

WORK-LIFE BALANCE FOR WORKING PARENTS: PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract *The changing dynamics of the workplace has forced the organizations to frame policies which are employee-centric. The workforce today is more dynamic and young in nature and wants to exude greater control over their work and life. The social structure of family is disintegrating more into nuclear families where both the parents are working. Pressures at work, competition, and target based management styles have resulted in increased pressure and also long working hours. The parents who overstay at work are continuously stressed out thinking of their child/children and associated responsibilities. The kids on the other hand feel neglected or may sometimes go astray, celebrate misadventures or bond in unfocussed companionships. The study explores the issues faced by such working parents and the surviving strategies adopted by them. The answers to a questionnaire administered on working parents has been analyzed to understand the underlying demographic as well as other variables to find out work-life imbalances. The findings of the study will benefit organizations as they will be able to design practices which focus on employee work/life issues and thus reap dividends. This will result in a more satisfied and productive workforce which is less stressed. Also such practices will result in the creation of employers' brand and the reputation of being an employer of choice.*

Keywords: *Work-Life Balance, Working Parent, Work Performance, and Personal Life.*

1. INTRODUCTION

For some, work is worship, for others a compulsion. In trying to churn out reasons as to why people work, money and economic fulfillment top the list of answers among others which harp on passion, self fulfillment etc. People have indulged in paid work since times immemorial and continue to do so, with more vigour and variety at offer. With passage of time, the social as well as gender inequations of work and personal life have undergone a sea change.

Glancing in the latter half of the last century - during the 1940's, and 1950's, men managed work and women managed life. Women were involved in taking care of the household work and also ensured the smoothening of the emotional underpinnings in the family (Moen, 1998) A significant change that occurred in the 1960's and 1970's was the increase in women entering the labor force, as well as the increase in single parent homes. This made the gender boundaries fuzzy, that defined who is responsible for work issues and who is responsible for life issues (Quick et al., 2004; Greenblatt, 2002).

With the gender roles being blurred, the possibility of work-life spillover has multiplied. All employees, both male and female, now deal with aspects of homemaking

and breadwinning. This has led to more and more people experiencing more worry about life issues during work hours and since they feel uneasy about the invasion of their personal life on their work-life, they also begin to experience more worry about their job during non-work/life hours (Quick et al., 2004).

Change has been conspicuous on the organizational front too. Globalization, the internationalization of markets, economies, and corporations, has changed the way modern organizations do business. The change brought not only opportunities in abundance but also left corporations struggling with challenges related to technology, economics, politico-legal, and socio-cultural aspects. The firms have to make necessary adjustments to the changing trends especially those related to the workforce. According to the organizational learning theory, organizations adapt to changing environment by adopting defensive strategies and use knowledge offensively to best fit with the environment. This includes people at all levels becoming involved in providing strategic perspectives in decision making.

As India started looking outside, the outward stride of the Indian womenfolk, away from home and hearth to the workplace, became speedier and smarter. Globalization brought forth unheard of opportunities and also introduced new work structures and culture. The influence of the

western world was sharp to see as women started opting for the unconventional sectors, night shifts in BPOs, sales field work, etc. Women also climbed up to become team leaders and company heads. This outward outlook at the macro level not only improved the available pool of potential employees (quantitatively and perhaps qualitatively for some skills), it also raised issues over the possible tilt in the work-life balance of the men folk. Equally, significant concern for work-life balance of the working women was highlighted. The long established patterns of working are being challenged at a dynamic pace by virtue of the businesses work imposing more burdens on individuals, families, and the household. People have started seeking solutions to the impact of long working hours, high stress, low energy, frequent travel, etc. This impact is so predominant in determining the quality of their life that even the employers are looking to the workplace for practical solutions to such issues.

The widening scope of work, lifestyle, educated workforce, shrinking family size has resulted in creation of nuclear entities where both men and women are working. With dual career becoming the norm, such parents are under a great deal of pressure to support the children, fulfill their needs and take care of other responsibilities as well. Every individual want to strike a better balance between work and life. People try to handle an increasing amount of workplace stress along with a wide range of factors including family, friends, health, and self.

