

**The Ohio State University**

**Report of the President and Provost's Council on Women Subcommittee on Technology and Work Life  
Balance**

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**Submitted to President E. Gordon Gee and Provost Joseph Alutto**

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## Executive Summary

OSU has a tremendous opportunity to proactively create an environment in which people are empowered to harness technology to improve their work life balance. Such an environment will give us a competitive advantage in hiring world-class faculty and staff, and will help us to move from excellence to eminence.

This subcommittee met with guest experts, interviewed faculty and staff, examined policies from OSU and other universities and reviewed the results of the culture survey to understand the current situation with regard to the impact of technology on work life balance and to provide recommendations to help move OSU forward in this area. Our work emphasizes four themes:

1. Quality, access, training and discomfort with technology;
2. The importance of technology to flexible work and the high value employees put on having a flexible work place;
3. Cultural expectations – the lack of communication about expectations, civility and “how we will work together using this technology” is a major contributor to the negative impacts of technology on work life balance;
4. Mental and physical health impacts.

The subcommittee recommends the following action steps as a way to begin moving OSU to a solution to this 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge:

- The President and Provost should begin a campus-wide conversation about our technology culture in order to recalibrate that culture.
- The Office of Human Resources should:
  - ensure that all employees have access to technology training by indicating a minimum number of hours per year that they will be permitted to spend in training courses;
  - provide training in supervision of staff working flex time/location;
  - label job categories as possible for flexible work with supervisor approval.
- The Office of the Chief Information officer should develop and communicate best practices for using technology to facilitate work life balance.

OSU has the opportunity to become the leader in technology and work life issues and policy as we help people create a healthy technology culture for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Introduction**

The world today is experiencing the biggest communications revolution since the printing press. Communications technology provides tools that can improve work-life balance, but can also create overwhelming work demands. This report examines technology and work-life balance in an effort to lay the ground work for an ongoing understanding (not just a snapshot) of the issues.

When we discuss “technology” in this context we are talking largely about devices: computers, tablet computers and cell phones. However the programs that run on the devices are part of both the joy and frustration. E-mail, texting, various aps, Carmen, PeopleSoft and OSU Pro (people were still using it when we talked to them), are all parts of “technology” as we are using the word.

## **Process**

The subcommittee reviewed materials on the topic, met with experts from both on and off campus, examined OSU policies, collected information on policies at other universities, studied the results of relevant questions on the culture surveys and discussed qualitative data from interviews with a mixed group of individuals selected by the members of the committee in their everyday round of activities (40 different people, male and female, faculty and staff, varying ages and positions at OSU).

This report will look first at university policy – both OSU’s and our peer institutions’. It will then examine the recent culture surveys for clues about work-life balance. The bulk of the document reports on the themes emerging from our conversations and reading and the final section provides a list of possible next steps.

## **Policies**

### **OSU policy**

University policies cannot address the full range of issues associated with technology and work life balance. However, OSU recognizes the growing demands on faculty and staff and the increasing challenge of finding new and better ways to serve customers and meet university goals. The university supports flexible work arrangements to achieve a highly productive work environment that enables faculty and staff to balance work and personal needs, while providing workforce predictability and stability.

Ohio State does not have a technology policy, but the Flexible Work policy 6.12, created in spring of 2011, allows staff to work a flexible schedule. Flexible arrangement options, particularly telecommuting, are supported by technology. Clearly, not all positions lend themselves to telecommuting. However, those that do provide employees with a greater ability to integrate work and life needs regardless of location. Telecommuting is one of the most utilized types of flexible work arrangement happening at the university.

In the future it may be possible to begin including some information about a position's flexibility within the performance profile (the tool being socialized to eventually replace the current job description). While most hiring managers want the autonomy to make the decision around flexible work arrangements once an employee has been hired (and has proven to be effective and dependable), some performance profiles could include language such as: "This position is eligible for consideration of telecommuting and/or other forms of flexibility". Again, the decision for flexibility at Ohio State is made on a position and individual basis. Flexible arrangements can be discontinued for business needs, decrease in productivity, or poor performance.

