

An Overview of Work-Life Management Practices from a Malaysian Perspective

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Abstract: A study of work-life issues has become the subject of research for many scholars in the field of business and management studies. Despite increasing attention has been accorded to work-life issues in developed countries, very few is known of the research of work-life issues in developing multi-cultural, multi-ethnic country like Malaysia. The fact that Malaysia has diverging ethnic groups and cultural system, this study addresses an insight analysis of work-life management issues from a different perspective. The research is conducted in 3 public sector organisations in Sabah, Malaysia and includes 71 in-depth interviews. The finding demonstrates the nature of the relationship between work and non-work varies according to the strategies which workers adopt. This is potentially an important finding, as it can provide critical learning points for policy makers and employers aware of the need to find culturally appropriate ways to enhance work/non-work integration, as well as to alleviate the harmful effects of work/non-work conflict.

Key words: Work-life balance, work-life integration, public sector, ethnicity, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Research on work-life integration is important to organisations, individual workers, families and societies, as they can affect organisational/worker performance, as well as non-work life functioning (Noon and Blyton, 2007). Moreover, these entities are important markers of societal well-being and can be used as a platform for harmonious employment relationships. It has been argued that achieving integration between non-work and work life is increasingly a priority for many people (Sturges and Guest, 2004) and integrated individuals are reported to experience a low level of stress when enacting their roles, probably because they are participating in role activities that are salient to them (Greenhaus *et al.*, 2003).

As the largest employers in the country, public sector organisations in Malaysia have pioneered work-life arrangements which can be emulated by private sector organisations. Such arrangements are however, still at the early stages and organisational, as well as workers awareness of them and work-life related issues is also believed to still be at a rudimentary level. Further, as work-life management in Malaysia is an under-researched area, it is the aim of this study to gain better understanding of the present situation of the work/non-work lives of workers in the Malaysian public sector context. Moreover, since the Malaysian Government is focused on the implementation of work-life policies in the public sector, there is a need for

more research on countries with diverse cultural contexts (Poelmans, 2005). Hence, the aim of this study is to examine how Malaysian public sector employees (particularly in Sabah) approach their work and non-work lives.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

There is a significant body of literature detailing the work/non-work issues, based on the experiences of Western societies. Such studies include case studies on how workers manage their work/non-work lives: The influence of organisational cultures on work-life integration (Lewis, 1997, 2001; Callan, 2007), the implementation and implication of work-life practices (Coussey, 2000; Manfredi and Holliday, 2004; Hall and Liddicoat, 2005). Researchers also show how workers attempts at work-life integration are influenced by a number of factors including state provision of work/non-work policies (Abendroth and den Dulk, 2011; Fagnani, 2005; Ackers, 2003; Taylor, 2002; Hardman, 1998), trade union involvement (Heery, 2006; Upchurch *et al.*, 2005; Budd and Mumford, 2004; Glass and Fujimoto, 1995), increased women's participation in the labour market (CIPD, 2007; Dex and Smith, 2002) and organisations who have been interested in the business case for work/non-work initiatives (Arthur and Cook, 2004; Coussey, 2000).

Many studies (Nord *et al.*, 2002; Coussey, 2000) have shown the positive effects of the integration of

work/non-work spheres on employers and organisations but how do workers successfully achieve such integration is still questionable. Moreover, literatures on work-life issues whether quantitative or qualitative approaches are dominated by human resource management mainstream with business case and employers perspective. Focus on employee is still lack investigated. It is therefore, the challenge for this study to offer new insights on work-life integration issues from employees perspective from widely scholarly contribution but also for the specific context of Malaysia. As the Malaysian labour force becomes more diverse, there will be an urgent need to ensure good employment relationship and fair treatment for all, including those working parents, individuals and families with crucial caring responsibilities. As this issue is such a new concept in the Malaysian workplace, therefore, this study is trying to fill the gap.

