

Work-life Balance: Does Management Care?



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Introduction

Work-life balance is one of the major themes that have emerged during the last decade in our country as the result of considerable work intensification which was caused by increase business competition and women participation in the work force. To respond to competition, organizations demand higher performance and commitment from their employees, which in turn has resulted in working longer and prioritizing work over personal life. Irrespective of gender these requirements have an impact on overall life satisfaction of employees. The aim of this presentation is to highlight the need to consider work-life balance in a more serious manner by management.

Firstly I will talk about the meaning of work-life balance and its importance; secondly I will focus on the relevance of Work-life balance in the Sri Lankan context, and finally work-life balance practices that can be used in organizations will be discussed.

Work-Life Balance and its Meaning

I would like to ask a question before I begin to search the meaning of Work-life balance. Why and how has work-life balance become a major issue since the employees choose to work and get paid for it? One obvious answer came is overwork. One Sri Lankan study conducted by Akuratiyagamage and Opatha (2004) on the grievances of the managers in the banking sector found that hours of work caused high level of grievances among them. This factor is identified throughout the modern world. If you are prepared to work for a certain times and you can get a leave when required, balancing work and life would not be an issue. The lack of balance in work and life brings negative effects on one's body, mind and soul. As one Australian researcher (Pocock, 2003) points out '...the moodiness at home that results from working excessively long hours, the guilt that parents feel for not attending their children's "significant events" at school and fraying of community fabric as workers' time to run local clubs disappears'. "Grumpy people do not make good lovers, fathers, mothers, drivers, neighbors or golfers" (cited in Eikhof, Warhurst & Haunschild, 2007, p.326).

Work-life balance is 'the maintenance of a balance between responsibilities at work and at home' (employee perspective) (Cieri et al, 2002). According to Hughes & Bozionelos (2007, p.146), a broader version of work-life balance is 'the ability of individuals regardless of age or gender to find rhythm that will allow them to combine their non-work responsibilities, activities and aspirations'.

Even though work-life balance 'terminology' is only two decades old, the issue is much older. Since the first and second world wars, where women came to the work force as a necessity, the problems of balancing their family and work roles existed (Roberts, 2007). Of course, those situations were not very much common to Sri Lanka, as result of minimum impact from such disruptions (World Wars). However, work-life balance currently has become a pressing problem to us.

The Factors Influencing Work-life Balance in SL Context

After 1977, with open market economic policies, a trend was set to earn money by various means. As the economic policy indicated people are free from many strict regulations, as

such new businesses entering into the market became a visible factor. At the same time, the opening up of free trade zone gave ignition to the economic activities of the country with increasing numbers of women participating in operational level jobs.

As mentioned above, all of those activities set a different social trend with related problems. Since the availability of the opportunities to participate in economic activities, more young women entered in to the jobs in the free trade zones. However, soon most of the organizations realize that they are not able to keep these women staying in the work force for a lengthy time. Either as a result of their marriage or influenced by their fiancées they tended to quit their jobs easily. Managing the family and the work is an issue since the working hours are based on traditional work schedules (i.e. 8hrs X 5 days or 45 hrs. including Saturday half-day).

As the years went by, the open market policy changed the social values of people gradually. Instead of education, money became a more prominent social status measure. As the new technology development brought new consumer products into the market people needed money for those with the result a greater willingness to do paid employment. By the early years of this century it was the accepted norm that, irrespective of gender, everyone goes for some employment. With the prevailing economic conditions such as high cost of living it is perceived as a necessity. The traditional breadwinners' family was gradually disappearing. As stated by Vloeberghs (2002, p.26) this trend is common around the world 'The breadwinners model is being replaced by the contemporary combination model in which professional and family labor is being divided between men and women in a more equal way'. In the Sri Lankan context whether the non-work responsibilities such as family labor is being divided between men and women in an equal way is questionable.

As explained above even though economic changes and social changes have been taking place, to the same level the micro organizational structural level changes have not occurred. Evidently, Sri Lanka went through all macro level economic changes as the other western countries, such as commercialization, deregulation and privatization. An interesting fact is that the internal change that has occurred in line with macro changes, within the organization, is minimal. As a percentage, 90% organizations, including private and public, are running in the same old pattern, i.e. traditional management models.

