



RESEARCH BRIEF

Staying at Work: Policies and Strategies that Support Workers with Disabilities

Balance between work and the rest of life is critical to individuals' employment choices and outcomes as well as their overall well-being. Employees who lack work/life balance may experience reduced productivity and decreased job satisfaction, and may opt to leave their positions or exit the workforce altogether rather than struggle to meet competing demands.

While maintaining a balance between work and the rest of life can be difficult for anyone, this may be particularly challenging for individuals with disabilities. In addition to the typical obligations and needs such as family, friends, and leisure interests, employed people with disabilities must also manage disability-related considerations which have implications both within and outside of the workplace.

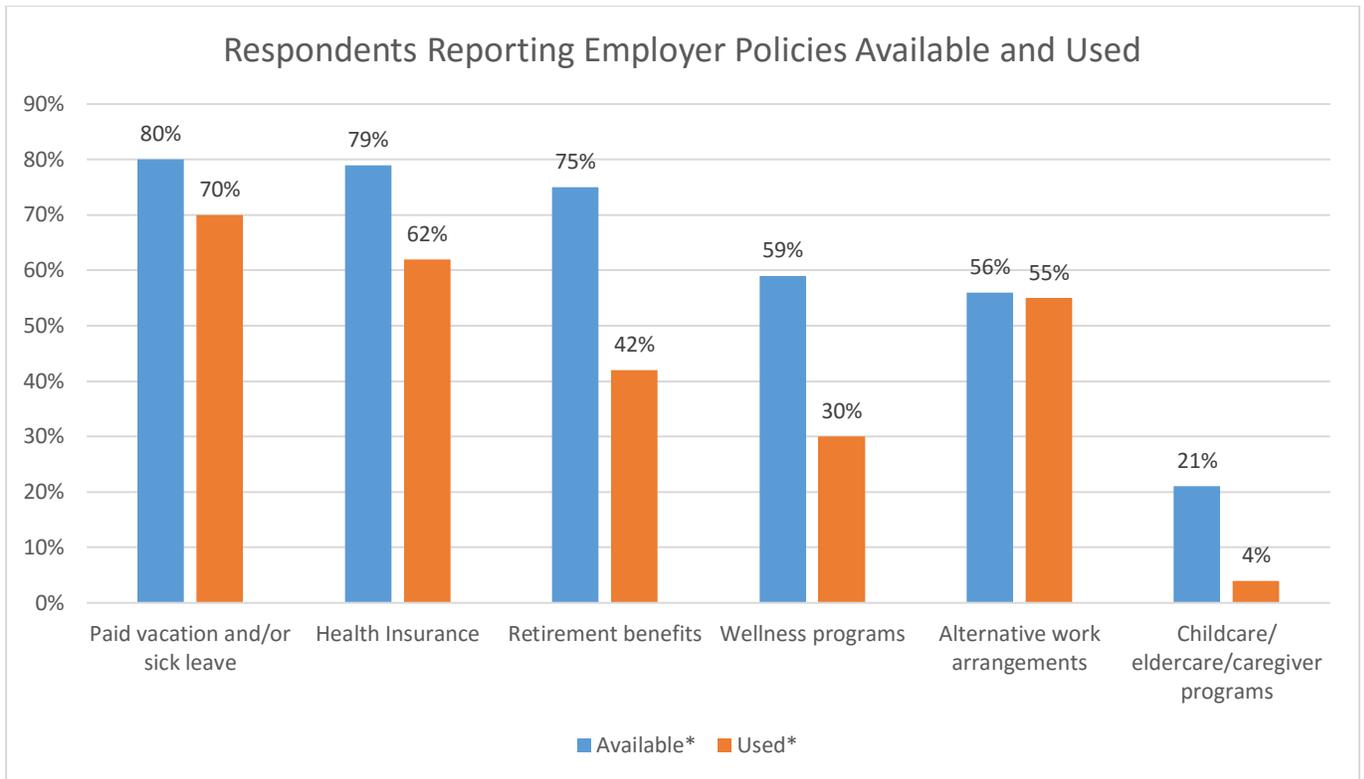
Successfully fitting work into the lives of individuals with disabilities requires an understanding of more than the skills they possess. It calls for consideration of how these individuals negotiate the roles and responsibilities they have within all life domains and the policies and practices that employers can implement to support these and other workers.

