



4-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Cohen '07, Ian (2007) "Work-Life Balance: Flexibility or Friction?," *The Park Place Economist*: Vol. 15

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/parkplace/vol15/iss1/9>

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Work-Life Balance: Flexibility or Friction?

Friedman's numerous contributions to economics earned him many accolades. He was a professor at the University of Chicago from 1946-1982. After 1982, he worked as a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, where he performed research on a variety of different topics. In 1996, Friedman and his wife started the Rose and Milton Friedman Foundation, aimed at

encouraging the implementation of universal school vouchers.

While these two men stood on two distinctly different sides of the economic spectrum, they were both respected and admired. Their aptitude and dedication to their field has created new economic ideas which will undoubtedly continue to shape the discipline of economics for years to come.

Work-Life Balance: Flexibility or Friction?

Ian Cohen

In labor economic theory, a person's allocation of time between work and leisure is an important area of study. Often times, these decisions are highly influenced by modern-day employment practices and working culture. If society does not protect the ability to take time off work and places extensive cost burdens upon its population, friction can develop in the work-leisure relationship. Dr. Peter Berg, Associate Professor of Economics at Michigan State University, studied the flexibility of this relationship in his research entitled, "Work-Life Balance Tensions in the United States and Australia." In these countries, work life is similar but the techniques used to gauge work-life tensions are vastly different. Berg, also a 1983 IWU alum, presented his work to Illinois Wesleyan students and faculty on March 7, 2007 as the annual Omicron Delta Epsilon speaker.

Berg began his discussion by describing the outside forces that have contributed to work-life balance tensions. He emphasizes the fact that employment experience is changing due to the rise of global competition and various other national demands at the workplace. With these developments, workers face increased competition from overseas workers and need higher skill requirements in a business environment that blurs the line between work and

home life. In this new global marketplace, the search for lower costs has led to decreased wages and higher income insecurity for the individual worker. This, along with ageing populations, has resulted in the individual having to work longer hours, thus forgoing personal leisure time, to meet the growing needs of work and life.

According to Berg, these broad external factors are only part of the reason for an increase in work-life balance tension. In the United States, citizens have no right to healthcare. Statistically, Berg notes that 15.7 percent of a population of 46 million have no healthcare. Most healthcare is covered by employers and expenditures on it have increased by 40 percent. Similarly, child-rearing costs are high with the increased expectations placed upon parents. Because society views it as a private matter, there is a lack of federal assistance for child-rearing and it is very expensive to obtain.

Moreover, Berg explained that there has been an increase in dual-earner couples in the United States. In fact, from 1997 to 2002, this trend elevated time at work by 10 hours per week and reduced personal time to an hour or less for men and women respectively. Additionally, increased technology is blurring the lines between work and home. Indeed, advanced technology allows individuals to work anywhere

at anytime. As Berg points out, we now witness higher levels of intensity at the workplace, which has led to a steadily rising workday and less time off for the individual worker. Like-wise, Berg mentions that only 20 percent of employees have flexible schedules, while there is no legal right to sick days or vacations in the United States. For Berg, all of these forces influence how a person approaches work and creates tension in the work-life balance.

In contrast, Berg observed different approaches to work-life balance in Australia. Unlike the United States, healthcare is a public good. It is easier to attain and not as expensive for Australian citizens. Moreover, Australian society is more community-oriented than the United States. As such, less of a burden is placed upon the individual to meet child-rearing demands. In Australia, more part-time work is available so as to hallow out the work-week and provide workers with flexibility in their work schedules. This allows individuals to know when they can expect time-off and the standard hours they work per week. With a comprehensive public service system and employment standards in place, Berg finds that work-life balance can be less tense in Australia than in the United States.

From these findings, Berg concludes that there is a tension between work and non-work roles. Within the United States, policies and practices are inadequate to ease this work-life friction. Such federal laws as the Fair Labor Standards Act and Family Medical Leave Act, as well as many State legislative initiatives, have attempted to afford work-life flexibility to individual employees. Yet, flexibility still remains unequally distributed and primarily dependent on the employers' terms. Until broad changes are made to employment policies and work life-style, Berg contends that work-life balance tension will continue to be an issue within the United States.