



Work-life balance policy and practice: Understanding line manager attitudes and behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Work-life balance (WLB) is receiving increasing attention in the human resource management field. Line managers are playing a more active role in HRM decision-making, including work-life balance decisions, with the devolution of human resource management responsibility. Drawing on the theory of planned behavior, this paper develops a conceptual model explaining what affects line manager WLB policy and practice behaviors and the consequent impact on employee WLB experience in their organizations. Line manager WLB policy involvement, policy awareness, perceived policy instrumentality, and personal policy utilization are variables which are proposed to impact line manager attitudes towards WLB policies. These attitudes, in turn, are proposed to affect three employee WLB policy outcomes: employee WLB policy awareness, policy uptake, and policy satisfaction. The implications for future research and practice are set out.

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1. Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) is an important area of human resource management which is receiving increasing attention from policy makers, organizations, management, employees and their representatives globally. In the US, recent studies highlight the phenomenon of “extreme jobs” characterized by grueling working hours, unpredictable workflows, fast work pace with tight deadlines, work-related events outside business hours, and 24/7 availability to clients (Hewlett & Luce, 2006; Hochschild, 1997). In Europe, a recent study conducted by The Boston Consulting Group and the EAPM (2007) of HR Directors across Europe, work-life balance is ranked as one of the top three challenges facing HR. In the UK, Worrall, Jones, and Cooper (2003: 3) reflect on the findings of the Quality of Working Life project and argue that “the evidence we have obtained ... leads us to conclude that the increased employment instability, the intensification and extensification of work that has taken place over the last ten years is unsustainable in terms of its impact on the working and non-working lives of UK managers”. If Worrall et al.’s (2003) prediction of the deleterious impact of recent workplace changes on managers is borne out, then the effect of such changes on employee WLB should be investigated.

Work-life balance is the general term used to describe organizational initiatives aimed at enhancing employee experience of work and non-work domains. Cascio (2000: 166) defines work-life balance programs as “any employer sponsored benefits or working conditions that help employees balance work and non-work demands”. Work-life balance arrangements and practices refer to initiatives voluntarily introduced by firms which facilitate the reconciliation of employees’ work and personal lives. Such initiatives include: *temporal arrangements* that allow employees to reduce the number of hours they work (e.g. job sharing where two employees share one job, part-time working where an employee works less than a full-time equivalent); *flexible working arrangements* such as flexi-time where employees choose a start and finish time which matches their personal needs but work

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certain core hours,, tele-working/home-working/e-working where employees have locational flexibility in completing their work; *work-life balance supports* such as employee counselling, employee assistance programs, time management training, stress management training; and *childcare* facilities on-site or financial support for childcare off-site (e.g. through subsidised childcare). Essentially, work-life balance initiatives are offered by organizations to assist staff manage the demands of work and personal life (Grady, McCarthy, Darcy, & Kirrane, 2008; McCarthy, 2004).

Work-life balance is a factor which has the potential to affect important workplace issues such as employee turnover, stress, job satisfaction, and productivity (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2006; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Parasuraman, Purohit, Godshaulk, & Beutell, 1996; Parris, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2008; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Veiga, Baldrige, & Eddleston, 2004). The implications of sometimes conflicting work and personal life responsibilities for people management and work structures are wide ranging (Fisher, 2000). De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott, and Pettit (2005) argue that the current highly competitive labor market, where the attraction and retention of highly valued employees is difficult, calls for greater awareness of employee work-life balance concerns. As a result, many organizations are exploring how they can help employees achieve more balance by offering a range of family or work-life balance policies and programs.

To-date, much of the research in the work-life balance arena has investigated individual level work-life balance factors such as employee demands for flexible working practices (Brannen & Lewis, 2000; Coughlan, 2000; Den Dulk, 2001), employee satisfaction with work-life or work-family policies and programs (Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002; Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1996), and impact of work-life balance programs on a number of employee level outcomes such as stress, commitment and productivity (Bedeian, Burke, & Moffet, 1988; Darcy & McCarthy, 2007; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Frone et al., 1992; Lambert, 2000; McCarthy & Cleveland, 2005). Other research has explored how work-life balance affects performance at the organizational level (Bloom, Kretschmer, & Van Reenen, 2006).

