Work Life Balance in India: Sources of Conflict & Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

There has been a growing interest among both academics and practitioners in the issue of work-lifebalance (WLB) across the world. This article discusses different causes and consequences of WLB. It argues that today WLB is not just a concern of certain groups of people but all people. The major causes responsible for WLB are societal, organizational and individual in nature. Societal drivers play an important role in creating variations in WLB. They include factors like Government, family structure, societal values, occupation, career, etc. Organizational drivers regulate the behaviour of people, thus creating structures and choices for WLB. They consist of organizational values, HR policies and WLB practices.

Finally, individual drivers are the major factors of WLB for people. Individual values, needs, work centrality, work holism, gender, and marital status are some of the important individual drivers. Poor WLB is often manifested in a range of physical and psychological strains in an individual. Further, it is conducive to low productivity, quality, employee retention and employee engagement in the organizational context. There are also several negative societal consequences of poor WLB. Finally, the paper suggests various organizational and individual level interventions to strike a balance work and life.

Keywords: Agrarian Societies; Flexitimmings; Job Sharing.

1.0 Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) is a concept with several connotations and varied consequences within and among different stakeholders.Till the industrial revolution putting out system was widely prevalent where work used to be largely home-based in agrarian societies.

After industrial revolution people started working in factories though in good measure home based work continued in farms, workshops and family businesses, specially repair, roadside restaurants and retail. Information revolution and 24 × 7 work in the wake of global competition and global production networks are increasingly blurring the distinction between home and work. Modern technologies reduced the physical strain of brawn work and facilitated women to join the workforce in large proportion. The term "work-life balance" (WLB) was coined in 1986 to response to the growing concerns by individuals and organization alike that work can impinge upon the quality of family life and vice-versa, thus giving rise to the concepts of "work-family conflict" (WFC) and "familywork conflict" (FWC). There are 24 hours in a day that can be divided into three important activities: work, family, and rest and recuperation. In a 24 × 7 cut-throat competitive work environment, the amount of time devoted to work can take its toll on one's family – it is little wonder therefore that there is growing concern about sleep deficit among the present generation more than ever before.

2.0 Reasons for Rising Concerns Over Work Life Balance

Rise of feminism apart, with dual earner families, nuclear families and single parents becoming virtually the norm especially in metros, concerns of WLB balance assumed urgency and new impetus from all quarters - governments, employers and individuals. The demographic shifts and increasing tendency for greater participation of women, who comprise almost half the workforce have resulted in a paradigm shift in redesign of workplace modeled on and for predominantly males to females, dual wage earners and those with family responsibilities.

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The issue can be addressed at the macro level through legislation at the national level by the government, policy at the employer association and/or enterprise level, communication and facilitation by the immediate supervisors, and making choices/ decisions at individual level and creating common/shared/pooled services at the community level by civil society institutions.

Government policies seek to protect the workers from overwork and abuse, ban women workers from night work in certain occupations, at least till recently, reduce the weights to be handled by women, provide maternity and paternity leave and other facilities for child and elder care.

Over the years, more and more companies have started regarding themselves as great places to work if they took care of some of the responsibilities of workers with family responsibilities and created family friendly policies and practices. Ranking of best places to work and best HR practices is contingent also upon how sensitive the employers are towards work, life and family concerns. Paying attention to WLB, most employers now realize, makes business sense and fundamental to overall competitiveness.

Most individuals realize that they do not live to work, but they work to live while life and family occupies central space, except in the case of few career minded individuals who prioritize life goals differently. While work-family and family-work conflicts are pervasive, to a large extent how they are managed is a function of individuals own sense of role-goal clarity and personal decisions about life's choices.

3.0 Consequences of Poor Work Life Balance

The gap between need for work-life balance and the reality in most workplaces remains disturbingly wide. More recently, the scarcity perspective has given way to the expansion-enhancement approach that views that work can facilitate participation at home and vice-versa. The nature of the workforce today is generally very different from the workforce of decades past. Employers across India do not provide sufficient or adequate work life balance programs for their employees. While, applications of statutory practices such as maternity/paternity leaves are common across most of the organization, discretionary practices such as flexi-time vary in their scope. However, recent research indicates that the factor that has the strongest association with employee commitment is managers' recognition of their employees' needs for work-life balance. Hence employers need to create supportive work place environments, as work life balance is the key to employee well being and hence organization's productivity.

