The Optimal Workplace: Organizational and Managerial Structures
Supporting Individual Role Quality in the Workplace

A Thesis

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By
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Jenifer Dawn Rodenbush, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology, has presented a thesis titled, *The Optimal Workplace: Organizational and Managerial Structures Supporting Individual Role Quality in the Workplace*, in an oral examination held on December 14, 2011. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

**Rationale:** The purpose of this thesis is to examine employee perceptions and experiences in order to understand which attributes support the creation and maintenance of an optimal work culture.

**Aim:** The thesis is driven by three areas of inquiry: an individual’s perception of workplace quality and optimality; organizational and managerial attributes contributing to quality workplaces; and techniques applied in a workplace to achieve an optimal workplace culture and employee experience.

**Methodology:** This investigation is situated under the rubric of the Interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the ‘lived experiences’ from the point of view of those who live it day to day as reality is socially and experientially based, local and specific. In line with this approach, qualitative methodology is used to address the research questions. The qualitative data used within this thesis are collected from four focus groups (n=11). Focus group interviews are conducted to collect original data about workplace managerial structures. The purpose is to add in-depth perspective to a small but growing collection of work in this area. The intent is not to generalize individual experiences, but to understand how a group of Saskatchewan government workers perceive the workplace and define what constitutes an optimal workplace. The data were analyzed using a grounded theory method. Lines of the transcription are sorted by thematic experiences, which are confirmed by empirical data to link individual experiences to relevant workplace issues.
Discussion: Results show that personal growth, flexibility and autonomy, social networking, and managerial support, are the factors most sought after in a workplace. The focus group data indicates that individuals who have elevated levels of quality and satisfaction within their work role report more positive experiences in the workplace.

Conclusion: Focus group participants discussed their workplace experiences and described how the organizational structure and management style of supervisors affected their perceived work culture. From the findings, interpersonal relationships with managers and peers were the most common source of support for individuals, followed by policies that promoted flexible environments and autonomy. Thus, it was determined that a workplace supporting individual efforts to balance work roles and obligations provides individuals with an advantage in maintaining work and personal role quality, and creating a sense of optimality at work.

Keywords: Work and life roles; optimal workplace; role quality; support; managerial and organizational structures; balance; well-being; networking; and satisfaction.
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This thesis has confirmed my personal belief that the workplace provides much more than a living for individuals. This environment has the capacity to foster both positive and negative conditions reaching employees on personal and professional levels – and it is the positive attributes on which I focus this research.

It was an honour to have Dr. Rozzet Jurdi as my supervisor. Through Dr. Jurdi’s steadfast support and guidance, I was able to finalize a thesis to be proud of. In addition, I was fortunate to have been introduced to role quality and health issues by Dr. Bonnie Jeffery, who hired me upon completion of my bachelor’s degree to work for Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit (SPHERU). Moreover, Dr. Murray Knuttila helped to identify the fundamental and underlying realities of the workplace that can either help or hinder individuals, depending on their perception of the work environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Setting the Tone

Workplaces are a popular topic for individual discussions and corporate and academic research. They are venues for camaraderie and teamwork as well as stress and frustration. Many individuals view their workplace as an opportunity for career and skill development, challenging and unfettered learning, and broad-sweeping professional experiences. In the workplace, people feed their social networks and skilfully develop relationships to bolster corporate and personal goals. Not to mention the added benefit of compensation to maintain a desired lifestyle and support family needs. At the societal level, the altruistic design of work plays a crucial role in enhancing communities and developing individual bonds.

The work culture itself is often difficult to assess and quantify because of its subtlety. Although work tasks are often patterned and routinized, the atmosphere in a workplace is constantly in flux given employees’ interactions and perceived working conditions. The social nature of a changing work culture cannot be ignored or devalued. Dynamics formed through working relationships may have two outcomes: compromise workplace productivity and effectiveness, or build stronger support networks to facility professional success and greater satisfaction at work.

Structural changes to the workplace culture through modified practices, policies, and transformed management may return positive and negative individual reactions that could potentially change personal dynamics, levels of engagement and fundamentally
shift how work is approached and perceived. This notion presents the question: what do engaged and productive employees consider an optimal workplace to look and feel like?

This thesis discusses current research themes toward creating and maintaining the optimum workplace and demonstrates that employee distress and role conflict can lower productivity and affect employee health. Moreover, as the results of the present investigation will show, work and home roles overlap and the conflict may contribute to employee stress. Employees’ attempts to juggle work and home roles in order to achieve an acceptable balance between the two roles are also discussed in the Results section.

Establishing and maintaining support networks and designing flexible corporate workplace policies and programs can reduce role conflict and balance employee work and home life demands. Quantitative population-based studies can help inform corporate policy-makers and employers about tangible workplace issues, even if they do not aptly portray employee needs and experiences. As such, qualitative research addressing Saskatchewan government workplaces might help to formulate a more complete understanding of work dynamics.

Three areas of inquiry drive this thesis: an individual’s perception of workplace quality and optimality; organizational and managerial attributes that contribute to quality workplaces; and workplace techniques that create an optimal workplace culture and employee experience. That being said, the main goal of this investigation is to examine individual workers’ perception of their job and work environment. I hope to accurately present their perspectives as they relate to the workplace as a shared environment. In addition, this thesis will address perceptions of workplace optimality. In turn, statements given by the study participants will be used to develop an employee-based definition of
an optimal workplace. Under the rubric of the Interpretivist paradigm, this study contributes original qualitative focus group data to the wealth of research already found in published, mostly quantitative-based works addressing workplace experience and culture.

1.2 Setting the Scope: The Workplace Experience

Statistics Canada surveys and analyzes employee data to monitor employment conditions. They do so in order to keep apprised of Canadian workplace issues. General areas of concern are identified in the literature as recurrent contemporary workplace issues: stress and strain in work roles that subsequently impact employee health and well-being, the type of formal and informal supports accessible to employees, and the perceived status of work-life balance as understood by the employee (Korabik, Lero and Whitehead: 2008; Nordenmark: 2004; Warren and Johnson: 1995; Grzywacz, Almeida and McDonald: 2002).

Statistics on mortality and morbidity routinely serve to educate the public on health status rather than the conditions or cultures that may cause ill effects (Macintyre, Ellaway and Cummins: 2002). Since a fair portion of an individual’s time and energy is devoted to a work role, the discussion of how an individual’s environment affects his or her overall health must also focus on the work environment and experience. The common themes in research of this nature are psychosocial work factors measured by scales of job
demands, decision authority, social support, development possibilities, work conditions, health, conflict at work and job insecurity (Lund and Borg: 1999; Dugdill: 2000).

As outlined above, flexibility and wellness initiatives are also commonly reported in literature. Organizations that encourage flexibility are beneficial to both employees and managers because they foster a culture of loyalty, respect for individual diversity, and reaffirm the importance of balance. Lowe (2003: 9) draws attention to the culture surrounding workplace wellness initiatives by outlining two concerns: “the first is narrow focus on individuals’ health-related attitudes and behaviour, often to the exclusion of job, organization and management factors that affect employee health and well-being … [and] the second is that workplace wellness is rarely integrated with other human resource management policies and practices into a comprehensive strategy for enhancing the work environment” (cited in Marshall: 2006). As such, some organizations aim to promote quantifiable, human resource programs and policies that evolve into a desirable workplace culture.

1.3 Work Stress and Job Strain

Stress, as a factor associated with role quality attainment, is generally considered a hindrance to levels of health and well-being (Palmer: 2004; Kivimaki, Feldt, Vahtera and Nurmi: 2000; Fuhrer, Stansfeld, Chemali and Shipley: 1999; Hall: 1992). Work and home role conflicts are frequently dependent on stresses and strains related to balancing

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1 Lund and Borg (1999) interviewed a random sample of 3,320 employees in 1990 and again in 1995 regarding their psychosocial work environment, health and job satisfaction. The male employees with high development possibilities and good self-rated health had positive reports. Female employees had similar work predictors. High development possibilities, good self-rated health, decision authority and social support were the indicators of reduced psychological strain in the workplace.
the roles (Noor: 1996). In this context, stress is described as, “the relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his/her resources, and as endangering his/her well-being” (Noor: 1996: 604).

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (1999) defines work stress as, “the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when job requirements do not match the worker’s capabilities, resources, and needs” (cited in Park: 2007). This stress is a common workplace phenomenon that affects employee physical and mental health². In fact, increased stress in the workplace may lead to unhealthy work habits such as being less productive and increasingly dissatisfied in the work role (Palmer et al: 2004; Park: 2007; Tjepkema: 2005). Statistics Canada Health Report (2001: 21) defines personal stress as work, family and social commitments that create a sense of time pressure and the inability to meet expectations. This form of distress can evolve into feelings of inadequacy and the inability to address the expected—and normal—work and life challenges.

Furthermore, according to the 1994/95 National Population Health Survey (NPHS), several types of work stress relate to health problems. Work stress variables include job demands, work strain, low co-worker support, weak supervisor support, and job insecurity (Health Reports: 2001: 23). Workplace stressors may also carry over to home and social situations, which ultimately compounds one’s stress level (Wilkins and

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² Shields’ (2004) synthesis of various Canadian Community Health Surveys (CCHS) found that an alarming one-quarter of Canadians characterized the level of stress in their lives as “quite stressful” or “extremely stressful” (p. 17). Furthermore, the Mental Health and Well-being cycle of the 1994/95 through 2002/03 National Population Health Surveys captured continuous feedback about stress. It was found that stress may be partially related to poor coping mechanisms and might be a precursor to poor health—particularly chronic conditions.
Beaudet: 1998). Typically, feelings associated with workplace stress linger long after work hours. Stressful work role conditions may decrease well-being, while preventing individuals from upholding social responsibilities and partaking in regular activities. In addition, workplace stress relates to higher rates of absenteeism, poorer physical and mental health, lower organizational commitment, greater use of the health care system and decreased satisfaction (Korabik, Lero and Whitehead: 2008; Mullen, Kelley and Kelloway: 2008). The negative stress associated with imbalance and dissatisfaction within the work role may impact other roles and can have significant impacts on an individual’s physical and emotional well-being (Dollard and Meltzer: 1999).

Combating work stress and job strain often depends on coping mechanisms and accessible support networks (Park: 2007). It can be offset by the ability to control work demands and make decisions that reduce job stress and associated strain (Turcotte and Schellenberg: 2005; Karasek: 1979; Theorell and Karasek: 1996; Wilkins and Beaudet: 1998). Simultaneous demands are particularly stressful when an individual has limited control over the situation (Nordenmark: 2004; Achat, Kawachi, Levine, Berkey, Coakley and Colditz: 1998). For instance, when job control is high and the individual has autonomy to make decisions to alleviate stress from challenging job demands, this results in a more favourable and productive working experience. Alternately, if an individual has minimal control over his/her situation increased stress may ensue and a decline in workplace productivity becomes more common. Even more important, this type of employee might even experience decreased levels of physical and psychological health (Williams: 2000; Karasek: 1998; Achat et al: 1998; Mennino, Rubin and Brayfield: 2005). Other disorders such as exhaustion, insomnia, immune-system disorders and
fatigue were also noted in the literature as affecting or limiting work-life balance and increased stress (Menzies: 2005; Noor: 1995; Barnett et al: 1992; Broad and Antony: 1999).

Lack of job control is only one cause of employee work stress. As Williams (2003) identifies, other potential work stressors that can weigh on employees include physical exertion and job insecurity. The psychological stress of uncertain jobs or strenuous repetitive working conditions can be harmful for employees. Findings of the 1994 and 2000 General Social Surveys show that slightly over one-third of working Canadians reported that having too many demands or working hours as the most common source of workplace stress (Williams: 2003: 3). In part, this can be the result of self-imposed work stress and the desire to accomplish as much as possible in and outside of predetermined work hours. For example, when work demands exceed the hours allocated to complete the assigned tasks, the situation can become even more stressful and result in disengagement, especially when goals are unreachable (Park: 2007). Moreover, concerns over the work culture, offered training, support, and management style may result in additional employee dissatisfaction and stress (Secker and Membrey: 2003).

Time pressure and multiple tasks in an individual’s personal life do not bode well when attempting to meet responsibilities in work roles. Published in a Statistics Canada Health Report, Shields (2004) summarizes data from the 2002 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) Cycle 1.2: Mental Health and Wellbeing, which surveyed about 37,000 individuals aged 15 or older living in private dwellings across Canada. This study shows that over a third of Canadians reported they were stressed because they were trying to do too many things at once (Shields: 2004:18).
Shields (2004) suggests that stress and a lack of control or inability to solve problems creates chronic strains. Examples include not having sufficient money to address perceived needs, poor workplace relationships and concerns about caring for the family, which are significant contributors to work stress and personal strain. In fact, higher levels of chronic strain often stem from conflicting time constraints, which are influenced by competing personal and work responsibilities (Park: 2007).

1.4 Impacts on Health and Well-Being

For the purposes of this thesis, the concept of “health” includes identifying social, physical, mental and emotional levels of individual well-being (Kendall, Linden and Lothian Murray: 1998; Todd: 2004; Lowe: 2003; Jeffery: 2002). In turn, “well-being” encompasses the positive effects of health such as self-esteem and perceived happiness. In fact, well-being is commonly measured by the individual’s perceived level of satisfaction or contentment, and may easily be disrupted by general exposure to any amount of stress. As such, well-being has similar connotations to health.

Similarly, perceived health captures an individual’s personal assessment and includes all elements of health from acute and chronic diseases, fatal and nonfatal diseases, and less tangible health issues such as being rundown, tired, or having backaches and headaches. Thus, it measures a state of overall well-being as perceived by the individual (Ross and Mirowsky: 1995; Faragher, Cass and Cooper: 2005; Spector: 2002). Subjective assessments of health generally incorporate factors such as self-esteem, well-being, coping abilities, self-perception, and for some, sense of accomplishment (Lund and Borg: 1999; Lerner and Levine: 1994).
Paid work occupies a sizeable part of an individual’s time. Thus, strain and stress within the workplace can considerably impact health (Ferrie, Shipley, Marmot, Stansfeld and Smith: 1998; Ferrie et al: 1998; Matthews and Power: 2002). Mental health and chronic physical health conditions have been associated with unfavourable employment outcomes. Uppal (2009) reports that the economic burden of illness was $159.4 billion dollars in 1998 (p. 5). This amount will continue to grow, especially considering the aging demographics. Sick leave is already a substantial cost for employers since it not only reduces productivity and taxes the benefits system, but it also impacts employee morale and lowers the quality of work output (Marshall: 2006; Williams: 2003).

Analysis of the 2003 Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) reveals there were about 720,000 work absences of two weeks or longer due to illness or disability (Marshall: 2006). As such, promoting workplace health is critical for helping individuals change their lifestyle in search of optimal health. Examples of health promotion activities include fitness subsidies, vaccinations, teaching stress management techniques, and employee assistance programs (EAP). The balance of emotional, physical, social, spiritual and intellectual health captures “optimal health” (Bachmann: 2002: 3). The promotion of wellness or health management as a preventative method also helps employers approach the issue of absenteeism due to health (Marshall: 2006). Therefore, the prevalence of sick leave may be viewed as a symptom of a growing challenge related to stress in the workplace.
1.5 Support Networks and Coping

Achat et al. (1998) examined data from 47,912 women using the Medical Outcomes Study Short-form Health Survey – focusing on the relationship between health, quality of life and social networks. It was found that there is a positive association between social networks and quality of life. In fact, large social support networks helped to reduce stressful circumstances because they act as a moderator to both home and work stressors. Similarly, in a sample of 116 employed mothers, Warren and Johnson (1995) examined coping mechanisms and corroborated that support networks and flexibility to manage stressful circumstances offsets the negative effects of stress.

Support networks, often found in connection to the community, interactions with friends, participation in social groups, paid employment and a life partner, are interactive relationships where individuals can seek the level of support they require (Lowe: 2003; Todd: 2004; Duxbury: 2003). Schonfeld (1991) suggests that support is particularly important during major life transitions.

The positive impact of social support extends to the workplace. Supportive work culture with formal and informal networks may mitigate the effects of work-related stress (Bliese and Castro: 2000; Pugliesi: 1998; Vermeulen and Mustard: 2000). Social support [including affection, social interaction, emotional or informational support, and tangible support] often helps people cope with stress and illness, and sometimes improves physical health (Health Reports: 2001: 30). However, when co-worker support is low or non-existent, employees tend to show symptoms of depression, absenteeism and disinterest in team efforts (Gilmour and Patten: 2007).
Gilmour and Patten (2007) associate depression with mental health disability, psychiatric illness, substance abuse, physical illness and/or an overall personal impairment of an individual’s personal and work lives. Secondary analysis of the 2002 CCHS and the 1994/1995 and 2002/2003 National Population Health Surveys (NPHS) reveal that depressed employees reported low levels of peer support (47% v. 32%), low supervisor support (24% v. 17%), and low emotional social support (24% v. 12%) (Gilmour and Patten: 2007: 26). Therefore, from the evidence, supportive relations in the workplace are essential for stress management (Warren and Johnson: 1995).

In turn, employees who apply negative coping mechanisms can compromise work productivity, which may affect peer relationships. In this regard, data from the 1994/1995 and 2002/2003 NPHS provide noteworthy findings. For example, some employees coped with stress by avoiding their peers and supervisors (66% depressed workers v. 33% non-depressed workers). Others used alcohol or smoking to reduce tension (82% v. 53%). Depressed employees sometimes blamed themselves (74% v. 50%) or simply wished for the situation to go away (91% v. 76%). When dealing with stress, the troubled employees were less inclined to talk with others (76% v. 83%) or try to have a positive outlook (88% v. 95%) (Gilmour and Patten: 2007: 26).

Differences reported between the social supports offered to men and women are important to any workplace study even if the differences are minimal (Pugliesi: 1998; Berkman, Glass, Brissette and Seeman: 2000). Pugliesi (1998) found that with regard to establishing support networks, there were differences in the types of support sought by men and women. For example, men tend to rely on female partners as their main source
of social support, while women are more likely to receive diversified sources of support, often from friends and children (Pugliesi: 1998).

Similarly, various studies indicate that men and women experience social support differently. Women commonly provide support to a range of people, while men tend to focus mostly on their partners. “[G]iven women’s larger networks and greater emotional and practical involvement in them, the caregiving aspect of their social role may attach health costs to women’s social network participation (in addition to possible benefits) that men do not incur” (Shye et al: 1995: 937). As such, women tend to have larger support networks and a wider range of sources for emotional support. However, they are also the central point of support for their male partners (Fuhrer and Stansfeld: 2002). Park (2007) also notes that males and females experience support differently. For men, a high level of peer support in the workplace was associated with a lower likelihood of reduced work activities such as absenteeism. For women, however, informal peer supports were extremely beneficial for emotional and informational purposes (Park: 2007).

Moreover, engaging work roles are also important in regard to support and coping (Vogt: 2005; Csikszentmihalyi: 2003). When employee abilities are not adequately matched to the role responsibilities, perceived stressors and strain can decrease satisfaction and well-being (Spector: 2002). The literature suggests that work roles more closely aligned to an employee’s skill-set allows them to feel more confident in the job and autonomous enough to manage increased demands (Spector: 2002; Karasek: 1979).

As such, the manager or supervisor holds an integral role in maximizing employee potential by considering the employee’s mental and emotional well-being when matching the employee to the appropriate role. The nature in which the supervisor
provides feedback, praise, guides development and offers support and flexibility often determines if employees can have more control to remove obstacles, stress and maximize their contributions (Csikszentmihalyi: 2003). The supervisor-employee relationship is also an opportunity for the employer to consider case-by-case support levels (Nussbaum and Sen: 1993). For example, recommending an employee refer to a family-friendly policy might work for some, but other employees might be best served by simply knowing their supervisor understands current role stressors.

