Organization Science

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Abstract. This inductive study of 44 consultants in a prominent consulting firm examines how consultants set work-life boundaries without getting stigmatized and how they develop their workplace relationships into sources of help for this process. Within this organization, dominated by the ideal worker norm, we found a hidden, self-sustaining network of consultants who delivered excellent work while violating the ideal worker norm without stigmatization. Their way of working was based on a coherent set of beliefs about work and the work-life interface we named the *sustainable worker schema*, which contrasted with the ideal worker schema in all ways except in the ultimate goals: high performance and excellent work. Essential to this way of working was not only effective management of boundaries between work and life outside of work (*work-life boundaries*) but also effective management of boundaries around each work task or project (*work boundaries*). Consultants who embraced the sustainable worker schema worked fewer hours and achieved higher satisfaction with work-life balance than their counterparts. Together, these findings highlight the importance of embracing the centrality of work in work-life research; underscore the power of invisibility when challenging the ideal worker norm; and paint a rich picture of boundary work as a network-level phenomenon.

Introduction

Many employees in professional jobs are pulled in two directions. On the one hand, they are committed to their careers and want to do right by their clients and be seen as fully dedicated employees who not only meet but excel at the extreme demands of their jobs. On the other hand, they want time for meaningful lives outside of work (Kantor and Streitfeld 2015, Beckman and Mazmanian 2020, Pinsker 2022). This dilemma presents a real challenge in professional settings where the ideal worker norm (Acker 1990, Williams 2000) persists, and people are expected to be always available for responding to work demands (Epstein et al. 1999, Perlow 2012, Baker and Brewis 2020).

Many organizations offer policies to support employees' work-life balance (Wharton et al. 2008, Tillay and Lock 2021, Deloitte US 2022, EY 2022), but professionals are still in a difficult spot. Those who use official flexible work policies risk losing status and incurring career penalties because of "flexibility stigma" (Glass 2004, Stone and Hernandez 2013, Williams et al. 2013).

Supervisors, coworkers, and even the professionals themselves interpret anything less than complete devotion and availability for work as a moral violation (Williams et al. 2013), which results in stigmatizing the behavior. However, if individuals attempt to adhere to the ideal worker norm, they need to make tremendous personal sacrifices (Shirom and Melamed 2006, Kelly and Moen 2020).

So, what are professionals to do? Recent research suggests that if professionals engage in more informal adaptations that can be concealed and only reveal them to specific trustworthy individuals with whom they have close relationships, they can avoid stigmatization and negative consequences (Trefalt 2013, Reid 2015). However, if others learn of the violations of the ideal worker norm, the employee's performance evaluations often decline (Reid 2015), their relationships can be damaged (Trefalt 2013), and their careers might be in danger (Judiesch and Lyness 1999, Wharton et al. 2008, Leslie et al. 2012). These findings make clear that relationships can be valuable shields from flexibility

stigma, but they do not tell us how such relationships come to be. To examine this process, we pose the following research question: How do professionals develop workplace relationships that help them place work-life boundaries while avoiding stigmatization?

In many contemporary organizations, there is the added complication that work is often completed in project teams (Werr and Stjernberg 2003, Gardner et al. 2015). Work is organized interdependently, as team members have to coordinate the sequence and timing of their tasks (Hackman 2002, Perlow 2012) to complete them simultaneously or in a particular order. In this type of work setting, it is challenging to hide one's limited availability from teammates who might call with a question, a request, or feedback at any time (Gladstein 1984, Perlow 1998), and relying on informal adaptations in *dyadic* relationships may not be an effective solution. There is an additional paradox with this model of team-based work, as research has shown that when it comes to resolving challenges of work-life balance, consultants prefer to rely on themselves rather than on company policies (Wynn and Rao 2020). In fact, these consultants saw their ability to address work-life challenges as an indicator of their skills and suitability for consulting work. It is unclear how these professionals, who prefer to be self-reliant but have to coordinate work at a team level, set their boundaries. Therefore, we ask our second research question: How do professionals who work in teams set work-life boundaries without getting stigmatized?

Exploring these two research questions promises important contributions to existing scholarship. Previous research shows that workplace relationship partners evaluate each other's trustworthiness, emotional connection, and support (Ferris et al. 2009) and that people tend to initiate relationships with similar others (Sias and Cahill 1998). For our study, a relevant dimension of similarity is a person's work-life ideology, that is, beliefs about how work and life are related (Leslie et al. 2019). Our first research question will offer insight into how interpersonal dynamics impact the deliberate or serendipitous development of workplace relationships into helpful sources of support for work-life balance. Our second research question promises to position dyadic relationships in a broader organizational context. Even though the power of dyadic relationships for enabling work-life balance was uncovered in studies of professional service firms (Trefalt 2013, Reid 2015), which are project team based, it remains unclear how a supportive relationship with a single individual can protect a professional from stigmatization in a project team–based workplace, where each person works interdependently with several others at all times.

We make three theoretical contributions. First, we argue that cognitive approaches in work-life literature are incomplete if they attend only to the work-life interplay (Leslie et al. 2019). How people view work itself,

not just the boundary between work and life outside of work, emerges from our study as critical. Specifically, our study reveals two contrasting sets of beliefs, each internally coherent: the *ideal worker schema*, which makes boundary work challenging, and the *sustainable worker schema*, which enables consultants to work in sustainable ways, that is, without depleting or permanently damaging themselves or their colleagues. Second, we uncover the role of hiddenness in making boundary work nonstigmatizing and effective. What we discover goes beyond passing and revealing stigmatized identities (Goffman 1963, Reid 2015, Johnson et al. 2020); we find that consultants encrypted boundary work aimed at flexibility and work-life balance, so that it appeared to be productivity oriented. Third, we uncover a hidden informal network of colleagues within which the necessary conditions for effective boundary work are created. Consultants in this network redesigned their work based on the *sustainable worker schema* to place desired work-life boundaries without stigmatization. This establishes boundary work as a network-level phenomenon and extends prior research on the role of relationships in boundary work (Trefalt 2013, Reid 2015).

Theoretical Background
Ideal Worker Norm and Flexibility Stigma in Professional Service Firms

In professional service firms, the ideal worker (Acker 1990, Williams 2000) is expected to prioritize work above everything else, including all other life commitments. There is an assumption that "to succeed, one has to be at work, one has to be there for long hours, and one has to continuously commit to work as a top priority. To be perceived as making a significant contribution, productivity alone is not enough" (Perlow 1995, p. 233). Although it sets unrealistic expectations, the ideal worker norm continues to persist as a standard in many professional workplaces (Kelly et al. 2010, Ramarajan and Reid 2013, Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015, Reid 2015, Wynn and Rao 2020, Thébaud and Pedulla 2022). Indeed, both supervisors and coworkers often frown upon those who challenge the norm. Employees who temporarily leave the workforce, for example, or use formal flexibility policies to balance their work and nonwork commitments are seen as "time deviants" (Epstein et al. 1999) who have violated important professional time norms. This deviance comes with stigmatization, reducing them "from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one" (Goffman 1963, p. 3) or, more specifically, from committed and worthy professionals to ones who cut corners and should be scorned. A professional's choice to limit their availability for work is seen as a moral violation (Williams et al. 2013), which may explain

why even those challenging the unrealistic expectations often view the flexibility stigma as justifiable (Stone and Hernandez 2013).

Attributes and behaviors that lead to stigma vary in their concealability. Being in a wheelchair in an ableist context or belonging to a racial minority in a predominantly white context are visible attributes (Roberts 2005, Taussig 2020). Being gay, lesbian, or transgender in a homophobic context (Ragins 2008) or limiting one's availability for work in an ideal worker context (Reid 2015), however, can be concealed. This makes issues of disclosure, the decision about whether to reveal an attribute or to conceal it and pass as not having it, salient and consequential (Griffith and Hebl 2002, Chaudoir and Fisher 2010). Disclosing stigmatizing attributes can have costly consequences that include status loss, stereotyping, and discrimination and can hinder career advancement and the development of work relationships (Day and Schoenrade 1997, Link and Phelan 2001). Thus, individuals with a concealable stigmatized attribute tend to be careful and strategic about how and to whom they disclose this information (Clair et al. 2005).

Boundary Work as an Alternative to Formal Flexibility

A more informal approach to work-life balance, as opposed to formal flexibility policies, is individual boundary work. Boundary work has been conceptualized as "the never-ending, hands-on, largely visible process through which boundaries [between work and life outside of work] are negotiated, placed, maintained, and transformed by individuals over time" (Nippert-Eng 1996, p. xiii). This can include boundaries to delineate the time people dedicate to work and nonwork domains, domain-specific behaviors and relationships, and where work and nonwork tasks are performed (Rothbard and Ollier-Malaterre 2016). People also use boundary work as they decide what cross-domain information to share with others (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell 2006).

Much work-life research on boundaries focuses on boundary *permeability*, or the degree of segmentation and integration between the two domains (Ashforth et al. 2000, Rothbard et al. 2005, Kreiner 2006, Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015, Rothbard and Ollier-Malaterre 2016, Beckman and Stanko 2020). Permeability captures the degree of difficulty in crossing a boundary. For example, work-life researchers study whether individuals display personal photographs in their work space, spend leisure time with work colleagues, or use on-site childcare (each of these activities reflects integration between work and home, whereas their absence reflects segmentation: two poles of permeability). Boundary *placement*, or how people define the size and shape of each domain, is another critical and contested aspect

of boundary work. The ideal worker norm exerts particular pressures on the *placement* of the boundaries, demanding long hours at work and leaving little time for any other commitments. For example, if someone works 45 hours a week but their supervisor wants them to work 55, this exerts pressure on the placement of boundaries around work hours (i.e., size). Similarly, an individual might want Wednesday nights off for a regular tennis lesson, placing a boundary to create a particular shape of the work (and adjacent nonwork) domain, which their supervisor might contest (i.e., shape).

The impact of boundary *placement* is central to the study of flexibility stigma and ideal worker norm violations. Individuals conduct boundary work against the backdrop of organizational culture, policies, and practices (Rothbard et al. 2005, Kreiner 2006). The ideal worker culture (Acker 1990, Williams 2000) of many professional workplaces is likely to lead to frequent boundary violations, that is, experiences of breaching or neglecting their desired work-life boundary (Kreiner et al. 2009). In response to boundary violations, individuals engage in boundary work to reduce their work-life conflict (Kreiner et al. 2009) and improve their satisfaction with work-life balance (Valcour 2007).

Close Relationships as Shields from Stigma

Boundary work is conducted within relationships (Trefalt 2013, Beckman and Stanko 2020). Although members of both home and work domains have stakes in one's boundaries (e.g., spouses, children, friends, bosses, coworkers), work relationships in professional settings are particularly critical sites of boundary work. Employees face challenging boundary negotiations with others at work (Epstein et al. 1999, Clark 2000) when their firms demand all their time and energy.

As we have seen, in ideal worker environments, boundary work can often lead to stigmatization, and thus professionals often only reveal their boundary work in close workplace relationships (Trefalt 2013, Reid 2015). Recent research has begun to look at how challenging it can be to forge these relationships. Namely, individuals hold different ideologies when it comes to the relationship between work and life outside of work (Leslie et al. 2019): (1) a fixed (versus expandable) pie ideology, or beliefs about whether work and personal life compete with or enhance one another; (2) a segmentation (versus integration) ideology, or beliefs about whether work and life are independent or interdependent domains; and (3) a work (versus life) priority ideology, or beliefs about whether work or life is the more important domain (Leslie et al. 2019). A close relationship with someone who holds a fixed pie, segmentation, and work priority ideologies is unlikely to protect from flexibility stigma. Our first research question, about how professionals develop workplace relationships that help them place work-life

boundaries while avoiding stigmatization, will shed light on how individuals go about finding like-minded relationship partners in their workplace, and how they develop these relationships into sources of support for boundary work.

Our understanding of how workplace relationships develop over time remains schematic. Ferris et al. (2009) offered a useful framework with four stages. The first stage, *initial interaction*, has varying degrees of instrumentality, affect, and respect. Then, in the second and third stages, *development and expansion* of roles and *expansion and commitment*, respectively, affect, trust, support, and mutual respect grow while instrumentality gradually decreases. The relationship culminates in *increased interpersonal commitment*, which is characterized by loyalty, commitment, and accountability of both partners. Yet, this framework does not provide the kind of rich understanding of workplace relationship development that qualitative research could yield (Ferris et al. 2009). If we better understood how relationships begin, develop, and sour, our theoretical understanding of the conditions that enable helpful relationships would deepen. On the practical side, we could gain insight into how to help such relationships grow. This would help us understand how workplace relationships develop into sources of help in boundary work.