Range of supports familial (family and spouse), communal (neighbour and private help) and organisations (employer/immediate superior and provisions provided by the employer) were found to help workers cope with the pressures of integrating their work and non-work lives, thereby enabling them to work without distraction (Van Daalen *et al.*, 2006; Abendroth and den Dulk, 2011). Thus, supports are important as they can contribute to how workers experience potential conflict or a more integrated approach to work and non-work life (Abendroth and den Dulk, 2011; Warhurst *et al.*, 2008) and influence how workers pattern their work and non-work lives. In order to understand, how workers manage their work/non-work lives, it is necessary to examine workers work/non-work patterns.

One of the consequences of the inability to integrate work and non-work demands is the increasing level of work-life conflict experienced by parents in employment (Erickson *et al.*, 2010) and workers who no longer have dependent children were associated with less work-life conflict (Baltes and Young, 2007). Work-life conflict occurs when an individual has to perform multiple roles that require time, energy and commitment. In Malaysia, the impact of marital status on work/non-work life has not been thoroughly investigated, since studies often include married workers only, single parents (Subramaniam and Selvaratnam, 2010) or workers with dependent children or a partner (Lu *et al.*, 2008).

Coffey (1994) indicated that the pressure to demonstrate commitment by working long hours was strongest in the early stages of a career. However, according to Warhurst *et al.* (2008)'s, workers alternated the needs of their work/non-work spheres differently at different life-cycle stages. At different life-cycle stages workers have different ways of managing their work-life

conflict (Erickson *et al.*, 2010). Work/non-work life can be examined by looking at the context specific logics for work/non-work life for work this is likely to be the importance of work for earning a wage but for life, the logics can be influenced by a multitude of logics, such as friendship, unconditional love of family members. This approach helps us understand how workers work/non-work lives shaped through alternation. According to Warhurst *et al.* (2008), depending on the work and its context, the logics of work and non-work can coexist without interference, allowing workers a fairly frictionless alternation between the two distinct spheres. This raises the question: to what extent did workers successfully manage their responsibilities in their work and non-work lives? Hence, an understanding of whether workers prioritise their work and/or non-work occurs differently or similarly among workers in various life-cycle stages is crucial in this study. Life-cycle is viewed as the dynamic nature of family roles and circumstances, as families and individuals move through their lives and the changes in roles, relationships and responsibilities over time produce corresponding changes in family needs, resources and vulnerabilities (Higgins *et al.*, 1994). Many studies have found that the life-cycle stage is associated with work-life conflict (Erickson *et al.*, 2010; Higgins *et al.*, 1994) and work/non-work alternation (Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). Thus, analysing the life-cycle stages of workers will indicate their differing needs to integrate their work/non-work lives.

Work-life management can be manifested at various patterns (Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). Work-life integration can be achieved should all the necessary supports available for workers. Additionally, work-life integration also can be hindered due to work-life conflict. As such, workers alternated the needs of their work/non-work spheres differently at different life-cycle stages. Thus, it is important to analyse how workers manage their work/non-work differently and what factors can support or impede their work-life integration.

The research adopted a qualitative case study research design of three organisations-higher learning institution (Unico), medical services (Hospico) and revenue services (Custco). The data collection was based on in-depth interviews with seventy one employees from Unico, Hospico and Custco. In-depth interviewing is a data collection method relied on extensively by qualitative researchers and in this study it was used to gain insights into employees attitudes to their work and non-work lives and how they managed their work/non-work lives and their experience of work. For ethical reason, the organisations and interviewees will remain anonymous and thus, pseudonyms are used. Unico is a higher

Table 1: Profiles of employee participants from the three case studies

Profiles	Total
Gender	
Female	34
Male	37
Age (years)	
Below 29	11
30-39	25
40-49	23
50 and above	12
Marital Status	
Single (without dependant)	7
Single with (dependant)	9
Married (with dependant)	53
Married (without dependant)	2
Religion	
Islam	42
Christianity	29
Ethnic background	
Sabah Bumiputera	57
Chinese*	5
Other Bumiputera	7
Indian	1
Other	1
Length of service (years)	
<5	11
5-10	22
10-15	15
15-20	5
20-25	5
>25	13
Tenure	
Life-time (permanent) employment	69
Contract (renewable in every 2 years)	2

