

Checks and balances: the role of managers in work–life balance policies and practices

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Abstract

Discussion of work–life balance (WLB) is presently much in vogue among politicians and business leaders in the UK. Furthermore, evidence of a high level of support from both employers and employees for WLB now exists. Much of the growing amount of research into WLB reflects the widespread interest in the topic. Much of it also promotes policy development of WLB in general organisational terms. This paper adopts a different stance in its focus on the role of managers, who themselves often work long hours, in WLB policies and practices.

The paper explores WLB in the UK retailing, tourism and finance sectors in drawing from and extending WLB research funded by a national UK organisation with interests in equal opportunities. In order to gain different perspectives on the development and implementation of WLB policies, the research design comprises a series of interviews with senior managers, line managers and individuals who have direct experience of WLB practices. The key findings in terms of the role of managers in WLB policies and practices are reported. The first principal finding is that managers evidently contribute to the development of WLB policies. The second is that managers apparently play a pivotal role in translating WLB policies into practice and in ensuring there are appropriate checks and balances in the management of such practices.

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Keywords: Work-life balance; Managers; Policy and practice

1. Introduction

Work–life balance (WLB) is defined by the UK's Department of Trade and Industry as being “about adjusting working patterns regardless of age, race or gender, [so] everyone can find a rhythm to help them combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations” (www.dti.gov.uk/work-lifebalance/what.html). The backcloth to WLB development in the UK is its dubious record of conspicuously long hours of work, particularly for managers (Cooper, 1999). Indeed, despite the existence of EU initiated Working Time Regulations which set a threshold for a 48 h working week, “UK managers are reputed to work the longest hours in Europe” (Worrall and Cooper, 1999, p.6).

The UK Labour government has, however, declared a commitment in its political manifesto to the promulgation of WLB arrangements in industry to reduce the long hours culture. This commitment can be seen in the promotional campaign on WLB that was launched in March 2000. A key element of this is the Challenge Fund that provides £10.5 million for a three year period to help employers introduce new working arrangements which benefit the organisation, customer and employee. In addition, a national work–life balance standard has been developed. This can be used as framework within which organisations can gain accreditation for good WLB practices. Also, comprehensive advice from the Department of Trade and Industry is available for employers and employees on improving WLB (*British Journal of Administrative Management*, 2002). The promotion of WLB in UK industry is, though, not without its critics. For instance, it has been reported, somewhat provocatively, that “Britain's long hours

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culture [is] a myth and ..work–life balance protagonists [are] anti-business” (Muktarsingh, 2003, p. 35). Further, it has been argued that the work ethic in Europe has already reduced to a point where “work ethic is being replaced by a secularised sloth that threatens to leave the European Union even further behind America” in working hours and days (Ferguson, 2003, p. 4). What is less controversial is the view that balancing working life and family life in the modern day is “a complex phenomena” (Tyrkko, 2002, p. 107), and as such a topic that warrants explanation and research attention.

This paper outlines the emergence of WLB in the UK as a preface for putting the role of managers in WLB policies and practices in the retailing, tourism and finance sectors of the service industry under scrutiny.

2. The rise of work–life balance policies

Flexible working is the very basis of WLB (Felstead et al., 2002). Service sector and large organisations, along with public sector organisations (Persaud, 2001), have more commitment to the work flexibility that is the essence of WLB than other organisations (Mayne et al., 1996). A range of contextual drivers have combined gradually over the past decade or so to create the business and labour market conditions for the emergence of WLB.

Taking business factors that arguably contribute to the rise of WLB in the UK first, experience of flexible forms of work, intensification of competition, enabling technology and human resource management approaches to managing employees are all ingredients. Possibly the most influential and probably the most widely used type of flexible work throughout the 1980s and 1990s is Atkinson’s Flexible Firm model. This model divides the workforce into two distinct groups: core and peripheral employees. The core employees are full time, permanent staff. The peripheral employees constitute the flexible workforce in terms of numerical flexibility (their numbers can be expanded or contracted quickly), functional flexibility (their skills can be varied) and financial flexibility (their rates of pay can be varied). Though the model generated debate (Proctor and Ackroyd, 2001), it acted to promote the profile of, and built up experience in, flexible work.

A parallel development in the UK in the 1980s was the increasing economic reliance on the service sector (Gardner and Sheppard, 1989) and generation of a consumer culture (Slater, 1997). Inherent in the service sector focus is high levels of competition for consumers’ spending and time. Retailing, tourism and finance are all highly competitive sectors and have been for some time. Moreover, they are often characterised by low profit margins so tend to attempt to minimise staffing costs. A more recent development is competition is for quality

staff in times of the highest employment levels, particularly for part time staff on whom the service sector depends heavily, since records began in 1984 (Hughes, 2003). Offering WLB practices may improve potential employees’ impression of companies so making them more attractive as employers. Developments in technology, used notably extensively in contact centres attached to the finance sector, have also facilitated WLB (Lester, 2000) along with the rise in 24 × 7 product and service provision.

Lastly, with human resource management (HRM) approaches to managing staff being given more attention from the mid-1980s onwards, there has arguably been an attitudinal shift away from the organisational position of viewing employees as a costly collective. Instead, employees may—albeit idealistically—be considered as business investments and as individuals (Guest, 1997) with differential needs from and interests in work. HRM also arguably brings with it an enlarged role for managers in managing their staff (Leopold, 2002). Several researchers develop the argument that HRM per se involves line managers (e.g. Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Renwick, 2003; MacNeil, 2003). In particular, it has been asserted that line managers have a distinct responsibility for HRM in practice as they are closer to their employees than specialist HR staff (Budhwar, 2000; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003), particularly where WLB is concerned (Frame and Hartog, 2003). Further, HRM can be conceived as a business response to competitive forces (Boxall and Purcell, 2003). The growing recognition of the role of employees in delivering service reinforces the business contribution of HRM. For it has been contended that there is “a positive relationship between more sophisticated/ innovative people management practices and improved organisational performance” (Baron and Collard, 1998; p. 38).

The second range of factors that have acted to generate WLB policies centre on labour market conditions and comprise the feminisation of the workforce and changing perceptions of work, both of which will be outlined. According to the *Labour Force Survey*, (2002), women now account for 51% of the UK workforce, a proportion that has steadily risen along side the expansion of the service sector in the economy. In framing the development of WLB, this proportion is significant because it has been levelled that gender at work is central to WLB, not least as it can be seen to represent an extension of the drive towards equality in the workplace.

Not only is women’s increased participation in work a significant economic driver, it also represents an important, concomitant social change (Kirkton and Greene, 2000). Gender differentials in family responsibilities, affecting inclinations towards work, have been raised by a number of researchers. Sullivan and Lewis

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