Critical Review of Barriers and Problems of Work-Life Balance in Organizations

By

Okere Loveday, Ph.D
Professor of Management (HRM)
Faculty of Administration and Management
Department of Management
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.
E-mail: okereloveday22@gmail.com
&
Nwachukwu Peace Ijeoma
Faculty of Administration and Management
Department of Management
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.
E-mail: ijeomapeacenwachukwu@gmail.com

Abstract

In a tight labour market with a shortage of needed skills, employers are forced into developing policies which attract and retain groups of workers who might previously have left the organization. Researches have proved that to attract and retain the workers that they needed they need to show that they were a progressive employer in terms of work-life balance policies. In this present investigation, literature review method was adopted to gather information on the issues bordering on the barriers and problems concerning work-life balance in organizations. The study discovered that when employees are given some control over their work-life balance they are likely to be more-satisfied with work, have greater commitment to work, be more productive and stay longer in the organization. The research also recommend that there should be increased legislation to encourage employers to support work-life balance.

Key Words: Barriers, Problems, Work-Life Balance, Employers, Employees, Management, Organizations, Managers.

Introduction

At the early stage in this twenty-first century there is increasing evidence that, for some, the value of work is changing. While the 1980s were characterized by the idea that lunch is for wimps, there has been a shift, perhaps encouraged by increasing work intensifications and pressure, towards valuing a slower and gentler pace, which allows more room for personal interests, environment and family. In 2021, 41% of managers in an Institute of Management survey felt that the quality of working life had got worse over the last years (Institute of Management, 2021). In 1990s the notion of downshifting appeared, which has been described as swapping a life of total commitment to work and possible high rewards, for less demanding, or part-time work or self-employment, or a combination of the three. This notion has been considerably expanded to form a wide range of legitimate work options under the banner of work-life balance or work-life integration which is being supported by government initiatives and is a key issue, rather than a key practice in organizations globally (Okere, 2019).

Barriers and Problems of Work-Life Balance

1. Take – up Gap

There is considerable evidence that the demand for flexible work options is much greater than the take-up so far, and this has been referred to as the take-up gap. Hogarth (2001) reports that 47% of employees not currently using flexitime would like to do so, and 35% would like a compressed week. Some work-life balance strategies cost the organization money and financial limits are set for such practices to be viable. The research also maintained that AA organization experienced difficulties in setting up teleworking at home. Productivity was greater than that of site-based staff, but in order to offer the cost of technology and infrastructure such workers had to be more than 1.5 times as productive as site staff. Bibby (2002) observed that to gain such productivity tight management and measurement of home-based teleworkers is necessary. Glynn et al (2002) are of the view that policies and some line managers may limit access to work-life balance to certain groups. There is evidence that some employers fail to have a strategic approach to work-life balance, but use such practices in a fire-fighting manner, to deal with situations when they reach breaking point. There is evidence in the human resource management literature that work-life balance requests for childcare reasons would be dealt with more favourably than requests or any other

basis. The association that work-life balance practices have with women bringing up children creates two problems (1) Work-life balance is ghettoized, as something done for women with children who are not interested in real careers. (2) This causes alienation from the rest of the workforce who are not allowed these special privileges (Rana, 2002b). In particular, working part time has been a popular option in combining work and other commitments, and yet there is considerable evidence that this limits career development (MacDermid et al, 2001). Thus, the take-up of work-life balance options is often equated with lack of commitment to one's career or to the organization. Hogarth et al (2001) in a baseline study discovered that two-thirds of male employees felt that there career prospects would be damaged, if they worked part time, and Rana (2002) found strikingly similar results in his survey of work-life balance. In addition there are many employees who are committed to full-time hours because financial commitments mean that they require full-time pay. This severely limits the type of flexibility that they feel is appropriate for themselves. Heavy workloads may prevent requests for flexible working, and where departments are inadequately staffed flexible options are entirely curtailed. High levels of work, combined with pressure from the organizational culture may also have unexpected consequences for those employees opting to reduce their hours to part time from full time. Furthermore in many organizations individuals have to be proactive and come up with flexible solutions which meet business needs and this is difficult when there are few precedents and a lack of understanding of what is available or possible. In addition the majority of organizations in an IRS survey had no procedure for employees to use to request flexible working (IRS, 2002). In a survey by CIPD says Rana (2002b) reports that 74% of respondents believed that working hours is not an indication of commitment, 84% felt that individuals working part time were not less committed and 77% believed that organizations should allow employees to attend to personal commitments in working time, and then make the time up. However, while these figures demonstrated that there have been some shifts in attitudes, culture remains a major barrier to take-up. Long hour cultures with early and late meetings are hard to shift. Researches show that more middle and senior manager role models are needed of flexible working and that there need to be work-life balance champions (Okere, 2019).