Bumiputera: son of the soil (native); Sabah bumiputera include the Kadazan Dusun, Rungus, Bajau, Suluk, Kadayan, Iban, Bisaya, murut, Sungai, Lundayeh, Idahan, Malay Brunei ethnic groups, etc., other Bumiputera include Malays from Peninsular Malaysia and other ethnic groups from Sarawak; *four respondents from Unico and Custco were of Chinese mixed heritage

learning institution with 1599 workforces. Meanwhile, Custco is a government agency responsible for administrating the nation's tax revenue policy and employed 752 people. Hospico on the other hand is a centre of specialist services for women and children and had 1076 workers. This study employed thematic analysis to analyse the data.

Table 1 presents the profiles of the employee participants in the three case studies. As can be seen, they represented a diversity of backgrounds in terms of gender, age, marital status, religion, ethnicity, length of service and tenure. Meanwhile, Table 2 illustrates employees level of care commitment. In this study, there were seven employees without care commitments these were mostly single, regardless of age. Meanwhile, 21 employees had grown up children and these were mostly above 39 years of age and either established in their career or had been working for >10 years. Table 2 shows 10 employees with parental and sibling commitments

Table 2: Employees level of care commitment

Employees data	Total
Employees with no care commitment	7
Employees with grown up children**	21
Employees with parent and sibling commitment	10
Employees with young children*	33

*Young children are those between infancy and primary school age who are expected to be dependent and rely fully on parents or grown ups to look after them; **grown up children are those from the teenage years who are in secondary school to adulthood who are more independent and can look after themselves

these consist of single workers who had either full or partial responsibility for their parents and siblings. Finally, 33 employees had young children.

RESULTS

This study examines how workers patterned their work and non-working lives at work and how a range of supports can influence these different approaches. Findings show that some workers achieved partial whereas others were able to fully integrate work and home to their satisfaction some felt work/non-work life relations resulted in conflict and some employees of a specific life-cycle were happy to prioritise their work lives and segmented non-work lives. This study will thus encompass discussion on the variations of work/non-work integration identified in this study, namely, work/non-work integration, work/non-work conflict and alternation of work life.

Work-life integration: In order to achieve work-life integration, Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) found that some workers were fortunate to benefit from social support provided by other individuals and by institutions. In this study, social support, i.e., family, spouse, employer/immediate superior and other private help was found to help and accommodate workers cope with the pressures of integrating their work and non-work lives, thereby enabling them to work without distraction. Viewing work-life integration, as a continuum, variations between workers can be identified such that some are more successful and satisfied in achieving integration than others. As such, some workers found to be partially integrated their work/non-work lives leading to their satisfaction. This can be seen in the case of Siti, a Senior Lecturer and single parent with young children who described the many non-work roles she had besides her work role and how Unico as an employer accommodated her role as a single parent. She said:

Working in Unico suits my non-work life. As a single parent with two young children, my children depend on me. So, I need to take care of my needs as well as their needs. I find it relaxing working here because the flexi hours allow me to do what I need to do, like being their mother, being their driver, being their feeder. I also need to be home if my washing machine needs fixing. I am the one who needs to be there to take care of that problem. And if anything else needs doing I can just go and do it. My colleagues and my superior are very understanding of my situation and are very supportive which is a blessing, etc. I might need to spend all day at my workplace but I can still deal with my personal affairs such as paying bills at the bank. Unico enables me to prosper and to function as a mother because of the flexible hours that I am entitled to work. Flexitime helps me career wise

The degree of integration of the workers work-life integration was varied depending on the range of support available to them. For some workers in Hospico for example, the integration was achieved through informal flexibility for instance, workers who worked on flexitime basis managed to integrate both their work and non-work spheres flexibly, as in the case of Evan, an Assistant Senior Pharmacist in the Pharmacy Unit who is married with five young children. Evan found flexitime working hours and other organisational work-life policies to be helpful in integrating his work and non-work responsibilities. He states:

