

The Concept, Advantages and Disadvantages of Work-Life Balance: the Case of a Multinational Company

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Abstract: With the continuous progress of social productivity and work patterns, work-life balance has received widespread attention. Combining with the basic definition and key dimensions of work-life balance, this study analyses the positive impact of a multinational company's new work model of 'work unbound' on employees' work-life balance in terms of both increased engagement and minimised role conflict. This is followed by a further discussion of the risks faced by this working system and recommendations for optimisation. When developing work-life balance regulations, human resource managers should not only grasp the flexibility of work, but also take into account the different cultures and continuously improve and refine the balance in practice.

Keywords: Human Resource Management; Work-Life Balance; Role Theory

1. Introduction

Market labour (i.e., work) and family activities (i.e., daily life) are the two most significant aspects that make up modern human social activities. With the accelerated pace of life and the increasing pressure of work, work-life conflict has come to the fore and has become one of the key essential factors affecting employees' well-being. As a result, work-life balance (WLB) has received a great deal of attention from scholars and managers in the field of human resource management. With a clear generalization of the concept, this study analyses the benefits and risks of a humane work-life balance management institutions adopted by a large multinational company during COVID-19, and makes corresponding recommendations.

2. Concept of Work-Life Balance

Since 1970, driven by globalisation and information technology, the new topic of work-life balance in human resource management has been born as a result of gradual changes in the economy, culture and family structures. More than half a century after the term was coined, 'work-life balance' still lacks a clear, unified definition - as it evolves in the social structures and circumstances of different periods, and it develops faster than theory. However it is defined, work-life balance is based on role theory, i.e., a pattern of behaviour that is expected of an individual in a particular role. When internal perceptions and external expectations fit together, the role is successful and thus the balance is achieved.^[1]

Zedeck and Mosier's (1990) segmentation model defines an early concept of work-life balance. From their perspective, work and life are two completely separate spheres in which a person plays two independent social roles without affecting each other. Based on this theory, individuals can maintain equal satisfaction and achieve balance as long as they divide their time and energy equally between work and life.^[2] Nevertheless, as work diversifies and becomes more complex, the feelings, attitudes and behaviours that individuals invest in one role can 'spill over' into other roles, thus enhancing or diminishing engagement and satisfaction in other roles. For instance, a discordant family climate can affect employees' attitudes and performance at work, and vice versa. In this context, equal distribution theory is not sufficient to provide a rational explanation and support for this. This is because work-life balance is no longer a simple division of roles, but should be seen as a psychological perception and evaluation of the individual. In other words, it is about maximising individual work-life compatibility and achieving the highest overall satisfaction with the least amount of role

conflict.

As Sirgy and Lee (2018) conclude, work-life balance is complementary rather than independent. Individuals need to allocate resources (e.g., social, personal) appropriately across multiple social roles in order to achieve 'work-life facilitation'.^[3] In addition, work-life balance emphasises the requirement for employees to have more autonomy in their work and life aspects (e.g., a degree of control over when, where and how they work), enabling them to achieve a better integration of work and non-work roles. True work-life balance can only be achieved when individuals own sufficient energy to participate effectively in their daily work and family life.

3. Advantages of Work-Life Balance

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, a multinational group is experimenting with a humane management model called 'work unbound', which allows employees to flexibly control and adjust their working hours at home according to their circumstances. Based on the reactions and feedback of some employees surveyed from different backgrounds (i.e., age, position, region and cultural context), the evaluation of this reformation in terms of work-life balance is given.

3.1 High Involvement in Work and Non-Work Life

Work-life balance can lead to a high level of role engagement, including both work and non-work life experiences. On the one hand, personal involvement in social work is a necessary condition for achieving work-life balance. A great work experience would have a positive spillover effect on life, thereby reinforcing and strengthening the balance. The flexible working system adopted by the company provides employees with more freedom and autonomy, thus stimulating a sense of enthusiasm and responsibility for their lives. As an engineer interviewed noted, the new way of working has enabled him to take a more mature and detailed approach to life, mainly in the form of more precise time planning and a more relaxed routine. This is because the positive work role experience improves employees' perceptions and quality of life, giving them a positive growth value. In other words, employees are able to take the positive aspects of the work, such as awareness, mindset and values, and apply them to the daily lives, thereby increasing their overall well-being and satisfaction.