The Office of Human Resources is developing a strategy that better communicates existing policies and established best practices surrounding work life integration. The work life website is another resource where employees and managers can find helpful information, guidelines, and tip sheets about work life integration, flexibility, and telecommuting. <http://hr.osu.edu/worklife/>

### Other universities' policies

We submitted a query to the Association of American Universities Data Exchange (AAUDE) mailing list. The query said that "Ohio State is concerned about the impact of technology on work-life balance. While there are many ways in which technology has a positive impact on work-life balance, including the ease with which faculty and staff can work remotely and with flexible schedules, technology can also make it the case that faculty and staff are always on duty. Employees may feel pressure to respond to inquiries 24/7; some supervisors may in fact have that as an expectation." The query went on to ask "Do you have any policies that address the role of technology in work-life balance? We'd probably be interested in any policy that used the words "technology" and "work-life balance" in the same paragraph."

Of the 18 universities that responded, only four indicated they had a policy related to technology and flexible work (including telecommuting) or something tangentially related to the topic. OSU is ahead of most other universities in having a formal flexible work policy. The vast majority report nothing at all related to this topic in their policies. The complete list of responses is in the Appendix.

### Culture survey results

The staff of Institutional Research and Planning (IRP) analyzed the 2011 culture survey for us with a focus on total satisfaction and on two questions about flexibility on the job. In general, the more hours a faculty member estimates he or she works in a week, the less satisfied that person is with everything about the unit. Self-reported work hours can be a problem in this context, but taking the responses at face value, if people feel that advanced technology causes them to work more hours, they may suffer a decrease in satisfaction with everything about their unit. It is worthwhile to keep this in mind as we examine the interview data to see if people's responses support this idea.

In addition, the IRP staff selected those units with especially high and especially low ratings in two questions related to work-life balance that were asked of the staff only:

- My job schedule can be adjusted to meet personal or family responsibilities when needed and
- My unit provides support to balance work/personal responsibilities.

Twenty units rated 90% or higher agreement with these two statements. Seven rated below 55% agreement with the first (some as low as 20%) and 13 units rated 55% or less agreement with the second (one as low as 10%). (We have included a list of the high scoring units in the Appendix.)

### **Interviews and themes**

Our guest speakers and the interviews conducted by each member of this committee provided a wealth of information for us to consider. In this section we will summarize major themes that appeared in these conversations. A detailed summary of the individual interviews is available upon request.

Cutting across all of the following topics is the diversity of OSU employees. One aspect of that diversity is the difference between faculty, who have more control over their work time and staff, who have less control over their work time. Career stage is a second consideration. Finally age or generational cohort differences can be important, with the younger cohorts generally being more comfortable with the technology. As one person on the subcommittee noted, older employees often learned technology at work first and it is associated in their minds with work even though they may use it for other things; younger employees learned technology first for socializing and games. The fact that it is useful at work is fine, but it is not associated with work per se – it is simply one part of who they are.

The primary themes that arose in the committee’s discussions were:

#### **1. Quality of technology, access to technology, availability and quality of training and general discomfort with technology.**

People acknowledge the convenience, the importance of access to information and connections and the increased efficiency technology allows for many applications. However, interviewees mentioned that access to technology and the quality of the technology is uneven. Some units have excellent access, others have very little. Upgrades to ubiquitous software are uneven (e.g. different versions of Word in different units makes exchanging documents frustrating at times). Some university systems are excellent, others less so (e.g. Carmen is “a little clunky”; OSU Pro was “very frustrating”).

Some people would like to learn more about new technologies but do not know where to find the training, are not sure that the time trade-off is worthwhile and may question their ability to learn in this arena. It can seem counterproductive to spend time and effort learning technology that will be obsolete next year. Professor Boyer from the Fisher College of Business suggested that one issue (often related to different generations) is that some people expect to become expert at a new technology and technology is evolving too rapidly for that expertise to remain relevant long enough to pay off the investment of acquiring it. It can be very stressful to those people to discover that they cannot “master” the technology because it does not stand still. He

suggested that it is less stressful and more useful to be open minded about trying new technologies, not expect to become expert at any of it (it changes too quickly to make that worthwhile, there are too many ways to accomplish the same thing and no one knows everything about any of it), use what works for you and forget the rest. He noted that our students do this naturally as a result of having grown up with the technology.

The quality of training and its availability are seen as variable, and much of the training is word of mouth rather than formal. Some employees do not have access to computers (at work or at home) and this can create stress as more and more of our processes and information are available mainly on-line. Even participation in university surveys and events can be hindered if one has no easy access to the technology. It is difficult to include people in a digital culture if they have little access to the tools.

Professor Randy Hodson from Sociology noted that some staff members find the new technology needed for their work intimidating. They may have difficulty with the training or with achieving the necessary level of mastery from the training that is offered. They may learn better from peers but be isolated in smaller units. In the extreme people may avoid doing the work or do it badly.

