

Work life balance initiatives in organisations management essay



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This paper will examine the extent which work-life balance practices in organisations can contribute to the well-being of employees. The starting point to this question is a brief introduction to the concept of “ work-life balance”.

Secondly, the essay outlines through theory how work-life balance could have an influence on work-related well-being.

Next, the essay examines based on different studies in the workplace whether work-life balance initiatives, such as flexible working arrangements, have actually helped employees reduce their work to non-work conflict, and as a result enhance their well-being.

The paper argues that there is gap between the work-life balance initiatives that exist on paper and the actual take-up level by employees (Warhurst et al 2008a: 1). Possible reasons for this low take-up rate of work-life practices are discussed.

Lastly, the essay ends up with concluding remarks and future recommendations for organisations on how to help their employees to reach a balance between their work and personal life demands.

The concept of Work-Life Balance

According to Noon and Blyton (2007: 356), “ work-life balance” is defined as “ ability of individuals to pursue successfully their work and non-work lives, without undue pressures from one determining the satisfactory experience of the other”.

The concept of “ work-life balance” is relatively new as it was first introduced in the 1990s (Lewis et al 2007: 360). In earlier years, the terms “ work-family” or “ family-friendly policies” were used to deal with the relationship of paid work and other aspects of life (Townsend and McDonald 2009: 364). However, these terms are not responding to all types of employees since they are primarily focused on women and in particular, women with young children (Lewis et al 2007).

The term “ work-life balance” is “ broader, “ more inclusive” and “ gender-neutral” (Lewis et al 2007: 360, 363). According to Lewis et al (2000), this relatively new term applies both to working men and women who have family commitments other than childcare. Furthermore, the authors state that it refers also to singles or young couples who do not have family commitments yet and simply want to enjoy life outside the workplace.

Usually the term “ family commitment” is automatically linked with the traditional family which usually includes a husband, a wife and children. However, people have family relationships and caring responsibilities other than children, for example their parents, grandparents and disabled siblings (Warhurst et al 2008).

Work-life balance and well-being

According to Townsend and McDonald (2009), the relationship between work and non-work activities has been an interesting issue for many years.

Academics as well other parties of the society show an increasing interest in how employees can reconcile their work and life activities to achieve their personal ideal balance (Fangel and Aaløkke 2008).

According to MacInnes (2008: 45), life includes “ unpaid work obligations specifically family commitments, leisure in general and ultimately anything that it is not employment”. Work can be explained in terms of paid employment and for the majority of people is viewed as the mean providing them with the necessary financial resources to cover their basic living needs (Noon and Blyton 2007).

Although the ideal balance is perceived differently by each individual (Blyton 2008), research by Ipsos’ (2009) specialists show that employees’ wellbeing is affected by the existence of a healthy working environment, a fair compensation system, availability of development opportunities and most importantly by the ability to balance work and life commitments.

According to Danna and Griffin (1999: 359), work-related “ well-being” is defined as “ comprising the various life/non-work satisfactions enjoyed by individuals, work-related satisfactions, and general health”.

Although Warr recognises the importance of physical health, he stresses that “ work-related well being” is mainly a “ psychological” state (cited in Guest 2008: 533), in other words it is about whether employees feel well and satisfied from their jobs. Furthermore, Warr suggests that worker “ well-being” can be measured using as indicators “ satisfaction-dissatisfaction”, “ enthusiasm-depression” and “ comfort-anxiety” (cited in Guest 2008: 533).

Achieving a good work-life balance can enhance the quality of life and well-being of both parents and employees without family commitments (Gröpel and Kulh 2009). This is further supported by Russel et al (2009: 92), who

argue that improvement on “ work pressure” levels and “ work-life” balance has significant effects on “ employees’ physical and mental wellbeing”

Work-life balance practices and their effectiveness in the workplace

According to Glass and Estes (1997), organisations can offer three types of practices for the improvement of work-life balance. According to the authors, these include leave entitlements for family caring commitments and ability to reduce working hours. Secondly, flexible arrangements may be offered to employees for scheduling working hours and location without reducing the number of hours worked and lastly, employers can offer parents caring facilities and crèches for their children (Glass and Estes 1997).