On the other hand, a high level of involvement in non-work roles can better reflect on work. Rozario et al. (2004) suggest that a high level of life involvement (e.g., rich social activities, appropriate leisure and recreation) can provide individuals with resources and opportunities (e.g., strong family ties, large social networks and pleasant moods) that are not available at work.^[4] A number of employees in the survey also pointed out that the old working pattern made it difficult for them to organise suitable personal activities (e.g., exercise, get-togethers). Now they are free to plan their time for rest and work, and could be more active at work after having sufficient relaxation. The most obvious response is an increase in performance compared to the pre-epidemic period. This is the benefit that a high level of life involvement brings to work, enabling employees to work with greater efficiency and energy. Achieving a work-life balance therefore helps employees to better fulfil their social roles at work and at home. As people take on different social responsibilities, the multiple roles reinforce and enhance each other, creating a virtuous circle. This is why the company's employees are able to lead a fulfilling and free life while performing their work more efficiently.

3.2 Minimal Role Conflict in Work and Non-Work Life

Another benefit of achieving work-life balance is the ability to mitigate conflict between different social roles to the greatest extent. When people play conflicting roles in their work and non-work lives, the work-life balance is thrown off. From this result, people need to determine where life and work clash, then pinpoint the root causes and negative impacts before attempting to strike a new balance. If a disagreement cannot be amicably resolved, individuals will be more prone to take drastic countermeasures, such as meeting the requirements of another party at the expense of work or life. Lower well-being and worsening mental and physical health are likely to result from this. The effectiveness and quality of work and life will be increased, though, when individuals have a good grasp of the new balance and the resources of life and work can be precisely merged and utilized with one another.^[5]

The new working mode the firm has chosen has as its main characteristic the reduction of work-life conflicts for employees and the achievement of the ideal work-life balance with a high level of freedom as well as flexible and autonomous scheduling. For example, interviewed employees with children have basically stated that they could now look after their kids and visit their parents

during their spouse's hectic weekdays, and then utilize the weekends to finish work at home. The unrestricted working schedule is like a 'game changer' since it minimises role conflict, lessens the stress on families, and fosters more employee engagement. Additionally, according to a certain employee working in human resources management, he has used this flexibility to develop side projects such as making customised gifts and giving them to colleagues. This is an excellent technique to integrate the demands or interests of employees into their job. Furthermore, it is a positive 'cultural shift' that fosters teamwork and improves communication. These adjustments make it possible for the company's personnel to successfully merge their work and non-work lives.

3.3 Disadvantages of Work-Life Balance

The first issue is increased management costs. It is challenging to evaluate and manage personnel because of flexible work schedules and environments. As the company's HR director feared, 'work unbound' would provide a huge difficulty for employee performance appraisals. The second is cultural differences. As a large multinational company, its staff is global in origin. Moreover, the cultural institutions of a region have a profound impact on the way residents think, value and behave, which results in variations in their understanding of work-life balance. For instance, Asian workers are generally more willing to embrace 'high intensity, high reward' employment, which differs dramatically from those in Western nations.^[6] The issue of working time coordination is the last one. Some interviewees mentioned that flexible working hours lead to varied schedules for each person, necessitating the need to be 'always on'. Along with making cooperation and communication more challenging, this also lowers the team's productivity. Most worse, unexpected outcomes (e.g., increased work intensity) may occur.

4. Recommendation

Firstly, it's critical to capitalize on the degree of flexibility. Making the required work arrangements for workers is sometimes essential. Woodrow and Guest (2014) suggest that it is advisable for the human resource department to form a "formal, written and objective policy on flexible working arrangements".^[7] Employers also need to take into account employee perks and ensure that incentives and penalties are matched with flexible work schedules. Second, human resource departments of global corporations should fully consider regional cultures when developing work-life balance regulations, and continually adapt them during implementation to preserve the greatest balance in accordance with local circumstances. Finally, supervisors must be in constant contact with their staff and offer more organized work guidance. For instance, leaders could plan future arrangements through regular meetings, and make employees know when they are free and when they need to cooperate.

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