

**Do people in top management positions benefit from a work-life balance?**

**When does work-life stops and private life begin?**

**Is it possible to combine work-life with social life without one dominating the other?**

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*Work-life balance*  
*Work-life conflicts*  
*Long hours*  
*Well-being*



**The importance to find a balance between work and private life for top management people in the Malta Public Service**

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## Introduction

Over the years, work-life balance has become an issue subject to extensive publicity and increased investigations. According to Jones, Burke and Westman (2006, p.1), work-life balance has become a “salient” concern for many reasons. Owing to “demographic and social changes”, more women are entering the workforce, with working mothers becoming the “norm rather than the exception” (Jones, Burke & Westman, 2006, p.1). Moreover, Jones, Burke & Westman, (2006, p.1) believes that the “advancement in technology” such as the use of the “cell phones, emails, fax” and having access to emails from anywhere has made it easier for work demand to “intrude” into family and personal life. Rao and Indla (2010, p.295) argue that technology provides the possibility to perform “job tasks from anywhere at any time”, which may “diminishing personal space and time”. Furthermore, global competition is increasing pressure on every organisation and their workforce to be more flexible and responsive to change. Jones, Burke and Westman(2006, p.1) argue that over the past few years, in industrialised countries there was an “increase in the proportion of employees working long hours” which is attributed to an increased workload, job insecurities, and long hours culture. This has contributed to “high level of working stress and stress-related illnesses” with the knowledge that the workplace will possibly become more “stressful” in the future (Jones, Burke & Westman, 2006, p.1).

Achieving a boundary between home/personal life and work is becoming more challenging for every employee, including leaders. A variety of different studies and literature show that employers and employees may find flexible and innovative solutions to maximize the productivity and the performance of the organisations without damaging the employees’ well-being, the relationship with their family, and different aspects of their personal life (e.g. Jones, Burke & Westman, 2006; Thompson, Beauvais & Lxyness, 1999; Lockwood, 2003).

## Goals and Objectives

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions, emotions, and feeling encountered by top management people in the Malta Public Service with respect of the concept of the work-life balance. Achieving a boundary between home/personal life and work is becoming more challenging for every employee, and top management people are not exempt from this either. This study aims to determine whether these employees have a work-life balance. In the process, it will look at the circumstances which are likely to affect their perception of their personal relation between work and family/personal.



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The research objectives are to produce insights and a better understanding of these concerns:

1. Whether and how dependents have an impact on the time duration committed to work.
2. If flexibility at work positively impacts their general wellbeing.
3. How long hours impact health and overall performance.
4. If fewer personal commitments push the employer to assume that you can invest more time in work.
5. How do top management people put in practice an appropriate work-life balance.
6. Whether and how the gender demographic conflicts with the balance between work and personal life.

The most important aspects of work-life balance of top management people that were relevant to the study resulting from the semi-structured interviews were grouped together in three main factors as mapped out in the table below:

Grouping of the three main factors:

<b>Family factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family's importance in one's life</li><li>• Family commitments</li><li>• Help from spouse or other family members</li><li>• Caring responsibilities</li><li>• Performance of household chores</li><li>• Gender roles</li><li>• Family-friendly measures</li></ul>
<b>Well-being factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stress/Anxiety</li><li>• Personal time</li><li>• Insecurity/Guilt</li><li>• Time for hobbies</li><li>• Time for family/friends</li></ul>
<b>Work/performance factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Team-building activities</li><li>• Flexibility</li><li>• Output (Time and extra time)</li><li>• Leadership</li><li>• Contactability after office hours</li></ul>



## Methodology

For this research, the target group were leaders in top management positions, which comprises Permanent Secretaries, Director Generals, and Directors in the Malta Public Service. Depending on their availability, this research tried to cover the maximum possible top management people falling within these grades. Yet, since the current number of appointees is 226 and in view of the fact that the study pursued a qualitative approach—which was more suitable for this study—a sample of 10 participants from the full spectrum of these leaders was deemed practical. Such a sample size was chosen keeping in mind that these top management people have very busy schedules and, given that the researcher had a timeframe, it was assumed with certainty that not all participants would find a slot to be interviewed and other leaders had to be contacted in their stead.

Given that the interview process can be a valuable resource of collecting significant and in-depth data, this can also prove to be very time-consuming. Further qualitative inquiries related to their work-life balance or lack of it provided new avenues for exploration and discovery within this emerging field in top management positions. The context of this study shifted the lens from studying the work perspective to the entire life-view of those people who support and have a say in the implementation of work-life balance.

A qualitative approach was adopted, and the method used for this study was that of semi-structured interviews. This qualitative method allowed for investigations in a natural setting and allowed issues and concepts to emerge throughout the research process during the interviews. Rossman and Rallis (1998, p. 2) state that qualitative design “takes place in the natural

world, uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic, is emergent rather than tightly prefigured and is fundamental interpretative”. Face-to-face interviews were carried out to allow for a better understanding and possible more in-depth conversations about the questions being posed. Galletta (2013, p. 1) believes that although the method of using semi-structured interviews is “typically underutilized”, this has “remarkable potential”.

