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A Conceptual Framework on Work-Life Balance Challenges in Harmonizing Professional Prospects & Personal Aspects

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Abstract:

The paper is a conceptual work that aims at gaining better understanding of the concept of Work-life balance challenges. The true essence of life of a person could be broadly classified as personal life and professional life. All the activities of a person are engaged either directly or indirectly in bringing out a healthy balance between these pursuits termed as “Work-life balance”. This article attempts to uncover the role – employers can play in enabling their employees’ in achieving work-life balance for the well-being of the self and the Organization, on the whole.

Keywords: *Work-life balance, Work-life programs, Time management, Professional life, lifestyle*

1. Introduction

An Organization is an enterprise which pools all resources together to produce goods or services with an aim to generate economic profit. The success of an Organization greatly depends on the performance of the people. Human resources play a vital role in augmenting the Organization’s competitive advantage in the marketplace.

In today’s fast paced society, the pre-dominant issue that hinders the efficiency of the employees in an Organization is the “Challenge of Work-Life balance”. Planning life between career goals and personal aspects of life becomes difficult with less time and energy. Some People value work and career highly, but there is more to life than work, which are family aspects [spouse, children, education, spiritual development, social life, etc.]. A state of equilibrium on the time spent between professional life and personal life is where work-life balance is achieved.

In the modern age, employees have many competing responsibilities at work and numerous commitments in family too. Work-life balance aims at improving an individual’s quality of life, which helps to fetch a positive impact on the organization, family and society, on the whole.

2. Genesis of Work-Life Balance

The Phrase “Work-life balance” gained huge importance, after the wave of globalization that hit India at the end of last century. The other factors that added cause for the growing work-life conflict are, 24/7 Connection- technology advancement, Long hours at work, dual- earners in the family, historically lower unemployment and Competent labor force.

2.1. 24/7 Connection – Technology Advancement

Technology is a boon to any business. A quick glance around any workplace confirms that it is essential. But all this technology always comes with a price. Normal noise of ringing phones, constant emails, and multiple text messages helps to connect with business 24/7 at the cost of deteriorating personal relationships. Technology advancement has broken the geographical barriers and has enabled the access to information beyond boundaries. This has led to spending of more time on work-related activities, neglecting family aspects.

2.2. Long Hours at Work

Of all the factors, long working hours are the strongest reason for work-life conflict. Long hours at work, not only affects employee’s ability to harmonize work and family, but also causes health risks. Employee intends to work overtime for fulfilling work demand, to ensure job security and for better appraisal in monetary terms.

2.3. Dual-earners in the Family

There has been a rapid increase in the dual-earner couples. From one perspective, it seems to be healthy, since loss of a job does not mean a complete loss of household income. But, on the other side, these trends may badly affect the family prospects. Both men and women, now-a-days, seem to concentrate more on work and career causing stress and unhappy results in family life.

2.4. *Competent Labour Force*

Increased literacy rate of people has made the labour force in India – more competent in the domestic market. Active participation of female employees has made more supply of potential labour force. And hence, employees are compelled to put additional effort for them to stand apart from the crowd. More competition has led to “Survival of the fittest”. This scenario resulted in more concentration on the paid work than the other unpaid personal aspects. Thus, had its root towards work-life conflict.

Thus, in today’s society, the working hours are not clearly defined. High speed internet and smart phones means that we are always connected to the workplace, not addressing the personal needs. Having work-life balance has become a challenging goal in one’s life. Recognizing that work has taken over our lives, it is high time to evaluate the work-life balance to determine steps to achieve quality life style.

3. **Defining – Work-Life Balance**

“Work-life balance is the relationship between the amount of time and effort that someone gives to work and the amount that they give to other aspects of life, such as family”.

-Macmillan Dictionary

“Work – life balance is proper-prioritizing between job responsibilities and family commitments”.

-Wikipedia

Work-life balance is subjective and has features of a chameleon that changes with changing situations. For the same person, the meaning of work-life balance changes at different stages throughout their life. Changes are likely to be often on daily basis. The right balance for a person today will be different tomorrow. For instance --- the right balance of a single unmarried differs after marriage; the balance of a married person will be different if they get children and so. Thus, the preference of participating in work versus family may not remain fixed but changes from time to time. The sense of balance differs from person to person. This is because everyone has different lives and different priorities.

