

Leader-member Exchange & Employee Retention: Investigating the Mediating Role of Work-life Balance

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This paper synthesizes the causal mechanism and intends to examine the relationship of leader-member exchange and employee retention through the mediating effect of work-life balance. This framework is based on the social exchange theory and tokenism theory. The hypothesis was tested statistically by analyzing the responses from women employees working in the Information Technology and Business Process Management (IT BPM) industry using SEM AMOS. The result motivates human resource managers to focus on enhancement of healthy leader-member exchange relationship that ensures retention of women talent.

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Introduction

National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM, 2018) credits 7.7 percent of India's GDP to the IT BPM industry and it was estimated to grow to US\$ 350 billion soon. Participation of women employees in the IT industry is second highest (NASSCOM, 2018) which is aided by many factors: gender-inclusive policies, social approval, belief that computer proficiency suits women (Varma, 2010). Organizations demand competence of knowledge, behavior and 24 x 7 work hours which is dull and tedious (Kanwar et al., 2009). This results in discontentment, annoyance, depression, addictions like smoking and alcoholism, lack of interest, displeasure, workplace accidents, relationship breakups, sickness symptoms, digestive tract disorders, insomnia, ocular symptoms like watering, redness, blurred vision, double vision, physical and emotional exhaustion, stress and hypertension (Babu et al.,

2013). Kanter's theory of tokenism argues that minority group or token (women) is treated unfairly by the dominant group (male) leading to stress on tokens resulting in reduced performance outcomes (Zimmer, 1988).

A serious fallacy held by most supervisors is that people quit mainly because of pay (Allen et al., 2010). Though management discussion includes work-life balance (WLB) as a significant agenda but little justice is done to its implementation. Additional understanding is obligatory into ways by which the work-home balance can be successfully accomplished (Delina & Raya, 2013; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) because entry of women in the IT BPM industry will go on rising in the future (NASSCOM, 2018).

Scholars have proposed that leader-member exchange (LMX) connections can reduce women employees perceived job stress and in turn will contract their work-life imbalance (Major & Morganson, 2011) and assure their retention in the organization (Bauer et al., 2006). Social exchange theory (SET) offers a leading theoretical basis (Emerson, 1976) for LMX theory, which is an evolved form of vertical dyad theory (Harris et al., 2005). It suggests that workers feel the responsibility to respond to the leader's supportive behavior with the desired role behaviors, for instance, organization citizenship (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). While most leadership philosophies focus on member attitudes, their drive and performance, LMX is oriented with the connection shared between a leader and his sup-

porter (Ilies et al., 2007). The goal of this study is to understand the association between LMX, WLB and employee retention (ER).

Conceptual Model & Hypothesis Formulation

LMX and ER: Leadership intellectuals discuss that managers significantly impact their subordinates' work and life experience (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Tummers & Bronkhorst, 2014). Therefore, this study examines the significance of leadership by means of LMX theory. The LMX philosophy that stems from social exchange relationship postulates that supervisor has exclusive connection with each member and describes LMX as a reciprocal interaction among leader and the member which is built on a belief of admiration and commitments (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX relationship could be graded and it revolves around employees' perception of their supervisors. Finest grade interactions are incorporated into the leader's coterie of trusted affairs, and so enjoy supplementary welfares and constructive experiences whereas an unhealthy LMX is grounded on signed job contract, and people get limited resources from the leader (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

According to Annabi and Lebovitz (2018), turnover rate of women in the first five years is 56% in the Indian IT BPM industry which is twofold that of men in that industry. High turnover of talented women results in replacement cost, knowledge asset loss and reduced

self-esteem (Dess & Shaw, 2001). As stated by McKinsey Global Institute study, women's participation in Indian workforce can add 16% to its GDP by 2025 (Bhandare, 2015) and International Monetary Fund research estimated an increase by 27% if only its women get an opportunity to join in the workforce as much as men (Economic Times, 2018). Thus, it becomes enormously important to retain women employees. Retention of talented women is a challenge for IT BPM employers (Adya, 2008) and requires leadership support. The sense of being supported by the leader augments employee retention (ER) (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Past literature suggests that ER includes measures, such as concentration on building healthy LMX relationship, (Al-Emadi et al., 2015; Tummers & Bronkhorst, 2014)). Thus, we hypothesized as:

H₁: A healthy LMX relationship would positively impact women employee retention in the IT BPM industry.

