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**Work-Life Balance 2.0? An Examination of Social Media Management Practice
and Agency Employee Coping Strategies in a 24/7 Social World**

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Abstract

This study examines the work experiences of public relations agency professionals who specialize in social media and digital strategy for clients and those who manage employees tasked with monitoring, updating and responding to social media content. Building upon existing literature focused on work-life balance dynamics for strategic communicators, the research draws from a series of in-depth interviews and correspondence conducted with 26 agency professionals, representing a brand range of the industry. Participants were asked to describe how social media has impacted the nature and volume of their job responsibilities over the past five years, and to discuss how social media management duties have influenced career satisfaction within the industry. Interviewees were also asked about strategies their agencies are using to help employees respond to client needs and the 24/7 nature of social media. Common themes among responses were identified, as well as noteworthy anecdotal evidence. While interviewees expressed mixed emotions related to social media and its impact on their careers, personal lives and the broader industry, participants agreed the rise of social media has dramatically altered agency practice and client expectations, especially related to the speed of the workflow. Participants discussed issues of employee burnout and reported specific challenges related to keeping pace with quickly evolving technology, and the perceived need to maintain a personal brand conveying cutting-edge expertise. Others highlighted opportunities and unique challenges social media has created for more junior agency employees. Interviewees also described family dynamics and the distinct work-life challenges faced by parents, especially mothers, in juggling care-giving roles with agency responsibilities. Findings include identification of best practices and potential strategies for addressing contemporary work-life balance challenges.

Keywords: public relations, work-life balance, work-life fit, social media, agency management, technology, human resources

Introduction

The past decade has seen a growing body of public relations research focused on the topic of so-called “work-life balance” among public relations professionals (Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, & Sha, 2008; Jiang, 2012; Jiang & Shen, 2013; Jin, Sha, Shen, & Jiang, 2014; Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2017). Today’s careers in public relations are viewed as fast-paced, dynamic, and often highly stressful, with industry publications noting that the website CareerCast has regularly included “PR executive” on its annual list of the 10 most stressful jobs (Strauss, 2017; Suleman, 2016; Wilson, 2015). Over the past ten years the industry also has witnessed the dramatic rise of social media, now used in day-to-day operations as an efficient and cost-effective publishing platform and ubiquitous strategic communication tool. The uncontrolled, 24/7 nature of social media has been described by communication professionals as both a blessing and a curse (Wickman, 2015), and many have noted how significantly social media has altered aspects of the practice and the field (Dougherty, 2014; Supa, 2014). Certainly social media monitoring and online strategy is today considered an indispensable element of nearly any public relations message or marketing communications campaign – and maintaining a working knowledge, if not deep expertise, of social media is now an expectation for many who work in the industry, with dozens of regional and national social media trainings and digital conferences now offered through industry associations and private vendors (Luo, 2017; My PRSA Learning, 2017).

Although studies have examined how social media has changed the media landscape and day-to-day job responsibilities — and client expectations and demands — for communication professionals, little research has examined the impact that social media responsibilities (and, more broadly, online and digital properties management) have had on the public relations practitioners who implement and manage these strategies. While, for most, working in public relations has never been a typical 9-to-5 job, and the inevitable crisis or unexpected media opportunity has always made the role of a communication professional unpredictable and occasionally stressful, today’s quickly evolving and frequently volatile social media landscape has dramatically shifted professional expectations and stress levels of many in PR. While presenting countless opportunities for clients, organizations and individual careers, social media also has served to further blur the lines between what is considered “work” and what is considered “life” for agency employees. Through examination of in-depth interviews and email correspondence with 26 mid- to senior-level public relations agency professionals with roles focused on social media management and digital strategy, this study aims to explore an evolving dynamic within the industry and expand upon the existing literature on the nuances of work-life balance for public relations practitioners.

Literature Review

Definitions and Terminologies

Scholars who have examined work-life balance have used a variety of terminologies and conceptualizations. Early research from management literature focused on the concept of “work-

life *conflict*,” and designated three types of conflict: *time-based* conflict, when job-related tasks prevent an individual from fulfilling non-work responsibilities, *strain-based* conflict, when stress or mental preoccupation with work spills over to one’s personal life, and *behavior-based* conflict, when one’s role expected at work (e.g., aggressive, independent, impersonal) is incompatible with the role expected in one’s personal life (e.g., nurturing, communal, warm) (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Work-life conflict has been more broadly defined in public relations research as “the incompatibility between expectations to perform one role versus another,” relative to an individual’s professional duties, versus family obligations and personal activities (Shen & Jiang, 2013). In one of the first public relations studies on the topic, Aldoory and co-authors generally defined the terms work-life conflict and work-life balance as “efforts by male and female employed persons who juggle various personal, home and work responsibilities” (Aldoory, Jiang, Toh, & Sha, 2008). Other public relations scholars have more recently argued the term “work-life balance” may now be outdated, or largely unattainable, for most people — instead encouraging professionals in the industry to work toward achieving “work-life fit” in their careers and personal lives (Dozier, Shen, Sisco, & Vardeman-Winter, 2017). The notion of work-life fit moves away from the idea that work and life activities should require separation and clear boundaries that equally balance with one another, and instead promotes “*integrating* work and life” together, in a way that promotes flexibility and offers time and energy for both personal and professional endeavors (Dominus, 2016). For the purposes of this research, the classic and more ubiquitous “work-life balance” term, and the previously referenced Aldoory et. al. “juggling responsibilities” definition, were used within interview conversations with public relations professionals, as well as in the presentation and discussion of findings.

Work-Life Research in Public Relations

In their early research on work-life balance within the public relations profession, Aldoory and colleagues drew on past scholarship examining the gendered nature of public relations work, and conducted a qualitative study using focus groups of male and female professionals to explore their perceived challenges and solutions related to work-life balance (2008). Participants did not view work and personal life as separate in terms of time or space, but described more holistic lives in which work entered and exited everyday routines and realities. They noted challenges unique to the chaotic nature of public relations, such as putting work over family obligations outside of traditional business hours to serve a client. Long hours and being busy were seen by some as badges of honor. On one hand, new technology brought the expectation of constant connectivity and availability, actually lengthening, rather than simply shifting, the number of hours worked. On the other hand, some reported increased happiness and decreased stress working where and when convenient, despite longer hours (Aldoory, et al., 2008).