1.6 Work and Life Balance: The Goal

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2005) defines work-life balance as a “self-defined, self-determined state reached by a person able to effectively manage multiple responsibilities at work, at home, and in the community … (that) supports physical, emotional and family health and does so without grief, stress or negative impact” (Williams: 2008: 7). When employees have balance in their work and home lives, they are able to simultaneously fulfill multiple responsibilities at home, work and in the community. Balance helps limit feelings of guilt or regret, which means employees who can find such balance are generally physically, emotionally and socially healthy. These individuals exercise a sense of control of their lives and make informed—rather than forced—decisions (HRSDC: 2005). By contrast, without balance in one’s life, an individual may feel lethargic, helpless and out of control. As such, they will be unable to manage the challenges of life and the direction necessary to accomplish goals (Williams: 2008; HRSDC: 2005).
Prolonged states of imbalance can lead to various negative outcomes as shown in the previous sections. Individuals may work longer hours, exhibit poor physical or emotional health, eat poorly and consume excessive caffeine, alcohol, sugar and fat. In addition, there is less likelihood of exercise and sufficient sleep. These individuals may find it difficult to feel satisfied or accomplished with work tasks, and personal relationships may be impacted by these negative behaviours and feelings (Williams: 2008; HRSDC: 2005).

The HRSDC (2005) outlines five phases of attaining the work-life balance: struggle, juggle, balance, integration and harmony. In the “struggle” stage, individuals feel stress and have little control over coping with it. The “juggle” stage is the initial understanding of the imbalance and includes trying various coping techniques. The “balance” stage allows the individual to fulfill multiple responsibilities, feel a sense of control and have sufficient energy to meet the day’s needs. “Integration” provides the energy and resources to manage future career development, and planning for personal growth while undertaking other ongoing responsibilities. The final stage is “harmony,” where the individual experiences a full sense of control and is managing his/her physical, emotional, mental, financial and personal responsibilities. This individual now has the energy to harmonize with community initiatives and experience a sense of well-being in all roles.

Employees that struggle to find work and home life balance may experience reduced feelings of satisfaction. In other words, feeling overloaded becomes more common by having too much to do and not enough time to accomplish tasks. Many

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employees consistently worry about accomplishments at work and devote more effort to “getting ahead”, which reduces time with family (Williams: 2008). According to Statistics Canada’s 2005 General Social Survey (GSS), over 14% of Canadian workers age 45 and over reported being dissatisfied with their work-life balance (Uriarte-Landa and Hébert: 2009: 20). Ultimately, the work-life conflict is continually associated with negative health, reduced productivity and decreased satisfaction (Duxbury and Higgins: 2003).

This imbalance does not result exclusively from time and energy conflicts between the two roles, as an imbalance can encompass additional personal responsibilities and result from limited personal support networks. Many work and life balance research articles focus on employees with younger children and growing family demands. However, employees with elder care-giving responsibilities are also considered (Pyper: 2006; Habtu and Popovic: 2006; Uriarte-Landa and Hébert: 2009). Williams (2008) reports the top reason for unhappy employees is that they do not have enough time for family because spare time is spent on job tasks. Some individuals sacrifice sleep in order to accomplish paid work, and struggle with feelings of guilt for not spending sufficient time with family and friends.

Work-life balance is considered a skill because it involves time management and task prioritization that can drain energy, affect health and reduce levels of productivity (Pyper: 2006). Successful care-giving, either involving young families or elderly members, combined with paid employment requires delicate juggling (Williams: 2008). The guilt that may be felt when personal and professional role demands are not met—particularly for women coupling care giving and paid work hours—is enormous. These
strained feelings also impact men, although men tend to experience feelings of guilt and stress as a result of working longer hours (Pyper: 2006). As a result of the conflicting role demands, employees must find innovative ways to support personal challenges through flexible, favourable work arrangements (Uriarte-Landa and Hébert: 2009). Workplaces may offer flex-hours whereby employees may accommodate appointments and other pressing family needs. Collaboration with the manager and supervisor is also a relationship that may garner support by encouraging employees to use workplace support programs and indulge in work flexibility.

Williams (2008) examines the hours spent on unpaid work or care-giving activities that add to the stress and strain in an individual’s life. More specifically, work and life balance may be considered an accomplishment that rests somewhere between role overload and personal well-being (Korabik: 2008; Turner: 2002). The underlying theme that seems to contribute to this balance is control of one’s life. When employees believe they have at least some control of the stressors in their lives, they are able to reduce conflicts between home and work by shifting priorities and focusing on one task at a time, efforts that increase role satisfaction (Williams: 2008). As a result, these employees have sufficient power to begin to solve – or at least to mitigate – their work and home dilemmas.

Family work patterns are another consideration for work-life balance. LaRochelle-Côté and Dionne (2009) conducted a longitudinal study over a five-year span to examine the relationship between work time and well-being indicators. They also included the adverse effects of stress on psychological and physiological health and well-being, and role overload (Higgins and Duxbury: 2002; Williams: 2008). Results of this
study indicate that lack of time contributes to issues of well-being at the family level. When the family has dual income parents, less time is spent at home than at work, leaving little time for personal and family duties (Keown: n.d.). Arguably, the authors also note that the issue of time or money adds another dimension to balancing work and home roles. In some instances, families with higher-incomes may supplement spare time by hiring someone to do household tasks or to help take care of the family. This support also reduces some of the negative side effects of stress (LaRochelle- Côté and Dionne: 2009). Overall, work-life balance is considered a personal responsibility to manage; more effectively accomplished with support from the workplace.

1.7 Optimal Workplace: Recommendations

In light of the breadth of research about workplace stress and potential solutions, no single theoretical framework can adequately guide this thesis. Therefore, this subsection briefly touches on the notion of optimality in the literature.

Vogt (2005) explores the “human capabilities theory” as a way to promote blending of work roles with personal play and creativity. When work environments approach employee relations with the capabilities mindset, it builds the conditions for an optimal work relationship because emphasis is placed on satisfying both work and personal development (Vogt: 2005). Workplaces that embrace an optimal working philosophy are recognized by employees as places where they can maximize their potential while also fulfilling other important obligations like caring for family (Nussbaum and Sen: 2003). In other words, this theory supports the concept of individual flexibility – suggesting that the work role cannot trump the importance of personal
relationships and responsibilities – and vice versa. It also implies that managing multiple roles while maximizing individual potential at work is an important piece of the work culture.

In this thesis, examining an optimal workplace culture will determine how workplace structures can enrich individual work experiences. However, concepts of optimal workplace and balance are subjective. For example, where flexible policies help parents with young children, the work they might postpone while tending to a family issue might need to be completed by an employee without family to avoid delay and “pick up the slack”. Furthermore, shorthanded employee groups may need to put in longer hours to match usual levels of work output and responsiveness. While changes in workplace policies and managerial tactics help some employees, not everyone benefits; adding stress to a different type of employee group.

In theory, an optimal workplace accommodates a balance between an individual’s home and work roles and may directly benefit both the organization and the person involved. It may also indirectly benefit the general employee population through a culture of satisfaction that improves morale. Some researchers suggest that employees operate more effectively when an employer fosters a culture of open-communication, flexibility and respect (Dugdill: 2000; Johnson et al: 2001). For example, using 29 semi-structured interviews, Dugdill (2000) explored the concept of overall health and well-being within the workplace from the employee’s perspective. Outcomes propose that the impact of a work setting is often more relevant to building optimal conditions through personalized support.

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4 October 2011: http://financecareers.about.com/u/ua/wheretowork/Good-For-Working-Moms-Bad-For-Others.htm
By offering opportunities for growth, support, and flexibility, the workplace is a vehicle for individuals to attain an optimal level of work and life balance. This environment may also hold other desirable characteristics such as relationship building, innovation and improved teamwork. If these aspects are present, individuals in these workplaces may be happier, more motivated to contribute to the work environment, and may have a higher sense of satisfaction (Ruth, Crawford, Wysocki, and Kepner: 2009; Dugdill: 2000; Matthews, Hertzman, Ostry and Power: 1998; Taylor and Seeman: 1999).

1.8 Thesis Inquiry Framework

This thesis addresses several themes relating to quality of an individual’s role in the workplace. It argues that workplaces that promote supportive cultures and develop formal employee assistance policies for greater workload flexibility are also the workplace environments that enhance an individual’s work and life balance. These attributes enable the employee to more adequately manage both personal and work role demands, and reduce the employee’s sense of distress arising from conflicting roles and time constraints. Employees who are accustomed to a work climate with formal and informal supports might be better equipped and more satisfied in their work roles. In fact, it may ease them into a sense of work and life balance because they can adjust their time and energy to accommodate competing demands with impending distress.

Some organizations have incorporated proactive measures into their policies and benefits, and are training management teams to develop a positive working climate that supports employees both formally and informally5. The premise of changing work

climates is to consider workplace culture, practices, morale and relationships. Both manager and employee should harness a workplace culture that encourages flexibility and provides benefits because this fosters a culture of loyalty, respect for individual diversity, and reaffirms the importance of balance (Lowe: 2003).

This thesis also discusses the issue of balance from the employee’s perspective as it relates to individual satisfaction and experiences in the work role. It investigates the relationship between organizational structures and management styles from the employee’s viewpoint and discusses the corresponding experiences in the workplace.

1.9 Thesis Questions

This thesis explores individuals’ experience and perceptions within the role of employee to better understand the workplace context, while also defining the role of interpersonal relations. These perceptions also shape the work culture and contribute to what focus group participants define as an optimal workplace. The objective of this research is to provide accurate descriptions of workplace experiences, to validate employee descriptions with literature, to use the data to answer specific questions about workplace experiences and perceptions, and to outline what participants view as an “optimal workplace.” Using study participant language, three research questions were formed:

i. Why is it important to recognize an individual’s perception of quality in his/her work role when defining an optimal workplace?

ii. How do organizational and managerial structures contribute to the overall work culture and influence the individual’s perception of quality in his/her work roles?
iii. How can policy and managerial techniques be guided to achieve an optimal workplace culture and employee experience?

The focus groups help ascertain employee opinion regarding what makes an optimal workplace. The employee’s perception describes a desirable workplace and formulates workplace attributes that may contribute to an environment that supports role quality.

1.10 Research Approach: Capturing the Workplace Experience

The qualitative data of this thesis are collected from four focus groups (n=11). Each focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. The data were then analyzed using a grounded theory method whereby the researcher approaches the material without an expectation of any themes or outcomes. Lines of the transcription are sorted by thematic experiences, which are confirmed by empirical data. The literature helps link individual experiences to relevant workplace issues.

Interpretivist research has been chosen because it allows for an examination of context-dependent “thick descriptions” that allow researchers to interpret individual interactions, the reality they experience and how meaning is ascribed to the work environment (Geertz: 1973; Grant and Giddings: 2002; Hudson and Ozanne: 1988; Ponterotto: 2005). As such, the emphasis is on the situation and work context rather than only on individual sensory observation (Grant and Giddings: 2002).

To understand the socio-cultural context of a workplace, interpretivist research aims to find meaning through lived experiences without losing individual perspective of the work environment. In other words, consideration for the work culture is a critical factor in understanding where individual perceptions are founded. This research is geared
to the individual’s constructed reality and therefore is not generalizable because the data presents detailed evidence from personal impressions, senses and mental pictures (Ponterotto: 2005). By design, there are multiple realities and social contexts to analyze. These realities do not require consensus or similarity of theme; they are transactional and subjective (Ponterotto: 2005). Although situations and conditions are dependent on each other for meaning, the individual’s voice and experience provides the catalyst for this link (Hudson and Ozanne: 1988). Further discussion about the interpretivist paradigm and the research design appears in Chapter III.

1.11 Thesis Overview

This thesis produces original qualitative research which substantiates the current literature. It explores the experience of individuals; divulges their personal perceptions so that, as researchers, we can learn from and better understand the experiences of those who struggle to balance competing demands.

I chose this subject area because it builds on the sparse literature on qualitative studies within working conditions in Saskatchewan. In terms of the contemporary labour force where working conditions can afflict individuals’ health, coping abilities, personal relationships and careers, this is a worthwhile topic.

The purpose of this thesis is to add needed perspective to a small but growing collection of work in this area by using an interpretive approach with focus groups (further details in Chapter III). The intent is not to generalize individual experiences, but to see how a group of Saskatchewan government workers perceive their workplaces.
Participant comments help to define what constitutes an optimal workplace. As such, this study fills an important gap in current research.

This thesis appears in five chapters. This chapter introduces the sociological context of the workplace and frames an understanding of workplace stress along with empirical evidence for Canadian literature. Chapter II provides an overview of literature surrounding general definitions about roles and role theory. The methods employed for this research and thesis are described in Chapter III. This includes the focus group data collected from the study: “Role Quality and Health: Influences of Individual, Workplace and Community Social Supports” (RQH). Chapter IV presents responses and rich detail to answer the thesis research questions outlined above. Chapter V concludes by discussing the social context of the findings and the corresponding perspectives of the workplace.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines and defines multiple and overlapping roles such as accumulation, strain, overload, and how each role can influence an individual’s ability to achieve work and life balance. Although the concept of gender is not a key variable, the literature review briefly examines gendered experiences. The understanding of overlapping roles and how individuals attempt work and life balance in the midst of stress and increasing role obligations may be paramount to an organization that wishes to develop policies and design a work environment that promotes employee work role satisfaction and balance.

2.1 Role Definitions for Work and Life

A “role,” defined as behavioural expectations in a given environment (Kendall et al: 1998), can have beneficial and detrimental effects on an individual depending on the value or level of satisfaction associated with it. Defining role responsibilities requires that individuals understand and assign value to the obligations associated with each role. Competing and complementary role obligations can be explained through various role theories – these will be discussed in subsequent sections (Adelmann: 1994; Dennerstein: 1995; Yoder: 1999; Sieber: 1974; Turner: 2002).

The following concepts are discussed in general terms and provide a foundation for the understanding of work and life balance with emphasis on the work role. “Role overload” is a “time-based form of role conflict in which individual perceives that the collective demands imposed by multiple roles...are so great that time and energy
resources are insufficient to adequately fulfill the requirements of the various roles to the satisfaction of self or others” (Korabik et al: 2008: 130). As such, occupying multiple roles increases the strain on physical and psychological health, and causes stress or limits personal resources (Korabik et al: 2008; Sieber: 1974).

By contrast, “role accumulation” or “role expansion” (Nordenmark: 2004) suggests that numerous roles are beneficial to individuals (Adelmann: 1994; Dolbier and Steinhardt: 2000; Martikainen: 1995; Lahelma, Arber, Kivela and Roos: 2002). Stress due to multiple roles can be “moderated because of the multiple benefits that come with multiple roles and the possibility that compatible duties of different roles can sometimes be combined” (Turner: 2002: 249-250). According to the expansionist theory, role accumulation may offset negative experiences when an individual focuses on experiences within the role and the quality associated with it (Korabik et al: 2008; Mullen et al: 2008). The combination of personal and work roles can enhance health, particularly through the increased range of social supports, and generate opportunities for success and satisfaction (Jeffery: 2002; Martikainen: 1995; Yoder: 1999; Nordenmark: 2004; Barnett et al: 1992; Verbrugge: 1986; Ballantyne: 1999).

Role accumulation may improve self-esteem, personal worth, and satisfaction (Nordenmark: 2004; Martikainen: 1995; Ballantyne, 1999; Berkman: 2000). According to the literature, it appears individuals balance multiple roles by using various coping mechanisms and supports, in addition to reliance on workplace policies—if these policies exist and are readily accessible (Warren and Johnson: 1995; Joseph and Hallman: 1996; Taylor and Seeman: 1999; Spurlock: 1995).
By contrast, “role conflict” addresses incompatible role demands (Kendall, Linden and Murray: 1998; Reid and Hardy: 1999; Turner: 2002) and describes the conditions of a clash between home and work roles, which creates hardships. The misalignment of roles may also be the result of individuals failing to meet their roles and responsibilities. This experience can be stressful and damaging to well-being and self-esteem (Jasso: 2002). Ultimately, when roles fit, individuals are better able to balance demands and are more likely to experience positive role association.

“Role strain,” also known as a decrease in psychological well-being, is an ongoing stressor linked to unrealistic expectations of a particular role (Elliott: 2003; Turner: 2002). Some role strain can be the result of not compartmentalizing roles, the inability to acquire and internalize attitudes and beliefs appropriate to the role, and resistance to change. The strain can also emerge when individuals have difficulty filling role obligations, particularly when roles occur simultaneously (MacDermid: 2005; Thompson and Prottas: 2009; Crouter and Booth: 2009). Role strain may produce feelings of tension, anxiety and frustration, and is tied to low levels of role adequacy stemming from a lack of resources, a lack of support, a lack of skill or a lack of motivation to cope.

Family sociologist Talcott Parsons (1949) observed the division of work and family roles and concluded that the family is optimized when men specialize in the paid-work realm and women focus energy on domestic work (Korabik, Lero and Whitehead: 2008). This conclusion was based on the notion that each individual had a limited quantity of energy and optimal use of this energy is better spent on one specialized area or role. If energy was spread over multiple roles, negative outcomes might occur such as marital problems, poor personal health or feelings of rejection (Korabik et al: 2008).
However, current research challenges Parsons’ claims and indicates that multiple roles can produce positive effects on health and well-being (Barnett: 2005; Korabik et al: 2008).

Yet, “multiple roles” may also have a negative impact on an individual, assuming that these consist of exhausting and stressful expectations (Brooker and Eakin: 2001; Dunn and Hayes: 2000; Dennerstein: 1995; Stephens, Franks and Townsend: 1994; Simon: 1998; Barnett, Davidson and Marshall: 1991). “Role stress” theory suggests the maintenance of multiple social roles can be a burden (Nordenmark: 2004; Karasek and Theorell: 1990). The high demands within roles create a feeling of being overloaded.

Noor (1995) explains that exposure to role stress “cannot be predicted solely on the basis of role occupancy. The potential for stressful experiences lies in the conditions surrounding the demands of the role, as does the potential for reward and gratification. Stress results from the quality of experiences within and between roles, not from the mere occupancy of roles” (p. 88). In other words, rather than considering the number of roles to be detrimental to an individual’s well-being and personal balance, Noor (1995) suggests that the environment may sway an individual’s perception and experiences within a role.

### 2.2 Gender

Although gender was not a variable distinctively explored in the focus groups, there is an abundance of literature that supports the notion of gender-specific role experiences. I will cover the essentials – which relate to men and women’s expenditure of time and energy to fulfill role demands, particularly in the home (Walters, McDonough,

By contrast to women’s role strain, in Hunt and Annandale’s (1993) study, men report more conflict between paid work and other roles of their lives such as than women because of the anxiety and higher levels of stress associated with work spheres. Hunt and Annandale’s work and life role study proposes that work realms are the individual’s first priority, either out of survival or to maintain a sense of worth. Some men adopt this mentality, giving energy and effort to the employer and using financial gain to support the family (Nelson and Robinson: 1999). Historically, “men actualize through paid work and women actualize through family” (Nelson and Robinson: 1999: 239). This means men may have more easily reached their professional work potential, versus women who put more energy into the home and family to ensure these aspects functioned smoothly.

Duxbury (2003) argues that when researching paid work and unpaid domestic work, it seems women, regardless of the division of domestic responsibilities, remain bound to increased demands in the home and have more care-giving roles than men. In fact, employed women tend to report more role overload than employed men, partially due to conflicting demands of the two spheres and at least two different roles. Not all roles are equal; some may be weighted more heavily depending on the responsibilities, such as the role of paid employee, while other personal roles are typically more flexible.
and can be adapted to accommodate conflicting demands (Yoder: 1999; Figart and Mutari: 1998).

