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WHITE PAPER

COVID-19 effects on work-life balance for working parents, military workers, and veterans

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Executive Summary

The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index highlighted concerns about important issues affecting Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes to home and work life due to shelter in place mandates and quarantines, school and daycare closures, and job losses affected many Americans. One in two Americans reported that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted their work-life balance. Work-life balance consists of overall well-being in five areas: career, social, community, health, and financial. Who were some of the groups negatively impacted by societal changes during the COVID-19 pandemic? How can employers help workers create positive and lasting changes to work-life balance?

This white paper will cover the implications of COVID-19 pandemic impacts felt by American working parents with children under 18 years old, military workers, military reserve workers, and veterans by examining five areas of overall well-being, reported needs, and concerns shown in the University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index. Then this paper will show how industry leaders and employers can utilize this information to support work-life balance for American workers.

How leaders should use this information

The information in this white paper can be used by industry as a guide to developing an understanding of the specific needs of working parents, working mothers, military workers, and veterans in order to inform reflection and changes to leadership practices and encourage policy support for employee flex and health needs, and for employees seeking career advancement opportunities.

Utilizing this white paper

This white paper should be used for:

- Knowledge management
- Programming measures for industry leaders

Recent research has highlighted concerns about important work-life balance issues affecting Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Important concerns about work-life balance were shared by working parents, working veterans, and military workers. These groups needed employer support to achieve a balance between their work and home responsibilities and address career growth concerns.

Understanding the need for work-life balance is vital for American workers as an imbalance between work obligations, family responsibilities, and personal time negatively affects health. Though some stress can be positive, helping us problem-solve, accomplish tasks, and enhance performance, chronic or long-term stress can

interfere with daily life resulting in physical and mental health symptoms such as a weakened immune response, increased risk of heart attack, and increased depression and anxiety.[1] United States workers ranked highest for daily stress levels during the COVID-19 pandemic indicating issues balancing life elements.[2] When balance is attained between work and home pursuits, the results are happier and more productive workers. Though many American workers tried to prioritize their work-life balance, over half of employed Americans say that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted their work-life balance.

Table 1: Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on work-life balance.[3]

Working Americans	General population	Working parents (children under 18)	Military workers	Reserve workers	Veterans
The pandemic has negatively impacted my work-life balance. (Somewhat agree or Strongly agree)	51%	61%	68%	63%	52%

Workers need to understand career opportunities in order to support their work-life balance through career development and advancement that can lead to financial gains and promotions. Recent studies showed that American working parents, working veterans, and military workers have concerns with available career development opportunities. Though understanding career growth needs have always been an area of concern, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted specific worker needs. Concerns about job stability and automation, technological advances, and pandemic-related work stress left many American workers confused about how to develop job skills and advance their careers.

What is work-life balance?

Work-life balance includes career responsibilities, family needs, and personal time. Finding a balance between career needs and home life does not mean that equal amounts of time are spent in each area, rather it is about finding the right balance for each person or family based on needs and preferences.[4]

Historically, working long hours may have seemed good for workers and companies. Deep focus on work can help workers achieve positive results such as following personal ambition, proving their importance, and achieving financial success. However, the negative impacts such as guilt and anxiety can be destructive for both workers and companies as overwork does not increase output but does increase mistakes, absenteeism, and employee turnover.[5] A lack of balance between work time and personal time leads to diminishing returns so work-life balance today is about overall well-being.

Well-being needs to include many different aspects of life. Career, social, community, health, and financial well-being are all vital to overall well-being so that workers like what they do and where they live, can manage their money and energy, and can have meaningful relationships.[6]

COVID-19 impact

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, modern workers struggled with work-life balance as increased digital connectivity and the rush to compete in a global economy extended work hours. The COVID-19 pandemic changed how people felt about their work and home lives once work moved into the home environment, workers were classified as frontline, schools and child care centers were closed sending children to learn from home, and social distancing and shelter-in-place mandates kept people from leaving home. Changes to work

and home life increased worry and stress and decreased employee engagement. Globally during the COVID-19 pandemic, half of workers received less money, stopped working temporarily, or worked fewer hours, and a third of workers reported losing their job or business completely.[2]