“When shall we live if not now” - a famous saying. Work-life balance is a coin where work and family are both sides to it. Both the sides are important for having value in life. Thus, it is all about making choices between career and personal aspects of life to match one’s aspirations and values.

4. **Work- Life Balance – Challenges**

Work and family are one’s priorities in life and hence, planning personal time is as important as a work commitment. Any imbalance in work-life may have adverse impact on both the employee and the employer.

4.1. *Increased Stress Level*

In today’s uncertain world, stress has become a normal syndrome in day-to-day life. An Increased level of stress may affect the mental health condition of a person and results in drop in work performance. Work-related stress are basically due to long hours, heavy workload, job insecurity, etc. that causes depression, head aches, fatigue and negative changes in the person’s psychological and behavioral aspects. The employers must recognize that work –related stress is a management issue and must take necessary steps to ensure that the employees are not subjected to unnecessary stress.

4.2. *Relationship Degradation*

Spending more time at work causes less family interactions and conflict in personal relationships. Work ensures achievement, while family gives as sense of enjoyment - the essentials of a better quality of life. And hence, it is the need of the hour to plan time effectively between family and work to have a satisfying work and home life.

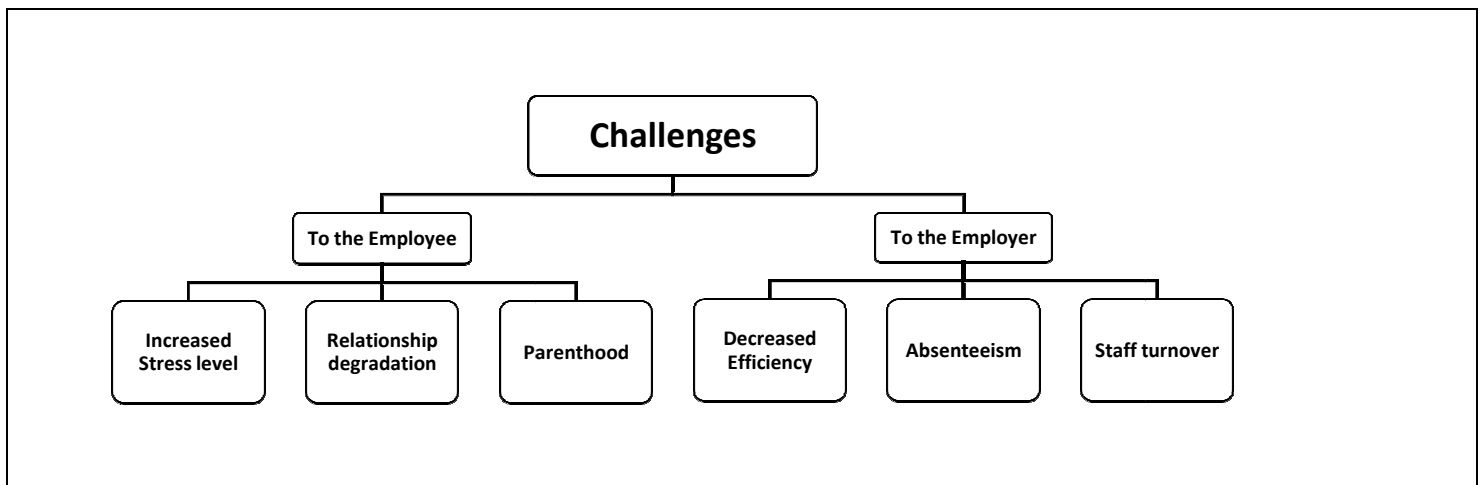


Figure 1: Explaining the Challenges to the Employee and to the Employer

4.3. Parenthood

Parenthood is the responsibility of growing and raising a child to a better position in the society. In a country like India, that gives more importance to family structures and cultural values, Parenthood plays a vital role. But, the Imbalance in scheduling proper work and life timings may hinder fulfilling of parenting responsibilities and leads to unhealthy family environment.

4.4. Decreased Efficiency

More hours at work may increase the quantity but badly influences the quality. An employee working more than the normal hours tend to make more mistakes, due to over workload, deadlines, etc. This hinders the Organizational growth through lesser productivity and lower efficiency and commitment of the employee.

