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Work-Life Balance Policies and Productivity

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Abstract

To remain viable, businesses must stay competitive in the global marketplace of today, and to be competitive, businesses must maximize all their resources. Employees are a major resource of a business, and it is imperative that a business maximize the productivity of its employees to stay competitive. Employees who are stressed from demands and issues of family and life outside of work do not make productive employees. Work-life balance practices have been adopted by businesses to provide some relief for employees from this stress with the assumption is that these policies will decrease the stress of the employee making the employee more productive and increase the productivity of the business overall. Research has shown that these policies helped the workers in some circumstances, but recent research is showing little to no correlation between adapting these policies and the overall productivity of the business unless the business is a large in size, has a manufacturing focus, or is mainly involved in electronic commerce. The major factor that is showing the most correlation to increased productivity is high-involvement management, or transformational leadership, which incorporates work-life balance practices when needed on an individual basis. The research suggests that a business should put more emphasis on hiring and training good, high-involvement managers and having work-life practices in place for the managers to use rather than just adapting general work-life balance practices.

Keywords: Work-life balance; Productivity; Family-friendly policies; Family-supportive policies; Work-family policies; Teleworking; Flexible schedule; Job-sharing; Employee fatigue

Introduction

The main purpose of a business is to maximize profits for its owners. [1] To maximize profits, a business must maximize all resources to be competitive in the global marketplace [2]. An important resource is the business's employees [3]. A competitive advantage depends on the employee's attitudes, competencies, and skills; their ability to generate commitment and trust, communicate aspirations and work in complex relationships [4]. The business must attract, hire, and retain productive workers and keep them productive at a competitive cost [2]. The business can pay high wages to accomplish this, but high wages cut into the profits of a business. [5]. For a business to remain competitive in the global marketplace with other countries where comparable wages are not as high, a business must find other ways to attract, hire and retain highly productive workers and maintain their high productivity while they are employed at the business [1]. Wages are not the only means to competitively hire and retain highly productive employees [6]. For instance, Millennials, the newest generation of young, productive workers, are seeking more than just high salaries for their career choices [7]. Employee fatigue is another consideration for retention of employees. Employee fatigue is a major contributor to employees leaving or productivity declining and adding to a business's human resources cost. Workers with fatigue cost employers \$136.4 billion annually in health-related lost productive time, an excess of \$101 billion compared with workers without fatigue [8]. A method, other than wages, for attracting, and maintaining a highly productive workforce is to offer work-life balance policies to the employees [9].

Work-life balance policies are incentives that allow the employee the flexibility to manage his or her life outside of work, or "work-life balance practices are deliberate organizational changes in programs or organizational culture that are designed to reduce work-life conflict and enable employees to be more effective at work and in other roles" [10]. They allow the employee "the experience of physiological well-being and harmony in life which helps employees concentrate on their work, resulting in better performance." [11]. "Work-life balance is a

practice of providing freedom to employees to make schedules for him or herself to perform work and life commitments like family, relations, studies, accomplishment of targets and assignments, leisure pursuits, painting and travelling, etc. all with comfort or simply work-life balance is a fit among multiple roles of an individual" [12]. They are also called family-friendly, family-supportive, and work-family policies [13].

An example of a work-life balance practice is flexible scheduling. This allows the employee to adjust his or her work schedule to attend to family obligations: arriving late on days when the parent must take a child to school, leaving early to pick up a child from school, or being absent on a day when a child is sick and cannot go to school [14]. Another example is schedule, or job, sharing. This is when two or more people share a job and agree to work during opposing times or shifts. Using job sharing, a husband can work on the second or third shift and be at home during the day with children while the wife works the first shift so there is always someone at home with the children [15]. A third example is on-site childcare. For this, the business has childcare available at the same location as the workers usually with a reduced fee subsidized by the business. This is convent, and the parent does not have to worry about the child while he or she is at work [16]. Another example of work-life balance practices is working from home, or teleworking. Teleworking involves taking the work laptop computer home or accessing work databases from a home computer and working at home or some other location with a good, secure high-speed internet connection. Teleworking has only become a reality in recent years with the advancement of portable computers and high-

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speed internet connections. This practice is mainly only available to professional workers who do not have to be at a physical location to complete their job tasks; production workers on an assembly line would be an example of workers that would not be a good candidate for teleworking. Telework would be useful to a parent who must stay at home with a child. The parent could work on the computer while keeping an eye on the child and the parent would not be using leave time in the process [17].

