

WORK-LIFE BALANCE AS REDISCOVERED MODERN TREND IN HR MANAGEMENT

Work-Life Balance as Rediscovered Modern Trend in HR Management

Klára Šimonová, Jana M. Šafránková

Abstrakt

Příspěvek se zabývá problematikou work-life balance (WLB), jako moderním trendem v řízení lidských zdrojů, ačkoli termín byl prvně užít již v roce 1986 a samotný koncept existuje od poloviny 19. století, nebereme-li v úvahu myšlenky a díla Senecova. To může znamenat, že lidé jsou ohledně konceptu WLB nejistí a ostražití a že není zcela jasné, jak lze výhody konceptu uchopit. Jak zaměstnavatelé, tak i zaměstnanci si nejsou plně vědomi výhod WLB, zatímco nevýhody jsou diskutovány často. Stres, rodinné neshody, nedostatek pocíťovaného štěstí a spokojenosti v životě, pouhé vykonávání rolí bez vnitřní angažovanosti, to jsou jen některé z mnoha důsledků nadměrné pracovní zátěže. Vlády nejenže do úpravy pracovní doby nikterak mnoho nezasahují, ale koncepty WLB neumějí nebo nechtějí aplikovat na své vlastní zaměstnance.

Zejména "sendvičová" generace trpí stále větším stresem a výčitkami svědomí, když se stará o své vlastní rodiny a děti, ale zároveň jejich výchova jim nedovolí nechat své rodiče v domovech pro seniory, a tak se všemožně snaží vyhovět představě okolní společnosti o dokonalém rodiči, dokonalém dítěti i dokonalém pracovníkovi.

Tento článek se tedy snaží poskytnout přehled současných diskusí o WLB (a práci na částečný úvazek jako nejviditelnější části WLB), změny v argumentech a změny ve vnímání WLB zaměstnavateli i zaměstnanci v posledních měsících.

KLíčové slova

Work-life balance, práce na částečný úvazek, řízení lidských zdrojů, trend v řízení lidí

Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of work-life balance (WLB) as a modern trend in Human Resources Management, while the term was coined in 1986 and the concept itself exists from mid-1800s, if not considering Seneca's thoughts. This means that people are anxious about how to handle the concept and how to use its benefits. Both employers and employees are not fully aware of advantages of WLB, while disadvantages are discussed frequently. Stress, family arguments, life unhappiness, playing roles without engagement, these are just few of many consequences of excessive work load. Governments not only do not interfere much into regulation of working hours, they do not apply WLB for their own employees.

Especially the "sandwich" generation is suffering from increasing stress and compunction, when caring of their own families and children, but at the same time their upbringing does not allow them to leave old dependent parents in homes for the elderly, and the society pushes its members into being perfect parents, perfect descendants, perfect workers.

This article thus attempts to provide an overview of recent discussions on WLB (and part-time work as the most visible part of WLB), its changes in arguments and changes in perceptions of WLB by both employers and employees in the last months.

Key words

Work-life balance, part-time work, human resources management, trends in management

JELL Classification: J 24, I 31, J 22

Introduction

The aim of this article is to think of the recent debates on working hours and life satisfaction in context, and perhaps to provide new connections of well-known facts. Definitely the article does not endeavor to provide an in-depth view and any new research of work-life balance; the article even does not attempt to describe the phenomenon in strictly academic terms. The article wants to reflect current events and incidents and discussions that appear either in the media or in the society.

It is noticeable that most of the research on work-life balance, gender issues at work, part-time work etc. was published in the year 2006 (see eg. the webpage of The research institute for labour and social affairs, www.vupsv.cz) and then there is a gap until now and there was little research published during these last years, usually one

thematically related publication per year. Not many other academic publications based on large scale research have been issued recently, but nowadays the public debates and media take place and inform about the issues connected to employment or to the negative aspects of employment respectively. Perhaps the crisis is over and people are not motivated by having at least any job any longer but are beginning to be motivated by other aspects of work such as job content, job satisfaction and perhaps by the possibility of work-life balance.