LMX and Work-life Balance: Shanmugam (2017) noticed woman's relational nature and that they respect connections they have and they are ready to step back for others if their progressive career poses threat to their relationships. Hence, women tend to quit more often either for nursing their children or for other members of the family. Boyar et al. (2012) reported that due to guilt of neglecting family priorities, stress invades and provokes women to explore other options to switch or leave the work permanently.

Hill et al. (2015) emphasized that LMX eases work family conflict. Past literature has evidence of supportive behavior of leaders with respect to helping their members to manage work-life issues but Major and Morganson (2011) say that in the absence of organizational support, a high quality LMX association would make an effort to provide psychological support to the stressed employee resulting in improved work-life experiences of employed women. Hill et al. (2015) stated that LMX is in inverse relation with work-family conflict. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H₂: A healthy LMX relationship would positively impact effective usage of WLB practices in the IT BPM industry.

Supervisors' empathetic response to female juniors' care-giving tasks is definitely linked to leaders' provision for females' harnessing of versatile work flexibility policies.

Mediating Role of WLB: Kumar and Arora (2012) discovered that WLB and leadership are highly weighted factors that affect ER. WLB is an equilibrium state in which both employer and employee succeed in managing an enhanced job and personal life (Suifan et al., 2016). Epstein et al. (2015) mentioned that WLB studies demonstrate that supervisors' empathetic response to female juniors' care-giving tasks is definitely linked to leaders' provision for females' harnessing of versatile work flexibility

policies. Employees consider their leader as a source for workplace support and therefore, they expect them to compassionately respond to their WLB issues (Hancock & Page, 2013). Such behavior is related to the leader's traits rather than the organization culture. Hence, they influence organization's WLB culture (Epstein et al., 2015). Aleksiȧ et al., (2017) found that high grade LMX can blunt the negative results of dissatisfying WLB.

There are several ER strategies that organisation adopts (Collins, 2007) but these are short term approaches, there seems to be scant enhancement in the ER rates (Deery, 2008) and in case of women, it becomes more convoluted (Emslie & Hunt, 2009). WLB is an organization's effort to improve employee's professional and personal experience with a view to retain them (McCarthy et al., 2010). Thakur and Bhatnagar (2017), Kashyap and Rangnekar (2014), Deery (2008) and Maxwell, (2005) suggest that WLB initiatives, flexible work hours, work from home and breaks from work enhance ER.

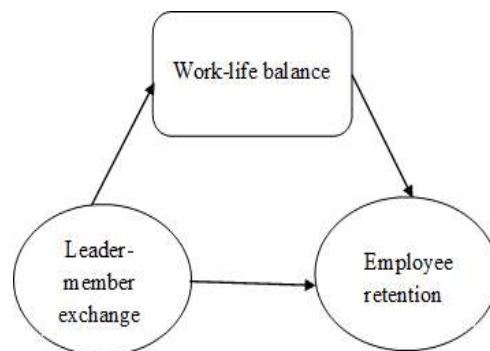
WLB becomes a key driver to retain talent unless managers take genuine interest in executing such initiatives by frequently monitoring the extent of WLB being experienced by employees. Figure 1 portrays the conceptual framework. This model is supported by Kanter's theory of tokenism that encourages organizations to implement retention policies which will result in increasing women number equivalent to dominant group in order to decrease stereotypical

polarization against them (Zimmer, 1988). It is also based on SET that implies that employed women tend to reciprocate the leader's support in providing balance of work and life (Talukder et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2005; Emerson, 1976). We argue that if employed women receive supervisor support in maintaining WLB then the result will be a corresponding shift with an intention to stay.