Working parents struggled with extra pressures to juggle work, financial needs, supervision of children and their virtual learning needs, and household chores. An imbalance in work responsibilities and family or personal time is of particular concern to working parents, veterans, and military service members. These groups of workers raised concerns about career issues and potential job loss as well as additional family support needs and mental health concerns brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concerns of working parents and working mothers

Career well-being

Working parents, especially working mothers, struggled to balance career expectations and family needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though one in four working parents reported having a lot of child care duties while working from home, working mothers were twice as likely to feel burdened with child care responsibility and reported difficulties handling virtual schooling, child care needs, and work tasks.[7] Mothers provide 60% of child care in couples where both parents were working.[8] Caregiving expectations and overrepresentation in industries disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic left working mothers 68% more likely to have to leave their jobs.[9] Working mothers also experienced notable job losses due to working in industries hit harder by the COVID-19 pandemic and fewer jobs that allowed remote work.

Social well-being

Feelings of social isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic brought new struggles for American workers. Many experienced increased social isolation and the resulting deteriorating mental health effects. Though work and family relationships helped with social needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, working parents reported feeling that lack of support, mentoring, and advocacy held them back in their careers and requested additional support from employers to connect with mentors and colleagues.

Community well-being

Community well-being includes social health determinants such as food, housing, transportation, physical and mental health, education, employment, social support, and safety needs.[10] During the COVID-19 pandemic, communities came together to support work-life balance and provide health and community services for those in need. Many people chose to volunteer, share helpful information online, or build their career and social networks during shelter in place mandates and quarantines to counteract feelings of social isolation. Despite these efforts, additional support was needed to reduce difficulties stemming from government restrictions in communities.[11]

Health well-being

Physical inactivity was already a major health concern worldwide costing billions of dollars in lost productivity for workers.[12] Then, COVID-19 pandemic shelter in place mandates forced many American workers to change their exercise habits to in-home or neighborhood options. Additionally, changes in work hours, social distancing needs, and remote working left workers struggling with sedentary behaviors, a lack of physical activity, and variable sleep patterns brought on by changed schedules and stress. Many workers struggled to maintain or improve stress levels and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Financial well-being

Financial insecurity places an additional burden on mental health and can lead to chronic stress issues for workers. Many working parents worry about finances due to job loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. Half of working mothers had to reduce their work hours leading to increased financial hardships for families.[13] Poorer households and women are more strongly affected by ongoing financial issues such as low paying jobs, job loss, increased debt, and child care needs.

The Career Optimism Index and working parents

The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index showed that American workers were struggling at work, and many felt their career had been derailed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Two in five working parents did not see a clear path forward in their career. One in four working parents felt that lack of upskilling and development opportunities held them back in their career.

Table 2: Needs of working parents and working mothers in career, financial, health, and social well-being.[3]

Working Americans	General population	Working parents (children under 18)	Working mothers (children under 18)
I do not have access to opportunities to develop the skills I need to advance in my career. (Somewhat agree or Strongly agree)	35%	38%	38%
I want to develop my skillset, but don't know where to begin. (Somewhat agree or Strongly agree)	43%	48%	50%
I live paycheck to paycheck . (Somewhat agree or Strongly agree)	43%	52%	54%
I am concerned about maintaining my overall health and fitness. (Somewhat agree or Strongly agree)	64%	78%	70%
My mental health has impacted my work performance. (Yes, this holds me back in my career)	34%	44%	42%
I need support to connect with others in my field or desired field. (I need some support or I need a lot of support)	55%	61%	61%

The concerns with career, social, community, health, and financial well-being for working parents highlight issues present with work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Support needs beyond those of the general population could help working parents toward career, financial, health and social well-being. Working parents specifically shared that a lack of time and schedule concerns kept their careers from moving forward.

Work-life balance concerns of military workers and veterans

Career well-being

Finding balance for military workers can be challenging, and both military workers and veterans suffered from changes to their work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2020 survey of military families showed that time away from family was a top concern.[14] The COVID-19 pandemic brought new struggles to attain work-life balance in the military with a lack of child care, distance education and support needs for children,

and the unpredictable schedules and extended deployment times of military workers. Work duties of military workers go further than the hours of a traditional career, heavily impacting spouses and children with work separations or relocations, unpredictable schedules, and safety concerns.