With the role of dyadic workplace relationships examined, a question remains about team-based contexts where a close workplace relationship, which is by nature dyadic, does not suffice to fend off flexibility stigma. If a team member wants to set boundaries, multiple people are positioned to notice this stigmatizing activity (Bailyn 1993, Epstein et al. 1999, Reid 2015, Ladge and Greenberg 2019). Given the visibility, it is less clear how an individual can avoid stigma in team-based work. Some research suggests that managers play a key role. When managers attribute the use of flexible work arrangements to the employees' desire for increased productivity (i.e., they assume an employee is using flexibility to be more productive and efficient, or to perform better), they perceive their direct reports as more committed than those who do not use flexible work arrangements, or who are seen as using them for personal reasons (e.g., to fulfill personal obligations or improve their work-life balance) (Leslie et al. 2012). In turn, these employees enjoy higher levels of career success than their peers, a sign of the absence of flexibility stigma. Although this research suggests that shaping managers' attributions may prevent stigma, it remains unclear how employees can influence this process or whether other possibilities exist for setting work-life boundaries without stigma. Our second research question, about how professionals who work in teams set work-life boundaries without getting stigmatized, sheds light on these dynamics in the context of team-based work.

Methods

Our exploration of boundary work in an ideal worker setting is grounded in a qualitative inductive study of consultants in a U.S.-based global consulting firm. The study draws primarily on semistructured interview data, which is useful for providing insight into relationship processes (Sias 2009). We gained understanding about the organizational context from archival data (e.g., human resources (HR) documents), conversations with the organization's leaders, and interviews with two HR managers; additionally, we measured respondents' satisfaction with work-life balance (Valcour 2007).

Research Context

We conducted our study at ConsultCo (pseudonym), a prominent consulting firm offering advisory services in multiple areas. This setting was appropriate for our exploration for two reasons. First, consulting, with its client focus, demanding hours, and importance of reputation and image for advancement in the firm, is a classic example of a profession with demanding work and high expectations for availability and responsiveness (Epstein et al. 1999, Blair-Loy 2009, Perlow and Kelly 2014, Reid 2015). In other words, it is a setting where the ideal worker norm persists (Ramarajan and Reid 2013, Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015) and flexibility stigma is a real threat and thus an appropriate context to examine how individuals avoid stigmatization while setting boundaries around work. Second, as a place where individuals engage in a variety of workplace relationships, it is a good context for examining how individuals develop those relationships and use them as helpful resources for boundary work. Consultants employed by large firms typically work in temporary project teams (Werr and Stjernberg 2003) with various supervisors and coworkers. This was true at ConsultCo, where consultants worked on two or more project teams, each lasting from a few weeks to several months (with substantial variety and unpredictability in project length). For these reasons, ConsultCo is an "extreme case" (Eisenhardt 1989), with the organization's normative pressures and staffing processes enabling us to study informal, relational pathways for placing work-life boundaries.

At ConsultCo, each team included individuals at three levels of hierarchy. *Partners*, the most senior consultants on the team, sold projects to clients and managed client relationships. Successful partners usually established long-standing relationships with clients who engaged their services repeatedly on projects, and typically oversaw four or more projects at a time. *Team leaders*, who reported to partners, were responsible for the day-to-day work of a consulting project and led teams that had, on average, three to ten *individual contributors*. This group, at the lowest level of hierarchy,

gathered data, conducted analysis, and drafted recommendations and reports. Team leaders typically ran two consulting projects at a time, and individual contributors also worked on two projects simultaneously. As is common in consulting, the work demanded frequent travel to client sites, including overnight stays. The firm did not practice a strict "up-or-out" policy, where consultants who are not promoted within a designated timeframe need to leave. Although there were no formal expectations about billable hours and clients were not charged by the hour, consultants were expected to complete the work assigned to them on time, which regularly required well over 40 hours of work per week. ConsultCo hired graduates from the most competitive colleges and MBA programs through a complex and rigorous selection process to ensure that each individual hired was able to perform at the expected high level of excellence.

Once a partner sold a project to a client, a team was composed to complete the work. Consultants could either be assigned to teams formally, with the help of the central HR function, or informally, through interpersonal agreements that were then approved by the HR. As is typical in professional service firms (Gardner et al. 2015), HR paid attention to the skills and knowledge needed on the project, the availability of individual consultants, and, if possible, their developmental needs.

Sample
We conducted 44 in-depth interviews with individuals across several organizational units, specializing in different substantive areas of strategy consulting, in six North American offices of the firm. Working with our contact at ConsultCo, we developed a stratified sample, considering previous research findings that suggest different experiences of work-life issues by gender and parental status. We received a list of 60 consultants (29 men, 31 women), emailed each an invitation to participate "in an interview for a research project about work-life balance." We arranged for interviews with the 44 who responded. Roughly 54% ($n = 24$) of our sample were women. Forty-five percent ($n = 20$) were parents. The majority of our participants were married, engaged, or in relationships; 14% ($n = 6$) were single; 5% ($n = 2$) were divorced. Most participants worked full-time; three worked part-time; and one had recently left the firm.

The firm granted us access to consultants who worked in two roles: team leaders and partners. Forty-eight percent ($n = 21$) of our interviewees were team leaders. Fifty-two percent ($n = 23$) of our interviewees were partners. Our interviewees ranged in age from recent college graduates to seasoned professionals and had worked for the firm from 1 to 13 years (with an average of 5.6 years).

Data Collection
In semistructured interviews lasting on average one hour, we began by asking questions about the consultant's career history and personal life. Because of our focus on the role of relationships in boundary work, the main part of the interview elicited stories about how people at ConsultCo had influenced their ability to manage work-life balance. We deliberately phrased our interview questions around work-life balance, a concept that is frequently used in everyday life (Greenhaus and Allen 2011, Groysberg and Abrahamson 2014, Hirschi et al. 2019) so that it had meaning for our participants. We adapted an interview protocol developed by Gersick et al. (2000) to study professional relationships. Specifically, we asked interviewees to tell us about five people at ConsultCo who had been most influential for their ability to balance work and life outside of work and why they had chosen them. We then asked them to talk in greater depth about the relationships that were most helpful or harmful in managing work-life balance, what made them so, and how they developed over time. We also asked our interviewees if they helped others at work to manage work-life balance and, if they answered affirmatively, we followed a similar protocol to learn about how they had helped specific people and how those relationships had developed. Consultants shared stories from different times in their careers at ConsultCo. Next, we turned to questions about hours of work. Full-time consultants who worked the least reported working 40–50 hours and those who worked the most 70–100 hours per week; part-time consultants reported working 35–60 hours per week. Finally, participants provided quantitative information about their satisfaction with work-life balance (Valcour 2007). All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed.[1] The transcripts provided the basis for our analysis.

Contextual Data
We obtained data about the organizational context through several sources. Prior to conducting the interviews with consultants, we reviewed HR presentations the firm used for intrafirm communication and engaged in several conversations with firm leaders. This provided us with perspective on the firm's culture and formal processes, as well as HR concerns as seen by the firm's leadership. During our interviews, it became clear that consultants viewed the process of being assigned to project teams as an important part of constructing work-life balance. To gain insight into the HR processes, we interviewed two HR staff members, asking them about the consultants' role in managing their work-life balance, and about the role of HR in creating and supporting project teams and in evaluating consultants' work. This helped us better understand organizational policies, the design of project work, and

staffing processes. We collected information about the firm on the Internet, from their official website, and from news articles about the firm over the period of data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data numerous times as we considered different theoretical contributions throughout data collection and review process. We approached the data analysis in a process of methodological bricolage, combining analytic moves tailored to addressing our research question (Pratt et al. 2022). The final round of data analysis involved six main steps. We present them as distinct, linear steps, but the process was emergent and iterative.

The first step involved composing summary sheets for each interviewee, which included the participant's career and personal information, responses to the work-life balance satisfaction survey questions, and details of the relationships they discussed in the interview. Relationship information included duration, the relative position of each person (i.e., was the relationship partner the interviewee's supervisor, subordinate, peer, mentor …), and how the relationship helped or harmed work-life balance, as well as details about the development of the relationship and any conflict or turning points. These summaries primarily included excerpts from the transcripts. Consistent with the discussion of narrative analysis of Maitlis (2012), constructing the relationship summaries allowed us to compile participants' accounts of each relationship into a relatively concise form. Because people's roles at ConsultCo had sometimes changed, several interviewees told us about their experiences in one role, even though they were no longer in that role at the time of the interview. We thus note next to each quote the position the interviewee occupied at the time of the described event, and therefore the same person might appear in our data with different positions, for example, Rachel (individual contributor) and Rachel (team leader). Although we regularly moved back and forth between the complete transcripts and the summary sheets throughout the analysis, the summary sheets enabled us to more easily compare and contrast consultants' accounts of their relationships and experiences of working at ConsultCo (Locke 2001).

The second step was comparing and contrasting consultants' accounts of relationships (Locke 2001). In this process, we noticed that people seemed to talk about two very different views and experiences of work-life balance within ConsultCo. One consultant, Joseph, described this difference as "different styles," noting that "some people are used to working harder and like their entire teams to work harder," whereas "some people have internal kind of checks in their minds where they understand how much is too much work, and how much is okay, and what the 80/20 line is." He

concluded: "Every head is a world, right?" To understand the characteristics of these different "worlds," we analyzed the full interview transcripts. Through comparing and contrasting transcripts, we identified a common view about excellent performance as a taken-for-granted goal. However, definitions of excellent performance, how it was achieved, and what this meant for work-life balance, differed. One set of beliefs was identifiable from previous research as the *ideal worker schema* (Acker 1990). We labeled the other view, in which consultants worked hard but also pursued work-life balance, the *sustainable worker schema*, to reflect the fact that this approach allowed consultants to deliver excellent service to clients over the long run, without depleting themselves or others. Through comparative analysis, we developed descriptions of these two schemas based on these work-life schemas and how they were related to one another.

We revisited a number of factors to try to explain these two schemas, including gender, parental status, organizational units, geographical offices, and hierarchical levels. None of these correlated with the different viewpoints. Intrigued by the possibility that these schemas would be correlated with the quantitative measures we collected, we compared the average hours worked per week and satisfaction with work-life balance of consultants who held these different schemas. We found that the sustainable worker schema was associated with fewer work hours and higher satisfaction with work-life balance compared with consultants who held the ideal worker schema, which provided confidence that the schemas influenced behaviors in ways that impacted work-life balance (Table 1).

Third, we returned to the full transcripts to code how consultants described relationships as helpful or harmful to work-life balance. We noticed that effective placement of work-life boundaries happened in helpful relationships and inductively developed a set of codes for boundary work tactics, moving from open to axial coding (Locke 2001, Charmaz 2014) while also comparing the tactics we identified with those in prior research (Kreiner et al. 2009). Importantly, although we did find *work-life boundary tactics*, consultants also described *work boundary tactics* as influencing work-life balance, that is, tactics aimed at managing boundaries around different work responsibilities. Although our data provide individuals' perspectives on relationships (versus dyadic data), we looked for evidence of the emergent patterns from multiple perspectives in a relationship hierarchy (e.g., a partner and an individual describing a similar experience from two different points of view).

Fourth, building on the prior two analytic steps, we identified the boundary tactics that occurred in relationships between consultants with shared schemas (shared sustainable, shared ideal worker) and contrasting schemas (sustainable manager/ideal worker subordinate,

Table 1. Two Work-Life Schemas at ConsultCo

	Ideal worker schema	Sustainable worker schema
Goals	High performance and excellent work	
Definition of excellence	Excellence = client satisfaction with work product	Excellence = client satisfaction with work product *and* team-members' (including self) satisfaction with work process
Theory of excellence	Constant availability and responsiveness to client leads to excellence	Careful project management and team- and self-management leads to excellence
Theory of career advancement	Promotions will go to those who are totally devoted to client satisfaction	Promotions will go to those who produce work that clients are satisfied with *and* who fellow consultants want to work with
Theory of excellence and work-life balance	Work-life balance endangers excellent work	Work-life balance engenders excellent work

ideal worker manager/sustainable subordinate).[2] We arranged this information in a 2×2 table with the manager's schema in the columns and the subordinate's schema in the rows and populated the cells with the boundary work tactics used in those relationships. This helped us see, for example, that work and work-life tactics were used when managers and subordinates shared the sustainable worker schema, but only work tactics were used on projects with an ideal worker team leader and a sustainable worker subordinate.

Fifth, given our initial interest in how work relationships develop, we re-examined the transcripts to understand how relationships began prior to working together (i.e., relationship initiation) and then how they developed after working together (i.e., relationship development, expansion, and commitment), using research on relationship development (Ferris et al. 2009) to organize our qualitative data into relationship development phases. Through this process, we noticed that the consultants' active engagement (or lack thereof) with the project assignment process was an important means of either continuing to develop a relationship or avoiding a problematic relationship. We therefore noted the formal and informal assignment tactics consultants used, the motivations for using them, and the relationship dynamics they generated, and we added this information to the 2×2 table, so that we could see how relationships of different types developed as well as the types of tactics used in each type of relationship.

Sixth, as we looked across our sets of findings as displayed in the 2×2 table, we recognized the need to graphically convey the dynamism of the process. Drawing inspiration from the variety of ways process models can be displayed (Langley 1999), we arranged our findings using the process of workplace relationship development (Ferris et al. 2009) as an organizing device. Having done that, we realized that some of our data were not about dyadic relationship development, but about how individuals brought in new people to the network of sustainable worker consultants. We went back through our data to identify any information about how networking into the hidden sustainable network

occurred, as well as the outcomes the network produced. With this final step, we developed our model of the development of a hidden sustainable worker network in an ideal worker organization.

