

THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS
OF WORK/LIFE PROGRAMMES**Ashley Sanichar (IBM)**

This article details research on work/life balance conducted at a large multinational organisation. Findings from this study help to delineate current approaches to flexibility initiatives and also help to recommend effective strategies and practices for successful flexibility initiatives, as well as requirements for managers and HR to understand and implement these programmes successfully.

The purpose of this article is to examine the possible role of work/life programmes and the issues surrounding the implementation thereof. It has been shown that there are strategic benefits to be gained from work/life initiatives for both organisations and employees. However, long hours are viewed culturally as a sign of commitment and hard work and many researchers have confirmed this view. The perception is that employees who use programmes for balancing work/life are not serious about their careers. This misconception needs to be dispelled publicly by the senior employees of the company.

This study was carried out over a period of nine months and included a literature study, face-to-face interviews, and an electronic survey of employees at a large multinational in South Africa. The face-to-face interviews were conducted with executives, senior managers and first line managers.

Key phrases: organisational culture, work/life balance, work/life programmes

"If the tensions between work and family are to be resolved,
it may be more satisfactory to alter work rather than the family"
- Rosabeth Moss Kanter 1981

ORIENTATION

The opening remark of Kanter seem to ring true even today as many companies acknowledge the need to change their structure and approach when it comes to supporting employees balance between work and personal life. This article aims to investigate and understand the sensitive issue called work/life balance.

In a business environment where downsizing is common and workload increases are the norm, it is becoming increasingly difficult for employees to balance their work and personal lives. This research is important because it attempts to show both sides of the story i.e. from a management perspective as well as an employee perspective. Most of the work/life studies conducted worldwide to date have either concentrated only on one or two aspects at a time, whereas this study aims to address multiple aspects of work/life balance including current thinking and practice.

Role of an organisation

To employees, work/life balance means having a life outside the work environment and to gain the support they need from managers, colleagues and the organisation they work for to handle personal responsibilities when needed. This also encompasses the tension that comes from not having work/life balance, and creates for most people a blurred picture of overwork, stress and neglect. Unfortunately, although the concept of work/life has evolved over many years, organisations have been using the same term for the negative aspect as well as for the positive.

Work/life balance to an employer means to create a more flexible, supportive work environment, so that employees will be able to focus on their jobs. It means making the organisational culture more supportive by adding programmes to meet the needs of life events, making sure policies give employees as much control as possible over their lives, and using flexible work practices as a strategy to meet the dual agenda of employees' needs as well as the company's needs.

Although there is significant amounts of literature that demonstrate the effectiveness of some workplace innovations in raising morale, productivity and enhancing retention of staff (Guzzo & Bondy 1983; Perry 1982), many employers remain reluctant to introduce innovations into their places of work.

"I don't want IBMers to be worried about who's watching their children. I don't want them to be worried whether they'll be able to leave early to attend their child's first recital or take elderly parents to the doctor. Each of us must continue to work to create an environment where our managers focus on results, not on activity or face time ... where flexibility and diversity is the norm, not the exception, results – not process – is what counts."

Louis V. Gerstner, Jr. – Chairman and CEO, IBM 1995

Gerstner's comments have become the cornerstone for what many companies are trying to achieve in supporting their employees' work/life balance.

Some work/life initiatives

Some of the most common programmes supporting work/life balance initiatives are:

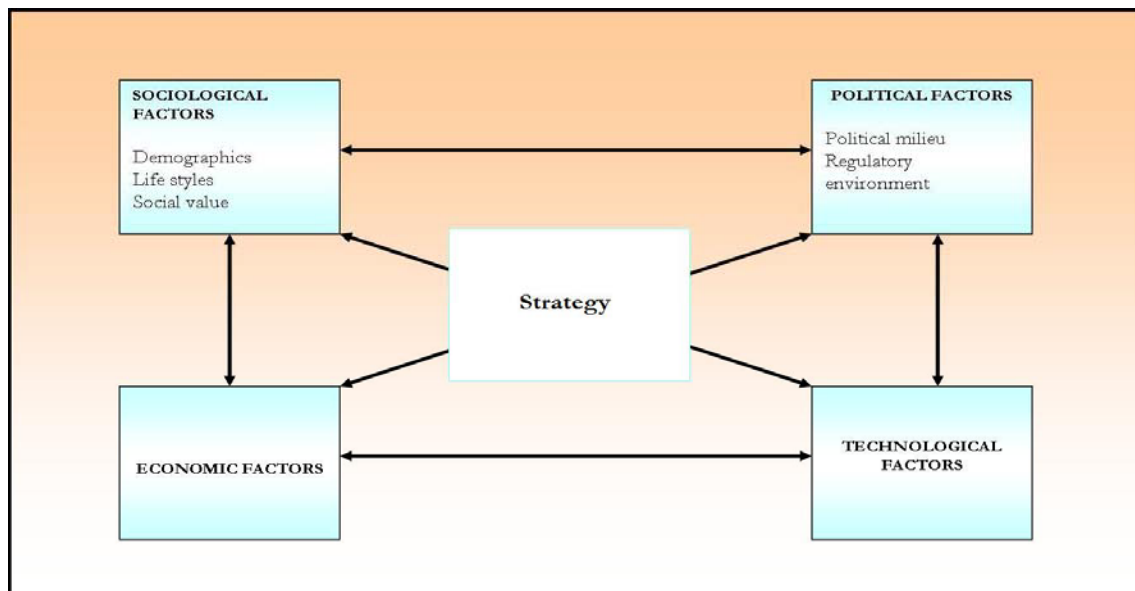
- Individual work schedules (e.g. flexitime meal breaks and working hours) – allows employees to begin their workday before or after their location's normal start time, subject to management approval

- compressed/flexible work week – allows employees to schedule their work week in different ways, subject to management approval
- part-time reduced work schedule – employees work a schedule of less than a full week
- leave of absence programmes – leave of absence (LOA) can be requested, for example, for dependent-care, continuing education; a voluntary LOA is not an entitlement but is granted, subject to management approval
- mobile/telecommuters – employees may spend one to three days per week working at home or an alternate location if they are usually on the move or at customer locations, subject to management approval
- work-at-home – employees work the majority portion or regular work period from their home residence, subject to management approval.

WORK/LIFE PROGRAMMES AS STRATEGY AND ASSOCIATED BENEFITS

Today organisations have strategies in some form or the other to compete in the industry. Changes in the internal and external environment trigger the need for changes in strategy. The strategic needs relating to work/life programmes can be explained in part, as indicated in figure 1.

Figure 1 A macro-environmental model of strategic relationships



Current sociological changes affect the need for change in work practices due to the demographics of organisations today changing drastically. Research (Hill *et al.* 2001)

shows that more dual income family members are in the workplace today, yet the model for work is still based on demographics that are from the 1950s and 1960s, where the male was the only breadwinner. In this context, men would not be allowed to take a sick child to the doctor, since that was regarded as the wife's job. Nowadays, we have many single parent families. Lifestyles and social values have changed since. Technology has also brought about changes that allow for employees to move away from the traditional office. Furthermore, economic factors, both internal and external, are forcing companies to maximise the resources they have.

In the war for talent (resources) research shows that many companies are trying new strategies and tactics, such as work/life programmes, to attract and retain top talent (Kropf 1999; New Hampshire Business Review 1999; Westchester County Business Journal 1999; Whitehead 1999:14).

This resource-based view of competitive advantage is generally accepted today. Grant (1991) points out that a firm's resources are its source of capabilities and those capabilities are its main source of competitive advantage. It is emphasised that resources should be "... scarce, durable, not easily traded and difficult to imitate, thus enabling the organisation to secure a revenue stream from them over time", hence becoming a source of competitive advantage.