Vecchio et al. (1985) suggested that association between LMX and turnover must be studied in detail with respect to variables that have mediating effect. Talukder et al., (2018) and Maxwell (2005) recommended that future investigations should give attention on the connection among WLB practices and managers and gain further understanding about organizational outcomes. This study pursues to address the inadequacy in the literature and proposes:

H₃: Work-life balance mediates the association between LMX and employee retention in the IT BPM industry.

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework



Sample & Data Collection

Information from the respondents were accumulated over a ten-week period using snowball sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2010) from employed women professionals in the IT BPM industries from major IT centers like Mumbai, Bengaluru and Pune areas in India. After data screening 447 acceptable responses were acknowledged for analysis. Sample was homogeneous because the study focused on a single gender from the same industry. Table I illustrates the respondent profile.

Measures

The anchors used for three constructs were calculated using a 5 - point Likert scale where, strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5 (Vagias, 2006). Psychometric scales were adopted from different literature sources cited as under:

LMX: It is an independent variable and was measured using Liden and Maslyn's (1998) 12-item MDM-LMX scale ($\alpha=0.89$), with an item for example, "I do not mind working my hardest for my supervisor."

ER: It is the dependent variable with a 3-item scale ($\alpha=0.76$) taken from Langford (2009). The items computing employee retention include items such as "I would like to still be working in this organization in 5 years' time".

WLB: It was assumed to be a mediator variable and was measured using a 3-item scale ($\alpha=0.70$) from Presbitero

et. al., (2016), Example of a sample item is "I can be involved in both work and non-work-related activities."

Analytical Approach

Analysis of data was completed using SPSS 14 and the SEM AMOS 21 software. Measurement model was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to prove model fit (refer Table III) using AMOS. Advantage of SEM is that it reduces the measurement error associated with the observed variable to identify real relationship between observed and latent variable and validates the observed variable to determine whether it examines the intended variable and innovative notional models can be related to discover which has the best fit to the acquired data (Amah, 2018).

Results

Respondents' demographic profiles are given in Table I.

Common Method Bias (CMB)

Although, during data collection, various preventive measures, like maintaining anonymity of the respondents, separating the independent and dependent variable in the survey form and taking responses from experienced women, were taken yet we applied common latent factor (CLF) technique to test possible effect of CMB (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). Results suggested that it is not required to retain CLF in the model and also proved that CMB was not an issue in this study.

Table I Respondent profiles

Employee Details	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (in years)		
21-25 (1)	135	30.20
26-30 (2)	167	37.36
31-40 (3)	96	21.48
41-50 (4)	42	9.40
51-60 (5)	7	1.56
Education		
Diploma (1)	51	11.40
Graduate (2)	238	53.24
Post Graduate (3)	134	29.98
PhD (4)	19	4.25
Others (5)	5	1.11
Family Structure		
Joint (1)	185	41.39
Nuclear (2)	262	58.61
Hierarchy		
Top Management (1)	50	11.18
Sr. Management (2)	70	15.65
Middle Management (3)	327	73.15

Confirmatory Factor Analysis & Measurement Model

Item LMX 1 and 2 had a reduced path loading (LMX 1 $\beta = 0.38$ “I am willing to apply extra efforts beyond those normally required, to meet my supervisor’s work goals.”; LMX 2 $\beta = 0.43$ “My supervisor defends my work actions to his/her superior even without complete knowledge of the issue”). Therefore, outliers were removed which gave a size of 381 (Aguinis et al., 2013). Further analysis did not show any significant improvement in the path loadings, distorted the model fit and caused model redundancy, therefore, LMX 1 and LMX 2 were deleted (Matthews & Toumbeva, 2015). Same model devoid of these two items and the outliers resulted in improved model fit.