2. Manager's Role in Implementing Work-Life Balance

Glynn et al (2002), argued that whether or not there is a work-life balance policy in existence, it is often line managers who will be the main arbiters of whether work-life balance policies become a reality, both by their attitudes and management practices. According to CIPD (2003) the Work Foundation found that managers were the main barrier to introducing and implementing work-life balance policies. Managers have to manage performance targets of the team and often feel the flexible working damages this, and flexible working for some may mean higher workloads for others. There is a pressure on line managers to be fair and their decisions about who can work flexibly and in what way are under scrutiny and may result in a backlash. On top of this managers may receive a bonus for meeting team performance targets, which may be jeopardized by flexible working. In a study MacDermid et al (2001) found that managers has three concerns relating to employees working reduced hours. The **first** concerned helping employees develop professionally while not working full time, the **second**, what to do if more employees wanted to work reduced hours as it could be a nightmare to manage a host of different alternative work arrangements, and **third**, that some jobs were just not do able on anything less than a full-time basis. Managing workers who are not visible that is, working at home for example, is a particular concern for line manager. Felstead et al (2003) report the fear that working at home is a "slacker's charter", but they are discovered that home workers themselves had fears about not being able easily to demonstrate their honesty, reliability and productivity. Some managed this by working more hours than they should in order to demonstrate greater output. To counteract this fear, managers in Felstead's study introduced new surveillance devices, set outputs and brought management into the home via home visits. Managers also felt that home working represented a potential threat to the integration of teams and the acceptance of corporate culture, and that it impeded the transmission of tacit knowledge. There is also a concern that only some employees have the characteristics to be successful home workers. Thus, it is becoming apparent that a range of key management skills is needed in managing flexibility. On this note Janman (2002) proffer that key skills are communication, empowerment, performance management and coaching. Glynn et al (2002) posit that line managers need to be able to push back work demands from other parts of the organization which they feel are unrealistic; plan and schedule; delegate in fair

and equitable way and understand the capacity and skills of those who report directly to them. The researchers suggest that it is important for managers to be able to crack down hard on individual breaches of trust without cracking down across the board. CIPD (2003) highlight that the Work Foundation suggest that implementing work-life balance requires managers to shift the way that they measure staff, requiring more effort in judging performance and output rather than time spent doing the job. Managers clearly have to learn how to manage at distance. However, all this needs to be supported by the organizational culture. McCartney (2003) believe that work-life balance to thrive needs a supportive organizational culture that has sympathetic values and practices at its core. Arguably, training practitioners have one of the most important and strategic roles in creating and supporting that culture through imaginative and appropriate training programmes. Unfortunately Kodtz et al (2002) found that line managers felt abandoned and did not get the support that they needed.

3. **Limits on Access Work-Life Balance**

So far we have treated work-life balance as an option potentially available for a majority of employees, but this is not the case in reality. Felstead et al (2003) reveal that the option to work at home is usually the privilege of the highly educated and/or people at the top of the organizational hierarchy. People in these jobs, they suggest, have considerably more influence over the work processes they are engaged in. They also report that although more women work at home than men, there are more men who have the choice to work at home. Nolan and Wood (2003) also argue that work-life balance is not for the lower paid workers. They report that 5% of such employees hold more than one job, and usually work in low-paid, low-status, jobs in catering and personal services. In the same vein Toynbee (2003) also demonstrate that many of these low-paid workers work for agencies and as such are distanced from the ultimate employer. In these circumstances work-life balance policies are unlikely to be available in any case. Even working only for one employer. Toynbee reports a hospital porter saying “you can’t survive, not with a family, unless you do the long, long hours, unless you both work all the hours there. Felstead et al (2002) argue that what is important is the option to work at home, as some people work at home doing low-paid unsatisfying jobs with no choice of work location, such conditions not necessarily being conducive to work-life balance. White et al (2003) argue that organizations are using flexibility to