Sometimes the issue can be one of control. People may feel that the technology controls them rather than the reverse. **Training and support are crucial, including support to continually upgrade one's skills.**

## **2. Flexible Work.**

One of the major strengths of technology for many people is its ability to facilitate flexible work schedules. Many people mentioned the importance of being able to work from home – perhaps when there is a sick child to care for, a delivery or repair person coming, or as part of a regular telecommuting schedule. Working at home to make up for time missed in the office is also seen as a plus. Faculty members mentioned being able to access files remotely, saving travel time and even shower time (“yes, I sometimes think taking showers and getting ready is a waste of time” as one person commented).

The technology is also seen as enhancing work by increasing the flexibility to work from anywhere and to be responsive no matter where one is. One person noted that he/she can work remotely from anywhere in the world and “keep many balls in the air”. And, as another person noted, “Aha moments” don’t always happen during work hours, so the technology facilitates creativity.

On a more prosaic level people commented on the need to check e-mail often and from many different places just to keep it under control. Some noted the ability to stay on top of things when one is home sick as positive.

The technology can work both ways – either bringing work into family life or bringing personal life to the office. People mentioned being able to attend family events but still remaining in touch with their office if something comes up. They also mentioned the advantages of having children able to send a text and get in touch with a parent even if the parent is in a closed meeting. People also find that technology allows them to accomplish personal tasks during lunch hours when there is not enough time to leave campus to take care of these things.

**OSU is in the forefront of universities nationwide with its flexible work policy**, but too few people are aware of it and some supervisors are unwilling to consider using it. There is evidence to suggest that workplaces in which flexible work is used have better productivity, happier staff, and less turnover, but **this information should be made more available**. As we will see in a later section, the key to making technology work in a positive way to create flexible work is the individual unit context and manager attitude.

### 3. Cultural Expectations

Work unit context and management have an enormous impact on work-life balance. People report pressure – sometimes explicit but more often perceived -- from the boss to stay connected at night, when sick, or on vacation. The pressure is felt more acutely when the unit provides the technology (e.g., a smart phone) but it is felt in nearly every case. Both faculty and staff members mentioned that expectations had increased due to technology. For staff this seemed to revolve around expectations of constant availability. Some faculty members felt that expectations about their productivity have increased, in part because of technology, as well as expectations that they would be available all the time. They sometimes feel caught in the middle between students who expect immediate responses and leadership that expects exceptional productivity.

Increased availability expectations and close monitoring of work among the staff can lead to frustration and anger as when people feel that others are keeping track of where they are and what they are doing every minute (whether it is during working hours or not in some cases). Very few interviewees mentioned having discussed expectations and requirements regarding technology and availability with their supervisors. Whatever the expectations, it is imperative that people discuss what is appropriate and expected and what the unit's ground rules are. Units need to have explicit agreement and that agreement needs to be carefully communicated to everyone in the organization. Some units find things work relatively smoothly as everyone "understands" the same things without formal documents. However, units where there is a disconnect between supervisors and their employees can have serious problems.

Some of the people who are happiest with their work-life balance report very supportive supervisors and unit cultures that make flexible work arrangements possible. The ability to telecommute or to work nonstandard hours provides flexibility that is very highly valued by those who are able to use it. Supervisors need to retain control over which employees and what

contexts are appropriate for flexible work but they should be encouraged to work with staff as much as possible in this regard. For both supervisors and employees it is very important to know when and how to say “no” and to be able to explain why they have said it.

This brief discussion and the more detailed results of our interviews indicate very clear differences among units on campus in the areas of flexibility and being able to adjust work to life demands. This connects to the culture survey results mentioned above. The varying policies, expectations, levels of communication and amount of flexibility provided to employees leads to serious inequities that do not reflect our values or our goal of being “one university”. One clear conclusion is the **absolute necessity of people at every level of the university communicating with each other about what is expected and appropriate in terms of use of the technology outside of work hours.**

