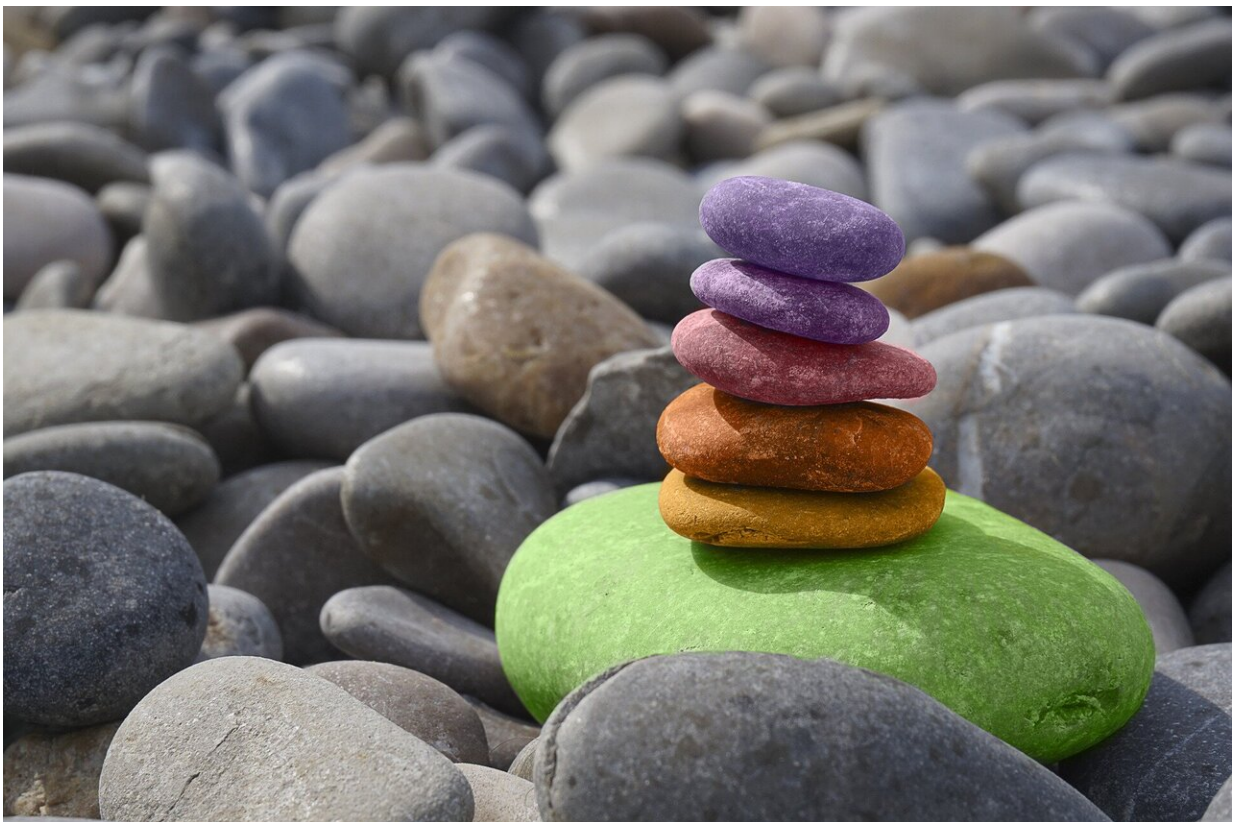


Older workers still struggle with work-life balance—and there's no one-size-fits-all remedy

December 27 2023, by Candice Harris, Barbara Myers and Jarrod Haar



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The idea that we can comfortably manage all the different facets of life—work, family, other responsibilities—is certainly appealing. But in

reality, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to [work-life balance](#)—especially for older workers.

Making up a third of the New Zealand workforce, [older workers](#) ([aged 55 and older](#)) are a growing cohort in the economy.

There is the temptation to treat everyone in this age bracket as the same. But [our new research](#) shows this is a mistake. In fact, the support older workers want in order to achieve better [work-life balance](#) can [differ as they age](#).

Indeed, the lives of older workers can vary greatly when it comes to employment, family structure, [financial resources](#), time and well-being.

As the number of older employees in the economy grows, it's important to understand what will help keep them satisfied in their work as they move towards and beyond retirement age.

Anxiety, depression and older workers

The goal of our research was to better understand the effects of work-life balance on anxiety and depression caused by job stress among older workers.

We asked two key questions: what effect does work-life balance have on older employees? And are there differences between groups of workers?

We surveyed 512 New Zealand employees in three [age groups](#): 55-59 years, 60-64, and 65-plus. Respondents had been in their current jobs for an average of 12.6 years.

Some 58.2% were in the [private sector](#), 31.6% were in the public/government sector, and 10.2% were in the not-for-profit sector.

In terms of age, 43.8% of respondents fell into the 55–59 age group. Those close to retirement age (60–64) made up 31.3% of respondents, and a further 25% were 65 and older—still working despite being eligible for superannuation.

Work-life balance at different ages

The average levels of work-life balance among the older workers we studied were high, comparing well with [similar studies looking at other age groups](#). Those reporting high levels of work-life balance said they were able to comfortably manage their work, family and other responsibilities.

Job stress (when the demands of work exceed the resources of the employee), job anxiety (when the job is mentally stimulating but not enjoyable), and job depression (when there is little mental stimulation or enjoyment), can all affect well-being at work.

The 55–59 year-olds reported higher levels of job stress than older respondents. These younger older workers reported juggling stress that was fueled by high job demands. Workers in this group were also managing the needs of younger families, often including children in their teenage years.

But respondents reported they experienced less stress in their jobs when their work-life balance was high. They subsequently had lower levels of anxiety and depression.

The younger cohort (55–59 years) reported the strongest benefits of having work-life balance. This effect reduced but remained significant as employees aged.

Respondents who were 65 and older reported a reduction in job stress,

and at levels significantly higher than the younger cohort with greater work-life balance.

Our analysis also showed the "retirement" group (those aged 65 and older) had the highest work-life balance, perhaps highlighting the strength of being "retired" (and receiving government income) while also being in paid employment.

At low levels of work-life balance, there was a significant difference in levels of job stress. Those in the younger age group (55–59 years) reported higher levels of job stress than respondents in the older age group.

When we compared this with respondents with high work-life balance, these differences were reversed, with respondents in the younger age group (55–59 years) reporting significantly lower job stress than the older age group.

Overall we found age—and proximity to the traditional [retirement age](#)—are [important factors](#) in how workers respond to work-life balance. Workers in the 55-59 age group still have a relatively long career ahead. For them, balancing work and life is especially beneficial.

Employers need to think differently

Managers need to understand that older workers are not a uniform group. It is important to develop age-relevant approaches to support the work-life balance of older employees.

Employers also need to consider how to allocate resources to support employee work-life balance across their lifespan.

These measures could include discussing interventions for managing job

[stress](#), as well as well-being resources that position aging as positive. For example, using older managers as speakers in organizational wellness initiatives.

By encouraging work-life balance, companies can foster lower levels of anxiety and depression and help staff find lasting job satisfaction.

Older people are often [invisible in conversations about mental health](#). However, having [older workers who are mentally strong](#), healthy and productive is increasingly essential for businesses.

Older workers themselves should also seek to understand what drives and diminishes their own work-life balance. It is an [important predictor of well-being](#)—especially as workers 55 and over could be an "older" [worker](#) for decades to come.

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