9 Work-Life Balance for Sustainable Tourism Development

Margaret Deery, Leo Jago, Candice Harris and Janne Liburd

The tourism and hospitality industry is very much a 'people industry', which requires a stable and talented workforce as a fundamental component. However, there are some aspects of the industry that make it unattractive to potential employees. These aspects include the long and unsocial hours of work, the low pay and often stressful working environment (Deery and Jago, 2015: Karatepe, 2013). These aspects contribute to the industry's reputation for not providing staff with an acceptable work-life balance. The question then becomes how the tourism and hospitality industry can contribute to a better balance and thus underpin the socio-cultural aspects of sustainability. This study examines the sustainability of the industry across three countries, Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand, by focusing on whether tourism employees in hospitality organisations consider they have a balance between their personal and work lives. Hospitality is chosen as the focus for this study since it plays a fundamentally important role in underpinning the viability of the broader tourism industry. Current practices are confronted by larger societal changes in the labour market, where lifelong careers within the same firm (or industry) are challenged by rapid employee turnover, demands for greater flexibility, new technologies, and alternative work schedules. We discuss how collaboration between industry, employees and wider community may help underpin sustainable tourism development.

Literature review

There is debate as to whether work-life balance (WLB) refers to: an objective state of affairs or a subjective experience, perception or feeling; an actuality or an aspiration; a discourse or a practice; a metaphor for flexible working; a metaphor for the gendered division of labour; or a metaphor for some other political agenda (Fleetwood, 2007). Although many definitions exist, WLB can be defined in general terms as "an individual's ability to meet both their work and family commitments, as well as other non-work responsibilities and

activities" (Parkes and Langford, 2008: 267). However, WLB is influenced by a range of factors operating at micro (individual), meso (organisational) and macro (national) levels (Gregory and Milner, 2009). As a multifaceted concept, WLB is shaped by unique life paths encompassing differences in culture, income, gender, age, occupation, personality, class, health needs, personal goals and choices, responsibilities for families and other life stakeholders, migration experiences, workplace relationships, hobbies, critical life events and other factors.

WLB policies are typically promoted as win-win for both individuals and organisations with the often espoused benefits including improved recruitment and retention rates, reductions in worker stress and increased productivity (Harris et al., 2005; Zhao et al., 2011; Deery and Jago, 2015). Work-life balance programs by hotels can assist through the use of flexible working hours, compressed work weeks and leave for child care (Lee et al., 2015). In the first broadly representative study of why New Zealanders move between employers and why they stay, conducted by Boxall, Macky and Rasmussen (2003) with 549 New Zealand employees, it was found that nearly half of the sample, the 'movers' (48.8%, n = 268) had changed employers over the past five years. Furthermore, over half (52%) of the 'movers' listed their desire to improve work–life balance as a reason for moving.

An assessment of the issues overlooked in the WLB debate highlight that what is needed is a more nuanced appreciation, and research agenda, of the complex relationship between work and life (Eikhof et al., 2007). A review by Chang et al. (2010) of methodological choices in 245 empirical WLB papers published in a range of journals between 1987 and 2006 found that sampling choice in previous studies is somewhat constrained, and may be enhanced by targeting areas such as the hospitality industry, single people, manual and lower skilled service workers, and through cross-national studies. They explain that samples of organizations employing relatively larger proportions of professional employees were over-represented in study samples at the expense of organizations employing a low-skilled or semi-skilled workforce. Hence, they posit that "organizations sampled in much work-life balance research are not representative of the population of organizations to which they purport to generalize" (p. 2395). The omission of casual and/or low skilled workers is problematic as these workers often hold positions that lack strong conditions such as tenure, power and income.

According to Todd and Binns (2011), the widespread assumption that individuals freely make choices and negotiate their preferred working arrangements allows managers to ignore the need to transform workplace structures, cultures and practices that may be impeding the implementation of WLB. They stress

that the WLB literature has increasingly highlighted the critical role played by managers in implementing WLB practices. Despite the robustness of the policies, where managers are ambivalent about flexible policies or apply them inconsistently, their usability and meaningfulness is undermined (Eaton, 2003; Todd & Binns, 2011). If "the bottom-line of WLB research is whether we can improve working conditions and subsequent levels of work-life satisfaction in employees in order to attract, motivate and retain personnel" (Poelmans et al., 2008: 228), then managers and organisations have a critical role to play.

The literature suggests that lack of balance between work and non-work activities is related to reduced psychological and physical well-being (Sparks et al., 1997; Felstead et al., 2002; Hughes and Bozionelos, 2007). Where their needs are not met, employees experience work–life stress (Gregory and Milner, 2009). While complaints about WLB may be common in all occupations, there is variance by occupation in the WLB issues faced, as well as unequal access to coping strategies (Roberts, 2007). Across various organisational studies, a commonly reported finding is that managers and professionals have greater flexibility and autonomy in their roles, hence WLB initiatives are more available to managers and professionals (Harris and Pringle, 2008). As an example of the disparity in access to WLB solutions, unlike managers and professionals, food service employees tend to enjoy less flexibility and autonomy in their work schedules (Rowley and Purcell, 2001).

While issues relating to obtaining a WLB have received substantial attention over recent years, less attention has been given to researching the impact of WLB in the hospitality area (Deery and Jago, 2009). Hospitality is a rich area for the study of WLB issues given the workforce is often characterised by its youth, feminisation, high proportion of immigrants, non-standard employment patterns, low coverage of collective agreements, low pay and high level of labour turnover. A culture of long working hours in the hospitality industry is so typical that many workers see their long working hours as normal (Cullen & McLaughlin 2006; Wong and Ko, 2009; O'Neill, 2011; Karatepe, 2013). In an Indian study, Kandasamy & Ancheri (2009) found imbalance in work and social life is pervasive among employees in the hospitality industry. However, as Ghazi (2003:xiii) states, "it is not necessarily about working less, rather about having personal control and flexibility over when, where and how we work".

A great deal of the literature in the hospitality and tourism fields shows a strong relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Yang, 2010). How workers feel about their work environments can vary due to individual characteristics, and these differences may determine the level of satisfaction with work environments and workers' intentions to remain in their positions (Franek and Vecera, 2008 in Lee and Way, 2010). Blomme, Rheede