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WORK-LIFE BALANCE: A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Summary

The pedagogy of work and the challenges of civilisation demand an analysis of the psychological condition of human beings regarding work, which would benefit the understanding of work-life balance. This article aims to identify selected axiological aspects of an individual's pursuit of balance between the essential spheres of human life and the factors that affect such balance. The article discusses the general characteristics of work-life balance and identifies the need for the same in the context of psycho-pedagogical dimensions.

Keywords: professional work, non-work life (time), work-life balance, professional burnout, stress, perfectionism

1. Characteristics of Work-Life Balance in Question

Work-life balance is very frequently presented as a goal in the literature on the pedagogy of work and human resource management (Gotowska, 2014; Tomaszewska-Lipiec, 2014, p. 64). The concept of work-life balance can be defined as the balance between the spheres of work and non-work life. Defining this term is extremely difficult because different people perceive this issue differently and, thus, focus on different aspects. For some, this concept denotes the separation of professional and non-professional, i.e. private life. Others consider work-life balance a concept of balancing the two spheres of life: professional and personal. Those remaining are of the opinion that the concept represents the ability to permeate between the professional and personal spheres (Rzepka, 2016, p. 9). Rzepka (2016), in discussing the concept of work-life balance, provides examples of responses from clients and their friends regarding this question. When asked what they associate the term 'work-life balance' with, they responded as follows:

- 'Less work and more time spent with family';
- 'Complete all jobs at work by 5 pm';
- 'Minimise the time spent commuting to work';
- 'Do not answer work calls after leaving work';
- 'Do not check your mail in the evening';
- 'Find time for personal pleasures';
- 'Spend your free time more interestingly';
- 'Avoid thinking of work when at home'. (Rzepka, 2016, p. 10)

According to Rzepka (2016), people associate various definitions with the concept of work-life balance differently. However, essentially, work-life balance is about balancing the two spheres of work and private life. Maintaining a balance between these spheres requires taking action that equally addresses the needs arising from the four spheres of work, family, oneself and family life (Rzepka, 2016, p. 30).

Meeting the needs of these four spheres forms the basis for wellbeing and 'a healthy balance in life' (Rzepka, 2016, p. 30). Therefore, it is necessary to look more closely at these spheres and present the elements that are typical of each sphere.

Work is presented as the first sphere, the elements of which may include professional work, formal trips from the workplace, contact with colleagues, running one's own business, continuing and further training, attending conferences, creating original works, and contributing to associations, foundations or voluntary work.

The second sphere—family—comprises constituents such as husband, wife, partner, the family in which one grew up, and the family in which the husband, wife, partner, close friends and animals grew up (Rzepka, 2016, p. 4).

The third sphere—oneself—is that of the human being (Rzepka, 2016, p. 41), which may include mental health, physical health and any intrusion related to such health.

The fourth sphere—social life—consists of friends and acquaintances, social groups (e.g. residential community), special interest groups, social networks, work friends and friends of one's spouse or partner.

The above-mentioned elements of these are spheres are considered by the paper's author to be key. However, due to people's unique individuality, each person can feature different elements.

2. The Need for Work-Life Balance

Having presented the elements of the above spheres, it is now necessary to present and characterise the ways and approaches by which balance can be maintained and improved in life. Each individual has their own developed ways of balancing the two spheres of work and private life. Below are five approaches to achieve work-life balance:

1. 'Quality, not quantity';
2. 'Better shorter but more efficiently';
3. 'Work hard, play hard';
4. 'Benefits of full engagement'; and
5. 'Using personal energy' (Rzepka, 2016, p. 4).

In the first approach, Rzepka (2016) points out that work-life balance is about the quality of the time spent on each sphere, not the quantity. If we undertake an activity, e.g. meeting friends, then the focus should be on that meeting and time should be devoted to those people. There are times when people are engaged in texting or taking calls from work during a meeting with friends, which results in the meeting being of poor quality due to too many distractions. When distracted, people do not feel satisfied with the spheres of their lives – in this case, social life.

The second approach considers efficiency. Maintaining balance is not about devoting the same amount of time to each sphere. For example, devoting four hours to work and another four hours to a family meeting does not necessarily mean that one's work and private life are in balance. Time is merely one element among many others, and it is not the most important. Focusing on work-life balance in terms of the amount of time spent on each sphere is not a good way to maintain balance between the spheres. More importance should be assigned to one's efficiency. The word efficiency is most often associated with professional work. However, this approach refers to making an effort, giving one's best in a short period and getting the most out of an activity that falls into any of the four spheres of life.

