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Commentary

Reflections on work-life integration post-pandemic: A perspective from pharmacy practice faculty

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The effects of COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on how work is conducted moving forward. Prior to the pandemic, work-life integration and well-being were priorities for many organizations, including pharmacy. The disruption associated with the COVID-19 pandemic pushed businesses and organizations worldwide into an era of agility and flexibility previously unknown to the majority of workplaces.

Perspective: Increased remote work has presented both increased challenges (e.g., engagement) and opportunities (e.g., productivity). After a year of experience, this shift in the nature of how work is done has provided an opportunity to reimagine how and where work will be conducted in the future.

Implications: Schools and colleges of pharmacy have an opportunity to re-evaluate how academic and practice responsibilities are accomplished in regards to work life-integration and management of concurrent work and family responsibilities. Administration and faculty should foster a culture of transparency on this topic to collaboratively incorporate methods that better facilitate work-life integration moving forward.

Introduction

The disruption caused by COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on how work is conducted in the future, presenting both new opportunities and challenges. Prior to the pandemic, the concept of work-life integration had been identified as a primary driver of engagement or burnout for health care professionals.\textsuperscript{1} The pandemic disassembled strides made towards well-being and work-life balance but opened a gateway to sanction new norms required for individuals to manage concurrent work and family responsibilities. The last year has pushed the limits of both individual and organizational agility. Safeguards put in place have necessitated a national shift from work-life balance towards work-life integration. Work-life balance implies both work and life receive equal time and effort and are competing with each other to some degree. Work-life integration implies there is significant overlap between the various facets of life with all parts intersecting to create a whole picture.\textsuperscript{2} Without careful management, work-life integration may result in role conflict and contribute to burnout. As we move towards establishing a new normal, we reflect as practice faculty on how far we have come and how the future workplace may be changed because of our experiences over the last year.

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The onset of the pandemic rapidly thrust faculty into an almost entirely remote work environment having to adopt virtual methods for traditional and active learning model-type teaching activities. Practice faculty have been challenged with maintaining practice sites and ensuring experiential students meet expectations to successfully complete pharmacy practice experiences all while navigating social distancing, facility restrictions, and the provision of care via virtual platforms. Many involved in research have experienced significant delays in moving forward on projects. The inability to enroll participants into a study or opportunities to be physically onsite to conduct laboratory experiments and collect data has been challenging. Committee meetings held in virtual formats coupled with virtual class and virtual practice have given us all an appreciation for what has been affectionately termed “Zoom fatigue.”

Not only have faculty endured a more frequent work-from-home model, but this has morphed into an eat-from-home, meet-from-home, entertain-from-home, and visit-with-others-from-home model. Doing “life” all in the same location, in some cases the same room, can be a threat to mental wellness. Over 50% of United States (US) adults surveyed have reported a negative impact on their mental well-being, not only from stress and worry over the pandemic, but also from significant isolation and lack of community engagement. In the early months of COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported approximately 31% of US adults were suffering from symptoms of depression or anxiety. This was up from 11% reported in 2019. A national survey of 484 health-system pharmacists showed that 47% were experiencing burnout. The most common factors contributing to burnout were related to workload, efficiency and resources, culture, and work-life integration. Similarly, remote learning has triggered issues among students related to mental and physical health, wellness, socialization, and academic success. The Healthy Minds Network, in collaboration with the American College Health Association, annually surveys mental health and related issues among college students. In a pre-/post-pandemic analysis of nearly 19,000 students, results revealed depression increased to nearly 41% in spring 2020 compared to 36% in fall 2019. For faculty, staff, and students, working from home may have presented challenges that were unable to be adjusted to improve productivity and efficiency. Primary caretakers of children and/or aging family members may have been particularly impacted. After more than a year in this new work model, lack of traditional interaction has led many to question optimal methods for conducting work moving forward. McKinsey et al estimated 22% of Americans will be telecommuting in 2025. Hybrid models of remote work are likely to persist for a portion of the workforce as well. Education ranked within the top five, with an estimated 33% to 69% of time potentially spent in remote capacities.

Despite the challenges, the pandemic has driven many to establish a new level of work-life integration, finding innovative ways to be both efficient and productive. While this does not imply the coping mechanisms have been optimal, it has given many a step-back perspective which was previously unrealized. As home and work have been forced to cohabitate, there has been an increase in personal autonomy and the ability to organize personal and professional responsibilities in ways that meet the obligations of both more efficiently.

Prior to the pandemic, it appeared a sense of stigma surrounded how to best navigate work-life integration for many, particularly caretakers of children or aging family members, in academia. Many of these conversations for airing what was considered acceptable norms have occurred among trusted colleagues or in women-centered special interest groups. Historically, the various expectations of health professions faculty can be challenging to navigate, often leading to decreased work-life satisfaction, engagement, and even withdrawal from the workforce. Literature points to this being particularly true for those early in their careers, non-tenured track faculty, females, and those serving as primary caregivers to children or elderly parents.