attempt to offset the damage being caused by high performance work practices, but they argue that they are only enjoyed by a small proportion of the workforce at the moment, and in any case only have a small effect on the problem. The researchers suggested for more fundamental changes in working practices with safeguards to protect work-life balance, such as giving teams themselves the responsibility for addressing work-life balance issues when setting output targets for themselves. In the opinion of Janman (2002) successful implementation of flexible working is a culture-changing programme, one that has relatively distinct goals in terms of values and beliefs, processes and behaviours. Viewing flexible working as culture changes places the topic firmly on the strategic agenda. IRS (2002) believe that few organizations monitor and evaluate the take-up of work-life balance options or measure their costs and benefits. However, McCartney (2002) discovered that in BT the company used an annual survey, web charts, career life planning discussions, and employee networks to do this.

Work-Life Balance Practices

Work-life balance options focus on three different types of work flexibility. **First**, there is flexibility in terms of the number of hours worked; **second**, the exact timing of those hours; and **third**, the location at which the work is carried out. Clearly some options may reflect all three types of flexibility. While the legislation only addresses the need of parents, there is a strong lobby for flexible work options to be potentially available for all employees. There are potentially many possible work-life balance options, and clearly not all of these options are appropriate for all jobs or employees, and employers will need to be convinced of the business benefits of any work-life balance option. In addition work-life balance will mean different things to different people, depending on their age, life circumstances, values, interests, personality and so on. At present says IRS (2002) flexible options are predominantly taken by women. Table 1 depicts the main options.

Table 1. Options or Achieving Work-Life-Balance

Part-Time	Term-Time-Working	Unpaid Leave
Flexitime	Job Share	Unpaid-Sabbaticals
Compressed Week	Self-Rostering	Work from Home
Annual Hours	Shift Swapping	

While flexitime has been used for some time the systems tended to be formal, with limits, and there is currently an emphasis on less formal approaches and a more and hoc approach to flexible hours, for example, days off for urgent domestic issues and time made up later. Compressed hours allow an employee to work perhaps a nine-day fortnight by working a little extra each day to allow for one whole day off. Self-rostering has been used particularly in the health service and allows nursing teams to design shift patterns and staffing around the demands of work, for example, getting the right mix of skills on each shift and taking account of patient core needs, and their own needs. Glynn at al (2002) suggest that in fixed hours cultures, such as a supermark, work-life balance policies which detail specific options for flexibility will help. In a long hours culture, like consultancy work, they are harder to achieve work-life balance, and a more viable option is to allow individuals more informal discretion to work their hours at the times and in the location that best suit business and personal needs (Rana, 2002a).

Drivers for Work-Life-Balance

Much of the pressure for work-life balance policies originates from the changing demographic make-up of our potential workforce, changing social roles, the changing responsibilities of organizations and legislative pressure. Increasing numbers of women in the workforce wishing to combine family and work responsibilities is an obvious driver for what were initially called "family-friendly" policies (Kodz et al, 2002) and which quickly work-life balance policies became. This legacy does cause some problems for the implementation of work-life balance. The aging workforce is another demographic change which has raised the importance of work-life balance for employers. Older employees may wish to remain in work, but work fewer hours or different shift patterns. In an extensive study, IRS (2002) found that the most popular reasons for employers to introduce work-life balance policies were recruitment and retention. The importance of this issue is underlined by the fact that the government is encouraging work-life balance, and began a campaign for this in 2000 (White et al, 2003). A further influence is the need for employers to respond to what is now termed a "24/7 society". In their study Noon and Blyton (1997) argue that individual working hours are being decoupled from operating hours, and that more flexibility is needed to cover round the clock peaks and troughs. They argue that this now apply to a much wider range of business areas than hotels, hospitals and

continuous processes operations. Financial services ad retail operations are now subject to similar processes. There is much evidence of work intensification over the past decades and this faster pace has been associated with much greater levels of stress in organizations. Holbeche and McCartney (2002) found that employees were experiencing anxiety, work overload, loss of control, pressure, long hours and insufficient personal time. Such experiences are likely to encourage a reassessment of values in workers, and there is also evidence that younger people entering the labor market are much less willing to sacrifice their personal lives for total commitment to work. Values and expectations appear to be changing. Thus, associated with such changes organizations have been facing, and sometimes losing, lawsuits in respect of stress resulting from work. From a legal perspective employers have a duty of care, so in terms of self-protection work-life balance measures have an attraction. On a more positive note there is some evidence that employers are more concerned about promoting a healthy working environment and are more aware of their social responsibilities as an employer (Holbeche and McCartney, 2002).