Work-life balance for all the workers (male and female) has taken varied dimensions. The prominent among them include: quantity and quality of work, creativity, cultural evolution, and physical and mental well being. These dimensions have important influences on various other factors that may build (or decline) company coffers and increase (or decrease) the happiness quotient of the workers (men and women).

2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The concept of work/ life balance and related issues is gaining popularity with the changing business demands and change in demographics of the workforce. The studies conducted so far have discussed how organizations are designing their HR policies to be employee-centric. Progressive Indian organizations are now responding to the needs of their workforce and providing adequate support. The study is oriented towards the outlook of working parents in organizations and focuses on their concern for kids and elders. The study tries to find out the strategies adopted by working parents and organizations to cope with work/life related issues.

The study will be helpful in furthering the cause and concern of working parents and the amount and kind of support desired from their employer. The employer can gain an

insight into understanding the employee perspective and can design their policies that are employee - centric.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Competition, renewed interest in personal lives and agile workforce has led to serious considerations of the concept of work-life balance. The genesis of work-life balance can be traced as early as 1930's where W.K. Kellogg Company created four daily six-hour shifts instead of customary three eight-hour shifts and the change reportedly resulted in increased morale and efficiency of workers. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's book, *Work and Family in the United States: A Critical Review and Agenda for Research and Policy*, published in 1977, brought the issue of organizational research on focus. In 1986 the term "work-life balance" was coined and 80's and 90's saw companies offering work-life balance programs which were primarily targeted to support working women with children. Twenty-first century ushered in an era where organizations saw more people friendly practices skewed towards employee welfare. In today's times the work-life balance programs are less gender specific, oriented towards dual career couples, recognizing other non-work commitments as equally pressing.

The measurement of work-life balance was done by scholars in the past on varying dimensions. Five different scales were suggested by Clark (2000) to measure work- life balance. The scales were role conflict, work satisfaction, home satisfaction, family functioning, and employee citizenship. Tausig (2001) also suggested perceived work-life balance using two items:

1. The extent to which workers feel successful in balancing work and personal life
2. The amount of conflict they face in balancing work and personal life.

Ezzedeen, S. R., & Swiercz, P. M. (2002) in a study reveal that those employees are often preoccupied with work when not working, and when in the company of family and loved ones, experience an inability to be meaningfully engaged in non-working spheres. According to the author "modern work has become knowledge based, fluid, and intellectual; overworked people think about work all of the time. For many people, work has become cognitively intrusive."

Fisher-Macaulay, Stanton, Jolton & Gavin (2003) proposed three major dimensions of work life balance i.e., a) work interference with personal life b) personal life interference with work and c) work/personal life enhancement. Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grzywacz (2006) developed measure of work/life enrichment that measures work to family and family to work potential resource gains through which enrichment might occur. These include time, energy,

resources, support, self-fulfillment, perceptions by others, behavior, skills, knowledge, perspectives, self-esteem/self-efficacy, moods, and attitudes.

3.1. Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance can be defined as finding the right balance between work and life and feeling comfortable with both work and family commitments. The concept of work-life balance is built on the idea that working life and personal life are essentially complementary to one another in bringing about completeness to one's life. However, they are often seen as competing objectives which may demand prioritization and hence subsidize a fuller life.

The balance between work, personal work and personal time has to be maintained in the best possible manner. Time is often considered to be most fluid in nature and people find it difficult to manage time in both personal and professional front. With the changing lifestyles, demanding work life, disintegrating family system, people often complain about not finding enough time or being fatigued too much. Striking the right balance between the two is what makes a happy and a winning employer. Organizations in terms of their practices have to adopt those which match the employee expectations.

Someone's life can be considered unbalanced when the amount of time one works causes some sort of conflict or stress in other areas of life. The choices people make about their priorities can cause conflict with bosses, coworkers and/or family members. Stress can also be due to spillover where a person is worrying about life issues while at work and worrying about work issues while at home. Stress can also come from feelings of guilt about the choices being made (Quick et al., 2004). Someone's work-life balance is primarily based on their own perception of balance.