Peteraf (1993) summarises the resource-based perspective and adds that sustained heterogeneity between a firm's resource positions gives rise to competitive advantage. It is just as important to ensure that the competitive advantage is sustainable. It is also noted that results from internal surveys show that graduates now consider work/life balance to be one of the key factors when considering future employers. Ted Childs, IBM Vice President of Workforce Diversity, acknowledges that data clearly show a linkage between motivation, retention and work/life balance, and that such programmes are a strategic effort critical to IBMs competitiveness to retain and attract talent. What then are the other benefits beside staff retention and competitive advantage?

Mohan (1998) subscribes to the view that it is a bottom line issue and that it is expensive to replace employees in the middle of their career. The question arises whether all employers look at the bottom line or are they concerned for the well-being of their employees. The unseen benefits that US and European companies do not mention are those that put them in line with government legislation in their respective countries. It must be noted that South Africa does not have legislation advising or

instructing local companies to practice flexible work options. A search on the South African Department of Labour website did not yield any information related to flexible work options legislation or guidance on this issue. This is possibly due to the higher priority that is given to other more important labour issues in a developing country such as South Africa, e.g. unemployment, minimum wage and employment equity.

Perhaps work/life initiatives are a win-win situation where the employee gains flexibility and the ability to balance life and work and the company gains loyalty and dedication. Another benefit that Kropf (1999) emphasises is that of an increase in morale using research findings to support this claim.

To date few studies have attempted to quantify the financial benefits and impact of such programmes. A study conducted by Meyer *et al.* (2001) on work family benefits considered a wide range of companies in different industries and focused on the financial impact of a subset of work/life programmes. While the results are significant and show benefits to the bottom line when the programmes are utilised, there are inherent flaws in their methods used for calculating the benefits. Their calculations are based on a complex mathematical formula that uses variables of which some are based on perceptions and are subjective. Furthermore, their study did not use a random sample but rather a group of companies that made the most extensive use of work/life programmes, hence their results are biased and cannot be generalised to all firms.

This does not mean that there are no benefits from work/life initiatives. Many show that there are benefits even if they cannot be measured mathematically or financially (Scheibl & Dex 1998; Worklife Report 2000). What is apparent though is that organisations that do not have these benefits certainly are facing a workforce that is changing the way they want to work.

Challenges in implementing and using work/life programmes

Implementing work/life programmes is not without problems and studies point out that it is useful to consider that introducing them is not an *event* but rather a process (Creagh & Brewster 1998; Kramar 1998.) In considering the challenges faced by both managers and employees, it might also be useful looking at the stakeholders and their vested interests and challenges with work/life balance from multiple perspectives.

Employee's today are faced with demands and commitments to their families, education, social responsibilities, customers and their own managers. More often than not this tends to become a juggling act between these responsibilities and relationships. This delicate balance can be thought of as a set of reciprocal relationships with a set of highly interdependent partners and demands mutual respect. Management, who are not supportive of employee child-care needs, create stress for employees at home and work (Papalexandris & Kramar 1997). What their study ignores is that there is considerable stress for management who have non-supportive staff and/or senior management too. Notably, businesses exist for their customers and managers are always forced to deliver by putting the customer first. This does not mean that management should always let the customers gain at the expense of employees. As was pointed out earlier, this delicate balance of reciprocal relationships requires mutual respect and understanding:

“By working faithfully eight hours a day,
you may eventually get to be boss and work twelve hours a day.”

Robert Frost (1875 - 1963) as cited by White *et al.* 2003

Sometimes in just many a truth are revealed as in the quote above. In an age where success comes at the price of long hours, it is becoming more difficult, even for management, to balance their lives. So what are the issues and challenges facing management today with respect to work/life decisions? This calls into consideration the paradox of diversity. Organisations need and thrive on diversity and it is this very issue that highlights the needs for work/life programmes. These challenges are the same issues faced by employees and more. Management still has the responsibility of keeping their bosses, customers, employees, family and friends satisfied. This is enough reason to take a reduced view of work/life issues of themselves and those around them. Management is empowered to support and encourage employees with flexibility requests that will assist in improving productivity, morale and commitment when policies are in place. In other words, managers have to “walk the talk” (Creagh & Brewster 1998).