Development of Hidden Sustainable Network in an Ideal Worker Organization

Our findings illuminate the process of the development of a hidden network of sustainable workers in an ideal worker organization. The experience of a typical consultant at ConsultCo began with an initial assignment to a project team by HR: with chance determining whether their team leader and partner embraced the ideal worker or the sustainable worker schema. Some of the consultants who were initially assigned to ideal worker-led teams remained unaware of any alternative to the ideal worker norm and expectations (Figure 1, left). Yet, as consultants spent more time at ConsultCo, some were able to observe signals from more senior consultants (usually by talking about their lives outside of work), indicating their sustainable worker schema. Junior consultants then tried to informally arrange to work with these leaders, and senior consultants tried to recruit individual contributors who appeared interested in this alternative way of working (Figure 1, right). Working together on project teams was a critical opportunity to engage in a wide array of helpful *work* and *work-life boundary tactics*. When one project concluded, consultants had to find a new one. Some chose to work on projects due to preferences other than sustainable worker schema or were assigned to ideal worker leaders. On these ideal worker teams, consultants who had learned boundary work while working with other sustainable worker consultants were able to use *work boundary tactics*, because these were encrypted to look like they were aimed exclusively at increased productivity and, therefore, did not violate the ideal worker norm. If consultants used work-life boundary tactics on these projects, they were stigmatized. For those who repeatedly worked on ideal worker teams, burnout, stress, and overwork were common results,
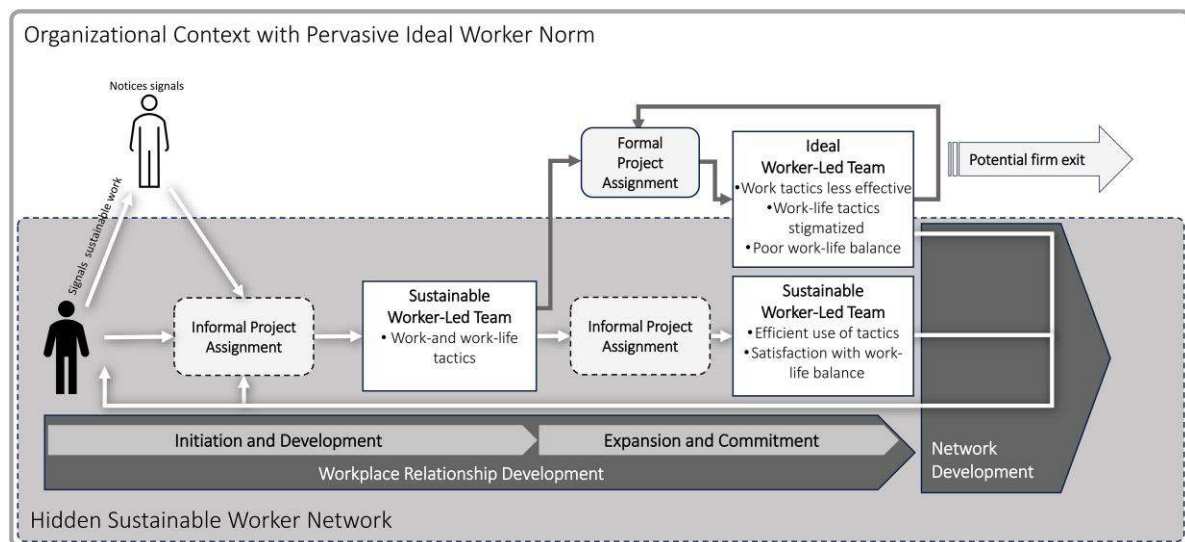
Figure 1. Junior Consultants Are Unaware of the Hidden Sustainable Worker Network (Left) or Enter it (Right)
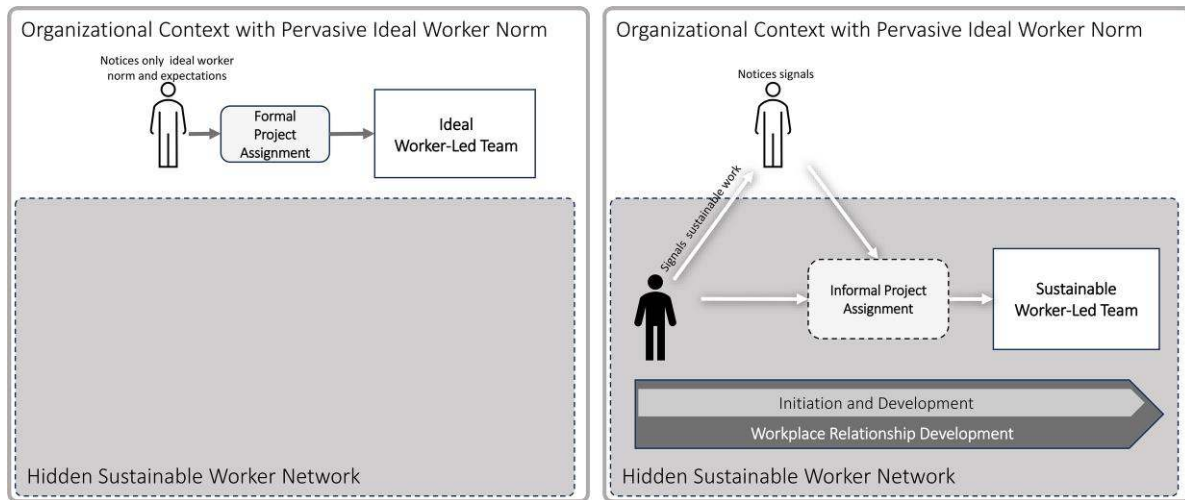
Notes. White arrows represent processes that are part of the hidden sustainable worker network. Thin gray arrows represent formal processes (e.g., HR staffing). Thick dark gray arrows show the phases of workplace relationship and network development. The black figure is a senior consultant. The white figure is a junior consultant.

often leading to exits from the firm. Other consultants repeatedly worked with the same sustainable worker leaders or arranged for (or were lucky to be assigned to) other sustainable worker leaders. Their relationships deepened, their skills in boundary work improved, and they were able to work fewer hours and enjoy higher satisfaction with work-life balance than their ideal-worker counterparts. They became a part of a hidden sustainable network. The remaining findings describe the process summarized in Figure 2 in more depth and detail.

Sustainable Worker Schema in an Ideal Worker Organization

Although everyone agreed that high performance and excellent work were nonnegotiable at ConsultCo, only six consultants in our sample believed one needed to adhere to the ideal worker norm to accomplish these shared goals, even in this high-powered context. For those who embraced the "ideal worker" schema, client satisfaction was the overriding criterion for excellence, and they believed they

Figure 2. Model of Sustainable Workers Co-Enacting the Hidden Sustainable Network

Notes. White arrows represent processes that are part of the hidden sustainable worker network. Thin gray arrows represent formal processes (e.g., HR staffing). Thick dark gray arrows show the phases of workplace relationship and network development. This Figure only depicts the experience of consultants exposed to the Sustainable Worker Schema; it does not depict the experience of consultants who are unaware of it or subscribe to the ideal worker norm.

had to be constantly available and responsive to the client's needs. As Thomas, one such partner, described: "Our industry is a very difficult one to turn off. You go on vacation; the clients don't go on vacation. The problem doesn't go on vacation; the deadlines don't go on vacation." This belief about being constantly available bled into a belief that people advanced in the firm by devoting long hours to demonstrate their devotion to client satisfaction. As Leslie (team leader) explained: "There is very much a culture at ConsultCo where it's like, I work harder than you. I work longer hours than you and that's what made people successful in the past and that's what's going to make them successful moving forward."

As a result of these beliefs, the pursuit of work-life balance by individual consultants was viewed as endangering the excellent work. Those who held the ideal worker schema viewed the sacrifices made in work-life balance as an expected part of the work: "[At] ConsultCo, [it's] accepted in the culture that there will be sacrifices in terms of work-life balance, and people are pretty okay about that" (Adam, team leader). When we asked Joseph (team leader) whether any individual contributors ever asked him for help with achieving work-life balance, he replied no, adding: "I think people are going to believe that if they ask you for help on work-life balance, they're going to be looked down upon." Even when ideal worker consultants wanted greater work-life balance, they believed achieving that meant leaving the firm. Samantha, for example, expressed wanting to work more contained work hours, but when we asked who helped her manage her work-life balance, she only wrote down herself: "The reason why I say myself [is] because it's very much up to you here. Nobody is going to watch out for you … especially in terms of work-life balance." In other words, despite a clear desire for greater work-life balance, she was in the dark that another approach existed.

Our first major finding is that there exists an alternative to the ideal worker schema, which we call the *sustainable worker schema* (Table 1). Consultants who adhered to this belief system defined excellence not only in terms of the client's satisfaction but also in terms of the satisfaction of the members of the consulting team doing the work for the client. Specifically, they believed teams had to do excellent work in a way that was sustainable and would not cause burnout. The logic for having a sustainable workforce was not purely altruistic, as some consultants saw it as a way to sustain excellent client service. Jasper (team leader) explained the link between his ability to manage a team without burning them out or "killing" them and client satisfaction: "As [the partner] saw that I could successfully manage a case and not either kill the team beneath me or kill myself, he said, 'Okay. Let's continue that on

[working together on projects for this client].' And that's something that you also want to do here [at ConsultCo] is you want the client to feel that there's consistency. You want people who know the … area or know the work that's required." As Jasper's example showed, consultants who held this belief structure saw value in having team members work consistently on a project and build up specific knowledge. This belief system also influenced how consultants viewed the pathway for career success at ConsultCo. As Susan (team leader) explained, "If you're going be a crazy worker and burn people out, it hurts you in your ability to move up … if you're burning out your teams, and it's hard to staff people to work with you, why should you get promoted? Even if you're doing amazing work for the client, it's not our values."

As Jasper's and Susan's examples imply, in the sustainable worker schema, excellence was achieved through allowing consultants to have sustainable work and robust lives outside of work, while also and at the same time by delivering work that clients considered excellent. The sustainable worker schema also had implications for how work-life balance was viewed: as supporting or enabling the ongoing provision of excellent work. For example, Rachel (team leader) told us: "I think that projects run more efficiently when everyone has good work-life balance."

In sum, these two belief systems, the ideal worker schema and the sustainable worker schema, coexisted at ConsultCo. The differing sets of beliefs seemed to be highly consequential: consultants who held the ideal worker schema worked longer hours and reported lower satisfaction with work-life balance than their sustainable worker schema counterparts (Table 2). Furthermore, consultants who held the ideal worker schema showed no awareness of the sustainable worker schema. For example, Lilly, a team leader who held the ideal worker schema, told us: "Look, I think that there's a general perception that something doesn't work really well [at ConsultCo in terms of work-life balance], but nobody quite knows how to fix it. There's a general assumption that the people who stick around will put up with it, and the people who don't will leave." In contrast, every consultant we interviewed was aware of and referred to the existence of the ideal worker schema as the dominant norm at ConsultCo; they knew and sometimes worked with people who adhered to it and who expected others to do the same. Sustainable workers did not reveal the existence of their approach to work, unless in the company of others who shared it.

Given the dominance of the ideal worker schema in the organization, it is a conundrum how consultants discover the alternative, hidden, and potentially stigmatizing sustainable worker schema. We uncover this process next.

Table 2. Work-Life Schemas Embraced by Interviewees at the Time of the Interview, Hours Worked, and Satisfaction with Work-Life Balance

	Subgroup	Sustainable worker schema	Ideal worker schema	Mixed/unclear
By gender	Male	12	3	5
	Female	19	3	2
By role	Team leader	20	4	6
	Partner	11	2	1
Average hours per week	Low	53.7	63.3	53.3
	High	63.2	68.3	73.3
	Satisfaction with work-life balance (1–5)	3.3	2.2	2.7

Note. Five sustainable worker consultants reported embracing the ideal worker schema earlier in their careers (three female team leaders, two male partners); interviewees reported a range of hours they worked and we report averages of the low point and the high point of the reported ranges; we measured satisfaction with work-life balance (SWLB) (Valcour 2007) with a scale of one (very unsatisfied) to five (very satisfied).

Initiation and Development of Sustainable Worker Relationships

Initiation of Sustainable Worker Dyadic Relationships

We found that sustainable worker team leaders and partners sent signals of their sustainable work approach to subordinates, indicating that they approached work differently. Consultants lower in the hierarchy recognized these signals as an indication that a higher-up might approach work differently. Intrigued, these consultants pursued relationships with one another (Figure 2, left).

Team leaders and partners who held the sustainable worker schema told us about looking out for potential project team members who might be open to the sustainable worker schema by signaling it as an alternative. Susan, a team leader working on a large project with a second team leader, noticed that the team was getting "swept up" by the other team leader's ideal worker work style. She tried to signal to the individual contributors who were working through the night that another approach existed: "I run into them at breakfast at the hotel in the morning, and I'm like, 'Did you get some rest?' I said, 'I've been doing this for many years, and I just think if you're consistently working late into the evening, there's a problem … It's just not necessary.'" Susan further signaled the sustainable work approach by telling the team she was going to have dinner with her mom while on the work trip to the city where her mother lived: "I felt bad, of course, like abandoning the team, but I also thought that they were wasting time. I didn't say explicitly you guys should all go have a fun dinner, go to a movie or whatever, but I left."