Blyton (2008) stresses that the most popular work balance initiatives offered by employers are the first two described above, which mainly relate to working hours flexibility. These flexibilities are considered to be more important and more helpful to employees, rather than provision of crèches (Eaton 2003).

Flexible working includes a wide range of practices such as, “ remote working”, “ reduced hours”, “ compressed working time” (Kelliher and Anderson 2008: 420), “ job-share”, “ shift swapping”, “ self-rostering”, “ time off in lieu, sabbaticals and career breaks”, “ part-time working” (Fleetwood 2007: 389).

There is a constant debate whether work-life balance initiatives, such as flexible working practices, can enhance employees’ well-being. On the one hand, flexible practices in the workplace are helping employees to plan

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better their work and life schedules according to their needs (Hill et al cited in Ten Brummelhuis and Van Der Lippe 2010). On the other hand, research by Desroches et al (cited in Ten Brummelhuis and Van Der Lippe 2010: 176) showed that flexible arrangements may distort the “ boundaries” between work and non-work and as a result increase “ work-family conflict” even further.

For example, research by White et al (cited in Russel 2009: 79) shows that some male employees instead of using “ flexible starting times” to balance work and life time, they intentionally choose to work longer hours and therefore increase “ work-life conflict”.

Russel et al (2009) tested whether flexible working arrangements could have a positive impact on work pressure and work-life balance. The authors concluded that part-time working gives the best potential for work-life balance improvement, as well as flexitime. However, home working and job sharing did not contribute at all to the reduction of work-life conflict and work pressure (Russel et al 2009).

At first, working from home can be seen as a very convenient work arrangement which has the potential to reduce work pressure, since employees believe that they can control better their workload (Russel et al 2009). In reality however, employees working from home cannot keep clear boundaries between work and private life and end up working longer hours than their colleagues at the office (Peters and Van Der Lippe 2007: 445).

In the study of Kelliher and Anderson (2010: 86), it was found that employees who chose to work “ reduced hours”, experienced greater “ work
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intensification". Warr argues that "work intensification" reduces "job satisfaction" and employee "well-being" (cited in Kelliher and Anderson 2010: 85).

For example, employees who chose to work reduced hours reported that because their "workloads" did not decrease accordingly, they end up working much harder and intense to meet their working demands (Kelliher and Anderson 2010: 93).

Furthermore, other "reduced hours" employees reported that because of limited time at work, they felt "forced" to be much more "focused while at work exercising greater intensive effort" (Kelliher and Anderson 2010: 93). Moreover, such employees felt that they were expected to be available while they were not working but during hours that the organisation was operational (Kelliher and Anderson 2010).

Ollier-Malaterre (2010) conducted a study on the contribution of work-life initiatives to the relationship of the organisation and employees. The results showed that these initiatives created positive outcomes such, "loyalty" and "pride" for the majority of the sample interviewees (Ollier-Malaterre 2010: 45). Furthermore, the authors found that employees felt more loyal and believed that their employer introduced the work-life balance practices because it cares about them rather than for economic or legal reasons. Moreover, other interviewees stated that flexible arrangements enhanced their pride for their employer and their "own self-esteem" (Ollier-Malaterre 2010: 51).

An interesting finding of Ollier-Malaterre (2010) is that increased pride was a phenomenon even for some employees that were not using these practices or were not relevant for them. Furthermore, the authors report that employees felt satisfied to be working for an employer who gave them the choice to manage their work and personal life. Therefore, it can be argued that the introduction of work-life policies has positive symbolic effects for all employees of the organisations regardless if they are using them or not.

Kelliher and Anderson (2008: 419) examined flexible arrangements and the employees' " perception of job quality". Employees felt that they were treated by their employers " in a more " adult" way" (Kelliher and Anderson 2008: 425). Specifically the authors state that an employee working under " compressed fortnight" appreciates that the employer trusts and gives employees the freedom to manage and schedule their workload according to their needs (Kelliher and Anderson 2008: 425).