Regardless, time use surveys indicate that the difference between male and female dedication to domestic responsibilities have significantly diminished over time. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that both men and women are balancing work and home responsibilities. Multiple roles often provoke additional conflict and stress for both women and men, but especially for women who experience strong ties to the home (Spurlock: 1995; Thomas: 1997; Simon: 1995; Verbrugge: 1985). Support networks are critical for the help and encouragement required to buffer distress and protect health (Reid and Hardy: 1999; Fuhrer et al: 1999; Dennerstein: 1995).

2.3 Complimentary Roles and Role Interference

One way to conceptualize competing roles is to consider the concept of “spillover.” Spillover is characterized by a negative conflict or interference between work and family (Grzywacz, Almeida and McDonald: 2002; MacDermid: 2005; Kossek and Lambert: 2005; Reid and Hardy: 1999). Spillover can include co-occurring negative events or stressors on the same day in multiple domains, as well as the “transmission of attitudes or moods from one domain to another” (Grzywacz et al: 2002: 28). Even with the physical and logistical division between work and home, the human mind carries moods across the threshold and back, blending the experiences from one role to another (Erikson: 1986; Gerring: 2001; Todd: 2004). Doumas et al. (2003) examine spillover and crossover patterns between work experiences and health behaviours. By studying the daily marital interaction in 49 dual-earner couples for 42 consecutive days, the research
concluded that spouses reported more positive marital interaction on days they worked less, felt more energetic and had more time to relax. As such, “an individual’s stress, emotions, or behaviours in either the work or marital domain carry over into her or his experiences in the other domain” (Doumas, Margolin and John: 2003: 4).

Some authors commend the development of support networks because they offset the spillover stress and offer individuals a sense of control over their lives (Adelmann: 1994; Stephens et al: 1994). According to Adelmann (1994), multiple roles are positively associated with higher life satisfaction and self-efficacy. They also appeared to lower depressive symptoms among older adults. Stephens et al (1994) examined well-being and stress in 95 women simultaneously occupying multiple roles. The findings suggest that multiple roles and varied levels of support both detract and enhance mental and physical health depending on how the roles are managed.

However, multiple roles sometimes limit the individual’s flexibility and thus become a detriment to the individual’s overall life satisfaction. According to Hibbard and Pope (1993), “[a] clear assessment of the effect of multiple roles on health must investigate the inherent characteristics of roles and how these roles are experienced; the privileges, disadvantages and stresses, as well as the satisfaction” (p. 217). This may be seen when increased role demands conflict and sometimes preclude the individual from managing responsibilities (Barnett et al: 1991; Barnett, Marshall, and Singer: 1992; Dennerstein: 1995; Spurlock: 1995). Todd (2004) provides an overview of different types of work-life balance initiatives in various countries around the world. From this research, noticeable work-life conflict and stress from work intensity contribute to health problems (Dunn and Hayes: 2000; Barnett and Marshall: 1992; Dennerstein: 1995).
Other factors such as enduring work-related travel, paid or unpaid overtime, shift work, organizational changes, lower job control, and role overload have also been found to contribute to a sense of work tension and have been linked to multi-dimensional health concerns and issues (Todd: 2004; Lowe: 2003; Cotton and Fisher: 1995; Theorell and Karasek: 1996; Matthews and Power: 2000; Kivimaki et al: 2000; Harrington: 2001; Shields: 2006; Park: 2007; Williams: 2003). Therefore, satisfaction with the work environment and the ability to balance increased and competing obligations in personal and work roles appear to impact overall health and well-being to some degree.

2.4 Responsibility for Job Satisfaction

Balancing time and energy to effectively meet work and personal responsibilities can be challenging. The societal importance of achieving work and life balance is evident in the sheer number of discussions among workplace policy makers and in overall changes to managerial techniques and strategies (Crouter and Booth: 2009; Halpern and Murphy: 2005; Korabik et al: 2008). Stress is of concern because it can reduce the quality of life at home and their productivity on the job. As such, managing continued distress may manifest physiologically, psychologically or behaviourally to hinder an individual’s experience within their roles (Marshall: 2006; Wilkins and Beaudet: 1998; Williams: 2003).

“Job satisfaction” is a subjective assessment of the individual’s attitude toward his or her role and work environment (Robbins and Langton: 2003). Robbins and Langton (2003) summarize four factors conducive to high levels of employee job satisfaction: mentally challenging work, equitable rewards, supportive working conditions and
supportive colleagues. Management can influence an employee’s job satisfaction by encouraging supportive attributes and building strong communication networks (Mennino et al: 2005; Schieman et al: 2003). According to these authors, “mentally challenging work” refers to the opportunity for individuals to apply their skills and abilities and receive feedback on their accomplishments. “Supportive working conditions” include personal comfort and reassurance about doing a good job. “Equitable rewards” refer to wages, policies, and recognized achievements. Clearly-defined promotional expectations and opportunities for personal growth are also included. Moreover, “supportive colleagues” refer to a workplace with nurturing co-workers who offer social interaction, friendly support, praise and reassurance (Robbins and Langton: 2003: 104). These four aspects, in combination, lead to increased job satisfaction and overall individual well-being.

Employers recognize that role imbalance causes strain and contributes to increased absenteeism, reduced productivity and general dissatisfaction with the work role. Theorell (1999) discussed concepts of psychological demands, decision latitude, social support, and effort-reward balance as variables for practical reorganizational efforts. The awareness towards balance, as a remedy, broadens the focus of organizational priorities to include individual employee’s needs and incentives designed to enhance overall work experiences. Although employees’ health and balance are not the direct responsibility of employers or companies, research suggests it is in the company’s best interest to endorse and support policy changes that help individuals mitigate the strain of multiple role demands (Todd: 2004; Duxbury and Higgins: 2001; Johnson, Lero and Rooney: 2001; Mandell: 1998).
2.5 **Supports: Balancing Time, Energy and Roles**

In this thesis, the concept of flexibility relates to the shaping of roles and tasks around personal and work obligations, while being mindful of time and energy limitations\footnote{March 2009: http://www.familiesandwork.org/3w/about/definition.html}. The availability and application of flexible work policies, without jeopardizing job stability or advancement\footnote{March 2009: www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/lp/spila/wlb/wppp/05workplace_flexibility.shtml}, may be beneficial for employers and employees alike depending on the individual’s job level and work industry\footnote{March 2009: http://www.law.georgetown.edu/workplaceflexibility2010/definition/index.cfm}.

Managing roles can be enhanced through developing and improving time management and organizational skills (Heslop, Smith, MacLeod and Hart: 2001; Johnson et al: 2001; Korabik et al: 2008; Halpern and Murphy: 2005; Crouter and Booth: 2009; Crane and Hill: 2009). Most employees need both informal and formal support as they face time constraints, multiple demands, and self-report stress. What is less clear from current research is whether the stress and imbalance is a growing problem, an individual’s perception, or if unrealistic social expectations have started to severely impact working people.

Informal supports systems, such as friends in the workplace, endorse feelings of a shared reality, camaraderie and a respect for individual experiences. These supports help employees mentally and emotionally discourage feelings of anxiety, stress or depression when faced with multiple expectations (Kivimaki et al: 2000; Matthews and Power: 2002). Social networks are one of the primary coping strategies for people perceived as There are limits to employee control over his/her work schedule if they are in the customer service industry, for example, where it is unlikely to be able to get time off at lunchtime to deal with family or personal issues.

Effective support networks require an individual’s time and energy to develop a relationship strong enough to handle pressure and help offset stress (Moya, Exposito and Ruiz: 2000). Berkman and others (2000) assessed networks by their characteristics and suggested the number of network members, density, boundedness, homogeneity, frequency of contact, multiplexity, duration and reciprocity are all considerations when understanding the strength of a support network. While many combinations of these variables will benefit an individual, not all are supportive (Berkman et al: 2000; Shye et al: 1995; Himsel and Goldberg: 2003; Simon: 1995; Riggs: 1998).

As an example, shift workers may experience more stress and may have less access to support networks as a result of their limited social time than those working regular hours. Stress may also arise because of the difficulty in fitting work schedules around personal or community activities. Symptoms of limited support and ineffective coping may be shown through loss of energy, disengagement, disinterest in work, anxiety, depression, discouragement and hopelessness, and a diminished ability to focus
on tasks (Harrington: 2001). In addition, job performance may be compromised because the employee lacks the ability to engage in teamwork, time management, or concentration (Burton, Pransky, Conti, Chen and Edington: 2004; Gilmour and Patten: 2007).

To understand limitations of time and energy, Doumas (2003) posits three spillover categories: time interference, energy interference and psychological interference. “Time interference” is the amount of time spent at work, which reduces the amount of time spent in the personal role. Time interference goes both ways: it can also be the amount of time spent in the spousal role, which reduces efficiency at work.

“Energy interference” is the psychological and physical fatigue resulting from one’s work that limits the amount of energy available for spousal activities. Finally, “psychological interference” reflects the worker’s absorption of work concerns that interfere with personal relationships. Time, energy, and psychological interference can impact employees negatively unless offset by other activities such as exercising, relaxing, sleeping, healthy eating, maintaining warmth in personal relationships, and managing interpersonal conflict (Aronson et al: 2001).

Time scarcity is a concern for many individuals who must balance home and work roles (Martikainen: 1995). Using the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) on time use, Zukewich (2003) suggests that time scarcity negatively impacts well-being. Factors such as family, career, housework, personal responsibilities, even commuting, to name a few, remove time and energy from an individual’s day and forces them to critically analyze the division of roles (Zukewich: 2003; Mennino et al: 2005).

Duxbury (2003) claims that home and work realms blend into each other. “While we separate life into neat little work and non-work domains with respect to research,
social policy, and so on, many Canadians are not living this reality. Their work and their lives are, in fact, quite intricately connected and changes in one domain echo in the other” (Duxbury: 2003: 73). Role competition exists because it is physically impossible for someone to simultaneously be two different people or conduct two different roles (Williams: 2000). The theme of the two-body problem fits well with an analysis of social relationships and associated support for balance between home and work. Time and energy are finite resources that are constantly divided between home and family demands. When one realm becomes particularly demanding, stress and strain increase. At times, the demands from one realm rival the other and the individual cannot accomplish the required tasks and demands. To maintain daily chores, work and family demands, and still find personal time, the individual then feels the need to be in two places simultaneously (Menzies: 2005; Duxbury: 2003; Yoder: 1999; Kroska: 2004; Fast: 2004; Zukewich: 2003; Thornton: 2005; Wilson: 2005; Hunt and Annandale: 1993).

Kroska’s (2004) research suggests that time is often understood as a commodity – something that can be spent, earned, saved or wasted. With increasing roles and responsibilities, it is more common for individuals to feel as though they are losing control over their time allocation (Kroska: 2004; Fast, Frederick and Statistics Canada: 2004; Zukewich: 2003). Despite individual differences, those who report time scarcity when balancing multiple roles tend to express similar outcomes: “the heaviest work load and the least amount of time for leisure and self-care” (Fast: 2004: 24) were associated with the feeling of being rushed each day. Individuals may juggle time and allocate effort toward the roles that demand more attention at any particular time as a coping
mechanism. However, the competition between dominant work and home roles remains (Hunt and Annandale: 1993).

The last concept to cover in this section is the notion of an “ideal worker”. Ideal workers are historically based on gender-segregated positions and are typically male (Mastekaasa: 2000; Matthews et al: 1997). The concept of an ideal worker is a standard created by the traditional employer who feels he/she is entitled to “demand an ideal worker with immunity from family work. The second constraint is husbands’ rights, and their duty to live up to this work ideal. The third involves the definition of the duties of a mother, as someone whose life should be framed around caregiving” (Williams: 2000: 20). Identifying the traditional definition of an ideal worker highlights the benchmark expectations for past roles – time and energy is devoted to work. Although this version of behaviour is dated and largely unrealistic, the notion of fulfilling these expectations lingers. Moreover, the male and female specific roles are further complicated when both parties are working and trying to support the family. For many employees, trying to fulfill the position of a traditional ideal worker only leads to increased stress and strain (Kinnunen and Mauno: 2001; Lahelma et al: 2002).

2.6 Workplace Structures: Work and Life Balance

Elements that contribute to a sense of balance – such as policies – may directly relate to the satisfaction an individual feels with the role (Crouter and Booth: 2009; Crane and Hill: 2009). Flexible workplace policies are designed and implemented to help individuals achieve work and life balance. These policy practices, such as flexibility or floating vacation days, offer the employee autonomy and some flexibility to redirect and
manage one’s time and energy to meet responsibilities and reduce the negative effects of conflicting roles (Brooker and Eakin: 2001; Lund and Borg: 1999). In addition to formal structures, work cultures can be altered by encouraging communication, approachability and friendliness as natural ways to diffuse uncontrollable stressors (Bliese and Castro: 2000; Lund and Borg: 1999).

Finding balance amidst multiple roles and obligations may result from jockeying time and energy resources to find the right combination, or fit, for the demands (Mullen et al: 2008; Duxbury, Higgins and Coghill: 2003; Zukewich: 2003; Bliese and Castro: 2000; Hibbard and Pope: 1991). Clarke et al. (2004) states that segregating fit and balance as distinctive categories is an innovative idea. Clarke et al (2004) believe, “if individuals can easily meet their work, personal, and family goals, given existing demands, they have a good “fit”” (Clarke, Koch and Hill: 2004: 122). As such, a positive fit can lead to success in balancing family, job and marital satisfaction – all aspects that can contribute to happier, more efficient environments (Todd: 2004; Miller et al: 1998).

A successful work and home life balance reflects the ability of an individual to manage the stress of multiple role responsibilities. Relying on personal networks, whether family, friends, or professionals for support appears to be a critical aspect of work role satisfaction (Wilkins and Beaudet: 1998; Park: 2007; Warren and Johnson: 1995; Achet et al: 1998; Gilmour and Patten: 2007; Himsel and Goldberg: 2003; Clark et al: 2004; Doumas et al: 2003; Elliott: 2003; Lahelma, Arber, Kivela and Roos: 2002; Aronson et al: 2001; Bliese and Castro: 2000). Also important in striking balance and being satisfied in the work role is regular feedback or performance reviews. The guidance helps to develop personal growth and developmental paths at work. The discussion
regarding work performance allows for an assessment of skills, conversation about fit, and offers the employee a sense of accomplishment and praise from his/her efforts. Positive performance reviews reaffirm an employee’s sense of worth and satisfaction at work (Mennino et al: 2005; Schieman et al: 2003). It might also lead to a reward of advancement or specialized training to further elevate the employee’s perception of work satisfaction and overall personal balance (Kossek and Lambert: 2005; Bianchi, Casper and King: 2005).

2.7 Role of the Workplace

Warren and Johnson (1995) focus on three types of coping resources that might be valuable to employees: “family-friendly organizational cultures”; “supportive supervisory practices”; and “family-oriented benefits” (p. 163). The organizational culture may adopt a philosophy or belief structure that is more sensitive to the needs of individuals and their families. In a supportive work culture, employees might be more likely to perceive their workplace as a coping resource. Research suggests that the workplace should share responsibility with the employee in generating solutions for work and family balance (Warren and Johnson: 1995; Cornfield, Giles and Belanger: 2002; Macintyre et al: 2002; Coburn: 2000; Lechner: 1993). For example, the workplace as a shared environment might be an ideal location to increase awareness and offer support. Acknowledging social stresses, developing the right formal supports and altering the institutional focus to address employee well-being is a positive direction for workplaces to move in (Martin: 2001;

2.8 Summary

Employee well-being and work satisfaction is becoming a key retention strategy in today’s marketplace. Workplaces aim to build satisfying work experiences by promoting work and life balance within the culture (Lowe: 2004). The benefits of lowered stress levels may result in more productive employees that are encouraged and able to address both workplace and home life demands. Employees with less stress tend to feel more satisfied in their work role and the shift in attitude may contribute to heightened office morale—a positive work atmosphere.

As discussed, an employee’s personal and work roles may conflict when the individual needs to simultaneously participate in both realms. Role spillover reaffirms that work and home realms are not mutually exclusive, however, support from the work environment can reflect positively on personal roles. Merely ignoring spillover from home to work roles, and vice versa, is counterproductive. Building supportive networks and being aware of the factors contributing to individual stress and strain are effective informal workplace modifications.

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10 Interestingly, Talcott Parsons (1951) coined the concept of “sick role”, a temporary role that grants the individual reprieve from usual role responsibilities. The privileges of the sick role include the reduction of time and energy devoted to social responsibilities, and the expectation that family or friends will provide support (Turner: 2002). When individuals fall into a sick role, also known as a stress role, they are temporarily disabled from fulfilling all of the expectations that are assigned to each of their roles.
Without informal peer and managerial supports, work-related tasks can become unnecessarily stressful. Heightened awareness about the value of working relationships and the impact on individual well-being needs to be demonstrated at the organizational level. Managing competing roles and obligations requires flexibility; collaboration between the organization and employee to balance work and personal roles facilitates stress reduction.

The evolution of workplace design has started to focus on issues related to optimal workplace environments because cultural changes may result in heightened productivity, employee well-being, and role satisfaction. It is evident that individuals can benefit from work environments that have strong support networks to assist in balancing obligations and responsibilities. Organizations may promote work and life balance by developing or updating policies to increase an individual’s flexibility to allocate time and energy among work and life obligations. This gesture of autonomy may ensure that management teams continue to build supportive relationships among employees; ultimately guiding them into more satisfying work experiences.
3. METHODOLOGY

This thesis examines work role quality. It aims to emphasize organizational and managerial structures that contribute to work culture and positively impact an individual’s work experiences. Focus is placed on elements that contribute to the optimal workplace as seen through employee perceptions.

To provide data with thorough contextual descriptions addressing these government workplaces, three interrelated research questions are proposed:

1. Why is it important to recognize an individual’s perception of quality in his/her work role when defining an optimal workplace?
2. How do organizational and managerial structures contribute to the overall work culture and influence the individual’s perception of quality of his or her work roles?
3. How can policy and managerial techniques be guided to achieve an optimal workplace culture and employee experience?

To critically address the subject matter, an interpretive approach was used to showcase the personal “emic” data found within the shared reality of the workplace and personally defined truth of individual experiences. Employee perceptions of the work environment and culture augment the understanding of an “optimal” workplace in this thesis.

3.1 The Study: “Role Quality and Health”

The focus group data used in this thesis are part of the information collected in a larger study entitled, “Role Quality and Health: Influences of Individual, Workplace and
Community Social Supports” (RQH). This study investigated how different levels of social support influence employee health and well-being and how these support systems and their health effects vary on the basis of gender and ancestry.\(^\text{11}\)

The RQH study was structured in two parts: interviews and focus groups. The individual interviews were a purposive\(^ \text{12}\) sample of forty-four employees, recruited from a provincial government department in the northeast region of Saskatchewan. These employees participated in semi-structured interviews, with questions relating to participants’ understanding of various aspects of their health and the work, community, and individual social supports that influenced their health and well-being. The second phase consisted of four follow-up focus groups with eleven of the interviewed participants. The four focus groups consisted of one group of supervisors/managers and three groups of non-managerial employees.

The focus of the analysis from the data used for this thesis does not precisely mirror the focus of the RQH study. Instead, this thesis analyzes the focus group data related to employee perceptions of managerial and organizational structures. Only data obtained from the focus groups is used to identify themes and specifics of how the work environment affects the participants’ sense workplace optimality. Research of this nature expands on existing literature and enables us to better understand the context that may be linked to empirically confirmed research (Schreiber: 1996). Most importantly, the

\(^{11}\) This study was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research through the Institute of Gender and Health, Grant #IGO-63146.