A lack of manifestation of work/life policy by management is also an issue that needs to be overcome. Kropf (1999) demonstrates that there are many stereotypes, misconceptions and myths associated with work/life programmes. She goes on to point out that the most common misconception is that professionals who participate in flexible options are not committed to their careers. Kropf also acknowledges that management is still comfortable with line of sight management styles. Inconsistencies

in the commitment of managers to these sorts of arrangements also present a challenge to employees.

Work/life balance is not dependent on policies, but rather on how they are implemented and supported by managers. With a few exceptions, a further challenge faced by managers is the lack of training for supporting and advocating work/life policies, as pointed out by Solomon (1999) in her article "Workers want a life! Do managers care?"

These challenges faced by employees and managers have been overcome at firms such as Jones Lang LaSalle that have focused on making work/life initiatives a success. This does take time, awareness and education to implement successfully. This also requires commitment from the most senior employees in the organisation. She acknowledges that policy is not enough as it needs to be put into use. It is interesting to note that there is still cynicism around flexible work options. Despite these challenges, there is enough research and anecdotal evidence to show that work/life programmes can be successful if implemented and supported appropriately (Kropf 1999).

The impact of organisational culture on work/life balance

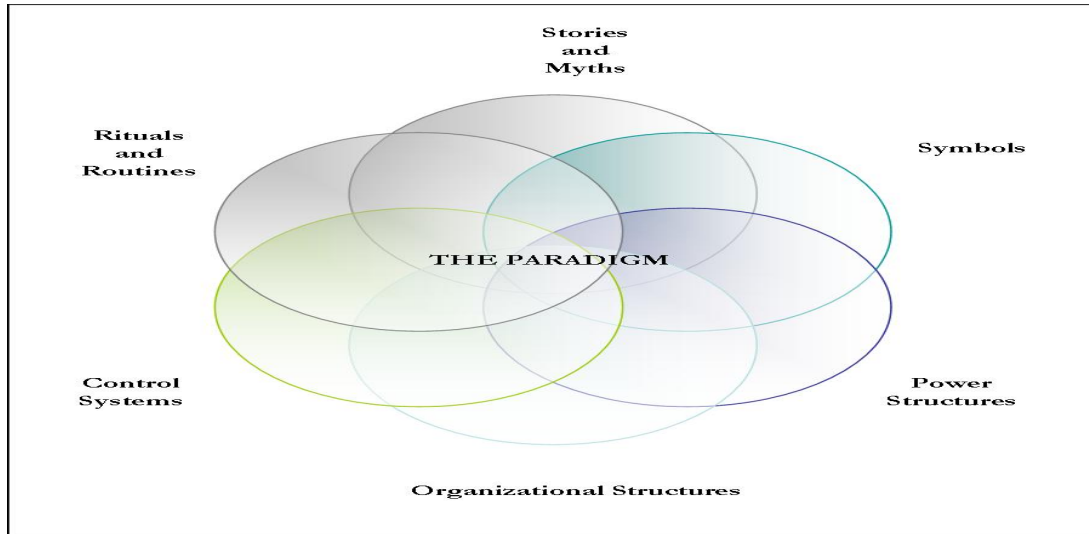
Organisational culture can be defined as the basic values, ideologies and assumptions guiding individual and organisational behaviour. Such values are evident in tangible factors, such as stories, rituals, language and jargon, as illustrated in the cultural web model in figure 2. Rituals and routines are very much at the core of an organisation and employees tend to follow the example set by their seniors. Organisational and power structures often dictate how employees behave at work and how their tasks are carried out.