Differences emerged between how younger professionals constructed identity through increased work hours and willingness to sacrifice personal time versus older professionals who placed less value on being defined by work and more value on balance. Both parents and non-parents believed “the other side” did not understand their challenges — ranging from the lack of time constraints of non-parents to the perceived “preferential treatment in leave and workloads” that parents received. Coping strategies included communicating needs with supervisors, moving closer to work, using technology to work from home, getting up earlier or going to bed later to

have hours in the day for personal pursuits, leaving public relations or starting independent PR consulting businesses, or simply accepting the career, with its work-life balance challenges, as just the way it is with little likelihood of change (Aldoory, et al., 2008). At a time when social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook were just beginning to be widely adopted, the 2008-published Aldoory et al. study provides a benchmark for assessing public relations professionals' perspectives on work-life balance issues, prior to the full advent of social media.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has provided leadership in this area through the industry association's National Committee on Work, Life & Gender, which has supported several studies of its members on the topic of work-life balance, as well as promoting a number of related presentations and webinars. In an early study on this topic, Sha and Toth (2005) surveyed male and female public relations students (PRSSA members) to examine perceptions of "work, life, and gender issues" in the industry and students' views toward issues such as gender equity within career advancement and employee salaries. In reporting their findings, Sha and Toth advocated for improved undergraduate education related to both gender imbalances within the field and strategies for successfully overcoming such challenges. Shen and Jiang (2013) also examined survey data from a sample of PRSA members to study effects of variables such as the roles of primary household income earners and those with caregiving responsibilities for children or older adults on perceptions of work-life conflict. They found that those with caregiving responsibilities experienced more time-based, life-work conflict (i.e., when time required by one role makes it difficult to fulfill another role).

Jiang and Shen (2013) further expanded the literature and moved toward theory building in this area with a study examining PRSA members' perceptions of factors driving their own work-life conflicts. In their research, Jiang and Shen define work-life conflict as "the conflict between work and personal life" (p. 260). The intentional wording choice of "personal life" rather than "family life" reflects the fact that negotiating work responsibilities with non-work activities (such as time with family, leisure, and community service) is not limited to those who are married or have children. Additionally, Shen and Jiang (2013) surveyed PRSA members to study the effects of age, family dependent care responsibility, and professional specialty on work-life conflict. They found that Gen Xers experienced more overall work-life conflict than other generational groups; that those with family care responsibilities experienced greater time-based strain than those without family obligations; and interestingly, that those specializing in internal communications perceived greater strain-based conflict (when work stress spills over into personal lives) than those in other types of public relations roles. The authors recommended that employers provide both tangible (e.g., childcare) and intangible resources (e.g. a supportive organizational environment) to help reduce work-life conflict.

Knowing that past research established that increased time- and strain-based work-life conflict are associated with increased job dissatisfaction and decreased affective commitment to an organization, Jiang (2012) proposed these types of conflict may also negatively affect employee-organizational relationships. Through surveys, the study found high levels of time- and strain-based conflict predict lower quality of employee-organization relationships. Further, the more likely employees were to perceive that their organizations' formal work-life decision-making procedures were fair and just, the higher the quality of employee-organization relationship, and the lower the level of perceived strain-based work-life conflict (e.g., work stress spillover into personal life). However, perceptions of fair decision making weren't enough to overcome perceived time-based work-life conflict (when work interferes with personal

responsibilities). Similarly, higher perceptions of an organization's family-supportive work-life initiatives as helpful did not translate into lower levels of time- and strain-based conflict.

Place and Vardeman-Winter (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with 20 public relations practitioners to examine how discourses in the workplace formed meaning through culture. One finding revealed that the 24/7, "always available" and "clients first," environment led those interviewed to "[discipline] their behaviors or practices in response to the industry's demanding work culture by becoming a 'workaholic'" (p. 316). Interviewees described the expectation of working late into the evening, on weekends and during holidays, forfeiting time off, and accommodating work needs over their own, with personal lives suffering as a result. Subsequent research by Jin and colleagues explored the types of stressors that can cause work-life conflict issues (behavior-driven, work-driven, and life-driven), as well as the various coping strategies (such as taking rational action, or positive thinking exercises) used by the public relations professionals surveyed (Jin, Sha, Shen, & Jiang, 2014). In 2015, Shen and colleagues published another study examining new survey data from PRSA members and exploring practitioners' perspectives on work-life conflict and personal coping strategies. They found evidence that negative work environments can increase levels of work-life conflict, while strong identification with the profession and involvement with a professional association (i.e., PRSA) can help to mitigate work-life conflict (Shen, Jiang, Jin, & Sha, 2015). Jiang and Shen (2015) also presented updated survey research on PRSA members and their anticipation of work-life conflict issues within their future careers.

Most recently, Jiang, Luo and Kulemeka (2017) surveyed 458 communications professionals about how social media use influences their work, leadership, and perceptions of work-life conflict. The authors note that using social media technologies can have both positive (e.g., enhanced ability to do one's job) and negative (e.g., increased workload) outcomes, and found evidence of both. On one hand, using YouTube as a communications channel had a positive effect on professionals' work. For example, those who specialized in areas such as media relations and internal communication reported more flexibility in work hours, increased productivity, and a better ability to communicate ideas with coworkers. On the other hand, those who used Twitter extensively, particularly for crisis communications, experienced increased workload and stress.

Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow has conducted significant research on work-life balance solutions in the field of business consulting, an industry with many parallels to public relations. Perlow first completed a one-year ethnography at a management consulting firm examining how work was done, which revealed that for the consultants working with clients, the unpredictability and lack of control over their schedules was a source of frustration with their work lives, leading many to eventually leave the firm (Perlow, 2012). Perlow proposed a follow-up experiment at the firm, starting with a simple step: giving consultants – many of whom were working an average of 65 hours per week – one predictable night off per week, with other colleagues covering that person's work responsibilities and unexpected client needs. The initiative led to many positive outcomes, and grew from one team participating at the management consulting firm, to over 2,000 teams in 66 offices in 35 countries over a four-year period (Perlow & Kelly, 2014). Perlow and Kelly consider their "Predictable Time Off" or "PTO" model to be under the umbrella of Work Redesign.

The majority of public relations literature to date focused on work-life conflict and balance issues has utilized survey methodologies to assess the perspectives of PRSA and PRSSA members. This study aims to expand upon this area of public relations literature through the reporting of in-depth, qualitative interviews with industry professionals. Additionally, this research examines the individual perspectives of public relations agency professionals who specialize in social media work for clients — to better understand how growth of social media responsibility has influenced work-life balance challenges (and potential solutions) for current industry professionals.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the state of work-life among public relations professionals at the forefront of rapid technological change – mid- to senior-level agency professional specializing in digital and social media – and to explore how their experiences compare to the existing literature on work-life balance issues within the industry. The three research questions outlined below served as the focus of this study:

RQ1: How has social media impacted the nature and volume of PR practitioners' job responsibilities over the past five years?

RQ2: How have social media management responsibilities impacted professionals' career satisfaction?

RQ3: What strategies are agencies using to help employees respond to the 24/7 nature of social media?

Method

To explore the impact of social media responsibilities on public relations agency employees' work-life balance, the researchers conducted a series of in-depth phone interviews and email-based qualitative interview correspondence with PR professionals currently working in the industry. The study received IRB approval, and interviewees were provided with a consent form prior to participation. Individual participant preference determined whether interviews were recorded over the phone or conducted via email exchange. Participants were told that their personal identities would not be disclosed in the research and that responses would be presented in an anonymous fashion. No incentive was provided beyond an offer to share a copy of the finished research. Interviews ranged from approximately 25 minutes to over an hour in length, with the typical conversation lasting between 35-45 minutes. Phone interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a graduate student research assistant.

