Need for work-life balance educational programs

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Abstract: Rather regularly used nowadays, the idiom work-life balance (WLB) proves to be an important phenomenon surpassing the simple prioritization between work and personal life. Aware of the great mental, biological, psychological, social and even economic impact that it has on each person, quite a few companies began developing WLB initiatives. However, it is unlikely to register many employees considering them, given the fact that those taking advantage of the WLB programs are generally perceived as not committed to the organization and therefore not deserving promotion. Hence, we plead for providing from an early stage (even the very first cycles of schooling), some educational programs focused on the key elements that drive a healthy balance between work and private life. This way, awareness of work-life balance would be raised and future employees would know how to use it in both their and their company’s advantage.

Keywords: work-life balance; education; organizational wellbeing; organizational effectiveness.

JEL classification: I12; 126; I31; J22.

Introduction

Coined in 1986, in USA, the work-life balance concept is nowadays a common expression meaning something different for each individual. This is due to personality traits, personal circumstances, gender differences and other cultural and demographic variables [Fleetwood, 2007]. According to Igret et al. [2016, pp.12], “work-life balance does not mean we all must have an equal balance. We all interpret the concept differently and have

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certain expectations [...] that vary over time and circumstances. “Moreover, work-life balance is ultimately each individual’s ability to maintain such stability between work and life that enables him to be dynamic and productive at work and, at the same time, have a healthy personal life [Mehta, 2014]. In other words, whenever a work-life balance occurs, the employer works “constructively with employees to put in place arrangements, which take into account the needs of the business as well as the non-working aspects of employee’s lives” [Barrera, 2007, pp.20].

There are a considerable number of studies focused on framing the factors altering the work-life balance. These resulted in identifying three main categories such as social (or societal) factors, individual factors and organizational factors. Thus, as far as the social factors are brought into discussion, age, gender, religion, education, income, family, life partner, etc. are equally viewed as potential triggering factors. As for the individual factors, being a matter of personal perception [Swami, 2007], work-life balance is strongly related to each individual’s personality [Robbins and Judge, 2011; Costa and McCrae, 2001; Wayne et al., 2004; Devados and Minnie, 2013]. For example, extraversion was found to facilitate the balance between work and family, and openness to catalyze positivity in the work place, the latter being far more sensitive when neuroticism occurs. The quality of work-life is also positively associated with emotional intelligence [Dulewicz et al., 2003], given the high role played by managers in encouraging employees to care about work-life balance while fulfilling their work-related goals [Alam, 2009]. Last, but not least, an important category of influencing factors is the organizational one. Here are included (flexible) work arrangements, work-life policies and programs, use of technology, level of job stress etc., in one word the type of organizational culture [Bell et al., 2012]. Even if still strongly countered by inertial managers and organizations in general, there are studies proving that productivity, performance, retention, job satisfaction, absenteeism, and work-life conflicts are highly influenced by flexible and foreseeable schedule, and shorter working hours [Baltes et al., 1999; O’Driscoll et al., 2003].

There are also studies showing that supervisor’s support reduces stress and conflicts [Warner and Hausdorf, 2009], and implicitly sustains the work-life balance by encouraging employees taking advantage of the company’s WLB initiatives. Otherwise, WLB policies are strongly associated with a negative career impact [Kirby and Krone, 2002], as co-workers generally perceive the employees considering WLB as less committed to the company and less ambitious, and therefore not deserving to be promoted since they do not put in the same effort [Rogier and Padget, 2004]. As a consequence, companies’ WLB initiatives may cause injuries for both categories of employees: those not taking advantage of them become angry and perform worse, making their own justice, while those who benefit of them feel depressed and under-rewarded [Hegtvedt and Clay-Warner, 2002].
This can go no longer, and the solution comes not only from the organizations’ part, but also from the educational sector, in general. The companies’ contribution should consist in providing employees the proper support and encouragement, together with flexible schedule and customized evaluation; and some of them really strive to fulfil their part with good faith. However, we believe that work-life balance education should be introduced in universities as well in order to prepare students for their future employment.

Such a program would be useful for young employees all over the world, since each individual could assess and achieve his own work-life balance. Awareness of work-life benefits would be raised and employees would learn how to deal with stress, no matter if it is the work or home stress. Developing a better work-life balance would start an important chain reaction: increased level of employees’ wellbeing leading to increased employees’ performance leading to organization’s increased productivity.

Consequently, one can conclude that WLB is an important phenomenon that surpasses the simple prioritization between work and personal life, as it impacts not only the individual’s attitude, behaviour, and own wellbeing, but also the organization’s effectiveness and success on the long run [Eby et al., 2005].

1. Methodology

Aiming to better understand the experiences and views on work-life balance of Romanian employees who work in multinational enterprises, the present research gathered a number of 128 respondents by means of convenient sampling and snowball effect sampling technique. Due to the sampling techniques used, the identity of companies participating in the survey is impossible to find, and therefore anonymity is assured.

Since the targeted segment has access to the Internet, and data gathering is fast, accurate and cost effective, the method chose was the online survey. For that, a structured questionnaire consisting of 56 questions with preset answers was designed.

Although the research was thoughtfully prepared, some limitations still occurred. On the one hand, the sample was relatively small compared to the big population. On the other hand, being gathered through a non-probabilistic method, the sample could prove a propensity of answers coming from a too small number of multinational organizations, thus the generalization degree is medium.
2. Outcomes of the research

As figure 1 shows, the age of respondents was predominantly between 20 and 25 years old (66%), only 26% reporting ages between 26-30 years, 5% between 31-35 years old, 1% under 20 years old and 0.5% over 40 years.