But the existing literature on the subject and the papers included in this issue deals with the white collar workforce. There is a need to focus attention on WLB concern and issues of blue collar workers and that of the casual, contract, contingent and outsourced workers. While nothing is said or written about the subject as yet, whatever little evidence one gets allows one to conclude that the less said the better it is because for these workers, especially in the unorganized sector who account for 93 per cent of the workforce in the country decent work is an elusive dream and even bare physiological and security needs having not been generally fulfilled, any talk about WLB remains a far cry.

Poor WLB results in a range of physical and psychological strains in an individual with attendant consequences for organization in terms of low productivity, poor quality, low employee retention and weak employment engagement. Individual drivers are the major factors of WLB for people. Individual must learn to prioritize between and professional and personal goals and companies cannot afford to neglect the need for WLB.

In terms of marital status and family size, those who are single and those with smaller families and/or with grown children generally experience less work-family life tensions than those who are married, have larger families and young children. As far as social support is concerned, it is usually of two types: instrumental and emotional. Instrumental support comes from society and employers in terms of the provision of family care facilities, long maternity/paternity leave, working women's hostels, and home for the aged to care for the ageing population. Emotional support comes from one's family, supervisors or colleagues. For example, if a woman can rely on her parents or in-laws and/or servants to assist with child care and household duties, she tends to experience less WFC.

The larger companies and those in more modern/emerging sectors (such as information technology and IT-enabled industries in comparison to the older industries like mining and construction) typically adopt more family friendly employees to attain greater WLB as it can affect a company's bottom-line. As such, governments, employers, individuals and society, as a whole, have to address and undertake concerted measures to reduce Work Life Conflict.

Research has shown that the attitude towards work, as defined in terms of hours worked per annum, varies across countries. Below is the average number of annual work hours in a select list of countries as reported by the *OECD*.

| Country	Annual Work Hours
Australia	1,814 hours
Japan	1,801 hours
USA	1,792 hours
Canada	1,718 hours
UK	1,673 hours
Italy	1,591 hours
Sweden	1,564 hours
France	1,453 hours
Norway	1,337 hours

4.0 Strategies Adopted to Maintain Work Life Balance

The website of the International Labor Organization contains useful information on workers with family responsibilities and offers recommendations on what can be done at the macro and micro levels. The following are the best practices of some select companies:

- **Accenture:** 60% of staff involved in flexiwork or Telecommuting
- **Eli Lilly:** 50% of Staff Telecommute, Encourage flexiwork
- **Johnson and Johnson:** Enhanced Parental Leave
- **Ford Motors:** Senior Women's Initiative
- **General Mills:** Flexi work, Telecommuting, Job Sharing
- **Harvard University:** Enhanced Parental Leave Benefits
- **Family 360:** Redefine success to include "meaningful family relationships

The Indian government has adopted legislative measures to support WLB through factory legislation (crèche, breast feeding breaks, etc.) and legislation on maternity leave. The Government of India also has special provisions for paternity leave and for coordinating transfers when wife and husband work for the same employer. In addition, progressive employers adopt family friendly policies in the form of job sharing, part time work and short paid and long unpaid leave for child care, etc.

