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Employee Work-Life Balance as an HR Imperative

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Abstract

There is a growing awareness in today's workplaces that employees do not give up their lives just because they work. Work and life remain the two most important domains in the life of an employed individual. However, the challenge of balancing work and non-work demands is one of today's central concerns for both individuals and organisations. With the growing diversity

of family structures represented in today's workforce, particularly with the growing norm of dual-career families, the importance of managing an employee's work-life balance have increased markedly over the past 20 years. Employers are realising that the quality of an employee's personal and family life impacts work quality and that there are concrete business reasons to promote work and non-work integration. In this paper, we contend that assisting employees to achieve a work-life balance should become a critical part of HR policy and strategy if it is to truly get the best from the organisation's people without leaving them unsatisfied, burnt-out and unfulfilled.

Key words: Work-life balance, Human resources, Employee, Organisation.

Introduction

Do we live to work or we work to live? Research has shown that work and home (or family) are the two most important domains in the life of an employed individual (Kofodimos, 1993; Lewis and Copper, 1995; Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw, 2003). While some may argue that we realise ourselves through work – being able to self-actualise – attaining unto the very zenith of our chosen career, a truly all encompassing self actualisation however, will integrate both our work and life (family, personal life, community service). When an individual is thus employed in an organisation, he does not give up his life in exchange for work rather he attempts to maintain a balance between them. This balance is necessary for a healthy life.

For many employees, the day is not over when they go home. Often, a second day of work starts at home (Vlems, 2005) and for most working mothers, they come home to the second shift (assuming the inescapable role of a wife and a mother). The challenge of balancing work and family (non-work) demands is one of today's central concerns for both individuals and organisations (Valcour, 2007). People who have better balance have a greater job satisfaction and perform better in their position. They have a bigger loyalty and a higher level of trust (Vlems, 2005). In many of today's workplaces, employers are cutting cost mainly through lay-offs and are placing more demands on the lean staff left behind. The excuse is to stay afloat in the wake of a global economic recession. The implication however, is that the more time and energy employees give to work, the less they have to give to the other important aspects of their lives, thus creating a work-life balance problem with its attendant negative consequences for both the employee and the organisation. In this paper, we contend that assisting

employees to achieve a work-life balance should become a critical part of HR policy and strategy if it is to truly get the best from the organisation's people without leaving them unsatisfied, burnt-out and unfulfilled.

Perspectives of work-life balance

No single framework or perspective of work-life balance is universally acceptable (Pitt-Catsouphes, Kossek and Sweet, 2006); a lot depends on the frame of reference scholars are using. As Morris and Madsen (2007) note, the academic body of knowledge regarding work-family or work-life balance scholarship relies on a variety of theoretical frameworks, which include spillover, compensation, resource drain, enrichment, congruence, work-family conflict, segmentation, and integration theories (Zedeck and Mosier, 1990; Frone, Russell, and Cooper, 1992; Clark, 2000; Edwards and Rothbard, 2000; Frone, 2003; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006).

Spillover is a process whereby experiences in one role affect experiences in the other, rendering the roles more similar (Rothbard and Dumas, 2006). The experiences resulting from spillover can manifest themselves as either positive or negative (Morris and Madsen, 2007). Research has examined the spillover of moods, values, skills and behaviour from one role to another (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000) and the majority of research in the work-family frameworks has been done using spillover theory (Zedeck and Mosier, 1990).

Compensation theory refers to the efforts aimed at countering negative experiences in one domain through increased efforts for positive experiences in another domain (Schultz and Higbee, 2010). It expresses a relationship between work and non-work roles whereby people attempt to make up for deficiencies in one role through greater involvement in another role (Champoux, 1978; Lambert, 1990; Zedeck, 1992; Edwards and Rothbard, 2000).

Resource drain theory refers to the transfer of resources from one domain to another and because resources (time, energy, money, attention) are limited, available resources in the original domain are reduced (Morris and Madsen, 2007). For instance, the more time an employee spends at work, the less he or she will have to spend with family or for other non-work roles.

Enrichment theory refers to the degree to which experiences from instrumental sources (skills, abilities, values) or affective sources (mood, satisfaction) enhance the quality of the other domain (Morris and Madsen,

2007). Simply put, enrichment is the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Good work outcomes lead to good family outcomes and vice versa.

