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The Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award

For Excellence in Work-Family Research



**Winner of
The 2015
Rosabeth Moss
Kanter Award**

"Changing
Work and
Work-Family
Conflict
Evidence from
the Work,
Family, and
Health
Network."

**American
Sociological
Review**

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What were the major findings of your study?

Our study addresses a big question: Can we make changes in the work environment that reduce employees' sense of being torn between work and the rest of their lives, that relieve some of the time strain they feel?

We investigated that by bringing a change initiative, called STAR, to the information technology (IT) division of a Fortune 500 company. We conducted a true field experiment; half of the work groups in this division participated in the STAR initiative and half were our control group who continued working under the pre-existing company policies. STAR involved two main components: training managers to express their support for employees' personal and family lives more deliberately and participatory workshops where teams talked together about how they could get their jobs done well while also maximizing employees' latitude about when and where they did their work.

We followed employees over six months to see how their work-family experiences changed and whether STAR brought more positive changes to employees than we saw with the "usual practice" control group.

Our key findings were:

- 1) STAR increased employees' sense of control over when and where they worked and their managers' support for family and personal life significantly, compared to the changes in the control group.
- 2) STAR reduced employees' work-life conflict and improved their sense of having "enough time" to be with family, again compared to the control group.
- 3) STAR employees' work hours and subjective work demands (measured by items like working very hard and work fast in this job) did not differ from the control group. So the improvements in the work-life domain were felt without an increase or decrease in work hours.
- 4) The benefits of STAR were felt broadly but were larger for employees whose supervisors had been less supportive at the outset and for "sandwich" caregivers with both childcare and elder care responsibilities. Employees who were working more than 50 hours per week felt a more dramatic change in having "enough time" with family but they did not see decreases in work-life conflicts.

Were you surprised by the findings?

Yes and no! Previous research had shown that employees with more flexibility (or schedule control) and workers who felt their managers supported their personal and family lives also tended to have better work-life "balance" and fewer conflicts. But most of that research only allowed us to see correlations or associations between those work conditions and work-life conflicts and time strains.

It was an open question whether the STAR work redesign approach would succeed in changing employees' sense of schedule control and their assessment of manager support. It was also unclear whether this initiative would be substantial enough to bring relief in the work-life arena to these busy professionals and managers. We were pleased, but not too surprised, to find the positive effects we did.

What do you think are the most important implications of your findings for employees? For human resource practitioners?

Our study demonstrates that work organizations can change to reduce work-life conflicts and relieve time strain. For employees, one implication is that it is not all up to you to figure out how to "balance" all the parts of your life. Changing your own behavior may be smart, but it is also important to recognize that the way work is organized is at the root of these challenges and that can be addressed with organizational changes too.

For HR professionals and other managers, we hope that this study provides some compelling evidence and a new example of an effective flexibility initiative. (workfamilyhealthnetwork.org.)

Our research shows that the benefits come when employees feel supported and have more say in when and where they work, in consultation with their teams. In STAR, flexibility is not an accommodation available to a few lucky employees but the whole team discusses how they can work effectively and still pursue their personal and family lives. We hope our research leads managers and other advocates to investigate and hopefully adopt a more collective approach to redesigning work policies and practices to match the needs of today's workforce.

Winner: Kelly, Erin L., Phyllis Moen, J. Michael Oakes, Wen Fan, Cassandra Okechukwu, Kelly D. Davis, Leslie B. Hammer, Ellen Ernst Kossek, Rosalind Berkowitz King, Ginger C. Hanson, Frank Mierzwa, & Lynne M. Casper "Changing Work and Work-Family Conflict Evidence from the Work, Family, and Health Network." *American Sociological Review* 79. 3 (2014)

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