Individual contributors reported noticing a specific team leader or partner who stood out in casual interactions as someone not focused only on work. Fiona (individual contributor), for example, got to know Joe (partner) when he stopped by to chat with a partner Fiona had been assigned to early in her career. Fiona described Joe as "atypical … He's just nice. He is fun. He's a really good guy. He's not uptight. He is, again, one of those people that if I met outside of work, I would have been friends with." When asked if Fiona thought about these interactions in terms of work-life balance, she said: "I didn't think of it from the standpoint of being very targeted, like, I know this person will be respectful of private time and all of that kind of stuff, but I just knew that he talked about his wife, and he talked about his children, and was excited to take off time to go drive his daughter up to college. He gave me a book of poetry. It was clear that he spent a lot of time thinking about other things that were important."

Initial Assignment to Sustainable Worker-Led Teams

When individual contributors, team leaders, and partners noticed a person they thought might be interested in working differently from the predominant "ideal worker" model, they worked informally behind the scenes to be assigned to the same project. Continuing with the previous examples, Fiona (individual contributor) told us about Joe (partner) asking if she wanted to join a project: "I was like 'Yes, like I'd love to work with you!' It was one of those things where it was interesting, because it was not in my area of expertise, but I wanted to be able to work with this guy."

Jess (team leader) emphasized the importance of informally talking with colleagues about who would be on her teams and added: "Before you staff someone on your team it's very common to try to get the scoop about them." She viewed finding people who shared the sustainable worker approach as integral to her ability to manage work-life balance: "So, I think there are times when you need to compromise your work-life balance to succeed, but I think there are a lot of times when you don't necessarily need to, and especially if you pick the right people to work for." Consultants were sometimes fortunate to get formally assigned to

Table 3. Initiation of Sustainable Worker Dyadic Relationships

Code	Illustrative quotes
Relationship Initiation	
Sustainable schema team leaders & partners signal sustainable worker schema	• Being on large projects, we spent more time together. So, offline having dinner, socializing, we talk about personal lives and that kind of thing. You know just as you get to know them as friends then they'll ask more about how did you do this when you were my age. I'm just happy to share those stories. (John, partner) • And people that get to that [team leader] job are extremely driven and super focused, and they tend to try to over deliver all the time, and that eats into their personal life. My point-of-view on that is that backfires on us, the company, because you have highly talented people that burn out really quickly. So very, very often I have conversations with these guys around please balance your work-life balance. Manage your work-life balance. Talk to me. (Joseph, team leader)
Individual contributors notice signals	• I'd done my homework and asked around. And a friend of mine told me that he [partner] was terrific. So that's why I picked the project to work with him, which in retrospect was a good move. (Jess, team leader) • So, I just knew Allana (team leader) socially, and she told me every project she was working on with Amy (partner). And I was like, I want to be on that project. It sounds really cool. (Rachel, team leader)
Initial Assignment to Sustainable Worker Teams	
Informal: Seeking out opportunities with sustainable worker schema holders	• So then after 18-months, I said, "I need a break. I need to see other management models. I need another boss," kind of thing. So, I got myself assigned to another project. (Roberta, team leader) • Rachel asked her peer to nominate her for a project with Amy: "And I was like, I want to be on that project. It sounds really cool. [My peer and I] are friends, and I want to work with Amy, because it'll be awesome. So [my peer] sort of nominated me to Amy." (Rachel, team leader)
Formal: Assigned via HR	• Ellen (team leader) actively practices a healthy work-life balance, in my opinion. She was one of my first team leaders … I first met her two years ago [when I was assigned to work with her]. I didn't know her very well at all. (Roberta, individual contributor)

sustainable worker supervisors, without having to actively arrange it. Roberta described such an experience when she realized the partner she was assigned to work with, James, was "really people-oriented, unlike a lot [of partners] I was working with" (see Table 3 for additional illustrations of initiation and initial assignment).

Project Work on Sustainable Worker Teams
When consultants who held the sustainable worker schema worked together in projects teams, they characterized the relationships as mutual (i.e., both individuals were engaged and invested), respectful (i.e., of each other as people and in terms of their work abilities), and psychologically safe (i.e., able to speak up about issues without fear of repercussions). Although these characteristics reflected relationships that were productive and helpful for work-life balance, they still involved significant power differences and were embedded in an organization in which consultants' reputations carried important weight for their potential advancement. Therefore, consultants never lost awareness of the career implications of their work relationships. Jill (team leader) told us about her relationship with Sara, a sustainable worker partner: "There is that sense of how something is going to be perceived, even with someone who is as open as Sara. There is that little bit of wanting to show the drive and excitement around things and all that." As a result, not all of these relationships included interactions that could be characterized as casual, and only rarely did any of the consultants

spend time together outside of work. Furthermore, the work for clients had to be excellent.

Despite these constraints, consultants working on projects with others who held the sustainable worker schema were able to use a wide range of work- and work-life boundary tactics. Consultants reported that by using these tactics, which we discuss later, they were able to produce excellent work for clients and improve their work-life balance (see Table 4 for definitions and additional examples).

Work Boundary Tactics. Work boundary tactics are social practices that manage the boundaries around each work task or project. Consultants used them to decrease the overall amount of work and increase the predictability of the work, making it easier to place boundaries around the work as a whole and increase their satisfaction with work-life balance. These boundary tactics helped consultants who held the sustainable worker schema to organize tasks, deadlines, and meetings, manage their relationships with other consultants on the project team, and manage themselves. We identified three tactics that focused on project management and one that focused on self-management.

Managing a project's scope, schedule, and risk involves consultants proactively prioritizing and planning in advance the sequence and timing of tasks and meetings to minimize risk and unpredictability. Barbara (team leader) summarized how she engaged in all three components:

Table 4. Boundary Tactics on Sustainable Worker Led Teams

Code	Illustrative quotes
Work Boundary Tactics	
Project Management	
Managing project scope, schedule and risk	• One of the ways she (partner) does that [helps me with my work-life balance] is she has a very organized way of approaching all the things that she simply has on her plate, things she has to do, and being realistic and clear about how long each of the things will take, when she [will] get things done and when she can't get things done, and constantly coming back to that, constantly going through a process of returning to that touch stone of what needs to get done. I mean I'm talking about a to-do list, right, at a very basic level, but the way she approaches that and approaches the disciplined use of time and resources to get each of those things done has been a very positive influence on me. She's constantly driving, not just about coming back to the to-do list, but actually how you approach each task. (Peter, team leader)
Definition: *Prioritizing and planning in advance the sequence and timing of tasks and meetings in order to minimize risk and unpredictability*	
	• I think I'm generally cognitive [sic] of kind of how much it takes to do a certain task, so I don't underestimate something, which I think people do. I am very clear on priorities, so I don't say yeah, there's five things, go do them. I'll be like, "No; this is the one that I need today. This is the one we need tomorrow. This is the one that can wait till Thursday," kind of a thing. So, I prioritize. I think I am mindful of what other obligations team members have. (Tina, team leader)
Managing up	• I tried a different way, and sort of put it back in her [partner's] court to sort of react to. And I think that just worked a little bit more effectively. (Lloyd, team leader)
Definition: *Interacting with superiors to create efficient work processes and prevent unnecessary disruptions*	• If he said, 'Can you do X?" I might say, 'Yes, but keep in mind that will take us a week, eight-hours,' … But no, I never sat him down and said, 'Have we really thought about the big picture and whether we need all this work, and think about the impact on my life,' no. (Jess, team leader)
Bolstering subordinates	• He lets me run the show, most of the time. Whenever he intervenes, it's never with a slap on the wrist. It's always like: "And I would add," or something. But he always positions me as being in charge, and he probably contributes to the positioning of he's the expert that gets called in to be the expert, but I'm really in charge of the project. It helps me feel better, and then it gives me the flexibility to say: "That is not getting done tonight. It's going to get done tomorrow. We're all going to go home and have a great sleep." And he would never judge that decision, ever, never, ever, ever. (Roberta, team leader)
Definition: *Team leaders and partners made subordinates feel valued, important and supported*	
	• At the meeting, I think I kind of had some comments that just clearly went well and impressed the more senior clients, Bill gave me-and there were some things that didn't go as well, but gave me feedback, gave me positive feedback. Based on that meeting, I think, is where I kind of cemented that I could go alone, and that he trusted me, and he wasn't nervous about me in meetings. (Frank, team leader)
Self-management	
Curbing perfectionist tendencies	• He was very open about advice and tips and all of that related to being efficient, prioritizing, thinking about … when do things need to be done to the fullest and when 80-percent would really be all that was needed. (Jill, team leader)
Definition: *Being intentional about not doing every piece of work and doing every piece of work perfectly*	• I do a lot of, "The document will be fine." "This is good enough, stop," or I say "Send me the materials and I will be the last leg on the materials." (Paige, partner)
Work-life Boundary Tactics	
Temporal Tactics	
Maintaining nonwork commitments	• I try to make sure that I am there in time to see the kids to bed, and which means leaving here much earlier than everyone else on my teams and then getting back to work after they're well asleep. (Jasper, team leader)
Definition: *Developing routines that enabled consultant to set work aside at particular times in order to make time for personally meaningful non-work interests*	• I don't know that she would say that to all of the most senior people that she works with, but she knows that I do not think she does not do a good a job because she is planning to go for a two-hour run in the woods when we are on a client site, a month from now. So, I make sure that people feel validated that they choose to commit to other significant things outside of work and that they should be able to say that to me. (Cindy, partner)
Finding respite	• [Describing a partner who does this]: He takes it seriously. He's inspired a lot of what I do with people who work for me. Just "Hey, you've been working a lot, looks like it's quite a week. Let's both take Friday off," or something like that. (Frank, team leader)
Definition: *Periodic and opportunistic recuperation from intense periods of work.*	• I like sleeping a lot. I could easily sleep nine hours a night or more, if somebody didn't wake me up. I try to do a really good job of saying: "Listen, I'm going to be useless if I don't actually get some sleep." (Fiona, partner)

Table 4. (Continued)

Code	Illustrative quotes
Support-Seeking Tactics	
Seeking support for placing work-life *Definition: Being forthcoming about selective personal information in order to place work-life boundary in a desired time and place*	• [She] (team leader) … says: If I'm telling the client I can't meet at 7 a.m., or I'm leaving at 5:00 to go to childcare stuff, I don't say why I'm leaving, there is no reason why they need to know. I think it weakens the way I look as a professional because people will label me as oh "the mom." I'll just say I need to leave or I can't make that meeting. I won't tell people why unless I'm really close to them. (Ann, team leader) • And I've reached this point with this particular individual where I can go to him, and I said: "I'm going to dial into this particular call on Wednesday, because I have this going on, and I'm going to be in some trouble if I don't make it to this particular dinner on the home front." And he looked at me and he's like, "I totally get it." (Lukas, team leader)
Seeking support for addressing boundaries with ideal worker *Definition: Reaching out to another sustainable worker consultant for advice or help on how to handle persistent and ongoing boundary violations that were occurring as a result of the dominant ideal-worker culture.*	• While I was on the project with Marley, she (team leader) helped me think through how to tell Marley I was frustrated and what to do differently to get the hours to not be so crazy. So she was very helpful in giving advice at that point. (Laura, individual contributor) • What I try to teach young people is learn to say no diplomatically. They really haven't. That is a skill you have to practice it and recognize it. So, for example, some of the really talented young people get asked to do way more than they are capable of doing time wise … So, you have to learn how to say no because it's going to drive you crazy plus you are not going to be successful. (John, partner)

I try to put a lot of thought ahead of time into doing the project schedule, and really thinking through how long is that really going to take, how many people is it really going to need, what are the chances for us to get bottlenecked, what if this doesn't happen here, can I switch things around. So, I really try to create my work plans in a thorough, thoughtful way, and also have kind of contingency plans around them … I definitely ran a lot of interference with the client [to prevent scope creep], and tried to deploy everyone to the best of my ability in such a way that people weren't going to have to be putting in a lot of late nights and weekends.

The remaining two project management tactics influenced the work boundaries by shaping how consultants engaged with those above and below them in their hierarchical project teams.

Managing up involved interacting with superiors to create efficient work processes and prevent unnecessary disruptions. It was critical to ensure superiors participated in constructive ways, rather than "micro-managing," which "made the teams crazy." Team leaders who engaged in managing up had to feel comfortable discussing and negotiating work-related issues. Peter (team leader) told us about how he was able to "push back" on a partner by asking for additional clarifying information rather than just accepting direction that did not fully understand: "If I needed a deeper understanding of the context of what he was asking for … I would say, 'When can we meet and talk about this?' And that would push it back for him to find a time to do that, and then really get into it and figure out what's really needed, as opposed to

going off and doing work without having any communication with him."

