



Exploratory study of understanding hotel employees' perception on work–life balance issues

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores hotel employees' perception on work–life balance issues. In-depth interviews and self-administered questionnaires were used to collect the data. Factor analysis discovered seven factors: (1) enough time-off from work; (2) workplace support on work–life balance; (3) allegiance to work; (4) flexibility on work schedule; (5) life orientation; (6) voluntary reduction of contracted hours to cater for personal needs; and (7) upkeep the work and career—the determinants perceived by employees to attain “better” work–life balance in the dynamic hotel environment. Adopting an employee-centric and integrative approach are the critical success factors for implementation of a work–life balance program.

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1. Introduction

Long working hours, shift duties and handling demanding and difficult customers in hotels has become a take-for-granted phenomenon in the hospitality industry (Hsieh et al., 2004; Sarabakhsh et al., 1989). This stress creates a demand on an individual to make a decision on the balance between work and family. People have difficulty working in different roles or even multiple roles (as a supervisor in work, a parent at home, a child helping elderly parents in a Chinese cultural context) which leads to stress (Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999). In 1991, Nelson-Horchler conducted a survey and discovered that only 36% of the respondents rated a job as the most important priority in their lives. This finding was echoed by the generation X'ers emphasis on quality of life (Report, 1999). In other words, if employees feel that work–life is not balanced, they may leave the job and seek “quality of life”.

Using a work–life balance approach to mastermind employees' well-being has emerged as a strategic human resources management tool (method or issue) in the western world. Staines (1980) conducted a literature review of relationships between work and non-work. However, while there is solid debate about work–life balance in the context of long-hours culture (Cushing, 2004), MacInnes (2005) argued that there is little relationship between

workers' family situation and preferences for working fewer hours. On the other hand, there are many cases that suggest that work–life balance assists in retention, productivity and the recruitment of good staff (Evans and Vernon, 2007; Pocock, 2005).

In general, hotels provide a traditional remuneration package to employees for the purpose of attracting talents and increasing retention rate. It includes “benefits” such as leave for getting married, compassionate leave, holiday house, office parties, and training courses for personal development, etc. Many benefits are designed to be family-friendly to balance shift workers' family needs due to their erratic job nature. However, from the perspective of work–life balance in today's working environment, these “benefits” tend to be segmented and can only be regarded as a piece-meal approach to staff support. In a workplace that is characterized by long and irregular working hours, are the existing “family-friendly” related practices adequate for employees to deal with their daily family responsibilities? Do they take into account and individual's needs?

The hotel industry in Hong Kong has experienced an amazing recovery since the dark days of SARS¹ in 2003. Over the past few years, the government has put in a constant effort to bolster Hong Kong's tourism. Tourism has grown so extensively that it now plays a significant part in the local economy. With an addition of 12,326 new hotel rooms set to open in Hong Kong between 2007 and 2009, the employment market in the hotel industry is envisaged to

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¹ SARS is a deadly disease stands for severe acute respiratory syndrome. The outbreak of SARS, between the period from November 2002 to July 2003, not only caused 299 deaths in Hong Kong but also hit the local economy severely. Many hotels only recorded with single digit occupancy during the pandemic period.

remain extremely buoyant such that career opportunities with good prospects are plentiful (Wong, 2007). Subsequently, there has been a noticeable uplift in demand for talent in the hotel industry. Hoteliers in Hong Kong are now facing not only an increased turnover and poor staff retention locally but also have to compete in the regional market for skilled talents with neighboring Macau and economic power China.

As work–life balance is relatively new to Hong Kong, it is worth studying its possible application in a context characterized by long and irregular working hours. The government’s recent implementation of 5-day work week² for civil servants has also stirred up many discussions and one primary focus is on whether the private sector should also implement a 5-day work week. As the issue of work–life balance is now receiving greater attention in the community, undoubtedly, many organizations and employees across different industries are gradually becoming aware of practices for balancing work and life. Some companies may copy the best practices and some may simply focus on the 5-day work week alone due to the complex options available. Whether this is a solution to work–life balance is unclear because it is not a “one-size-fits-all” strategy and also poses significant financial implications.