\(^{12}\) Purposive sampling is often used with qualitative research in an attempt to reflect diversity within a given population by offering researchers a degree of control over the sample group. This non-probability sampling technique illuminates subtle but potentially important differences in views and experiences of respondents who have been selected precisely to capture the variation of a group (Barbour: 2001).
purpose of using the focus group data is not to generalize, but to assess whether the comments and outcomes are consistent with related literature and larger studies. As such, the data helps identify elements of the work role that are perceived as important factors in the promotion of a quality work environment.

3.2 The RQH Study: Individual Interviews and Focus Group Questions

The research team used open-ended, multi-layered questions to explore participants’ perceptions of health and well-being. They asked participants how they interpreted both concepts and how such concepts are represented through their experiences (Appendix A: RQH Individual Interview Questions). The health and well-being questions included physical, mental and spiritual dimensions.

There are also questions about workplace conditions and support networks. Researchers inquired about the aspects of the job that helped to fulfill job requirements, and the aspects of a work environment that hinder productivity. The study also included an inquiry about support systems ranging from religious institutions, physical activity centers, community centers to general membership organizations. None of the interview questions specifically requested an individual’s membership information, but the format of questioning allowed the participant to discuss and elaborate on personal involvement in any community outlet.

A question about policies was discussed under the context of policy awareness and family-friendly features of the workplace. Another question examined the level of social support employees supplied to others. The interview design was semi-structured, allowing for participants to define terms, express personal experiences and generally
identify the components of roles, health, support and policies that affect their experiences. Participants were encouraged to think openly of their perceptions or experiences in the home and work worlds and define them by their own standards. The participants were then asked if they would be interested in partaking in a focus group in the future.

Based on the analysis of information from the individual interviews, the following questions were developed by the RQH team and were used in the focus groups to expand on the roles and relationships within workplaces:

1. People commented on the importance of relationships among coworkers and with their supervisors and managers as an aspect of the workplace that affects their health both positively and negatively.
   a. What policies and practices would promote positive relationships?
   b. What policies and practices would promote negative relationships?
   c. Who can make these changes? What is your role in these changes?
2. People commented that workload and caseload pressures and the travel time required on their job contributed to job stress that affects their health.
   a. Which of these factors are most important to address?
   b. What changes could be made?
   c. Who could make these changes? What is your role in these changes?
3. Other comments from the interviews related to the importance of a balance between work and family demands. As you recall from the interview we asked you to comment on specific work-family policies such as flex-time, job sharing, family-friendly culture in the workplace, alternative work arrangements and recognition of child and elder care issues.
   a. Which of these policies are most helpful to you in balancing your work-family demands?
   b. What changes could be made?
   c. Who could make these changes? What is your role in these changes?
   d. Some interview responses suggest there are cultural differences in the definition of family that are currently not reflected in policies and practices in your workplace.
      i. How should family be defined?
      ii. How could workplace family policies and benefits accommodate these views?
4. Are there any other comments you would like to make?
3.3 Phase One: RQH Individual Interviews

For this exploratory study, the team chose a site covering a portion of northeast Saskatchewan, including Prince Albert as the major urban center and four smaller rural service centres. Participants were recruited through employee and manager presentations in several government workplaces. The presentations outlined the purpose and summary of the research project while extending an invitation for voluntary participation. These government departments also granted permission for the RQH team to interview individuals during work hours in an effort to increase participation rates and to show support for workplace research initiatives.

The RQH team requested that willing employees contribute one to two hours of their time to this study. Out of approximately 206 part- and full-time employees ranging from positions of management to supervisory, professional and clerical staff, a sample of 44 participants was interviewed. Interviews (and focus groups) were coded using Atlas-ti 5.0 software. Codes were created and categorized with additional use of a tool called “memo-ing” within Atlas-ti 5.0 to capture thoughts or critical observations about linkages, connections, contradictions or interesting quotations as they emerged. These memos were saved as scratch-pad ideas and were often accessed throughout the analysis by all team members to understand connections between themes and experiences. Each interview participant received a copy of his or her transcription as a means of validation to ensure accuracy and gain approval for the content prior to analyses (Barbour: 2001).
3.4 Phase Two: Focus Groups in this Thesis

To reiterate, there were two phases to the RQH study: 44 interviews with managerial/supervisor and non-managerial employees and 4 follow-up focus group discussions with 11 previously interviewed participants. Research ethics approval was obtained through the University of Regina (Appendix B) first on February 2, 2004 for interviews, and second on January 26, 2006 when a modification to the original ethics submission was submitted and approved. This modification indicated that I would be using focus group data for analysis in my Master’s thesis. The RQH focus group consent form (Appendix C) specified that confidential material would be used in a Master’s thesis to illustrate role quality and health issues in personal and professional domains.

Ethical guidelines prohibit the particulars of the focus group to be shared – these include names, sex, designations, location of interview, or age. Although participants were instructed to avoid using personally identifiable language in the groups, quotations were also checked and de-identified to avoid the disclosure of any identifiable characteristics. When the focus groups were organized, the moderator oriented the participants through a welcome process where she explained the question and response process and obtained informed consent. The moderator presented ground rules for confidentiality and encouraged everyone to be respectful of all opinions. As a result, no answers were right or wrong and feedback remained confidential (Milligan et al. 2002; Kitzinger: 1995).
3.5 Data Collection Activities: Focus Groups

As part of my role within the RQH team, I helped conduct individual interviews in various Northeast Saskatchewan locations. After each interview, I met with the RQH team to debrief and discuss what went well and what did not go as well. Another researcher and I helped to transcribe and code each interview transcript parsimoniously (line by line) (Kidd and Parshall: 2000). In addition, the team members with experience conducting interviews and focus groups trained me to moderate focus groups and taught me how to be an active listener. Of the four focus groups, I observed three and led one.

The focus group sample was one of convenience\(^{13}\) and availability (Berg: 2001; Neuman: 2007). As such, this non-probability convenience sample has a few notable limitations, which are discussed below. For example, qualitative focus groups are time consuming because they require extensive amounts of time to organize, conduct, transcribe, analyze and report the findings. Moreover, the sample size is relatively small as compared to other quantitative research (Neuman: 2007). As a result of the size, the data does not include all variability, meaning that the results may show a distortion or skewed reality. Therefore, the research is not generalizable. In fact, the results of a small population will not be applicable to an entire population of government employees. However, these drawbacks do not refute the value of this research. As stated previously, the goal and success of this research is measured by the ability to gain in-depth information and analysis of an employee’s experience.

\(^{13}\) A convenience sample, also known as a sample of availability, relies on participants that easily accessible. This strategy has been considered an excellent means when obtaining preliminary information quickly and inexpensively (Berg: 2001)
Each focus group interview, lasting from 60-90 minutes, was audiotaped and transcribed. Similar to the individual interviews, focus group participants were instructed not to use identifiable names or places during the interview. Therefore, if a participant accidentally referenced another person or specific department, we neutralized specific references in the transcript to maintain confidentiality (Grant and Giddings: 2002). The only other person who had access to personal references was the transcribing team member, and that person was bound by a confidentiality contract to eliminate personal and identifiable references.

Relationship building is important for focus group success. Focus groups require the interviewer or moderator to build trust into the context of the discussion. Although confidentiality could not be assured because of the number of people involved, onus was on the moderator to encourage participants so that information exchanged during the focus group would remain private as well as to respect each other’s opinions and reciprocate confidentiality (McLafferty: 2004).

I and another researcher coded and transcribed the focus group discussions. To strengthen our analysis and check the work, we used “member-checking” (Flick: 2002), which meant we both coded focus groups and checked each other’s work. This approach offered an element of reliability. The inter-related14 reliability helps to target researchers’ disagreement in the content and furnish alternative interpretations to the data and context by means of reaching an agreeable conclusion (Kidd and Parshall: 2000; Barbour: 2001; Flick: 2002). The rest of the RQH team then reviewed the coded transcripts, where each member individually studied the thematic coding to check for discrepancies. Any

14 Inter-related reliability involves cross-checking coding strategies and interpretations of data by independent researchers (Barbour: 2001).
divergence in the material was discussed openly at team meetings until a consensus was agreed upon and our interpretation made sense to everyone on the team.

3.6 The Interpretive Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm develops through listening to people. It differs from other research approaches by seeking to understand human perspectives and meaning attached to life events (Grant and Giddings: 2002). Furthermore, emphasis is placed on considering the situation or circumstance as part of truth in understanding participants’ reality and experiences (McLafferty: 2004). As such, the truth of a situation evolves from personal reflection and discovery rather than sensory observation. Ultimately, researchers, in this paradigm, interact and relate to the participants’ efforts to understand the meanings they ascribe to each personal experience. Obviously, listening and observing is critical to this approach; it allows researchers to capture the essence of the experience (Grant and Giddings: 2002).

The interpretive research approach is receiving renewed attention in a number of disciplines because it challenges what constitutes knowledge (Hudson and Ozanne: 1988). For example, interpretivist research is based on a participant’s socially constructed reality – the way they shape meaning and contribute to their social environment. As such, this approach is contextual, voluntaristic, context-dependent, time-bound, simultaneous, interactive, and cooperative and it does not give the researcher a privileged point of observation (Hudson and Ozanne: 1988).

Indeed, interpretivists deny that one world exists, which means they embrace the viewpoint that reality morphs based on individual mental and experiential perceptions.
Reality is (and becomes) the accumulation of socially constructed situations that are the sum of continually changing parts. From this holistic approach, situations and conditions are dependent on each other for meaning, and researchers need to study not only the individuals, but also the context in which they exist (Hudson and Ozanne: 1988). As a researcher, my role was to seek to understand motives, meanings, reasons and experiences that are specific to the individual’s life through their descriptions and subcultural vernacular (Geertz: 1973; Hudson and Ozanne: 1988; Fielding and Fielding: 1986).

In view of that, interpretivist research focuses on the understanding that people are unique and complex. As a result, research is descriptive and detailed in presentation. It focuses on assessing an individual’s experiences without generalizing. This research is also considered “emic”—it seeks those “constructs or behaviours that are unique to an individual, sociocultural context that are not generalizable” (Ponterotto: 2005: 128). Therefore, meaning is hidden within the experiences and context each individual creates and cannot be separated from the situation without losing relevance and accuracy. To reiterate, while interpretivist research is geared to individual experience, it is not generalizable and does not seek consensus on themes. Instead, it presents detailed transactional and subjective evidence from personal impressions—senses and mental pictures that allow the researcher to better understand an individual’s action or context.

Clifford Geertz (1973) approaches interpretive research as an anthropological understanding, claiming that interpretation comes from understanding individual expression and the social symbol system through metaphors, analogies or parables (Hudson and Ozanne: 1988). As researchers are unable to live a participant’s experiences
and feel his/her feelings, they must instead rely on interpreting the description that accompanies the evidence (Geertz: 1973). This description focuses on the culture surrounding individual experiences as a way to gain an explanation about a particular phenomenon (Hudson and Ozanne: 1988). Individuals change reality as they develop new perceptions based on their personal interactions (Blumer: 1969; Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds: 1975; Hudson and Ozanne: 1988). Furthermore, because data are determined by a reality as defined by individuals or groups, a natural bias exists.

The grounded theory approach is the “market leader” in qualitative research because it studies the content and awareness around data (Ponterotto: 2005; McLeod: 2001). In this thesis, grounded theory is used primarily as a technique for coding the qualitative data. It is an approach that inductively\(^{15}\) derives theory about a phenomenon by extracting re-occurring themes (Strauss and Corbin: 1990). Thus, this ethnographic inquiry builds theory from the data. As grounded theory is considered an approach to processing data, the formulation of theories are considered “grounded” in a participant’s real world (Chenitz and Swanson: 1986; Schreiber: 1996; Babbie: 2001). In fact, grounded theory assumes that each social group shares an unarticulated basic social problem that can be examined by each participant’s lived experience.

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\(^{15}\) Induction is the constant comparison of coded data required for the generation of theory. As data is coded and analyzed, ideas and insights develop into a theory to enhance understanding of a subject and encompass all other considerations. With induction, researchers resist preconceived ideas and focus on concepts to emerge (Strauss and Corbin: 1990; Heath and Cowley: 2004).
3.6.1 Symbolic Interactionism and Role Theory

Symbolic interactionism is commonly associated with the interpretivist paradigm (Avramidis and Smith: 1999; Geertz: 1973). For this reason, symbolic interactionism is discussed here as it relates to this study’s overall research approach. Theorists framing “symbolic interactionism” claim that in order to understand social behaviour, research must incorporate the perspectives of those participants involved in the interaction (Babbie: 2001; Mead: 1934; Berg: 2001). It emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of others and offers the possibility for social interaction, openness, human agency and self learning or development (Babbie: 2001). Further, the interaction is the compilation of self and social relations that are context-dependent and within the confines of the person’s social structure and his/her understanding of the experience (Stryker: 2002: 212). As such, symbolic interactionism was built upon the presumption that human beings are active agents that shape their realities through communication, interaction and symbols.

George Herbert Mead offered a framework for structural symbolic interactionism\textsuperscript{16}, which is summarized next (Stryker: 2002: 224-225; Mead: 1934; Blumer: 1962). He suggests that the human experience is socially organized and shaped by a person’s location in the social structure. Therefore, experience is the culmination of relationships, groups, networks and institutions that play roles in developing an individual’s perceptions. Social life becomes the construction of collective activities and environments that form meaning and interaction. As such, individuals are actors within

\textsuperscript{16} Mead coined the term symbolic interactionism with the perspective that people act based on self-assigned meaning. The said meanings are derived from social interaction which is modified through personal interpretation (Blumer: 1962).
different roles and environments, where adaptive behaviour is required based on personal navigation of situations.

In addition, subjective interpretations and symbolic understanding is central to social life. Mead claims that there is no reality outside of definitions and interpretations (Stryker: 2002), thereby making social construction part of the individual’s responsibilities. Individuals mediate their behaviour and how they relate to society based on the social context and perceptions shaping their surroundings. Consequently, they have some freedom in action, but may be constrained, or may not have enough control to influence factors beyond their role or membership in society. This summary is especially reflective of how the workplace constitutes a shared environment that is open to subjective interpretation based on each employee’s own experiences.

Mead and his colleague Herbert Blumer shaped symbolic interactionist theory by analyzing social processes (Stryker: 2002: 215; Turner: 2002; Blumer: 1969). As part of this theory, Mead asserted that human survival is dependent on communication between individuals, and around solutions to problems and social interaction. This means that an individual’s experience and concept of “self” emerges from mingling in their social environment, which allows them to understand the symbols within their life while making sense of their role (Stryker: 2002: 216; Mead: 1934). Moreover, Mead (1934) suggests that individuals can choose their actions by imagining the role they want to fill. Not surprising, playing the role helps individuals interact effectively with other roles and assimilate to societal expectations. In doing so, the individual avoids feelings of isolation and disconnect—what Durkheim calls “anomie” (Turner: 2002; Parson: 1951).
Turner (2002) separates roles into three categories: functionality, representationality, and tenability (p. 236). “Functionality” includes roles that are typically understood by the division of labour. These roles may be further segregated by different skill sets, knowledge, diversity of actual or potential characteristics, and by compatibility of goals and means. “Representationality” often incorporates an image of what the role should hold, requiring individuals to hold same characteristics and be willing to grow into the reputation or image of what that role means socially. “Tenability” roles balance benefits and costs to the role incumbent (240). These roles contribute to role character through adding or enhancing benefits, while offsetting or minimizing costs.

Although these role differentiations outline social functionality, a critique of role theory is that it does not offer enough support by way of individual choice and choice beyond traditional practice. Therefore, we cannot assume that individual behaviour is the result of an associated role or that it is simply a reflection of a person’s daily negotiation of reality (Stryker: 2002). Historical social conditions do not dictate emergent interpretations or social interaction and therefore may not adequately consider the changing social content and myriad of variables or symbols that are left for individual development.

### 3.6.2 Interpretivist Considerations

As much as interpretivist research extracts depth from personal experiences, there are a few notable critiques. First, and quite obvious, interpretivist researchers need to be aware of their biases. It is important to reflect on the reactions and emotional impacts
derived from participant experiences. Although some bias helps with understanding and relating to situational differences, when interpreting each experience, any preconceived notions must be acknowledged (Rubinstein: 1981; Thorns: 1976).

According to Hudson and Ozanne (1988), researchers rely on empathy to understand and identify with an experience despite the argument that it is nonsensical to assume they can experience the situation through participant thoughts. As a result, it is important to pay attention to intentional actions or conscious decisions rather than consider what other factors might be involved in understanding the features of a social phenomenon (Rubinstein: 1981). That being said, researchers must also consider the features of a social setting rather than focusing too heavily on the individual. The final critique relates to the proximity of the researcher to those they observe. This suggests that participant observation might impede on normal activities of those studied because they may become too close to the subject and unable to step back and remove any biases when considering the social and cultural backgrounds (Thorns: 1976; Hudson and Ozanne: 1988). Rather than compromising the experience and data collection, Hudson and Ozanne (1988) argue that boundaries are often blurred when studying culture or groups. Perhaps the relationship between researcher and participant adds a dimension of understanding to surface data, allowing for the experiences to be felt and heard.

3.7 What are Focus Group Interviews?

Originally coined as “focused interviews” (Merton: 1987), focus groups are now defined as an interview-style approach for small groups, designed to extract information about life structures and experiences (Fern: 1982; Kitzinger: 1995). Focus groups help
researchers identify general areas of agreement and controversy according to individual perspectives (Kidd and Parshall: 2000). A moderator or facilitator generally monitors participant contributions and ensures the topics or issues of interest guiding these small group discussions undergo a semi-structured review.

The moderator guides the conversation based on a pre-determined question set, and probes for details from the participants when required (as explained in the RQH study description). Ideally, moderators are neutral members of the focus group because they do not side with one opinion or suggest a direction for the conversation. Moderators discuss the importance of confidentiality and ensure that the members are comfortable to decline participation at any time (Fern: 1982; McLafferty: 2004). Skilled moderators have the ability to sense and monitor the emotional level of the conversation and offer a calming and measured reaction (Kidd and Parshall: 2000).

A skilled and expert moderator is critical for promoting group conversation (Fern: 1982; Kidd and Parshall: 2000). Moderators explain the research goals, build trust, encourage a confidential interaction, promise no repercussions and keep the conversation on track through the use of open-ended questions (McLafferty: 2004). Moreover, the moderator’s activities also include “controlling dominant respondents, activating shy respondents, extending the range of the discussion, regulating interactions, coping with interruptions, and counteracting the leader effect” (Fern: 1982: 2). Ultimately, they ask the questions and remain neutral through the responses.

Focus group settings should be relaxed and calm (Kitzinger: 1995). For RQH, the office setting sufficed because it was familiar. When administered properly, focus groups offer dynamic and original data. As Berg (2001) points out, “interactions among and
between group members stimulate discussion in which one group member reacts to comments made by another” (112). This discussion is also known as a “synergistic group effect”, allowing participants to collectively brainstorm about ideas, issues and solutions. This brainstorming dynamic strengthens focus groups.

3.7.1 Focus Group Strengths

Focus groups have merit in several areas. They encourage open and individual responses. For example, the group effect can help participants feel safe to share experiences; the multiple voices allow for some depth in responses, and there is an opportunity to follow-up and expand the dialogue if clarification is necessary. Another benefit of focus group interviews is that researchers can closely observe human interaction and have access to substantive content through opinions, views and biographical experiences (Berg: 2001). Where single interviews pursue detailed information, observing participants’ spontaneous reactions to other opinions and the expansion of thought is where focus groups are strongest. As such, witnessing group members respond to one another provides insight into contextual interactions.

Many group sessions can be “phenomenological,” meaning that through the discussion of topics, themes are unearthed to define and describe an issue common to all participants, but one that is perceived differently (Berg: 2001: 116). This is a positive result, one that helps us understand workplace conditions through employee’s perceptions.