1. Work-life balance

The term work-life balance is used mostly for part-time working mothers of children under the age of 15. The term “family-friendly policy” was introduced to eliminate the gender perception, but again was limited to organizations that needed to facilitate the return of mothers with children to work. However, this is a misunderstanding. Work-family balance is something slightly different. It should not be limited to mothers with children. It should be extended to fathers, too. And it should be extended to grandparents, to people taking care of any family member no matter how old he is. And it should be extended to anyone who perceives his or her family as a value that cannot be outweighed by anything else. Some of previous publications suggested that even “work-life balance” is not a correct term and tried to explain their point of view and invented many other words for, actually, the same. The arguments against work-life balance are summed up by Lingard and Francis (2009, pp. 124-126), we can for example notice two thoughts: Halpern and Murphy (2005) suggest that work-life balance creates a mental image of a seesaw or a weighing scale and thus is a zero sum game, and so Greenhouse and Powell (2006) came up with the term “Work-family enrichment” that attempts to show the win-win strategy, that participation in paid work can enhance the satisfaction in the worker’s family life and vice versa.

However, this is exactly the same debate as above. Work-life balance’s original meaning is an optimal balance between private life and work life and by nature is individual and subjective. Two different people perceive it differently. One may seek self-actualization in his or her job and hence spends more time at work; other wants to have enough time for his or her hobbies and hence leaves the workplace as soon as he or she can.

One of the greatest problems of work-life balance is that is perceived as a gender issue, that only women tend to consider their job as too time-consuming and that only women can and do complain about being overworked and that “two shifts” a day, one shift at work and second shift at home, are simply a phenomenon of last decades and women were not trained for centuries to stand such a fast pace for a lifetime. On one hand, this is true; on the other hand, this is far more complicated. Some gender studies focus on women in managerial positions and emphasize their lack of private life, for example Gazdagová and Fischlová (2006).

“The other hand” is also represented by now popular idea of equality in genders, that nothing like gender difference exist and both men and women can succeed in career if they work hard and strive. However, this idea does not fully reflect the reality of our current society, where women are still influenced by the society in choosing their type of education (high school vs university, technical vs humanities) and the necessity to show more qualities than men in order to be perceived as equal to men, in order to succeed in masculine environment, such as assertiveness, rapacity, willingness to risk, swiftness of authoritative decision-making etc. Gazdagová and Fischlová (2006, p. 13, 16) relate the education to continuous stereotyping in traditionally masculine industries that have never been feminized such as the construction industry (and electro-technical branches as well). If we connect these two findings, we can see that this is a phoenix issue and women in masculine environment would have to meet the masculine expectations in the near future and would have to be tough and that only a minority of women would go to study technical university and consequently less women would work in masculine industries and therefore the whole circle begins again.

A research by Haberlová and Kyzlinková (2009, p. 8-19) has revealed that the utilization of alternative work schedules is connected to the preparedness of employers to offer such options and possibilities, thus that the rare alternative work scheme in the Czech Republic is caused by lack of employers’ willingness. The research has also shown the “verbal” appraisal of family-friendly policies, but no real action, in fact, suspension and confusion. And moreover, this qualitative research has found this ambiguity even within large multinational companies that show significantly higher concern for work-life balance and family-friendly policy in quantitative studies. Well, this is worth noticing. The only companies that showed active support of their employees with family obligations were the “feminized” ones, i. e. companies with prevailing feminine workforce. The authors suggest that perhaps the government and laws could help in the beginning to launch support for work-life balance.

1.1 Specific environment of construction industry

The research of Gazdagová and Fischlová (2006, p. 10) mentions also the specifics of construction industry and its demands on worker’s physical condition and preferences of women to avoid noisy and dusty work environment. The influence of weather or exposure to weather conditions, respectively, such as cold, rain, wind, etc. is more important to women than to men. Women also prefer jobs with less physical exertion if this can be anticipated, employers intuitively prefer men for straining positions, even if this is not on daily basis but rather occasional and a woman could ask for help. Though from New Zealand, a study by Morrison (2012, p.22) suggests that

construction industry is a very complicated environment to implement work-life balance and estimates that costs for the employer can be higher than in other industries, the tailored solution can, besides reduced working hours and flexible work options, include also social events, fitness and health concerns, and of course reduced work pressure, limited weekend work, wellness and personal development.