Communication is also important in establishing what qualifies as “civility” in any context. Is ignoring e-mail on the weekend rude or unresponsive? Is a one word answer from one’s cell phone offensive? Is sending a message that requires multiple screens to read a waste of time? Is not reading the whole message a problem? These are new areas of interpersonal communication that we are working out. What may be appropriate in an off campus setting or social group may not be in the professional setting. There are times when face-to-face communication is necessary, but what are those times? What has been standard practice may be too time consuming to continue. But discussing how a group chooses to interact is crucial to keeping those interactions smooth, no matter what the technology involved. Unit supervisors must take the lead in these conversations and help their units understand what kinds of conversations need to happen – these conversations may be between staff members, between staff and faculty or between faculty. They may include students. They may involve discussing how the unit wants people to communicate to outsiders as well. And supervisors may need to communicate to outsiders what is appropriate – for example, we heard from a staff member who was covering two jobs while a search was going on. She received demands for work on weekends from faculty who were frustrated and angry if the work was not done first thing on Monday morning. Her supervisor needs to communicate with others in the unit about what is or is not a reasonable expectation. In other words, **units need to explicitly discuss and create their technology culture.**

#### **4. Physical and mental health**

Many people recognize **technology as having an impact on their physical and mental health both directly and indirectly (through things like social interactions)**. Some of the younger employees we interviewed have found ways to make the technology work to help them. Some examples include having work-out aps on the smart phone or using the alarm on the phone to remind the person to meditate or to stand up and move around. Others mention that staying abreast of e-mail while away from campus makes it easier and less stressful to do their job on-



campus. Many people are grateful that they can use the technology to stay in touch with children and other family members while they are at work.

The negative effects of being always “at work” were felt by a large number of our interviewees. Comments such as “I never feel a sense of downtime,” “it affects my sleep,” “there are no vacations,” illustrate the kinds of issues people deal with. They recognize that these things can make them irritable and less productive and are not good for their health overall, but many do not see any solutions.

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help people in these situations and reports seeing an increase in cases of technology-related work life stress. These include cases such as employees being reprimanded at an 8 a.m. meeting for not having read a message the supervisor sent out at 2:30 a.m. the same morning. Robert Meier, Director of the OSU Health Plan, suggests that the EAP would see more people with these problems if it occurred to employees to turn to the EAP in these situations.

There is also a thread through many responses indicating that people recognize the problem may be theirs rather than the fault of the technology or demanding bosses. People mentioned responding to e-mails when they did not have to, checking e-mail on their phone all the time, even when it is not necessary, or being unable to leave the computer alone. No one went so far as to call it an addiction, but many described something trending in that direction. The EAP is an appropriate place to turn for help with this issue as well.

Supervisors, coworkers and colleagues can help people understand that it is OK to step away and they can help define when it is appropriate and when it is not. Once again, communication to create a shared culture is critical.

### **Action Steps**

OSU is a leader in work life balance and flexible work policies. We have an opportunity to become **the** leader in technology and work life issues and policy as we help people create a healthy technology culture for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1. The President and Provost should **begin a campus-wide conversation about our technology culture in order to recalibrate that culture**. It is important that this effort start at the highest levels as everyone in the university looks to these leaders as the models of how we, as a university, work. If the President and Provost make this a priority, talk about it with those who report to them and make it part of their performance evaluations these practices will trickle down through the university.

We must communicate broadly about the issue, our policies, expectations and the assistance available. We must make it acceptable for employees to talk about technology

and work-life balance and to ask for clear guidelines or help in other ways. Supervisors and employees need to work together to develop clear contracts or understandings that delineate expectations with regard to availability through technology. Faculty, staff and students must have clear guidelines to understand what is and is not appropriate. All of this starts with the President and the Provost; the directives they give to Vice Presidents, Vice Provosts and Deans; and what they say to the community.

2. The Office of Human Resources should:
  - a. assure that all employees have **access to technology training** by indicating a minimum number of hours per year that they will be permitted to spend in training courses;
  - b. provide training in supervision of staff working flexible time/location;
  - c. provide training for supervisors about communicating expectations around technology;
  - d. label job categories as possible for flexible work with supervisor approval.
3. The Office of the Chief Information Officer should **communicate best practices** for using technology to facilitate work life balance. The Digital Union should create ways to help employees learn from each other about the best ways to use and control the technology. Having the President, Provost and other senior leaders discuss best practices and how they put those practices into action using 30 second spots, cartoons and so on would gain attention and help people take the issue seriously.

## **Conclusion**

Ohio State has a tremendous opportunity to create an environment in which people are empowered to harness technology to improve their work-life balance. Such an environment will give our University a competitive advantage in hiring and retaining world-class faculty and staff, and will help us to move from excellence to eminence.

