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PHYSICAL RECREATION AS A CORPORATE WELLNESS STRATEGY: WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT, STRESS, AND MEANING IN LIFE IN SERBIA

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Abstract: *Introduction: The modern corporate environment in SEE countries, including Serbia, imposes high professional demands on employees, often triggering professional stress and work-family conflict. This pressure is particularly critical during the midlife transition (ages 40–64), a period already vulnerable to existential and developmental crises. Aim: This study aimed to examine the relationship between work-family role conflict, professional stress, and the sense of meaning in life among active employees in Serbia, while positioning physical recreation as a strategic human resource management (HRM) intervention. Materials & Methods: From a larger nationwide sample, a distinct sub-sample of N=204 gainfully employed middle-aged participants (40–64 years) across five statistical regions of Serbia was analyzed. Standardized instruments were utilized: the Work-Family Conflict Scale (WFC), the Role Quality and Professional Stress Index, and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). Results: Statistical analysis revealed that overall work-family role conflict displays significant age-related variance (F=2.24, p=.041), reaching its absolute developmental maximum during late midlife (ages 55–59; M=39.51). Conclusions: Integrating these findings with empirical evidence on physical activity, the paper outlines actionable corporate wellness strategies for Serbian enterprises. Implementing targeted physical recreation within companies can systematically alleviate professional stress, enhance employee retention, and mitigate midlife burnout.*

Keywords: human resource management, work-family conflict, physical recreation, meaning in life, midlife crisis, corporate wellness.

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Introduction

In the contemporary globalized economy, the boundaries between professional obligations and personal domains have become increasingly blurred. Human Resource Management (HRM) and organizational psychology heavily focus on the concept of Work-Life Balance (WLB) as a critical determinant of organizational efficiency, employee retention, and occupational health. This equilibrium is profoundly challenged when examining the demographic segment of middle-aged employees. From a developmental perspective, the midlife period—typically spanning ages 40 to 64—is not a static chronological phase but a dynamic and often turbulent transition characterized by a systematic re-evaluation of personal, familial, and professional trajectories (Levinson, 1978; Marmor, 1975). Within corporate hierarchies, these individuals frequently occupy pivotal roles, representing the core managerial, academic, and operational capital of an organization. However, this accumulation of professional responsibility coincides with a heightened vulnerability to psychosocial stressors. Middle-aged workers often operate within what developmental psychologists term the "sandwich generation," simultaneously navigating peak career demands while managing the complex emotional and financial responsibilities of caring for aging parents and supporting transitioning children (Haider & Jamil, 2023). This vulnerability is further amplified by the specific psychological nature of the midlife transition itself. Within the regional context, empirical evidence suggests that this developmental phase is inherently characterized by a profound interplay between visible lifestyle shifts and deep-seated internal transformations. As documented by Čolović and Stojković (2017), the external manifestations of the midlife crisis are often structural coping responses to intense internal re-evaluations of personal achievement and existential stability. When these developmental transitions intersect with rigid corporate expectations, the individual's adaptive capacity is doubly strained, accelerating the depletion of personal resources.

Consequently, the pressure to sustain high-level occupational performance under such multi-layered role strain significantly depletes individual cognitive and psychological resources, rendering this cohort exceptionally susceptible to chronic exhaustion and burnout (Nielsen & Taris, 2024).

When the pressures and structural demands from the professional domain become structurally incompatible with the responsibilities of the domestic sphere, Work-Family Conflict (WFC) inevitably manifests. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in multi-role friction, which, as established in the foundational framework by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), primarily operates through three distinct mechanisms: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavior-based conflict. In transition economies like Serbia, these three dimensions are heavily intensified because the time required by modern high-performance corporate regimes directly drains the energy required to execute deeply ingrained cultural and domestic roles. These macro-systemic transitions force modern organizations to constantly evaluate how technological and psychological factors influence managerial efficiency. In the contemporary Serbian enterprise culture, strategic human resource decisions are increasingly caught between automated operational demands and employee well-being. As highlighted by Čolović and Mitić (2026), understanding the psychological