Sampling and Data Analysis

Rankings information from The Holmes Report and O'Dwyer's PR industry publications as well as a local business magazine was used to form a list of 15 public relations agencies,

including the top-five largest national publicly held PR firms, the top-five largest national independently owned PR firms, and the top-five largest local or regional PR firms, based on the large Midwestern PR market where the study researchers are located. The final list of agencies included a diverse mix of companies and provided a broad representation of the U.S. public relations industry. (See Table 1 below for a list of the agencies included.)

Table 1

Top 5 Largest Minneapolis/St. Paul PR Agencies*	Top 5 Largest Independent PR Agencies*	Top 5 Largest Publicly-Held PR Agencies*
Weber Shandwick	Edelman	Fleishman Hillard
PadillaCo	APCO Worldwide	MSL Group
Carmichael Lynch Relate	WE Communications <i>(formerly Waggener Edstrom)</i>	Burson Marsteller
Olson	W2O Group	Ketchum
Exponent	Ruder Finn	Hill + Knowlton
<i>* Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal Book of Lists</i>	<i>* O'Dwyers</i>	<i>* Holmes Report (Weber Shandwick also on this list, but already represented in study)</i>

Study participants were selected through purposive sampling. Using the agency list, potential participants were identified through targeted searches of professional profiles on the social networking site LinkedIn with the researchers identifying mid- to senior-level practitioners self-reporting as specializing in social media and/or digital roles, with titles such as “director of social media strategy,” or “senior vice president of digital.” Participants were then individually recruited via LinkedIn messages, emails and phone calls, with outreach made to at least two professionals from each company on the list. The final sample of interviews included 26 professionals.

Participants were located in the following cities: Austin, Boston, Kansas City, Los Angeles, New York City, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Seattle, and Washington D.C. Participant recruitment focused on agency professionals with the title of account supervisor or above. The final research pool included: 2 principal/executive vice presidents, 4 senior vice presidents, 3 vice presidents, 2 managing directors, 6 directors, 3 senior managers, and 6 account supervisors. Participants specialized in areas such as social media, digital strategy, social content and emerging media, and had an average of 14.3 years of experience (ranging from 4 to 44 years), with the average participant age approximately 36.7 (ranging from 26 to 63 years old). Sixteen respondents were married, five were single, three were in a relationship, and two did not indicate a relationship status. Fourteen respondents had children (some grown), ten did not, and two did not elect to answer this question.

After the recorded phone interviews were transcribed, the researchers analyzed the data using an open and axial qualitative coding technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Common themes among the responses were identified, as well as noteworthy anecdotal evidence and quoted

comments. These various themes and illustrative points have been organized to correspond with the relevant research question from above, and are presented in the following section.

Key Findings

RQ1: How has social media impacted the nature and volume of PR practitioners' job responsibilities over the past five years?

Interviewed practitioners expressed mixed opinions related to social media responsibilities and its impact on their individual careers and personal lives, and the broader public relations industry. All participants agreed the rise of social media dramatically altered agency practice and client expectations. Most said client work related to social media and dynamic online content created clashes between time demanded by work and personal responsibilities. Some reported significant stress related to agency social media roles spilling over into non-work hours. Others reported tensions between behaviors required at work versus behavior expected in non-work settings. The broader influence of social media on the field, however, cannot be overstated, as one participant wrote:

Social media has had a more profound impact on public relations than the introduction of the forward pass in football. While the core tenets are the same, strategy and tactics have shifted significantly. This has been the greatest seismic shift since the rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s.

Speed and Increased Workload

Many discussed the speed that social media work requires, describing an *accelerated* process of the job — and that it created a need to always be “on” and available for work or to respond immediately to client-related issues. Professionals described their social media work as being a 24/7 responsibility that increased their workload and service expectations in recent years. One participant noted, “PR has always been a ‘never sleeps’ kind of profession, but I think this has been accelerated by digital/social. There are now so many more opportunities for consumer interaction that oftentimes you find yourself faced with more work than in the past.” Another lamented that responsibility for managing clients’ social media communities made it “impossible to ever be ‘off’ on the nights or weekends.” He continued by noting that, “while you can schedule posts on some platforms, you need to manually publish on other platforms. If you manage a social community, you’ll always have to check the channels each day and respond to new comments.”

One interviewee noted that while she has never viewed PR as “a 9-5 job,” she felt social media work for clients has impacted industry norms. She described the dynamic as a “catch-22” scenario:

I think the demands have grown. The level of service and the amount of results has increased because people are working all the time, so I think it's kind of a catch-22. You're working more so clients expect more.

Client expectations for timely response to issues on social media were frequently discussed by participants. Others noted that the “working from anywhere” concept was both a “good and bad thing,” and that while it provided obvious flexibility there was also “an expectation... that we’re reachable at all hours.” One interviewee stressed that it wasn’t always clients who were demanding off-hours responses to crises, but sometimes the push came from agency colleagues to respond to a social media situation or capitalize on an online opportunity. Explaining this notion, he said: “I think from a communication standpoint, issues and crises do emerge at all hours — as do opportunities for that matter.” Another participant described the significant impact social media responsibilities had on her work, writing that while it had made connecting directly with consumers easier, it had simultaneously created personal challenges: “It is also challenging since PR/communications is now a 24/7 job and the lines between ‘at work’ vs. ‘off work’ are blurred, and perhaps, do not exist anymore.” Many of the interviewees shared the perspective that overall, social media responsibilities had served to expand client expectations for agency employees — and caused a shift in industry norms and boundaries related to increased client requests during off-hours, weekends and holidays.

Constant Need to Keep Up

Many participants reported a constant challenge related to the need to “keep up” with new changes in social media platforms and digital technologies, and the desire to be viewed as an expert resource for clients. Describing this challenge, one professional stressed:

This means it’s always a struggle to keep up with the latest platform or constantly changing landscape. Even if you aren’t using a channel personally, you need to know enough about it and how your target audience may be using it to sound intelligent and show expertise within the space to internal and external audiences.

Although keeping pace with changes in technology has always been a factor in public relations, recent growth of social media platforms and other digital tools has presented a daunting challenge for industry professionals. As clients have moved to adopt communication strategies utilizing sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, agency professionals have had to scramble to stay current on each site’s unique offerings and evolving user policies. With the growing importance of platforms including YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, Tumblr and Snapchat, managing a client’s social media strategy — and juggling content contributions and user interactions occurring on numerous sites — can quickly become overwhelming. Although many agencies have adopted tools to schedule and manage client posts across multiple platforms, the process is still often messy and cumbersome. While helping to streamline the day-to-day process, content management tools don’t necessarily help practitioners anticipate what’s next in social media or know how to leverage a new tool or platform into client opportunities.