Length of Maternity Leave taken in different countries (ILO, 2013)
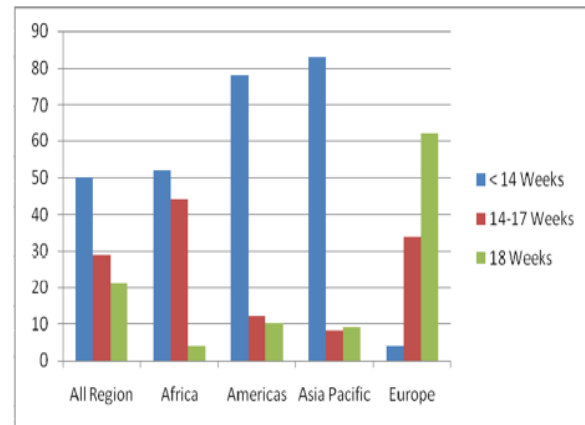
At the community level, there are some initiatives for the provision of common services like crèche, etc. As women's participation in the workforce increases, workfamily conflicts pertaining to care of children and the elderly, the growing incidence of divorce and parenting have emerged as major concerns among employees. This is possibly due to the influence of Multinational Corporations' policies on inclusive workforce and family friendly workplaces. Most Indians still seem to consider WLB as an issue for the "haves" and less so for the "have not's" where work tends to take precedence over family. Some companies have publicized themselves being a family friendly workplace as a recruitment tool, rather than facilitating women to advance in the workplace. Organization, like WIPS (Women in Public Sector), are working with the British High Commission and the Standing Conference on Public Enterprises to organize special training programs for the career advancement of women to balance work and family.

Large companies in both the public and private sectors have started to pay greater attention to the subject because of their growing realization that workplaces and human resource policies that would enable workers with families to carry on both family and work responsibilities.

The gap

Despite these findings, in most workplaces, family friendly work arrangements and services still remain limited. Comfort et al. analyzed the data collected from new Workplace and Employee Survey (WES) and showed that only 2 to 7 percent of workers analyzed reported having child or elder care services available to them at the workplace. They also demonstrated that access to such arrangements varied considerably by gender, type of benefit, and job

characteristics. Gender differences in access to flexitime were interestingly in direction opposite to that which could be expected. Women reported lower flextime participation rates than men; 44% of men reported a flextime arrangement, as compared to only 36% of women. Also, women acknowledged part time telework as a means of providing increased access to flextime or telework schedule, as compared to men for whom part time work was unrelated to flexibility in work time or place. This finding rendered support to their claim that part-time work facilitates work-family integration for women. With regards to job characteristics, managers and professionals had a higher level of access to all four work arrangements (child care, elder care, flextime, and telework) than did employees in virtually all other occupations.

5.0 Costs and Benefits to Employees and Employers

Whatever may be the case, work-life balance seems to have dual benefits for both the employing organization and its employees. Work-related stress consists of working conditions involving heavy workloads; lack of participation in decision-making; health and safety hazards; job insecurity; and tight deadlines. Employees (with high levels of work-life conflict)are three times more likely to suffer from heart problems, infections, injuries, mental health problems, and back pain, and five times more likely to suffer from certain cancers (Social Development Canada, 2004). Another study indicates that such Workers are also more likely to experience poor health; experience negative impacts on relationships with children and their spouse; likely to miss more days per year; less committed to the organization; less satisfied with their job; more likely to intend to leave their job; and have poor quality of relationships outside work (Duxbury et al., 2002). Employers benefit by decreased absenteeism, increased retention, increased job satisfaction and employee commitment; while employees benefit with decreased stress related illnesses, decreased health care costs, lower role stressors and less interference of work in family life.

6.0 Future Implications

The future will bring more pressures on prime-age workers, because of the coming retirement of baby boomers. The previous model of family and life-cycle pattern such as education followed by career (mostly for males) and then retirement is no longer viable. With aging population, economic and social gains could possibly be derived from more flexibility of choice regarding the allocation of time among work, family responsibilities, leisure and learning throughout one's life. Demand for elder care will also be of paramount concern. Work-life balance must be supported by top management and encouraged at all levels of the organization. Organizational culture must be developed in such a way that employees making efforts to have healthy work-life balance will not be looked down upon. Only then in true sense will work-life balance gain strategic recognition in India Balancing work and non-work life is going to remain as one of the employee needs in the foreseeable future. Hence, organization should continue to look for innovative ways to cater to this need in order to retain the key employees. Work-family integration should not be seen as a parenting or dependent care issue only. Organizations have to broaden their policies and practices to support employees' participation in many life roles and even personal developments to make work-life balance a reality in Indian corporate landscape. To make WLBPs successful, utmost care should be taken from their introduction to implementation. Very soon, WLBPs will become a distinct part of organization' HR policy and corporate strategy and will have positive impact on business performance.

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