The reason for increased focus in work-life balance can be attributed to the following factors:

- a. More women joining the workforce
- b. People carrying out part-time jobs
- c. Nuclear families
- d. People handling work pressures
- e. Expanding job roles/responsibilities
- f. International trends coming in
- g. Better lifestyle
- h. Younger workforce

Bratton and Gold (2003) define work-life balance as, "the relationship between the institutional and cultural times and spaces of work and non-work in societies where income is predominantly generated and distributed through labor

markets." This includes the concept of paid work and also indicates the trend of how our home life and work life can merge. According to Lewis (2000) the way to achieve work-life balance is to adopt an approach that is "conceptualized as a two way process involving a consideration of the needs of employees as well as those of employers."

From an economic perspective work-life balance is a trade-off between time given to work and leisure given the market price for labor. A more clear definition of work-life balance, given by Jones (2003) says, "Work-life balance is meant to articulate the desire of all individuals - not just those with families or caring responsibilities - to achieve and maintain a 'balance' between their paid work and their outside work, whatever their 'life' involves from childcare and household work to leisure or self-development."

Labor economics also focuses on the number of hours of work that individuals wish to supply at the going wage and overtime rate, along with the times of day or week or year when they prefer to supply their labor (Bosworth, 1981). However evidences reveal sub-optimal outcomes for individuals where the number of hours of work is either longer or shorter than their expectations, or the time of work is not suited to their lifestyles (Bosworth et al., 1996). It is also stated that if a market is left on its own, it is unlikely to deliver a fair or equitable work life balance. With the passage of time scope of balance between work and life has changed from a narrow perspective of health and safety to a wider set of issues ranging from care for dependents to personal needs. Increasingly it is also recognized that work is not limited to formal employment but also includes caring responsibilities that occur at various stages of life along with various preferences individuals have about the time they want to devote to a perspective. Case studies by UMR Research (UMR) in October 2003 identified three components that need to be in balance to achieve a healthy lifestyle: paid work, unpaid work, and personal time (UMR Research 2003).

3.2. Does Work-Life Balance Matter to Employees?

The inherent concern for familial responsibilities is sharply reflected in the concern of Indians over balancing work and life. According to the bi-annual global consumer opinion survey by market research company, The Nielsen Co., done in 2008, about 20% of Indians cite achieving this balance as their main worry, and 13% cite the economy as the second biggest concern. (The Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey, conducted by Nielsen Customized Research, was conducted in April 2008 among 28,253 Internet users in 511 countries from Europe, Asia-Pacific, North America and West Asia).

“A booming economy has resulted in better jobs and salaries. However, this has brought in long work schedules, leaving individuals with very little time to balance their work and life,” said Sarang Panchal, Nielsen’s managing director, customized research, Asia-Pacific, India, China and Greater China, in a report by Rajeshwari Sharma in the financial daily Mint (July 7, 2008). Also, numerous examples of employees quitting because of poor work-life balance can be found in most urban cities of India and especially reported/ documented in organized sector.

According to a survey conducted by Delhi based Marketing and Development Research Associates (MDRA) during November 23 - December 7, 2009 on behalf of Outlook Business and Avtar Career Creators, 87% of the surveyed individuals considered work-life balance important.

3.3. Does Work-Life Balance Matter to Employers?

In 2002 a major research study carried out by researchers at the University of Cambridge found that family-friendly policies result in positive effect on employee commitment with increased organizational productivity. Organizations in their turn have found it to be cost effective to adopt work-life balance practices that not only influence the employees’ job satisfaction but also ensure greater performance at the work front.

Bangalore-based Infosys has 49,400 employees and is one of the major Indian firms providing software-outsourcing services to clients in the U.S. and elsewhere. The company tries to establish a sense of work-life balance for employees early in their careers. Interestingly, the employees are encouraged to take half-hour exercise breaks during work and go back home in reasonable hours. This helps in reducing burnout and improves productivity.

