Particularly with managers, given their sphere of influence in the workplace, higher salaries, and greater costs to employers when they are stressed or ill due to work stress, it is especially important to create supports that ensure they are functioning as well as possible at home and at work.

Positive emotions are the building blocks of human performance. They broaden our thought and action repertoire, improve our problem-solving, urge us to approach and persevere, and provide us with enduring psychological resources. This is the heart of the 'broaden-and-build' theory of psychologist Barbara Fredrickson and one that is supported by many other researchers. In general, meta-analyses of thousands of studies show that positive affect and job satisfaction connect to bottom-line organizational performance.

EAP Trends

Methodology

WarrenShepell tracks a number of relationship issues that may be presented to and are assessed by the EAP. Among these are:

1. Marital/relationship discord
2. Separation/divorce
3. Domestic violence

Marital cases are those in which individuals engage in counselling for any reason related to their intimate relationship with a significant other. This includes heterosexual marriage or common-law relationships as well as lesbian or gay relationships. It may also include relationships of a more casual level of intimacy such as dating and friendship. Counselling for marital issues may comprise either individual or couples counselling.

We analyzed data on general relationship issues as presenting issues from 2000 to 2002. We analyzed these data at the national (aggregate) and individual sector levels. We also focused analysis on marital/relationship discord as a sub-category of general relationship issues.

Results

Following are some of the key findings:

- Relationship issues account for nearly 30 per cent of all EAP presenting issues. This includes marital and relationship discord, separation and divorce, and domestic violence.
- Over 90 per cent of clients with relationship issues self-report stress levels of moderate or high.
- Marital/relationship discord, alone, accounts for 23 per cent of all EAP presenting issues -- the single most frequent presenting issue observed in EAP.
- Marital/relationship discord is trending downwards at the national level, from 24.06% in 2000 to 22.18% in 2002.
- Marital and relationship discord over three years was highest in the entertainment, automotive, agriculture, food and beverage and manufacturing sectors.
- Marital and relationship discord over three years was lowest in the communications and healthcare sectors.
- Self-reported stress increased over three years among those presenting with marital/relationship discord.

Discussion

The preponderance of marital/relationship discord among EAP presenting issues is consistent with published EAP research. It is also consistent with Health Canada research that relationships are the number one source of home-based stress (34 per cent of reports).

The prevalence of marital/relationship discord may even be underestimated as a presenting issue. Rob Graff, a Regional Clinical Manager and counsellor with WarrenShepell, suggests that "seventy-five percent of counselling is related to marital problems, even if marital/relationship discord was not the primary presenting problem when they entered EAP." It is likely that other primary presenting issues, such as personal or workplace stress, often 'mask' marital and relationship discord, even if the latter is not reported as a presenting issue. Counsellors will often uncover marital/relationship issues as a key source of stress in the course of counselling.

"It's not specific to any one level or occupation," says Smith. "We have clients from senior management right down to janitorial staff with serious marital and relationship issues. It cuts across the board. No one appears immune."

We know that marital/relationship discord is often at the heart of presenting problems in EAP, but what is at the heart of marital/relationship discord? What are the specific problems that typically contribute to marital/relationship discord?

Gerry Smith offers his insight. "Based on the studies I've conducted on work and life stress, it's clear that the biggest source of stress at work is the employee's supervisor, while the biggest source of stress at home was inevitably the inability of couples to communicate. Communication is the biggest source of relationship breakdown." Rob Graff agrees. "By far, the most frequent problems we see in relationship counselling are communication issues, in terms of the quality of partner communication".

The identification of supervisors as a source of work stress is consistent with published organizational research.

Fig. 1: Marital & Relationship Discord by High/Low Sectors
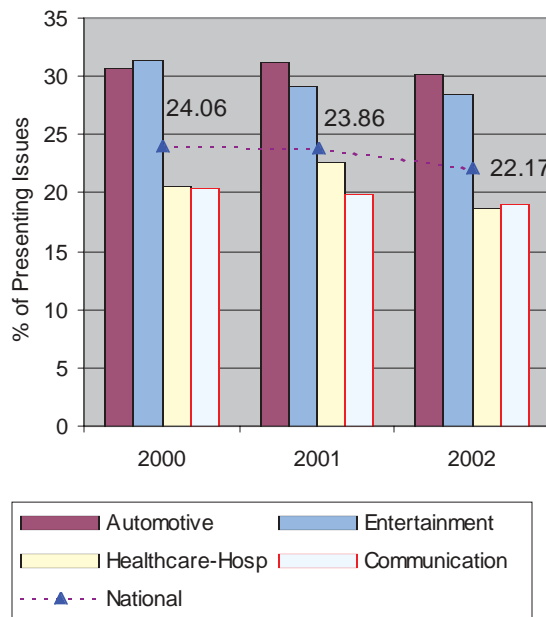
Study after study has shown that supervisor satisfaction accounts for most of an employee's overall job satisfaction. People often quit supervisors, not companies. Furthermore, "leadership" overall is cited consistently as the key criterion for the creation of a "healthy" workplace.