The work-life balance practices are not only advantageous to workers with families, but to all workers. A worker who loves to travel or has hobbies or other leisure pursuits would also find the work-life balance practices attractive especially the flexible schedule. An example would be a worker who has a farm in addition to working full time. The flexible schedule could be used to take more time off during times of the year when more chores must be done on the farm like at planting or harvest time [14]. The work-life balance practices must be made available to all workers and not just workers with families since only offering the practices to workers with families would be a form of discrimination which is illegal in the workplace in most countries [18].

History

During the industrial revolution, workers were leaving farms to work in the factories. On the farm they were accustomed to working from daylight to dark and the only compensation was self-grown food for the table if the harvest was good. Factory work was more favorable with set work hours, a steady paycheck and usually less strenuous work than farm labor. The factory conditions were usually bad and unsafe, but with no social programs, the work was better than starving [19].

In time, mainly with pressures from labor unions, working conditions and worker safety improved. Child labor laws were passed. Some semblance was given to the life of the worker outside of the workplace when maximum work hours and paid vacation and holiday time were implemented. A worker would now have evenings, weekends, holidays and two weeks each year to spend with his or her family [19].

As two earner households became the norm when more women entered the workforce, childcare while both parents were working became a problem [20, 13]. To solve this problem, flexible schedules, job sharing, and more liberal leave policies were offered [21, 13]. Men and women who did not have children also benefited from these policies in that the policies had to be made available to everyone regardless of family condition to prevent discrimination against any class of individuals [18].

As technology advanced the boundary between work life and home life began to blur. Portable laptop computers, tablets and mobile phones with high-speed internet access allowed workers to be reachable and available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Workers wanted more work-life balance programs as work demands started protruding on the worker's home life [22].

Research Review

Work-life balance policies and how they improve the productivity and profitability of a business are difficult to measure [23]. Work-life balance policies are good for the worker by providing a happier, less stressed worker [24], but the benefits to the business are more difficult to measure. Work-life balance policies "do not directly affect the workplace, but rather enhance the ability of employees to combine working and personal life" [25]. To assess work-life balance policies, "The dominant method used in recent published papers is large-

scale cross-sectional surveys often combined with structural equation modeling" [26]. The surveys were conducted by sending questionnaires to workers with questions about family life and work life aimed at determining if there was any conflict between the two and if the worker was feeling any stress at home, at work, or both. Questionnaires were also sent to management with questions about the productivity of the worker. Researchers also compared the productivity of companies offering work-life balance programs with those that did not. Many variables are involved in the productivity of a business and the feelings of a worker at any given time. The answers to the questionnaires are also subject to the truthfulness and honesty of the person answering the questions [26]. Researchers have tried to define the variables and isolate them when analyzing the data. As the variables became better defined and isolated, the link between work-life balance programs and the productivity of the business began to break down [25].

Research into work-life balance policies has generally found that they have a positive influence on the worker and the business [9, 23]. Konrad found that the productivity impact of work-life programs may be contingent on the type of workers employed by the firm. Firms employing higher percentages of professionals and women showed a stronger relationship between the extensive work-life balance benefits and productivity, but on the other hand firms hiring less skilled, less autonomous, and less highly paid workers work-life benefits were found to be close to negligible [27]. A study of federal agencies found that only a childcare subsidy had a positive and significant influence on reducing the turnover rate of the agency. The study also found that a childcare subsidy program and an alternative work schedule policy had positive and significant influences on agency effectiveness, but interestingly, the study found that agencies where there was a higher satisfaction with a teleworking program had a significantly negative effect on agency performance [28].

