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Work–life balance: One size fits all? An exploratory analysis of the differential effects of career stage

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KEYWORDS

Work life balance;
Career stage;
Life-cycle approach

Summary This paper explores the antecedents of work–life balance for employees as they progress through different career stages denoted by age. To date, research has failed to adequately explore how work–life balance issues develop over the course of an employee's working life. As a consequence, much of the work–life balance policy and practice research examines WLB issues from a relatively static and unchanging perspective resulting in praxis which is undifferentiated. Such a 'one size fits all' approach to the design and development of work–life balance initiatives is not only costly but likely to be ineffective in terms of meeting the real needs of different categories of employees. This paper challenges the static approaches and instead seeks to examine if and how WLB is affected and shaped by different antecedents as they impact on differing career stages as defined by distinct age categorisations.

The research was carried out among a sample of 729 employees in 15 organisations (10 private sector and 5 public sector organisations) in the Republic of Ireland. Four career stages are considered with regard to both men and women irrespective of their parenting status. The findings suggest that factors which impact upon work–life balance differ marginally across various career stages thereby indicating that WLB is a concern for employees at all career stages and not the preserve of parents with young children only. These findings shed new light on our understanding of the antecedents of work–life balance and have particular implications for organisations who wish to foster a culture which values work–life balance across all career stages for all their employees.

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Introduction

Changes impacting on the work environment over the past 10–20 years such as globalisation of competition, changes in the patterns and demands of work, and the fast pace of technological innovations have placed extra demands upon

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employees (Coughlan, 2000; Department for Education, 2000; Fisher, 2000). Coupled with these organisational and work design changes are demographic changes including the increase in the number of women in the workplace, dual career families, single parent families and an aging population (Brough & Kelling, 2002; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Frone & Yardley, 1996; Hobson, Delunas, & Kesie, 2001; Smith & Gardner, 2007). Together, these have combined to generate an increasingly diverse workforce whose personal and work related needs are often complex. Organisations that aspire to promote a healthy work–life balance environment within their organisations are now faced with an equally complex problem. How do you assist such a diverse group of employees achieve a healthy balance in a fair and transparent way whilst maintaining organisational efficiency?

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, p. 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 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 to manage the demands of work and personal life (Grady, McCarthy, Darcy, & Kirrane, 2008; McCarthy, 2004).

The business case for the introduction and continued support of these arrangements and practices is that work–life balance has been shown to be a factor which has the potential to affect important workplace issues such as employee turnover, stress, organisational commitment, absenteeism, job satisfaction, and productivity (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2006; Frone et al., 1992; Parasuraman, Purohit, Godshalk, & Beutell, 1996; Parris, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2008; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Veiga, Baldrige, & Eddleston, 2004). In a European study conducted by The Boston Consulting Group and the European Association for People Management (2007) of Human Resource Directors across Europe, work–life balance was ranked as one of the top three challenges facing HR.

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 the 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; Frone et al., 1992; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Lambert, 2000; McCarthy & Cleveland, 2005). Other research has explored how work–life balance affects performance at the organizational level (Bloom, Kretschmer, & Van Reenen, 2006).

However there is a lack of consensus about whether the positive effect of work–life benefits is universal (i.e. experienced by all employees, irrespective of their individual characteristics or circumstances) or whether the effect of work–life benefits differ for particular sub-populations of employees (Smith & Gardner, 2007). Some research exists to suggest that employee demographic differences impact upon the outcomes of work–life benefits. For example, McKeen and Burke (1994) explored the extent to which managerial women valued different types of work–life benefits and found significant differences according to age and parental status. Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) found that in a homogeneous sample of managers and professionals, the work–life benefits of family-care and flexibility were used by employees possessing different demographic and family status characteristics. Despite the potential advantages to be gained from the implementation of work–life balance initiatives, some initiatives may be costly to implement and it is therefore imperative that organisations firstly consider the likely potential benefits before deciding to provide such initiatives (Darcy & McCarthy, 2007).

This paper explores work–life balance for employees as they progress through different career stages denoted by age. To date, the majority of focus both in the literature and in practice has been on working parents to the exclusion of other employee stakeholder groups. It is the intention of this paper to broaden the discussion beyond working parents to a consideration of different employee career stages to examine the impact of WLB on these very different employee groupings.

Life cycle approach – the impact of age on work–life balance

Researchers have long since recognised that depending on one’s life-stage, different factors take on differing degrees of importance and that these varying factors and issues may affect both attitudes towards work and behaviours in the workplace (Giele & Elder, 1998). Research on adult development has found that as individuals age, they pass through different development stages that affect their employment priorities (Veiga, 1983).

‘Age’ is a marker of a number of life circumstances: career stage, family stage, maturity, biological aging (Moen & Yu, 2000). Finegold, Mohrman, and Spreitzer (2002) offer a theoretical rationale for the significance of age effects within the employment relationship. This rationale draws upon the work of Sparrow (1996) who found that individuals have very different employment preferences as they age and that these preferences when acknowledged and considered by the employer have a significant impact upon job satisfaction and motivation. Guest (1998) found that firms which better meet individuals’ work preferences are more likely to retain

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