

Navigating the Digital Divide: A Self-Study of Work-Life Harmony in Online Higher Education

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Abstract

This study addresses the deteriorating work-life balance for online faculty, resulting in burnout and low retention rates. Utilizing self-study in an auto-ethnographic dimension, the lived experiences of an online graduate faculty member were investigated. This study identified strategies for managing workload and maintaining well-being through reflections, journal notes, and personal observations, highlighting the Person-Environment Fit Theory. Findings could inform other faculty on increasing job satisfaction and preventing burnout, contributing to institutional success.

The transformation of learning and instruction has dramatically increased with online education. While it affords many advantages, challenges also exist. For faculty, the lines between professional and personal duties, though flexible, are now blurrier than before (Hung et al., 2022). Faculty members must quickly adapt to the numerous demands of students and colleagues around the clock. Unlike their traditional counterparts, online faculty may feel like they are “always on,” with expectations of constant availability (Cutri et al., 2020; McMurtrie, 2020). Faculty must confront three key considerations: work-life balance, unique challenges, and institutional expectations and support (Sotirovic et al., 2024; Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Unique challenges surface as the flexibility of online environments gives way to extraordinary expectations of presence, community building, and mentoring (Chernosky & Keever, 2023; Cutri et al., 2020; Stone & Springer, 2019). These expectations, along with overwhelming commitments to meet institutional standards for promotion and tenure, produce new pressures and stress. Family members, while supportive, contribute to regular daily interruptions and family-related expectations, creating feelings of guilt and subsistence in the faculty. Darby and Lang (2019) assert that without constructive support and resources, burnout and job dissatisfaction rates will soar.

The Problem

The problem is the deteriorating state of work-life balance among higher education faculty,

especially online faculty, leading to burnout and lower retention rates (Covarrubias, 2021; McCandless et al., 2023; Seaman et al., 2018). This significant concern affects productivity, job satisfaction, and general well-being, leading to higher burnout and lower retention rates (Covarrubias, 2021). These conditions are exacerbated by significant personal life demands, producing stress and burnout, adversely affecting faculty, students, and institutions. McCandless et al. (2023) note this imbalance can impact faculty's ability to promote, gain tenure, fulfill roles, and ultimately affect student satisfaction and institutional success.

Purpose of the Self- Study

The purpose of this self-study auto-ethnographic research was to explore factors influencing the successful implementation of work-life balance for an online graduate faculty member in higher education. As the sole participant, the author engaged in introspective reflection on both professional and personal components, aiming to contribute to existing knowledge by exploring success factors and offering principles for balancing life and work.

Literature Review

Work-life balance and workload concerns are unique to online higher education faculty. In 2023, 19% of provosts reported higher faculty departure rates, with 60% indicating increased rates (McCandless et al., 2023). Exiting faculty reported feeling emotionally exhausted (38%), physically exhausted (33%), and worn out (40%; McCandless et al., 2023).

What is Work-Life Balance?

The imbalance between work and life commitments is central to faculty departure. The equilibrium between personal commitments (familial responsibilities, personal life activities) and professional commitments (teaching, research, service, professional development) is termed 'work-life balance' (Bridges & Newell, 2021; Gatta & Roos, 2021). Five factors dominate the discussion: increased workload, technological evolution, faculty retention, consequences of imbalance, and institutional implications.

Increased Workload

Online faculty report increased presence and commitment compared to their traditional counterparts (Stone & Springer, 2019). There is an expected "ever-present" need for availability due to the varied schedules of students, many of whom are working professionals. Geographic dispersion means only virtual meetings can gather all students, which may occur at any time. Course materials must be frequently updated for content advances, accessibility compliance (e.g., Accessible Canada Act (ACA), Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Australian Disability Discrimination Act, European Union Web Accessibility Directive, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD; etc.), technology upgrades, and learning design (Hung et al., 2022; Saikat et al., 2021). The additional preparation time contrasts with the interval-gauged traditional face-to-face model (Lederman, 2019).

Wolf (2020) notes the flexibility of online teaching can be liberating, but the lack of

boundaries lead to blurring work and life lines. Faculty may find disconnecting from duties challenging. The pandemic has led many faculties to spend more time at home offices, often filled with distractions. McCarthy and McPhail (2020) explain that the lack of social connection with colleagues and campus events in the traditional setting may exacerbate isolation.