Bolstering subordinates was a project management tactic in which team leaders and partners made subordinates feel valued, important, and supported. Feeling the confidence of a superior helped to build the team member's own confidence and decrease their worries about being judged. Frank (team leader) described his experience of feeling bolstered when working with a partner, Chad: "When I could see he became more comfortable with me, and Chad saying, 'Oh, I'm not going to go to this meeting, because I think you can handle it.' Okay, that makes me feel he values my role on the team, and therefore, we can start to have more of a divide-and-conquer point of view."

From the perspective of the team leaders and partners engaged in this tactic, bolstering subordinates involved being kind to and developing skills of those who worked on their teams, but also helping them achieve their work-life balance goals. As Jordan, a partner, explains:

The main thing [I do to help others balance their work-life demands], which I don't think we do enough, is simply begin all projects with a conversation that's less about balance than it is about their career ambitions, which as you can imagine, kind of has a life balance attribute built into it. But essentially, the question I'm asking is; 'What do you want to get out of this project?,' so that we can have a contract to make that happen for them, or for me to be able to say at the beginning, 'That's an unrealistic expectation, given the nature of the work, so let's reset

what we can possibly achieve for you,' and I do the same. And we talk about how we'll help each other and how we'll hold each other accountable.

Curbing perfectionist tendencies was a self-management tactic that involved consultants being intentional about not doing every piece of work and not doing every piece of work perfectly. In the context of ConsultCo, which consultants described as filled with "Type A ambitious people," "insecure overachievers," and "people who are afraid to kind of choose to not work," this was an effortful achievement. As Tatiana explained: "Sometimes it also means that we're just going to be less ambitious for some meetings, just because [the partner] is taking the stance that we shouldn't kill ourselves in the process. So that means that we're definitely kind of forcing ourselves to go the 80/20 way sometimes." Working "80/20" was a phrase we heard repeatedly to describe this tactic. Barbara (team leader) explained how a partner encouraged her to realize that "the 80% solution is usually the best solution, because the 100%'s going to kill me." Barbara now explains this to individual contributors on her team: "You need to put in your best effort, but you also need to do kind of the cost benefit analysis … around when enough is enough, and when it's good enough."

The "80/20 rule" stands in contrast to "boiling the ocean," which referred to partners or team leaders asking their teams "to see the universe of information and analysis to be able to come up with [a] theory" (Leslie, team leader). But sustainable worker schema partners did not ask for nor expect endless data gathering or analysis. Jasper told us about the advice he got from a partner: "He said, 'It never gets to 100%. The difference between 85% and 90% isn't even worth it. Get it to 85%, and the client is happy and you're happy. If the client isn't happy with 85%, we need to figure something out, right? But the fact that you're killing yourself for the extra 5% or the extra 15% is absolutely not worth it.'" By changing how they thought about effective work that provided excellent service to clients, these consultants were able to better control their own relationship to the work.

Work-Life Boundary Tactics. We also found that in relationships in which both parties held a sustainable work schema, consultants engaged in a variety of work-life boundary tactics. The first two tactics are temporal tactics or ways in which individuals in relationships are able to manipulate time (Kreiner et al. 2009). The second two are support-seeking tactics, or ways of seeking advice or assistance from others with the sustainable worker schema to place boundaries between work and life outside of work. We discuss each in turn below, starting with the temporal tactics.

Maintaining nonwork commitments involved developing routines that enabled consultants to set work aside at particular times to make time for personally meaningful nonwork interests. Tina (individual contributor) recalled how she and a peer encouraged each other to sign up for classes on Wednesday nights: "I just remember conversations she and I would have about: 'Okay, just sign up for a photography class,' because we weren't married at the time, we don't have children, but if you don't give yourself something to do at 7 o'clock on a Wednesday night, you'll just be working. … So, she took a photography class. I took a writing class, just to do things outside of work that were meaningful." As a result, Tina and her colleague limited their work time to pursue their own creative interests.

Team leaders and partners engaging in this tactic encouraged others to maintain nonwork commitments, as Cindy, a partner, demonstrates: "I make sure that people feel validated that they choose to commit to other significant things outside of work and that they should be able to say that to me." In relationships in which both people held the sustainable worker schema, consultants felt that they could exert some control over time, that is, when they worked and when they took time off.

Finding respite involved periodic and opportunistic recuperation from intense periods of work. For example, Shane described a partner, Tim, who demonstrated how to take advantage of less demanding work periods: "I could see different patterns and choices that Tim would make in terms of work-life balance and of managing the … peak periods, as well. It's always harder to manage the balance when you're in a peak period, but I think I've kind of learned the discipline of keeping an eye on kind of your own well-being. I'm looking for that finish the major project, take some time off, refresh, renew."

Next, we turn to support-seeking tactics, which involved explicitly bringing up personal needs or struggles regarding the work-life boundary to other consultants who held the sustainable worker schema to gain their support.

Seeking support for placing work-life boundaries meant that consultants were forthcoming about selective personal information in relationships with other sustainable workers, with the goal of getting support to place a boundary in a specific time and place. The disclosure of the personal information was voluntary, pre-emptive, and proactive. Shane, for example, described seeking support about work-life balance conflicts: "Something really important is coming up. I have made a commitment to that. I need to find a way of managing it. Can you help me think through ways that I could manage it?" In these cases, consultants felt comfortable disclosing elements of their personal lives and explicitly negotiating how to place a desired work-life boundary in a way that enabled high quality work while also allowing them to attend to personal nonwork needs and events.

Seeking support for addressing boundaries with ideal worker consultants entailed reaching out to another consultant who held the sustainable worker schema for

advice or help on how to handle persistent and ongoing boundary violations. These violations most frequently arose from working with specific team leaders or partners who embraced the ideal worker norm. Ideal workers put extreme demands on consultants' time and energy, and sustainable worker consultants often had difficulty managing these situations themselves. Laura, recalling a story from when she was an individual contributor, told us about how Eva, a team leader, provided her with "moral support" and advice about how to deal with Oscar, an ideal worker team leader: "I said to Eva, 'I have no idea what to do. Oscar's making me crazy. I don't know how to handle this. I can't possibly get all of this done and he asked for something. I was up until four in the morning. He didn't even look at it. I don't know what to do about it.' And she said, 'Well, you should talk to him. Why don't you say this?' And I [drafted] an email and Eva read it for me and then [I sent it]." Relationships between consultants who embraced the sustainable work schema helped consultants manage relationships with consultants who held the ideal worker schema.

When one project ended, consultants were quickly assigned to another project, and there was no guarantee of ending up on a team with consultants who shared their schema. In the next two sections we examine how consultants ended up on projects teams led by ideal workers versus sustainable workers and how that impacted their ability to use the boundary work tactics.

Assignment to and Experience on Ideal Worker-Led Teams

Assignment Process to Ideal Worker-Led Teams
A consultant might work on an ideal worker-led team following an assignment with a sustainable worker-led team for several reasons. Sometimes they are not given a choice. HR often assigns consultants based on their staffing criteria, including availability and the skills needed for the project. Donald (team leader) told us about receiving a call from HR: "We need someone … You're supposed to be good. Nobody else is out there. Can you do it?' Which I interpreted to be like: I should do it." The team was led by an ideal worker partner, and Donald worked through weekends for several months.

Sometimes consultants pursued projects based on priorities other than work-life balance, such as lower travel demands or projects that appealed to them substantively, even if that meant working with ideal worker supervisors. Lilly (team leader), for instance, described how she ended up working with an ideal worker partner: "I had actually sought him out, because he does very, very interesting work. And we met and he was like: 'Okay, well next project I have, let's talk.' And

so then he got a project about three weeks later, and then I managed to finagle my way free out of what I was doing, because I was more interested in doing his work." She said that the partner "doesn't do particularly good work-life balance" and, in particular, lets the project scope expand: "We need something for Monday, and we decide this on Friday, and so that involves working on the weekend. It involves working later. It essentially involves more work." Similarly, Leslie (team leader), pursuing an interest in marketing, was willing to have an unpredictable travel schedule to focus on the type of work she wanted (see Table 5 for additional illustrations of assignment to and experience on ideal worker-led teams).

Experiences on Ideal Worker-Led Teams
Sustainable worker consultants working on teams led by ideal worker supervisors reported relying on the work boundary tactics; they did not use work-life boundary tactics. Because work boundary tactics were solely focused on work, ideal worker managers did not see them as violating notions of how excellent work was produced, and their effect on work-life balance remained hidden. By using work boundary tactics, sustainable worker consultants could avoid potential stigmatization from openly trying to pursue work-life balance in the face of a manager who believed that this undermined excellence.

Managing up was used here as a critical strategy to keep the ideal worker supervisor (be it the partner or the team leader) at a safe distance from the day-to-day work. Barbara (team leader) told us about how she actively managed up with a partner who worked "7 days a week, 24 hours a day" and had a reputation for being difficult to work with: "We would often pow-wow before meetings and create a plan together. And I made sure that he copied me on all his correspondence with [the client] to the extent possible or at least let me know when he had conversations with [the client], which he doesn't do as well with other people." Barbara had to manage the partner actively to stay informed, but this allowed her to manage her team and the work without the partner's involvement in every decision.

By enlisting her partner in the process of *managing project scope, schedule, and risk*, Barbara tried to minimize how much he disrupted her attempts at controlling work tasks and schedule. However, it could feel like a lost cause. As Adam (team leader) told us about working for an ideal worker partner: "I think what he's been doing currently is trying to be some kind of super human and do everything for everyone, but he's gonna burn himself out. So, I'm trying to, at the lower level, negotiate with him that he releases away from some of these things, but it's hard. It's not working very well."

Table 5. Assignment to and Experience on Ideal Worker Led Teams

Code	Illustrative quotes
Team Assignment to Ideal Worker Led Teams	
Formal: Assigned via HR	• And then last year, around the time of the renovations, I had bought the condo, but I couldn't work for [sustainable worker partner] full time. I had to take another 50-percent, and [ideal worker partner] happened to be available. And I had a 50 [percent of my work time] free, so I ended up working with [ideal worker partner]. (Roberta, team leader) • *Interviewer: Did you know of [ideal worker partner] before you worked with her?* No. *How did you come on the project?* Basically, I became available, and I was a good choice. (Joseph, team leader)
Informal: Seeking projects for substance & geography	• … not that I love traveling but I love [marketing] … I was like, "If I want to do [marketing] stuff and stay at ConsultCo I have to travel, until we build … that [marketing] business in the West Coast.". (Leslie, team leader) • At some point, my life as a family and with my wife was a disaster because I was working, I don't know, 90-hours, 100-hours a week and always available to do anything that anyone would ask me. And I was always a "Yes, yes, yes, yes" kind of person. And then the relationship with my wife deteriorated so much that, I was blind, but I hit a wall at some point with my wife, and I decided to change. And that change translates into, I decided to go to [industry-based companies], which I know are in [a local region] and won't require too much of my time. (Todd, partner)
Experiences in Ideal Worker Led Teams: Less effective use of work boundary tactics	
Ideal worker team experience of: Managing up	• He gets anxious really easily and so he is constantly sending emails, constantly working people into the ground, and if you are ever like, 'I don't think we can do this in three hours, can we do this later?,' he's like, "I don't really understand why this is so hard, let's just sit down right now and do it together." And he'll just lock you in the conference room and go for two-hours. Or you'll schedule 30-minutes to do something with him and he'll like want to look at all of the details and it will be like three hours down the road and you are still stuck in this conference room with him... I never want to work with him again. (Lindsay, partner)
Ideal worker team experience of: Managing project scope, schedule and risk	• He is the iteration king, like, 'I'll give you three words of advice' about what he wants you to do, and you have to go away and try and read his mind, and then come back and it will be wrong, obviously. And then you have to try to do it again, wrong, and back and forth and wrong. (Roberta, team leader)
Ideal worker team experience of: Bolstering subordinates	• I was just protective over my team members and it felt like I was the only one who was going to do this for them... Like there was a point [when we were working for an ideal worker partner] when one of the team members, we had a team room and one of the girls on our team who is suffering really badly, like wrote a sign that said, "Den of Despair" and like put it on the outside of our team room (Kathleen, team leader)
Ideal worker team experience of: Curbing perfectionist tendencies	• He was leaving for business school, and so for like the previous four or five-months, he had sort of really taken his focus off of the way he normally did things, and was focusing on his business school applications. And we were both kind of laughing, because he was like: "I feel like I'm doing maybe 70-percent of what I used to do." And he's like, "and no one notices, like they don't even notice that I'm not doing it." (Barbara, team leader)
Outcomes of Working on Ideal Worker Led Teams	
Stigmatization if using work-life tactics	• I've been called a whiner by a partner I've worked for...I will literally have tough questions for partners like, 'Do we really need this at this time? … If we do this, this is going to mean that the team is going to have to stay up until 1 a.m.; do we really need to do this?' I was like, 'I just want to manage about what we can get done and I've already worked the team like one or two weekends I really don't want to do that again.' And the partners that I was working for were working like 24-hours. They have extreme amounts of energy, and they were kind of like used to people just delivering whatever if they were asking for it …So I've said that a couple of times and the person was literally like you are always whining. You are a big whiner … I think some of it was kind of a joke, but behind the joke it was very serious, they think that I was always pushing back. (Leslie, team leader)
Stress, burnout, overwork	• Yeah, I have a colleague who had just a very, very bad winter, kind of working through weekends, working through holidays, working late hours, working early mornings, and was just absolutely getting fried. … And one of the things that we talked about a lot was whether he should take a leave of absence, which he eventually did. But that's a little bit of an extreme. When your balance is either being on or being off, that's not really balance. That's like I'm going to work really hard for three-months, and then I'm going to stop working for three months in order to recuperate. That's not a really great life plan. (Lilly, team leader)
Avoiding ideal worker supervisors	• Basically, I think she just had unrealistic expectations, and she continuously tried to over deliver … And I was on the other side of the question, which is the team that actually has to deliver on that... *Interviewer: Did you work with her for a long time, or was this just one project?* Thank God, only for 12-weeks. I'll never work with her again. (Joseph, team leader)
Poor performance challenges	• So [the partner] was imposing really tight deadlines, which was hard for me to juggle with [my other case]. She had two junior resources on that project to work with, and the moment that I said I actually need your help, or I don't know how I'm going to deliver against that certain milestone, I need either some help from you, or I could use some help from the junior resources, she would basically say, I can't help you. You need to figure this out. (Tatiana, team leader)

Sustainable worker team leaders tried to *bolster their subordinates*, despite the demands from their ideal worker partners. However, unlike on project teams led by partners who held the sustainable worker schema, the tactic did not have the same payoffs here. Todd (team leader) described himself as "very protective" of his team: "I was a sponge. That created a lot of damage [to me and my career], but I was happy anyway. I have a team that was all happy, and the other stuff I can handle. Don't worry guys. Don't worry about [the partner]." For Todd, and other consultants in his position, this caused stress, overwork, and in some cases career damage.

