Between Work Responsibilities and Family Obligations: A Study on the Management of Work-Life Integration among Academics

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Abstract: The management of work-life integration is an important element in the career of any individual, regardless of gender. In this era of globalisation, work and life integration has become a priority not only for dual-career women but also for male workers. A study conducted among the academic workforce in two public universities in Sabah, Malaysia to explore the extent of the perceived importance of managing work-life integration in fulfilling responsibilities at work and family obligations, found similar perceptions in both male and female workers. It is therefore contingent that organisations provide work-life integration programmes to assist their workforce in creating, managing and sustaining a more effective lifestyle. The workforce as organisational assets should be sustained with continuous encouragement and motivation to ensure their dedication and commitment to both their career and religious, family and societal obligations.

Key words: Globalisation, Sabah, Malaysia, sustaining, obligations

INTRODUCTION

The integration of work-life is a process that would facilitate a harmonious relationship between work, family and the management of self (Grady and McCarthy, 2008). Wright *et al.* (2014) Warhurst *et al.* (2008) and Blyton and Dastmalchian (2006) posit the existence of two domains in work-life integration: the work domain and life domain. The first limits the ability of the individual in dealing with family obligations while the second impedes his capacity for managing workplace responsibility. A cohesive integration of the two domains is therefore critical to prevent conflict (Ibrahim, 2015a; Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). Studies have found that the work domain could transmit workplace conflict into life and family in the same way that personal and family conflicts may be demonstrated at work. According to Ibrahim (2015a) work-life integration points to the presence of integration between the domains of work and non-work (the employee's personal life, family, religion and community activities). From this definition, it can be summarised that work and life integration is a process whereby the individual as a worker manages or harmonises his daily life with both workplace responsibility and obligations related to family, religion and community. Based on this concept, this study will discuss the perceptions of the academic staff in two public universities in Sabah, Malaysia on the management of work-life integration at their workplace.

Literature review: The management of work and life in this study refers to the role of the organisation in developing programmes and policies that support the integration of both elements. Friedman and Westring (2015) argues that the onus is on the organisation to create policies, programmes and an environment that supports and encourages employees to manage time and effort that would enable them to fulfil the demands of both work and life domains without eroding work and daily life quality.

Work and life management encompasses workplace practices such as flexible working hours, sustainable working hours, telecommuting and leave from work that would facilitate the integration of work and life and the reduction of conflict that arise from this dual role (Friedman and Westring, 2015; Wright *et al.*, 2014). A study by Gatta and Roos (2004) on university academic staff stresses work-life integration as a major issue that should be addressed due to the perceived notion by lecturers of the absence or lack of organisational support in implementing a system of flexible working hours and maternity leave which had resulted in female academics putting on hold child-bearing plans and male staff arranging teaching schedules to ensure work responsibilities would not be affected.

Hammer and coauthors (2006) assert that an alternative method of work management such as the implementation of flexible working hours, work sharing, part-time work and a reduction of workload greatly contributes towards good work performance and at the same time allows the employee to fulfil his family, community, religious and social obligations without

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detriment to his role in the organisation. A family-friendly policy, according to Davis and Kalleberg (2006), help decrease issues of non-punctuality or absence from work. This study proposes the introduction of health well-being and further education programmes, telecommuting and employee self-achievement awards as a means of demonstrating organisational support and commitment towards the integration of work-life among its employees.

Kee Y. Sabariah and Mahadirin reported that workers' unions in Sabah such as the Sabah Union of Telecom Employees (SUTE) realised the necessity of negotiating work terms and conditions that could contribute towards the integration of work and life in the form of paternity leave, compassionate leave, Haj pilgrimage leave, study leave on company scholarship and the incorporation of company recreational activities as official duty. A collective agreement that clearly and transparently outlines work terms and conditions reflects the commitment of the company in addressing work-life conflicts and in turn becomes a motivating element and increases employee job satisfaction in the organisation.

Sanseau and Smith (2012) assert that long working hours and overtime impact the life domain of employees since these would necessitate them assigning more time at the workplace compared to the home and community. Both male and female respondents were similar in their views of long working hours and overtime being disruptive to the amount of time spent with their families. In this study, the need for flexible working hours is highlighted for both male and female employees. From this, it can be deduced that there is no significant difference between the genders on their perceptions of the importance of work-life integration among employees.