Congruence theory refers to how additional variables that are not directly related to work or family influence the balance of multiple roles (Schultz and Higbee, 2010). Whereas, spillover is a direct relationship between work and family, congruence attributes similarity through a third variable such as behavioural styles, personality traits, and socio-cultural forces (Staines, 1980; Zedeck, 1992; Edwards and Rothbard, 2000).

Inter-role conflict theory refers to what happens when meeting the demands in one domain makes it difficult to meet the demands in the other domain (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Inter-role conflict theory is also termed opposition or incompatibility theory in the literature (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000).

Segmentation theory specifies no systematic relationship between work and non-work roles (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000). Rather, it views work and family as separate domains that do not influence each other. Initially, segmentation was thought of as the natural division of work and family due to the physical and temporal division of the two roles and their innately different functions (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Dubin, 1973). In recent times however, it has been proven that work and family are closely related domain of human life (Kanter, 1977; Voydanoff, 1987) and thus, segmentation has been reconceptualised as an active psychological process whereby people may choose to maintain a boundary between work and family (Eckenrode and Gore, 1990, Lambert, 1990).

Integration theory refers to the holistic view that a healthy system of flexible and permeable boundaries can better facilitate and encourage the family-life, work-life, and community-life domains (Clark, 2000). The idea is that integration theory best describes the incorporation of additional contextual elements, such as community, into the body of knowledge regarding work and family (Morris and Madsen, 2007). It calls for contemporary understandings that retool traditional work-life paradigms, making all stakeholders (employers, workers, and communities) active partners with equal voice in the creation of a holistic model of work-life balance (Morris and Madsen, 2007).

Defining Work-Life Balance

Since work-life balance could be understood from various perspectives, it is pertinent for us to establish our bias and hence, the theoretical framework for this discourse. For this purpose thus, we will adopt the *Resource drain theory* and the *Inter-role conflict theory*. Though these two theories represent separate perspectives of work-life balance, they are however related and suit the purpose of our discourse. The Resource drain theory refers to the transfer of limited resources (time, energy, money, attention) from one domain to another which consequently reduces the available resources in the original domain (Morris and Madsen, 2007). The consequence of resource drain brings about inter-role conflict. The Inter-role conflict theory refers to what happens when meeting the demands in one domain makes it difficult to meet the demands in the other domain (Greenhuas and Beutell, 1985). It is also useful to point out that though inter-role conflict can occur both when work roles interfere with non-work roles and vice versa, the focus of this paper is on the former relationship, as it considers work-life balance in the context of the impact of work on non-work.

Thus, we could define work-life balance as “satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict” (Clark, 2000: 751). It could also be seen as an experience of satisfaction in all of one’s life domains, which requires personal energy, time and commitment resources (Kirchmeyer, 2000).

Work-life balance is about finding the right balance between one’s work and one’s life (i.e. life outside work) and about feeling comfortable with both work and non-work commitments. Many people find it difficult to manage their time in a way that is healthy for their work as well as for their personal life (Vlems, 2005). This may not be because they are poor at time management, but largely because a good part of the “time” is not theirs. It belongs to the organisation. But do employees have to crowd out other activities that are important in their lives just to satisfy the boss? Achieving the right ‘balance’ is something very personal, because we all have different priorities in life (Vlems, 2005). However, it is not what can be personally achieved without the support of the organisation. So what are the options that organisations can deploy to assist their employees achieve work-life balance?

Work-life balance options

Employers are realising that the quality of an employee’s personal and family life impacts work quality and that there are concrete business reasons to

promote work and non-work integration (Lockwood, 2003). As Vlems (2005) notes, when organisations decide to facilitate their employees' work-life balance, they choose from a wide array of options that include:

(a) Flexi-time

Flexi-time is a scheduling policy that allows full-time employees to choose starting and ending times within guidelines specified by the organisation. It works well for full-time office staff, but not in shift patterns or in a production line. Flexi-time allows an employee to attend to non-work demands without having to take time off work.

(b) Compressed working hours

This is a system of a four day working week. An employee can work his total number of agreed hours over a shorter period. For example, an employee can work his or her hours over four days in a week instead of five, and thus, gains a day for himself.

(c) Job-sharing

Job-sharing is a system where two people share a job. They both have the same job, but split the hours, so that each employee has a part-time position. Apart from splitting the hours, they also split the payments, holidays and benefits. The idea is to afford employees ample time to attend to non-work activities so as to be able to achieve a good measure of work-life balance.