Eaton (2003: 150) poses the argument whether flexible practices in an organisation are a " rhetoric or reality". Warhurst et al (2008: 1) argue that there is difference between the work-life practices that are in place and their actual usability by employees. This paradox was reported also in Hochschild's work which demonstrates that just having in place flexible arrangements is not enough to help employees balance their work and life worlds (cited in Warhurst et al 2008). As Eaton (2003: 151) explains the " perceived ability to use" these arrangements is also very critical.

Furthermore, as Ollier-Malaterre's (2010) study showed if the business culture does not encourage and enable employees to use flexible working

arrangements then it is very unlikely for employees to feel free to use them. For example, Ollier-Malaterre (2010: 54) argues that “ supervisor support makes a world of difference”. The authors explain that without the approval and support of the direct supervisor, it is very difficult for employees to have access to formal or informal working arrangements.

Furthermore, Ollier-Malaterre (2010: 48) concludes that “ lack of support” made employees to feel that achieving a “ balance” and healthy “ well-being” was their individual “ responsibility” and not the organisation’s priority. More importantly, the author states that some employees felt that when there is a choice to be made between making money or improving employees’ well-being, unfortunately employers will decide based on financial grounds and cost/benefit analysis.

According to Chatrakul Na Ayudhya and Lewis (2010), in some cases the existence of work-life balance policies was intentionally not communicated to staff in an attempt to prevent their usability. Furthermore, the authors found that unfortunately, managers viewed such policies as extra cost instead of seeing the long-term benefits that a healthier work-life balance could bring to both the organisation and employees.

Eaton (2003) states in her work that sometimes managers were reluctant to allow flexible policies to their staff because they were concerned that more and more employees will want to have access to them as well. When employees are denied access to flexible practices they feel unpleased and dissatisfied with their employer (Hayman 2009). In this case, the aim of work-life balance initiatives is eroded and low “ morale” of employees can

result to increased turnover rates (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya and Lewis 2010: 256).

Also, flexible working arrangements may not be utilised by employees at the level expected because they believe that using them may lead to future career damage (Bailyn 1993). For example, new mothers are reluctant to use all the available maternity they are entitled because of fear that they will lose the position or status they had before the leave (Kirton and Greene 2005). Relevant research of Blackwell shows that women after maternity leave return to “ lower-paid, lower-status jobs” (cited in Kirton and Greene 2005: 18).

Furthermore, Kelliher and Anderson (2008) report that employees who use flexible practices feel that they do not have the same opportunities for progression as their full-time colleagues. For example, an employee working partly from home reported that because he was less visible to its senior managers it was more difficult to achieve a promotion (Kelliher and Anderson 2008). Also, a majority of flexible workers in the authors’ study felt that it was difficult to be included in important or interesting projects due to their decreased visibility at the workplace.

Moreover, Kelliher and Anderson (2008) report that reduced hours employees felt that the performance appraisal system was unequally and unfairly comparing the outcome and visibility levels of full-time employees with those working flexibly and fewer hours. In these grounds, the authors conclude that the chances for advancement are obviously less for flexible employees.

Additionally, high levels of demands and high pressure characterising senior roles are seen as obstacles to progression since a level of flexibility would have to be lost to progress to such senior positions (Kelliher and Anderson 2008).

In the case of reduced hours employees, because time for working is already limited employees feel that they do not have the availability to go to trainings sessions (Kelliher and Anderson 2008).

Terminologically, the work-life balance is “ broader” and “ more inclusive” than family-friendly policies (Lewis et al 2007: 360). However, organisations continue to introduce practices that are helpful mainly to parents, and more precisely to women (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya and Lewis 2010). In this way, organisations fail to acknowledge and take actions for the needs of other groups of employees who do not have children and this may lead to negative reactions and employee dissatisfaction (Young 1999).

In the major accounting firms in Cyprus several work-life balance practices are offered to employees, both parents and singles. These include mainly maternity leave, unpaid paternity leave, unpaid emergency leave, flexible start and finish hours, Friday afternoon off for all, study leave for accountant trainees and reduced hours for mothers. In theory all these policies can enable employees to balance their work and non-work roles and demands.