A phenomenon related to culture is the differences of cultures across countries as well differences within a multinational organisation. Although the issues of dealing with work/life balance across countries differ, all countries nevertheless still have to deal with the fundamental issue of balancing work and life. The same can be said of different companies.

Verespej (1999:37) maintains that imbalances, workload problems, skills shortages, and business pressures that exist around the world, are surfacing in South Africa for the first time, creating social problems. There are different problems that exist in each

country, for example, in Japan work/life issues revolve around women because there is little equity for women in the workplace (Verespej 1999:37). Other countries have yet other specific cultural issues.

Figure 2 The cultural web of organisations



Why then is there often a conflict between work and life? One answer could be that the value placed on organisational success is so deeply embedded in culture. People who want successful careers are faced with a dilemma. To succeed, they may have to adopt the necessary behaviours and rituals even though doing so might involve compromising themselves and subordinating some of their personal and family needs and values to those of the organisation. Hansen (2002:34) points out that organisational culture and the example set by top managers can make or break work/life programmes. Hansen also acknowledges that until employers build a supportive corporate culture across all departments, the talent pool will remain underutilised and diversity may be a fragile and tentative achievement.

Maitland (2000:14) emphasises that a supportive culture can be fostered by leaders who encourage innovative ways of working and challenging resistance to them. She goes on to affirm that a clear link must also be established between work-life policies and core business objectives. This reaffirms the idea that senior management is sometimes the worst culprits of work/life imbalance and unknowingly (or knowingly sometimes) set the pace and culture for others to follow.

Kropf (1999:177) claims that traditional organisational cultures continue to value long hours in the workplace and reward those who arrive early and work late. This

sentiment seems to be pervasive and has surfaced in many work/life reports (Champion-Hughes 2001; Watkins 1995; *White et al.* 2003). Hall & Richter (1988:213) also claim that when career-oriented executives look at employees who are concerned with work/life balance, they cannot understand the values of that employee. Hall & Richter go as far as to say that an executive views this as a weak commitment and a poorly motivated individual. This claim by Hall & Richter is not substantiated in the research. This implies that awareness of these programmes is low, that senior management has low understanding of issues surrounding work/life and that training is required for both management and employees.

Another significant barrier that is not evident in any of the documentation is that fact that 'clock watching' is a current barrier to work/life balance: i.e. the failure of management to respect differing needs in how people divide their time. What can be concluded is that culture plays a dominant role in deciding the success or failure of work/life programme implementations. What companies do not need are employees who actually do not have a life outside work.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Results of the research show that most of management are aware of the needs for and existence of work/life programmes in their organisation, but could not articulate what these programmes exactly were. This is primarily the reason for not implementing and utilising the programmes fully. Another reason is that managers did not believe that employees were mature in their approach to utilise such programmes properly. Employees on the other hand were less informed of these programmes, which implied that there were few employees actually using them.

Employees receive low levels of support from managers, whilst managers are not sufficiently confident that employees are capable of handling the programmes maturely. To date work/life programmes have met with limited success. Most flexible arrangements are agreed informally with managers. Although the policies exist, employees are unaware of the formal process for application.

While most of the informal work arrangements observed were somewhat successful, some workers felt frustrated and perceived the arrangements as more costly than beneficial from personal and career perspectives. All managers agreed that utilising these options does give the impression (to management) that participants are not

serious about their careers. All of the managers interviewed claimed that they did not subscribe to this view. So what then allows this view to be propagated among staff? This question could not be answered conclusively in this research but perhaps these stories of bad experiences do get going through the rumour mill somehow.

Misconceptions, perceptions and ignorance are hindering the proliferation and use of work/life programmes. Management is clearly untrained to deal with this and does not understand the dynamics of work/life balance. Staff is in exactly the same position. Customer commitments and workload pressures are also having an effect on work/life balance adversely as most respondents work longer hours than 'normal'.