The telecommunication system and the emergence of the concept of teleworker have brought impact on the work and life management of the employee (Wright *et al.*, 2014). The availability of the smart telephone, laptop and various communication devices that could be used outside of the normal confines of office hours, during weekends and on family vacations have in essence eliminated the boundaries between work and everyday life. This technology can in fact be double-edged: while it facilitates faster and more efficient work application and implementation, it can also at the same time infringe on individual time and privacy and subsequently disrupt the everyday life of the employee. Left unchecked, conflict could easily occur and life integration outside of the workplace and working hours would then be affected. However, the Wright *et al.* (2014) study does not ignore the importance of the telecommunication system in
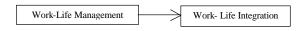

Fig. 1: Conceptual framework of influence of work-life management on work-life integration

facilitating a more flexible management of work and office duties outside the scope of the workplace and normal working hours. The onus would be on the individual to put in place boundaries between work and daily life in the event that telecommunication and such like devices become his main work medium. This study will attempt to identify the influence between the variables of work-life management and work-life integration for the domains of work and life as illustrated in the conceptual framework (Fig. 1).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is exploratory in nature and utilises the questionnaire mode to ascertain the relationship between work-life management and work-life integration. The unit of analysis is drawn from the academic staff of two public universities in Sabah, Malaysia directly involved in the academic calender schedule which starts from September every year. The questionnaire is adapted from the Work Life Balance Questionnaire Survey The University of Auckland, New Zealand in htpp:/www. surveymonkey. com/s (accessed on 3rd March 2015). A total of 83 questionnaires were analysed with all the items measured at individual level based on the Likert scale with 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Sosial Science (SPSS) Version 20 software. Descriptive statistics and the regression test were applied to analyse the data obtained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent demography analysis: The names of the two organisations are not revealed for the purpose of confidentiality. Table 1 presents the respondent profile according to university with Public University A accounting for 72.3% of the overall respondent total while Public University B had 27.7%. Of this number, 53% were female respondents and 47% males. The majority, 56.6%, were in the 31-40 years age range followed by 20.5% of those in the 41-50 years old bracket.

Multiple regression test analysis: Multiple regression test analysis was utilised to examine the influence of the dimension of work-life integration management with the domains of work and life. Table 2 presents the regression analysis of independent and dependent variables.

Table 1: Respondent demography

Demographic variable	Frequency	Percentage
Institution		
Public University A	60	72.3
Public University B	23	27.7
Gender		
Male	39	47.0
Female	44	53.0
Age (years)		
21-30	9	10.8
31-40	47	56.6
41-50	17	20.5
51-60	7	8.4
61 and above	3	3.6
Marital status		
Single	21	25.3
Married	62	74.7

Table 2: Regression analysis of life domain independent and dependent variables

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	SE of the estimate	F-values	Sig.
0.128	0.016	0.002	2.70	1.12	0.292
0.515	0.265	0.220	2.39	7.34	0.000

Table 3: Gender influence, work-life policies, management support, absence of management support in life domain

Model (1, 2)	R	R^2	Standardised coefficents	t-value	Sig.
Gender	0.128	0.016	-0.128	1.062	0.292
Gender	0.515	0.265	-0.089	-0.808	0.422
Work-life integration policies			-0.167	-1.521	0.133
Management support			-0.246	-2.249	0.028
Absence of Management support			0.423	0.842	0.000

Table 4: Regression analysis of work domain independent and dependent variables

Model (1, 2)	R	R^2	Standardised coefficents	t-value	Sig.
0.051	0.003	-0.012	5.55	-	0.672
0.495	0.245	0.200	4.93	-	0.007

Influence of work-life policy, management support and absence of management support in work-life integration in the life domain: Based on the results of the regression analysis whereby the value $R^2 = 0.265$ was indicated for both models with the inclusion of the gender variable in the first block ($R^2 = 0.016$), the work-life integration variance for the life domain could be explained by the independent variables of gender, work-life policies, support from the organisation and absence of organisational support at 26.5%. The Anova test found the value of F = 1.12 (model 1) 5.87 (model 2) to be significant and indicated that the regression model could be used to examine the influence of work-life management on the integration of work and the daily life of academicians (Table 3).