Participants are not selected randomly; the selection of focus group members tends to be decided based on shared characteristics or experiences. As such, “naturally
occurring” group dynamics means the participants come from the same setting and can all speak of their personal experiences regarding a consistent environment (Kitzinger: 1995). Another benefit to this model is that during focus groups, participants can share a common frame of reference (Kidd and Parshall: 2000). Thus, the data are layered with practical feedback and hands-on knowledge about the subject matter, in this case, workplaces.

As mentioned earlier, the importance of having a facilitator or moderator to unobtrusively and effectively guide the conversation is paramount. The moderator must be mindful of ethical issues and act responsibly to ensure the participants are not pressured or uncomfortable when sharing their information. As Babbie (2002) notes, the researcher’s presence is a powerful technique for gaining insights that are full of human complexity. The observations and conceptualizations are valuable because the social realm in which they are studied frames the data.

Some evidence suggests that focus groups participants find the experience more stimulating than self-administered open-ended surveys because of the spontaneous dialogue and interaction (Kidd and Parshall: 2000; Bristol and Fern: 1996; Calder: 1977). In fact, generating various ideas, opinions, and a range of insight that may encourage individuals to expand on their theories or consider another’s viewpoint might be beneficial to those involved (Fern: 1982; Wilkinson: 1998; Carey: 1994; McLafferty: 2004). This means focus groups allow for a broad range of clearly articulated responses that might have otherwise been missed (Kidd and Parshall: 2000).

Another significant advantage of focus groups resides in the purposeful interaction of the participants (McLafferty: 2004). Indeed, communication among
participants generates anecdotal and experiential data useful for analyses (Kitzinger: 1995). The group interviews are a flexible approach to exploring opinions, experiences, attributes and the testing of personal ideas (Fern: 1982). Focus group data can stand alone to provide quality responses and details to questions that go beyond numbers to introduce emotion and personal explanation.

### 3.7.2 Focus Group Challenges

There are a few important focus group criticisms that must be addressed before embarking on the focus group approach. One common drawback is that other group members may influence focus group discussion. This influence can often have unintended or unwanted effects on participant behaviour and contribution (Fern: 1982). In some cases, the group dynamic may prevent individuals from voicing any dissent to the dominant opinion because they feel intimidated or influenced by others (Kitzinger: 1995; Kidd and Parshall: 2000; Fern: 1982). In an ideal focus group setting, the participants naturally provide some mutual support through the expression of common feelings and shared experiences. Regardless, if a participant feels uncomfortable or unsupported, he or she may not be forthcoming with necessary information.

Another concern is maintaining confidentiality. While it may be easy for the researcher to de-identify transcribed discussions and make reference to short and anonymous quotes, confidentiality concerns may restrict data flow (Berg: 2001). Confidentiality can never truly be “guaranteed” because there is always a risk that someone will violate the privacy agreement (Kitzinger: 1995). However, without some assurance of confidentiality, the focus group may not solicit truthful and free-flowing
discussions because of apprehension or fear. Ultimately, the reluctance to disclose feelings and experiences can easily hinder a successful interview.

In terms of this thesis, there is a noteworthy drawback to the focus group model. The limited sample size of 11 participants produces limited material and restricts any significant first-hand comparisons that could have been made, for example, between employees and supervisors, different age groups, women and men, or temporary, part-time or full-time staff. This also means the focus groups may not have been able to capture all of the variability of experiences or opinions within the group discussions. However, as will be discussed in the upcoming section, the analysis gaps are supported through related empirical review and transcripts that produce more than adequate data to frame our understanding of workplace optimality.

3.8 “Crystallisation” as an Alternative to Triangulation\(^\text{17}\): The Literature Review

Literature was used to substantiate the predominant themes of workplace research and to compare individual experiences. Specifically, the intent was to connect employee’s perceptions and experiences from the focus group data to previously published, mostly quantitative, findings about workplace conditions, their determinants and their impacts. This process also serves to identify those areas that can be better highlighted through qualitative methodology.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that while triangulation relies on the notion of a superior explanation against which other interpretations can be measured, the

\(^{17}\) Triangulation addresses the issue of internal validity by using more than one method of data collection to answer a research question (Barbour: 2001: 1117).
present research is carried out from an interpretivist, “relativist” perspective that emphasizes the existence of multiple perspectives—considering them of equal worth and validity (Barbour: 2001). As such, my use of the literature does not readily endorse hierarchal evidence. In line with Richardson’s (1991) “crystallisation”, it is better to see this process as an attempt toward augmentation rather than toward competing perspectives, with the intent to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon studied (cited in Barbour: 2001). Thus, any apparent contradictions or competing theories do not pose a threat to the explanations presented by individual participants; they merely provide further scope for refining our understanding of this subject (Barbour: 1991: 1117).

Peer-reviewed studies were identified using the University of Regina library’s search engine (e.g., JSTOR, PROQUEST and EBSCO) and the library catalogue, with focus on articles published between 2002 and 2010. Google Scholar was also used to locate a wider variety of research to ensure that all pertinent literature was identified and included. The keyword parameters used during the empirical search included: “role quality”, “health”, “wellness”, “role balance”, “well-being”, “gender”, “socio-economic status”, “mortality”, “morbidity” and “workplace”. The breadth of this search produced over 500 documents worthy of consideration. I used this selection to further direct the search to isolate research articles, reports and books that were most applicable to the North American context. I also searched for recent Canadian empirical research in Statistics Canada’s website.

To organize the abundance of information, a working Excel database was created to group and sort the various research articles by themes. This table organized the articles by author, year, title, notes and keywords. A second table was created to summarize the
most relevant studies by identifying the methodology used in each including the sample, instrument and design and the outcome and independent variables (Appendix D). In turn, Appendix E summarized the most important findings with a focus on the determinants and significance of different workplace variables and role experiences.

3.9 Summary

Using the data from eleven focus group participants, coupled with grounded theory as an approach for data analysis, several workplace attributes were identified as contributing factors to a quality work role. The findings are discussed in the next chapter (IV).
4. RESULTS

Throughout this thesis, an interpretivist approach was used to analyse focus group data, while three interrelated research questions helped to guide the investigation. These questions helped probe how individuals interpret quality within the work role, identified how the workplace culture influences their specific relationships with managers, and revealed the formal supports available for employees to achieve a sense of workplace optimality.

Chapter IV analyses focus group data aimed at understanding the foundations of the workplace experience and the employee dynamics that shape perceived role quality. There are notable similarities within two sub-sections addressing the notion of support. In the first instance, employee perception of overall work quality is explored. In the second, employee perception of organizational and managerial structures are examined; both in relation to enhanced support as it contributes to the overall work culture.

As we will see below, the data provides evidence to suggest that employee perceptions about their work environment create and define an optimal workplace. This section explores the experience of a small and select sample of Government of Saskatchewan employees, in turn, providing feedback on their roles. This feedback is both personal and entwined with relationships that help them evaluate workplace optimality.
4.1 Why is it important to recognize an individual’s perception of quality in his/her work role when defining an optimal workplace?

An employee’s perception of the workplace shapes the culture, values and individual experience. Vetted through employee experience, an optimal workplace becomes subjective based on work characteristics identified through each employee’s viewpoint. By using focus group data, common themes or characteristics have been identified as variables contributing to an optimal workplace.

4.1.1 Flexible, Family-Friendly Culture

Increased flexibility in the work environment offers autonomy, allows for flex-time policies, and generally helps the employee achieve work and life balance. Flex-time policies can result in higher job satisfaction, lower absenteeism and turnover, improved job performance, lower accident rates and reduced health benefit costs (Quinlan, Mayhew and Bohle: 2001; Emslie, Hunt and Macintyre: 1999; Lowe: 2003; Murphy and Zagorski: 2005). For employees, flexible solutions may include job sharing, part-time employment, telecommuting, working from home, and flexible start and stop times, all of which can relate to perceived better role quality.

The rationale behind flexible initiatives is to consider the balance and accommodation required to navigate work and family roles (Dorio, Bryant and Allen: 2008; Korabik et al: 2008; Elliott: 2003; Clark et al: 2004). Duxbury (2003) states workplace flexibility designs help to eliminate unnecessary stress for both employees and management. Similarly, Elliott (2003) surveyed 1,200 participants to understand the impacts of role strain, concluding that flexibility allowed increased balance in multiple
It was found that role strain commonly resulted in absenteeism, job turnover and lowered productivity, which only increases costs for employers. Similar to the focus group feedback, these findings suggest that without flexibility stress is more likely to occur, ultimately increasing dissatisfaction due to role strain.

Focus group participants relayed the value of flexible work hours, job sharing options, education, family leave, wellness programs and child and eldercare programs. One participant noted, “We do have some ability to use flex time. So, if I need to come in a little later or leave a little earlier, I have the option of working through the lunch hour, coming in earlier, leaving later the next day and that usually works quite well.” Another respondent stated, “I love the flexibility … going on an extended lunch hour, to work off some of the time banked, and it’s never an issue. I love that part of it.” Therefore, flexibility in the workplace allowed participants to reduce the rigidity of their work hours or practices and accommodate their personal responsibilities, when necessary.

Increasing the quality and satisfaction of work roles might be derived from partial control over one’s life through increased autonomy and access to flexible policies. Workplaces that promote flexibility through policies and the autonomy to use them create an environment that enhances an individual’s ability to manage and cope with increasing demands from work roles (Thompson and Prottas: 2009; Crouter and Booth: 2009; Crane and Hill: 2009). One focus group participant notes: “I think the flex-time is really good and I’ve been fortunate in my job to have had that,” succinctly portraying satisfaction with flexibility.

However, not all workplace policies have a positive impact on role strain or spillover. Mennino (2005) studied 3,718 employed people and found that role spillover is
not entirely mitigated by use and access to flexible policies. At times, pressure and work demands trump the attempt to balance personal and professional roles despite any formal supports such as policies. Competing roles may negatively impact employees to a point where they are unable to recuperate from the drain on their time, energy and health (Todd: 2004; Barnett and Marshall: 1991; Cotton and Fisher: 1995).

Although flex-time policies propose a solution to time and energy constraints, participants in the focus groups identified a few concerns as well. Challenges at the organizational level include heavy workloads, cultures that do not support work and life balance, and mismanagement of the flexibility feature. For example, one focus group discussant noted, “the flex-time sounds really good and it generally is really good but sometimes it works against you, as well … there are times where it can be quite inconvenient too because the flex time means that you’re working flex-hours, [and] you’re taking calls after hours.” Overall, participants praised this workplace feature but were mindful of its limitations.

Other concerns expressed involved the interpretation and enforcement of flex-time policies. Some participants noted that the downside to these policies was their dependency on supervisory discretion, or on the supervisor’s interpretation of the employee’s perceived need. Consistent findings were noted in the literature, confirming that employees reluctantly entrusted supervisors to interpret and discretionarily execute policies (Brooker and Eakin: 2001; Lund and Borg: 1999; Siegrist: 1996). In more extreme cases, focus group participants reported that at times it was inconvenient to ask for flex-time. One participant felt uncomfortable justifying his/her personal need for flexibility to the supervisor. Focus group respondents noted that criteria associated with
flexible policies were somewhat intrusive on personal privacy. As a result, requesting flex-time became more of a plea than a request.

The evidence from the focus groups seems to suggest that interpretation and enforcement of policies may vary, depending on the individual’s position in the workplace. This finding was consistent with the literature (Figart and Mutari: 1998; Coburn: 2000; Greenhaus: 2009; Cornfield: 2001). One participant stated, “I guess there are some people that might take advantage of [the flexibility],” but the misuse of the benefit can happen at any level of the organization so he/she concluded it was unfair to generalize. In ideal circumstances, the access and use of these policies accommodates the need to manage competing responsibilities. Flexibility and the benefits associated with flex-time provides individuals with some protection from high workloads and stress, and offers autonomy to manage outcomes of work-life balance.

4.1.2 Support and Role Quality

example, Shye et al. (1995) states, “social networks function to meet basic emotional needs for social integration, reassurance of worth … as well as practical needs for assistance, guidance, [and] advice” (p. 935). In other words, a network of shared coping and support reduces negative workplace experiences.

Formal and informal support networks reaffirm the connection, support and compassion employees share during varying or challenging circumstances (Rose: 2000). This same support may also encourage individuals to help each other out when the workload is heavy or stress is high, thus acting as a buffer to the stress and strain employees endure (Warren and Johnson: 1995; Palmer, Cooper and Thomas: 2004; Secret: 2000). Wilkins and Beaudet (1998) studied 9,023 Canadians aged 18 to 64 using the National Population Health Survey to assess work stress, strain and occupational health. They found that workplace support, specifically relationships among peers and supervisors, decreased effects of psychological stress, adverse health outcomes and depression. This reaffirms the necessity of collegial work relations and the importance of communicative work relationships (Lowe et al: 2003). After all, employees are more loyal, feel greater satisfaction and report elevated levels of productivity when they feel cared for and supported in the workplace (Dunn and Hayes: 2000; Dolbier and Steinhardt: 2000).

Cornfield and colleagues (2001) report that co-worker relations can be either beneficial or conflictual (Hodson: 1998). Their ethnographic evidence reveals that solidarity and peer conflict, as principle dimension of co-worker relations, are key determinants of job satisfaction, meaningful work, and relations with management (Cornfield, Campbell and McCammon: 2001). Research indicates that employees in
supportive work environments had greater job and life satisfaction, less stress and showed more commitment to the organization (Thompson and Prottas: 2009; Crouter and Booth: 2009).

Thompson and Prottas (2009) admit the factors contributing to a supportive organizational culture are generally unknown until the work culture develops. Moreover, formal construction of policies, job design and performance rewards do not determine if these will support balance for employees (Batt and Valcour: 2003; Glass and Estes: 1997; Briscoe: 2009). The need for support may be especially true for women, who can be perceived to have additional needs as they balance work and family responsibilities (Fuhrer and Stansfeld: 2002; Strobino, Grason and Minkovitz: 2002). This directly relates to the amount of help from work relationships that allow for coping and mitigating stress (Drach-Zahavy and Somech: 2008; Korabik: 2008; Behson: 2002).

Similar to the literature review findings, the focus group data highlight that a critical part of workplace support comes from relationships with peers. As one focus group participant stated, “If I see a co-worker struggling and if there’s something I can do for that moment for that day, I think that … I should [help].” Although choosing to help is a courtesy among work peers, it was more formally suggested that, “if somebody is struggling and the supervisors think that [someone] could do something to help out, I think that the supervisor has the role to ask me to do that and to make it more official.” The quote suggests that employees and employers both share responsibility to offer and enforce a supportive environment. This means offering support becomes a mandate—part of the culture – and recognized to improve the quality of the work role and as such, an opportunity to enhance employees’ perceived role quality.
Communication is another offer of workplace support is. It is the ability to voice concerns on the employee’s side and actively listen to individual experiences on management’s end. One focus group participant stated, “I know that it really, really makes a big difference in the workplace if you feel like you are being listened to and respected. It makes people feel happier to come to work … it’s the same job but just the attitude of the supervisor really does make a big difference. It really does.” Beyond listening, the opportunity to engage in a conversation with a supervisor or manager helps employees connect and build work relationships. Having a talk offers the chance to show support, empathy, concern, and allow someone to vent frustrations with someone else who understands the environment.

From the participants, support from colleagues was a commonly stated work environment benefit. Supportive coworkers helped individuals balance stress and pressure of high caseload expectations by providing the “I-have-your-back” attitude. Focus group data confirmed that employees who felt supported in their work environment had a higher perceived role quality and literature supports the benefits of social networks, listening and sharing work concerns and experiences (Korabik: 2008; Fuhrer and Stansfeld: 2002).

4.1.3 Work – Life Balance and Fit

Optimal work environments contribute to an individual’s perceived role quality by lessening stress in both their personal and work roles. As such, the overriding theme of enhancing an individual’s perceived role quality centres on personal satisfaction, accessible policies, and communicative cultures. Thus, the daily function of balancing
work and life roles is part of an employee’s experience and becomes a strong work environment attribute that can help optimize a workplace.


Workplace efforts to improve flexibility helped balance work-life conflict by providing individuals with more control over their resources (Murphy and Zagorski: 2005; Halpern and Murphy: 2005; Warren and Johnson: 1995). Warren and Johnson (1995) used a role strain questionnaire on 116 employed mothers managing multiple roles at home and work. Findings were similar to the focus group data: support at work helps decrease strain in other roles. It might also lessen another negative aspect of the job – burnout (Voydanoff: 2008; Korabik et al: 2008).

In terms of this thesis, the focus group data demonstrated the importance of recognition when it came to managing various roles. One participant stated, “I think that when supervisors and management respect that you have a life away from the office, it’s very rewarding to people.” In other words, when personal obligations are fundamentally respected, employees feel as though the necessary supports to control competing
responsibilities exist. Here, merely recognizing that work may spill into personal time was a satisfactory consideration.

Focus group participants shared that supervisors or managers could be very helpful in the plight for work-life fit. One participant expressed appreciation for a supervisor who respects work and home challenges, and how this support and acknowledgement created better working relationships: “[my supervisor] has an expectation that we should all have lives after hours, and that’s really nice … my supervisor really respects down-time.” Not only did this supervisor consider the employee’s role strain, but he/she also understood the positional demands and respected the amount of energy required to fulfill this role.

Optimal workplaces are those that support an individual in achieving work-life balance by facilitating a flexible work environment. Both the literature and focus group data complemented the other with similar conclusions to support the notion that flexibility is an important attribute to attain work and life balance. Strong employee and supervisory relations create trust and acknowledgement for role demands and the need for autonomy; solutions for both employee and employer.

### 4.2 How do organizational and managerial structures contribute to the overall work culture and influence the individual’s perception of quality in their work roles?

Between workplace culture and managerial skill, the employee builds a perception of quality and assesses satisfaction within the work role. Focus group data highlighted the importance of support and communication, and how these properties influence the overall workplace experience.
4.2.1 Support and other Desirable Workplace Characteristics

This sub-section supplements the earlier discussion about peer support. Similar to the employee’s perception of role quality at work with respect to peer support, the focus here shifts to organizational and managerial structures that are beneficial to the employee’s role and the work culture.


Part of implementing a balanced approach requires managers and supervisors to build interpersonal relationships with the employee group. The personal connections facilitate a broader understanding of daily stress and the challenges employees face at that level of the organization (House, Landis and Umberson: 1988).

Focus group findings corroborated the literature review conclusions. Most focus group participants noted they valued strong working relationships with co-workers. These work environments were likely more amicable, friendly and supportive – deeming them as more desirable places to work. Focus group participants who helped others when
workload flexibility was needed believed the workplace offered a platform for support and work-life balance.

Participants acknowledged that supportive co-workers helped them balance stress and pressure of high caseload expectations. One participant stated: “I think we should take more time out to talk to each other and communicate more effectively because I think a lot of times we get all caught up in our own work and what we’ve got to do and everyone’s stressed [getting] it done.” Even the ability to speak freely about concerns or feelings of stress associated with work, became an outlet to better manage their stress. Plus, the shared experience of the workplace and similar stressors helped the participants connect.

Another participant reflected on the notion of support: “It can’t just be the support that we get from the office, but we need to have a good personal support system that also helps us out when we’re having a very stressful time at work.” This quote emphasizes one point not as commonly discussed in the literature; confirming the value of workplace relationships and supports but reminding that it is only a partial support function. People also need personal support to offset stress and strain from work spillover.