However, in the case of accountant trainees who returned from their study leave after having professional examinations, sometimes they were “ denied” annual holiday in the excuse that they had their “ holiday” (study leave) and now it is time for the rest of the staff to take a leave.

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Also, employees who chose to come earlier in the morning and have a shorter break in order to leave earlier in the afternoon, are seen as less committed than their colleagues that came late, had longer break and therefore stayed longer to only cover their standard hours.

How employers can respond – Possible solutions

The gap between work-life balance practices and their low take-up is due to the “perceived usability” held by employees (Hayman 2009: 329). To increase take-up of policies, employers should ensure that employees feel free to use the available practices without any negative impact on their future working experiences.

Lewis et al (2007: 370) argues that work-life balance initiatives will be helpful to employees only if they are accompanied by deep reconsideration of the characteristics of the “ideal workers” and by challenging the existing way work is expected to be done.

If the implementation of work-life balance practices is not supported by a change in the organisational culture and employment norms then employees using such policies will be labelled as “secondary, less committed” employees (Lewis 2001: 24).

Furthermore, as part of a deeper cultural change, organisations are advised to review their current performance evaluation, pay appraisal, training and development systems to ensure that all employees have equal opportunities in respect to their “life circumstances and work-life preferences” (White et al 2003: 192). Hayman’s (2009: 335) study confirms that “perceived usability”

can encourage employees to use work-life balance practices and therefore improve the conflict between work and life demands.

Among other aspects, organisations can increase the effectiveness of work-life balance initiatives by reconsidering the design of jobs. According to Bailyn and Harrington (2004), job design has important impact on whether employees will be able to meet both their work and personal demands. Batt and Valcour (2003: 196) support that jobs that give employees “ autonomy” and flexibility to decide the time and location of their working hours are more likely to help them meet their work and personal demands and make employees more satisfied.

From the organisation’s side, by involving and letting employees participate in the arrangement of their work schedule, employee productivity will increase and employee turnover will decrease (Batt and Valcour 2003). Furthermore, autonomy can increase employees’ “ job satisfaction and motivation” (Hackman and Oldham cited in Eaton 2003: 148).

Following the above results, employers should realise that the introduction of work-life balance initiatives can bring a “ win/win” outcome both for the organisation and employees (Lewis and Roper 2008: 194).

By adopting the “ dual agenda approach”, employers recognise the long-term organisational benefits of having satisfied and committed employees (Lewis et al 2007: 370). Consequently, under this approach organisations go beyond a shallow development of policies that exist only in paper but aim to an effective implementation of policies that have the potential to really help

both employees and employers to meet their needs (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya and Lewis 2010).

Conclusion

According to Fangel and Aaløkke (2008), it is difficult to define the one best way of achieving good and healthy work-life balance. The authors argue that some people prefer to clearly separate work and life, while others choose to combine these two spheres. Furthermore, for some employees work-life practices are actually helping them to achieve a balance but others cannot utilise them to their advantage (Fangel and Aaløkke 2008).

It is very important to note that the ideal balance is perceived differently by each individual. Different perceptions result from each individual's family environment and demands, personal preferences and finally on the "conception of work" (Fangel and Aaløkke 2008: 137). Work is not all bad and for some people it could be a way to feel satisfied and contented (Warhurst et al 2008: 2).

Work is big part of our life and it is "generally considered to be a central defining feature of ourselves as individuals" (Noon and Blyton 2007: 50). Therefore, it is very important for employees to work in an organisation that gives choices and understands their personal and work needs (Crooker et al 2002).

According to Noon and Blyton (2007: 354), "work-life balance" is an issue that has caused interest to academics, politicians, employers and of course employees. Furthermore, the authors believe that this issue will continue to attract high attention in the future as well.

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In this course, employers should introduce work-life balance practices that are inclusive and correspond to the needs of all employees. More importantly however, these initiatives must be supported by an organisational culture that allows employees across all hierarchical levels and social groups to have access to these policies (Noon and Blyton 2007).