The flexi hour system is useful because if I start work at 7.30 pm. I can take the children to school on the way and then when I finish work at 4.30 pm. I can avoid the traffic jams on the way home. The flexi hour arrangement also enables me to go back home early and start preparing dinner (I do the cooking) while waiting for my wife to come back from work. In the morning we normally do not have much time to do things such as tidy up the house or cook as we're always in a rush. The long Friday lunch break allows me to go to the bank to pay bills, etc. Working 5 days only also allows us to spend time together as a family during the weekend

This view is supported by Alana, a 25 year old female Pharmacist who had just joined Hospico 3 months earlier:

This flexi working hours suits me as I can avoid the traffic jam and I like to wake up early. As the finish time is 4.30 pm, it suits me as I can reach

home earlier for shopping (with my mother) and spend the rest of the day with my family. I like it very much

Although, limited to those who worked fixed working hours in non-emergency departments, the flexitime privilege provided by Hospico appears to have assisted workers in managing their work/non-work spheres.

Apart from supports available that enhanced workers work-life integration workers in the research context also found to experience work/non-work conflict due to insufficient support received by certain group of workers.

Work-life conflict: Work-life conflict occurs when work demands and non-work responsibilities clash. In their study, Erickson *et al.* (2010) found that the group of workers with young children experienced a double bind, since they were not as established both financially and occupationally and thus, felt pressure to provide for their families and work long hours. Consistent with studies by Erickson *et al.* (2010), Ngah *et al.* (2009), this study also found that work-life conflict tends to be mostly experienced by workers with young children. As John, a Radiographer, married with a young child states:

I do not think my work and non-work lives are integrated because at the moment I spend more time at work than I do with my family due to heavy work demands. The drawback of the roster duty is that I have to work longer hours. Thus, I have no time for myself or my family. If I want to deal with personal matters for example, draw money from the bank, I have to take the day off to do so and that day will be deducted from my annual leave etc. As my wife also works as a radiographer in this department and does not drive and we live some distance away from the workplace, normally one of us has to wait for the other one to finish their shift duty. Sometimes we stay here at work 24 h. Frequently, we have to bring our daughter who is 3 and a half years old here as most of the time is spent at the workplace

Due to the long and inconsistent working hour culture in Hospico, workers in certain departments had to bring their children to the workplace, especially if their spouse had to work during the same hours.

In John's case, the lack of organisational support resulted in work creep and conflict between work and non-work spheres. The experience of Nora, a Radiographer, married with a young child, showed how

the strain from her work role made it difficult to fulfil her caring responsibilities. Greenhaus and Beutell refer to this as strain-based conflict. Nora said:

At the moment, it is difficult to work at night or during public holidays as I have a problem finding suitable childcare provisions. The childcare centre to which I used to send my child has closed. When I was single, I did not have that problem, now my problem is the difficulty in finding appropriate childcare. If I send my child to a 24 h childcare centre then I need to pay extra money. My husband works as an Assistant Medical officer so if both of us find ourselves having to work shifts, we have no alternative but to send our child to a 24 h childcare centre. However, last Christmas holiday both of us worked at night and the childcare centre was closed. We had no other option but to bring our child here (to the workplace) and take turns to look after him in the rest room

The fact that both John and Nora had to take their children to their workplace shows that there was limited or no childcare facilities available to them and also that the time they spent with their partners and children was fragmented.