During the spring of 2014, as part of a study entitled "Getting and Keeping People with Disabilities in the Workforce: Negotiating Work, Life, and Disability," researchers at Cornell University's Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability fielded a survey of employed individuals with disabilities to gain insights about a wide range of workplace issues and experiences; this brief presents some key findings from this research.

Employer-Sponsored Resources

Balancing work and non-work demands can be accomplished in a variety of ways that take into account the circumstances, needs and resources of individuals. Among the resources available to many workers, are family- and disability-friendly workplace policies. Family-friendly policies tend to support individuals' balancing of work and family demands, while disability-friendly policies more specifically ensure individuals with disabilities equal access to employment. Workers' access to these sorts of supportive policies and the degree to which they utilize them can vary widely.

Survey respondents were asked about a range of possible employer policies and indicated varying degrees of access to and use of these resources. Of particular note, while respondents reported that they did not make full use of most available employer-sponsored work/life resources nearly as many workers who had access to alternative work arrangements (such as flexible schedules or remote work options) used them. Many individuals noted that some type of alternate work arrangement was the policy that was or would be most useful in helping them to manage work/life demands.



*Percent of all respondents

Personal Strategies

Beyond workplace policies, respondents were asked to describe the strategies they used to manage work and non-work demands and achieve a sense of work/life balance. Many respondents described using multiple strategies with outcomes that ranged from feeling like they had achieved a reasonable level of work/life balance, to others who had resigned themselves to something always being neglected (in many cases their personal health or well-being.) Some of the more commonly reported strategies are described below.

Seeking/relying on support. This included relying on family, friends and coworkers as well as hiring paid helpers: "...delegate as needed to those in my support network (ask my husband or older son to pick something up)."

Setting boundaries and limits. "...I try really hard to just work Monday-Friday with very little personal activity and then on the weekends I try to add the personal activities without doing too much to overdo or over-exert myself to cause me to be overtired on Monday morning. It takes a LOT of planning and a LOT of willpower to say NO when I used to be able to say YES to so much more."

Engaging in leisure activities. This included things like exercise, hobbies, and social activities. "I try to spend time with friends and family, even if I have to use vacation time, because it's important to have a life outside of work. Fostering cats and kittens also helps me feel more balanced."



Being flexible and using flexible workplace options. Many respondents noted that they established work arrangements that worked for them in terms of schedule, number of hours, flexibility of location and work demands, and about the use of sick or vacation time as needed to manage non-work demands. “Because I have some flexibility with the hours I work and have an honest relationship with my boss who understands my disability, I can schedule my work in a way that takes advantage of my great functioning days; and I can do less important tasks on days that I know I am not 100%.”

Planning/scheduling. Respondents reported keeping lists, schedules, plans and prioritizing demands. “I make a list of activities to be attended to - either personal or work - everyday...This helps me to reflect on what is important to me, both personally and professionally.”

Resting/conserving energy. Respondents used non-work time to recharge and recover, including evenings, weekends, paid time off, as well as breaks during the work day. “I try to make sure that I'm meeting my physical needs at work so that I can still have energy outside of work for my other valued activities. And I do the same outside of work so that I can give my all at work.”

Taking time for self-care. Respondents acknowledged a need for and efforts toward self-care. “If I can address the personal stuff and feel well physically about myself, everything else falls into place and I feel self-motivated to do anything I wish. It also allows me to focus on work related items without being distracted.”

Conclusion

While all employees encounter challenges in balancing work and life demands, individuals with disabilities have additional considerations in maintaining a sense of balance between work and other life domains. This research suggests that individuals with disabilities use personal strategies as well as strategic use of employer-sponsored resources and policies to help enable better work/life management, though individuals vary in the degree to which they ultimately feel they are able to achieve a sense of balance.

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