Table 2 exhibits correlations among study variables and descriptive statistics (LMX, WLB and ER) that includes CR, AVE, MSV and discriminant validity. Scores were calculated at individual level. Amos version 21 was used to verify the factor loadings of the latent variables. Convergent validity was measured by calculating CR and AVE. CR for WLB was less than 0.70. The AVE for LMX and WLB was less than but near 0.50 which is acceptable as per Fornell and Larcker (1981) and therefore, it can be concluded that convergent validity was established. Values of CR and AVE for ER were within acceptable limits (Malhotra & Dash, 2011; Hair et al., 2010). Discriminant validity was demonstrated by using Fornell and Larcker. (1981) method.

Table 3 contains CFA results. The baseline model (three-factor) qualified the data ($\chi^2 = 196.309$; $df = 91$; $RMSEA = .05$; $GFI = 0.93$; $CFI = .96$; $TLI = .94$) (Arbuckle, 2006; Hair et al., 2010; Bentler & Bonett, 1980). Against the baseline model, two alternative models were tested – both two-factor model forming a single factor model: Model 1 was LMX combined with WLB, and Model 2 was LMX combined with ER. Alternate models showed poor model fit as compared to the baseline model. Thus, fit indices proved the hypothesized baseline model and the sufficient variance between the three constructs.

Results indicated that WLB mediates relationship between LMX and ER.

WLB ($\beta 0.63$; $p < 0.05$) supporting H_2 and WLB showed significant positive impact on ER ($\beta 0.45$; $p < 0.05$) supporting H_3 . Results indicated that WLB mediates relationship between LMX and ER. It is a partially mediated model because direct path from LMX to ER was significant ($\beta 0.31$; $p < 0.05$). Table 4 provides detailed standardized path loading estimates.

Path Loading

As path loadings were significant, H_1 , H_2 and H_3 were supported. LMX displayed significant positive impact on ER ($\beta 0.31$; $p < 0.05$) supporting H_1 . LMX displayed significant positive impact on

Mediation Analysis

Table 5 shows bootstrapping results. Bootstrapping was used to test mediation which indicated that the indirect effect of LMX on ER via WLB was significant (bootstrap 95% confidence, CI).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics

Constructs	Mean	SD	α	CR	AVE	MSV	1	2	3
1. LMX	3.60	0.86	0.89	0.903	0.484	0.408	0.696		
2. WLB	3.51	0.83	0.70	0.700	0.437	0.437	0.637	0.661	
3. ER	3.40	0.94	0.76	0.767	0.526	0.437	0.610	0.661	0.725

Note: SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted, MSV = maximum shared variance

Table 3 Comparison of SEM

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2 / df	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Null model	2732.67	120	22.77	0.30	0.000	0.00	0.23
Measurement model (three factors)	196.30	91	2.15	0.93	0.96	0.94	0.05
Alternate model 1 (LMX + WLB - two factors)	385.469	93	4.14	0.87	0.88	0.85	0.09
Alternate model 2 (LMX +ER – two factors)	318.22	93	3.42	0.89	0.91	0.88	0.08

Table 4 Standardized Path Loadings of the Hypothesized Model

Hypothesis	Paths	β	SE	Result
H1	LMX → ER	0.316	0.082	Supported
H2	LMX → WLB	0.639	0.071	Supported
H3	WLB → ER	0.459	0.107	Supported

Note: β = coefficient estimates; SE = standard error

Table 5 Mediation Analysis & Bootstrapping

Path	Effect	SE	P	LL (95% CI)	UL (95% CI)
Total effect of LMX on ER	0.61	0.059	0.00	0.486	0.718
Direct effect of LMX on ER	0.31	0.102	0.00	0.096	0.494
Indirect effect of LMX on ER	0.29	0.77	0.00	0.168	0.466

Note: LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; CI = confidence interval

Discussion

In the IT BPM industry, women employees have to often reiterate that their competencies are equal to those of men. They aspire to gain recognition in terms of salary equity and elevations. It is grounded on Kanter’s theory of tokenism. Kanter’s perception that in an environment where women have to consistently demonstrate their capabilities, attempting to get noticed for their achievements and keep surmounting role encapsulation, they will choose to move out of the industry. This poses a threat to the organization in retaining talent. Zimmer (1988) discusses about tokenism concept and states that if token status of women is abolished then their position and proportion in the organization will drastically improve.

