

A downside to work flexibility? Schedule control and its link to work-family stress

September 28 2010, By April Kemick

Is there a downside to schedule control at work? According to new University of Toronto research, people who have more schedule control at work tend to report more blurring of the boundaries between work and the other parts of their lives, especially family-related roles.

Researchers measured the extent of schedule control and its impact on work-family processes using data from a national survey of more than 1,200 American workers. Sociology professor Scott Schieman and PhD student Marisa Young asked study participants: Who usually decides when you start and finish [work](#) each day at your main job? Is it someone else or can you decide within certain limits or are you entirely free to decide when you start and finish work?

Schieman said, “Most people probably would identify schedule control as a good thing — an indicator of flexibility that helps them balance their work and home lives. We wondered about the potential [stress](#) of schedule control for the work-family interface. What happens if schedule control blurs the boundaries between these key social roles?”

The authors describe two core findings about the downsides of schedule control:

- People with more schedule control are more likely to work at home and engage in work-family multitasking activities; that is, they try to work on job- and home-related tasks at the same time while they are at home.
- In turn, people who report more work-family role blurring also tend to

report higher levels of work-family conflict — a major source of stress.

The authors measured work-family conflict by asking people questions like: How often have you not had enough time for your family or other important people in your life because of your job? How often have you not had the energy to do things with your family or other important people in your life because of your job? and How often has your job kept you from concentrating on important things in your family and personal life? According to Schieman, discovering the conditions that predict work-family conflict is critical because “a substantial body of social scientific evidence demonstrates its link to poorer physical and mental health outcomes.”

Schieman added, however, that their findings revealed some benefits of schedule control to counteract the downsides: “People who had partial or full schedule control were able to engage in work-family multitasking activities with fewer negative consequences in terms of conflict between their work and [family](#) roles. Overall, our findings contribute to an ongoing — and complicated — debate about the costs and benefits of different forms of flexibility for workers.”

Provided by University of Toronto

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