Global giant PricewaterhouseCoopers International Limited believes that people are successful when they have the flexibility to meet the demands of their professional lives and accomplish personal goals outside their offices. In a bid to enable work-life balance for their employees, the company has created a flexible working environment to enable provision of timely client service and also enable the employees to have enough control over their personal life.

Also, there is a significant body of evidence provided by major world-wide employers such as IBM, GlaxoSmithKline, BT, Lloyds TSB, and others, which shows that work life balance policies and practices can bring clear benefits to their business (The Business Case, DTI, 2001, and A Good Practice Guide, DFEE, 2000). Valid empirics outline the benefits of offering flexible and special leave arrangements to employees in terms of improving staff recruitment, reducing turn-over,

absenteeism and the costs associated with all this as well as increasing employee satisfaction and productivity. “There’s a very clear business imperative for us, as what distinguishes us from our competitors is the quality of our people. Since we introduced 7 Work Options, morale has improved among individuals working flexibly, leading to better productivity” (Fiona Cannon, Head of Equal Opportunities, Lloyds TSB, cited in The Business Case, DTI, 2001: p.32).

It is important that the change enabling work-life balance commitment from the employer must come as a top down approach. Once the CEO or the organizational head decides in the direction after weighing the business imperatives with the cost of employee turnover, it sets clarity of vision in the internal environment of the organization. This is expected to bring greater employee loyalty, motivation, and therefore productivity. When Citigroup initiated flexi-working, the then CEO Chuck Prince took special efforts to emphasize and reinforce the concept. The new work method was tested before it was included in the company’s policy.

According to the survey conducted by MDRA (November-December 2009), 80% of the surveyed companies considered that work-life balance initiatives would benefit their companies.

It is critical that employers in India too, give a serious thought to the issue which is now assuming a compelling business case. The workforce demographics are evolving, the workplace is changing, work dimensions are expanding and so must the work schema.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the challenges faced by employees in managing work and home life.
2. To explore the specific issues faced by working parents and their coping strategies.
3. To find out the effect of work-life balance on employee satisfaction and employee commitment.
4. To gain an insight into practices adopted by companies to help an employee become more effective.
5. To understand how employees perceive their company as being supportive of their out-of-work needs.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. A paper and pencil survey was administered on potential participants. Participants were asked to fill out the survey and return as per their convenience. The questionnaire was also e-mailed to a few respondents. Due to shortage of time 100 questionnaires were sent, out of which 78 were returned. 6 of the filled-in questionnaire were incomplete, therefore rejected. Effectively, 72 questionnaires were subjected to data

interpretation.

- The survey included three scales along with demographics. Also working parent's issues were adequately covered. The demographic questions asked about age, gender, marital status, number of children, number of elders in the family, and employment status.
- The study was conducted on working parents whose kids are in any stage of school education. Parents were conveniently selected from population residing in north Delhi. Either of the parents could form a part of the sample.
- The first scale used in the study is Work Interference with Personal Life (WIPL) scale developed by Fisher-McAuley et al. (2003) and validated by J. Hayman (2005). The scale has been chosen with slight modifications to assess if the participants feel they had a balance between work and life. The scale has 7 items and the responses are scored using a five point Likert scale. Item 7 in the questionnaire is reverse scored. The scores can vary from 7-35 with higher score signifying less work-life balance.
- The second scale measures how often individuals take initiatives with regard to work-life balance. This scale was developed by Bolino and Turnley (2005) and contains 15 items. However 2 items were dropped from the list as their relevance in Indian context was found to be limited (Cronbach's alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .91$). Participants respond as to how often they engage in these specific behaviors using a 5 point Likert scale. Scores can range from 15 – 75 with the higher score signifying more frequent engagement in these behaviors.
- The third scale was used to measure the current state of work life balance programs being offered by their employers. In addition questions were asked on specific household role and responsibilities, time spent with children, regular school work, time and attention to the child, and stresses related to managing both the perspectives.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Work-Life Balance

