When Home Becomes Work: The Pandemic’s Impact on Work and Family for College Sport Employees

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Management - Work-Life (College Sport)  
Abstract 2021-272  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Mode: Asynchronous  
Session: Live Q&A for Management 2 (Asynchronous)  
Saturday June 5, 2021, 3:50 PM - 4:50 PM

The purpose of this study was to investigate how college sport employees’ perceptions of workplace behaviors including work-family spillover, perceived external prestige (PEP), job commitment, burnout, and workaholism changed from before to after the COVID-19 pandemic and if changes were due, at least in part, to familial responsibilities. Investigating these changes in both work and family provide a more global understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on employee perceptions, specifically within the context for employees working within sport, a vocation notorious for having unhealthy work expectations.

We surveyed 1,139 NCAA Division I, II, and III intercollegiate athletic department employees who completed both a pre- and post-COVID-19 survey via Qualtrics, in November 2019 and May 2020. We used paired samples t-tests to assess differences between negative and positive work-family/family-work spillover pre- and post-COVID-19 as well as levels of PEP, job commitment, burnout, and workaholism. Structural equation modeling was also utilized to analyze the relationship between negative and positive work to family spillover, perceived employer prestige, and job commitment.

We found athletic department employees’ perceptions of negative work-family spillover (p < .001), and personal (p < .01) and work-related burnout (p < .01) decreased post-COVID-19 when compared to pre-COVID-19 levels. Additionally, employees reported higher levels of both PEP (p < .01), positive work-family spillover (p < .001) and workaholism (p < .1). There were no significant differences between job commitment levels or positive/negative family-work spillover for pre- and post-COVID-19. The structural model (χ² = 1,400.37, CFI = .95; RMSEA = .05) found a significant, positive relationship between positive work-family spillover and PEP (β = .19, p < .001; β = .27, p < .001), and PEP and job commitment (β = .37, p < .001; β = .27, p < .001), on both the pre- and post-COVID-19 model. The indirect effect of positive work-family spillover on job commitment, as mediated by PEP, was also significant on both models (β = .07, p < .001; β = .11, p < .001). When comparing the pre- and post-COVID-19 models, there was a significant, negative relationship between negative work-family spillover on job commitment. Indirectly, there was a significant, negative relationship between positive work-family spillover and job commitment as mediated by PEP.

Our findings demonstrate that athletic department employees’ perceptions were impacted both positively and negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic and employers should strive to learn from these changes to better structure the work environment moving forward. Our study is the first to examine the PEP-work-family spillover relationship and looked to highlight the changes sport employees perceived from pre- to during COVID-19. As positive perceptions of work-family spillover were related to an increase in PEP, it speaks to how individuals who value a work-family balance might anticipate others’ valuing this same construct. Also, our findings indicate that work-from-home orders might increase workaholism even when job responsibilities decrease. This increase in workaholism was not accompanied by increases in other negative well-being outcomes which might indicate that employees are using work as a coping mechanism for anxiety.