4.5. Absenteeism

Absenteeism is the other major effect of the Work-life imbalance. Absence of proper management of time between career and family leads to frequent absenteeism of employee from work, affecting the smooth functioning of the Organization.

4.6. Increased Rate of Staff Turnover

Rate of staff turnover is the average number of staff leaving the organization during a given time period. Failure of an organization to ensure healthy working environment and not enabling its employees to strike work-life balance, may result in increased rate of staff turnover , higher recruitment and training costs and relatively less retention of staff.

“Be a Company that People want to work for”

Thus, it is high time that the employers must realize the importance of creating and maintaining supportive working environment which will enable employees to have satisfying work-life balance and thereby, strengthening employee loyalty and productivity. A work-life balance organization that executes “work-life balance programs” helps in creating family-friendly organizations. These programs reduce employee hassles and interruptions that affect work-place productivity. These mainly constitute---flexible work schedules, Paid leave policies, co-sponsored family events and activities.

5. Work –Life Balance Programs

“Keep up the People who keep you in business”

Today’s corporate trend institute policies, procedures and actions that enable employees to easily pursue more balanced lives. Work-life balance programs are effective tool in achieving quality jobs and quality management. Proper implementation of balance programs not only boosts employees for greater performance but also have optimistic results in the business. Some of the programs that find place in the modern companies to eliminate imbalances are,

- Flexible working arrangements
- Leave Policies
- Counseling services
- Food Services and Transportation
- Financial planning
- Recreational activities

5.1. Flexible Working Arrangements

One of the most desirable solutions to the challenge of work-life balance is the “flexibility at work”.

- Having flexible start and finish times, provided total working hours remain fixed,
- Choosing own lunch break,
- Having access to phone and messages,
- Occasionally, working from home ---are the working arrangements which the employer could extend to overcome work-related stress and ensure retention of employees.

5.2. Leave Policies

“Leave is granted to employees with good intention of providing rest, rejuvenation of health and for fulfilling family obligations”. Leave policy must be flexible enough to meet organizational goals through personal goal. Apart from sick leave, casual leave and emergency leave, having extra unpaid leave may reduce absenteeism and increases the quality of the employees.

5.3. Counseling Services

Some organization has a clinical psychologist, counselor or comparable specialist to staff for mental stress, family counseling and marriage counseling services. Mentoring services also been provided wherein the mentor act as a guide, coach or advisor in helping employees to achieve their personal goals.

5.4. Food and Transportation Services

This service is the most common of all, which yields positive results. Many organizations offer food services to their employees through vending machine, cafeterias and lunch wagons. These are usually provided at free of cost or at comparatively less cost with an

aim to offer quality nutrition. This also helps in keeping the employees close to the work location. The other service is the transportation. Daily commuting to and from work is the basic concern for all employees. Employer organized van pooling operated in main areas helps in reducing absenteeism and tardiness.

5.5. Financial Planning

Financial planning that includes investments, tax planning and other management services are generally offered to executives and middle-level managers. This enables them to save tax, gain return on investment activities and thereby helps in effective management of money.

5.6. Recreational and Social Activities

“There is no reason that work has to be serious...Professionalism can be worn lightly”.

–Herk Kelleher, CEO – Southwest Airlines

Recreational activities aim at refreshing body and mind and thus, form an essential part of human life. Organizations may conduct recreational and social activities for creating a healthy, stress-free working environment.

- Sports programs conducted that invites employees’ participation on voluntary basis.
- Membership discounts at health clubs and fitness centers.
- Arranging for an informal party or picnic
- Volunteering activities in groups – extending helping hands to the needy and the poor in the society.
- Celebrating family events and festivals – by holding fun contests and other activities.

6. Conclusion

The topic of work-life balance grabs a great deal of attention both in the academic and corporate world, because of its greater influence on the performance of the people in the society. Work- life balance is not an impossible deal, but requires proper managerial skill to segregate productive time to fulfill job requirements and personal needs. Having a balance--- benefits both the employees and employers of an Organization. Hence, “work –life programs” formulated by the employers act as the key for eliminating the conflict between work and family life and thereby, improving the value of life of the People in an Organization.

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