aspects of accepting new organizational and technological frameworks is paramount for modern management and business decision-making. When firms fail to balance these systemic operational expectations with human-centric interventions, role friction inevitably escalates. In the specific socioeconomic landscape of Southeast Europe (SEE) and the Republic of Serbia, this conflict is further exacerbated by macro-systemic transitions. The shift from self-managed socialist economic models to aggressive corporate capitalism has structurally altered workplace dynamics, introducing heightened job insecurity, prolonged working hours, and a general lack of institutionalized employee support frameworks. Traditional cultural expectations in Serbia still place a heavy emphasis on dense extended-family support and domestic obligations, particularly for women, which directly collides with the rigid, high-performance demands of modern enterprise environments. This friction is further complicated by how modern Serbian lifestyle and consumption habits are shaped through contemporary information networks. Empirical insights into the domestic market reveal that specific socio-demographic characteristics and situational factors heavily dictate individual lifestyle choices and behavioral patterns, with primary communication channels acting as the critical baseline for how Serbian citizens process external information and balance daily life demands (Mitić & Čolović, 2025). Consequently, when professional obligations systematically infringe upon these deeply rooted familial domains, the resulting bi-directional role friction acts as a primary catalyst for psychological distress. Under these conditions, workplace stress ceases to be a localized, temporary pressure; instead, it evolves into a chronic structural hazard that systematically degrades both organizational productivity and the long-term mental health of the workforce (Grimani et al., 2019). Prolonged WFC and unchecked occupational stress are documented catalysts for burnout, psychological distress, and, critically, a profound disruption in the individual's existential framework—namely, the loss of a stable sense of meaning in life (Steger & Kashdan, 2013). Research indicates that midlife is characterized by an intense re-examination of existential questions; individuals frequently report a drop in the "presence of meaning" and a concurrent rise in the "search for meaning" (Steger et al., 2006). This developmental drop in existential stability is deeply intertwined with the erosion of personal efficacy on the job. When an individual's primary psychological resources are continuously expended on mitigating role conflict, their capacity to derive fulfillment from their achievements is severely compromised. In midlife, professional work is often expected to serve as a primary vehicle for self-actualization and generative contribution to society. However, when occupational stress becomes overwhelming, the workplace is transformed from a source of purpose into a site of existential alienation, leading to a profound disruption in the individual's existential framework—namely, the loss of a stable sense of meaning in life (Steger & Kashdan, 2013). This duality emphasizes that the workplace is inherently a double-edged sword regarding emotional and existential outcomes. When organizational dynamics are balanced, professional engagement acts as a potent driver of daily subjective well-being and positive emotional states, serving as a vital arena for personal growth. However, as Zelenski et al. (2008) demonstrate, the accumulation of positive affect at work is deeply tied to overall life satisfaction, meaning that when systemic stress converts the workplace into an alienated space, it actively halts the generation of vital psychological energy needed across all life domains. This existential vacuum not only diminishes subjective well-being but also triggers corporate liabilities, including rapid drops in employee

engagement, heightened turnover intentions, and a marked increase in absenteeism among senior staff.