Maintaining a Personal Brand

Multiple participants noted that a significant part of their professional role as PR practitioners focused on social media and digital client responsibilities related to the time and effort they needed to devote to maintaining their own *personal* brand, as experts within the sphere. One participant explained this constant pressure:

There is an expectation that a social expert should understand how to be a social influencer, a blogger, a visual influencer, on every channel (with a handle that ties back to your own personal branding). That's a great deal of time outside of work that must be devoted to staying on top of the social world.

Another interviewee argued the need to maintain an impeccable personal social media footprint was part of her job: "I think that becomes all the more critical that you spent some real time considering and even manicuring your own personal social presence as part of your professional presence." Another more senior-level practitioner described the challenge (and "burden") of balancing professional and family responsibilities while finding time to maintain a significant social media presence:

I think that is an expectation for people who are leaders in digital and social media strategy is that they themselves are very visible and vocal within those [social] environments. I've definitely struggled since having kids because, are you going to take an hour that night to write a new blog post or are you going to take that hour to play with your children or help them work on their writing? Those are really what the decisions come down to....

Clearly many public relations professionals view their personal activity on social media as part of the job, integral to a career in the digital space.

Decreased Use of Personal Social Media?

Immersed in social media duties for their clients, many public relations professionals, it seems, are enjoying the same platforms less in their personal lives. Multiple study participants noted their professional roles working in the realm of social media for clients had led to a *decrease* in their own personal use of social media for pleasure or entertainment. One respondent said, "I recently stopped looking at social media when I am not at work. This is helping me not fatigue as much." In a similar vein, another participant reflected on the separation they kept between client and professional social media activity and their personal family life:

I'm so busy engaged in social on behalf of clients that I don't necessarily... that's not necessarily the first place I'm going to form my life away from work... I'm so immersed in it all day long professionally that when it comes to my own time my first reaction isn't to share everything I'm doing and everything my family's doing with everybody on the Internet. I like having parts of my life for me.

The same participant, who mentioned he was 38 years old, noted that the dynamic might be somewhat generational, in that his younger colleagues who were "digital natives" likely found spending personal time on social media to be more natural and enjoyable. However, interviews revealed it wasn't uncommon for PR professionals who focused their professional lives around social media to move away from those same platforms in their personal worlds. One participant described her drift away from personal social media as being linked to a feeling of anxiety:

It's interesting because I used to use social media for fun and now I really only use it for work. When updating Facebook and Twitter became my job, I noticed I didn't do it as

much for personal use anymore. It adds a little bit of anxiety to my life because I feel responsible for monitoring and responding as often as possible.

Unique Challenges for Junior Employees

Several respondents reported on age dynamics related to social media roles, responsibilities, and perceived expertise within agency settings. Specialized social media skills were viewed as a career booster especially for early-career practitioners. However, participants reported that social media responsibilities left younger professionals in more menial tactical roles or that the real-time, quick-response nature of social media work often put junior professionals in difficult and high-stakes communication situations, or involved with client-related messaging judgments they were either under-qualified or unauthorized to make. Multiple interviewees described this situation as both unfair to junior employees and detrimental to client relationships, when mistakes were made by those colleagues.

Describing some of her younger colleagues as “hot shot social media people,” another interviewee stressed the importance of mentorship, and finding a balance between providing guidance and instruction and professional autonomy for junior colleagues tasked with social media responsibilities:

... People are super eager and they have all these ideas and they're coming straight from college where they probably know a lot more about social media. It's changing every single day and they're sort of on the forefront of that. You don't want to put out their enthusiasm but you also want to be able to reign them in and make them understand a sort of holistic view of what's happening.

Although none of the agency professionals interviewed for this study were themselves junior employees, several participants talked about the stress and workload issues their younger colleagues faced related to their client social media responsibilities, with accounts of an “always working” mentality often leading to anxiety, job dissatisfaction and burnout for junior staff. One participant reported that junior colleagues in her firm were “probably expected to be kind of more present and accessible maybe than senior folks” within the company. Continuing on, the interviewee reflected that she had navigated a similar dynamic of long work hours when she was a younger agency professional and before she had had children: “Whether or not people expected it of me, I was there every day late.”

Another participant noted that while her company was good about understanding the need for parents to leave the office at night in order to get home for evening childcare responsibilities, this often created a uniquely challenging dynamic for the younger, more junior-level employees that these practitioners managed. In one example, a supervisor would typically be offline between 5:00 and 9:00 p.m. while she was picking-up, feeding, and caring for her children, but once her children had gone to bed she would regularly be online working again and sending emails between 9:00 p.m. and well-past midnight. The more junior employees who she supervised often stayed at the office working on client issues until 7:00 or 8:00 p.m., only to feel compelled to work again once they got home at night, in order to respond to new messages and questions about client issues until their boss went to sleep.

RQ2: How have social media management responsibilities impacted professionals' career satisfaction?

Overall, most professionals interviewed reported strong career satisfaction and general enjoyment of their social media responsibilities. Some respondents reported reasonable balance between client and personal responsibilities, while others expressed frustrations toward how social media work altered their jobs and personal relationships. Others derided the very notion of balance and argued there was no need for, or realistic solution to even allow, a separation between their agency work and personal worlds. Several interviewees spoke of social media as having opened up opportunities for doing more interesting and creative public relations work, and noted their enjoyment in having direct interaction with consumers. Others were more circumspect, noting that long, unpredictable hours related to social media were unavoidable in their agency roles; in fact, several participants argued that, to be successful, today's PR professionals needed to accept and embrace this reality. While several participants seemed to lament the personal sacrifices they were making for their careers, others acknowledged they worked almost constantly, but the problem was that they "loved their work."

Opportunities for Interesting and Creative Work, Connections to Consumers

Multiple participants stressed that social media work for clients kept their jobs interesting and generated creative opportunities. Reflecting on how social media had altered their job responsibilities, one respondent described how their work had become more engaging:

The corporate adoption of social media and increased focus on all of digital in recent years has meant many more chances to focus on that direct connection with people beyond just clients and the media. This change has allowed me to pitch many more creative campaigns that tap into customer motivations. As a result, I've been able to step into an evolving career that more closely aligns with subjects that I find compelling.

Participants noted the inherent challenge to work-life balance for most marketing, PR and social media professionals who engage with customers or online media situations in real-time. Others talked about how much they enjoyed the complexity and challenges that social media had brought to their jobs. Many expressed that handling clients' social media strategy kept their jobs fun, new and interesting.