The third approach, 'work hard, play hard', focuses on the idea that if one is working, then one's focus must be on work; if one is with one's family, one's focus must be on the family; if one takes time for oneself, one's attention and thoughts must be focused only on oneself; and if one is out with friends, one must make time for them so that they do not feel a lack of attention and interest.

The fourth approach concerns the benefits of total commitment. It is easy to imagine the positive consequences of fully engaging in and devoting attention to one area of life rather than being distracted by others. By focusing on one sphere, one gains satisfaction with that particular area, and with a strong commitment to the area, one can achieve far-reaching benefits. For example, one can strengthen ties with loved ones and increase their sense of security, get to know one's inner self, work more efficiently and improve the quality of the health and relaxation of everyone involved.

The final approach is to use personal energy. Some activities require the use of personal energy. Also, for some people, a large volume of energy is superfluous; every person should be aware of their energy levels. When undertaking an activity, one needs to know when and for which activities to use a higher level of one's personal energy. A lack of awareness and misuse of one's energy can result in fatigue and inactivity, in which case it is very difficult for one to feel a sense of work-life balance (Rzepka, 2016, pp. 60–71).

3. Obstacles to Maintaining a Work-Life Balance

In life, one encounters many obstacles that adversely affect the maintenance of work-life balance. Among the main obstacles are professional burnout, stress, perfectionism and workaholism. The difficulties that one faces can do a lot of damage to one's work-life balance. If one does not react in time, one may encounter problems with maintaining work-life balance and, consequently, one's mental health will suffer (Rzepka, 2016, p. 73).

Professional burnout

When writing about the main obstacles to maintaining work-life balance, it is important to characterise them. The first of the obstacles is professional burnout, which signifies the ultimate effect of work overload: mental and emotional exhaustion (Furmanek, 2008, 2015, p. 321). According to Tucholska (2003), professional burnout can be defined as a gradual loss of energy, goals and idealism in people who work in helping professions as a result of unfriendly working conditions (Tucholska, 2003, p. 26; Furmanek, 2015, pp. 321–322). Professional burnout is therefore the human body's reaction to stress resulting from a high volume of tasks and unfavourable working conditions. It can also be a response to a monotonous and exhausting job and being overloaded with tasks and responsibilities (Furmanek, 2015, p. 322). The following are three types of behaviours that facilitate conditions for professional burnout:

- Being too attached to one's work, treating it as the most important sphere, i.e. as if it is more important than leisure or family;
- Exaggerated devotion to work as a counterbalance to an unsatisfactory private life;
- Over-commitment to work, which stems from the conviction that one is unique and cannot be replaced (Wilczek-Rużyczka, 2014, p. 35).

Overworking and stress that persist over a long term in the workplace cause professional burnout. As such, an employee's qualities have a considerable impact on the course of burnout. Such qualities are, for example, stress tolerance, personality traits, schema of values and level of responsibility for tasks.

Environmental conditions and a person's psychophysical characteristics can be mentioned among the causes of burnout. Repeatedly mentioned causes are personality traits conducive to the development of professional burnout. These traits can include low self-esteem, a vaguely defined value system, problems with controlling emotions and instrumental treatment of other people (Winch, 1995; Furmanek, 2015, pp. 330–331).

Throughout life, people encounter a variety of situations that cause feelings of burnout. Such circumstances could include, for example:

- Lack of awareness of control over work,
- Insufficient time to complete work tasks,
- Professed values of the employee not corresponding with the values recognised by the workplace,
- Vaguely defined objectives in relation to the employee,
- Unspecified requirements for the employee,
- Working in adverse conditions caused by the working environment,
- Poor support of the employee from their CEO or boss,
- An unfavourable working atmosphere,
- Underestimation of employee effort (Rzepka, 2016, pp. 90–92).

Professional burnout has its characteristic symptoms, four types of which are described next. The first type is 'physical symptoms' (Furmanek, 2008, p. 328.), such as:

- Long-lasting fatigue,
- Neglecting physical activity,
- Sleep disorders,
- Lack of appetite and weight loss,
- Reduced libido,
- Using alcohol to improve one's mood (Furmanek, 2015, p. 332).

The second type is 'emotional and behavioural symptoms' (Furmanek, 2008, p. 328, see: 2015, p. 332), the most common symptoms of which include:

- Relaxation issues,
- Prolonged feelings of fatigue,
- Reduced mood,
- Prejudice against people,
- Feelings of loneliness,
- Frequent anxiety,
- Feeling a lack of purpose in life.