Since the subject of this research is people, particular care was taken to ensure that any harm or undesirable consequences were avoided. Punch (2005, p. 276) argues that qualitative research probes into people’s lives, where it deals with the most “sensitive, intimate and innermost matters in people’s lives”. Therefore, ethical issues were inevitable when collecting such data.



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### Findings and Results

Although work-life balance initiatives such as, but not limited to, teleworking, career breaks, reduced hours and flexi hours have long been enforced, such measures are not available to top management, i.e., Permanent Secretaries, Director Generals, and Directors. These people are not able to avail themselves of such opportunities. As some participants said, “In theory yes, we can avail ourselves of such measures but in practice no”. In circumstances when these top management employees need to avail themselves of such measures, they must resign from their position.

### Findings:

<b>Integrating the Two Aspects</b>	This study seemed to point to the fact that the structure between work and family life does not always result in equilibrium. However, participants also showed their interest and commitment to maintaining a significant personal life. Moreover, it is interesting to note that participants whose partners are not as supportive aim to retain a more distinct separation between the two domains.
<b>Potential -Work-life Conflicts</b>	Those participants in a stable relationship shared their worries about how to maintain personal commitments with their spouse or bearing responsibilities for their children. Obviously, due to the nature of their work, unwelcome and unexpected situations may conflict with their personal needs such as relaxation and recharging.
<b>Hobbies</b>	It was also established that these participants do not have time for hobbies, with some of them stating that they will enjoy their hobbies when they retire. Only a few said that occasionally they have a little time for their hobbies.

<p><b>Planning and organising their life</b></p>	<p>Participants declared that they feel frustrated when they must cancel or postpone a personal or family commitment due to work. However, there were instances when they still remember the negative impact this left on their young children. Some said that they experienced periods of conflicts between work and home life when they had to choose between important meeting and their children’s school activities. Guilt was an issue here. One participant specified that her personal life is planned around the exigencies of work.</p>
<p><b>Holidays</b></p>	<p>All participants revealed that they have overseas holidays on a yearly basis. There was no mention of cancellations of holidays. Therefore, there are no apparent restrictions as such.</p>
<p><b>Family factor - Supportive Environment</b></p>	<p>Male participants who are the sole breadwinners with a stay-at-home partner agreed that they have all the support and understanding of their partner. On the other hand, when both partners work, female participants argue that it is unlikely to find help from the other spouse. The only help, if any, is from their mother.</p>
<p><b>Gender</b></p>	<p>All participants have agreed that there are no discrepancies in gender in their place of work, i.e. the Malta Public Service. However, this study found that in household responsibilities, gender does make a difference.</p>
<p><b>Organisation Factors: Supportive Environment</b></p>	<p>Participants said that they are expected to work longer hours to cater for strict deadlines and commitments. Thus, while work-life balance exists on paper, very few of the participants can avail themselves of such flexibility.</p>



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<b>Retention of employees</b>	<p>Participants were all in agreement that they approve work-life balance initiatives for their employees to help them maintain a balance between their work and family/personal life so that they will be less prone to suffer from stress-related ill-health. This will help to retain employees in the workplace. However, one participant disagreed as it was argued that whatever work-life initiatives his employees are given, should they decide to leave, they would.</p>
<b>Co-workers' Support</b>	<p>There was total agreement among participants in the role of Director General and Directors that if team-building activities were organised for them, this would help them to meet their co-workers in an informal setting, getting acquainted with them, and helping each other to coordinate projects so that the same project would not be presented to the authorities more than once.</p>
<b>Time Management</b>	<p>There was only one participant who said that she did her best not to miss anything. However, she was single at the time and her only child is grown-up and married. Moreover, she felt exhausted and constantly suffered from burnout and stress from trying to find time for everything.</p>
<b>Hobbies and Personal Time</b>	<p>All participants agreed that they do not have time for hobbies. One participant said that hobbies were a waste of time although she was aware that eliminating hobbies was not right. Moreover, one participant said that as work itself does not have a balance, she made it a rule to find time for leisure and spend time with her parents on a Sunday.</p>
<b>Well-being factors</b>	<p>One participant said that there was a limit to human energy and like any other employee must accomplish multiple roles</p>



A common aspect emerging in relation to family factors was the external help required for every top management position. Moreover, such positions and work commitments mean that these same employees have had to, on several occasions, miss important family events. A common trend emerging from the discussions was that gender did not make a difference within the workplace and with respect to job demands. However, it emerged that on the home front, it was females who run the family life, sometimes with the help of their mothers. Swarnalatha and Rajalakshmi (2007, p. 12) concluded that family support plays a “key role in leading a contended life journey” with males whose partners are housewives being expected to have

less work-life conflicts because their female partners can assume more household responsibilities. This concurs with what Rizzo (2004, p. 5) stated, that although there is the “belief” that in Malta there is more sharing of housework, “some men still insist that housework does not form part of their sphere of life”.