It was observed that LMX had direct relationship with ER because H₁ was statistically significant. Reinforced by Suifan et al. (2016) it was believed that it is the managerial support that has unfathomable effect in bringing down the

increasing turnover rate. It can also be said that LMX relationships form an antecedent of ER (Kapil & Rastogi, 2018). Hypothesis 2 (H₂) was supported, i.e., LMX positively impacts WLB. From the lens of Major and Morganson (2011), manager and employee are reciprocally benefited from social exchange between leader and his follower. It is the psychological contract that acts as a linking mechanism between LMX and WLB (Hill et al., 2015). Social exchange theorists advocate that employee psychologically hope that their leader will address their requests and needs.

Manager and employee are reciprocally benefited from social exchange between leader and his follower.

Hypothesis (H₃) that assumed WLB to be a mediator between LMX and ER was found statistically significant. This indicates that high-grade LMX relationship results in ER but effective implemen-

tation of WLB practices acts as a facilitator to strengthen the direct relationship. According to Beauregard (2014), social exchange theory postulates that talented women employees who receive WLB benefits, respond by staying with the organization. However, if they are treated unfavorably then WLB initiatives fail to increase retention of such employees. In adverse situations, they may either quit or indulge in counterproductive work behavior. Therefore, Beauregard (2014) cautioned on proper implementation of these initiatives through trained managers.

WLB turns as a partial mediator because the direct association between LMX and ER was significant.

Present study focusses on understanding whether effective implementation of WLB practices act as mediator between LMX relationship and ER. Results showed that WLB turns as a partial mediator because the direct association between LMX and ER was significant (H3 was supported). Also, bootstrap analysis confirmed the hypothesis.

Implications

This study suggests that human resource (HR) leaders should sensitize their team to build a climate of high-grade LMX relationships understand employee thought process, their behavior and factors that influence their motivation to continue with the organiza-

tion. WLB policies should be oriented for career development of women employees with the view to not only retain them but also motivate them to be more committed and productive for their organization. Policy makers and management consultants can incorporate the learning of the present study into diversity and inclusion studies. Principal strength of the IT BPM industry is its employee's tacit knowledge. This framework gives one of the most long-term solution to retain experienced women talent. Academicians could utilize learnings from this study to deliver courses on diversity and inclusion, gender-based studies and studies on strategic human resource management. Moreover, discoveries of this study agree with the two theories namely SET and Kanter's theory of tokenism as leading support (Liden et al., 1993; Zimmer, 1988; Emerson, 1976).

Limitations & Future Research

As this study was conducted in the IT BPM organizations, expanding it to other sectors would be a useful attempt. Therefore, LMX related future studies could include supervisors' response. Majority of respondents belonged to the junior and middle management hierarchy. Including senior management positions may result in different findings. A gender-based comparison could be studied in future. A multi-country comparison and cross-cultural studies (Hofstede, 2001) could also be conducted. Role of empathy in the existing model that leads to ER could be studied by future researchers (Sampath et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This paper contributes to extant LMX theory (based on social exchange theory) by demonstrating that positive encouragement strategies are linked with constructive social exchange methods like LMX in present-day IT BPM industry. The results of the study offer substantial understanding on the role of LMX in implementing WLB policies and retaining women employees that sensitizes HR managers in creating practices that ensures a balance of work and life. It also provides insights into the link between the ER practices to maintain inclusion of women in the work force.

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