It is widely acknowledged in the WLB literature that line manager support for work-life balance is an important factor affecting employee WLB outcomes (Lapierre et al., 2008; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Thompson, Jahn, Kopelman, & Prottas, 2004). Generally, employees whose line managers are more supportive of their WLB needs tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, experience less work-personal life conflict, and report lower turnover intentions. Notwithstanding the importance of line managers in WLB management, there remains a paucity of research, both theoretical and empirical, exploring how line managers enact and manage work-life balance policies and practices for their staff (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). Given that line managers play an increasingly active role in HRM decision-making, including work-life balance decisions (Bach, 1994; Hales, 2006; McConville & Holden, 1999; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Storey, 1994), it is important to understand how line managers, who are a critical meso-level factor affecting organizational functioning in general (Hales, 2006), affect and influence work-life balance policy and practice. The definition of line managers for the current paper is that employed by Currie and Procter (2001) who note that line managers mediate, negotiate and interpret connections between the organization's institutional (strategic) and technical (operational) levels. Little is known about the factors affecting line manager support and how organizations can foster supportive WLB attitudes among line managers (Casper, Fox, Sitzmann, & Londy, 2004; Eby et al., 2005). This paper aims to address this important gap in the theory by focusing on line managers in particular.

The purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptual model to explain what affects line manager WLB policy and practice behaviors and the consequent impact on employee WLB experience. This paper contributes to work-life balance theory and research in two important ways. First, the work-life balance literature is reviewed with particular reference to line management's role in work-life balance policy and practice management. Given the importance of line managers in enacting HR policies such as WLB, allied with the lack of focus to-date on the exact nature of line manager support for WLB, it is necessary to shed further light on this stakeholder group within the WLB field. Second, by using the theory of planned behavior (TPB), we develop a theoretically grounded model to identify and explain a set of factors which have the potential to affect line manager work-life balance behaviors. The model not only specifies the role of several variables in predicting line manager intentions to engage in specific behaviors but also can assist in understanding how work-life balance initiatives can lead to better outcomes for employees. The value of the TPB in understanding and predicting behavior in organizations is well recognized in the management literature (Hurtz & Williams, 2009; Jimmieson, Peach, & White, 2008; McCarthy & Garavan, 2006). In terms of line managers and WLB in particular, the TPB provides a theoretical framework to identify the factors which affect line manager work-life balance management intentions and behaviors. By focusing on the line manager and applying the TPB to identify the predictors of WLB behaviors, this paper goes some way towards addressing the gap that remains in our understanding of work-life balance in organizations.

2. HR and WLB policy and practice – the role of line managers

Human resource management practice has seen a significant shift from centralized decision-making at senior management levels to decentralized devolved responsibility at line manager level (Bond & Wise, 2003; Colling & Ferner, 1992; Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Hales, 2006; Hall & Torrington, 1998; Hutchinson & Wood, 1995; Stoker, 2006). Line managers are playing more active roles in HR decision-making and the line manager acts as an intermediary between strategic and operational organizational activities (Dopson, Risk, & Stewart, 1992; Hales, 2006; Stoker, 2006). The devolution of HR decision-making to line management inevitably means there is greater scope for disparity and inconsistencies between the policy formulated at senior HR level and the actual decisions taken by line managers. Legge (1995) argues that HR policy (rhetoric) can be somewhat divorced from actual practice (reality) and other research tends to support this view (Cunningham, James, & Dibben, 2004; Purcell, Kinnie, Hutchinson, Rayton, & Swart, 2003; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). As HR policies cascade down the organizational hierarchy, middle and line managers become relevant stakeholders in influencing how HR policies are interpreted and enacted.

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