Stress and anxiety were common issues amongst top management employees, mostly due to the heavy workload within such positions, which constrained their time, and in most cases taking up most of their personal time. It is a well-known fact that stress and anxiety are in no way healthy for a person’s mental and physical state, though, most of these employees accepted this aspect as part of their lives. In

fact, although indoor and outdoor activities, pastimes, and any other sort of personal enjoyment can sometimes alleviate some of the daily stress most of us tend to encounter in our daily lives, most of these employees had given up on these aspects due to the time limitations they currently had. Time constraints were highlighted as factors leading to missed health-related appointments,



**key role in leading a contended life journey**





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taking less care of themselves, or missing quality time with family and friends. According to Susi and Jawaharrani (2010, p. 477), work-life balance must be supported and encouraged throughout the workforce, including “senior managers”. However, the participants stated although they were not excluded from the family-friendly and work-life balance policies such as flexible hours, career breaks, reduced hours and teleworking, due to the exigencies of their work, it was impossible to avail themselves of such measures.

According to literature, top management people cannot rely on the “social support from their co-workers” like other employees, because they are perceived as “role models” by their subordinates (Stock, Bauer & Bieling, 2014, p. 1816). However, from the interviews, it transpired that team building activities were never organized for Director Generals and Directors. There was total agreement from these participants that these team-building activities would help them to meet their co-workers in an informal setting and getting to know each other. Nonetheless, they can also discuss their tasks and learn what the other is doing which may result in helping each other. In the interviews, the participants were of the belief that there should be coordination between them, especially when they are involved in a project, so that the same project will not be presented to the authorities by different departments. Therefore, they argued that this may enable them to have more time for other tasks. In the interviews, the participants displayed a high degree of appreciation if support is received from their respective colleagues. We may perhaps assume that such team-building activities may assist the top management to be able to accomplish certain commitments.

Work-life balance may depend on how an individual manages time and adjusts according to circumstances. Managing time in a dual working family may be problematic to keep the household “operating successfully on a day-to-day basis” (Rizzo, 2009, p. 3). Moreover, time may be a “scarce commodity” when holding two jobs, working longer hours, high job demands, and taking care of children or ailing relatives (Rizzo, 2009, p. 3). Therefore, this implies that leaders may have to give up time for their friends, sleep, and leisure activities which may then lead to stress and burnout. In this study, most of the participants declared that sometimes they missed important family or personal events due to other work commitments. There was only one participant who said that she tries not to miss anything. However, this participant’s child was grown-up and married and she was single at the time of the interview. However, she also declared that she felt exhausted and suffered from burnout and stress from trying to find time for everything. Rizzo (2004:13) argues that time may not depend on “quantity but rather on the quality of time” and the way an individual is able to use it.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, it has been shown that work-life balance should be taken seriously as otherwise it can lead to negative effects on the employees, their work and personal lives, which may include health issues such as stress and burnout, work-family conflicts, and satisfaction issues. Although work-life balance cannot be 50/50, at least these employees must learn to find good quality time for their family and for their personal things. Moreover, as these employees support and have a say in the implementation of work-life

balance, it is important for them to maintain a work-life balance. Finally, it is recommended that policies regarding family-friendly measures and work-life balance may also take into consideration the perceptions and priorities of these top management people. Moreover, although these top management people are paid a communication allowance, there should be a policy to establish a working time limit after office hours. Through this study, it is also recommended that top management people that household chores and other family factors are shared equally by both partners. More importantly, leaders may take better self-care to achieve a better work-life balance. Moreover, juggling multiple roles are the recommended way forward, living a full satisfied life is compared to living life to the full.



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### Conclusion

Work-life balance is an important topic for everyone, both for the employer and their employees. Based on the findings, work-life balance may be taken seriously as otherwise it can lead to negative effects on all employees including top management people, their work and personal lives which may include health issues such as stress and burnout, work-family conflict and satisfaction issues. From the interviews carried out, it emerged that there is an imbalance between work-life and family/personal life.

Participants confirmed that work-life balance was an issue for them because they dedicated most of their time working which was having a negative impact on their personal life. It can be argued that the role of these leaders in the Malta Public Service is important as they support and have a say in the implementation of the work-life balance. Therefore, the need to address the issue of the work-life balance of these people is evident. Moreover, it may be argued that there is no simple solution to the work-life conflicts experienced by these leaders and the challenges they face daily. Although work-life balance cannot be achieved 50/50, considering the long hours at work and the pressure these leaders face every day, focusing on their life in a positive way is deemed crucial to avoid conflict. Moving forward, it is important for these leaders to maintain a good work-life balance so they may be able to manage their time better and for the organization to be able to track the correct usage of time. The findings of this study are subject to limitations, due to the small sample of the participants.



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