As far as the work support is concerned, one participant suggested that as an employee, he/she would like to be more involved with decision-making and policy creation to harness a stronger feeling of “team”. This employee believed that getting active in formal workplace activities was a perfect opportunity to express opinions, share experiences, provide expertise, and also offers additional exposure and face-time with supervisors and manager. As stated, “how can we work as a team if we’re not part of a
team, we are just the players [and get the] game plan after the fact.” This notion identifies the importance of inclusion and is a direct solution to the desired workplace characteristic of having approachable and visible supervisors and managers.

Another point of differentiation is that focus group data highlighted a relationship variation between employees/managers and employees/supervisors. Managers were more removed from the daily work functions and were not always accessible, whereas supervisors had closer relations, showed greater visibility especially through a reporting relationship, and seemed more approachable. It appeared to be the relationships with supervisors that provided the most support and offered the most compassion for the conflicting roles and strain that front-line employees endured.

From the feedback, it appeared that supervisors had a direct level of exposure to front-line employees. The proximity made supervisors more attuned to workload issues. They had a better grasp of daily battles and their employees’ problems. As a result, it was easier for supervisors to offer support when they had a thorough understanding of the negative workplace attributes. A participant encapsulated this by saying, “the supervisors are there for us every day. The management, we may not see them for weeks.” Managers were not typically on-site and possessed a removed understanding of how the office functions. The distance between employee and manager made supportive relationships more difficult to obtain; and ultimately did not create an optimal work environment.

4.2.2 Communication

Communication is an individual’s ability to relate to others and share experiences. Expressing happiness or even concerns helps to link people to their environments and
understand their strengths and limitations in the workplace. As will be discussed, focus group participants confirmed they used open-door communication to actively reduce tension, to engage in informal conversation, and to lessen the health-related effects of dissatisfaction in stressful work environments.

In the literature, the benefit of communication was not commonly explored (at least not to the extent that it appears in the focus group data). The way in which support networks tie employees to supervisors and peers requires communication to build trust and reduce stress, and most would agree proper communication increases satisfaction with work roles (Warren and Johnson: 1995; Achat et al: 1998; Schieman et al: 2003; Lowe et al: 2003; Himsel and Goldberg: 2003). One participant stated, “[W]e certainly have training on how to communicate with clients so I think there could be training on how to communicate with co-workers.”

Typically, workplaces embracing “back and forth” communication and problem solving techniques appear to be desirable. In such a situation, employees appear to feel valued and have hands-on experience with organizational problem solving, making positive contributions to the workplace (Vermeulen and Mustard: 2000). Moreover, effective two-way communication helps address dilemmas and leaves employees feeling more satisfied, comfortable and supported in their work environment (Bliese and Castro: 2000).

A study participant stated that the goal is to set an example by creating a safe place to discuss issues: “Just listening … and letting [employees] vent … [I realize] that lots of times…listening and respecting the fact that they are feeling that way about certain things helps. And interestingly, some of the smallest things that I’ve done have made the
biggest impact.” Indeed, allowing workplace members to express opinions or contribute to organizational discussions gave them a sense of belonging.

Open communication not only helps create a supportive environment, it also has beneficial impacts on the efficiency of the work environment by means of work processes and transparency as indicated in this response:

There are times where I think it would be nice to have … the middle manager … be more connected to what we do on a daily basis. And not to say that they should be there all the time, but maybe to be there for major events during meetings where we discuss major concerns or new policies are coming out and how are we addressing new situations or things that are coming up.

In another instance, one participant’s comment reflected a manager’s positive habits, and how these habits increased awareness for departmental issues, “relaying information to staff and at the same time doing a check-in with each supervisor to see how they are managing with their respective units … is good in the sense that there seems to be that information sharing from the top-down.”

As shown in the focus group responses, one participant noted he/she thinks, “an open door policy [is] very useful … [this means] feeling that you can approach a supervisor with questions or concerns and that you will be treated with respect.” Written policies may have this concept noted in organizational guidelines, but the truest measure of its success was through conscious and visible promotion and encouragement of this practice. Therefore, for policies and practices to work effectively, workplace relationships need to build on trust between employee and manager. This is confirmed by the following response, “I guess we are very fortunate with our immediate manager, she has been very much operating in that mode [of having] an open-door policy and she is very good about helping.”
In the focus group, both the employees and managers acknowledged the value of releasing stress and decompressing their feelings in an open, safe environment. Creating such a supportive environment occurs when it is acceptable to discuss negative aspects of work, and where managers and peers carefully listen to each other and try to mitigate concerns. In this study, employees were keen to discuss work issues and receive managerial advice and expertise. In turn, managers wanted to gain feedback about organizational concerns. These interactions seemed to reinforce work relations and allowed managers and employees to better mitigate workplace stress and negativity.

Applying and promoting communication in terms of performance feedback may be accomplished through formal training, job shadowing or a mentoring program to guide development (Hopkins: 2005; Kossek and Lambert: 2005). Also, praise and coaching highlights one’s strengths and builds a work environment where individuals can hone their skills, improve performance and support the organization through retention (Kivimaki et al: 2000; Dugdill: 2000). These aspects were considered desirable workplace attributes in the focus group data.

Overwhelmingly, employees valued positive feedback from managers or supervisors because it helped them feel valued and recognized for work well done. In situations with minimal or no feedback, individuals felt negative feelings about work and their supervisors. Moreover, organizational morale was bolstered when supervisors acknowledge employee efforts and work contributions. Thoughtfully communicating issues and concerns, and discussing constructive ways to rectify workplace challenges, suggests both the manager and employee are benefiting by working together.
In addition, focus group participants suggested that analyzing employee reviews and discussing personal goals with employees could easily address growth and succession planning. In fact, managers who inquired about an employee’s professional aspirations also helped develop and actualize goals. For example, one participant indicated, “they ask what our goals are, like do you want to stay in this position? Do they need to help us get to a different position? Do [you] want to explore assistance or supervisory roles?” By engaging in developmental discussions, employees felt the organization and management team had a vested interest in helping them succeed within their role and develop skills for future career plans.

Communication in regard to development, goals, and performance was favourable. One individual made note of feedback and guidance:

I know other industries have things like job performance sessions with their employees and I think those things can be very positive because I think it allows you an opportunity to find out how well you are doing. It allows for growth. If there is something that you can improve on, your supervisor should be the one that brings that to your attention.

When focus group participants were asked about developing or enhancing management skills, they indicated the required skill to operate a department was difficult to attain or learn because these skills were associated with inherent abilities. As such, feedback and guidance afforded improvement in the current work role and showcased the skill-set to advance.

Focus group participants highlighted the need for constructive feedback to promote development. They also recognized the value of venting as a stress-reducing communication activity. Informal efforts such as casual conversations and collaboration helped employees share opinions with the work team. Communication also allowed for
top-down sharing of workplace information, which helped participants to lower unnecessary strain and stress. Literature reaffirmed communication as a healthy workplace attribute to reduce stress and help employees share their experiences.

4.3 How can policy and managerial techniques be guided to achieve an optimal workplace culture and employee experience?

An individual’s perception of the quality of work role directly affects the organization’s reputation as an optimal or ideal workplace. Previous sections discussed how flexibility and culture could facilitate work-life balance and a higher perceived role quality. The challenge is how organizations seek out managerial traits in their leadership and institute formal policies to achieve role quality and build an optimal workplace.

4.3.1 The Management Culture

Management culture holds an important role in facilitating an optimal work environment. This culture is the product of a flexible and supportive atmosphere and primarily influences an employee’s perceived role quality. It is an excellent platform for interaction and effective communication. Management’s role in an organization is to set the pace of the work culture (Murphy and Zagorski: 2005). Moreover, managers need to be aware that they directly influence values and facilitate an effective approach for work and family balance. As such, any work climate is strongly dependent on management’s visibility and encouragement of flex-policies throughout an organization (Murphy and Zagorski: 2005; Halpern and Murphy: 2005).
Hopkins (2005) discusses how psychological closeness between supervisor and employee is beneficial for organizational effectiveness and overall leadership styles. Further, managers and supervisors can positively influence the work culture by displaying “support sensitivity” (Murphy and Zagorski: 2005: 37), by encouraging the use of benefits, policies and supports that help employees balance their roles. However, it is important to note that managerial structures affect employees differently. For example, “[t]he employee who perceives his or her manager as a person who helps the employee do a better job will have one behavioural response to the manager. The employee who sees the same manager as a tyrant who closely monitors will have a different response to that manager” (Robbins and Langton: 2003: 61). These authors suggest employees may have more satisfying work experiences with managers who adopt behavioural attributes that facilitate a balanced work environment for all employees. In workplaces where the line between manager and employee is blurred by friendship, the perception of fair treatment for all employees might be compromised. This shift in the work culture puts strain on professional working relationships and makes support and balance more challenging to obtain (Casey: 2008; Blake: 2009; Karger & Aldrine: 2004).

Focus group participants also reflect on the concept of “visibility,” which means that managers or supervisors were approachable during the workday and promoted cohesiveness between employees and management. Most focus group participants indicated that supportive managers or supervisors were positive workplace attributes because they “help get the job done” and try to offer support in a genuine way. This reference includes being available for a conversation, reducing tasks to alleviate heavy workloads, paying attention to employees themselves – particularly when they struggle to
balance work and home roles. One statement about discretionary effort and recognition was:

When supervisors and management respect that you have a life away from the office, it’s very rewarding to people … they are working under their constraints too but I think that if supervisors and management respect individual workers, give them some recognition when they’re doing a good job and cut them a little bit of slack when things are difficult for them, it just fosters an attitude of co-operation and makes workers more willing to try and work things out.

The sense of camaraderie encourages thought sharing, creates ideas and experiences, and provides synergy for a more engaged workforce.

Although the majority of feedback surrounding the management culture was positive, a couple of concerns arose. Focus group data showed that at times, employees felt marginalized and lost in the bureaucracy of workplace change. Concern was expressed over staying current with work trends and the communication of rapid shifts in policy and practice was not sufficient. Furthermore, focus group employees felt minimal thought and consideration was given to the amount of strain that changes to policy and procedure often creates.

Another participant reflected on leadership techniques when workplaces make sudden changes without surveying or briefing other staff members. In such a situation, employees had a difficult time coping, and in turn, “it frustrates people and stresses them out….I think it is totally unacceptable in fact, and we need to do a better job. We should expect more from what is supposed to be our leadership, both our elected leaders and our senior bureaucrats and managers.” The process of change accompanied by minimal communication was shown to be detrimental to the employee experience and created a negative work culture. In fact, one participant commented on the importance of respect
and consideration when collecting feedback and collaborating: “so often we are given a task and you don’t really have any input into working on it, you know, so you might not feel that positive about doing something but if you can be involved in the goal setting as well, I think it makes people happier employees.” Essentially, focus group participants sought out inclusive and collaborative work cultures that embraced all opinions and levels of expertise. It was far more desirable to be included on discussions rather than simply told of an outcome.

Overall, focus group data and the reviewed literature complemented each other. Both sources recognize the manager’s role in shaping flexible and supportive work cultures. Their visibility and respect for employee work-life roles were valued, and their sensitivity to other responsibilities showed encouragement for balance and role satisfaction. Material divergence began with focus group data highlighting privacy concerns when using flexible policies, and with discontent when sudden changes were not communicated properly.

4.3.2 Policies and Policy Interpretation

Organizations can influence an employee’s role quality by implementing formal policies designed to provide flexibility. Management teams have the authority and strategic insight to encourage the use of flexible policies to benefit employees (Thompson and Prottas: 2009; Crouter and Booth: 2009). Considerable research is devoted to understanding the benefits of flexible hours, job demands and policies (Greenhaus: 2009; Crouter and Booth: 2009). Part of the findings indicates that policies need to be continually revisited to meet new or growing dilemmas (Jacobs and Gerson: 2004).
The crux of most workplace policies is the dependency on supervisors or managers to adequately interpret and implement them. Indeed, “the view that employees’ work-life balance is often at the discretion of individual managers” (Duxbury: 2003: 74) seems apt. Policy implementation was highly effective when managers were genuinely empathetic and had effective communication skills. Not surprising, organizational support increased when the management team believed in the overall benefits of promoting employee work and life balance.

In addition to policy interpretation, the use of policies must be clear and transparent. Supervisors must be knowledgeable about flex-time policies in order to offer them as a support or alternative for employees (Hopkins: 2005; Thompson and Prottas: 2009; Crouter and Booth: 2009). Many employees underutilize formal workplace supports and policies (Lambert and Waxman: 2005). Focus group participants said that at times, the personal information they provide to receive such accommodation may be detrimental to career advancement or to share in work relationships. This might explain some reluctance in utilizing policies as a formal support.

Focus group participants revealed several differences in their interpretation of organizational policies. For example, in offices where “personal day” absenteeism policies were implemented, individuals’ stress levels increased if they were expected to explain why they were absent. One participant said it was easier to use a sick day instead of a personal day because with a sick day, a person’s privacy would not be violated. Some supervisors and managers required a fully defined reason for employee absenteeism, whereas others allowed the employee to apply the policy at their discretion.
Employees felt more comfortable in workplaces where their personal information remained private.

In the focus group, a few managers and supervisors commented on workplace conditions by stating they were satisfied with their ability to use flexible policies to occasionally adjust workloads and address personal issues. What appeared to be a double-standard policy that provided flexibility for managers or supervisors but not for all staff, suggested to employees that they were not trusted to use this perk. There was a perceived discrepancy in the implementation of policies; some participants wanted firm and equitable policy implementation while more participants hoped management would customize policies with greater flexibility for all staff.

Excessive policy guidelines may also cause overlap and confusion. One focus group participant commented on the large number of policies as a source of complexity and a potential barrier to use by stating, “the more policies you have, the more stringent things become and it seems like we’re never short of policies; if there’s a problem then you develop a policy to deal with it, you know, policy after policy but, each policy in turn makes it more cumbersome to be for an individual.” It became self-defeating for the workplace to construct complex and multi-faceted policies when employees and managers were unsure of how to interpret and execute them appropriately.

Due to the authority supervisors and managers held to interpret and apply policies, focus group participants noticed that not all workplaces used them in a consistent way. One participant shared:

Not even the policies are most important but more the personal qualities of the supervisors and managers. I don’t know if it could ever be put into policy, but supervisors that take the time to listen, take the time to make suggestions and hear your suggestions and take your suggestions seriously
… but I think that’s probably what really makes for a successful relationship between management and front line workers.

This suggests the policy interpretation and accessibility filters through the management structure, and the management structure is built on work relationships. One supervisor commented that policy use can go both ways in practice: “most policies are black and white. We do have a little bit of latitude where we can approve policy or make-out-of-policy decisions...” but as a supervisor, his/her control over implementation is limited.

Ambiguous policies leave room for differing interpretations and cause concern in a team atmosphere. In the case of a training policy, at one location a select number of employees were able to participate in a learning session while others were not included. One focus group participant remarked, “I don’t think one group of people should be able to go to something that the others are excluded from. I just don’t think that makes for a healthy work environment. Everybody should be treated the same.” As discussed in the focus groups, employees who felt others had preferential treatment developed a negative perception of the work environment and felt stressed and excluded.

It is difficult to emphasize the importance of a nurturing culture in written policies. The combination of written policies and approachable, open and consistent action encouraged reciprocal, respectful behaviour between both employees and managers. The reviewed literature praised flexible policies as a positive workplace trait (Elliott: 2003). Focus group data, however, showed a concern with employee privacy and policy interpretation. Participants felt exposed when disclosing personal reasons for needing flexibility. According to the data, managerial interpretation was most beneficial when people trusted their direct reports and felt respected. Otherwise, equal treatment might be the best alternative.
4.3.3 Mitigating Stress and Negative Conditions

In ideal work environments, stressful situations and conditions are reduced through support and the elimination of problematic working conditions. As discussed earlier in the chapter, negative working conditions can be mitigated when supervisors provide emotional support to employees by means of mitigating stress, work strain, and encouraging work-life integration (Hopkins: 2005; Park: 2007; Warren and Johnson: 1995; Mennino et al: 2003). There are three general areas of supervisory strength to offset stress and negativity in the workplace: offering concern and help, displaying sensitivity to work-life issues, and being flexible (Hopkins: 2005: 447). These attributes are driven by a supervisory mentality that affords employees autonomy and the ability to juggle differing role obligations without additional stress or strain (Kossek and Lambert: 2005).

In negative working conditions, stress and burn-out were common outcomes. Some focus group participants felt professionally stigmatized when they expressed concern about their work stress. Considerable feelings of guilt and inadequacy accompanied the stress they felt from work, as these individuals believed they were no longer able to balance work and personal demands. From one supervisor’s account, if someone has a major life event, “we hope in most cases they’re able to reach out and ask for help, but by that time and most of the time it’s too late, we’ve lost a good worker; they’re labelled.” The idea of being “stressed-out” was a personal account used to acknowledge conditions or feelings beyond the individual’s control. Another stress-related term used by participants was “burn-out” and as described, burn-out was a
concern in the workplace because it denoted employees who had heightened stress, and depleted energy, thereby making coping with multiple roles difficult.

Focus group findings identified how important it was for managers to become acutely aware of workplace stress and personal struggles. If the management team was visible and accessible, it was easier for employees to seek and receive support. When asked about manager visibility and level of general awareness, one participant said that managers who were more present at work were “more in tune with what we deal with and the stresses we have and the struggles and the barriers and I think it creates a little more understanding.”

The reviewed literature showed that managers and supervisors have the ability to mitigate stress and offer support by showing compassion for employee stress (Warren and Johnson: 1995; Schieman et al: 2003). The proximity to each other on a daily basis facilitated more informal meetings and gave both parties a venue to discuss the concerns or challenges they were facing, both at work and at home. This was a chance for greater awareness in the personal and professional dynamics affecting work-life balance.

4.4 Summary

Dissenting information regarding workplace flexibility and supportive, trusting work relationships were fairly limited compared to the abundance of material regarding the benefits of flexible policies, practices and cultural guidelines. Although participant data briefly identified some areas of concern, there were other arguments disapproving of flexible incentives due to the negative impacts on team building and the social component of teamwork and performance (Goldsmith: 2009; Sennett: 2000; Magowan:
2009; Sarantinos: 2007; Peacock: 2007; Acker: 2009). These same authors expressed concern that flexible conditions make tracking work productivity more challenging. Moreover, researchers noted that flexibility may create disengagement with employees who do not have regular interaction with each other, make the relationships with employee and supervisor difficult to maintain, limit career succession planning, and challenge the employee’s sense of loyalty to the organization (Sennett: 2000; Richardson: 2008; Blake: 2009; Karger & Aldrine: 2004; Casey: 2008; Buckingham & Coffman: 1999).

The themes found in the focus group data were difficult to sort and segregate because many of the notions regarding support and flexibility overlapped and to some degree, filtered through each sub-section. Notably, coupling support networks and flexibility was a prominent association noted by participants. Also, support networks grow among peers but have an especially strong tie to supervisors and they way they facilitate flexibility. This highlights the need for participants to build quality relationships at work; and communicate concerns during particularly strenuous personal and professional events. As a result, the root of an “optimal” workplace tends to be defined by the construction of personal experiences and supportive relationships. This makes the definition of optimality as unique and transforming as the employees living the experience.
5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This qualitative research study was designed to investigate the perceptions of role quality and workplace optimality, as expressed by a convenience sample of Saskatchewan government employees. The study was an effort to uncover personal insights, attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding work environments. It contributed unique contextual data to a sizeable body of literature focusing on workplaces and employee experiences. Based on the perceptions of these employees, I was able to glean a better understanding of work culture attributes that foster support and improve the working environment.

Throughout this thesis, the importance of perceived role quality has been discussed in relation to an individual’s workplace experience. The research focused on how a work environment impacts an individual’s sense of optimality and quality within their work role. Specific aims of the research addressed in this thesis were as follows:

i. Why is it important to recognize an individual’s perception of quality in his/her work role when defining an optimal workplace?

ii. How do organizational and managerial structures contribute to the overall work culture and influence the individual’s perception of quality in his/her work roles?

iii. How can policy and managerial techniques be guided to achieve an optimal workplace culture and employee experience?