Single employees with parent/siblings commitment is a group ignored in other studies. Erickson *et al.* (2010) and Higgins *et al.* (1994) excluded single employees from their studies, as they assumed that employees having no care commitment would be able to manage their work/non-work life. As such, workers were compared across the full spectrum of family life except those with parental/sibling care (Erickson *et al.*, 2010). This study found that workers with parental/sibling care commitment were found to be juggling between work and home responsibilities. Despite being young and single, Ayu, an Administration officer in Unico, experienced restrictions on her time due to both work responsibilities and family demands. Being the eldest in the family, she felt it her responsibility to look after and take care of her siblings in order to show respect and loyalty to her parents. She said:

My time is always tight and is normally spent fulfilling work demands, as well as fulfilling family needs especially those of my siblings. As the eldest in the family, I have to prepare meals first for my siblings, as my parents are busy with their business. I would say that of my time, 10% is spent on myself, 10% on friends, 30% on family and 50% on fulfilling work demands. I do not even have time

to pamper myself with lotion due to my need to fulfil my job and family responsibilities as a child to my parents as an elder sister to my younger siblings and as a worker to my employer

Lilly, single and an administrative assistant in Unico, also found it difficult endeavouring to fulfil her work duties and to look after her sick mother. She said:

During the school graduation night, we were asked to attend the dinner as it was compulsory but at that time, my mom was on chemotherapy treatment and it was my turn to look after her. So, I did not go and the next day, I (and others who did not go) were summoned to explain the failure to attend. For me, my mother came first because I felt it was my duty to be with her and look after her. I love her and she needed me because the chemotherapy treatment always makes her feel ill afterwards. My mother has been looking after me for 27 years and supported me in whatever I have done. Now it is my turn to look after her in her hours of need. In Christianity, we are taught to love and respect our parents

Ayu and Lilly's comments indicate that fulfilling work and family responsibilities was important to them. Work demands left Ayu exhausted and with little time for herself. For Lilly, despite work demands, being grateful and showing love to her mother was more important than her paid work responsibility. Ayu also felt responsible for her siblings. In a society where the family institution is significantly important, caring for parents and siblings is viewed, as a desirable quality to maintain good relationships in the family.

The evidence shows that workers with parental/sibling commitments were also concerned about their work/non-work integration. Without social and organisational support, workers will continue to struggle to integrate their work/non-work lives and experience conflict between work and family life responsibilities.

Alternation of work-life: At different life-cycle stages workers have different ways of managing and prioritising their work/non-work lives. In this study when workers reached certain life-cycle stages, i.e., post-conflict stage, such as when they had no care commitment or when their children were grown up, they did not show a tendency to seek a more integrated work and non-work lives, instead the alternation in work or non-work life was preferable.

The study in Unico found that workers with grown up children not seeking work-life integration and instead alternated to prioritise work. The study found that

workers in the post-conflict stage, represented by mature and middle-aged workers had developed effective mechanisms to cope with work-life conflict. This was due to a life time of communicating, solving problems and integrating knowledge with practical experience (Baltes and Young, 2007; Sterns and Huyck, 2001). To some extent when workers reached a certain number of years of service and had an established family, they had a tendency to view the current period as compensation for the time when they had been less able to focus on their career due to bringing up young children. Hence in their current life-cycle, the focus was more on commitment to work. For example, Abu, Unico Senior Academic, married with grown up children commented:

As my children are all grown up and independent, I do not think I need the flexitime anymore. As I get older and career advanced, I am more committed to work because there are less things (at home and personal) to worry about

Similar passion and prioritisation towards work life was also supported by findings found in Custco:

I don't feel stress although the workload is intensified and always under pressure. Working outside the typical office environment helps me to release tension as we can find new experience each time we go out to work. I love this job (Chief Vince, a Senior Officer with 29 years of service)

The working hour is inconsistent in this unit but it suits me as I used to this type of work. I like this job (Jaideh, an Officer in Marine Prevention Unit, with 17 years of service)

The quotes earlier demonstrate that when workers reached senior positions in their work lives and have been working for a lengthy period of time whereby their jobs required an urgent response, they were happy to prioritise work and thus, segment home.