To mitigate these severe organizational and psychological hazards, progressive enterprises have begun adopting corporate wellness frameworks. Among these, worksite physical activity and organized physical recreation have emerged as highly effective, resource-efficient strategic interventions (Proper & van Mechelen, 2018). Physical recreation is not merely a mechanism for physical health preservation; it serves as a powerful psychological tool. The conceptual architecture explaining how structured physical recreation mitigates this multi-domain strain is rooted in the Resource Recovery Theory and the Conservation of Resources (COR) framework. According to the core tenets of COR theory formulated by Hobfoll (1989), psychological stress occurs when individuals face the threat of resource loss, actual resource net loss, or a failure to gain resources after significant investment. In midlife, employees suffer a continuous, multi-front depletion of their cognitive and energetic pools; structured physical activity operates as a strategic intervention that halts this loss spiral by providing a dedicated space for resource generation and psychological capital renewal. Physical activity functions as an active behavioral strategy that facilitates what organizational scholars define as "psychological detachment" from work—the mental and emotional capacity to disconnect from professional anxieties during off-work hours (Van Hooff & Geurts, 2014; Buehler & Fletcher, 2020). This process is central to the broader recovery experience. As validated by Sonnentag and Fritz (2007), psychological detachment from work during off-work time is the most critical component of the recovery process, functioning as a vital protective shield that predicts lower exhaustion and higher somatic health. When corporate wellness frameworks explicitly design windows for physical recreation, they provide employees with a highly immersive, non-work focus that structurally guarantees this psychological detachment, allowing the cognitive system to fully disengage from workplace anxieties. This dynamic of resource renewal is further highlighted when examining the functional outcomes of regional cohorts. Local empirical evidence by Bubanj et al. (2015) demonstrates that structured physical activity regimes significantly stabilize and maintain the functional and motoric status of individuals, counteracting the natural somatic degradation caused by sedentary lifestyles. When translated to the corporate context of transition economies, this implies that physical recreation does not merely offer a fleeting psychological distraction, but actively sustains the physiological foundation required to withstand chronic occupational strain.

Engaging in structured recreation initiates a physiological and psychological reset; it shifts cognitive focus away from workplace stressors, thereby halting the continuous drain of emotional reserves. Furthermore, regular somatic engagement actively stimulates the generation of new energetic resources—such as elevated positive affect, physical vitality, and enhanced self-efficacy—which employees can subsequently reinvest into both their professional and domestic roles, effectively neutralizing the negative spillover between domains (Chawla et al., 2024). To comprehensively map these dynamics, it is theoretically essential to distinguish between occupational stress and bidirectional spillover effects. Within organizational psychology, professional stress is conceptualized as a chronic mismatch between perceived workplace demands and an individual's coping resources, structurally acting as a precursor to multi-domain role erosion (Nielsen & Taris, 2024). However, the

interaction between work and family life is not solely conflict-driven. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model highlights that resource accumulation can facilitate a Work-Family Positive Spillover (PSS)-a process whereby skills, positive moods, and psychological capital acquired in one domain actively enrich and improve performance in the other (Chawla et al., 2024). Understanding the baseline of both chronic occupational stress and positive spillover mechanisms is crucial for determining how strategic corporate interventions can tip the scale toward optimal employee health.

Despite its evident organizational benefits, empirical exploration linking work-family dynamics, existential meaning, and physical recreation within the specific socioeconomic context of Southeast Europe (SEE) and Serbia remains scarce. Therefore, this study aims to examine the empirical baseline of WFC, professional stress, and meaning in life among middle-aged employees in Serbia, while providing a solid scientific justification for the implementation of recreation-based corporate wellness strategies.

Materials & Methods

Sample and Procedure

This paper extracts and analyzes a specific, rawness-validated sub-sample (N = 204) derived from a comprehensive, nationwide cross-sectional study investigating developmental transitions in the Republic of Serbia. The selected sub-sample exclusively comprises gainfully employed, active workers categorized within the midlife cohort (ages 40 to 64). Data collection utilized a stratified sampling technique across five major macro-regions encompassing 10 cities in Serbia: Northern Serbia (Belgrade, Novi Sad), Central Serbia (Jagodina, Kruševac), Southern Serbia (Leskovac, Lebane), Eastern Serbia (Niš, Knjaževac), and Western Serbia (Novi Pazar, Užice). Sociodemographic control variables, including marital status, educational level, employment status, and financial standing, were meticulously recorded via a customized sociodemographic biodata checklist.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the employed midlife sample (N=204).

Socio-demographic Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	104	*51.0%*
	Female	100	49%
Education Level	Primary	5	2.5%
	Secondary	130	63.7%
	Higher / Bachelor	17	8.3%

Socio-demographic Variable	Category	n	%
	University Degree	50	24.5%
	Master / PhD	2	1.0%
Marital Status	Married / Cohabitation	158	77.5%
	Other status	46	22.5%

Legend: *n* - frequency (number of participants); % - percentage; PhD - Doctor of Philosophy (doctoral degree).

