

Challenges of Quality of Work Life: Evidence and Implications in Developed and Developing Countries

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Abstract

In the promotion of health and well-being at work, recent evidence suggests that work can be good for health in reversing the harmful effects of unemployment but yet if one is unhappy in their working environment, one can easily fall into sickness absence or ill-health. This paper would deal with the well-being of the working age population deriving data and evidence and implications from surveys in specific industry and country. The nature and characteristics of the jobs, supportive colleagues and employers contribute in terms of satisfaction, reward, and improved performance. The concept of well-being is open to interpretation and cultural context in addition to changing perceptions of expectations in terms of work benefits and conditions given the presumption that there is relationship between good quality of work life and good health, in creating new perspectives on wealth and work, improving work and workplaces, and supporting people to work policies. This paper will contribute a critical perspective on the nexus between work and well being in developed and developing countries given the different contextual and cultural settings taking some evidence from empirical studies, reports to the governments, policies, etc., and thereupon conceptual interpretation.

Keywords: QWL, well-being, policies

Introduction

The concepts of Quality of Work Life (QWL) and work-life balance are not new. In its initial development in the mid 1970s, QWL was first defined in terms of people's reaction to work, particularly individual outcomes related to job satisfaction and mental health. Using this definition, QWL focused primarily on the personal consequences of the work experience and how to improve work to satisfy personal needs. A second definition was defined in terms of techniques and approaches used for improving work such as job enrichment, self-managed teams, and labor-management committees (Davis & Cherns, 1975, Davis, 1977). The expansion of QWL beyond the initial development include features of the workplace that can affect employee productivity and satisfaction such as reward systems, work flows, management styles, and physical work environment (Cummings & Worley, 2005).

This paper briefly reviews some of the issues facing industrialised developed and developing countries in regards to work-life balance and quality of work life. As Duxbury & Higgins (2003) said that work-life conflict is not only a moral issue but also a productivity and economic issue, a workplace and social issue and needs to be addressed as such. The evidences for QWL suggest that it is not only a concern for the individual but also a consideration for the organisation and society at large, both individual and collective experiences.

Staffs expect greater freedom, flexibility and cooperation from their employer than ever before. Hence, the challenge for employers was to develop a flexible working strategy that helped meet the needs of its people whilst improving its competitiveness. There exists constantly the push for a flexible labour market with flexibility at work so that jobs, and careers are part of what we do and who we are and of which we can have control though may be limited. Having the flexibility to strike the right work-life balance improves morale, and helps organizations with staff retention.

Literature Review

Despite the importance of paid work, more people desire to have a balance between work and other activities. A Work Foundation survey found that nearly three-quarters of full-time workers want to spend more time with their family and that this includes those without children, with nearly two-thirds of those without children in agreement with this. Flexibility is about being able to change when, where and how one work. It includes a wide range of different arrangements, with some of the current types identified in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Some different types of flexibility of work organisation

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Part time working; | <input type="checkbox"/> Working time accounts; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Job share; | <input type="checkbox"/> Shift swapping; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flexitime, formal and informal; | <input type="checkbox"/> Compressed hours; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nine day fortnight; | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-rostering; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shifts; | <input type="checkbox"/> Time off in lieu; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Homeworking; | <input type="checkbox"/> Sabbatical; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time work; | <input type="checkbox"/> Career break; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Annualised hours; | <input type="checkbox"/> Family contracts; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Term-time working; | <input type="checkbox"/> Lengthy lunch breaks! |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Provision of technology e.g. blackberry | <input type="checkbox"/> Office 'pods' (hired desks) in |

to enable 'any-time' working;

a range of locations, giving flexibility over where people work;

Research on work and family has sought to explain work-family conflict from multiple theoretical approaches such as boundary theory, compensation theory, ecological systems theory, social identity theory, and spillover theory, to name a few. Researchers generally state that role theory has provided the broad theoretical umbrella for much of the work-family conflict literature. Role theory implies that work and family roles result from the expectations of others, and what is believed to be appropriate behaviour for a particular position. Role theory indicates that both work and family domains entail multiple roles where numerous demands are placed on the individual, often resulting in conflict. And rooted in role theory, and deriving from the conflict, conflict theory posits that work and family domains can be incompatible resulting from different norms and requirements, hence resulting from different norms and requirements of societies, increased role performance in one domain (such as work) results in decreased role performance in other domain (such as family) and vice versa.

The perspective of the gender role theory establishes that the family and work roles have traditionally been gender-specific, such that men are socialised so that their central role in life is that of worker and family breadwinner, whereas women are brought up in the line that their essential role in life is at the heart of the family, as wife, mother and homemaker (Gutek et al., 1991). Empirical evidence support that work is more central for a man's identity, whereas the family is more central for a woman (Cinnamon & Rich, 2002; Mauno & Kinnunen, 2000, Parasuraman et al., 1992). However, due to gender role socialisation, men show a higher level of identity and involvement with work than with the family, so the interference is less damaging to their social identity, and consequently, less threatening (Grandey et al., 2005).