(d) Breaks from work

By taking breaks from work once in a while, the right balance between work and life can be achieved. These breaks should not only be about maternity, paternity and parental leave, but also time off for career breaks and sabbaticals.

(e) Self-rostering

Employees can roster their hours the way they want to. The organisation checks every day the number of staff and skills required and lets the employees then decide which of hours they would like to work. Employees are thus able to schedule their time conveniently between work and non-work activities.

(f) Teleworking

Employees, with the aid of modern communication technology carry out their jobs without necessarily having to be at the office. Often, they can work from home or in satellite offices (telecentres) rented by the organisation close to

where they live. Teleworking allows employees to attend to family or non-work issues so long as it does not affect their output or the quality.

(g) Child care

People with families do not have the luxury to stay at home anymore and take care of the children. The trend is towards dual-earning families as life has become too expensive to let a potential money-maker stay at home. Thus, the demand for child care options as a means of helping employees achieve work-life balance is becoming increasingly important (Vlems, 2005). Some popular child care options include Crèche, Day-nursery, After school child care, Teen care, Host parent care, and Leader-at-home.

The consequences of employee work-life imbalance

There is compelling evidence that work-life imbalance portends grave consequences for employees, their organisations, and society (Allen, Herst, Bruck and Sutton, 2000; Lockwood, 2003; Vlems, 2004; Mordi and Ojo, 2011). Conflicts, particularly between work and family, significantly affect quality of family life and career attainment for both men and women. Personal and societal consequences of work-life imbalance, according to Hobson, Delunas and Kesic (2001) include:

- Increased level of stress and stress-related illness -
- Lower-life satisfaction
- Higher rates of family strife, violence, and divorce
- Rising incidence of substance abuse
- Growing problems with parenting and supervision of children and adolescents
- Escalating rates of juvenile delinquency and violence

The continuous inability of employees to balance work and life responsibilities according to Hobson, Delunas and Kesic (2001) can have the following organisational consequences:

- Higher rates of absenteeism and turnover
- Reduced productivity
- Decreased job satisfaction

- Lower levels of organisational commitment and loyalty
- Rising healthcare cost.

The benefits of work-life balance

Positive work-life outcomes for employees are key ingredients of a successful business strategy (Lowe, 2006). Work-life balance is an ongoing quest for the individual employee, but this should now also become a concern for the employers because of the double-throng benefits of employee work-life balance. Where the right balance is found and sustained, both the employee and the employer gains.

Benefits for the employee

Many factors improve where the employee is able to find the right balance. Some of these factors, according to Vlems (2005) include:

- Improved employees' happiness. Employees would be happier when they are able to balance their work and life demands. The advantages of many organisations come from happy employees.
- Improved relations with management. Perceived support of management towards employees' work-life balance fosters a good relationship between the workforce and management which itself improves effective communication within the company.
- Improved employees' self-esteem, health, concentration, and confidence. One UK study reports that more than forty percent of employees are neglecting other aspects of their life because of work, which may increase their vulnerability to mental health problems (Mental Health Foundation, 2012).
- Employee loyalty and commitment. These increases with opportunities for work-life balance. Employees are more likely to stay with an organisation when there are opportunities for achieving work-life balance.
- Tasks are managed better, there is increased motivation, and there is reduction in the level of stress among employees.

Benefits for the employer

Generally, the following factors, as Vlems (2005) notes, improve for the employer:

- Maximised available labour. The workforce will be very motivated and so the employer can benefit from maximised available labour. Every employee will give their very best during the working hours.
- The balance makes employees feel valuable. Implementing work-life balance programmes gives an impression that the organisation cares about the employees. Thus, they will feel more valuable and work harder as a result.
- The work environment will be less stressful; which means, less stress related illnesses and decreased health care costs.
- The presence of work-life balance programmes in an organisation makes it attractive to a wider range of candidates when it comes to recruitment.
- The workforce will be more loyal and motivated, absenteeism will be reduced, and productivity will increase because of the maximised available labour.

Establishing effective work-life balance programmes: challenges and the critical role of HR

Work-life balance programmes (WLBPs) are those institutionalised and procedural arrangements, as well as formal and informal practices that make it easier for employees to manage the often conflicting worlds of work and non-work (Osterman, 1995). With the growing diversity of family structures represented in today's workforce, particularly with the growing norm of dual-career families, the importance of managing an employee's work-life balance have increased markedly over the past 20 years (De Bruin and Dupius, 2004) and it has thus become imperative that the human resource professional understands the interface between work and non-work relationships and the resulting impact in the workforce (Lockwood, 2003). The idea is to attempt to increase the flexibility by which employees can enact both their work and non-work roles without jeopardy. The adoption of work-life programmes and policies are being considered as a part of 'high commitment work systems' (Osterman, 1995) required for ensuring high levels of employee commitment and innovation.