## **Appendix**

### **Guest speakers:**

Ken Boyer, Professor, Fisher College of Business

Liv Gjestvang, Systems Manager, OCIO, Digital Union

Randy Hodson, Professor, Sociology

Deb Jaspar, Principal, Mindset Digital

Robert Meier, Director, OSU Health Plan

Bernadette Melnyk, Dean of the College of nursing and Associate Vice President for Health Promotion

### **AAUDE university responses to query about technology and work-life balance policy**

1. University of Arizona: The University of Arizona has a brochure on Flexible work arrangements provided by Human resources [http://lifework.arizona.edu/etc/guides/FWA\\_guide.pdf](http://lifework.arizona.edu/etc/guides/FWA_guide.pdf)
2. University of California System: The University of California does not have any system wide personnel policies that address the impact of technology on work-life balance.
3. MIT: our policies and procedures don't have anything on this topic
4. University of Michigan: Sounds nice but we don't have any policies on this.
5. University of Wisconsin: No
6. University of Kansas: No policy here and we will be interested if your query surfaces any.

7. University of Southern California: We have a Center for Work and Family Life that does touch upon certain technology issues. The URL is: <http://www.usc.edu/programs/cwfl/news.html>. We have very strict rules here in California regarding non-exempt staff and work schedules. So I don't think the issue of always being "on" is an issue with that group of employees. I am unaware of any such policies regarding exempt employees with or without faculty status. <http://policies.usc.edu/>
8. University of Maryland: A thorough scan of University policies did not reveal any combinations of "work-life" and "technology" balance references. There is a work-life reference to tele-commuting /telework under UMD's Student Affairs Division (see; <http://www.studentaffairs.umd.edu/worklife/telework.html> ), but that reference seems more related to the 'technology' being used to support/improve 'work-life' demands -- open to interpretation, I suppose. Briefly stated, no formal policies at Maryland regarding work-life and technology balance.
9. University of Rochester: Rochester does not have such a policy.
10. University of Nebraska Lincoln: The University of Nebraska-Lincoln does NOT have any policies relating to technology and work life balance. Response provided by Bruce Currin, Director, Human Resources
11. University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign: No
12. Texas A&M University: I did a search of our System Policies and Regulations and could not find anything that addressed technology and work-life balance.
13. University of Colorado Boulder: No. <http://hr.colorado.edu/worklife/Pages/default.aspx> is about work-life balance but doesn't cover the sort of thing you're interested in.
14. Harvard University: No official policy. There's nothing really germane in Harvard's work/life policies, but following "Work at Home" IT policy may be of tangential use: [http://www.uis.harvard.edu/support\\_services/work\\_at\\_home.php](http://www.uis.harvard.edu/support_services/work_at_home.php). The upshot is that to access core Harvard network resources (like a shared drive, remote desktop, central database, etc.) remotely, an employee needs to have an authorized, Harvard-owned device. From a work/life perspective, this limits the amount of work that employees are allowed to do at a home unless they have such a device. One can always access "central web enabled" services (like email) from many computer, but for many employees full network access is a requirement for most job functions.
15. Purdue University: No. Purdue does not have a policy that addresses the role of technology in work-life balance.
16. University of Iowa: No
17. University of Toronto: None but are interested to see the results.

18. University of Pittsburgh: No. We have no Formal written policy in our policy manual that pertains to the impact that technology has on the work-life balance.

### 2011 culture survey

Units with high levels of agreement with two work-life questions asked on the staff survey

Department	My job schedule can be adjusted to meet personal or family responsibilities when needed.		(My unit) Provides support to balance work/personal responsibilities.	
	n	% Agree	n	% Agree
Astronomy	5	100%	6	100%
CMIB-Ctr Microb Interface Biol	5	100%	5	100%
Ctr-Study&Teaching of Writing	5	100%	5	100%
ES & UE Admin Services	16	100%	16	94%
Human Resource Admin	35	100%	35	91%
Integrated Systems Engineering	12	100%	12	92%
Internal Audit	13	92%	13	92%
Marketing Comm & Univ Pub	16	100%	16	94%
Newark - Cost Shared	10	100%	11	91%
OARDC Director's Office	8	100%	8	100%
OARDC Food Animal Health	11	100%	11	91%
OARDC Human Resources	5	100%	5	100%
OARDC Interdisciplinary	6	100%	6	100%
OARDC Outlying Stations	5	100%	5	100%
Ohio Learning Network	7	100%	7	100%
Optometry	36	92%	37	89%
Organization & HR Consulting	32	97%	32	91%
Schl of Environ & Natural Res	21	95%	21	95%
Senior VP Admin and Planning	7	100%	7	100%
Student Affairs HR	5	100%	5	100%