![Figure 1 Distribution on age, gender, education and awareness of WLB programs existence](image)

Considering that what is commonly called generation Y broadly comprises individuals aged between 20-30 years old, and given the demographic structure revealed by figure 1, the majority of respondents (over 90%) belong to Millennials (Generation Y). This delimitation is important for the research because the perception of work, family, leisure activities, and also the behaviours and attitudes toward them differ across generations. Since such a large percent of respondents corresponds to the Generation Y, the study becomes relevant especially for its perspective. Additionally, given the lack of interest shown to the conducted study, it could also be concluded that baby boomers and the generation X hold the higher-level positions in their organizations, hence their non-involvement into WLB programs.

A rather uneven distribution is observed in respondents’ gender, as well: 61% are female and only 39% are male. This is not a huge surprise considering the essential role that women have in founding a family and raising children (figure 1).

As per education level, responses reflect a huge majority of high level studies, as following: 69% - master degree, 22% - bachelor degree, and 9% - only the baccalaureate. The above outcome (graduating the faculty), is strongly connected with the regular requirement of multinational companies when considering potential employees. Therefore, we can state that our respondents are predominantly young (women) faculty (master) graduate.
Related to their awareness of WLB programs in organization, less than half responded affirmative (45%), while 31% thought that there might be work-life balance programs in their organization but they were not aware of them and another 24% of respondents declared that there are no work-life balance programs running in the company.

However, out of the 45% of people sustaining the existence of WLB programs in their organizations, only a very small number (35%) benefitted from them (figure 2). The simple explanation of this situation is fear: fear of being judged by colleagues and superiors as less loyal and committed and therefore not being promoted or fairly rewarded.

![Figure 2 Taking advantages of work-life programs](image)

Under these circumstances, there is no surprise that most employees frequently think about their job, this fact causing a higher level of stress (figure 3). Whether they manage or not to finish their work in time, their impossibility to disconnect and have a private time leads to stress and anxiety, this negatively impacting their capacity of further working efficiently.

![Figure 3 Declared levels of stress and connection to job](image)

The hardest aspect in balancing work and private life is dealing with the conflicting situations between the two of them. Figure 4 shows that Romanian employees working in multinational companies are not confident when it comes to managing conflicting situations: only 30 people (23%) declared they manage well a conflicting situation between work and life, 60 (47%) rather hesitating in this respect, and 38 (30%) of the respondents have serious doubts regarding their capacity of balancing work and life. As seen in figure 4 as well, the tendency is similar in case of dealing with a singular or multiple conflicts and challenges. In order to find the correlation between the two
statements, a correlation analysis was performed based on the received answers. The resulted correlation is 99% so that it could be concluded that irrespective of the number of employees involved in the conflicting situation, generally, they will have difficulties in managing it.

Genuine appreciation and positive feedback grow employees, driving them to do their best work. It generally matters more than money. The situation perceived by the respondents is reflected in figure 5 where 66 respondents (52%) show being appreciated at work for their efforts, 33% not so obviously appreciated (but still they do not feel unappreciated), and 15% considers that their efforts are rarely or never appreciated. Accordingly, the same number of respondents (52%) gets what was promised to them (be it a salary raise, a new position, training etc.), and just 12% of the respondents had the unpleasant experience to not receive what was promised.

When it comes to work satisfaction, answers are rather symmetrical, in the sense that the percent of those feeling they are accomplished (28%) is almost the same with those who do not (30%). Also, surprisingly, 54 respondents (42%) cannot decide if they feel accomplished or satisfied.

We can correlate this with the demographic segmentation of the respondents (above 90% of the respondents are Generation Y representatives). Thus, the fact that almost one third of the respondents do not feel accomplished can be explained by the fact that they are still young professionals at the beginning of their working career. It is highly probable that they have not found the field in which they want to activate. On the other hand, Millennials are impatient and eager to see results. Only 44% of the respondents consider having good chances for promotion, 37% do not possess clear information and do not know if they will be promoted and 19% do not consider having chances to be promoted. As promotions reflect appreciation and that the employee is capable and has the knowledge to be set forth, fair yearly promotions in multinational organizations increase the loyalty and engagement of the employees.
Conclusions

On the one hand, we suggest organizations should continue developing flexible arrangements and also encouraging their utilization. Since WLB programs were proved by the conducted study as motivating factors, we sustain their importance for increasing employees’ commitment and loyalty, the latter being beneficial for both employees and organizations. However, it should not be forgotten that work-life balance programs are not one size fits all type, thus employers must come up with different solutions so employees can choose which is best for them.

On the other hand, we plead for the necessity of preparing young people not only for their professional lives, but also for being able to maintain a balance between their work and personal life. Concerning the conducted study, the small number of employees able to handle work-stress and to act properly in conflicting situations reveals the lack of education related to work-life balance. In our view, universities should start taking responsibility for the development of a healthy society, and therefore offer realistic courses on work-life balance in order to prepare students for their future careers.

Eventually, everyone should find his own balance providing him accomplishment and happiness. Easier said than done, but with understanding, will and patience, it can be achieved.

In the mean time, work-life balance remains an actual subject and therefore research should be further developed.
References