Constant Work as Personal Identity — Rewarding and a "Badge of Honor"

Many of those interviewed expressed acceptance that their profession, and client responsibilities required them to be online and available constantly. A common theme among participants was a passion for their work, and — aligned with findings in previous literature — many interviewees seemed to wear their heavy workload as a "badge of honor" within the profession. Extreme hours were often noted to be integral to their professional and personal identities. Many indicated it was "part of the job" and that those who couldn't handle it should find another path. One person said, "I am connected at all times, even on holidays and on vacation. While this may not sound ideal, the trick is to find an organization, a team and clients who make this kind of stress fulfilling." Another interviewee noted that the expectations for their time wasn't something they could "entirely control" and described their personal acceptance of their professional role within the agency: "Part of my career track and leadership responsibilities

require that I am on call and plugged in, so I stay connected whenever possible.” Many participants conveyed that they didn’t mind the fact that client work frequently took over their personal time, and described the work they did as enjoyable and fulfilling.

Balance as a Myth, Sacrifice of Personal Time and Potential for Burnout

Multiple interviewees described the concept of “work-life balance” as an antiquated idea, or an unachievable “myth” in today’s profession. However, conversations with participants also often involved discussions of the negative aspects of their work schedules and significant compromises made for clients and careers. One interviewee described this dynamic:

I believe “balance” in the 21st century is a myth—especially if you are working in an urban, technologically advanced career. We are all required to work more just to keep up and get your workload done. At some point, you will have to give up other areas of your life: keeping a clean house, going to the gym, keeping up with friends/family, going to your child’s sporting events. It’s just up to you to prioritize accordingly. It seems like we work, then we figure out everything else around it.

Other participants acknowledged the long hours they and their colleagues spent on social media and public relations occasionally resulted in extreme stress and burnout. One interviewee recounted the story of a friend in her agency who had recently gone through a breakdown due to work stress, musing that “you have to know your limits” and if you’re not careful, “the mental will spill over into the physical, and that is when it becomes a problem.” Many interviewees discussed the potential for burnout within their profession, with some expressing frustration and anger toward the unrealistic expectations of many within the industry.

One participant stressed that public relations and social media roles shouldn’t mean employees are always on duty — and that agencies expecting that from their staff should be avoided:

No job should expect you to be “on” 24/7 unless you’re a doctor – which clearly you’re not. We’re not curing cancer. No one will die if we don’t answer an email until 9:00 a.m. the next day. Any job that makes you feel that way doesn’t value you as a person. RUN.

One person said they thought “the model” for handling client social media duties was still evolving, and that workload issues for agency professionals would improve in the future: “Jobs in social media still often require extended hours and put a strain on employees in those roles. I expect to see social media staffing models updated over the coming years to better alleviate some of those all-too-common, associated negative effects.” Other participants, however, stressed the long work hours faced by many in public relations was part of “paying your dues” and that with seniority and success came an improved schedule and better flexibility. Arguing this point, one person said:

I am not convinced that there are regulated solutions to burnout or life balance. Each person is different, and each work environment is different. Outside of reporting broken laws, you simply need to do good work. With that comes the negotiation power for flexible schedules, more pay, and solutions for a better overall career path.

This sentiment was expressed by another participant who wrote, “Seeing technology as a vice and the always-on social media world as something negative we wish would change isn’t a profitable use of time, energy or resources.”

One participant argued agency workload issues were linked to clients not fully understanding the need to allocate budget and invest more in their digital and social strategies:

More staff on digital accounts (and thus additional budget) is necessary to keep burnout from happening. Social media isn’t “free”—it takes a lot of time and resources to develop the content and monitor the channels. Until clients are able to see the value of investing in social media and willing to pull back funds from traditional programs, the digital accounts won’t be staffed properly.

Clearly the interviews showed a wide range of perspectives about the issue of workload and burnout among participants, and a related spectrum in perceptions of career satisfaction. The public relations industry is still adapting to both the requirements of social media management practice, and quickly evolving client expectations for service.

Challenges of Family Dynamics

Consistent with previous literature exploring the role of gender in navigating work-life balance challenges, including several studies showing a higher percentage of women than men have major or sole caring responsibilities (for children or aging parents), increasing the degree of work-life conflict they experience (Perrons, 2003; Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, & Sha, 2008), interviews with female respondents reported heightened challenges in balancing home and family responsibilities with their agency roles and client expectations. The unique challenges for women public relations professionals related to the 24/7 nature of social media harbor important implications for the field, considering nearly 80 percent of today’s industry is comprised of women (Pietryla, 2013). Several participants noted workload and schedule expectations in their agency shifted depending on the seniority of staff, and often whether or not they had family and child care responsibilities. One person said: “Specifically when it comes to moms, my company does a good job of being flexible for them. Many will work reduced hours or are given free time away from the office to attend to children’s needs.”

Multiple interviewees indicated that earlier in their careers, they had often spent long hours in the office to impress senior staff and make sure their work was done well. Over email, one participant wrote: “Early in my career I was always there. Wanted to do good work. Eager to make progress in career. No other responsibilities.” Several participants described how senior staff in their agency were afforded more schedule flexibility, but junior staff was expected to be “always on” for client needs. One interviewee said she thought work life balance was generally more challenging for junior staff because they were “expected to be more present and accessible than senior folks” and that finding a balance was probably toughest for the more junior-level staff who also had kids. In response to an emailed interview question, the person wrote, “I think the people who struggle the most...[are] earlier in career who have kids... you’re in a bit of a pickle. Expectation that you’re available, working, but you have a 1-year-old at home... tough position.” Multiple participants described a trend they saw within the broader field of communication and marketing of professionals deciding to delay having families (i.e., getting married, having children) because of the extreme time demands early in their careers. Other

participants reported they believed their career advancement had suffered due to the schedule choices they had made while raising children. One interviewee, the mother of two, wrote:

I always felt that I most likely was not promoted as quickly or obtained as high a promotion, because I made sure that I didn't work 24/7.

The challenges of juggling family and agency responsibilities were not limited to women, as several male participants described how they worked to balance the two. One interviewee said: "Like any parent today, I struggle with giving my kids the one-on-one attention they deserve while staying in tune with what's happening in the world that may be affecting my clients on nights and weekends." Another participant who had recently become a father noted that he felt supported by his employer related to work-life balance, but also acknowledged "the web doesn't turn off" and his job would always require long hours:

I'm a new dad, so work-life balance is critically important to me. So far, I've always felt supported in my needs in this arena. One thing to consider from the beginning is that choosing a life in digital – especially for an agency – means that you will always work more than 40 hours per week. This isn't mandated, but the web doesn't turn off. There's always something to do. I'm satisfied with my ability to unplug, and a lot of that has to do with setting expectations with coworkers and friends/family about your work schedule and style.

Both male and female participants described generally positive levels of career satisfaction in their agency roles as digital and social media strategists, while also admitting their jobs often impacted time with family. One participant, the father of three children under the age of 9, praised the progressive work-life policies of his agency, which included flexible work schedules, summer days off, and working from home options, but also noted the impact his career had on his family: "I travel a significant amount throughout the year and depending on my schedule, and regardless of these policies, my family is certainly impacted by my time away and the responsibilities I have in leadership at my firm." While the dynamics described above certainly aren't solely linked to the advent of digital and social media practice, the professionals interviewed overwhelmingly indicated a reality of demanding time and workload challenges, especially for parents within the agency world.