N	Mean	Standard Deviation
N=72	18.63	4.10
Male (n1=39)	18.73	4.16
Female (n2=33)	18.66	4.13

6. DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

Of the 100 questionnaires that were given to the participants, 81 filled responses were returned. Out of the returned, 9

responses were rendered not fit for analysis as five were incomplete, and 2 respondents had kids not falling in the category of school going kids, and 2 questionnaires were returned blank. Data for 72 responses (n=72) were subjected to analysis. There were 33(45.8%) female and 39(54.2%) male respondents. Scores for work-life balance were determined by adding individual scores on the 7th question in part 1. The 7th question was reverse scored. Higher values for the work-life balance score represent less work-life balance.

For the total 72 respondents, the frequency mean has been low and therefore work-life imbalance is not high. Generally work-life balance studies report higher imbalance in work and life in case of female employees; however the study shows almost identical pattern of work-life balance for the male and female respondents as the reported means are not significantly different.

6.1. Individual Initiative Activities

Scores for individual initiative behavior were determined by adding the individual scores on the 13 questions of part 2.

Table 2: Individual Initiative Behavior

N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total (72)	33.22222	7.897624
Males(39)	33.15942	7.986428
Females(33)	33.3	7.85

Individual work activities for male and female showed no significant difference in their mean. Majority of respondents fell in the "sometimes" category of the Likert scale. It might be possible that the data suffers from central tendency error. With the technology connecting people across the boundaries, 33% of the participants frequently checked email or voice mails at home. Almost 75% people reported altering personal plans because of work.

6.2. Work-Life Balance Programs

The questions concerning work-life balance programs asked participants about 10 specific programs. Participants were asked about whether or not their company offered the program. Many of the participants did not complete all of the questions for all of the programs. The aim of the question was to understand the current state of availability of such programs

For improving work-life balance of an employee, and subsequently the organizational productivity, constraints upon individual's work-leisure choices need to be slackened. Organizations' have to adapt to various flexible work patterns/

Table 3: Work-Life Balance Programs Offered by Corporate

S.No	Programs	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't know (%)
1	Flexible Work schedules	47	47	6
2	Leave of absence for education	53	28	19
3	Part-time work	28	71	01
4	Brief(1-2 months) paid sabbatical	10	58	32
5	Work for home occasionally	50	40	10
6	Work from home all the time	3	86	11
7	Compressed work week	19	61	20
8	Paid maternity leave	53	19	28
9	Paid Paternity leave	25	36	29
10	Paid leave for sick family member (child, parent spouse)	28	61	11

arrangements suited to the needs of working parents. The data do not indicate a favourable work-life balance support given by the organizations. Parenthood which brings joy to the life of so many people, is surprisingly not reportedly supported by lot of organizations. 28% of the people were unaware of paid maternity leave in their organization. Compressed work week leaves lot of scope for working parents to have more time for children on weekend, yet 61% of the organizations have no provision.

Table 4: Flexible Options Preference

S.No.	Work-Life Balance Programs	% Respondents in Favor
1	Flexible Work schedules	58
2	Leave of absence for education	28
3	Part time work	11
4	Brief(1-2months) paid sabbatical	17
5	Work from home occasionally	18
6	Work from home all the time	8
7	Compressed work week	27

A large number of respondents favored flexi-timings and compressed work week programs to improve the work-life balance.

Table 5: Time Spent by Working Parents on Various Activities

S.No.	Activity	% of Respondents
1	Homework	36
2	Preparation for exam/test/class activity	22
3	Routine practice work	32
4	Indoor activities	60
5	Outdoor activities	28

Individual work activities for male and female showed no significant difference in their mean.

Table 6: Help Alternatives for Child Care

S. No.	Help Alternatives	%age of respondents
1	Spouse	54
2	In-laws	31
3	Parents	15
4	Servants	0
5	Crèche/Day care centers	0

54% of the respondents (39) seek help and rely on their spouse for taking care of their children. Interestingly all of these respondents were male working parent. 22 respondents, i.e., about 31% reported that the child care responsibility was shared by in-laws and the remaining 11 respondents, i.e., 15% were helped by their parents for the purpose. None of the respondents took help from servants or day care centers.