Challenges to the effective utilisation of work-life balance programmes (WLBPs)

Establishing work-life balance programmes is one thing, getting employees to make use of them (*i.e.*, to make them effective) is another. Thus, there remains considerable contention about the effectiveness of organisational work-life balance policies in delivering flexibility and reducing stress and job dissatisfaction in the modern workplace (Kirrane and Buckley, 2004).

The success of WLBPs depends among others, on the existence of a family-supportive culture in the organisation, and the role that managers play in that context. Managers make implicit and explicit choices regarding the adoption of workplace practices and are thus in a position to actively encourage or discourage employees' effort to balance their work and non-work lives (Thompson, Beauvis and Lyness, 1999) even where the policies exist. However, there exist a plethora of challenges to the effective utilisation of WLBPs in organisations. Available research shows that very low percentage of employees actually make use of available WLBPs in organisations (Spinks, 2004; Kiger, 2005; Mordi and Ojo, 2011). Several reasons have been adjudged to be responsible for this low usage of WLBPs. Mordi and Ojo (2011) for instance, attributed the low usage of WLBPs to include, *inter alia*, the lack of information and training on work-life balance. In a study of some bank employees in Nigeria, they report that most employees are unaware of WLB policies that are in place in their organisation. According to them, many of the employees of the bank were surprised to learn that their organisation had a flexible working arrangement, saying that the idea was strange to them and that if it existed in their organisation, only the senior executive must be making use of it.

Another reason that has been given for the low utilisation of WLBPs relates to equity. According to Dex and Smith (2002), many employees report that they did not wish to appear a 'special case' or to require 'special treatment' to their colleagues. In short, Allen (2001) reports that co-workers perceive employees who utilise WLBPs to be less committed and that this perception significantly implicated subsequent reward allocation, advancement opportunities, and salary increases.

Again 'time-demands' or norms concerning the number of hours which employees are supposed to devote to work or work-related activities is also known to influence the effective utilisation of WLBPs in organisations (Thompson et al, 1999). Working long is usually confused for working hard

and this creates strong organisational norms for ‘face-time’ and workaholic hours (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002). Since most employees want to be perceived as hardworking, they thus seldom utilise WLBP.

Another challenge facing the utilisation of WLBP is that many of the WLBP are designed without adequate understanding of the needs of employees. A wide range of policies adopted by organisations has been based on an ill-informed conceptualisation of contemporary work-life balance (Dex and Smith, 2002). Thus, where employees do not see any value in the extant WLBP in their organisation, they will not make use of them no matter how impressive they may look or how well informed the employees may be about the programmes.

Again, personal values may discourage employees from using WLBP. According to Glass and Finley (2002), an ambitious employee may decide to concentrate on his or her career waiving the advantages of any WLBP that may be available in the organisation. Where this is carried to the extreme, employee burnout may result with its attendant organisational consequences.

The critical role of HR in establishing effective Work-life balance programmes

An increasing number of employees are struggling with work-life balance (Lockwood, 2003). Mordi and Ojo (2011) reports that 88% of bank workers in a Nigerian study say they recognised that personal and work demands were overwhelming; but that they showed a *deep organisational citizenship* by being willing to disrupt their family lives for the sake of the growth and profitability of their organisation. The problem however, was that over 80% of the workers could not balance their work and life, and could not reach their personal and career goals satisfactorily. Thus, 87% of the employees emphasised the need for work-life balance to be given immediate priority and that management should employ a more pluralistic approach in terms of employers and employees jointly regulating issues related to work-life balance (Mordi and Ojo, 2011).

The low level of management awareness of the importance of work-life balance in Nigeria for example, and the difficulty of getting good jobs lead to a lack of consideration on the part of management for employees’ work-life balance and the lack of bargaining power of employees who do not have alternatives (Epie, 2006). A respondent in Mordi and Ojo’s study says, for example, about flexible work: “If there is flexible work, they must be using it only for the big senior executive. We have no choice. We have to report to

work every day, if not, we will lose our work. I think you know it is hard to get job in Nigeria. We are suffering and smiling”(Mordi and Ojo, 2011: 4). It is thus very likely that many Nigerian organisations, owing to the high rate of unemployment in the country, and the ‘loyalty’ of employees to their organisation, may not bother themselves too much about employee work-life balance. In short, one of the respondents, a management staff, in Mordi and Ojo’s study, opines that giving workers more work-life balance options or policies will incur unnecessary cost (Mordi and Ojo, 2011).