Analysis of findings found the gender aspect impacted by the implementation of work-life management in their life domain. The absence of support from the organisation in the management of work-life integration posted the highest β value among all the independent

Table 5: Gender influence, work-life policies, management support, absence of management support in work domain

Model	R	R^2	Standardised coefficents	t-value	Sig.
Gender	0.051	0.003	-0.051	-0.425	0.672
Gender	0.495	0.245	-0.030	-0.274	0.785
Work-life integration policies			-0.304	-2.76	0.007
Management support			-0.111	-1.017	0.313
Absence of management support			0.362	3.29	0.002

variables at β = 0.423, t = 0.841, p = 0.000. This indicates that when there was no support forthcoming from the organisation on work-life integration management, the level of life conflict in the work of the employee increased to 42%. The second highest β value was derived from organisation support variable at .β = -246, t = 2.24, p = 0.28. When the organisation was supportive of work-life integration management, the influence of the life domain in the employee's work decreased by 24.6%. Work and life policies posted the value of β = -16.7, t = 1.52, p = 0.33 which showed that when the organisation improvedon these, the influence of the employee's life domain on his workwas reduced by 16.7% (Table 4 and 5).

The regression analysis revealed a value of $R^2 = 0.24.5$ for both models with the inclusion of the gender variable in the first block ($R^2 = 0.003$). However the gender variable in this model was not significant. Therefore, the work-life integration variance for the work domain could be explained by the independent variables of work-life policies, support from the organisation and absence of organisational support at 24.5%. The Anova test found the value F = 0.181 (model 1) to be not significant; 5.44 (model 2) was significant to show that the regression model was applicable to examine the influence of work-life management on work and life integration of academicians.

The regression analysis also indicated gender to be unaffected by work-life management in their work domain. Absence of organisational support in the management of work-life integration posted the highest β value among all other independent variables at 0.362, t = 3.29, p = 0.002. This showed that when the organisation failed to provide support in work-life integration, the level of conflict in the work and life of academicians increased by 36%. The less support there was from the organisation, the more impact or effect there would be on the work domain of the employee. The second highest β value was work-life integration policies at β = -0.304, t = 2.76, p = 007. An indication from this was that when the organisation improved their work-life integration policies, the influence of the employee's work domain on his job was reduced by 30.4%. The lowest β value, β = -0.111, t = 1.01, p = 0.313, was derived from the support from the organisation

variable. It can therefore be deduced here when the organisation extends support towards the management of work-life integraton, it would effectively lower the influence of the work domain on the daily life of academicians by as much as 11%.

Since, work-life management influences the life domain, failure to facilitate integration between the former with the domain of work would inevitably give rise to life conflicts affecting the work of academicians. For the life domain, both male and female employees are similarly impacted by how the work-life integration is managed. This implies that regardless of gender, demands in life limit their capability in fulfilling work responsibilities.

The most obvious example of this is in terms of female staff utilising their maternity leave; when this occurs, the work assigned to them would then be set aside for that specific duration. Putting work on hold would also occur for male staff in the event that they take paternity leave during the birth of their children. The likelihood of the emergence of conflict in life and work is very probable if the employees fail to integrate life and work due to unavoidable demands in life. The respondents in the context of this study would likely face conflict when they fail to fulfil their responsibilities as lecturers and resort to postponing classes due to maternity or paternity leave. Organisational support in this instance is critical and necessary for the utilisation of e-learning or smart learning systems, permission to haveguest lecturers, merging or 'compressing' lecture hours to ensure all topics are sufficiently taught before the scheduled maternity leave and allowing replacement classes for male lecturers intending to take paternity leave. The findings of this study correspond with the assertion by Gatta and Roos (2004) that academic staff experience life conflict at work regardless of gender. To attain job stability, several life-related aspects are put on hold such as decisions on when or whether to have children. If the respondent demography is to be scrutinised, the majority are in the 31-40 years old age range and at a stage in life whereby careers are being built and job confirmation determined. It is therefore not impossible for conflict to surface when integrating life and work expectations if no support is forthcoming from the organisation.