1.2 The sandwich generation

The “sandwich generation” is characterized by being the middle generation that has both dependent children and dependent parents to take care of and support financially. Some women would like to take care of their families themselves without the help of institutional care, but home care is not a paid job, so they have to keep working and pay for daycare, because daycare is either free for pre-school children or affordable for the elderly as is supported by the government. Therefore these women are forced to go to work and pay for services they can and would like to do themselves. Others prefer to keep their career and leave kids and parents with the institutions because the care is provided by professionals and because their career allows them to make more money and be better off. These women are also scared that if they would give up their career for certain period of time that is not known in advance they would remain unemployed after their parents do not need their help any longer, because they would be too old for the labor market (Cechl, Hejkrlik, 2014, p. 71)

1.3 Career development

In the last years, both men and women have far more opportunities to build their careers than before the year 1989. Today it is easier to study, to gain experience and learn languages abroad, the access to technological equipment that make life easier such as computers, microwave ovens, etc. is wider, men are expected to help with the household more than ever in the history, the family also has more options and can even outsource services such as babysitting or housecleaning. On the other hand, women are more expected to build their career than before, and these opportunities and expectations make them think they have to build their career. But their time is limited. Sometimes career means no private life. As Gazdagová and Fischlová (2006, p. 26) suggest, this makes women frustrated; seemingly they have everything they can long for, such as good job, good salary etc., but they are single, alone, lonely, because career is everything they have. On the other hand, some women perceive maternity leave as a good excuse to escape the “rat race” and at certain age, usually around 35, simply become pregnant no matter what their marital (or even partner) status is and leave the job (Dudová, Křížková, Fischlová, 2006, p. 51).

1.4 A thought on what might have happened

Recent news show the fatal consequences a burnout syndrome can have – the co-pilot of Lufthansa flight that crashed in France is said to suffer from depression and burnout syndrome. Burnout syndrome is typically the result of being overworked in caring and helping professions where making a mistake always means a great trouble for someone else.

2. Part-time work

Let us illustrate recent debates on shortening the working hours per week that were published in Czech journal “Týden” (‘Week’; 2014, vol. 37, p. 29) in an article that put in contrast two mainstream opinions, one represented by the unions and the second by economists: Mr. Ungerma, an economist of the trade unions, states that every fifty years the working week is shortened by approximately eight hours or one day respectively and there was no fatal consequence either 150 or 100 or 50 years ago, simply because the productivity of labor increases and the economy can make it. Moreover, he states that shortening of working hours can lead to reduction in unemployment rate and to increase in work-life balance satisfaction due to enough time for both work and family and self-development (e.g. through more time to devote to further education). A young single economist of a bank, Mr. Michl, opposes by saying that by shortening the work week we would discourage US companies from investing their money here, and that all these debates are odd because unemployment is caused by unsound labor market, by discouraging investors, and by unwillingness of people to work. One technical worker with a good salary will be able to create five jobs in the future – such a worker will buy services. And Mr. Michl adds that only our laziness leads people to consider the shortening of working week. Though this is a slightly different debate, rather macroeconomic, perfectly illustrates the status quo: can we really measure the life happiness? Do we have any other options than to buy services? Are we lazy or do we just want more from life? Is really everything about money and economic growth? Is GDP really the best indicator of quality of life?

Part-time work is currently utilized mainly by women after maternity leave because it gives them better option for work-life balance and better time management possibilities. Part-time work offered to women after maternity leave (or parental leave, respectively) can enhance their retention rate and reduces turnover rate in the whole company (Lingard and Francis, 2009, p. 194).

Some workers are ambiguous about working full time or part time. They weigh pros and cons – some of the well-known disadvantages are less money, lower security of job, missing career and development plans, missing other

benefits from job such as extra sick days, extra days off, lunch tickets or car for private purposes, and, of course, the great possibility to work overtime finally and expectations to be flexible (Hinterseer, 2013, p. 3).