The data suggest that marital/relationship discord is trending downwards. Does this mean that couples are becoming better communicators and that relationships are improving? It may be possible, but the trend is small and may not be statistically significant. Gerry Smith offers one possible interpretation: "Perhaps people are trying their best to stay together and make the best of it. The ramifications of separation and divorce are huge these days, which includes many financial and familial impacts."

The differences among industry sectors (see Figure 1) was one finding that remained robust over the three-year period. "If you look at the automotive industry over the past few years in Canada, there have been huge changes and cutbacks," argues Gerry Smith. "Canadians are holding onto their cars much longer than they used to before buying new ones. That's dealt a blow to the industry, and likely, their employees as well." Additionally, the entertainment industry, which is in the business of selling non-essential 'luxuries,' has been affected by events such as

9/11. With insecurity and uncertainty comes fiscal conservatism on the part of consumers.
Employees in the healthcare sector appear to be slightly less affected in the marital/relationship domain. There is some research to suggest that healthcare workers have stronger than average social support systems both at work and home. This could buffer the impact of specific relationship problems. "Some nurses choose shiftwork because it actually suits their family life and promotes stability, providing the shifts are aligned with the rest of the family's schedules. We know that 12-hour shifts are not healthy in general, but it seems to work well for some nurses," notes Smith.

Although the level of marital/relationship discord appears lower in some sectors, it is important to note that marital/relationship discord is still the number one presenting issue in every sector studied. Even low levels of discord may be problematic for employee and organizations given their impact on wellbeing and performance. Additionally, those employees accessing EAP for marital/relationship discord may represent only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the prevalence of such problems within the organization. Thus, it is critical for employers to appropriately address marital/relationship issues when and where they arise.

What Can Employers Do?
Employers can proactively take steps to help employees build and maintain their personal relationships outside of the workplace. Following are some tips and recommendations:

Re-design jobs
Explore roles, duties and accountabilities with employees. If they're not already formalized in a contract or job description, now is the time to do this collaboratively with employees. Perhaps there has been a long-standing disconnect about expectations. This also gives supervisors an opportunity to learn about necessary extra-role duties that aren't 'counted.' These may be a source of unpaid overtime. In general, find ways to reduce employee workloads and overtime (especially for managers and professionals). Consider whether some activities can be shared across jobs. If structure is needed for job re-design, use a standardized job profiling system, study similar jobs in other organizations, or consult HRDC's National

Occupation Classification system. Finally, it is crucial for supervisors and employees to collaboratively set realistic, challenging goals that are concrete enough to be measured (i.e., management by objectives) and tracked.

Offer training and developmental opportunities

While job re-design considers how jobs impact personal relationships outside the workplace, training and development considers what employees can learn to do differently to become more effective in the workplace. Employers could offer such opportunities if it is clear that more effective time management or self-regulation is needed. Competency-based multi-source assessment may go far to help pinpoint areas for development.

Offer alternative work arrangements

One of the most effective ways of helping employees to achieve a better work-life balance is to offer a range of alternative work arrangements. Examples include flextime, telecommuting, part-time, and job-sharing. Some of these will not be possible for some jobs.

Flextime programs, for example, involve a 'core' period during which the employee must be present. The employee chooses the start and finish times based on his or her relationship needs. Employees can also vary the length of the workday or week and 'bank' unused hours for subsequent days/weeks, or negotiate compressed work weeks. Flextime programs are not as prevalent as they should be. It is estimated that only 24% of workplaces offer them. However, their costs are minimal. Flextime work hours lead to higher organizational commitment and job satisfaction, less absenteeism, lateness and turnover and increased productivity.

Other alternatives are telecommuting or working at a site away from the office. These can lead to greater autonomy, more flexible work hours, less commuting and more time to spend with partners if they are also home-based.

Create flexible career development programs

Work with employees to create flexible career paths that are more aligned with their values and/or personal relationships. This may lead to alternative ways of contributing to the organization. In general, examine employee career aspirations and development in the context of their optimal work-life arrangement. The nature

of rewards and advancement may need to be re-defined for some, particularly at different life and career stages.

Train supervisors and managers to be sensitive to employee relationship needs

Employees with supervisors who are sensitive to their personal needs have higher job satisfaction and lower absenteeism than employees with non-supportive supervisors. Supervisors can try to understand what makes their employees 'tick', and get to know more about their lives outside of the workplace without being too intrusive. In this way, they're more likely to be understanding if a crisis develops at home. In particular, supervisors could be more sensitive to any gender-based stressors that employees may have. Women continue to be the primary caregivers in society and constantly juggle the roles of careerist, mother and spouse.