Table 7: Daily Time spent with child

S. No.	Hours Spent	% age of respondents
1	<2 hours	12
2	2-3 hours	21
3	3-4 hours	22
4	4-5 hours	21
5	>5hours	24

Of the 72 respondents, 9 (12%) responded to be spending less than 2 hours with their children, another 15 (21%), 16 (22%), 15 (21%), 17 (24%) spent 2-3 hours, 3-4 hours, 4-5 hours, and more than 5 hours respectively. Given the Indian culture of parents closely monitoring children's indoor and outdoor activities, the lesser time spent can be inferred as

indicative of work-life imbalance, compelling a sacrifice on the number of hours spent with children.

Table 8: Periodicity of Seeking Child's Educational Progress

S. No.	Periodicity of seeking child's progress	%age of respondents
1	Once a week	0
2	Once in 2 weeks	8
3	Once a month	10
4	Once in 6 months	13
5	Rarely	57

Majority of the respondents (41 or 57%) rarely sought progress of their ward from the school/educational institution. 9 respondents did not opt for any of the periodicity alternatives given as their children were past surveillance-desirous school life and were either in colleges or were settled in jobs. 8% (6) enquired about their children's progress once in 2 weeks, 10% (7) once a month and 13% (9) once in 6 months.

Table 9: Work-Stress Related Ailments

S. No.	Ailments	% age of respondents
1	Hypertension	18
2	Obesity	10
3	Diabetes	15
4	Frequent headaches	21
5	None	28
6	Others	08

For a significant number of respondents the work related stress had manifested itself into frequent headaches (15), hypertension (13), diabetes (11), and obesity (7). 20% responded to be not suffering from any occupation induced physical/mental problems. 6 respondents quoted some other ailments which included cervical spondylosis, joint pains, and worsening of eye vision.

6.3. Suggestions to the Corporate

Work-life balance is increasingly becoming a consciously prominent factor influencing – a potential employee seeking work in an organization, an incumbent employee's satisfaction and performance; and its absence is also becoming a potential risk leading to employee turnover. Employers need to accept the need for work-life balance and the sooner they appreciate the compulsions and take concrete steps in the direction, the better it would be for their image and performance.

In the light of the findings of the study, flexible work schedules are the most sought after feasible options which are likely to improve the work-life balance of the employees especially if they are working parents. Compressed work week and work from home options also find favor amongst the respondents which give clear indication to the organization to remodel their work assignments to suit mutual requirements. Organizations must not overlook employee perspective and design strategies which help align the personal objective of the employee with that of the organization. The renewed awareness and interest in personal life of employees must no longer be considered a perk by the employer but rather a compelling business sense!

7. CONCLUSION

The importance given to personal life in addition to work is not new to the working Indian. This concern and importance may at times lead to stress at work place or work related stress may interfere with a person's personal agenda, in case there is an imbalance between the time and task prioritization causing neglect of one at the expense of the other.

Working parents seek more time for their personal life for which they expect organization's help in the form of flexible work schedules and work from home options. Organizations on their part have begun to realize the significance of work-life balance for a happy work force. But the expanse and pace of this realization is slow. Work-life balance in the coming time would be part of company policy of the organizations and be seen as a critical strategy to target better employee satisfaction and lower the cost of employee turnover.

8. LIMITATIONS

- Generalization on the basis of the said study would be erroneous due to its small coverage. The sample in the study may not be representative of the entire population and therefore the sample inferences suffer from the usual limitations of a sample survey.
- Due to scarcity of time, rigorous statistical treatment of the information gathered could not be done due to which some inferences may have remained latent.
- The study also leaves scope for further analysis on the work-life balance issues of parents with kids going in kindergarten, pre-schools or daycare. Another perspective that needs attention is the training and counseling of working parents.

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