On the other hand, some workers in certain departments in Custco who worked on-call duty were found to prioritise their non-work life as soon as they transferred to less hectic departments and when their children were all grown up and hence, segmented work. The impact of different work patterns on non-work life was vividly portrayed by Tuan Ashley when he said:

Previously, when I was attached to the Prevention department, there was a conflict between my work and non-work life. I did not

have time for my family as I worked 24 h a day. During that time, my children did not know their father in fact, at one point, my son complained and said to me from the time I was in Year 1 until high school or even on Father's Day or when I was having an exam you never took a day off for me. When I worked in the Prevention Unit, I had no time for my wife or children. Only my wife was committed to parenting. But now, the scenario has changed. Not only are my children now grown up, I have transferred to the import/export unit and work flexi hours from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm. I spend more time with the family, I go jogging and we go on family outings together. Since, I was transferred to this unit, I can plan my holiday with my family. That is the advantage of working here. When I come to work, I am in a good mood. I am not stressed and my work flows more smoothly. For some people, if they have a problem at home, it affects their work performance. Working in this scenario in this unit, I feel less burdened and less stressful and I am more comfortable to be around

This was supported by Madam Melly, Custco Superintendent Officer with 22 years of service:

It was stressful when I was assigned to the preventive operational unit before, as the workload was so intensified and the working hour was longer. I had no time for myself and my family especially my 4 little kids. Now not only my children are grown up but since I attached here in the Airport Unit, I can spend more time with them. I gain satisfaction from my non-working life to be with my children as they are valuable assets. If the children were neglected and do not become a good citizen, they can be a liability to the parents as well as to the nation

Workers with different job vocations and with grown up children exhibited different ways of managing their work-life spheres. For some workers, having grown up children meant they could concentrate more on their work responsibilities than when their children were younger. They could now make up for lost time and devote far more effort to their work sphere. The nature of work also influenced workers prioritisation and passion to work particularly when they reached senior positions in their work. On the other hand, some workers in Custco for example, found their work life far less demanding when their children were grown up. For such workers, it was as though they were discovering a lost life and prioritising family life over paid work was more meaningful and rewarding.

DISCUSSION

The nature of the relationship between the work and non-work spheres of employees vary according to the strategies they adopt. This is also very much dependent upon the nature of their informal relationships such as having supportive colleagues and managers, their life-cycle position, the extent of work demands and the degree of family support received. These variations in work-life integration can be best viewed as a continuum. Blunsdon *et al.* (2006) define work-life integration, as individuals successfully segmenting or integrating life and work, so as to achieve a satisfying quality of life, overall satisfaction and less strain or stress from not having to juggle conflicting role demands. Over and beyond this definition in order to understand the relationships between work and non-work life, it is crucial to understand that variations in the workers work/non-work integration modes in this research context can be best considered, as a continuum.

Consideration of the management of work and non-work life as a continuum includes whether workers achieved partial or full integration from segmented to conflictual and whether employees were satisfied or dissatisfied with the relationship between their work and non-work lives. The workers capacity to integrate both spheres is dependent on their work position, life-cycle position, organisational support (both formal and informal), family help and paid support. By viewing work-life integration as a continuum, variations between workers can be identified such as that some are more successful and satisfied in achieving integration than others.

Hence, work-life integration can be best thought of as a continuum rather than as an on (present) or off (absent) phenomenon (Fig. 1).

Evidence indicates that there are variations and diversity in the way workers manage their work/non-work lives. Some workers were able to achieve informal flexibility depending on the nature of their specific roles-leading to full satisfaction and integration. It is evident that the nature of the workers specific roles at work being single and organisational flexi-time policies resulted in seven workers, across the organisational cases

studied, achieving better integration than the others where two of them were from Unico and four from Hospico and one from Custco.

The evidence also indicates that in some cases, respondents had supports in place to help cope with and develop strategies to deal with work intrusions on the other spheres of their life. These were in the form of informal flexibility provided by understanding managers at the organisational level or a helpful spouse and family/extended family members and also includes paid support. The privileges provided by the Government in the form of flexitime and leniency and understanding from immediate superiors/supervisors appear to have assisted workers in managing their work-life spheres.