This study purports to explore and gain a better understanding of the current situation in the hotel industry so as to provide HR practitioners a comprehensive solution to create a healthy and productive workforce as well as help their hotel to become an employer of choice to attract the best talent. The contribution of this study is to explore the perception of work–life balance issues among hotel employees in the Hong Kong hotel industry. By understanding their perspectives, hotel management can derive ways to improve staff productivity. As the jargon goes, “Happy Employees Produce Happy Customers.” By conducting this study, the findings should help both hotel managements and employees understand this intangible concept in human resources management. Specifically, the four objectives are to

- examine hotel employees’ perception over work–life balance issues;
- investigate any underlying dimensions influencing hotel employees in facing the work–life balance dilemma;
- investigate which factors affect overall perception of work–life balance; and
- make suggestions to hotel management on devising policies on work–life balance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Work–life balance: a new thematic framework for the 21st century

There is an impressive history associated with the evolution of the concept of work–life balance since the eighteenth century perceived from the origin of trade union development (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007a). Due to the ever-changing social, economic and legislative conditions in different countries, there is literally no universal definition on work–life balance. Much discussion about the concept was triggered by the entry of a greater number of women into the workforce. Dual income parents, therefore, struggle to balance their work and family responsibilities. Many firms started to feature “family-friendly” related practices such as child care facility provision for

² Five-day work week was implemented by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region for its 163,000 civil servants. It was carried out in phases starting from July 2006 to be fully implemented by July 2007 (JobsDB, 2006).

workers with babies or school age children. Some exemplars of good practice also include paid maternity leave or opportunities to work more flexibly (Pocock, 2005).

At another level, in the U.K., several million people are acting as caregivers for elderly or disabled family members (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007b). Hence, employees who are single with no children may have other commitments within the community. There are also documented attempts to categorize employees’ needs according to the broad groups they belong to: baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y or the PC generation. Consequently, using the broad term “family-friendly” is too narrow a term and can, therefore, alienate some employees in today’s environment (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007b). Taking a step into the outer reaches of work and life, “work–life balance policies” and “workplace flexibility programs” are now increasingly used to collectively refer to a combination of initiatives designed to address individual’s needs. Thus, work–life balance should be defined in the direction of “people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual’s right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as a norm to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society” (Employers and work–life balance, 2007).

Often when work–life balance is mentioned, time was a particularly important factor that could not be ignored. According to Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), time-based conflict is one of the three forms of work/life conflicts (in addition to strain-based and behavior-based conflicts) for employees. Many researchers have pointed out that time commitments and expectations, and the actual number of hours spent working, have a significant relationship with work and life balance (Duxbury et al., 1994; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Gutek et al., 1991). Apparently, it might be easy to understand that no one expects to enjoy a career that provides them with insufficient time for their personal life, family and friends.

2.2. Employers’ view: corporate social responsibility versus competitive advantage

Work–life balance programs have become a matter of interest around the world. In general, the cultural viewpoint of countries in the European Union (EU) including the U.K., differ from those of the United States. Often, programs in the U.K. came about as a result of government legislation backed by public mandate and is based primarily on corporate social responsibility, which refers to a concept that organizations have an obligation to consider the interests of customers, employees, shareholders, communities, and ecological considerations in all aspects of their operations. On the contrary, there has been little Government involvement in the U.S. Companies view work–life balance as a competitive advantage that allows them to recruit the best candidates and potentially increase employees loyalty to the company (Joshi et al., 2002).

Hong Kong employers have been encouraged by the State of Work Life Balance in Hong Kong 2006 Survey (HKIHRM, 2006a; Mahtani, 2006) to do more to promote work–life balance as well as a 5-day work week. One of the reasons might be those companies which need to recruit from a global talent pool must be conscious that a 5-day work week is now the norm in many economies. They need to initiate the new work scheme to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

2.3. Work–life balance for the hospitality industry

A culture of long working hours in the hospitality industry is so typical that many workers see their working hours as normal and

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