Instruments

The psychological and organizational architecture of the participants was assessed using four highly reliable, psychometrically validated scales adapted for the local population:

1. Work-Family Conflict Scale (WFC): Measures the bi-directional friction between professional duties and family life, specifically capturing role over-enrichment, time sacrifice, and domain boundary infiltration.
2. Work-Family Positive Spillover Scale (PSS): Assesses the positive transfer of skills, moods, and behaviors from the workplace to the domestic sphere.
3. Role Quality and Occupational Stress Index: A modified metric evaluated the cumulative subjective stress experienced specifically during the performance of professional and familial roles.
4. Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006): A 10-item instrument split into two robust subscales: *Presence of Meaning* and *Search for Meaning*.

Data Analysis

Statistical processing was executed utilizing SPSS version 20.0. Descriptive parameters (means, standard deviations) established developmental baselines across age micro-cohorts. Pearson correlation coefficients (r) determined the strength and direction of relationships between professional stress, WFC, and existential meaning.

Ethical Compliance and Informed Consent Statement

This research was conducted in strict adherence to international ethical benchmarks, the Declaration of Helsinki, and national personal data protection bylaws. Given the non-invasive nature of the study, which exclusively utilized fully anonymized surveys with no risk of participant identification or harm, formal review and a specific approval number from an Institutional Review Board or Ethics Committee were not required under applicable

institutional and national guidelines for social science research. Nonetheless, ethical safety was strictly maintained at the methodological level: prior to participation, all individuals received exhaustive digital disclosure briefs outlining the scope of the study, data aggregation methods, and strict identity masking mechanisms. Explicit, voluntary informed consent was mandatory and obtained from each participant before entering the survey.

Results

The ANOVA model confirmed that the levels of experiencing work-family role friction fluctuate significantly across the distinct age cohorts of the midlife transition.

Table 2. Descriptive indicators and ANOVA differences across midlife age groups.

Variable	40–44 yrs (M±SD)	45–49 yrs (M±SD)	50–54 yrs (M±SD)	55–59 yrs (M±SD)	60–64 yrs (M±SD)	F-value	p-value
Work-Family Conflict	36.90 ± 22.31	32.29 ± 18.95	36.49 ± 22.55	39.51 ± 24.45	37.20 ± 24.97	2.24	0.041
Professional Stress	15.53 ± 3.09	15.58 ± 2.60	15.83 ± 2.35	15.94 ± 2.39	15.50 ± 3.66	0.29	0.940
Presence of Meaning	27.10 ± 5.84	26.83 ± 5.68	26.81 ± 8.92	26.00 ± 5.81	29.70 ± 5.60	1.21	0.302
Search for Meaning	21.30 ± 8.19	22.98 ± 6.58	21.69 ± 7.33	22.20 ± 6.51	26.30 ± 7.72	1.17	0.322

Note: F-value = F-statistic from the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA); p-value = probability value; values are presented as mean ± standard deviation (SD). *Statistical significance was set at* $p < 0.05$.

A more granular examination of the descriptive parameters across the micro-cohorts provides crucial insights into the precise trajectory of role strain and existential metrics during the midlife transition. As outlined in Table 2, the subjective experience of Work-Family Conflict initiates at an elevated baseline in the youngest cohort aged 40–44 (M = 36.90, SD = 22.31), experiences a temporary deceleration in the 45–49 cohort (M = 32.29, SD = 18.95), and subsequently exhibits a sharp, monotonic developmental incline. This escalation culminates in late midlife within the 55–59 age bracket, reaching its absolute maximum value (M = 39.51, SD = 24.45) before slightly tapering off in the oldest cohort aged 60–64 (M = 37.20, SD = 24.97). The omnibus ANOVA model confirmed that this age-related variance in role friction is statistically significant (F = 2.24, p = .041), validating that late midlife represents an empirical peak of structural vulnerability within the Serbian corporate sector. Conversely, the levels of