If HR must deliver on its mandate: *to help the organisation reach its goals through the people it employs*, work-life balance issues must become a critical aspect of HR policy and strategy. HR must develop a deep understanding of people and their roles, so as to create a work environment that is friendly, motivating and productive (BeakWare, 2008). HR should champion an effective conceptualisation of work-life balance that requires a holistic approach to human resource management, implying a greater awareness of the total context of worker’s daily lives, and not just those hours they spend at work (Elloy and Smith, 2003).

Before establishing work-life balance initiatives, HR must begin by appraising the culture of the organisation to ascertain if it is open and ready to support work-life balance programmes. An overriding thread linking the reasons work-life benefits go unused is organisational culture (Reynolds, 1999). Culture-readiness appraisal can be achieved through a formal employee survey assessment or simply by a thoughtful judgement made by the organisation (Lockwood, 2003). This assessment should bring to the fore, the peculiar work-life balance needs of different employees in the organisation. For example, employees at different stages of their lives will have different work-life balance needs. The knowledge gained from such an assessment thus, will enable the organisation to tailor work-life balance programmes to employee needs.

Secondly, establishing effective work-life balance programmes requires the support of senior management, managers, and supervisors. Senior management, managers and supervisors must be seen to support the achievement of effective work-life balance if there is to be an ‘up-take’ of work-life balance opportunities by employees. As an advocate of the employee, HR must obtain a commitment from senior management to make work-life balance initiatives work in their organisation. This support is seen in the manner in which work-life balance is defined and formalised within

the HR policy and/or how managers respond to employees' request for work-life balance relief (Wickham, Parker and Fishwick, 2006). In terms of formalisation, as Wickham *et al* (2006) further expatiates, organisations need to be aware of the extent to which work-life balance is operationalised – in other words, whether it is to be regarded as a 'right', a 'right to request', or as a matter of managerial discretion. In terms of managerial responses, Wickham *et al* (2006) suggest that organisations need to decide whether to apply an authoritarian (hard HR) approach, a paternal (benevolent) approach, or a commitment (soft HR) approach to employees' requests for work-life balance relief. HR must drive a commitment approach to employees' work-life balance reliefs. Where leaders in the organisation work very long hours, tend to take little or no annual leave, and require their subordinates to follow in their footsteps, employees will be very cautious in utilising work-life balance programmes so as not to pass for an unserious or lazy employee before the 'boss'. However, where the organisation's leaders themselves make use of work-life benefits, the message that filters down the line is that the organisation is serious about work-life balance and other employees will have no hesitation to utilise available WLBP. Thus, when senior management, managers, and supervisors are supportive, employees are likely to utilise available WLBP (Baral and Bhargava, 2011).

Thirdly, HR must find means of effectively communicating available work-life balance programmes to all employees in the organisation. Communication about work-life balance is essential. Poor communication has been found to be a factor affecting the low usage of work-life balance programmes in many organisations (Mordi and Ojo, 2011). It is not enough for organisations to offer a rich menu of work-life balance benefits, the desired effect is unlikely to occur if the employees do not know about the programmes or understand them (Lockwood, 2003). It is the role of HR to effectively communicate work-life balance programmes/benefits to employees so that employees can see and understand how these benefits offer ways to manage work-life imbalance.

Conclusion

Work-life balance programmes offer a win-win situation for employers and employees. While the employee may perceive work-life balance as the dilemma of managing work obligations and non-work responsibilities, work-life balance from the employer's point of view encompasses the challenge of creating a supportive company culture where employees can focus on their jobs while at work. In whichever way it is viewed, the existence of effective

work-life balance programmes in an organisation will do both the employee and employer good. For the employer, work-life initiatives create positive employer branding, promote being an employer of choice, foster organisational citizenship, and support diversity initiatives. For the employee, there is lesser stress, increased happiness, motivation, and productivity, and a better chance of reaching both personal and career goals satisfactorily. The key role of HR therefore, is to understand the critical issues of work-life balance, integrate it into the organisation's HR policy, and champion work-life balance programmes.

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