Technological Evolution

The constant evolution of technology causes both ease and friction. Herman (2012) noted the stress of learning new shortcuts and increasing workload. Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) remarked that institutional support for online faculty is often inadequate, failing to realize the unique setting differences. Online faculty are sometimes forced to conform the evolving online environment to traditional formats, which may not align with best practices. For example, the institutional requirement for all faculty (regardless of teaching modality) to post and attend 'office hours' in their campus office, even when their online students work during the traditional hours and days and are geographically dispersed in various time zones. Programs and support structures for faculty development, technical assistance, and challenge recognition may be absent or come with requirements of physical presence only (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009).

Faculty Retention

The retention of faculty is impacted by these factors. A 2018 study by the Babson Survey Research Group found lower satisfaction rates among online faculty compared to traditional teaching faculty (Seaman et al., 2018). The increased workload and lack of support led to 43% of online faculty being less satisfied with their experience. Over 70% of faculty in another study indicated signs of work-life imbalance and burnout (Wolf, 2020). McCarthy and McPhail (2020) noted that faculty experiencing high stress levels and lower job satisfaction are more likely to leave their positions. In their study, 62 % of faculty stated they were considering leaving their position (McCarthy & McPhail, 2020).

Consequences of Imbalance

The multifaceted nature of work-life balance deficiencies contributes to greater imbalance. Faculty experiencing higher stress and burnout levels are likely to encounter greater dissatisfaction, turnover rates, and reduced productivity, impacting education quality and student outcomes (Darby & Lang, 2019; Eagan & Jaeger, 2009; Taris et al., 2017).

Institutional Implications

Educational organizations face challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified faculty (McMurtie, 2020). A culture of support and sustainability must address work-life balance for faculty (Curti et al., 2020). Improvements can be realized through holistic, comprehensive approaches: improved institutional support, professional development opportunities, clear policies on work hours and availability, and increased community-building efforts (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Herman, 2012; Lederman, 2019; Seaman et al., 2018; Wolf, 2020).

Method

Research Question

The central research question guiding this self-study auto-ethnographic model was:

What strategies were employed by an online tenure-track higher education faculty member to manage workload and maintain well-being?

Theoretical Framework

The study was framed from six emerging theoretical lenses: work-life balance theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), role theory (Biddle, 1986), boundary theory (Nippert-Eng, 1996), conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and person-environment fit theory (Caplan, 1987). Ultimately, the study was situated with the person-environment fit theory (Caplan, 1987), which notes the importance of aligning environmental demands with personal preferences. The flexibility and continuous demands of the online environment can contribute to dissatisfaction, isolation, and stress (Caplan, 1987).

The work-life balance theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and role theory (Biddle, 1986) highlight the conflict between differing roles, particularly work and personal. The boundary theory (Nippert-Eng, 1996) and conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) explore resource management and its effect on conserving time and energy. Both self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and person-environment fit theory (Caplan, 1987) address aligning environmental demands with personal motivations, emphasizing competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Four observations can be made about the theories: they address the impact of stress and well-being related to work-life balance; highlight conflict and its impact on balance; recognize the dramatic effect of resource management on social support, energy, and time; and underscore the necessity of understanding intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. The person-environment fit theory (Caplan, 1987) was most appropriate, addressing the adaptation of technology and revealing the alignment between faculty preferences, skills, and values.

Design

Self-study offers many advantages, capturing the authentic experiences and perspectives of practitioners (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2020). This method enhances introspection and clarity, allowing researchers to examine their thoughts, experiences, and actions (Berry, 2018; LaBoskey, 2016). It encourages continuous improvement in instructional strategies and learner outcomes (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2020; LaBoskey, 2016). However, challenges such as subjectivity and ethical concerns must be acknowledged (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2020). The study's transferability may be limited by the researcher's experiences and practices (Billups, 2021). Auto-ethnography was also incorporated to understand how my background and social experiences influenced my work-life balance choices (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This methodology encompasses my journey and addresses contributions from places, people, cultures, and experiences.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established by employing triangulation (data, method, researcher), thereby enhancing confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I utilized data triangulation (journaling, self-observation and field notes, mind mapping), including reflective and analytical memos to cross-verify information and ensure comprehensive representation. New insights were gained as patterns and themes were identified across the data.