Beside work and customer commitments, family and especially children are affected by the inability of employees to balance work and life. Most respondents agree that work pressures affect family life more than family life interfering with work. Most senior management and executives seem to have accepted the fact that their family life will be impacted and that their families have learned to accept this.

Business benefits are more related to the soft side than the bottom line. Competitive advantage gained from attracting and retaining the best staff is paramount and as management has already conceded that work/life programmes do improve morale, productivity and performance this is critical now. In spite of the benefits cited, management still do not advocate it for reasons mentioned earlier in this section.

Common culture in organisations is definitely that of long hours and management by sight. The culture of late hours at the office is deep seated at the top of the management hierarchy (as results from this research show) and thus filters down to the employees giving the impression that this is the way to work and possibly move ahead in one's career.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These are the recommendations proposed to address work/life issues and to build on this strategy. Managers and executives need a clear strategic understanding of the range of business benefits even beyond the retention benefits before they can start creating awareness. Only when management understands the implications of work/life balance themselves they can talk knowledgeably about it. The goal would be for executives to clarify and live up to their values. This sort of personal exploration can

also lead top management to consider other value issues that affect career advancement in the organisation.

Managers are varied in their support and implementation of work/life programmes, partly because of the lack of management and employee training with regard to such programmes. To build this organisational support, it is suggested that the link between flexibility and business goals be determined and understood. The most senior executives need to be profiled and shown as champions of flexibility and demonstrate how this helps the business. Openness to requests and policy will make this journey easier for all involved. In doing so, management and human resources (HR) department must remember that this is not an overnight solution and needs to be developed and implemented over time with consistent feedback (both ways) to the organisation at large.

All training efforts needs to have flexibility incorporated into it especially management training. HR and line managers need to arrange regular sessions for open learning and discussion around work/life issues. This commitment by management needs to be continuously communicated internally and must become a part of the culture. Another important link in this communication chain would be inclusion of presentations on the business impact of flexibility to customers and employees.

HR also needs to support managers and employees by providing tools that allow effective evaluation of individual arrangements. Having these tools that allows the monitoring of initiatives could also be linked to performance. It is imperative to consider at all levels how flexibility affects work at the individual level, at the team level and the organisation as a whole. Of course this practice needs to be integrated into the business and employee management systems of the organisation.

To promote and propagate work/life initiatives (after the full impact is understood as discussed earlier), it is recommended that HR with management create a brochure and communications on work/life and flexibility programmes available. This should be distributed to all employees clearly outlining the options available. This can also be assisted by sharing models, case studies and success stories on an ongoing basis as is practiced successfully everywhere else.

To avoid misconceptions, a clear understanding needs to be communicated that reduced workload arrangements for a defined period of time may affect the timing of career progression but will not ultimately affect the individual's ultimate career

potential. This type of commitment from top management needs to propagate locally to make work/life initiatives a success.

It is important to acknowledge that these recommendations do not purport to remedy the work/life issues overnight as there are many intricate soft issues that surround the context of this complex subject. They are intended as a base and guide to start from and certainly require solid effort and commitment from HR, management and employees if this is to become a success.

CONCLUSIONS

To recap, here are the key conclusions and recommendations:

- There are low levels of awareness and support for the work/life programmes at a management level that needs to be addressed using training and other education as well as tools to monitor and assist all involved
- Employees are even less aware of such programmes and need to be informed of their options
- Management themselves are not balancing work and life and this work ethic filters into the organisation – this needs to be rectified and they need to lead by example to make these programmes a success
- The perception is that employees who use these programmes are not serious about their careers and this misconception needs to be dispelled by the most senior employees of the company publicly and through continuous commitment to such convictions

Returning to Kanter's remark from the opening of this article, companies have acknowledged the need to change their structure and approach when it comes to supporting employees balance between work and personal life as is evidenced by comprehensive work/life programmes. The challenge now is to successfully implement the range of appropriate programmes effectively.

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