Within the context of this thesis, the answers to these questions fall within a few general interpretations. First, the way individuals perceive their work environment becomes the reality of their experience. Second, relationships are an integral part of reaching
workplace satisfaction. Finally, “optimality” means something different to each person and is based on ever-changing experiences and relationships. These three general interpretations, discussed at length, collectively provide insight into a truly optimal workplace.

5.1 Conclusion 1: Why is it important to recognize an individual’s perception of quality in his/her work role when defining an optimal workplace?

Perceptions alter individuals’ thoughts, set emotional tones, create memories, and determine how they will react to events and circumstances. Individuals’ perceptions shape the way they interact with peers and within their environments, influencing behaviours in work circumstances and with co-workers. As such, a situation can be swayed depending on how a person perceives and interprets the working conditions. This subjective reaction filters into actions, and through other work peers and supervisors, may set the tone and influence the work atmosphere.

How individuals perceive their workplace is significant. Employee attitudes play a crucial role in influencing others and setting the pace of work. This perception of the work environment results in an experience; the more positive reactions align with a desirable and optimal place. An optimal workplace is the result of employees thriving within a work culture that makes them feel valued, worthwhile, appreciated, and trusted. As such, an employee who experiences the benefits of an optimal workplace may report heightened well-being, less stress, stronger support networks and better relationships with management.
Major factors in an employee’s perception of workplace satisfaction come from flexible working conditions, accessible support and emphasis on work-life balance. The conduit to accessing these supports, as discussed in the previous chapter, specifically targets managerial relations. Support from managers offers the individual employee a buffer against conflicting work and home roles. Indeed, flexibility and autonomy to meet the needs of external responsibilities during work hours improves the quality of the work experience and allows employees to experience more work-life balance.

In terms of this study, focus group participants appreciated supportive management. The praise for these managers were linked to the ones who took time to listen to their employees, provided performance feedback, and considered employee recommendations for change. It should also be noted that management teams who openly encourage the use of helpful supports such as flexible and family-friendly initiatives better afforded their employees an opportunity to find balance in their roles. This appeared to create a quality working experience.

Open dialogue and the quality of working relationships facilitated the understanding of gaps in personal support and presented the opportunity to create a solution. Employee work role perception improved because effective employer-manager communication existed, support networks improved, and the dynamic increased morale and minimized the effects of workplace stress.

Ultimately, the sense of quality and support in her/his work role produced a more satisfying employee experience. The foundation of an optimal workplace, in simple terms, was defined as the compilation of support networks and recognition for work-life
balance. Therefore, what employees perceive as supportive becomes part of the quality experience.

5.2 Conclusion 2: How do organizational and managerial structures contribute to the overall work culture and influence the individual’s perception of quality in their work roles?

For better or worse, work relations heavily influence the workplace experience. A sense of camaraderie—network of support—that can be called on in times of stress, strain or transition help employees mitigate stress through their interpersonal interactions. Formal supports, such as policies also mitigate some of the strain employees might experience. The caveat is that policies are more useful when applied by managers that interpret and apply them with supportive intent.

Many formal policies are constructed to allow for some flexibility—and reduction of stress—through the use of sick-time, personal leave, child and elder care, medical necessity, and time to attend appointments. The access and application of these benefits may often be contingent on managerial interpretations to actualize the potential of such policies. Focus group responses suggest the management team may best support employees by educating them about the optional ways to use family-friendly flexible policies. In addition to the education, it is equally important that all members of the organization are aligned and consent to the use of such flexibility in varying ways (Bianchi, Casper and King: 2005; Kossek: 2005).

Employers recognize that offering the support to employees creates a return in organizational dedication, discretionary effort and productivity (Lero and Lewis: 2008).
These individuals connect and support each other through shared experiences and tasks, which perpetuate the reputation of a work culture that aims to support employees and reduce unnecessary stress.

Reflecting upon stress as a negative occurrence, focus group participants emphasized that their well-being in both personal and professional roles have been compromised to some degree. Participants were acutely aware of impacts from systematic change, noting that they felt a lack of concern from the management team in the workplace – particularly when new policies were introduced or old ones misused. The concern over newly implemented practices in the workplace is valid; not all transformations take into the account how employees will be impacted and where additional support will be needed (Bianchi, Casper and King: 2005). Focus group participants frequently commented on quick changes, lack of transparency, and limited support – none of which aligned with an optimal workplace.

As revealed in the focus group discussions, employees were keenly aware of the attributes that both contributed and detracted from the perception of workplace “optimality”. Examples of positive attributes included developing a sense of camaraderie, having access to supportive and friendly managers, and being included in peer support networks. Another example is harnessing a sense of autonomy for employees, when and as needed. Most importantly, the perception of role quality was a major contributing factor to shaping the definition of a desirable or optimal work culture.

Supervisor and manager support is crucial for the development and maintenance of work-life friendly organizations. To improve work environments, the recommended areas of focus included training first-line supervisors to be the linchpin and program
representative for formal policy utilization. Their actions and attitudes toward support and use of policies are critical (Murphy and Zagorski: 2005; Halpern and Murphy: 2005). Other attributes pointed out in the focus groups included developing and practicing effective communication of expectations and accommodations throughout each and all levels of an organization. In essence, to be a desirable and strong organization means to be empathetic and act on corporate responsibility as though it is strictly a workplace’s responsibility to support employees (Halpern and Murphy: 2005).

5.3 Conclusion 3: How can policy and managerial techniques be guided to achieve an optimal workplace culture and employee experience?

Writing new policies will not change a work environment. Those responsible for the implementation of change have shifted toward the management team. They now need to be transparent about policy interpretation, promote usage, and apply these policies as support during stressful situations. The focus group data corroborated the importance of policy usage and managerial interpretation, which is summarized below.

The data show that formal workplace policies and informal managerial support used to implement organizational practices may influence the individual’s perception of “optimality” in the workplace. Genuine working relationships among peers and with management can result in effective support networks and personal growth. The participating employees suggested that optimal workplace cultures are environments that formally (and informally) promote the resolution of stress and accommodate work-life balance. By this definition, a desirable workplace is a continually evolving environment clearly rooted in the quality of meaningful and supportive relationships.
As outlined above, communication is another optimal characteristic of the workplace. Communication is important for many reasons, including performance feedback, discussing concerns, providing work updates, learning and developing skills, helping with decision-making and gaining quality support in the work role. Focus group participants emphasized that communication with the management team was especially important. It helped them feel heard and understood when coping with work stress and role demands. Several comments suggested that open-door policies and mere visibility of the management team made employees feel as though they could talk freely about concerns and relate to each other in the same work environment. This also contributed to stronger support networks. Ultimately, management teams that strive to enhance corporate culture through formal policies and supportive behaviours may bolster employee work role optimality and satisfaction.

5.4 The Optimal Workplace

According to the focus group data and the literature review, the attributes of an optimal workplace include encouraging and assisting employees to find and maintain quality in their work roles. As one of the workplace attributes outlines, support networks involve the efforts of the individual, their peers and management team to create supportive connections with each other and share their workplace experience. This bond enhances working networks by creating an environment where individuals can learn from each other, grow professionally and have more positive feedback in work roles. The focus group data also revealed work traits and characteristics linked to an individual’s level of satisfaction. In particular, the data reveals that it is precisely those individuals
who receive regular feedback, evaluation, praise, advancement opportunities, and training that are better positioned to achieve work role satisfaction.

For some individuals, the level of satisfaction within the role is directly related to the transparency and communication about work performance from supervisors a supervisor and managers. Acknowledging a job well done confirms to the employee that they are valued and contributing positively to the organization. The success in the work role is also more prevalent when employees experience balance in work and home roles. In optimal working conditions, thriving employees often seek opportunities for training and organizational advancement to satisfy goals of professional development. For these employees, work environments that provide learning opportunities offer the desirable prospect of personal growth and improvement.

Being able to prioritize responsibilities and respond to role demands are important components of achieving balance and success at work. As previously discussed, flexibility and autonomy required for prioritization generally rests with the manager and supervisor’s discretion and company policies. Therefore, flexible policies that facilitate a degree of mobility may help an individual to self-manage stress and competing responsibilities.

Focus group data highlighted that individuals with multiple responsibilities in their work roles often relied on support networks to effectively manage the stress of various and sometimes conflicting roles. Importance was placed on open and honest communication between management and employee. This included management’s visibility in the workplace and approachability when any issues arose. Furthermore, employees who had the opportunity to openly discuss concerns and partake in decision-
making felt their opinions and feelings were respected, which helped them better engage in their work roles.

Organizations that wish to drive cultural change will require support from the management team to ensure success of such initiatives, and the communication back to employees regarding the corporate goals. In other words, managerial support, compassion, and transparency are necessary when creating an environment to facilitate work satisfaction. Focus group participants reported this relationship as one that directly affected their sense of optimality with their work role.

5.5 Discussion

This study was of considerable value to me. I wrote about this subject matter after thinking of various workplaces and the employees who join each other to fulfill their paid duties daily. Consider this—in some cases, we spend more time with coworkers than we do our families. Therefore, it is important that our workplace experience is one of quality.

I specifically used an interpretive approach to obtain data about workplace experiences. Each employee spoke of real experiences that shaped his/her understanding of workplace optimality. The personal stories provided information about work culture and revealed worthwhile positive and negative attributes. The small sample size, however, did not allow me to study all variability and certainly does not provide the basis for generalizability. Regardless, this was the not the point of this research. I wanted to hear the employee perception in order to understand and interpret workplace culture through each lived experience.
Discussions about optimal workplaces are passionate. As shown in the focus group feedback, despite our varied experiences and viewpoints, the framework of a desirable workplace often amounts to a similar outcome or “wish list”: positive working relationships throughout the organization, supportive frameworks in the form of formal policies, wide open communication, approachable supervisors, and respect for the art of balancing personal and professional roles.

The findings suggest that optimal workplace conditions offer the capability to address other personal responsibilities while upholding professional ones. Both formal and informal supports are necessary in shaping a quality work role. Desirable workplaces depend on the quality of relationships, accessible support, and opportunity for personal development. Optimal workplaces should also provide employees with a sense of self-worth, allowing them to hone skills and develop into a more experienced contributor to, and within, the workplace.

Flexible policies were commonly discussed. As much as standardized policies and procedures were in demand, the focus group results showed that the intent and function of policies needed to be communicated better. Some employees were not aware of the benefits some policies could offer; this was often the result of subjective interpretation of each policy. More specifically, the employees appreciated when supervisors and managers customized (case-by-case) the usage of policies as a way to increase support when they needed it most. This information confirms the strong emphasis on positive relationships between management teams and employees.

A unique focus group finding worthy of notation related to the feelings employees encountered when they were reliant on supervisors and managers for support or to
provide flexibility. If the relationship was solid, they felt comfortable communicating and asking for assistance; however, if the relationship was founded on weak trust levels, employees felt their privacy was invaded and they were insecure when discussing personal details. The problem was that without providing personal details and asking for the support, the discretionary flexibility that came from the work relationships left them disadvantaged and often restricted from the benefit of such flex-policies.

Policies were not the entire answer to optimality. Either were increased wages, better benefits or extended holidays. What focus group participants appreciated and thrived best under was the support they harnessed through personal interactions. Supportive working relationships facilitated employee progress, moving them from “struggle” through “juggle”, “balance”, “integration”, and “harmony” by providing individuals with autonomy to manage their mental, emotional and physical well-being (HRSDC: 2005). This leverage provided employees with the ability to manage demands, reduce stress, and find equilibrium.

The research from this thesis is important because it harnesses experiences of 11 individuals who share a workplace. Clearly, stress and strain negatively impacts employees; however, support networks help alleviate high tension, remove feelings of alienation or isolation, and develop bonds. There will always be workplace dilemmas, conditions that do not appease each employee. However, with increased recognition of the issues and where room for improvement exists, the most optimal characteristics—support, flexibility and communication—can be promoted.
5.6 Limitations of Study and Findings

To reiterate, I acknowledge there were limitations to this study and thesis. First to note is the interpretivist approach. The interpretivist ontological construction of the social world is limited to conscious interpretations of the social actors. This precludes any understanding of either very deep-seated unconscious factors or underlying social dynamics (Wainwright and Forbes: 2000: 268). In other words, this paradigm speaks to the individual’s subjective and localized lived experience - ‘over privileging of agency’-, and does not provide the most objective assessment of the workplace structure (Wainwright and Forbes: 2000: 268).

Furthermore, the social setting is defined by the views of the focus group participants rather than in relation to any broader social forces which may be beyond the consciousness of those participants; thus, ignoring the possibility of ‘false consciousness’ (Wainwright and Forbes: 2000: 267). The interpretivists’ obsession with the individuals’ ‘lived experience’ deters them for examining the broader social context where those experiences are founded (Wainwright and Forbes: 2000: 267).

By virtue of focus group dynamics, another limitation is that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed and this leaves some individuals reluctant to share. Having a moderator structure the discussion and guide subject matter is an unnatural way to converse in a group, and as such, may not afford the right atmosphere to disclose information. Personal dynamics may also impact the data because participants with more dominant voices may influence others’ opinions. If any of the focus group members feel intimidated or reluctant to share their thoughts and feelings about work, the data will be limited.
The sample of eleven is small, making it difficult to capture all potential variability in experiences of this group of Saskatchewan government employees. Larger sample sizes may offer more data richness which could allow better understanding of the phenomenon under examination and perhaps greater comparability. Additionally, if the number of participants for this study increased, the anonymity and confidentiality would be easier to protect while comparing demographics.

Data analyses and findings have certain limitations because it is based only on the themes found using a grounded theory approach. This means that although additional information about desirable workplaces appears in literature, if participants neglected to mention certain concepts during the focus group, the information would be excluded from the analyses. With reliance on “grounded theory”, the interpretivsit approach tends to discount larger theoretical and empirical literature (Wainwright and Forbes: 2000: 267). As Williams (2003) succinctly notes: “The social world, in this respect, becomes little or nothing more than the (inter)subjective accounts, interpretations and viewpoints of those studied” (47). Lastly, another potential limitation might include questions used in the focus group. Generally speaking, these questions probe for supports, role quality, personal assessments of the workplace, and benefits. Perhaps it would produce more detailed information behind flexible policies if employees were asked to share the specific process of requesting flexible time, or how they achieve approval through their supervisor.
5.7 Future Research

Workplace policies and the working culture need to be compatible with organizational goals. Focus group participants identified the importance of family-friendly initiatives, flexible work hours, job share options, education and family leaves, as well as wellness, child and eldercare programs. Other supports, such as the ability to attend personal appointments, or the chance to build trust with managers, made these individuals feel connected, valued and respected. Furthermore, collegial work environments with formal and informal supports assisted with employee satisfaction and promoted what is perceived to be an optimal workplace.

Future research may be conducted to examine how an organization may become more effective through cultural change. For example, adopting more recruitment, retention and engagement strategies, and heightening morale through employing strategies to ease anxiety around organizational change and role strain may bolster a workplace. In addition, to gain a thorough understanding of employee and management dynamics, researchers may consider interviewing in a variety of occupations—both public and private—to understand family-friendly and flexible policies in various types of workplaces.

Comparisons may be made among different business sectors and each may offer feedback regarding the most effective policies, as well as those most necessary for future sustainability. Another critical future consideration includes an examination of employee and employer attitudes with respect to family-responsive policies. Specifically, it would be beneficial to dive deeply into the perspectives around policy usage and vulnerability (Schieman, McBrier and Van Gundy: 2003). This includes an examination of employees
who do not benefit from flexible policies – such as single employees who have to increase their workload to cover for partnered employees who might be called away to tend to family needs.

To date, much of the research on workplace optimality focuses on role quality as it relates to work and family balance. Findings are described through challenges individuals face when managing multiple roles (Lero and Lewis: 2008). Beyond recognizing challenges, Lero and Lewis (2008) suggest that more understanding about the social and organizational systems that make it difficult for individuals to combine work and family roles is necessary (p. 373). Attention should be paid to the culture and social systems surrounding employee experiences. Indeed, an examination of rapidly changing environments that might be going through extensive transformation or transition may also be a factor for the cultural consideration and experience.

An organized study considering the effects of gender and workplace hierarchies may also be useful. The positional structure of the workplace appears to influence access to flexibility, control and succession planning. Adding sex as a variable may uncover hidden dynamics and provide information about experiences and role-specific expectations. Male and female responses to interview questions might show distinct gender experiences through the participants’ attitudes and observations about how workplace policies are applied.

Perhaps future research should consider analyzing shift worker perceptions. Non-standard work hours add another dimension of stress to an individual’s life. It has been known to cause scheduling challenges because his or her fluctuating work hours may not coincide with adequate time spent with family and friends, thereby shorting the ability to
build and maintain support networks. Other adverse impacts include marital strain and restrictions to participation in family and social activities. Shift workers not only struggle to integrate work and family roles, but are often unhealthy as well (Lero and Lewis: 2008; Korabik et al: 2008).

Rural versus urban residence is another variable that is not often considered in workplace role quality research. The struggle of small communities to bind together and assist each other is exacerbated when new stress and strain from work demands cripples an individual’s ability to partake in the social and cultural supports (Lero and Lewis: 2008; Korabik et al: 2008). Tight-knit communities that support each other formally and informally may be compromised if employees lack the time or energy to partake in sustaining these relationships.

Considering that Saskatchewan’s Aboriginal population sits around 14% based on the 2001 Statistics Canada census figures, and is expected to grow to approximately 33% by 2045, another avenue of research should examine Aboriginal workplace experiences. Specifically, design research to explore the community of support networks in Saskatchewan, accessibility to formal work supports such as policies, and workplace flexibility would be beneficial. Further research may also include investigating the types of training and work role development offered by the organization, along with career-path recommendations and hands-on coaching from supervisors and managers.

Lastly, future research could provide insight or an evaluation of wages associated with various organizational positions. This understanding may advance current research

by grasping if monetary compensation is a strong factor in achieving work and home balance. Wages are often integrally tied to position, whereby some positions have more flexibility and authority by the nature of job responsibilities. For example, employees with higher wages may be better equipped to afford child or elder care, which may relieve some strain on their personal time and energy. Having the ability to afford additional services may benefit individuals who require support in the home sphere, especially as they devote extra time and energy to other roles. If wage is not a primary consideration, perhaps the autonomy and control attached to a work role is adequate and flexible enough to address the needs inherent in personal roles during work time, and in time away from work.

5.8 Summary

Employees, as individuals, are expected to compartmentalize work and life roles. In reality, though, this division is virtually impossible to achieve because work and personal roles can overlap, intermingle and potentially conflict. Arguably, home and work realms are inextricably intertwined and cannot be studied in isolation, regardless of the logistics of each role. The overlap between realms intrigues researchers because individuals adjust their lives to accommodate strenuous situations, and many may experience a reduced level of satisfaction overall. The reduced or diminished role satisfaction can manifest itself in decreased well-being, lowered productivity, increased stress, and further strained roles. Support systems or networks, whether formal or informal, may often help to improve experiences in the workplace and sustain a perceived level of balance and satisfaction.
The question becomes whether or not work and home balance evolves beyond the individual and becomes an item on the agenda of corporate social responsibility (Pitt-Catsouphes and Googins: 2005; MacDermid: 2005). More precisely, who is responsible for recognizing the imbalance and forging ahead with change? The workplace might pay closer attention when the controversy of lagging work-life balance influences employee productivity, energy or visibility in the workplace. Or, some managers might become acutely aware and become proactive by building an understanding, or offering support to those employees who want work and life balance.