Results

Findings and Recommendations

The findings include five themes: planning and scheduling, engagement and support, teaching strategies, self-care and mental well-being, and personal fulfillment. Recommendations will be provided for each finding.

Finding #1: Planning and Scheduling

Effective time management strategies are essential. Establishing and adhering to structured schedules and maintaining dedicated workspaces and consistent routines help manage workload (Darby & Lang, 2019; Cutri et al., 2020).

Recommendation. Faculty could develop a weekly schedule that categorically separates daily tasks by professional and personal types. For example, designated times for professional development, relaxation, administrative duties, phone calls, cooking, reading, etc. could be determined by the individual.

Finding #2: Engagement and Support

Building supportive relationships within and outside the institution can mitigate stress and improve satisfaction. Mentorship and collaboration enhance a sense of community and belonging (Herman, 2012; LaBoskey, 2016; Seaman et al., 2018).

Recommendation. Establish mentorship programs and peer support groups. Through active participation in online forums and faculty meetings, new networks could begin.

Finding #3: Teaching Strategies

Adapting innovative teaching strategies such as collaborative learning, asynchronous discussions, and technology integration enhances instructional efficacy and student engagement (Hung et al., 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Recommendation. Maintaining virtual office hours, increasing multimedia engagement through video, and using Artificial Intelligence for rote tasks could provide more time for higher-level activities. Doing this will also help with community building.

Finding #4: Mental Well-being and Self-Care

Prioritizing self-care, including regular breaks, exercise, and hobbies, reduces burnout risk and promotes mental well-being. Boundaries must be established between work and personal life (Darby & Lang, 2019; Herman, 2012).

Recommendation. Regular “brain breaks” to disengage from the tasks can refocus the faculty member. Taking a walk, coffee break, or diversion to read unrelated materials at regular intervals throughout the day can be beneficial to establishing boundaries of well-being.

Finding #5: Personal Fulfillment

Aligning professional duties with personal values and interests fosters a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Finding a balance between teaching, research, and service activities is key to achieving personal fulfillment (Cutri et al., 2020; Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Recommendation. Embrace the personal values and goals with the professional duties so that both can grow concurrently. Choose professional development opportunities that reflect your broader interests.

A summary of data and results with instruments can be found in Table 1. It includes the thoughts and reflections about theories, observations, interpretations, the associated sources, and recommendations.

Table 1*Summary of Data and Results with Instruments*

Results	Observation	Interpretation	Recommendations	Instruments Used
Mismatch Between Job Demands and Personal Resources	High workload, constant connectivity leading to stress and burnout	Poor fit between job demands and personal resources leads to stress and burnout	Adjust workload, increase support to improve fit between job demands and personal resources	Reflective Journaling, Self-Observation and Field Notes
Role Ambiguity and Level of Institutional Support	Feelings of role ambiguity, lack of clear guidance and support from the institution	Poor fit between need for structure/clarity and ambiguous expectations/limited support leads to job dissatisfaction and burnout	Provide clearer guidelines, more robust support structures	Self-Observation and Field Notes, Reflective Journaling
Personal Strategies for Coping and Adaptation	Setting work-life boundaries, seeking peer support, journaling for self-reflection	Efforts to improve fit between personal needs and environmental demands mitigate negative impacts	Encourage self-reflection, promote work-life boundaries, foster peer support networks	Reflective Journaling, Mind Mapping
Positive Outcomes from Better Fit	Improvement in job satisfaction and reduction in stress with flexible scheduling and timely support	Better alignment between personal needs and environmental conditions leads to higher job satisfaction and lower stress levels	Implement flexible scheduling, timely support systems	Reflective Journaling, Self-Observation and Field Notes

The findings highlight the importance of holistic strategies in managing work-life balance. Institutional support, professional development opportunities, and community-building efforts are critical in mitigating challenges faced by online faculty (Curti et al., 2020; Herman, 2012; Lederman, 2019). Adopting flexible, innovative teaching strategies and prioritizing self-care can significantly enhance job satisfaction and reduce burnout (Darby & Lang, 2019; Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Conclusion

Addressing work-life balance issues among online faculty is imperative for enhancing job satisfaction, reducing burnout, and improving retention rates. Institutions must foster a supportive culture, provide necessary resources, and encourage continuous professional development to create a sustainable and fulfilling work environment (Curti et al., 2020; Herman, 2012; Lederman, 2019). In the end, the faculty members must advocate for themselves as ownership begins with them.

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