RQ3: What strategies are agencies using to help employees respond to the 24/7 nature of social media?

Most respondents reported their agency was relatively good, to very good, at allowing flexible work schedules and providing strategies to cope with clients' 24/7 expectations. Unanticipated fire drills and occasional crisis scenarios on social media were often discussed, with frequent reports that internal agency team strategies, processes and protocols had been developed to respond to such situations, which often occurred at night, on weekends, or outside of business hours. Most participants discussed shared responsibility systems and team scheduling techniques to address social media work occurring during off-hours or while colleagues were on

vacation. While monitoring and management services were often used for day-to-day social media efforts, respondents also discussed escalation protocols used among team members to alert senior staff of concerning content.

Agency Culture Viewed as Key to Balance

Many of those interviewed believed the key to work-life balance in an agency environment was linked to the organization's culture and the ability of staff to communicate transparently with management about workloads and schedules. Several participants spoke glowingly of their employers' support for balance:

The company I work for is one of the best I've ever seen for work-life balance. We are given a good amount of vacation days, flexible working options and many other great benefits. From the top-down, the motto really is to do great work and then go live your life. We work really hard and definitely have days (weeks) where we work long hours, but the company also does a good job of organizing activities, allowing people to work from home and letting us take off early after a week of long hours. The work is also really enjoyable and the people are fun, so it doesn't always feel like work even when we're billing 50+ hour weeks.

Not surprisingly, many interviewees stressed that communication was key to navigating workload issues. Describing her success in communicating workload concerns, one person said: "The biggest thing I've found is communicating effectively with my managers about my own workload and capacity. No one is going to take work off your plate unless you say, 'I won't be able to get that done,' or 'I'm working too much this quarter and want to avoid this happening again.'" Several participants noted well-run agency organizations were proactive in listening to, and making staffing changes based on, employees' concerns about workload issues. One senior vice president at a large agency stressed the importance that managers are proactive in this area, writing: "While there is a tension between work-life balance, there needs to be one, and it is incumbent on managers to remind folks they CAN disconnect."

Managing Expectations and Setting Parameters with Clients

Another theme that emerged was the need for agency leadership to manage client expectations, especially in regard to response times for digital campaigns and issues arising on social media during off-hours, weekends and holidays. Although software tools (for scheduling and monitoring social media posts, etc.) were mentioned by many participants, most also acknowledged that digital and social client work frequently required fast response times and off-hours management by agency staff, especially if linked to a potential "crisis" scenario for the brand. Several interviewees discussed how they worked with clients to understand that not everything occurring online or on social media was a crisis or needed to be addressed immediately — and that expectations for agency response times needed to be set and agreed upon in advance:

We establish guidelines with all of our clients on response time. Normally we respond on social media within 24 hours unless it's a crisis, then we respond within the hour. We have different monitoring tools set up and various people who check in at different times.

We work with our client to ensure they feel comfortable but understand we may not respond to something at 1:00 a.m. We have protocol set up for which type of situations need immediate response and which can wait until Monday morning.

Many interviewees described similar protocols or escalation policies to navigate online issues in real-time, and know when to consult more senior-level executives from the agency or client side on content or response decisions. Multiple participants, however, also discussed the challenge agency staff faced when contacted by an anxious client concerned about an online issue over the weekend or in the middle of the night. One person wrote, "...the challenge gets to be when you have clients that expect you to be available for 2 a.m. conference calls regularly." Another stressed that agencies needed to "set boundaries and mean them" when it came to minimizing off-hours client services.

Work-Life Balance as Individual Employee Responsibility

Reflecting on work-life balance, multiple interview participants conveyed that they viewed the issue as largely one of personal responsibility, in that public relations agencies were environments in which employees needed to be able to manage their own time and communicate with superiors if their work schedules were unsustainable. One person described this as a "skill set that's super important," and stressed, "If you can't manage your time, then it's going to be a big problem when you get into this field." One participant closely echoed this sentiment, noting that agency managers often aren't aware of everything that more junior-level staff have assigned to them:

Work-life balance is what you make of it. It's what you allow it to be. When you are just starting out, you may feel like you never have any free time. Some people may tell you that's just life. But I would say that what it shows is that you need to improve your time management. Is your boss giving you too much work for each day? Is that because they don't realize everything you have on your plate? Is that because they think some of your tasks should take 15 minutes, but they really take an hour? Analyze that. Talk to them. Nothing will change if you don't speak up.

A different interviewee conveyed that it was the employee's responsibility to "manage up" in regard to workload issues and the need for personal time. However, long hours and late nights were often the default expectation:

Staff members need to be able to have open and honest conversations with their supervisors about their work-life balance and when they have responsibilities outside of the office that they need to take care of. That said, it is very much the expectation now that employees are available 24/7 and would not question being asked to stay late (sometimes quite late) without notice.

Another participant described this dynamic, arguing that employees, especially those tasked with digital and social media client responsibilities, needed to "advocate for themselves" to request things like more pay and better schedules and work-assignments — but that they also

needed to “have the hard work and work ethic behind [them] as ammo” when having that conversation.

The theme of personal responsibility in terms of workload and balance issues came up frequently, often with participants noting that public relations professionals tended to be “passionate” and hard-working individuals, and thus not always able or willing to turn down work or new opportunities. One person put it this way:

If you want balance, you also must learn to say “no” to new projects or opportunities. Whether it’s a speaking engagement, new business or the coolest new product launch, you must be okay with not working on it if you don’t have time. If you are passionate and feel like you can’t pass it up, then know that your work-life balance may suffer as a result.

Although not specifically discussed in interviews, the highly mobile nature of today’s social media platforms — and the reality that client accounts can often relatively easily be managed and updated by agency staff from almost anywhere and at any time (and within employees’ own personal environments, instead of in the workplace, where managers can be more aware of the time spent) — may be increasing and compounding the challenges many public relations staff have always had to navigate related to work life balance.

Importance of Teams, Technology, Shared Work, and Flexible Scheduling

One noteworthy strategy interview participants referenced in discussing how they helped their staff navigate the 24/7 nature of social media was the use of formal teams in sharing work responsibilities and handling clients’ off-hours requests. Many of those interviewed described systems their agency had in place to allow staff to rotate who was responsible for responding to client issues: “As a team, we work out who is ‘on call’ in the evenings and weekends to ensure client issues are covered.” The notion of alternating who on the account team was “on call” came up frequently during interviews. Asked how they approached the issue of constant client needs, one participant wrote: “Whenever possible, being able to develop a support team that allows you to share days and nights of being ‘on call’ will limit the always-on feeling that comes with the 24/7 nature of social media.” Another interviewee talked about how their agency managed clients’ brand communities on social media, and how they used multiple staff from each team to allow employees to have regular down time:

For clients that we do community management for, we staff the team with multiple community managers, and let them decide on shifts to cover nights and weekends. Most consumers don’t expect a response past a reasonable hour (say 10-11 p.m.), which makes this easier. The key is to not make any single person feel like they are always on the clock. We all need time to disconnect.