In a study of 16,000 employees in Australia, Parkes found that work-life balance was least related to employee engagement and intention to stay with an organization. She suggested that "creating work-life alignment through congruent goals and values, fostering corporate social responsibility, looking after the health and safety of employees, improving reward and performance appraisal systems to more accurately reflect performance outcomes." She also suggested that business should develop fair and supportive supervisors and facilitate participation and involvement in decision-making among all employees to increase employee engagement and retention [29].

A study by Arthur checked to determine if the share price of a public company announcing a new commitment to work-life balance policies showed any significant changes. He found that share prices did show a statistically significant increase on the day of the announcement, but the price increase was not resilient over a longer time greater than three days [30].

A study in Pakistan of the telecom and banking industries did show a significant positive impact of work-life balance programs on employee performance, but the researcher qualifies this with the fact that the supportive culture of the firm for the use of the practices and family support of the worker played a significant role in the results [12].

A study of parents with small children found that women with small children at home were not significantly more productive when they have access to work-life balance benefits, but it did find that men with small children at home are significantly more productive in the workplace with access to work-life balance benefits. The researcher further explored this and found that men were likely more productive

because the women did most of the housework and the women used the additional time at home to complete household chores and attend to other parental responsibilities, whereas the men used the additional time for relaxation and leisure pursuits, thus the family friendly benefits appeared more advantageous to men than to women. The researcher concluded that when the flexible schedule is open to all employees, this benefit is advantageous to workers without children since they can use this time for leisure pursuits and this can be an incentive to recruiting all workers, but when the benefit is only made available to families with children, this generates resentment among childless employees who feel they must compensate for their coworkers' time off by working harder [31].

A study by Heywood of the wage effects of work-life balance programs showed that workers do accept reduced earnings to cover the cost of providing flexible schedule programs, but these are usually higher paid workers who value this practice and have already high enough earnings thus the wage reduction does not impair their lifestyle. He also found in lower wage workers that if the work-life balance programs are associated with too large an earnings reduction, such workers may find it optimal to not work at all. An example is a low income, single parent. If childcare is not offered at a free or very low rate, it may be more cost effective for the parent to accept payment from social programs than to work. An important point the author makes is that increasing the provision of family friendly practices can increase the labor supply for a company if the company depends on lower wage workers, and on a more civic level, can save social safety net and other costs beyond the size of the potential work-life balance subsidy costs [32].

A study of small to medium sized enterprises in South Korea determined that employees' experience of work-life balance contributes to favorable evaluation of their organizations and affective commitment (an emotional attachment to the organization which cause employees to want to remain with the organization: the employee feels the organizational support of caring about his or her well-being). Employees who are strongly committed to their organizations identify with, get involved in, and feel loyal toward the organization which leads to a more productive employee. The study also showed that social situations and lack of organizational support may hinder employees' work-life balance. Organizational support of work-life balance programs was the key driver in increasing the employee's affective commitment. The social situations are unique in South Korea in that South Korea has a collectivist organizational climate and employees tend to value organizational goals more than their personal goals. Also, South Korea introduced the five-day work week in 2004. This has resulted in many changes in work and social environments and individual values. The five-day work week started a paradigm shift from a work-oriented society to a family and people-oriented society by enabling individuals to have more spare time for their families and personal development. This shift is continuously increasing the interest in work-life balance programs in South Korea [11].

Wood conducted research related to employee turnover on a large sample of organizations across the British economy. He separated out two different types of management: family friendly and high involvement management. He defined high involvement management as management that offered and actively practiced nine flexible work organization and high involvement skills acquisition practices: quality circles, functional flexibility, team working, suggestion scheme induction, interpersonal skills training, team briefing, information disclosure, and appraisal. He then defined family friendly management as management that offered work-life balance practices, but none of

the other indicators of high involvement management. He further defined family friendly management as either an integral element of high involvement management or as strongly associated with it. He found "that family friendly management will strengthen the relationship between commitment and key economic outcomes, as the relationships between workforce commitment and productivity or quality is stronger when a workplace has a high level of family friendly management, which is consistent with social exchange theory. Family friendly management was not found to be related to the human resource outcomes of labor turnover and absenteeism. Nor does the study find support for the arguments that its use in conjunction with high involvement management enhances the performance effects of both, nor for the hypothesis that family friendly management has positive effects on the legitimacy of the organization" [33].