Curbing perfectionist tendencies was still a possible tactic, even when working with ideal worker partners and team leaders. Barbara reported, "It's like [partners] don't notice that extra 20% unless it's really something incredible. And the client definitely doesn't notice. So, it was kind of this like revelation that we don't have to kill ourselves to add that last little inch of value. It's really not that beneficial to anybody." Ideal worker superiors did not encourage or support their consultants to deploy this tactic, but, with skill and practice, sustainable workers were able to use it covertly.

Overall, drawing on these work boundary tactics enabled consultants to maintain at least some parts of the sustainable work approach even in less-than-ideal circumstances. In contrast, when sustainable worker consultants attempted to engage in *work-life boundary tactics* with ideal worker team leaders or partners, they were publicly ridiculed or humiliated. For example, Cindy (individual contributor) recalled being humiliated by an ideal worker team leader who made a last-minute demand for work over the weekend:

> I'm supposed to be on a plane to visit my boyfriend, now husband. We were living in different cities at the time. [The team leader was] making plans for how all ten of us are going to work all weekend. He's making these plans Friday at five, or four, or whatever time it was. I'm supposed to be on a plane at six. He says, "Who has plans this weekend?" I said "I do." He said, "What are your plans?" I said, "I'm going to visit my boyfriend." He said, "Are you getting married?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, then cancel your plans." I had to make the call in front of the entire case team to my boyfriend that I was not coming. I remember thinking, "Holy shit, you really don't care anything about my life."

Similarly, Roberta (team leader) told of how ideal worker partners derisively repeated a story about how, instead of coming to the office to meet with them in person on a Sunday, she joined the meeting by phone while getting a pedicure.

Although sustainable worker schema consultants were able to enact work boundary tactics when working with ideal worker team leaders or subordinates, the tactics themselves were less effective because they were not being carried out on a team that supported them. This often led to stress, burnout, and overwork. As a result, if sustainable workers were assigned to teams with ideal workers repeatedly or for an extended period, they began to see employment at ConsultCo as unsustainable. Their awareness that sustainable work was possible at ConsultCo but lacking sufficient access to the hidden network undermined consultants' belief that working sustainably was feasible for them. Kathleen, for example, had endured a punishing nine months on a case in which an ideal worker partner showed "total disrespect for [her] as a human being" and she struggled to enact work boundary tactics. At the time of our interview, she had already handed in her resignation (Figure 2, top right).

When sustainable consultants could minimize exposure to ideal worker managers and use informal assignment processes to find projects with sustainable worker supervisors, they felt their career prospects at ConsultCo were more viable. Consultants avoided explicitly stating that they were avoiding working with a specific manager to not overtly confront the ideal worker schema. As Adam (team leader) described, "a request to specifically not work with somebody … would kind of raise some eyebrows." Instead, consultants sought support for avoiding work with ideal worker consultants. Rose (individual contributor), for example, said to a team leader she no longer wanted to work for, "Look, I just don't think it's good for my professional development." However, she told us: "I also knew that it was going to be three months of absolute hell. And it turned out it was. I mean, the team of three people who worked on that case got worked to the bone."

The situation was more complicated when a superior made it known they did not want to work with a particular subordinate, as this called into question the subordinate's ability to do excellent work, a fundamental requirement in both work-life schemas. Several consultants in our sample felt that their abilities were doubted by a manager, which caused "negative swirls" about them. Donald (team leader), for example, worked on a challenging project with an ideal worker partner. When Donald failed to meet the partner's expectations, he was "rolled off" the case and replaced with another team leader. He told us, "I started hearing from [senior] people that I've worked with before … that were like, 'Donald, what's going on? I heard this. Tell me what's happening,' … So there was just this kind of like crazy Donald story that occupied a lot of people's time over the course of like a week or two." Because excellent work was a shared goal across the two work-life schemas, such stories were very concerning. Whereas supervisors embedded in the ideal worker schema saw individuals as fully responsible for their own (poor) performance and thus simply replaced them on their projects, supervisors who held the sustainable worker

schema examined the circumstances, conditions, and context to see what could be done to help the consultant improve their performance. As Rachel told us, "It's my job to develop [subordinates]." In the sustainable work view, a lack of performance was seen as an opportunity for growth that was part of a supervisor's professional responsibility.

Expansion and Commitment in Sustainable Worker Relationships
Assignment Process to Sustainable Worker-Led Teams

Many sustainable workers informally arranged to work together after a first project. Although ConsultCo's HR team told us that just 20% of project assignments were informally allocated by consultants themselves, sustainable worker consultants described staffing as a "free market" and reported arranging 80% of project staffing informally.

Following an assignment to a first project with a sustainable worker supervisor, many consultants informally sought out additional assignments with the same supervisor, simply by asking them if there were opportunities to work together again. Jess (team leader) told us what occurred after her first positive experience of working on a sustainable worker-led project team with Seth (partner): "I actively sought out working with Seth the second time around … I'm willing to compromise on other things, what the project type is, what the industry is, there's a whole lot of other things, to get the good boss."

Supervisors tried to informally staff projects with subordinates who had learned to work in line with the sustainable worker schema. Jasper, for example, recalled that when he was an individual contributor, a team leader asked him to continue working with him and a partner. Our HR interviewees told us that some partners offered to postpone the start date of projects to wait for their desired consultant to become available: "I have this. I can delay the start date with this client if you'd be able to join in three weeks." Conversely, Joseph told us he tried not to have consultants on his teams who "kill their teams": "I actually look out for that stuff now that I'm a manager. I look out for these types of people [ideal workers] and try to single them out [and not staff them on my teams]."

Emerging Hidden Network of Sustainable Worker Consultants

When sustainable consultants were able to develop relationships over time, support for boundary work deepened beyond boundary tactics to include additional support for one another's work and nonwork pursuits. They also reinforced the tactics among consultants newer to the sustainable worker schema and brought new consultants into the hidden network. We use the term "network" here to mean a set of interpersonal relationships, developed through mutual investments and recognition, that can be counted on as a reliable source of benefits (Portes 1998) (Figure 2, bottom right). We identified four ways in which the deeper relationships among the hidden network of sustainable workers enabled increased satisfaction with work-life balance.

First, when consultants were able to fully staff project teams with sustainable workers, they could better reap the schema's rewards for both work and work-life balance. Continued work with the same team members provided the opportunity for the supervisors and subordinates to have greater knowledge of each other and of the client (if the same client requested additional projects). Instead of having to start from scratch, team leaders and partners knew that they had strong performers who could also enjoy and support greater work-life balance. Jess, a team leader, explained how she was able to work repeatedly with an individual contributor: " … one of the guys on my team right now, he's been working with me … consistently for almost two years. He's terrific, and I try to be a good manager to him to keep him wanting to work for me. So, he keeps wanting to sign up again to work with me and we have a really positive relationship." As a result, consultants could be more efficient in how they did their work. As Rachel (team leader) explained, "One of the things that also gave me a lot of flexibility was working [with] the same people a lot of times, which then, you just get to know people better, they trust you, and there's a lot more flexibility, and you have sort of comfort and efficiency in the working relationship."

Second, sustainable worker superiors protected and advocated for sustainable worker subordinates because they knew how valuable they were. Also, because they knew more about each other, the relationships became broader and deeper sources of support for work-life balance. When Tina (team leader), for example, was told that she would have a shorter maternity leave than she expected, she "flipped out" and told the sustainable worker partner she had been working with. As she described, "He's like 'Not acceptable!' and … [he] made a phone call and played top cover to make sure I got what I had expected, which was an extra month, fully paid. And so that was a pretty pivotal thing he did for me."

Third, some sustainable worker consultants reported making explicit partnerships to support each other's ambitious career goals while also achieving work-life balance. This came as a result of the deep trust and respect they had built within the relationship. Lloyd (partner), for example, described the "informal contract" he had developed with Cecilia (team leader) that would help both get promoted within the firm:

I would help give her opportunities that in her [team leader] role she might not otherwise have, for example, writing a proposal a few years ago, getting involved in those types of business development activities where she was typically more involved than just running projects. So, I would essentially help pull her up, and she would take on more responsibilities that would allow me to free up to do other things. Having somebody who's able to work with you on a more consistent basis like this relationship allowed really did help free me up to do other things, which impacts your work-life balance.

Fourth, as consultants understood the possibility and the benefits of working with the sustainable worker schema approach, they strengthened the community of "believers" by training others on the needed skills in boundary work and sharing information about this alternative approach. Peter (team leader) described Vera's (partner) response when he told her about regretting working over a weekend for an ideal worker partner, who then told him his work wasn't needed. "And I chatted with her about that. I was like, 'Oh I can't believe I did that.' And she's like, 'Yeah, I don't know why you did that. I wouldn't have done it. Even though someone asked me to, I wouldn't have said no, I'm not doing that. [But] I want to know more, why? What's it going to be used for? What's the purpose here? What do you really need?' So really testing and pushing back … to understand why something needs to be done, and really being disciplined about that." Vera was letting Peter know how she, a sustainable worker partner, managed project work. She made sure to understand the purpose of the work before committing to it.

Consultants also tried to expand the network of those who would value and could prosper in the sustainable work approach. Hierarchical power reduced the risk of getting stigmatized in this process, which is why this usually came in the form of partners endorsing team leaders or individual contributors who would embrace the sustainable worker approach. For example, Amy (partner) asked Paige (partner) to work with Melinda, a sustainable worker team leader who was returning from maternity leave on a part-time basis. Because Paige and Amy both embraced the sustainable worker schema, the recommendation shaped Paige's decision to take on Melinda, despite the part-time status: "I took it upon the word of Amy, who had worked directly with her before, that Melinda was going to make my life easy even with the extra effort, that she is so competent that 60% of her is as good as 100% of someone else. At the end of the day it's … true because there is no risk in what she does. It's just she can't do it all of the time." Although Melinda's part-time status might have been a "career killer" if she had worked for an ideal worker, the network of sustainable worker partners found a way for a team leader to continue to be valued and to create value for the firm. In fact, when life events forced consultants to use *formal* flexibility policies, such as part time work, maternity leave, or leave of absence, sustainable workers provided safe harbors for one another within an ideal worker organization that would otherwise stigmatize them (see Table 6 for additional examples).

Through this continued reinforcement and careful disclosure of the sustainable worker approach, the network of consultants who held the sustainable worker schema gradually grew and could remain hidden from the firm as a whole. Although those who did not know about the network or did not have access to it struggled under the pressures of the ideal worker norm, consultants who participated in the network benefitted from its support (Figure 3).

Discussion

We embarked on this study to better understand how professionals develop their workplace relationships into sources of help for boundary work, and how they engage in boundary work while avoiding stigmatization. In analyzing the experiences of consultants in an established U.S.-based international consulting firm, we discovered—within an organization that was dominated by the ideal worker norm—a hidden network of consultants who were able to coordinate among themselves a way of working that allowed for violations of the ideal worker norm without stigmatization. This way of working was based on a coherent set of beliefs about work and the work-life interface we named the *sustainable worker schema*, which contrasted with the ideal worker schema in all ways except in the ultimate goals: high performance and excellent work. Essential to this way of working was not only effective management of boundaries between work and life outside of work (what we call *work-life boundaries*) but also effective management of boundaries around each work task or project (what we call *work boundaries*). In fact, *work boundary tactics* were a necessary condition of effective boundary work and the main feature of the emergent version of work redesign, which enabled the network of consultants who embraced the sustainable worker schema to work fewer hours and achieve higher satisfaction with work-life balance than their colleagues who embraced the ideal worker schema.