Family-Friendly Law

In recent years a significant contribution to the development of workplaces which offer a better work-life balance has been made by the government and other institutions. This has involved the introduction of new regulations which require employers to take account of the needs of people with family responsibilities as well as substantial improvements to existing statutory rights. Campaigners pressing for greater family-friendly working practices would like to see a much further extension of this kind of legal right, and this may well happen over time. For now though the government has chosen to take an incremental rather than a radical approach to policy development in this area, taking care to balance the interests of employees and employers. The major ways says Okere (2019) in which the law plays a part in promoting family-friendly working practices are set as follows.

Ante-Natal Care

A well-established statute gives pregnant employees the right to take reasonable time off work to attend medical appointments connected with a pregnancy without losing any pay. However, permission must be sought and gained before

the leave is taken. There is no general right simply to leave the employers' premises and then later state that this was for the purposes of attending ante-natal care appointments. If an employer unreasonably refuses a request, a claim can be taken to an employment tribunal. In many cases the employer's action will constitute sex discrimination and will lead to compensation being awarded.

Maternity Leave

The right for a mother to take time off before, during and after her baby is born has applied for many years. The scheme specifies three different types of maternity leave:

1. Ordinary Maternity Leave (OML)
2. Compulsory Maternity Leave (CML)
3. Additional Maternity Leave (AML)

Ordinary Maternity Leave (OML) applies only to employees but there is no qualifying period of service. It can last for up to twenty six weeks, that is six months, and can start anytime within eleven weeks of the date that the baby is expected to be born. During OML the contract of employment continues in all respects except for pay. The woman is entitled to retain any contractual benefits such as company cars, portable computers and mobile phones, and her holidays continue to accrue. Any health insurance provided by the employer is retained and all the general duties owned by employers to employees and vice versa continue. Moreover, there is a general right for the woman to return to same job on the same terms and conditions following ordinary maternity leave. All pay rises and other improvements to terms and conditions must be honoured so that after her return to work the contractual situation is as if the maternity leave has not occurred. The only exception is where the job becomes redundant during ordinary maternity leave, in which case the right is to return to a suitable alternative job with similar terms and conditions. Another maternity leave being Compulsory Maternity Leave (CML) is straight forward. It is simply the two weeks after the birth, during which there is now a compulsory period of maternity leave. The onus is on the employer to make sure that no work is done during this period. Except in the case of very premature births, compulsory maternity leave, and ordinary maternity leave overlap, so compulsory maternity leave only applies where a woman decides she does not wish to exercise her right to ordinary maternity. Also,

additional maternity leave can only be taken by employees who have completed twenty six weeks service with their employer at the fifteenth week prior to the date at which the baby is expected. It runs for a further twenty six weeks following on from the end of ordinary maternity leave, giving women in this position the right to take a full year of leave following a birth. Whether a woman just take ordinary maternity or exercises her right to take additional maternity, she is entitled to return to work before the full period of leave elapses, but to exercise this right she must give twenty one days notice to her employer. There is no longer any requirement to inform the employer in writing of a return to work after twenty six weeks, or fifty two weeks in the case of additional maternity leave. The assumption must be that the woman will return at this time (Davidson, 2002).

Maternity Pay

Public sector employers as well as many larger companies continue to pay their employees during maternity leave, but this is not a legal requirement. Regulations specify only that Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) is paid through the payroll to all those who are entitled to receive it. Statutory Maternity pay is payable for twenty six weeks, that is, during ordinary maternity leave, for employees who have completed twenty six weeks' service with their employers at the fifteenth week prior to the week that the baby is due, and who earn more than the lower earnings limit for national insurance purposes.