Employees, managers, and organizations all have the potential to benefit if they challenge some aspects of the workplace culture. Research associated with individual well-being continues to support the necessity for improved role quality. Individuals must consider their personal well-being and the intricacies of balance as their foremost priority. The disbursement of their energies and efforts in their personal and work roles not only affects home life, but also can compromise workplace productivity and overall sustainability. Essentially, an environment that encourages role quality fosters close employee and managerial relations, and supports policy and managerial techniques inherent in flexibility, helps individuals achieve an optimal work role and experience.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: RQH Individual Interview Questions

1. Overall Health and Well-Being
   a. What does good physical health mean to you? Tell me about your physical health.
   b. What does good mental health mean to you? Tell me about your mental health.
   c. What does good spiritual health mean to you? Tell me about your spiritual health.
   d. What does a good quality of life mean to you? Tell me about your quality of life.

2. Workplace Factors/Supports
   a. We are interested in how your job might have both positive and negative influences on your health and well-being:
      i. What are some of the positive influences?
      ii. What are some of the negative influences?
   b. Tell me about any supports in the workplace that help you get the job done.
   c. Are there supports you haven’t used?
   d. Are there other supports you would like to see available to you in your workplace? What would these be?
   e. Some people talk about features of an organization that make it particularly “family-friendly.” Please comment whether you have experienced any of the following:
      i. Flexibility
      ii. Supportive supervisors/managers
      iii. Family-friendly culture
      iv. Alternative work arrangements
      v. Recognition of child and elder care issues

3. Individual Factors/Supports
   a. Who in your personal life do you turn to for help or support when you need it?
   b. What kind of supports do these people provide to you that you feel contributes to your health?
   c. Is there anything these people do that strains/has a negative impact on your health?
   d. What kinds of social support do you provide to others?
   e. In what ways does your work influence the role you play in your family?

4. Community Factors/Supports
   a. Where in your community do you turn to for help or support when you need it? Could you please describe this for us?
   b. What kinds of community supports do you find helpful to you for your own health and well-being? What are these?
c. Are there other things that you wish were available in your community that you think would be supportive to your own health and well-being? What are these?

d. In what ways does your work influence the involvement you have in your community?

e. How satisfied are you with the role you play in your community?

5. Are there any other comments you would like to make?
Appendix B: Research Ethics Board Approval (University of Regina)

UNIVERSITY OF
REGINA

OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES
MEMORANDUM

DATE: February 2, 2004
TO: B. Jeffery
SPHERU

FROM: J. Roy
A. Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: Role Quality and Health: Influences of Individual, Workplace and Community Social Supports. (47R0304)

Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

1. ACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. The Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans requires the researcher to send the Chair of the REB annual reports and notice of project conclusion for research lasting more than one year (Section 1F). ETHICAL CLEARANCE MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS. Clearance will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received.

2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and subsequently approved prior to beginning research. Please address the concerns raised by the reviewer(s) by means of a supplementary memo to the Chair of the REB. Do not submit a new application. Please provide the supplementary memorandum**, or contact the REB concerning the progress of the project, before May 2, 2004, in order to keep your file active. Once changes are deemed acceptable, approval will be granted.

3. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

Dr. Joan Roy

**supplementary memorandum should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (AH 505) or by e-mail to research.ethics@uregina.ca
Subject: Slight changes
From: Bonnie Jeffery <b.jeffery@sasktel.net>
Date: Thu, 19 Jan 2006 22:16:01 -0600
To: Katherine.Arbuthnott@uregina.ca, Meigen.Schmidt@uregina.ca
CC: Colleen Hamilton <colleen.hamilton@sasktel.net>

Good evening,

This update is related to the project "Role Quality and Health: Influences of Individual, Workplace and Community Social Supports" (47R0304) - approved February 2, 2004.

I talked with Meigen today and she advised me to send a memo to highlight two changes to the project since the approval by REB. Meigen's advice is that these are fairly minor changes that will be reviewed and approved within a short time period -- we are beginning the focus groups on January 26, 2006.

There are two issues to bring to your attention:

1) We have now decided to pay focus group participants $20 to assist with childcare and other related costs to permit them to attend the focus group. We will have a few participants whom we are asking to travel to a more central location to attend the focus group because of insufficient numbers of volunteer participants from their resident location. For example, several volunteers will travel from Melfort to Nipawin to attend the focus group discussion and we anticipate a few individuals from Meadow Lake and LaRonge who may wish to participate but will travel to Prince Albert for the focus group. For these individuals, we have calculated an approximate gas cost for their travel and so will reimburse them an additional amount to the $20. We are referring to these still as honoraria to assist with the cost of travel to attend the focus group.

2) Since the REB application was submitted, I have a Graduate Student (Jenifer Rodenbush - MA in Sociology and Social Studies) who has been working on the project and wishes to use some of the focus group information for her master's thesis. I believe it is important to inform participants of this so have made the following change to the focus group consent form. The original sentence "Your answers will only be used for the purposes of this project" will be replaced with "Your answers will be used for the purposes of this project and for a master's thesis at the University of Regina."

Thank you for your review and anticipated approval of these changes. Please note I have copied Colleen Hamilton on this email -- Colleen is the project coordinator.

Please contact me if you require further information.

1/20/2006 9:28 AM
Bonnie Jeffery

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DATE: January 24, 2006

TO: B. Jeffery  
   University of Regina  
   SPHERU – Prince Albert  
   Box 2830  
   Prince Albert, SK  S6V 7M3

FROM: Katherine Arbuthnott, Chair  
       Research Ethics Board

RE: Role Quality and Health: Influences of Individual, Workplace and Community Social Supports (47R0304)

With reference to your email of January 20, 2006, please be advised the changes have been approved as outlined for your research project titled: Role Quality and Health: Influences of Individual, Workplace and Community Social Supports (47R0304)

We have noted in your file that Jenifer Rodenbush (MA in Sociology and Social Studies) will have access to the data for use in writing her master thesis.

Please note that this project is up for renewal on February 2, 2006. Please submit the renewal form found at: http://www.uregina.ca/research/REB/forms.shtml

Please contact us if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

Katherine Arbuthnott
KA/rr
Appendix C: RQH Consent Form

**Project Title:** Role Quality and Health: Influences of Individual, Workplace and Community Social Supports

**Principal Investigator:**
Dr. Bonnie Jeffery  
Faculty of Social Work and SPHERU  
University of Regina  
Prince Albert Office  
P.O. Box 2830  
Prince Albert, SK S6V 7M3  
306-953-5311  
b.jeffery@sasktel.net

**Overview:** This research project will examine the health effects of different levels of individual, workplace and community social supports that workers experience in their social roles. The goal of this research is to investigate how these different levels of social support influence employed people’s health and well-being and how these support systems and their health effects vary on the basis of gender and Aboriginal status.

**Methods:** The research will be conducted in three stages and will include collection of information through interviews, completion of focus groups, and completion of a dissemination strategy with policy makers.

During the second phase of this project we are asking for your participation in a focus group where we will ask you a number of questions about the findings from the first phase of the study (interviews) and about policy options that would respond to the findings. We anticipate that the focus group discussion will take no more than one to one and half hours. Please be advised that you do not have to answer any questions you are not comfortable with and that you may change your answers or withdraw from the study at any time. No questions will cause undue physical or emotional stress. What we discuss here today will be kept confidential and only the research team, and other participants in this focus group will be aware of your identity. We ask that you do not discuss the details of the discussion or the responses of any of the individual participants after you leave here today. Should you request a transcript, we also ask that you do not share the contents with individuals who did not participate in the focus group.

You will have the opportunity to review the transcript of this discussion, if you wish. All materials pertaining to this discussion (tapes, digital recordings, hard copies of transcripts, electronic files on disk), will be stored in the office of the principal investigator in a locked cabinet. Any findings from this project will be reported in such a way that no individual participant is identifiable. Your answers will be used for the purposes of this project and for a master’s thesis at the University of Regina. All original data will be destroyed no later than three years after the end of this project.

If you have any question or concerns regarding the procedures of the study as they are outlined here, please contact Dr. Bonnie Jeffery at the phone number or email address above.

This project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If research subjects have any questions or concerns about their rights of treatment as subjects, they may
contact the chair of the Research Ethics Board at 306-585-4775 or by email at research.ethics@uregina.ca.

I have read/ or had read to me, and understood the contents of this consent form. I agree to participate in this discussion group and the study: _______Yes _________No

I give the researchers permission to use direct quotes from my comments in the focus group if these quotes are seen as helpful to illustrate a particular finding and as long as these quotes do not reveal my identity: ______ Yes _______ No

I have received a copy of the consent form for my files: _______Yes _________No

I agree to have the discussion group audio taped: _______Yes _________No

________________________________________
Participant Name (Please print)

________________________________________
Participant Signature

________________________________________
Researcher Signature ________________________________
Date

I wish to review the transcript of the focus group, only with respect to my responses: _______Yes _________No

I understand that my address will be used only to arrange for transcript review:

Name: ___________________________________________________________

Address: _________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________

Phone : _________________________________________________________
### Appendix D: Summary of Empirical Journal Articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Instruments</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Independent/Control Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Park, 2007</td>
<td>37,000 people in private dwellings in the 10 provinces</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) (in-person interviews &amp; telephone)</td>
<td>Assess mental health and well-being</td>
<td>Work stress; job performance; age differences; socio-economic status; coping behaviours;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Nordenmark, 2004</td>
<td>9000 Swedes</td>
<td>SWEDEN</td>
<td>ULF survey (interviews)</td>
<td>Assess level of well-being; Multiple social roles ↑/↓ individual well-being</td>
<td>Multiple social roles; well-being; role stress theory; role expansion theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Warren &amp; Johnson, 1995</td>
<td>116 employed mothers</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>Bohun &amp; Viveros-Long job/family role strain scale questionnaire</td>
<td>Work-family role strain</td>
<td>Components of workplace support, organizational culture; supervisor support; family-oriented benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Graywacz et al, 2002</td>
<td>3032 adults aged 25 to 74</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States &amp; National Stud of Daily Experiences</td>
<td>Negative spillover from work to family</td>
<td>Age; gender; race/ethnicity; marital status; parental status; educational attainment; occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Secret, 2000</td>
<td>527 employees in 83 businesses</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Employee Benefits Survey (EBS)</td>
<td>Assess utilization of work-family benefits</td>
<td>Family role (5 items); paid leave benefits; child care benefits; mental health benefits; job attributes; workplace structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Faragher et al, 2005</td>
<td>267,595 individuals</td>
<td>UK, USA, CAN</td>
<td>Meta-analysis: 485 studies (Warr Job Satisfaction Questionnaire, Occupational Stress Indicator, Michigan Organisational Assessment Questionnaire, Job Diagnostic Survey, Job Descriptive Index, Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire, Brayfield-Rothe Questionnaire)</td>
<td>Assess relationship between job satisfaction and health</td>
<td>Job satisfaction (intrinsic &amp; extrinsic); Health outcomes (physical health, mental health, psychosomatic complaints, strain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Achat et al, 1998</td>
<td>47,912 middle-aged and older healthy women</td>
<td>AUS</td>
<td>Medical Outcomes Study Short-form Health Survey</td>
<td>Perception of quality of life</td>
<td>Social networks; mental health; home and work stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Marshall, 2006</td>
<td>30,000 people aged 16 to 69</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>Absence from Work Survey (AWS) and Labour Force Survey (LFS)</td>
<td>Work-related absences</td>
<td>Long-term absence; absence rate; health status; disability status; stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Uppal, 2009</td>
<td>28,000 working aged people (aged 15 to 64) in 10 provinces</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS): Mental Health and Well-Being</td>
<td>Health and employment</td>
<td>Physical and mental health; chronic conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Wilkins &amp; Beaudo, 1998</td>
<td>9,023 employed Canadians (aged 18 to 64) in 10 provinces</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>National Population Health Survey (1994/95)</td>
<td>Work stress and health</td>
<td>Job strain; occupational health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Williams, 2008</td>
<td>19,600 Canadians (aged 15 and over) in 10 provinces</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>General Social Survey (GSS)</td>
<td>Work-life balance</td>
<td>Role overload; work-life balance; shift work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Gilmour &amp; Patten, 2007</td>
<td>489,000 working Canadians (aged 25 to 64)</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>2002 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), cycle 1.2: Mental Health and Well-being, and the 1994/1995 to 2002/2003 National Population Health Surveys (NPHS)</td>
<td>Depression at work</td>
<td>Work impairment; reduced work activities; mental health disability days; work absences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix D: Summary of Empirical Journal Articles...Continued /2

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13. Shields, 2006</td>
<td>36,984 Canadians (aged 18 to 75) in 10 provinces</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>2002 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS); Mental Health and Well-being; 1994/1995 National Population Health Surveys (NPHS)</td>
<td>Stress and depression</td>
<td>Job strain; life stress; occupational health; work stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Williams, 2003</td>
<td>25,000 Canadians (aged 15 and over) in 10 provinces</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>General Social Survey (GSS)</td>
<td>Work stress</td>
<td>Stress; health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Wilkins, 2004</td>
<td>938 Canadians (aged 25 to 65)</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>2002 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS): Health and Well-Being survey</td>
<td>Social support and work</td>
<td>Mood disorder; social support; mental health; comorbidity; health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Shields, 2006</td>
<td>20,747 Canadians (aged 18 to 75)</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>2002 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS): Health and Well-Being survey</td>
<td>Mental health and well-being</td>
<td>Job satisfaction; occupational health; employment; tolerance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Scherman et al, 2003</td>
<td>1,393 Canadians</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>Face-to-face interviews</td>
<td>Work-home conflict and distress</td>
<td>Depressive symptoms; home-to-work conflict; age; sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Mennino et al, 2005</td>
<td>3,118 employed people (aged 18 to 64); Multivariate analyses</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce</td>
<td>Home-to-job spillover</td>
<td>Age; education; occupation; job position; hours worked per week; time; autonomy; job satisfaction; income; family; policies; supervisor support family support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Lowe et al, 2003</td>
<td>2,112 employed people</td>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>2000 Cross-sectional telephone survey</td>
<td>Healthy work environment</td>
<td>Employment conditions; work organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Krantz et al, 2005</td>
<td>2,600 employed people (aged 32 to 58)</td>
<td>SWEDEN</td>
<td>2001 TWL (Total Workload) mailed questionnaire selected from Statistics Sweden</td>
<td>Perceived work stress; total workload</td>
<td>Gender; household work; multiple roles; stress; paid work; ill health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Kroska, 2004</td>
<td>101 heterosexual co-residential couples</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Self-administered survey</td>
<td>Division of household work</td>
<td>Division of labour; gender; housework; resources; time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Himel &amp; Goldberg, 2003</td>
<td>25 fathers</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Role strain; division of housework</td>
<td>Dual-earner couples; social comparisons; fathers; gender roles; division of labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Clarke et al, 2004</td>
<td>387 married business graduate school alumni</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey mailed</td>
<td>Work-family balance and fit</td>
<td>Work-family fit; work-family balance; work-family conflict; job satisfaction; marital satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Doumas et al, 2003</td>
<td>49 couples (aged 29 to 57)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Diary questionnaire</td>
<td>Work-family spillover</td>
<td>Interference; health-promoting behaviour; marital interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Elliott, 2003</td>
<td>1,200 permanent faculty and staff of university</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Self-administered survey mailed</td>
<td>Role strain</td>
<td>Family; gender; strain; university; work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix E: Summary of Significance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors (Demographic)</th>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Significance and Direction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Stress (work stress)  | 1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 18, 19, 21, 25, 26 | 4, 19 work family spillover ↗ stressful work family experiences  
6 job dissatisfaction ↘ levels of stress  
8 stress ↗ work related absences  
10,14 stress ↘ health implications  
11 ↑stress ↘ work-life balance  
13 stress ↗ depression  
14 ↑demands ↗ stress  
18 home-to-work conflict ↗ stress  
21 stress symptoms ↘ from paid work  
25 stress ↘ by support and energy  
26 stress ↗ with feelings of dissatisfaction from spillover and role strain |
| Job strain            | 1, 3, 7, 10, 13, 16, 18, 19, 23, 26 | 1 strain ↘ reduced activities at work  
1 strain ↑job satisfaction  
3 supportive work culture ↘ strain  
7 decision and social support (strain) ↗ poor health outcomes  
10 job strain ↘ support from co-workers  
13 job strain ↗ depression  
16 job dissatisfaction ↗ physical and mental health and well-being  
18 distress ↗ job absenteeism and dissatisfaction; ↘ productivity  
19 time pressures ↗ spillover  
23 role strain ↘ without support from peers  
26 role strain ↗ ability to care for work and family  
26 role strain ↘ satisfaction  
26 role strain ↗ absenteeism, job turnover and ↗ productivity |
| Gender                | 1, 2, 5, 7, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23, 26 | 2 women ↑ risk of health problems  
5 traditional gender roles ↗ use of work-family benefits  
7 women’s social networks ↗ mental health ↗ quality of life  
17 women ↘ experience double-shift (parent and work)  
18 some employers ↗ use of family-responsive policies  
18 some employers ↗ use of family-support policies may experience discrimination  
19 women report ↘ spillover than men  
21,22 women ↘ workload than men in home  
23 support from peers ↘ role strain in women  
26 women may experience ↗ role strain (v. men) from demands at work and home |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors (Demographic)</th>
<th>Studies</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Health/Well-being (mental, physical) | 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 20, 23 | 2 number social roles=changes in health  
2 number social roles & increase in social roles ↑ risk of suffering insomnia, lingering illness  
6, 12 ↑ burnout, depression, anxiety, dissatisfaction at work ↓ mental health  
6 ↓ job satisfaction ↑ risk mental/psychological problems  
6 ↓ job satisfaction ↑ good health (physical and mental)  
7 social networks ↑ associated with mental health  
7 ↓ decision and social support (strain) ↑ poor health outcomes  
8, 9 work absences associated ↓ health  
10 ↓ job strain ↓ physical and emotional health  
12 depression ↓ associated with work absences, lost productivity, work impairment  
14 stress ↓ health  
15 employees ↓ mental health need support networks  
16 job dissatisfaction ↓ physical and mental health and well-being  
20 healthy work environments ↓ absenteeism and intent to quit  
23 support from work peers ↑ perceived well-being and mental health |
| Support/Coping/Social Networks | 1, 3, 7, 10, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26 | 1 ↑ coping mechanism ↑ protective factor for workers  
1 ↓ coping mechanism ↓ work impairment  
3 supportive supervisors ↓ strain  
3 available benefits ↑ likely fulfill role demands  
7 social networks ↑ associated with mental health  
7 social networks ↓ effects of higher stress from home and work  
10 social support ↓ psychological stress  
10 social support ↓ adverse health outcomes  
12 social support ↓ depression  
13 low support ↓ stress + depression  
18 employers benefit by helping employees cope with stress  
19 supportive supervisor ↓ spillover  
20 ↑ communication and support = healthy work environment  
23 ↑ support from partner ↑ satisfaction in home and work roles  
24 balance and fit ↑ coping and satisfaction  
25 marital/spousal warmth ↑ spending time together/energy/relaxing  
26 supportive partner ↓ role strain |
## Factors (Demographic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors (Demographic)</th>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Significance and Direction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Work-life balance     | 3, 4, 11, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 24, 26 | 3 family friendly ↗ balance work and family roles  
4,19 spillover ↘ work and family experiences  
11 shift workers ↘ work-life balance  
14 work/multiple demands ↗ stress  
17,19 parenthood ↗ time scarcity  
18 home-to-work conflict is distressing  
19 family policies have no effect on spillover  
19 more job to home spillover v. home to job  
21 work-life stress ↗ health symptoms  
24 balance and fit ↗ job satisfaction and marital satisfaction  
26 balance easier to achieve with ↗ flexibility |