Bloom was one of the first researchers to shed empirical light on the issues of work-life balance policies and management quality. He collected data from over 732 firms across four countries (United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States). The management practices covered the combined elements of shop-floor operations, monitoring, targets, and people management. The work-life balance measures included part-time work flexibility, time off for family duties, childcare support, and the ability to work from home. His methods employed a combination of the quantitative skills of survey design and the qualitative skills of the case study approach. He wanted to determine if tougher globalized market competition comes at the price of reducing work-life balance for the workers and if work-life balance practices were correlated with quality management and higher productivity. To the first question, he found that tougher competition increases average management quality but does not negatively affect employees' working environment. His key finding "is that tougher competition raises management quality but does not reduce work-life balance. In other words, employees and managers end up 'working smarter' rather than just 'working harder'" [34]. To the second question, he found that work-life balance outcomes are significantly associated with better management, so that well run firms are both more productive and offer better conditions for their employees. He also found that better work-life practices are associated with significantly higher productivity, but this relationship disappears after controlling for the overall quality of management. "This suggests that much of the human resources management literature has exaggerated the potential for work-life balance policies to raise productivity and the win-win model is excessively optimistic this weakens the argument for mandatory introduction of work-life balance regulation, as one of the promised benefits—higher firm performance—may not materialize however, the absence of a strong negative association of work-life balance practices with productivity may be reassuring. Employees clearly value better work-life balance policies so this has benefits for the working environment and may justify the costs of introducing more flexibility" [34].

Bloom tackled the work-life balance versus profitability question again in 2011 using a sample of 450 manufacturing firms in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. He assessed prior research by stating "many strategies designed to improve workforce productivity are only expected to translate into 'hard' performance measures like firm value, or accounting profits, through 'soft' channels like organizational commitment or employee turnover. Family friendly work policies do not directly affect the workplace, but rather enhance the ability of employees to combine working and personal life. Prior work looking at the association between family friendly work policies and firm performance has generally found a positive

association whether performance was measured in terms of work attitudes, organizational citizenship, or firm productivity” [25]. He goes on to say that family friendly work policies and performance may be problematic to study. “If a well-managed firm uses a number of performance-enhancing management practices and concurrently uses family friendly work policies, omitting the set of other practices in performance regressions creates a spurious correlation between family friendly work policies and performance, a so-called ‘false positive’ [25]. His research found “that increased provision of family friendly work policies is only positively correlated with better firm performance if we omit management quality. Once we control for general management quality, there is no significant association between family friendly work policies and performance measured in different ways” [25]. He states that his “results support the conclusion that family friendly work policies are neither a value-creating bundle of activities nor a lever for existing resources—they do not affect firm performance directly or indirectly” [25]. He goes on to state, “the provision of family friendly work policies is also not negatively correlated with firm financial performance although providing family friendly work policies may not increase profits, they at least pay for themselves. Family friendly work policies should be treated as policies that improve firm performance in terms of the satisfaction of a particular stake-holder group—the firm’s employees—but that financial performance should not be the primary goal of implementing family friendly work policies” [25].