Social well-being

Isolation from physical or social distancing, shelter in place orders, and distance learning needs affected military workers and their families. Reduced social opportunities and unpredictability from the COVID-19 pandemic brought on boredom, loneliness, and worries about the future for American military workers. Social support can combat the effects of chronic stress by providing a support network, effective leadership, and healthy relationships.[15] Commitment to others, a sense of group unity, and unit cohesion are integral to military life and support the needed courage and resilience for military workers and veterans. However, veterans suffer from mental and behavioral health issues from previous trauma exposure which can leave them without needed social support networks.[16]

Community well-being

Community engagement helps military workers and veterans feel connected to others and find needed support in their area. Community activities, civic action, connecting through organizations, and collective action for community improvement support military workers and their families. Military community events and opportunities create a sense of shared purpose, social support, and an awareness of community resources for military workers, veterans, and military families.[17] This community support was especially important to combat the isolation brought on by COVID-19 pandemic shelter in place restrictions and quarantines.

Health well-being

Military workers are concerned with keeping up their mental and physical health. A lack of emotional energy or task switching from drills and orders to family time can also make military workers feel drained at home.[18] Difficulties with work-life balance can lead to negative health effects and increased stress for military workers and veterans. Six out of ten military workers reported that their overall happiness was worse or much worse due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[19] Veterans especially suffered from mental health and trauma issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Financial well-being

Financial security is a concern to many American workers burdened by credit card, medical, and student debt as well as auto loans and mortgages. The economic insecurities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated financial issues for military workers and veterans. Job loss affected Americans working in industries such as mining and extraction, transportation and warehousing, employment services, travel, and leisure and hospitality more than other industries. Though emergency financial assistance was available, organizations working with veterans reported that 61% of veterans needed financial assistance and only 22% of veterans had their needs completely met with available resources.[20]

The Career Optimism Index and military workers

The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index showcased the career, social, financial, and health issues of military workers and veterans intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over half of military and reserve military workers do not see a clear path for career advancement and many feel held back in their career by the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of opportunities for upskilling and development, lack of career feedback or communication on their performance, mental health needs, and financial problems. Over half of military veterans did not feel that their employer-provided useful career development and planning resources or shared job advancement opportunities.

Table 3: Needs of military workers, military reserve workers, and military veterans in areas of career, financial, health, and social well-being.[3]

Working Americans	General population	Military workers	Reserve workers	Veterans
I do not have access to opportunities to develop the skills I need to advance my career (somewhat agree or strongly agree)	35%	52%	61%	32%
I want to develop my skill set, but don't know where to begin (somewhat agree or strongly agree)	43%	62%	61%	30%
I need support to connect with others in my field or desired field (I need some support or I need a lot of support)	55%	76%	70%	50%
I have looked for mental health resources to help me manage work-related stress (somewhat agree or strongly agree)	33%	69%	67%	30%
I am concerned about maintaining my overall health and fitness (somewhat agree or strongly agree)	64%	72%	65%	64%
I live paycheck to paycheck (somewhat agree or strongly agree)	43%	63%	71%	35%
I am overwhelmed by debt (somewhat agree or strongly agree)	28%	79%	77%	24%

Supporting work-life balance

Despite many concerns stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, many American workers view their work-life balance as a priority when advancing their careers. This balance can be supported by employers and communities moving forward.

Employers can provide more opportunities for workers to understand potential career opportunities and areas of growth. This can take the form of job shadowing, training sessions, and mentoring to recognize gaps and improve foundational skills and future requirements. Family supportive work cultures increase employee retention and job satisfaction, lower turnover intentions, reduce work anxiety and isolation and build trust, peer support, and teamwork in workers.[21] Supportive work cultures can include remote work options, flexible work times, parental leave, individualized managerial support, and an overall workplace culture of work-life balance.

Communities can provide physical and mental health resources and offer support to those in need. Supporting others is still vital for communities despite physical distancing limitations. Helping others reduces the COVID-19 pandemic's negative impacts on mental health.[22]

Workers should ask for flexibility at work when needed and take breaks to reduce stress. Setting manageable goals and using time management strategies supports feelings of control and accomplishment at work to help balance time.[23] Volunteering to support others within your community helps with a healthy work-life balance by increasing social connectedness.

Work-life balance includes many facets of life. Incorporating career, social, community, health, and financial well-being into businesses and community support offerings helps workers and employers by decreasing the negative outcomes associated with work-life imbalance.

About the author

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