Part-time workers are mainly women, who are aware of and understand the disadvantages of being a part-timer. However, sometimes they have only three possibilities: to work full time and be exhausted, not to work at all and give up their future career and have no money, or to work part-time and put their career aside for limited period of time and have opened doors for future career and still manage both the household and the work. As the society is also somehow traditional in most countries, it is more acceptable for women to ask for part-time after having a child than for men, and also to switch to full-time after the children are more grown up. So, this seems to be a gender issue, too – the woman has an “excuse” that is tolerated by the society, while a man does not. A man willing to work part-time can be perceived as a less working, less willing to work, less loyal, less perspective. The society’s judgment on proper behavior is what makes women choose either to work full time or not to work at all and consequently the women derive their self-esteem from their proper role imposed by the society, but Bollé (1997, p. 578) cautions that no one should be forced to such a choice and vice versa people who want to work full time should not be persuaded to work part time, because both unemployment and underemployment have its economic and social fallouts.

Women accepting part-time jobs are also aware of the acceptable maximum wages they can ask for, so they usually do not attempt to ask for more. However, this lack of self-confidence and preference of smaller but stable and certain income leads to even greater income gap between men and women, as reported in the study by Gazdagová and Fischlová (2006, p. 24). They also mention other preferred material benefits such as the car, expensive laptops and cell phones as required by men and thus provided to men rather than to women, because women are less competitive in status symbols and perceive them more as tools for work. Dudová, Křížková and Fischlová (2006, p. 24-27) noticed that these benefits can somehow serve as a substitute for high income – the man’s role is to economically support his family, but this is for most men virtually impossible, so their wives have to work, too, and they would never be able to buy such expensive things themselves to they require them from employers. Especially male managers are under great pressure, the nature of their work automatically assumes their full devotion to work, but this means a full service at home from their partner, who should suppress her own career.

Companies that are ready to offer part-time jobs usually operate in public sector and employ in average more women than men, employ in average people with higher education and of older age, this means in particular that these are educational institutions, social welfare institutions and nonprofit organizations (Haberlová, Kyzlinková, 2009, p. 23).

To add, not many countries in the European Union signed the International Labor Organization convention no. 175 on Part-Time Work. In this context, it is presumable that among the few signatories there are countries such as the Netherlands, Italy, Finland or Sweden.

We have to stress here that not everyone is willing to work part-time or to use other forms of WLB. Usually these people are satisfied with their status quo and have no intention to change anything. Anyone should be forced neither to reduce the working hours nor to extend the required working hours if he himself does not want to. Women, who consider their career as more self-actualizing than housework, should never be forced to stay at home when they can buy all the services necessary. Vice versa, men who decide to stay on parental leave should not be discriminated against after they return to work, especially if their motivation was different from financial if their wife earns more money than them (Gazdagová, Fischlová, 2006, p. 28).

2.1 *Flexitime*

Flexible working schedule, called flexitime, means any deviation from standard working schedule, for example daily schedule from 9:00 am to 5:30 pm including 30 minutes lunch break, but flexitime still assumes 40 hours per week. Most usual flexitime is with “core hours” when the worker has to be present at the workplace, for example between 9:00 am and 3:00 pm and can arrive between 6:00 am and is free to leave any time after 3:00 pm either when is finished with 8-hour shift or when completes 40 hours per week. Flexitime also includes “compressed week” work schedule, which means that 40 hours are completed in 4 days. According to Baltes (1999, as cited in Lingard and Francis, 2009, p. 194), any kind of flexitime increases employee job satisfaction, productivity of labor, and decreases absenteeism, however, this statement is valid for blue-collar workers rather than managers, because they already enjoy certain degree of autonomy and thus launching of flexitime does not mean much to them.

As part-time work is not common in the Czech Republic because of limited income, flexible working schedule is discussed more, nonetheless this does not mean that flexitime is more common, on the contrary. Surprisingly, most companies are likely to offer rather the part-time work than flexitime; the less qualifications are needed from the employee, the less probability of flexitime (Haberlová, Kyzlinková, 2009, p. 34, 57). Though flexitime

was introduced to support the family-friendly concept in order to help women with children, currently flexitime is utilized mainly by men in the Czech Rep.