Perceived balance between work and social roles usually is conducive to life satisfaction. Work-family balance was found to predict well-being and the overall quality of life (Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003). Conversely, failure to achieve balance was associated with reduced job and life satisfaction, decreased well-being

and quality of life (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton 2000; Aryee, 1992; Grant-Vallone & Donaldson, 2001).

Work-Life Balance Policies in Developed and Developing Countries

Current approaches to work have increased economic pressure on organizations, which has equated to greater work pressures and affected work life balance. Individual consequences of work-life imbalance are documented (e.g. Brough and O'Driscoll, 2005) and organizations, for instance Higgins, Duxbury & Johnson (2004) in a benchmark study, estimated that work overload cost the Canadian healthcare system CA\$5.92 billion per annum, followed by caregiver strain (CA\$4.85 billion), work-to-family interference (CA\$2.77 billion), and family-to-work interference (CA\$514 million).

Recent policies of work-life balance include initiatives for employees to achieve balance regardless of their actual care-giving responsibilities (Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007). Currently there are four major categories of work-life balance and family friendly initiatives: 1) flexible/alternative work arrangements, such as compressed working weeks and permanent part-time positions; 2) paid and unpaid leave arrangements, such as paid maternity, paternity, and adoption leave, and unpaid leave for sabbaticals, cultural, or volunteer reasons; 3) dependent care services, such as the provision or subsidy of childcare or eldercare services; and 4) access to information, resources or services, such as employee assistance programs, health facilities and stress management programs (Gray & Tudball, 2003).

Policies in Anglo-Saxon countries, such as Australia, tend to emphasise individual responsibility and are voluntarily adopted by organizations with little government influences. In contrast, policies in Scandinavian countries (e.g. Norway and Sweden) are influenced by a prevailing public responsibility model characterised by generous leave conditions and benefits (Brough, O'Driscoll, & Kalliath, 2007; Gauthier & Hatzius, 1997).

Similarly, a comprehensive study of 2191 UK organizations (Heywood, Siebert, & Wei, 2007) found that the organizational costs of family-friendly policies were offset by reduced employee earnings.

On the other hand, in the developing countries, benefits relating work-family balance are rare and less obvious in most countries in Asia. Lo (2003) reported that socio-cultural environment in Hong Kong ensured that married professional women received limited support from their husbands and employers to assist them in managing the demands of both full-time work and family responsibilities. In identifying what would help them to improve their situation, the over-whelming response was the need for flexible working schedules (Brough, Holt, Bauld, et al, 2008).

Case Studies of UK Companies/Research

Employment rates of older workers reflect the recognition of the value of retaining these skilled employees, although rates do vary by country: - 30 – 42% in the southern European and continental European countries, 50% in Nordic countries and the UK, 59% in US, and 62% in Japan (Burniaux, Duval, and Jaumotte, 2003). Mercer (2004) reported that while 93% of UK unemployed workers aged 55 – 64 would prefer to be working, a lack of access to flexible working conditions and quality part-time work directly prevented their employment. Reday-Mulvey (2005) demonstrated that older workers in 'low-quality' jobs were four times as likely to leave employment as workers in 'high quality' positions.

The UK Government's commitment to improving the health and well-being of the working age population is a central element of wider welfare reform agenda which was set out in the Government's White Paper *Choosing Health: Making Healthier Choices Easier*. One of the strategies in helping people return to work due to ill health is to engage healthcare professionals, through employment advice in finding suitable jobs and if necessary, support in managing their condition, adaptation to workplaces and work practices including time flexibilities as key to reducing the number of people who suffer from work-related ill health.

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A 2004 review of over 20 evidence-based survey articles on work-based health promotion programmes and studies concluded that health-promoting programmes do have positive impact. Fourteen evaluation studies included in the review examined absenteeism and reported that health promotion measures led to between 12 per cent and 36 per cent reduction in sickness absence. This led to a saving of 34 per cent in absenteeism costs, including that every pound spent on promoting health in the workplace could lead to a £2.50 savings (Kreis & Bödeker, 2004). In 2003/04, there were 609,000 new cases of workplace ill health – of these cases, stress contributed 254,000 (42 per cent) and musculoskeletal disorders 204,000 (33 per cent). This was out of a total 2.2 million new and existing cases. In the same period, 29.8 million working days were lost to ill health; the equivalent figure for injuries (i.e. safety) is approximately 9 million (HSE, 2004).

Case Study 1: Work and Health Network

This group represents a wide range of expertise in delivering occupational health support in primary care, for small and medium-enterprises and the voluntary sector.

Members include:

- Sheffield Occupational Health Advisory Service, which sees over 1,200 patients a year and provides advice on prevention, returning to work and general issues such as employment and health and safety law;
- Health Works in London (Newham) which works alongside other agencies to provide services for long-term unemployed people to help them back to work and support and training for SMEs to help them improve their workplace health and safety standards.

In developing these, they will therefore create a National Stakeholder Council & Network, develop a Charter for Health, Work, and Well-being, and support the creation of local stakeholder councils.