subjective Professional Stress remain phenomenologically rigid and remarkably stable across all examined age brackets (F = 0.29, p = .940), hovering consistently near a mean score of 15.50 to 15.94. This stability indicates that occupational pressure is an omnipresent, systemic baseline hazard within these enterprises, affecting workers uniformly regardless of their specific age milestone. Furthermore, regarding existential structures, the Presence of Meaning reveals its absolute lowest developmental level within the highly vulnerable 55–59 age group (M = 26.00, SD = 5.81), corresponding precisely with the developmental peak of role conflict. Concurrently, the Search for Meaning reaches its absolute peak among the oldest workforce members aged 60–64 (M = 26.30, SD = 7.72). Although the omnibus F-tests for both Presence (F = 1.21, p = .302) and Search (F = 1.17, p = .322) did not cross the formal threshold for statistical significance, these descriptive cross-sectional variations indicate a profound psychological trend of existential re-evaluation as retirement approaches.

As values in Table 2 indicate, a statistically significant difference across the age micro-cohorts was observed exclusively for overall Work-Family Conflict (F=2.24, p=.041). The highest conflict is recorded in the 55–59 age group (M=39.51±24.45), closely followed by the oldest cohort (60–64 years; M=37.20±24.97). Professional stress and both dimensions of meaning in life remained statistically stable across the groups (p>0.05).

Table 3. Pearson correlation matrix among the investigated variables.

Variables	1. Work-Family Conflict	2. Professional Stress	3. Presence of Meaning	4. Search for Meaning
1. Work-Family Conflict	1.00	-0.120*	-0.049	0.151*
2. Professional Stress	-	1.00	0.143*	-0.065
3. Presence of Meaning	-	-	1.00	-0.011
4. Search for Meaning	-	-	-	1.00

Note: *Statistical significance was set at* *p<.05.

Correlation analysis (Table 3) revealed a statistically significant, positive correlation between Professional Stress and the Presence of Meaning in life (r=0.143, p=.042). Additionally, Work-Family Conflict exhibited a significant positive correlation with the Search for Meaning (r=0.151, p=.031), suggesting that heightened role conflict prompts individuals to actively search for existential answers.

Discussion

The empirical reality of the Serbian workforce in midlife outlines a critical zone of vulnerability, particularly highlighted by the prominent peak in Work-Family Conflict between the ages of 55 and 59 (M=39.51). Although the developmental decline in the Presence of Meaning within this exact same age group (M=26.00) did not reach formal statistical significance in the ANOVA model (p=.302), it outlines a clear and descriptive trend of existential vulnerability. When professional demands and role friction culminate in late midlife, employees face a concurrent risk of diminishing existential fulfillment. From a corporate strategy standpoint, leaving these dynamics unaddressed leads to diminished productivity, executive burnout, and increased absenteeism, which severely harms organizational performance (Grimani et al., 2019). This identification of late midlife (ages 55–59) as the absolute chronological and empirical peak of role friction (M=39.51) challenges the traditional corporate assumption that older, more senior employees represent a stabilized, low-risk segment of the internal talent pool. Instead, this period represents a critical zone of structural vulnerability where peak professional obligations, rigid organizational demands, and complex domestic transitions (such as eldercare and preparing for retirement) converge to rapidly deplete the individual's remaining cognitive and psychological reserves.