Work Is Back in Work-Life Research
The sustainable worker schema and the ideal worker schema that emerged from our data extend the recently developed theory on the role of cognition in the work-life literature (Leslie et al. 2019). While the work-life ideologies of Leslie et al. focus exclusively on the interplay between work and life outside of work, the

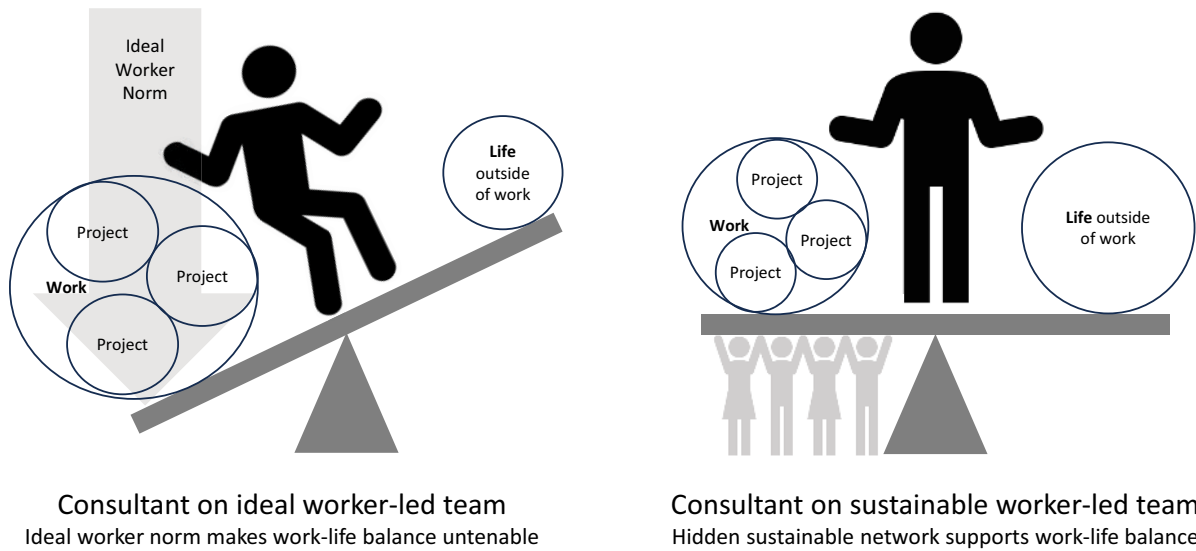**Table 6.** Expansion and Commitment in Sustainable Worker Relationships

Code	Illustrative quotes
Assignments Process to Sustainable Worker Led Teams	
Informal: Seeking out opportunities with sustainable workers	• I've just been checking in with Dana to see what's going on, because the other thing I do with Dana is I try to figure out what cases she's working on and see if I can get in on one of her cases again, because when you find someone that you work with well, you try to kind of work with them [again]. (Donald, team leader)
An Emerging Hidden Network of Sustainable Worker Consultants	
Repeating work with teammates yielding more efficient work	• Over the course of time, you get to know people well, and that really lays the foundation, I feel, for kind of how productive and how far your professional relationship is going to be stretched. (Donald, team leader)
Increased satisfaction with work-life balance	• My [Sustainable Worker team leader] person is basically taking direction from me, but it's a much more give and take relationship than that sounds where they're kind of telling me what needs to be done, and recommending to me how we do it, and then I'm trying to figure out with them how to make that fit the budget, fit the client's wants and all that stuff. And so that person is really essential to allowing me, making it possible for me to meet my ambitions of a vacation this week, taking Friday off to go and do something. If I can't have their coverage, it almost doesn't work, no matter what anybody above me says, because I need the person below me to cover my ass. (Jordan, partner)
Superiors advocating for valued subordinates regarding work-life issues	• I helped him negotiate extra time off for his wedding and his honeymoon, yeah, so those types of things … I was negotiating with HR at length about what could we do for Erik. He was really stronger than we had anticipated. His starting salary was much lower. What could we do? There were very limited degrees of freedom at that time, and so where we came down was they were able to offer him a couple of extra vacation days, and a couple hundred dollars to take his wife to dinner. So, I just kind of pursued it until there was something, as opposed to, "Sorry, there's nothing." And then he got promoted right away. (Tina, team leader)
Making explicit partnerships for advancement	• We are a very effective team. We help each other achieve what we are trying to achieve. He [the team leader] is single. He does not have children. He is very ambitious. I help him with that. I support him in sort of getting to that next level providing him with recognition of those things. He knows that what I am trying to achieve is really in the zone of making my life work with regard to kids so he helps let me know when is the high-value moment where I need to be in the room, but then other times he says: "You don't need to be in the room." So, he is good at helping me with that. (Paige, partner)
Strengthening network of believers via informal training and information sharing	• Just earlier this week we were at a goodbye dinner for a colleague and Tina was saying oh how's it going? We started talking about how I take Friday mornings off to go to music class with my daughter. The way it came out she said, "Do you have PTO [paid time off] coming up, are you taking a vacation?" I said, "I'm actually using my vacation time to take Friday mornings off to do this." She turned to me and she said, "Why do you use your vacation time for that? I remember when I was with [my son] and I was taking music class and it was near by the office and I was only out of the office for like an hour and a half. I never felt like I needed to take PTO for that, I'm just out of the office for an hour and a half.' (Ann, team leader)

schemas our consultants held include theories about the work itself, what constitutes the shared goal of excellence, how to achieve that standard, and what paves the path to career advancement. Work-life balance and its effect on excellence were only one component of this schema (Table 1). One theoretical contribution of our study, therefore, is to affirm the importance of the role of cognition in the work-life literature but argue that attending only to the interplay of work-life is incomplete. Our findings show the necessity of considering how people view the work itself, not only the boundary between work and life outside of work.

Consultants who embraced the sustainable worker schema used *work boundary tactics* as an essential part of work-life boundary work. This is a departure from

prior research in the work-life domain, which focused exclusively on boundaries between work and life outside of work (Nippert-Eng 1996, Kreiner et al. 2009, Trefalt 2013, Beckman and Stanko 2020). Our research showed that to set desired work-life boundaries while maintaining high levels of work performance, consultants needed to approach their work in specific ways. They had to set limits on how much time and effort they expended on each task and project rather than thinking only about time at work and time outside of work. Interviewees who held the ideal worker schema found it simply impossible to limit the time spent on work without jeopardizing its quality because they were not aware of the work boundary tactics and their enabling power. The interviewees who held the sustainable worker schema learned these tactics from

Figure 3. Work and Life Outside of Work on Ideal-Worker and Sustainable Worker-Led Teams

Consultant on ideal worker-led team
Ideal worker norm makes work-life balance untenable

Consultant on sustainable worker-led team
Hidden sustainable network supports work-life balance

Note. The light gray arrow (left) and people (right) represent the organization's impact on the focal consultant's ability to achieve work-life balance.

each other. Effectively, these tactics, which sustainable workers learned from each other, made it possible to contract the territory around each work task or project and therefore place desired work-life boundaries.

Together, the sustainable worker schema and the work boundary tactics suggest that it is imperative for work-life scholars to expand our focus beyond the most obvious points of interplay between work and life outside of work to include a full examination of the work itself. An interesting possibility for future research is a further exploration of the sustainable worker schema. Our inductively developed construct is, no doubt, industry specific. It would be valuable to understand what beliefs about work contradict the ideal worker norm and critically shape employees' approaches in other jobs. For example, we can imagine that in creative industries, a "sustainable" theory of excellence might rest on the belief that engaging in a variety of meaningful endeavors outside of work gives access to better ideas. Furthermore, although some variations in definitions of excellence might have deep implications for work-life balance, the effect of others might be less clear (e.g., if one academic defines excellence in terms of the number of A-level publications and another in terms of impact on practice). Similarly, the work boundary tactics we identified are specific to the work we studied. Although managing up, bolstering subordinates, and curbing perfectionist tendencies seem likely to be useful across a variety of work contexts, the central importance of managing project scope, schedule, and risk is clearly specific to project work. Identifying work boundary tactics that facilitate the needed containment of each work task in different

types of work is of practical importance and could help to advance the theory of work redesign for work-life balance (Bailyn 1993; Perlow 1998, 2012; Perlow and Kelly 2014).

The call to put the work back into work-life research is not new (Bailyn 1993, Perlow 1995), and researchers and practitioners have attempted to design work interventions that would enable better work-life balance (Bailyn 1993; Perlow 1998, 2012; Kelly et al. 2011; Perlow and Kelly 2014). However, what we found at ConsultCo is emergent, self-created, and self-sustained, grounded in employees' understanding of what it takes to deliver excellent work.

Is Invisibility a Superpower?
The emergent work redesign under the sustainable worker schema was able to persist because it was hidden. Consultants who embraced this schema kept it concealed by sending and interpreting signals to identify like-minded others: the main signaling mechanism being shared information about nonwork interests and commitments, known in the literature as cross-role referencing (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell 2006, Dumas et al. 2013, Uhlmann et al. 2013, Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2019). Only in these relationships with like-minded others did consultants openly use work-life boundary tactics, which were undeniably aimed at improving work-life balance and were thus stigmatizing in the eyes of those who embraced the ideal worker schema. They could also be transparent about the purpose of the *work boundary tactics*, which were the foundation of effective boundary work. Although work boundary tactics alone yielded only partial benefits for their

users, they offered the advantage of usability even in relationships with ideal worker consultants.

Work boundary tactics, unlike the work-life boundary tactics more commonly reported in research (Kreiner et al. 2009, Carlson et al. 2015, Rothbard et al. 2022), did not appear to conflict with the predominant ideal worker norm present at ConsultCo. In a culture focused on high performance and excellence, the use of work boundary tactics was not at all controversial and in fact aligned well with these overarching goals. This meant that the substantial efforts that went into controlling the boundaries of the work by sustainable worker consultants did not attract stigmatizing attention, and instead may have actually enhanced these consultants' reputation for excellent work (Anteby 2008). Although previous research has focused on the decision to pass or reveal a stigmatized identity (Goffman 1963, Reid 2015, Johnson et al. 2020), our research shows how a set of work practices aligned with a potentially stigmatizing identity can remain hidden in plain sight.

In this ideal worker setting, boundary work has to remain private if one is to avoid stigmatization. Although work-life boundary tactics are kept private by only using them when ideal worker individuals are not present (i.e., blocking), work boundary tactics are kept private through "encryption" (Bernstein 2012), by speaking about them, and others interpreting them, as productivity tools rather than foundations for work-life balance. Bernstein suggested that, due to the costly nature of encryption, this path to privacy is best reserved for "illegitimate hiding" (p. 206) and pursuing work-life balance is certainly viewed as illegitimate through the ideal worker lens. The cost—the effort consultants expended to consistently present their work boundary tactics as only productivity oriented—was worth it because it enabled consultants who worked with ideal worker supervisors to reap at least some of the rewards of the sustainable worker schema. This "passing" (Goffman 1963) might have also been effective because it induced the supervisors' productivity attributions, which have been shown to be an effective shield against stigmatization (Leslie et al. 2012).

The emergent work redesign we observed in ConsultCo has similarities to some organizationally sanctioned interventions aimed at redesigning work "for better work and better life" (Perlow and Kelly 2014), such as agreed upon "quiet time" for focused work (Perlow 1998), team-coordinated predictable time off (PTO) (Perlow 2012), a results-only work environment (ROWE) (Kelly et al. 2011), and predictable scheduling (Kesavan et al. 2022). These experiments were based on a realization voiced almost three decades ago (Bailyn 1993, Rapoport et al. 2002) that the nature of work is problematic and that the norms and expectations about how the work gets done need to be challenged. Some of the interventions yielded encouraging results, but

they did not persist. We believe that these outcomes are indicative of the power of the ideal worker schema: the requirement for complete devotion to work and the belief that such devotion is a prerequisite for excellent work. In the face of this belief, alternative approaches to work are perceived as inevitably shortchanging the client and thus seen as immoral (Williams et al. 2013). Under such pressure, highly visible challenges to the norm may not be able to survive.

Our study uncovered a durable but hidden work redesign, suggesting that hiddenness might be a valuable attribute of work redesign interventions: one that shields the intervention from the deleterious pressures of the ideal worker norm. Supporters of the ideal worker schema did not know of sustainable worker schema's existence. Although ideal workers may have worked on a project with a sustainable worker, they saw sustainable workers' approach to work as idiosyncrasies rather than as a schema and accompanying practices. It may very well be that the visibility of redesigns makes them vulnerable to the pressures of the ideal worker environment, whereas invisible targets are hard to hit. Additionally, participation in the sustainable worker network is voluntary (in contrast to mandatory or taken-for-granted participation in imposed work redesign experiments). Mandates may very well increase resistance not only because they often do (Courpasson et al. 2012, Kuh 2012, Dobbin and Kalev 2013, Knight et al. 2022) but also because those who embrace the ideal worker schema are highly uncomfortable with alternative approaches to work, even viewing them as morally problematic (Williams et al. 2013, Padavic et al. 2020). Finally, new participants in this hidden network are inculcated into the sustainable worker schema gradually, understanding over time how these theories of excellence and career achievement are congruent with limiting time at work. In public, imposed interventions, this shift in cognition is usually not particularly well attended to or monitored (Bovey and Hede 2001).