In this study, apart from full to partial integration, some workers were also found to experience work-life conflict due to insufficient support. Work-life conflict tends to be associated more with workers with young children (Erickson *et al.*, 2010; Ngah *et al.*, 2009) where workers with young children who struggled to integrate their work/non-work spheres and did not receive support were seen to be experiencing conflict. This is a result of the absence of organisational supports such as an on site creche and superiors support as well as social support. Both an on-site creche and support from the supervisor were found to be important in assisting workers to meet their caring roles and responsibilities at work. Immediate superiors/supervisors played an important role in setting the overall tone and expectations of the workers who reported to them in terms of the extent to which non-work demands would be permitted to influence the work sphere. This study found that supervisors and supportive work-life arrangements were especially important as conduits for satisfaction in workers work-life integration. Additionally, it is important for employing organisations to provide 24 h childcare facilities to cater for those who need to work inconsistent hours or on night shifts.

Evidence in this study demonstrated that there are common characteristics in explaining work-life conflict, such as an unsupportive working culture, i.e., absence of on-site creche, supportive superiors and colleagues as well as the absence of familial and communal supports. It is also evident that work-life conflict can be experienced by all range of workers, women and men with young children as well as single workers with parental/sibling commitments. Thus in order to reduce work-life conflict, the most common source of support needed at work is from supervisors, co-workers and

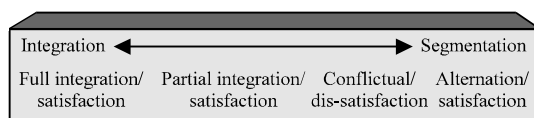


Fig. 1: Work/non-work integration as a continuum

organisational policies as well as familial (spousal, family and extended family) and communal (private helper and neighbours) support.

Apart from full to partial integration of the work/non-work spheres and work-life conflict, workers at the individual level also experienced alternation of work/non-work life as compensation for their lost time during the earlier stage of their life-cycle. It is evident from this study that there are variations in alternation to work/non-work life as workers tend to segment their work and non-work responsibilities according to life-cycle changes. In this study, it was found that when workers reached a certain stage of their life-cycle such as when they no longer had any care commitments or when their children were grown up, despite there being less work/non-work conflict they did not show a tendency to seek a more integrated approach to work and non-work lives and instead showed preference for the alternation in work/non-work life. These were workers in the post-conflict stage who had strong work ethics and thus prioritised their work responsibilities over their non-work responsibilities and appeared to gain more fulfilment from their work. On the other hand, however, some workers who experienced work creep due to work intensification and the nature of their job vocation who had had to put family life aside, particularly when their children were young were now found to focus more on their non-work responsibilities, due to re-arrangements at work. These workers enjoyed the change in their prioritisation and took the opportunity to spend more time with their family members.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, this study found that when work demand was high or when workers had to work away from home, they found various ways of handling non-work responsibilities leading to variations in work-life integration. The findings discussed earlier demonstrate how work-life integration can be best thought of as a continuum rather than as an on (present) versus off (absent) phenomenon. It is evident that the variations in work-life integration identified among the workers in this study show that some achieved greater integration than others. Thus, the various patterns of work-life management found in this study demonstrate the importance of understanding how structural factors can support or impede Malaysian workers integration of their work/non-work lives and how workers manage their work/non-work spheres differently at the micro level.

At the organisational level, policies and arrangements which promote the re-entry of women who have taken time off for childcare and more flexibility in the workplace need to be enforced by public sector organisations in a more serious and systematic manner. The research findings show that despite the Government's encouragement to establish on-site creches, an on-site creche was absent in all the organisational case studies, indicating that they were not seriously engaged with government initiatives on work-life integration. Hence, supports and awareness from Government, organisations and unions, particularly in terms of on-site creches and care of the elderly should be encouraged.

The management in public sector organisations needs to develop new strategies to resolve work-life conflict and dilemmas taking into account cultural characteristics, distinct economic situations, social institutions and family structures. Management should also consider strategies to help workers with work/non-work conflict, particularly if they do not have the financial ability to get private supports. Finally, findings from this study can provide critical learning points for policy makers and employers aware of the need to find culturally appropriate ways to enhance work-life integration, as well as to alleviate the harmful effects of work-life conflict.

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