The third type is 'family and social factors' (Furmanek, 2008, p. 328, 2015, p. 332), which consist of:

- Little interest in the family,
- Getting angry quickly,
- Arguing with the family over minor issues,
- Spending less time with household members,
- Reluctance to relax together,
- Spending a lot of time in front of the television alone (Furmanek, 2008, p. 328).

Several stages in the process of professional burnout can be distinguished. The first stage is characterised by the fact that one has to prove one's worth as an employee. One sets the bar high for oneself, expecting much more of oneself than one is capable of. Effective work turns into a compulsion to work effectively with great results. In the second stage, one has to prove one's worth through a self-performed task. At this stage, an extremely high-level commitment emerges that was not present before. The third stage concerns negligence. It refers to one's needs, which are ranked as second to one's work. Entertainment, relaxation and meeting friends or family fade into the background. One develops sleeping issues and, sometimes, problems with drug abuse or heavy smoking; trouble sleeping often leads people to take sleeping pills (Furmanek, 2015, pp. 336–337).

The fourth stage manifests as an imbalance of external demands and internal needs. One can experience memory problems and confusion with nomenclature or terminology. The symptoms of this stage are not caused by overload but by low energy levels, which decrease when one has to cope with forced internal demands. The fifth stage of professional burnout is re-evaluation, where a shift in priorities and one's value system occurs. Social relationships are considered a burden. Only a return to previous values, priorities and interpersonal contact can help at this stage. The sixth stage is characterised by one becoming less effective at work, problems with patience, isolation and physical disorders. The seventh stage concerns withdrawal. The social sphere becomes the enemy: it is perceived as problematic and a burden. In the eighth stage, behavioural changes, isolation and withdrawal from functioning occur. Outside attempts to help or support are perceived negatively. Delusions may occur at this stage (Furmanek, 2015, pp. 336–337).

The ninth stage concerns the loss of personality and autonomy. In the tenth stage, panic attacks, phobias and social anxiety can occur. In this stage, one feels internally empty and alone and believes oneself to have no values. The eleventh stage comprises of depression, exhaustion, cachexia and thoughts of suicide. The twelfth and final stage is total burnout. The organism is completely exhausted, and severe mental and physical disorders follow. Frequent illnesses occur, such as infections due to reduced immunity. At this stage, an increased risk of heart attack and other heart diseases is present (Furmanek, 2015, pp. 336–337).

When one notices the onset of job burnout, one must take immediate actions to overcome it. Burnout will not disappear on its own; one needs to find the root cause.

Combating burnout does not take only a moment of support, rather, it is a long-term process. If the degree of burnout is already advanced, specialist counselling is required. However, in the initial stages, one can cope independently with the occurring burnout. Rzepka (2016) suggests implementing a four-step process to help combat professional burnout that encourages engagement in deeper reflection, pausing for some moments and giving oneself time to heal. The process consists of the following steps:

1. Cause,
2. Values review,
3. Solution,
4. Celebration (Rzepka, 2016, pp. 98–100).

The first step of the process is to reflect on the reasons for burnout occurring in one's life. One needs to think about whether the problem lies with the work itself or within other spheres, such as family, that clash with it. For example, the manager of a shop chain that has outlets in several countries with different time zones works from 6 am to 8 pm. The work results in the manager lacking time for their family or themself. They can burn out quickly because performing the role of a manager requires the dedication of a lot of time to the work, the family is on the sidelines and they cannot satisfy the needs that arise from the personal and family spheres.

The second step relates to the values one identifies oneself with. One needs to slow down and review them and redefine one's life goals or currently important values. There is a high probability that if one experiences burnout, one's values have changed, resulting in greater difficulty to perform at work. A longer reflection on personal values and a review of these values can help one understand the situation and consider it from a completely different perspective. Taking these steps will help one understand the root of the problem.

The third step can only occur when one has successfully found the cause of burnout and redefined one's value system, as the solution to one's burnout is examined in this step; solutions are only sought when the root of the problem is found. Some people may want to dispose of the problem by getting fired from their jobs, but this is not always a good solution. There are many solutions to burnout besides redundancy, for example:

- Changing of job position,
- Asking the manager to reduce or modify one's duties,
- Introducing remote work,
- Requesting the employment of an additional person to assist in one's duties.

A person experiencing burnout needs to consider several options alongside their values. The main consideration here is the cause of burnout, identified during the first step. The fourth step encourages the celebration of successes. It is important to take care of one's wellbeing at this stage. Celebrating even the smallest success can improve mental health. During this step, care should be taken to rest and relax. Taking up an activity that provides one with pleasure and joy is also a good way to deal with burnout (Rzepka, 2016, pp. 98–100).