Knowing their employees better also enables supervisors to notice when personal relationship problems may be affecting work. "You have to be familiar with an employee's normal patterns of behaviour in order to recognize when something may be wrong in their personal life," offers Gerry Smith. "In order to recognize and respond to that, you need to engage in close, visible management."

Schedule events that build strong employee relationships

Hold regular social events to give employees opportunities to build personal relationships in the workplace that transcend traditional 'teams' (e.g., parties, celebrations, retreats). Personal relationships in the workplace are not a substitute for intimate relationships outside of work, but closer internal ties may translate to stronger social support networks that can be accessed in times of personal and organizational crisis. Personal relationships in the workplace may be especially beneficial when there are marital problems at home and an alternative source of social support is needed. Research by the Gallup Organization shows that having a 'best friend at work' predicts organizational performance measures such as customer satisfaction, profit, and productivity.

Offer EAPs with trained relationship counsellors

EAPs offer a variety of services to help employees with relationship problems. This includes one-on-one counselling with counsellors specially trained for relationship issues, including counsellors certified by the

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). EAP programs can also deliver wellness seminars on factors that affect relationships such as shiftwork and dealing with difficult teenagers. This is a cost-effective way of reaching a large number of employees and may prevent future relationship problems on a wide scale. In general, EAPs have been recognized by work psychologists as appropriate initiatives for promoting work-family balance.

What Can Employees Do?

Increase opportunities to communicate with your partner
Most relationship counsellors would agree that many marital problems begin and end with poor communication. Gerry Smith: "What often happens when there is little overt communication is that people start to make attributions about their partner's behavior. They infer thoughts and feelings that may or may not be true - and often they assume the worst."

Rob Graff continues: "Many of the singular issues and complaints that come up in couples counselling can be handled through better communication. It's surprising how many problems are resolved just by facilitating more open and frequent communication among partners. A lot of the other 'stuff' falls away once the lines of communication are open. It often doesn't matter what the concrete issues were. It creates a whole new positive cycle and often returns a relationship to a level of intimacy that had been lost for some time."

Make firm commitments to spend quality time together
Despite our ever-increasing commitment to our employers, strong commitments must also be made at home to spend regular time with partners, free from work-related interruptions. Smith offers the following tips: "Draw your boundaries very carefully between work and home. With your partner, start each week with a decision and a plan, knowing what you're going to do with the time you have. Plan significant events together like your weekly night out. Make sure that you formally build that time in for each other." But couples must also be realistic. "Don't be too rigid. It's good to have expectations, but the night out doesn't have to be Monday. You also have career expectations. Those affect your financial and family security, which are equally important for the relationship."

Try to limit the amount of work that is brought home. If work must be taken home, find opportunities to complete it after social commitments have been taken care of (e.g., dinner together, after the children are in bed).

CONCLUSIONS

A vast body of research suggests that close, personal relationships enhance our physical and mental wellbeing. Relationships may, in fact, be the most important source of wellbeing in human lives. Given that employee wellbeing has significant impacts on employee and organizational performance, employers would do well to explore ways of helping employees to build, maintain, and in fact thrive in their personal relationships outside the workplace. This includes marital and other romantic attachments, which appear to offer the most benefits in terms of wellbeing.

Employers may feel that implementing relationship-friendly policies and practices is outside their domain.

However, most of the recommended policies and practices are non-intrusive and have as their primary objectives the enhancement of workplace relationships, with secondary benefits for personal relationships. For example, policies and practices that are already aimed at improving work-life balance may also have the desired effect of helping employees to maintain close, personal relationships.

It is our hope that taking the first steps to implementing this report's recommendations may help to position organizations as 'caring employers' and improve attraction, recruitment and retention outcomes. In the end, our workplaces, home lives and communities benefit.

THE WARRENSHEPELL RESEARCH GROUP

The WarrenShepell Research Group has been formed to gather, analyze and provide commentary on organizational health trends that affect our clients, their employees and families. Collecting and disseminating data about mental health issues, linking with some of the industry's highest profile research institutes and individual scholars, and drawing from our 24 years of expertise in the industry, the WarrenShepell Research Group's mandate is to help our clients and the broader business community understand the intricacies and the impact of poor mental health, work/life imbalances and related issues in our workplaces and in our communities.

This report is supported by a large body of academic and survey research. The references to over 60 published studies have been omitted for space considerations. These references are available upon request. The EAP findings contained in this report are based on WarrenShepell proprietary data.

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