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Gender and Work-life Balance

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The concept of work-life balance is an increasingly important issue in today's society as a result of changing labour demographics. The traditional 9-5 working week cannot cater for all workers and many employers recognise this. Research from the CIPD (2012) indicates that 96% of employers in the UK offer some form of work-life balance practice, with part-time working (88%) and homeworking (54%) being the most common arrangements offered. Despite the increased interest in the work-life balance, there is ambiguity around what work-life balance is. Much of the confusion comes from a lack of agreement over what constitutes 'work', and what is 'life'. This chapter explains the concept of work-life balance, the measures organizations can take to support the work-life balance of its members and the potential benefits and barriers associated with their implementation. The chapter also considers the role of gender in work-life balance, as women are more likely than men to use a work-life balance policy, with 77% working flexibly in some way (CIPD, 2012).

What is work-life balance?

The relationship between employees' working lives and their non-working lives has been recognised as a concern at national levels across Europe (Crompton and Lyonette, 2006) and is driving policy at governmental level (Gregory and Miller, 2009). This relationship is often called: *work-life balance*, a widely used term with no set definition. It is usually taken by researchers and practitioners to refer to the balance between paid employment and child care. However, this perspective does not take into account other aspects of people's lives, for example, care of parents, partners, adult children or pets. In addition, it assumes that work-life balance is the interaction between paid employment and (unpaid) care work. Broader definitions may include other aspects of 'life', including leisure.

Researchers may consider how these different dimensions of an individual's life interact, referring to work/life conflict. This conflict can arise from the number of hours worked. Those early in their careers may feel pressure to work long hours in order to secure later career success (Sturges and Guest, 2004).

Employers are expressing an increasing interest in work-life balance due to changing labour market demographics. Data from the UK shows that women's labour market participation has increased over the last 40 years, with just under 70% of working age women in paid employment (ONS, 2013). Similar patterns are seen in other western countries but gendered divisions of household labour remain, with women undertaking most childcare work, and men more leisure time (Craig *et al.*, 2012). The gendered aspects of work-life balance are discussed in some detail later in this chapter. Further, patterns of work intensification across western countries is associated with poor work-life balance (Macky and Boxall, 2008).

An assumption underlying the development of work-life balance policies within organizations is that they will increase performance and reduce turnover and absenteeism, which are key aims of the HRM department. However, the evidence is mixed in this regard, with some suggestion that work-life balance can improve retention (Duffield *et al.*, 2011) or decrease engagement (Timms *et al.*, 2015).

Exercise

Suggest five measures an organization could put in place to support the work-life balance of its employees. How would these vary between employees who have/do not have young children?

■ Work-life balance practices

Work-life balance practices usually focus around the arrangement of working hours. This is called 'flexible working' and covers three core arrangements;

- 1 The number of hours worked by an employee,
- 2 When those hours are worked and,
- 3 Where those hours are worked.

Employees may work part-time, for example, a parent with a school age child may work between the hours of 10am and 3pm to accommodate the school day. Part-time working can also include working term-time only, or two employees 'job-sharing' one role. The timing of hours could mean that an employee is full-

time, working a core working week of 37 hours, but these hours are condensed over four days. An employee would work longer hours on those four days. Alternatively, an employee may have an arrangement to work a certain number of hours over the course of a 12 month period (annual hours) and these are worked according to care needs. The location of hours can also be adapted in order to support an employee with their non-work needs. Working from home may be possible, for those whose roles permit. The work-life balance practices that can be used by employers include:

- Flexible hours,
- Home-working,
- Condensed hours,
- Job-sharing,
- Part-time working,
- Shift swapping.

It is important to recognise that the flexible working arrangements are dependent upon the job role, since some roles are less amenable to the kinds of flexibility to which employees may aspire. Someone working in the service sector, for example a waitress, is unlikely to be able to work from home, much like someone working in a traditional 9-5 occupation is unlikely to be afforded flexible hours. However, flexible arrangements can be more informal, such as, shift based employees swapping their working hours to accommodate responsibilities or other non-work issues, like attending a family wedding.

Work-life balance practices are designed to meet the needs of those with caring duties and such individuals are more likely to make use of them (Goni-Legaz and Ollo-Lopez, 2014), specifically for the care of young children, rather than older family members, spouses or pets. We can see here that 'work-life balance' often refers to the balance between paid employment and unpaid labour, such as childcare. Leisure hours are often neglected in the consideration of work-life balance, by employers and researchers. The relationship between the uptake of flexible work arrangements and employee engagement is complex, with evidence that use of policies is associated with decreased engagement in the long term (Timms *et al.*, 2015).

The approach taken to work-life balance practices is contextual amongst organizations, with each one having their own approach, whether that is formal or informal. A real world example is that of multinational retailer Marks & Spencer, who use a more informal approach. Employees are initially encouraged to raise work-life balance requests informally with their line manager

arguing that this both saves time and forges better working relationships (CIPD, 2012). Therefore students must be aware that practices deemed effective in one organization, may not be deemed effective in another.

Benefits of work-life balance practices

Employees with 26 weeks of continual employment have the right to request flexible working, and this right is not restricted to those with children. However, this is only a right to *request* flexible working and employers are not legally obliged to provide such flexible working practices. The adoption of work-life balance practices is not enforceable by Government legislation in the UK meaning for organizations to use these practices, they must be beneficial to the organization itself in some way. It is therefore important to look beyond what work-life balance practices mean for employees and focus on the business case for their implementation.

Advocates for work-life balance practices argue that they lead to an increase in organizational and employee performance. Beauregard and Henry (2009), in their review of literature linking performance with work-life balance practices, found evidence to suggest that employees have peak performance times, where they work more productively at certain times of the day. Employees working flexible hours could work at their peak performance times, which results in a greater output of work than that of a normal 9 to 5 week. Those working from home also report greater productivity, with workers often working longer days by factoring in time they would be away from the home (Kelliher and Anderson, 2009). However, it is important to remember that working from home can make it more difficult for employees to distinguish between working time and non-working time. Smartphones, tablets and home-based internet can all make it much more tempting, and easier, to stay in touch with work when out of the office. Better morale and greater job satisfaction are also cited as consequence of work-life balance practices which, although difficult to quantify, are argued to improve employee performance. A reduction in absenteeism is also proposed as a benefit from the practices (Joyce *et al.*, 2010). For employees with flexible working it is much easier for them to work from home if their child is home sick from school, for example, and therefore unauthorized absence is lower. However, De Menezes and Kelliher (2011) in a review of literature around work-life balance practices found the evidence for lower absenteeism is mixed.