However, gender was found to have no influence on the work domain of staff of both universities. The findings on this were not significant, an indication that work demands did not impact the work-life integration process. Work conflict for both male and female respondents did not spill over into their daily life. Two possibilities could have contributed to this non-significant findings: that the universities provided good work-life management to their staff and that the academic staff was able to adapt the demands of work and life and practised good planning that did not disrupt or adversely affect the two domains.For instance, the two institutions in the study practised a solid work policy and provided an enviable environment to their academic staff in the form of playschools, mosques, adequate maternity leave and flexible working hours. Telecommuting and e-learning or smart learning that facilitated online teaching and learning outside of university ground and regular work hours were also available. These policies and management support helped academic staff integrate work and life more efficiently and reduced the influence of work conflict on life. Similar findings on the ability of flexible work hours in reducing work conflict on life are documented in Sanseau and Smith (2012). Wright *et al.* (2014) view the availability of information technology and the telecommuting system as enablers towards job completion within a time-frame and location that are flexible and allow the employee to address the demands in their life. Sanseau and Smith (2012), however reiterate the need for the employee to establish boundaries between work and life when working with technology such as the smart phone, laptop and other devicesto ensure that work commitments do not infringe onto the time allocated for family and community.

Apart from good work-life integration, both male and female respondents were also likely to practise proper management and planning of family and life obligations. The academic staff in the context of this study were able to adapt their lecture schedules, although the university semester break no longer coincided with their children's school holidays. In general, the academic staff would experience conflict due to this mismatch of university and school semester and holiday schedule whereby their children would be on vacation while they themselves would still be working. The male and female academic staff were able to put in place proper work planning and adapted the demands of work in their daily life. As posited by Gatta and Roos (2004), there is a need for academic staffto plan wisely in terms of family vacations, child-bearing timeframes and suitable time allocations in the event that the family home is not near the universities. This is to ensure that work problems would not be transferred onto daily life and subsequently create conflict due to aninability to integrate the demands of work and life.

The non-support of the organisation towards the management of work-life integration heavily influences both the domains of work and life in the individual. In the context of this study when the organisation was perceived as not supportive of the integration, conflict

inevitably arose as the employee tried to manage the demands of both work and life. Management support was therefore a critical element in reducing the conflict in the life domain. Friedman and Westring (2015) views the purpose of integration and life management as a form of employee motivation to encourage them to integrate their daily life without affecting work quality.

The percentage of married respondents in this study was 75%. This in itself indicated their need for support from the organisation to create a viable integration of work and life without which conflict would emerge in both domains. For unmarried respondents, obligations in life were towards family, parents and personal daily life. This is in line with the findings of Ibrahim (2015a, b) whereby non-married respondents too have commitments and obligations towards parents and siblings. Likewise, being an academic necessitates a high degree of work commitment not only in terms of teaching but also in research, writing, consultation, conferences and community service. Organisational support contributes towards the motivation at work and increase in the quality of output. The findings of Leslie *et al.* (2006) and Davis and Kalleberg (2006) argue that organisations with provisions for family-friendly policies would positively impact work performance and at the same time assist employees in fulflling their family, community and social activity obligations without detriment to their work. Gatta and Gatta and Roos (2004) opine that many among the academic staff felt pressured due to the failure of their universities to provide viable work-life integration policies. Absence of such organisational initiatives necessitates individual wisdom in managing daily life so as to ensure their chances of career advancement are not affected.

In this study, work-life integration policies were found to greatly impact the work domain. The findings demonstrated that improvements in work-life integration policies would lead to a decrease in the influence of the work domain on the daily life of academicians. The existing policies helped employees organise their daily duties so as not to prevent them from fulfilling their family obligations. The organisation therefore has an important role in ensuring the periodic improvement of work-life integration policies. Among the job terms or job practices offered by the universities to their academic staff were maternity and paternity leave, compassionate leave, Haj pilgrimage leave, flexible working hours, sharing of teaching load, daycare centre and telecommuting that involved online teaching. However, these facilities and work practices should be continuously improved with the university managements periodically assessing the needs of their academic staff. The work demands of

academicians necessitate work-life integration policies for career advancement opportunity in this field is very wide. The availability of study leave and sabbatical leave for instance assists in career development and at the same time help integrate work-life in the work domain. This study leave does not curtail family and community involvement; in fact privileges in the form of children allowances and living stipend are provided.

CONCLUSION

The management of work-life responsibilities brings impact to work-life integration for both the domains of work and life. In view of this, to reduce work conflict in life and vice versa, the organisation should focus on improving work-life integration policies and increasing organisational support. This would serve to motivate academicians to continuously develop in their careers with minimal conflict as a result of work-life integration failure. This study demonstrates the important implication on harmonious employment relations and human resource management within the organisation whereby the aspect of work-life integration must be viewed as among the main agendas in organisational development and the production of a competitive workforce. Harmony between work and life should be a pre-requisite in the working life of the individual to ensure career development is in tandem with the fulfilment of family, religious and community obligations.

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