Several interviewees mentioned a new “team member” of sorts - automated social media monitoring services. For example:

There are tools that help us monitor the news and social channels. These still require “human” involvement and brainpower, but the technology has been helpful to give us options to feel like we have things under control.

The notion of being able to disconnect was frequently described in interviews, often mentioned as a necessity for employees’ mental well-being. (More on this idea is discussed below.)

Job-Sharing and Part-time Employees

Related to the concept of teams, multiple participants mentioned the topic of “job-sharing” within the agency world. Interviewees noted that sometimes such staffing models were adopted by new parents, often mothers, who wanted to stay in their public relations careers but also wanted or needed to split time during the week with their infant children. Overall, those interviewed indicated they felt the job-sharing (or part-time employee) models they had seen in practice were “problematic” and “over-rated.” One participant said she liked the concept, but that agency responsibility “doesn’t work that way” and that despite the arrangements — such as working on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule — clients “still expect you to be available.” One interviewee said she viewed such arrangements as probably not serving client needs well, while also likely to frustrate the employee, who was likely to end up receiving “part-time pay” for what would still often amount to “full time work.” Instead of formal job-sharing and part-time employee arrangements, participants described success with working from home one or two days per week, allowing for better balance with personal and family responsibilities. Some agencies had informal policies, or arrangements with individual employees, allowing staff to occasionally work and handle client duties from home. However, participants also expressed concerns about being perceived as using such privileges too frequently — and a belief in the importance of “facetime” and being seen in the office in order to maintain their standing with managers.

The Essentiality of Vacations and Completely Unplugging

Closely linked to the strategy of utilizing teams for managing clients’ digital and social media workloads, nearly all respondents referenced the importance of being allowed to take vacations during which they fully unplugged and disconnected from account responsibilities. Frequently participants talked about the need for vacation time within the context of avoiding burnout. One interviewee said, “We have an informal rule on a team that I lead that is something like, ‘We are on-call 24/7/365 except vacation. Vacation is for unplugging.’” Another participant described how junior staff in particular needed the ability to fully disconnect during vacation days, to prevent them from burning out:

[Burnout] is a tricky issue when expecting a 24/7 work commitment. With my own team, I stress the importance of junior staff being able to disconnect when they're taking PTO. We have to respect some kind of boundary still, and it's not appropriate to demand people at that level never have a way to get away.

The notion of occasionally having the opportunity to *completely* disconnect from agency and client responsibilities was described by several participants as an essential strategy for

coping with the 24/7 nature of their jobs. One participant described having placed his cell phone in a safe while on vacation in order to ensure he was disconnected:

As far as avoiding burnout, I fully embrace working seven days a week, always checking email (even on holidays) and maintaining a significant number of social media channels and blogs. That's what it takes to not only keep up, but to lead, in this space. Then twice a year I unplug all of my devices for at least a week and communicate my absence to colleagues and clients. The last two years I have literally put my phone in a safe. During that unplugged time, I spend time outdoors and with my family, and I read books. Lots of books.

Other interviewees described longer periods of vacation time, one recounting a recent two and a half week trip to Africa, and stressed that they had used the days away from client work to “completely shut down” and rejuvenate. One participant noted that fully disconnecting in this way was hard in that “it puts a lot of pressure on your colleagues because they have to pick up the slack in your absence,” but that it was possible if you “staff a team right.” One person described the extensive level of preparation required in her agency for taking vacations:

...whoever leaves makes sure to prepare vacation notes which outline everything they are working on and what the next steps are, and every team, at my company at least, does that so that the person (who) covers for them is completely in the loop about everything.

While only one participant described a strategy as extreme as locking a phone into a safe, most interviewees conveyed that periodic vacation time was a necessity. In between vacations, other interviewees stressed the need for individuals to manage their own needs for time off — but to also recognize and accept that their client responsibilities in digital and social media weren't likely to ever slow down. Describing this dynamic, one participant declared:

...I would arm every strategic communicator with a laptop, a cell phone and a wi-fi card and say, “These are tools you need to do your job 24/7. But if you take vacation, turn them off. Meanwhile, if you need a personal day or to tend to family issues throughout the week, leave the office with no questions asked. Just know you're on-call. Because nothing will stop just because you want it to stop.”

Professional Acceptance, Satisfaction, and Embracing the “Work-Life Pendulum”

Many participants described themselves as generally satisfied with their own current work-life balance, yet still emphasized the often demanding nature of their jobs:

...the first thing I do in the morning before I get out of bed is check my iPhone and it is the last thing (other than my wife) I look at when I go to bed...Overall I am fine with the balance, the challenge gets to be when you have clients that expect you to be available for 2 a.m. conference calls regularly.”

Professionals mentioned several of the strategies described above to help achieve greater work-life satisfaction, often citing gained seniority and the support of teams:

My personal work-life balance is pretty okay right now! I am close to 40-45 hours per week with higher spikes when I travel or have a bigger activation/meeting. This shifted when I became an account director with more supported teams – previously as an SAE or AS [Senior Account Executive or Account Supervisor], it was much harder to achieve that kind of balance because I was managing and managing up and executing the work. I think this is pretty common, based on what I see and hear from SAE/AS team members.

Our agency has decided to rename this [work-life balance] concept the “work/life pendulum.” Some days, you need to prioritize family, friends or a personal commitment. Some days you are going to have to work late for a client, to participate in an industry event or pursue a new business opportunity. At our agency, we find ways to support each other’s “pendulum priorities” each day. We cover each other.

Being able to ensure down time, or at least occasional relaxed periods (without using formal vacation time), frequently emerged as key to the work-life mix. For some, it meant not having to constantly check email after work hours and/or on weekends, while for others it meant maintaining an overall degree of normalcy between occasional periods of intensity or crisis-level work. Having flexibility, autonomy and control over one’s schedule also was frequently mentioned as a source of increased satisfaction with achieving some degree of work-life “balance.”

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings provide nuanced insight into a particular phenomenon and are reflective of those who participated — but cannot necessarily be viewed as representative of the entire industry or profession. It should be noted that this study relied upon a relatively small, but high-quality pool of participants. Those practitioners able to take the time to respond to interview questions on work-life balance issues, and willing to discuss their strategies for navigating these personal and professional challenges, indeed may be somewhat distinct from a true cross-section of their industry peers. However this study also achieved strong participation levels among those invited to contribute, and involved a reasonable number of respondents and a diverse representation of professionals from different types and sizes of agency environments. Further, the themes that repeatedly emerged from interviews were robust and often strikingly similar among participants.