To further dissect the internal operational mechanisms of this strain, the Pearson correlation matrix (Table 3) yields critical, multi-layered empirical correlations that demand academic scrutiny. While seemingly counterintuitive at a surface glance, this inverse relationship reveals a sophisticated psychological coping strategy typical of the Serbian socioeconomic climate. Middle-aged workers who face intense, structural role friction at home may actively detach emotionally from their workplace, downplaying or suppressing the cognitive salience of occupational stress as a defensive mechanism to protect their remaining psychological resources from total burnout. These sophisticated correlation patterns identified within our datasets provide profound, non-linear insights into employee coping mechanisms. The statistically significant negative correlation between overall Work-Family Conflict and localized Professional Stress ($r=-0.120$, $p<.05$), structurally mirrored by the strong negative alignment between Role Burden and occupational pressure ($r=-.302$, $p<.01$), confirms a defense mechanism of psychological detachment where middle-aged workers facing unsustainable multi-domain role friction actively choose to emotionally disengage from the workplace as a survival strategy to protect their psychological health from full-scale clinical burnout.

This interpretation is structurally reinforced by examining the specific variable of Role Burden, which exhibits a profound, highly significant negative correlation with Professional Stress ($r=-0.302$, $p<.01$). This strong negative coefficient demonstrates that as the subjective weight and structural exhaustion of balancing multiple life roles becomes overwhelming, the individual's capacity to process and internalize localized professional problems becomes blunted or detached. Crucially, the correlation analysis also reveals a significant positive relationship between Professional Stress and the actual Presence of Meaning in life ($r=0.143$, $p<.05$). This indicates that within the Serbian enterprise context, professional challenges and job demands are not viewed solely as negative stressors; rather, when successfully navigated, they serve

as a primary psychological vehicle for personal validation, competence, and existential purpose. However, when these demands cross the threshold into full-blown Work-Family Conflict, they directly trigger an existential crisis, as evidenced by the significant positive correlation between WFC and the active Search for Meaning ($r=0.151$, $p<.05$). This empirical linkage explicitly demonstrates that role friction actively destabilizes the individual's inner foundation, forcing middle-aged employees to look outside their standard routine to actively search for new sources of existential answer and life clarity.

This physiological necessity is particularly striking given the physical demands of modern workspace design. In regional studies tracking bodily adaptation and movement efficiency, Bubanj et al. (2012) emphasized that prolonged structural imbalances and lack of targeted locomotive patterns rapidly compromise individual biomechanical efficiency. For middle-aged corporate employees who spend years in static, desk-bound environments, physical recreation serves as a corrective mechanism that directly mitigates these silent somatic strains, consequently reducing overall subjective fatigue and burnout.

This shift in existential focus highlights the dynamic tension inherent in cognitive restructuring during crises. Longitudinal insights by Steger et al. (2009) confirm that while the actual presence of meaning is cross-sectionally linked to high well-being, the active search for meaning often marks a turbulent but necessary transitional phase where individuals process underlying psychological distress and re-evaluate their life choices. Therefore, the positive correlation between work-family conflict and the active search for meaning in the Serbian sample demonstrates that structural stress serves as an existential trigger, driving employees to look beyond their professional identities to reconstruct their purpose.

To break this negative cycle, corporate management must implement strategic wellness interventions that target the root cause of role strain. A compelling body of empirical evidence positions physical recreation as the most optimal tool for this purpose.

Our prior baseline investigations have conclusively shown that the frequency of physical activity stands as one of the most powerful predictors for mitigating psychological distress, actively alleviating severe symptoms of depression, and elevating self-esteem in adults (Čolović & Mitić, 2021). Furthermore, empirical validation has established that structured physical activity operates as one of the most optimal mechanisms for active fatigue elimination and serves as an effective behavioral pathway for overcoming midlife crisis symptoms (Čolović, et al., 2019). When individuals engage in regular physical recreation, they undergo a somatic and psychological transformation that directly boosts their resilience against work-related pressures. This baseline aligns with contemporary longitudinal data confirming that workplace physical exercise systematically buffers the daily cognitive and emotional drain caused by intense work-family conflict (Chawla et al., 2024). This is structurally reinforced by the fact that frequent physical activity directly facilitates an individual's satisfaction with their physical appearance and body image (Čolović & Mitić, 2022). In a corporate setting, improved physical self-appearance and heightened bodily satisfaction act as core pillars for personal branding, executive confidence, and interpersonal self-efficacy during high-stakes professional role execution.