Implications

The physical presence of faculty members in students’ academic career is pivotal. Similarly, as practice faculty, there is a responsibility to serve both patients and health care providers as role models engaged in the continuity of care at affiliated health institutions. Students will continue to benefit and thrive from in-person support and training which means a return to balancing teaching on campus as well as practice site and research responsibilities. While virtual platforms have made some aspects of experiential teaching more feasible (e.g., leading topic discussions, engaging greater participants), retaining key physical interactions are necessary to promote pharmacy services and build rapport with interdisciplinary teams. Beyond teaching, other activities have been cited to be more effective when conducted in an in-person environment. Some previously described include coaching, on-boarding new employees, providing advice and feedback, negotiating, making critical decisions, and engaging in collaborative work within the organization (e.g., innovation, problem solving, creativity). However, the pandemic has equally highlighted certain tasks have effective remote work potential including those which involve updating knowledge and learning, general communication with colleagues (e.g., checking email), and processing, analyzing, and interpreting information (e.g., scholarship). Acknowledging these responsibilities can be accomplished outside the traditional workspace with greater autonomy could build the bridge of support faculty need to further a more harmonious approach between life and work obligations.

As schools re-evaluate methods of returning to “normal,” for many faculty and staff a looming question exists regarding how future work expectations are accomplished. The need for balancing work and family responsibilities is crucial for success and a driving indicator to remain in academia for both men and women. While core requirements involving teaching, research, service, and scholarship, among other academic responsibilities, will still be expected moving forward, the manner in which this is done has an opportunity to deviate from previously established norms. Given recent changes in the US job market, perhaps now is the time to have these conversations as employees across the country re-evaluate priorities.

Moving forward, department chairs and members of administration can seek meaningful channels to review feedback and outcomes from both faculty and students on topics involving teaching and work engagement. Recent surveys point towards national
declines in employee engagement. Reduced engagement can be detrimental to organizations, affecting teamwork and collaboration, increasing individual stress, and affecting overall employee retention. It will be critical for administration to employ methods to regain faculty engagement. It is also important to pay attention to outcomes of productivity, which can be measured among teaching, scholarship, service, and practice. Scholarship involves several qualities that lend itself to high remote work potential. For some, the pandemic may have created pockets of time for increased productivity whereas for others, barriers may have hindered such outcomes. Just as each institution may have varied work culture philosophies, each individual faculty member may have different work-life structures which can propel or impede progression. Loss of collaboration is not always compromised with remote work. Department chairs can create new practices of hosting informal meeting times to encourage engagement (e.g., debriefing after faculty attendance at key conferences, hosting scholarship brainstorming sessions via breakout rooms). Getting plugged into local and national organizations’ committees can also facilitate a greater sense of meaning and broaden networking opportunities externally. Developing metrics and methods of assessment to evaluate challenges faculty may be faced with, both personal and professional, will be important moving forward. Flexible work schedules, work from anywhere models, or restructuring of assigned duties may be reasonable adjustments to prevent burnout.

Departments can also consider whether specific changes during the pandemic led to process improvements which warrant retention in a post-pandemic environment. It is often easier to remotely connect with students at various times, collaborate with colleagues outside of traditional conferences, and attend or deliver online webinars. As the outlook of work begins to reshape, there is an opportunity to redefine culture as a group and discuss suggestions on how to preserve it. The organization can offer some guidance on structure and clarity as it pertains to remote work. It may be relevant to discuss optimal times for remote work (e.g., university break when students are generally not on campus) and which in-person activities are inflexible. It is prudent to gain student and faculty input on the strengths and weaknesses related to hybrid, remote, and in-person methods of meeting and instruction. For junior faculty, it will be equally important to listen and be a part of this dialogue. Seasoned faculty can also share experiences and suggestions to maximize efficiency or healthy work habits such as maintaining an updated calendar and being generally available via email or phone during normal business hours. For faculty members with practice site responsibilities, prior obligations, or unforeseen circumstances, virtual meetings provide an opportunity to participate while balancing other obligations. However, there are notable risks associated with these virtual platforms. It can be more difficult to disconnect from work (e.g., longer days) or faculty may be prone to be in multiple places at once (e.g., attend a conference and teach in the same day). Setting boundaries and discussing realistic expectations with department chairs or practice site stakeholders will be important to maintain faculty engagement and prevent depersonalization, a sign of burnout. The impact of virtual attendance on networking and relationship building as well as organizational engagement must be further assessed for both students and faculty. A national consensus report developed by several key stakeholders, including the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, specifically called for the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education “to require the inclusion of annual well-being assessments for students, faculty, and staff to facilitate regular dialogue, destigmatize behavioral health, and guide organizational initiatives within colleges and schools of pharmacy.” As new norms are established, institutions will need to assess the impact of such changes on individual well-being, particularly as we continue to manage effects of the pandemic. Colleges and universities may benefit from examining methods utilized by other educational institutions and business entities to improve employee engagement, ensure wellness, and optimize productivity, looking for opportunities to optimize what may have been previously established.

There are no substitutes for social interaction among colleagues and students. Water cooler chats, incidental hallway conversations, and community gatherings help foster both personal and professional relationships. However, the pandemic has allowed working professionals to openly acknowledge the dichotomy of the benefits and barriers to work-life integration resulting from greater flexibility in work arrangements. To ignore these moving forward can reverse progress made on equality for working professionals (especially women) and halt strides made to promote well-being and prevent burnout. Seeking meaningful conversations about which specific tasks require a tethered presence are necessary to foster an organizational culture of transparency, engagement, and well-being. Doing so can help normalize the multifaceted demands of educators and mobilize strategies for success both in their personal and professional lives.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Disclosure(s)

None.

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