The question to ask is can we run the organizations as we run it always. What I mean is the traditional way. You may have noticed that in educational sector, the new courses being introduced, everyone wants to do a degree and postgraduate studies. Where are all these leading to? Organizations say they want talented, committed employees. There is the supply side of labor getting more qualified academically and or technically. What about the demand side, what they are offering to employees in exchange to their efforts? Have they been thoughtful or considerate of employment job demands? Evidence suggests that unless there is some form of industrial unrest, organizations will happily stick to their traditional ways of managing people. The question I want to pose is can management wait without changing their ways?

The recent incidents of graduates, who leave the private sector for the public sector, are often accused of being lethargic and not wanting to take challenge. Most employers go to the extent to express their disapproval by saying the government university graduates are not capable. In fact did anyone carry out a study on why people leave the private sector? What are the factors that affect employee choice? With my recent studies done on undergraduates and also in-

depth interviews conducted with graduates who move jobs from the private to the public sector, the most pressing problem they face is work-life balance. Their claims center on the fact that many organizations are inflexible in terms of providing non-financial benefits; flexible work schedules, good policies and practices, good supervisors, performance feedback, and recognition. In general the employees mentioned that they were not happy. Their family life is affected as a result of overwork and inflexibility in the work place. At the same time technological developments such as company mobile phones, laptops and the internet mean that employees are required to attend to work matters outside normal working hours. Hence, they are unable to properly organize their personal life and unable to dedicate time and proper attention to non-work activities and obligations. It is an interesting fact that these reasons were stated by both men and women. This shows that our organizations are not concerned about new management models such as stakeholder model and triple bottom line approach.

How can an organization avoid such unhappiness of their employees? Does Management care? So far from my experience through research and observations, in Sri Lanka there are very few organizations concerned about the well-being of the employee. I must say that they have to care. Why? With the “war for talent” reflected in the need to recruit employees and to keep them in the organization, management should consider employee requirements. A fundamental question management should consider is why employees come to work. Of course no one can dismiss the economic reasons, but is that all? I must say, once upon time that was the case. The possibility is that work can be a source of satisfaction and self-fulfillment. In today’s competitive labor market where the opportunities are more, employee tends to go for places where their dreams can be achieved. The generations who are in the workforce are increasingly from generation X and Y, who expects work life balance facilities more than the traditionalists and baby boomers. Hence I would like to stress the management must give more attention to providing work-life balance practices in their organizations.

What are Work Life Balance Practices?

Having flexible work schedules

This means having core time for all employees to be in the organization, to have flexible coming in and going off with the provision the employee works on the pre-determined work hours. This may not be possible with certain work areas, but wherever possible it is good to implement this. In Sri Lanka most IT companies practice this (Wickramasinghe & Jayabandu, 2007), but not in other sectors.

Another way of providing flexibility is having part-time work. This is one of the most widespread forms of alternative work schedule in western countries. This is specially advantageous for the young employees who are still in education and trying to get experience. Research shows that full time employment does not mean that the organization is actually getting a full day’s work from each employee. Part time work is also very conducive to people with pressing family responsibilities. Having such schedule, organizations will not lose productive employees.

A compressed workweek is another way that management can alter to reduce the workweek. This involves 4 days for a week, 10 hours a day working. This is also effective schedule to minimize the absenteeism which is unusually high on Mondays and Fridays.

There are other areas that management can think of providing to their employees such as child-care and dependent care facilities. In developed countries on-site child-care centers are

a common practice. If not organizations should provide some financial assistance to put employees' children to child-care center. Research shows the evidence that on-site child-care centers helped in recruiting and retaining new employees and lowers intention to quit. In Sri Lanka, looking after children is a pressing problem since there are no proper child care facilities. Domestic help is not readily available and also expensive. Hence many good employees quit their jobs. As mentioned earlier, many graduates (majority females) left their better paid private sector jobs for lower paid government jobs as a result of child care issues. The government jobs are perceived as having more flexibility and less work pressure.

A pressing problem faced by many middle-aged employees is caring for elderly parents. These employees faced considerable financial and emotional strain in trying to balance work and family. In our country as the dependent category grows, many employees face this dilemma. In our culture we do not encourage our elder parents to be put into elder care homes. As such management should consider having generous paid-leave policies and if possible on-site care for dependents of all ages.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is a country moving forward economically at an increasing speed. The question remains as to whether the organizations in the country are aware and/or care about the changes required in management thinking in relation to employees. It is a necessity that management move into 'family-friendly arrangements' in order to gain more positive effects from employees. The onus is on employers now to think creatively about how it can be used not just to benefit staff but to transform the organization to make it more efficient, receptive and encouraging to 'good work'.

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