Parental, Paternity and Adoption Leave

Law gives both parents of a child the right to take up to thirteen weeks unpaid leave during the first five years of the child's life or during the five years following the adoption of a child. If the child is disabled, eighteen weeks may be taken during the first eighteen years of the child's life (McCartney, 2003). This right currently only extends to employees who have completed a year's continuous service with their employer. It is only available to parents who have caring responsibilities for the child and the leave must be for the purpose of caring for that child. Interestingly, in this area of law, multiple births give multiple rights. On this note, parents of triplets are entitled to take thirty nine weeks leave. As with the Working Time Regulations, employers may if they wish enter into a formal workplace agreement with their employees setting out how the principles of the law are to be applied locally. In the absence of such an agreement, a statutory

default scheme applies which sets out how parental leave schemes should operate in practice. Included are clauses which restrict parents to a maximum of four weeks' parental leave per calendar year and which give a right to return equivalent to that for additional maternity leave. In addition to the right to take unpaid parental leave Okere (2019) conclude that law has given fathers of new babies the right to take two weeks' paid paternity leave within the first fifty six days of the birth. As with parental leave Toynbee (2003) opine that only fathers who expect to have responsibility for the child's upbringing are eligible. Paternity leave is paid at the same rate as the lower rate of statutory maternity pay, while return-to-work arrangements and contractual entitlements are the same as those for ordinary maternity leave. Here though, multiple births do not give multiple rights. Also, when parents adopt a child, only one is entitled to take full adoption leave on the same basis as the maternity leave scheme outlined above, with pay during the first six months. The other is then entitled to take unpaid parental leave and two weeks' paid adoption leave. The payment arrangement rules about entitlement, notification procedures and contractual entitlements are for maternity and paternity leaves respectively.

Time Off for Dependants

Further, law gives workers a right to take reasonable amounts of time off during working hours for urgent family reasons, employers being informed of the intention to take the leave as soon as is reasonably practicable (Holbeche and McCartney, 2000). Legislation specifies the following situations in which such leave can be taken.

1. To provide assistance when a dependant falls ill, give birth or is injured.
2. To make arrangement for the provision of care for a dependant who is ill or injured.
3. On the death of a dependant.
4. Due to unexpected disruption or termination of the arrangement for the care of a dependant.
5. To deal with an incident involving a child during the time when an educational establishment has care of that child.

According to Nolan and Wood (2003) dependants are defined as spouses, children, parents or people who live in the same household with the worker, but they only

become dependants once they rely on the worker for assistance when ill, either directly or through arrangement made with a third party. Tenants, lodgers and employees are specifically excluded. Law does not therefore give a parent the right to take weeks of time off to care for a child during the whole duration of an illness.

Right to Request Flexible Working

Potentially, the most significant new family-friendly measure is the right to request flexible working. It goes some way to meeting the demands of campaigners that parents with child-rearing responsibilities should be able to work part time as a right, but it falls short of this position by some margin. The right as observed by Lea (2001); Mahoney (2002) is for parents of young children to request any form of flexible working, but it is likely to be used principally by women returning from maternity leave who would like to cut or alter their hours. Collins (2002) suggest the regulations set out a procedure which requires the parent to write formally to their employer asking for a one-off change in terms and conditions, together with an explanation as to how the request could be accommodated in practice. The employer can turn the request down, but only if one of the following eight reasons applies.

1. Burden of additional costs;
2. Detrimental effect on ability to meet customers demand;
3. Inability to reorganize work among existing staff;
4. Inability to recruit additional staff;
5. Detrimental impact on quality;
6. Detrimental impact on performance;
7. Insufficiency of work during the periods the employee proposes to work;
8. Planned structural changes.

When a request is turned down, the employee has a right to make a formal appeal, but if this is unsuccessful must wait for a further year before being allowed to make another request to work flexibly.

Debates about Family-Friendly Legislation

Views are divided about how, and indeed whether, further extensions of the family-friendly rights outlined above would be justified. Some mooted changes are uncontroversial, such as allowing a couple to choose whether it is the mother

or the father who exercises the right to take Additional Maternity Leave (AML), but others are strongly resisted by employers' associations. These include paying women at the higher rate to SMP throughout Ordinary Maternity Leave (OML), giving employees returning from maternity leave a legal right to work part time and requiring larger employers to provide access to crèche facilities. Many employers argue that such measures would unacceptably add to their costs and make them less competitive internationally. There is also evidence of growing discontent about such measures from employees who do not have families, and a fear that too much regulation of this kind actually serves to hinder rather than help women's employment prospects by acting as a "disincentive to hiring women of prime child-bearing age" (Lea, 2001).