Our findings thus suggest an alternative path to large-scale organizational change through a version of coordinated tempered radicalism (Meyerson and Scully 1995). Sustainable worker consultants did not openly challenge the system using "voice" (Ashford et al. 1998), which Wynn and Rao (2020) suggest is required to create change in a consulting firm because the status quo is perpetuated when consultants take individual responsibility for their work-life conflict or leave the firm. Instead, consultants at ConsultCo used at least two of the tempered radical strategies proposed by Meyerson and Scully (1995): the small wins approach (Weick 1984), by changing their approach to project work and improving team-members' work-life balance, and authentic expression, by talking about the sustainable worker schema theories with other members of the hidden network and, if their hierarchical power allowed,

with those they were trying to recruit to the network. Coordinating and organizing with like-minded others changed the experience of the organization for a good number of its employees. In our sample, 31 individuals across hierarchical levels embraced the sustainable worker schema, and only 6 fully endorsed the ideal worker norm, indicating a significant, if hidden, shift away from the ideal worker organization of the past. Although many formal organizational change efforts and policies have struggled for success, the hidden efforts of our sustainable schema consultants, in contrast, made life better for well over half of our sample.[3] Any flexibility policy with a 50% uptake would be considered a huge success (Eaton 2003).

These insights contribute to the stream of recent research into visibility and hiddenness in organizations (Anteby 2008, Kellogg 2009, Bernstein 2012, Knight et al. 2022). In short, we uncovered three important roles that concealability played in this ideal worker norm context: (1) a partial answer to the question of how to engage in work-life boundary work without stigmatization, (2) a protector of an effective system, and (3) a potential path to large-scale change.

It is important to acknowledge that consultants who embraced the sustainable worker schema and benefited from alternative approaches to work still worked a lot: between 53.7 and 63.2 hours per week, on average, and rated their satisfaction with work-life balance with a 3.3 on a scale from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Although it is reasonable to question how this can constitute anything akin to balance, we must consider the data in context (Table 2). These consultants' ideal worker counterparts worked much more, between 63.3 and 68.3 hours per week, and were much less satisfied with their work-life balance, at 2.2 on average. Our findings suggest that invisibility played a critical role in making that improvement possible.

Recent research suggests that some individuals deliberately and openly challenge ideal worker pressures (Kossek et al. 2021). In particular, in academic science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) settings during the pandemic, some (predominantly tenured) women actively revealed their nonwork roles (e.g., attended meetings with children visible in the background) to "challenge ideal worker pressures and to advocate for increased support of nonwork roles" (p. 1620); in other words, they were working "in the interest of smashing the patriarchy" (p. 1620). Consultants at ConsultCo did not seem to share this ambition. Even sustainable worker partners carefully managed others' perceptions about their availability and priorities. Indeed, maintaining this invisibility was an important part of their strategy, which points to a significant downside of this approach. The invisibility led to limited accessibility of the sustainable worker schema. Namely, for consultants without exposure to sustainable worker supervisors,

this alternative approach to work remained out of reach, especially in their junior years. In fact, some of our respondents, for example, Samantha, mentioned previously, were convinced no such alternative existed. This presents fairness concerns and makes a fundamental organizational culture change unlikely.

Future research should examine the dynamics that, perhaps surprisingly, prevented the numerical majority of sustainable worker consultants (in our sample) from wholly changing the organizational culture. These individuals' approach to work was superior to their ideal worker counterparts because it led to two desirable outcomes (excellence and work-life balance) instead of a single one (excellence). In fact, with the combined focus on work, work-life boundaries, and relationships, these consultants' work redesign accomplished all three goals required for enhancing worker well-being: increased job control, tamed job demands, and enhanced workplace relationships (Lovejoy et al. 2021). Because of these benefits, we would expect this approach to diffuse (Strang and Soule 1998) and prevail over time. Yet, organizational practices kept the ideal worker schema alive. The process was shaped by power and stigma: The partners who embraced the ideal worker schema were never openly challenged. The "skillful work of resistance" that Courpasson et al. (2012) found to be effective, where allies publicly declare their points of view to change power relations, is unlikely to work in a situation marked by stigma. None of the consultants, not even the most senior ones, engaged in truly public advocacy of the sustainable worker schema. This also contrasts with the findings of Kossek et al. (2021) in academic STEM environments during COVID, perhaps because the audience there was exclusively internal, with no clear "clients" who might be viewed as being shortchanged by a more sustainable approach to work. The process to move from a hidden system to a dominant narrative of sustainable work, in the challenging terrain of flexibility stigma in client-facing work, is therefore for future research to uncover.

Safety Net(work)

Boundary work emerges from our study as a network-level phenomenon. Echoing prior research (Trefalt 2013, Beckman and Stanko 2020), we found that boundary work takes place in dyadic relationships. However, it is within a hidden, informal network—similar to the ones that tempered radicals (Meyerson 2001) used to do important behind-the-scenes work—that the necessary conditions for effective boundary work (including work boundary tactics and work-life boundary tactics) were created. Within the hidden network, enacting the sustainable worker schema not only became possible, it became safe. Previous research suggests that in organizations in which the ideal worker expectation persists, high-status members embrace it (Reid 2015). In our setting, however, we found partners and team leaders who

embraced the sustainable worker schema and led teams accordingly. It is within these teams, staffed with the help of an informal network that individuals were able to engage in alternative, innovative, and effective ways of getting work done and making space for life outside of work. Unlike individual efforts to address work-life issues, which do not seem to be effective (Wynn and Rao 2020), this network solution was. It required the deliberate sharing of information from nonwork domains (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell 2006) and a particular approach to the work itself: one that views sustainable, stable teams as the source of excellence and productivity and thus a worthwhile investment that benefits the client, the firm, and the consultants alike. Team leaders or partners who wanted to work with the same teams on several consecutive projects were invested in preventing burnout of their team members. Similar to the study of medical professionals who needed "free spaces" (i.e., cafeteria tables) to gather with like-minded others to build opposition to established institutional order (Kellogg 2009), these professionals relied on the privacy afforded by work meetings and business travel to locate potential sustainable workers for their hidden network and discreetly share its tactics. Unlike prior research on "free spaces," or small-scale settings isolated from the direct control of dominant groups in which people can generate cultural challenges (Polletta 1999), the consultants in the hidden network were decidedly not attempting to launch a systemic change.

The members of these teams were intentionally drawn from the network of individuals who embrace the sustainable worker schema, which functions similarly to the "social niches" Lazega (2001) found in a law firm. Although these social niches, or "especially durable exchange relationships" (Lazega 2001, p. 25), were used to get access to clients, coworkers' goodwill, or advice, we found that consultants created and sought to be a part of social niches to facilitate their boundary work and even gain protection when using formal flexible work arrangements. In a context where boundary work is potentially stigmatizing, that is, an organization with high-status individuals who embrace the ideal worker schema, individuals look to their supervisors for signs of the schema they hold. Only when a sustainable worker assesses that the supervisor also embraces the sustainable worker perspective will they engage in behaviors that lead to the deepening of the relationship beyond the professional realm. It is this type of relationship development that then critically shapes an individual's ability to engage in boundary work. This extends prior research on the role of relationships in boundary work (Trefalt 2013, Reid 2015) by examining how workplace relationships that are helpful in boundary work develop. Although prior research is clear that individuals seek to initiate relationships with similar others (Sias and Cahill 1998), our findings add specificity to this general notion by identifying similarity in

sustainable worker schema as an important factor that individuals "size up" (Sathe 1985) in one another.

We also highlight the role of staffing project teams as an essential mechanism for developing or avoiding specific work relationships. Given that this was a routine occurrence at ConsultCo, the process of proactively pursuing projects with specific colleagues for the most part appeared quite ordinary. Yet many participants who held the sustainable worker schema used the project assignment process as an opportunity to build relationships with others who shared their beliefs, through a process that evaded the potential for stigma. This finding helps answer the call for a greater understanding of how HR practices influence networks of relationships and individuals' self-concepts (Gittell and Douglass 2012, Methot et al. 2018, Soltis et al. 2018), in our case, their role in building networks of employees who share an interest in creating work-life balance in a firm whose predominant culture stigmatizes it.

The centrality of project work in the networks we uncovered is at the same time a limitation and an opportunity for future research. Project work, with relatively short-lived teams and the latitude to make changes to team membership and to exert influence over those changes, is at the heart of the model we developed. If individuals cannot exercise any agency over whom they work with, they are stuck with team members and supervisors assigned to them, and the process of sending and interpreting work-life schema signals can have limited impact on one's ability to effectively place boundaries or improve satisfaction with work-life balance. Although this may appear like a significant limitation, project work is ubiquitous. Most professional service firms are organized this way (Maister 1993, Gardner et al. 2015), and project-based organizations span a number of other industries, such as fashion, filmmaking, high-tech, telecommunications, and infrastructure (Sydow et al. 2004). Our research could also apply to academic teams. Future research could extend our findings by examining how individuals with different work-life schemas interact and send and interpret signals in more traditional, stable hierarchies.

Practical Insights
Our findings have several possible implications for organizations. One that might be tempting to make is that organizations are off the hook because individuals can find nonstigmatizing paths to flexibility all on their own. This is not the case. Organizations would do well to train all their employees on domain-specific work practices that can act as work boundary tactics. Several years before our data collection, ConsultCo had cut project management and sales training due to budget cuts, which left many team leaders and partners poorly prepared to set realistic prices for their projects and to effectively manage projects once sold, leading to extreme

overwork. This training does not openly challenge the ideal worker norm because it can be presented as purely productivity-oriented, but it does improve the ability to manage work-life boundaries. Once work boundary tactics are mastered and embraced, further change is more likely to be successful if ideal workers get to work with sustainable schema leaders and if all leaders are held accountable for positive work-life outcomes (Dobbin and Kalev 2016).

Organizational development (OD) practitioners should consider examining and supporting the informal efforts that occur in organizations, as the people doing the work are often able to find better ways to complete tasks (Bernstein 2012). In addition, OD practitioners may experiment with keeping hidden workplace interventions aimed at unraveling the ideal worker norm. While there is value in publicly questioning the norm and proposing alternative approaches to work, many settings that embrace the ideal worker norm are unlikely to welcome such alternatives. Our qualitative study confirms that individuals who subscribe to the ideal worker norm see alternative approaches as shortchanging clients, and thus morally corrupt. Although hidden approaches certainly have limitations, they may be able to benefit more people for a longer time than publicly declared interventions.

Finally, our research has clear implications for individual managers. Although our findings say little about *how* to shift from ideal worker to sustainable worker schema, they make clear *that* such a shift is beneficial. Sustainable worker managers enjoy several advantages over their ideal worker counterparts: reduced hours of work, higher work-life balance, and, importantly, direct reports who do high-quality work and are eager to continue to work with them.

Conclusion

Organizations, researchers, and policy makers have invested significant time and resources into understanding a formidable challenge: how professionals can experience greater satisfaction with work-life balance while working in ideal worker organizations, in which they may face stigmatization if they do not appear to be completely devoted to work. This is a critical issue for organizations trying to recruit and retain employees, for researchers, and for policy makers trying to understand and improve experiences of employees and employees seeking to be effective at work while also having a life outside of it. As new generations enter the workforce seemingly wanting greater work-life balance (Alesso-Bendisch 2020), and workers everywhere re-evaluate the place of work in their lives after surviving a global pandemic (De Smet et al. 2022), addressing this challenge will only grow more important and vital.

The hidden network of consultants that emerged in this study, individuals who shared a set of beliefs about work, that is, the sustainable worker schema,

and practices to support it, was powerful, effective, and seemed to endure in part because of its concealability within the firm. This suggests that professionals elsewhere may be developing alternatives to the ideal worker norm that are hard for outsiders to see, given the need to hide them. Our research shows that how the work itself is done, who works together, and why they choose to do so, may provide important clues to identifying other hidden systems that enable work-life balance in demanding organizations. We hope that bringing these alternatives to light, and providing a roadmap for how to find them, will help bring organizations, researchers, policy makers, and professionals themselves several steps closer to what was once thought to be unattainable: being a professional who feels successful at work and at home.

Endnotes

[1] One interview was an exception because the recording failed. Detailed notes were taken immediately after the interview was conducted and those notes were used in the analysis. In some cases, interviewees later sent additional information in email form, and those emails were added to the transcripts.

[2] To avoid unwieldy writing, we sometimes use the shorthand "sustainable worker" or "sustainable consultant" for consultants who hold the sustainable worker schema and "ideal worker consultants" for consultants who hold the ideal worker schema. We use sustainable worker relationships for relationships between sustainable consultants.

[3] Even if the 16 individuals who did not respond to our invitation for an interview all embraced the ideal worker schema, there would still be only 22 such individuals versus 31 of those who embraced the sustainable worker schema in a sample of 60 consultants.

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