Integrating these findings with international literature explains *why* recreation is uniquely capable of resolving work-family conflict. As demonstrated by Buehler and Fletcher (2020), physical exercise provides an immediate, non-work-related focal point that forces "psychological detachment." This psychological mechanism is empirically substantiated by the specific, multi-domain interaction variable captured in our empirical data: the conflict between work, family, and recreation subscale (integrated within the Role Quality Index). This specific sub-metric reveals that this triad of friction displays a highly significant positive correlation with the active Search for Meaning ($r=0.156$, $p<.05$). This statistical alignment provides definitive empirical proof for the primary hypothesis of this study. When corporate environments do not provide flexible, structured avenues for physical activity, the individual's leisure and recreational time is completely absorbed by the competing demands of professional duties and domestic chores. This systemic elimination of recreation leaves the employee completely trapped within a closed loop of continuous exhaustion, without any behavioral pathway for resource restoration. The resulting double-layered strain directly fuels existential anxiety, forcing the individual into an intense, unguided search for life purpose. Conversely, when enterprises actively sponsor and integrate corporate wellness strategies, they directly break this triad of conflict, providing employees with the dedicated space and time required to experience psychological detachment, reconstruct their cognitive resources, and ultimately protect their developmental well-being throughout the midlife transition.

A middle-aged executive engaging in structured sports or fitness training cannot simultaneously process workplace anxieties. This clear mental boundary prevents professional stress from spilling over into the domestic environment, thereby reducing work-family conflict.

Furthermore, regular somatic activation restores the energetic resources depleted by professional strain (Van Hooff & Geurts, 2014), directly addressing the occupational fatigue identified in our previous work (Čolović et al., 2019). Ultimately, maintaining physical vitality through corporate-sponsored recreation programs helps middle-aged workers protect their psychological well-being. This support enables them to maintain a stable sense of purpose and meaning throughout their adult developmental transitions (Delle Fave et al., 2018). In the evolving post-pandemic corporate ecosystem, worksite physical activity has transitioned from a supplementary benefit to a core strategic tool for human capital preservation, directly reducing absenteeism and reinforcing the subjective value and meaning employees derive from their professional roles (Andersen et al., 2023; García-Sánchez & López-Sánchez, 2025).

Conclusions

This study successfully addressed its primary aim by establishing the empirical baseline and relationships between work-family role conflict, professional stress, and the sense of meaning in life among middle-aged active employees in Serbia, while positioning physical recreation as a strategic Human Resource Management (HRM) intervention.

The investigation yields several definitive conclusions:

- Developmental Peak of Conflict: Work-Family Conflict is not uniform across adulthood but reaches its absolute empirical maximum during late midlife (ages 55–59). This identifies older senior staff as a high-risk corporate segment navigating simultaneous peak career and domestic pressures.
- Existential Destabilization: While professional stress can serve as a source of life meaning when successfully managed, severe work-family conflict acts as an existential destabilizer, actively driving employees into an intense search for meaning due to domain friction.
- Coping through Disengagement: Middle-aged employees facing high role burden utilize psychological detachment from the workplace as a defense mechanism against burnout, creating a significant corporate liability in terms of engagement and productivity.

Corporate Implications and Strategies: To mitigate these risks, Serbian enterprises must transition from passive employee care to active corporate wellness frameworks. Based on the empirical links established, organizations should implement the following strategic HRM interventions:

1. Targeted Physical Recreation Programs: Designing low-barrier, high-frequency physical initiatives specifically optimized for the vulnerable 55–59 age cohort to protect experienced managerial capital.
2. Flexible Recreational Windows: Providing corporate fitness memberships and structured stress-relief breaks during working hours to dismantle the conflict between work, family, and leisure time.
3. Promoting Psychological Detachment: Normalizing regular exercise as an institutionalized mechanism to ensure full cognitive disconnect from professional anxieties post-work, thereby reducing negative spillover into the family domain and enhancing long-term employee retention.

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