However, strong public policy arguments can also be put in favour of family-friendly legislation and these hold sway in current government circles. In short, it is believed that such measures are needed to provide gateways which allow parents (particularly mothers) to combine working with their family responsibilities and hence to put much needed skills and experience at the disposal of the economy. They also serve to encourage single mothers and those with unemployed partners to come off welfare benefits and to take up paid employment instead. Helping fathers to take a greater share of domestic responsibilities contributes to this aim as much as removing the barriers which discourage mothers from returning to work following a pregnancy. In a tight labour market, where skills shortages are common, a compelling case can thus be made for family-friendly regulation on purely economic grounds (Collins, 2002).

Benefits of Work-Life Balance

According to Perry-Smith and Blum (2000), work-life balance practices have been shown in some instances to reduce absence, especially unplanned absence, raise morale and in increase levels of job satisfaction. Increased levels of performance have also been found as employees are less tired and so work more effectively when they are working. Kodz et al (2002) in their study found that productivity and quality of work has both improved, as has staff retention and the ability to recruit staff. Perry-Smith and Blum (2002) also found that hurdles of work-life balancy policies were related to higher organizational performance in a US survey of 527 firms. Kodz et al (2002) report that there is increasing acceptance that choice,

control and flexibility are important in work, that personal fulfillment is important outside work, and further, that satisfaction outside work may enhance employees' contribution to work. In a base line research covering employers and employees, conducted by the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick and IFF Research Ltd, 91% of employers and 96% of employees felt that people work better when they can balance work with other aspects of their lives (Hogartz et al 2001). Employers can also find that such policies can meet business needs for flexibility and can be a way of addressing diversity issues. Some employers have argued that staff on shorter working hours are still producing the same amount of work that they did on full-time hours, however, this was found to be, at least in part, due to the fact they were working longer than part-time paid hours.

Conclusions

Demographic factors, the changing composition of the workforce, recruitment and retention problems, work intensification and the 24-hour society are all drivers for work-life balance initiatives. There is increasing legislation encouraging employers to support work-life balance, but the emphasis is on family-friendly measures, and not on work-life balance for all. Work-life balance policies generally provide options around how many hours are worked, exactly when these hours are worked and where they are worked. When employees are given some control over their work-life balance they are likely to be more satisfied with work, have greater commitment to work, be more productive and stay longer in the organization. Barriers to work-life balance include understaffing, line manager fears, worries about career damage and organizational culture.

Recommendations

The study recommend the following points to tackle the barriers and problems of work-life balance in organizations:-

1. There should be increased legislation to encourage employers to support work-life balance.
2. Employer should develop policies which can attract and retain groups of workers who might previously have left the organization.
3. Since individual working hours are being decoupled from operating hours, there should be flexibility to cover round-the-clock peaks and troughs.

4. Organizations should curtail greater levels of stress which is caused by work intensification.
5. There should be proper statute to give pregnant employees the right to take reasonable time off work to attend medical appointments connected with a pregnancy without losing any pay.
6. Right should be given to mothers to take time off before, during, and after her baby is born.
7. Employers should continue to pay their employees their pay during maternity leave.
8. Organization's law should grant the father of new baby the right to take two weeks paid paternity leave within the first 56 days of the birth.
9. Workers should have a right to take reasonable amount of time off during working hours for urgent family reasons, however, employer should be informed of the intention to take the leave as soon as is reasonably practicable.
10. Family-friendly measure should allow the employees the right to request for flexible working.
11. Work-life balance practices should reduce absence, raise morale and increase levels of job satisfaction.
12. Policies and some line managers should not limit access to work-life balance to certain groups. Therefore managers should be the main arbiters of work-life balance policies become a reality, both by their attitudes and management practices.
13. Management of organizations should monitor and evaluate the take-up of work-life balance or measure their costs and benefits.

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