Case Study 2: AstraZeneca

This pharmaceutical company, made a £5 million saving in one year through a programme of initiatives, including standalone projects and improved management aimed at reducing sickness absence levels through top management commitment.

Case Study 3: Port of London Authority (PLA)

PLA provides safe navigation on the tidal Thames. The company introduced a sickness absence management policy which resulted in a 70 per cent drop in absence rates from 11 – 12 per cent to 3 - 3.4 per cent (2003). PLA estimate that the improvement was the equivalent of 8.2 per cent more staff at work.

Case Study of Malaysian Companies/Research

A case study of 450 managerial staff from 25 firms of electrical and electronic industry in Malaysia, in the state capital was employed to determine the level of QWL. The results of this study support the proposition that the degree of satisfaction in QWL is related to the degree to which the individual believes one's success criteria have been met where the emphasis is on income, position, personal growth, and work-family balance. It further suggests that a successful and harmonious family life carries over into one's career and makes one even more satisfied with personal achievements (Rose, R.C., Beh, et al., 2006a, 2006b). In this sense, QWL indicators can be used to assist the organization to improve work-life quality through flexible scheduling, time-off policies, financial assistance and other similar supporting programmes.

QWL and Performance

Similarities exist between QWL and Job Performance in that both are organizational-based. Job performance is a function of both the individual and the organization. Therefore the basis of the two constructs is, they are situational based and contextual in the workplace. This means that individuals and organizations are interdependent. As such, QWL can be identified as a plausible predictor of job performance.

Many studies have examined the multidimensional and complex construct of job performance. For example, Campbell, McHenry, & Wise (1990) identified eight major dimensions of performance: (1) job-specific task proficiency, (2) non job-specific task proficiency, (3) written & oral communication tasks, (4) demonstrating effort, (5) maintaining personal discipline, (6) facilitating peer and team performance,

(7) supervision, and (8) management/administration. A number of theoretical perspectives have been put forth, some representing performance on jobs in general and some specific to managerial jobs (e.g. Borman & Brush, 1993; Yukl, 1989). Through the literature, dimensions of individual job performance include units of production, quality of work, tenure, supervisory, leadership abilities, output, quality, lost time, turnover, training time, promotion, and satisfaction. Hunter & Hunter (1984) described characteristics that can predict future job performance. The list includes past performance on related jobs, job knowledge, psychomotor skills, cognitive abilities, social skills, job-related attitudes such as need for achievement, enthusiasm, stress, and control. Viswesvaran, Ones, and Schmidt (1996) identified ten dimensions of job performance: (1) overall job performance, (2) job performance or productivity, (3) quality, (4) leadership, (5) communication competence, (6) administrative competence, (7) effort, (8) interpersonal competence, (9) job knowledge, and (10) compliance with or acceptance of authority.

The results gave strong support that QWL was applicable across a homogenous sample of organizations and that the work life of acceptable level existed. Thus, the construct can be operationalized along repeatable dimensions. This finding contributes to the theory building in operationalization of QWL construct and validates as a measure instrument. The finding is consistent with the study by Lau (2000) and Delaney and Huselid (1996) that indicated that QWL is a significant factor in determining job performance. Thus, the study exhibits optimism concerning the potential of QWL in enhancing the performance of employees and organizations as QWL is found to significantly reduce absenteeism, minor accidents, grievances, and quits (Havlovic, 1991).

The relationship between productivity and performance and changes in the quality of a particular dimension of work life depends to some extent upon the particular employees' awareness of certain deficiencies (Walton, 1975). Presumably, those aspects of work and work environment in organizations can be identified which would enable and encourage employees to ascend a hierarchy of achievement and enrichment of work life. In having a theoretical rationale, in assessing the QWL provided by a particular organization, two questions could be asked. First, what potential situation exists for employees to reach successively higher level of QWL?

Second, what percentage of employees is currently operating at each of these levels of fulfillment of QWL in their working roles?

Inevitably, this means that the key determinant of a great organization to work in is the level of QWL. Obviously, employees will want to choose the best employer or organization to work, to share the direction and alignment as to the engagement perpetuated through good practices that can provide such quality of work life. The result of the study (Beh, 2007) has important implications for future research. QWL is a relevant and crucial dimension of job performance. This could be an important prerequisite for future job performance studies involving comparisons across organizations and industries. This study provides strong evidence that QWL accounts for some proportion of job performance. Future studies can provide a discerned pattern applicable to a wider sample of companies. Future research is also needed to provide additional empirical evidence for the two concepts in other work settings.

Conclusion

This review considers the evidence for future consideration for why work-life balance is important, may not be just an individual's concern but that of organizational and social concerns, though seemingly short-term but rather has long-term effects. Most of the studies which have looked into the relationship between work-family have assumed similar expectations and results between the employees, without considering the individual differences in a range of characteristics. The health and well-being of people of working age is therefore a fundamental importance to our future, given the attention it deserves and a commitment to bringing about a real and sustained improvement. However, there is no one size of QWL that fits all model as every organisation needs to develop its own, responding to employees, customer and organisational needs though evidences and implications in developed and developing countries do not seem to suggest stark differences.

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