Home office is also perceived as a benefit for work-life balance because the worker can usually arrange the schedule according to his or her needs, and moreover, the time spent by commuting is saved and can be used for other useful activities. Home office is also used when traditional office work is insufficient because in times of high workload and intensity of work traditional office worker is far less productive than remote worker, at least according to the research by Lingard and Francis (2009, p. 193). And again, surprisingly the public administration organizations are the most resistant to offer home-office (Haberlová, Kyzlinková, 2009, p. 37). Home-office is more common for highly skilled professionals who work in such sectors as banking, insurance, education or IT and are expected to report a result.

However, both of these flexible working schedules including home office are hardly applicable in construction industry for all workers. Architects, designers, engineers, planners, economists and similar professions can well work under these schemes mainly because of the more independent nature of their work, but other professions that work on-site such as bricklayers, crane drivers, site managers, simply all the professions that have to cooperate, cannot choose when to arrive to work, and understandably, tile layer cannot work from home, but on the other hand, he is very much independent on other workers (not to mention the supply of tiles and other material and, of course, the ready time and place within the construction site), so such a professional can be applicable to flexible work schedule. 60 % of companies that operate in construction industry does not offer any type of flexible working schedule to any group of employees in the Czech Republic (Haberlová, Kyzlinková, 2009, p. 33).

3. Undeclared labor

Readers might doubt what does undeclared labor have in common with work-life balance and part-time work? In fact, undeclared labor involves worker's life a lot both in the sphere of job security, stress, finance, and life happiness. By definition, undeclared labor is, according to International Labor Organization: *"any paid activities that are lawful as regards their nature but not declared to the public authorities, taking into account the differences in the regulatory system between Member States"*. Undeclared labor means no employment contract, no fulfillment of tax obligations, of social and health insurance obligations etc. In short, for the purpose of this article undeclared labor is anything that takes place outside the legal labor market.

The extent of undeclared labor in construction industry is enormous, however, most studies struggle with relevant data and reliable estimates cannot be done even with help of data from the Aliens Police. At least an estimate of Kux and Kroupa (2006, p. 7) counts with roughly one half of total workforce of construction industry work either illegally or at least occasionally without having a contract signed, altogether for both foreign and domestic workers. If some typical kind of undeclared labor occurs, usually does not affect the worker's well-being or life satisfaction at all – typical undeclared labor is self-employed persons who do not report the work in accounting or employees of a company who perform some extra work directly for the customer paid in cash. However, and this addresses especially foreign workers, if the person has no contract at all, or works for a dubious agency, or works for minimum wage and extra money receives in cash, this may cause a real problem in the future as the person is either not entitled to any social security benefits including old-age pension, or even in the worker's psychological condition in the time being. Illegal workers work under far worse circumstances, with poor safety measures, they work long hours, and they are not allowed to complain otherwise they lose the job. The insecurity of job and future is what influences work-life balance the most. In case of illegal foreign workers, they have no private life at all.

Discussions and conclusions

This article attempted to show that there is some research on work-life balance or on part-time jobs, though many of them are conducted in the framework of gender studies as this is a popular topic in the society. The media also inform from time to time about part-time workers or rather about negative consequences of workload and connected insufficient controls and insufficient support from the government and also economic point of view. The negative side of the research is that it is only a research and does not serve as a tool for change. A research article is just words and so are the attitudes of employers – officially especially large companies have developed a human resources management strategy that reflects the need for work-life balance, the need for family-friendly policies, but finally, the real support is gone.

The need for work-life balance is likely to grow in importance since there are growing numbers of people who have to take care both of their children and their aging parents at the same time. The issue of single mothers who escaped the rat race for career by having a child and leaving the labor market for a while will show its importance only in the near future.

The main thing that has to be discussed (and solved) is the economic versus the humanistic viewpoint, i. e. whether we will continue measuring welfare in economic terms or in terms of subtle, hardly measured emotions such as quality of life and life happiness.

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SUMMARY

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