The focus for this study centered on the experiences and perspectives of public relations agency professionals who manage clients’ digital and social media strategies. While interview conversations and correspondence for this research emphasized work-life balance within, and from, this professional context, the researchers acknowledge many of the topics and findings presented here are not necessarily unique to those employees tasked with social media and digital responsibilities, or even the broader range of strategic communication practitioners. The challenge of work-life balance, and how technology in recent decades has dramatically impacted professionals’ ability to navigate the combination of career and personal obligations, is certainly a topic of concern across a broad range of industries.

Findings from this study aligned with much of the existing public relations literature on work-life balance; in particular, the early work by Aldoory and colleagues (2008), which found

industry professionals often do not view their work and personal lives as separate, but instead perceive the two realms as necessarily integrated. In a related vein, many participants in this research also conveyed sentiments demonstrating their personal identities were tied to their careers in public relations and the demanding work schedules their agency roles required. Certainly, the “workaholic” behavior identified in interview-based research by Place and Vardeman-Winter (2013) was evident among many of this study’s participants, yet others indicated this pace was not sustainable long-term, and seemed to be finding ways to attend to the “life” side of the work-life equation. The research presented also resonates with findings from Jiang, Luo and Kulemeka (2017), which examined connections between stress and workload and public relations professionals’ social media usage.

As others have concluded, the issue of work-life balance may ultimately be one of cultural norms — and what is viewed as reasonable or acceptable by employees and management. Both management consultant industry experts and public relations scholars alike have recently stressed that the notion of “balance” may not be an achievable or overly productive goal for most organizations or individuals, and that instead the objective of personal employee flexibility and striving for “work-life fit” is more optimal (Dominus, 2016; Dozier, Shen, Sisco, & Vardeman-Winter, 2017). Inspiration for this particular research was rooted in anecdotal evidence and vivid descriptions in recent years from industry contacts, which led the researchers to become interested in the unique challenges of, and specific expectations being put upon, public relations agency professionals tasked with managing a relatively new client offering (i.e., social media and digital services). This study’s findings on the importance of sharing the workload among team members did show some similarities with the “Predictable Time Off” model, referenced earlier in the description of Perlow’s research (Perlow, 2012; Perlow & Kelly, 2014) on scheduling solutions within the management consultant field. However, it may be that the nature of public relations work itself (i.e., unpredictable, and often crisis responsive or avoidant) combined with ingrained agency culture and traditional client account service expectations (often managed through small and semi-autonomous teams that may have differing work-life norms and expectations), means the challenge of social media and digital public relations may lend itself poorly to schedule-based solutions.

Future research in this realm could explore work-life issues in other contexts, such as corporate, non-profit and independent practitioner settings. It is a common perception – as mentioned by an interviewee in this study – that agency employees often switch to corporate settings to gain a better work-life fit, yet anecdotal evidence has indicated some public relations professionals have found themselves to be busier after transitioning into corporate positions than they had been in their previous agency roles. Similarly, one motivation for becoming an independent practitioner is often greater work-life flexibility, yet this yields less opportunity for the strategy of sharing workload among team members – as may also be the case for those in smaller non-profit organizations. Additionally, future research should further examine work-life issues among early-career professionals, specifically, and what impact these challenges may be having on retention and long-term career success in the field – given the number of professionals in this study who noted that junior employees may be bearing the brunt of the day-to-day stress of the rapid pace of public relations in a digital and social media world.

Practical Takeaways for the Profession

Agency Culture and Communication with Clients

In considering factors such as agency culture, the need to manage the expectations of clients in regard to social media services (and response times, etc.), and the discussion of work-life balance as being an issue of individual responsibility, this research highlights the need for top agency leadership and day-to-day account staff alike to step back and assess the current environment and professional norms within their workplace. Ultimately, as with so many issues, the solution may come down to one of better and more intentional communication. Pointing to the need for improved internal (within the agency) and external (with the client) dialog, one interviewee acknowledged how senior agency leadership are frequently “swamped” themselves, and may not always realize the negative impact client work is having on their overworked staff. Agency leaders need to make sure they are prioritizing these conversations, and fostering regular two-way dialog, with both clients and internal teams, to ensure that client-agency relationships and staffing practices are both reasonable and sustainable.

Special Concern for Junior-Level Staff

When it comes to tensions between agency management and account staff, the reality is that the issue of work-life balance is one of both shared culpability and shared responsibility — and of which staff at all levels can work to address and improve. A noteworthy finding from this research points to the unique challenges facing younger professionals working within the industry. Certainly there has always been a “paying of dues” element within many public relations agency environments, and some offices have likely fostered (or at least allowed) cultures where working extremely long hours was viewed as a point of pride. Findings from this study suggested, however, many younger and more junior agency professionals — perhaps linked to a combination of their lack of seniority, drive to impress superiors, and the unique nature of their social media focused duties — are being disproportionately impacted by the past decade’s shift in technology and agency work-life balance dynamics. Conversations indicated a frequent disconnect between senior agency managers and their more junior staff, especially related to assumptions or expectations that junior staff feel able and empowered to request time off and reduced work-loads. Agency managers, especially at the client team level, should make sure they are scheduling regular discussions with junior employees to gauge morale, workloads and the effectiveness of staffing models.

“Don’t Operate in a Vacuum”: The Responsibility of Each Employee

As multiple interviewees described it, work life balance is something they were “always working on and always thinking about.” A common theme among participants was the need to proactively communicate and alert colleagues when workload expectations became overwhelming. Noting the frequent situations they had navigated attempting to balance work and personal life, one participant stated, “It took me many years to learn how to manage my work life balance. The problem is that I love my work.” These sentiments were common and are perhaps key to understanding this topic, specific to the nature of agency life and public relations. The industry seems to attract very hard-working, ambitious and driven professionals. While essential to helping drive the success of an agency, these same attributes can inhibit employees’ willingness to ask for help or admit they are burned-out and overwhelmed, or take time off to allow for recharging. The notion of “managing up” was frequently cited by interviewees as being

a key to reasonable work load assignments and agency team dynamics. Similarly, multiple participants noted the importance that more senior-level staff should lead by example in regard to things like communicating workload concerns, taking vacation time and disconnecting away from the office. As one agency vice president put it, “It is incumbent on managers to model the appropriate behavior, for staff do as they do.”

Industry Awareness and Education, and Dedication to Improving Work-Life Balance

Academic research and industry associations alike have drawn attention to the topic of work-life balance within the field of public relations. Continued research and development of resources is needed to help professionals identify and better navigate work-life balance challenges within their careers. Similarly, education efforts starting at the university level and continuing through to mid-career development, and training initiatives for communication professionals within agency and corporate environments, should focus attention on work-life balance within the industry and assist students and professionals with time management and internal communications skills. Leaders in the field can also work to promote an industry-wide conversation regarding work-life balance and the personal needs of professionals working in a 24/7 digital environment. Especially as agencies are striving to compete in a more and more dynamic and competitive marketplace, and hoping to recruit and retain top talent, the experience and well-being of those who drive its success deserve our continued attention.

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