In a literature review by Beauregard in 2009 she found that “the mechanisms by which the provision of work-life practices affects both employee behavior and organizational performance remain unclear...the results of a number of studies reviewed in this paper appear to suggest that work-life balance practices do not necessarily influence levels of employee work-life conflict, but instead improve organizational performance via other routes, such as reduced overheads in the case of employees working from home, improved productivity among employees working at their peak hours, or social exchange processes arising from perceptions of organizational support” [35]. She later states, “Two things become clear after reviewing the literature on work-life balance practices and organizational performance. One, such practices do not necessarily reduce levels of employee work-life conflict. The presence of supportive managers and organizational climates may at least as if not more important in decreasing conflict. Two, work-life balance practices are often associated with improved organizational performance. [The practices] appear to give organizations a competitive advantage in terms of recruitment, particularly with those who might require support due to care-giving responsibilities. The availability of practices may also increase positive job-related attitudes, work effort and contextual behaviors by enhancing social exchange processes; as symbols of organizational concern for employees, work-life practices promote employee interest in and obligation to the organization” [35]. She gives a final caveat, “we cannot discount the possibility that successful organizations are more likely to offer work-life practices, and that the practices themselves are not exerting a favorable effect on organizational performance. Equally, it may simply be that organizations offering work-balance practices are more likely to engage in high-quality management practices overall, generating positive effects on employee and performance outcomes” [35].

In 2012 Yamamoto used panel data from 1,677 Japanese firms and an unbiased direct measure of firm productivity called Total Factor Productivity to evaluate work-life balance practices on firm productivity. He controlled for firm-fixed effects in his estimation, and these include firm management practices that are emphasized by Bloom. The firm heterogeneity controlled in Yamamoto’s analysis

includes firm management practices that are emphasized by Bloom. He found that the firms implementing more work-life balance practices are likely to have better management practices, and therefore the estimations that control for firm heterogeneity (firm-fixed effects) or management practices may have suggested no causal effects of work-life balance practices on firm productivity [36]. Even when including for firm-fixed effects, Yamamoto confirmed the existence of improvement in productivity caused by work-life balance policies in particular firms: firms with certain characteristics, such as those having large, fixed employment costs. He also found significantly positive effects for firms with the following characteristics: large size, manufacturing focus, those that exhibit labor hoarding during recessions, and those using electronic commerce [36]. Work-life balance policies are cost effective for the latter firms because they can save on the adjustment cost of employment and earn returns on the firm’s human investment as work-life balance policies decrease employee turnover and absenteeism. For firms not meeting the conditions in the list above, he could “find no causal relationship in which work-life balance practices increase a firm’s Total Factor Productivity. Therefore, the work-life balance practices by themselves that were examined in this paper [childcare or family care leave programs, flexible working arrangements, and the establishment of departments for promoting work-life balance practices] do not increase a firm’s productivity” [37, 38].

In 2013 Syrek introduces transformational leadership and looks at the association of transformational leadership and time pressure and work-life balance as well as exhaustion. “Transformational leadership refers to leaders motivating and empowering employees, supporting and challenging them to develop new skills, enabling them to face problems and find creative solutions, recognizing good performance, having an inspiring vision of the future, and acting on a personal level with the employee. [Transformational leadership] specifically aims at attending to employee’s needs providing constructive feedback and fostering a climate for individual growth” [22]. She found that “transformational leaders take employees’ personal situation into account, build on their strengths, and appreciate employees’ efforts so that they may be better able to fulfill their work demands, and therefore have more energy left to engage in private life activities and duties, which results in a better work-life balance.” [39].

Conclusion

Research is beginning to show that, for most industries, direct, high-involvement management has a greater influence on the well-being of the employee than broad institutional work-life balance policies. Overall, work-life balance policies are associated with a firm’s productivity, but it is likely that this association is coming from the reverse causality in which firms with higher productivity tend to implement work-life balance policies. Once controlling for the unobserved firm heterogeneity, no causal relationship in which work-life balance policies increase firm’s productivity was found. The work-life balance policies are needed for managers to utilize, but it is the managers that make the difference. Work-life balance practices are the most beneficial in increasing the productivity of certain types of businesses. The establishment of a department to promote work-life balance practices and organizational efforts to reduce overtime as well as child-care and family-care leave above the legal minimum tend to improve firm productivity. In conclusion, the research should imply to most businesses that to increase productivity of employees, more should be invested in hiring and training managers than to just adapting broad work-life balance policies although the work-life balance policies are important to codify for the managers to utilize. Future research is

needed to isolate the many factors that influence the productivity and profitability of a business to determine the significance of work-life balance policies on a business' productivity and profitability.

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Authors' contributions

All research and writing were done by the author.

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