Stress and perfectionism

Stress is yet another obstacle to maintaining work-life balance. It adversely affects the private and professional spheres. Stress is not a bad thing in itself, for it often entails a motivating effect. The problem arises when stress levels become too high and cause negative effects, such as breakdowns and a loss of momentum (Rzepka, 2016, p. 74). Stress can occur in a variety of ways, and there are several types of reactions to stressful situations in the workplace:

- Physiological,
- Emotional,
- Cognitive,
- Behavioural (Furmanek, 2015, p. 203).

The first type of reaction can include high blood pressure and accelerated heartbeat. The second type can manifest as irritability, impulsiveness and anxiety. The third type can manifest as poor concentration and poor memory. The last reaction emerges as rage, aggression, hyperactivity and frequent slip ups (Furmanek, 2015, p. 203). These types of reactions show that work-life balance cannot be maintained if one is stressed.

The next obstacle to work-life balance is perfectionism. There are two types of perfectionism:

- Positive, and
- Negative.

Positive perfectionism results in one constantly developing one's abilities, qualifications and competences while simultaneously increasing one's level of happiness and joy in self-development. Negative perfectionism occurs when the pursuit of perfection begins to upset the balance in one's life. One constantly feels dissatisfied with one's achievements and work, which leads to feelings of failure, dissatisfaction, frustration, discouragement and doubt.

Negative perfectionism disrupts work-life balance. Perfectionism that occurs at work translates into the suffering of one's family and friends through the imposing of perfectionism at home. This can also occur in reverse order, with perfectionism that occurs in the home extending its influence to work. This is the case where one's work suffers (Rzepka, 2016, pp. 103–104).

Workaholism is the last of the obstacles to work-life balance that will be discussed in this paper. It is a peculiar addiction that, similar to other addictions, indicates emotional problems. Disturbances that occur during this phenomenon cause personality disorders that result in the disruption of normal functioning in various spheres of a person's life (Szymczak & Rybak, 2016, p. 148). Workaholism is a self-destructive behaviour and a pathology that disrupts work-life balance. This addiction has its own characteristic symptoms, such as:

- A strong commitment to work,
- Constant dissatisfaction with work,

- Constant talk of work,
- Planning work at home,
- Reluctance to leave work.

A workaholic is a person with the above symptoms. For such a person, work is the highest priority (Furmanek, 2015, pp. 368–369), and satisfaction is only realised through work. Workaholics often have impaired imaginative capacities and quite narrow interests. They view others through the prism of work. To them, a person of value is synonymous with a person who works hard.

4. Towards a Work-Life Balance

By listing and describing the problems that can be encountered in life regarding work, the author aimed to convey how difficult it is to maintain a balance between professional and personal life: it requires a lot of effort and continuous learning. When entering the professional world, one solidifies one's status as a lifelong learner; there is no golden cure-all for reconciling work and home: one must learn relevant strategies and gain experience. It is often the case that many people fail to establish work-life balance at the beginning of their professional careers, but when they learn to draw conclusions and learn from their mistakes, they manage to achieve work-life balance, which is highly important for feeling inner peace. Work must not intervene with the family sphere, nor must family and family problems be the cause of a reduction in the quality of one's work. A person feels satisfaction with life if they are able and manage to maintain a work-life balance. The balance is considered appropriate when found satisfactory to the individual in the right time and moment (Clutterbuck, 2005, p. 90 et seq.; Sadowska-Snarska, 2014, p. 35).

Work-life balance is quite a broad concept. It encompasses numerous spheres of life, and the needs in these spheres must be fully met in order to achieve a balanced life. Any person who wants to maintain a work-life balance needs to make time for four important elements of life:

- The realisation of personal needs;
- Work, in order to raise funds to meet many needs;
- Entertainment;
- Meetings with friends (Clutterbuck, 2005, p. 27; Sadowska-Snarska, 2014, pp. 35–36).

Work is of value to all people. Each generation of working people has its own norms, values and characteristics. For one generation, work may be the most important thing, with non-work life being sacrificed for it. For another, family and leisure may be just as important as work. However, striving for work-life balance – a concept based on evenly attending to work and leisure which calls for continuous self-education and improvement – is important for everyone. Although many obstacles may stand in the

way of achieving work-life balance, which some people manage better than others, every person has to make a great effort to strive for such balance. By balancing the time spent on work and personal life, one can gain satisfaction, joy and happiness from life.

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