

## Work-Life Balance: Who is the Target for this Silver Bullet?

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### Introduction

*“In New Zealand, at some point in the 1990s, the phrase ‘work life balance’ slipped into the popular lexicon virtually uncontested. Media, government agencies, politicians, and unions are in principle agreed on, not only what work life balance means, but also that we should all have more of it. Work life balance has become the silver bullet that will help solve, among other things, the care squeeze, reduce absenteeism and increase productivity, tackle long hours working, build “employers of choice”, enhance gender equity and enable New Zealand to compete in the global economy.” (Domett, 2006: 94)*

Work-life balance (WLB) is an intuitively appealing concept, yet definitions of work and life are slippery and shifting. The above quote confirms WLB as an overloaded concept carrying multiple meanings, notwithstanding the local definition as “effectively managing the juggling act between paid work and the other activities that are important to people” (Department of Labour cited in McPherson and Reed, 2007:14). The government State Service Commission lists ten outcomes that WLB ‘should’ achieve to benefit both the individual and the organisation (Dupuis, 2007). It should be a joint responsibility between union, employers and employees; should be affordable and available to all employees regardless of their working pattern. Hence, this raises the question, are WLB initiatives simply synonymous with good working practices?

Research in work-family/life balance reflects wider social, economic and workplace developments (Lewis, Gambles and Rappoport, 2007). The early focus was on the home-work interface and was driven by a feminist agenda as women attempted to participate more fully in paid work. Consequently, there was concern with ‘working mothers’ and dual earner families/dual career couples. In the 1980s the academic study of stress spillover between work and family grew. In the 1990s research turned to studying the large organisation’s responses to the experiences of women as shackled workers. This stream continues with New Zealand (NZ) researchers O’Driscoll and Bough finding “‘work-family interference’ to be greater than ‘family-work interference’” (2004:16). Yet organisational policies have been directed at the family-work interface, with the most common initiatives directed towards reducing the interference of family to enable workers to give more to the workplace (Lewis, 1997).

The recent change in work-life terminology has been more than a linguistic shift arising out of equity concerns (McPherson and Reed, 2007) raised by those excluded from work-family policies. It is contemporary ambiguities around the meaning of WLB plus the nature of people included and excluded in the WLB discourse that forms the central discussion of this paper.

### **Towards conceptual clarity of work-life balance**

Since the industrialisation of western countries, paid work and home have been perceived as two separate domains in time and place (Clark, 2000). Consequently, assumptions underlying the concept of WLB are that work and life are separate, the spheres are in conflict and that balance between the two spheres is sought. Not only is balance sought, the promise is that balance, once achieved, creates contentment (Jackson, 2002). While balance is constituted as desirable, it remains conceptually problematic and perhaps unachievable for a variety of reasons.

Work as oppositional to life is a false binary. The ambiguity of this metaphoric boundary is apparent through the convention of using a hyphen, *work-life* rather than the more intertwined *work/life*. This conceptual separation implies that organisational members at work are functioning in a realm that is not 'life', It also implies that 'work' is merely a means to experience 'life', reminiscent of the instrumental approach to paid work (e.g. Goldthorpe, 1966).

Additionally, both poles of the balance-work and life/family-are contested concepts. Within the well developed literature on work-family, *family* is still typically defined in terms of parent/child or dual-career relationships. The term 'life' has recently superseded 'family' as the partner in balance for a variety of gender and equity reasons, including the desire to include all organisational members in work-life initiatives, such as those without dependents (Bailyn et al., 1996). The term 'life' seems to equate to 'non-paid-work', an expansive grouping that can include such categories as family, friends, pets, leisure, recreation, unpaid home activity, caring for children, and love-motivated activities. Consideration of a wider array of individual life paths is important, because demographic groups such as singles who may have less financial flexibility, male primary caregivers, family members responsible for elder care, collectivist cultures such as Maori and Pacific Island peoples with extensive whanau (extended family/community) commitments, immigrant groups, custodial grandparents, older and semi-retired people have often been invisible in the discourse (Crooker, Smith and Tabak, 2002; Waring 2007).

Altogether WLB is a duplicitous discourse in which work and leisure are commonly viewed as dichotomous and antithetical. A significant problem with the concept according to Caproni (2004: 209) is that much of the discourse of WLB is built on a language and logic that are based in traditional models of bureaucratic organisations, and "thus the discourse is likely to perpetuate and perhaps further entrench – many of the problems it promises to alleviate". She heralds the importance of using alternative perspectives to ask: What is the current version of reality promoted by the discourse on WLB? Recognition of the deficiencies of the discourse has promoted efforts to 'rebrand' WLB with alternative discourses through the rise of terms such as work-life articulation; work-life integration, socially sustainable work (Lewis, et al. 2007). In seeking new descriptors for the area, McGregor draws our attention to the discursive strength of terms because "language is a powerful symbol of social construction" (2007:37). In rebellious mode against the denigration of life and the aggrandizement of paid work, she

advocates use of the term 'lifeswork' as an alternative to the notion of work-life balance (2007:37).

### **WLB under a critical lens**

The social construct of WLB originated within a specific cultural context and flourished in a Western neoliberal environment with its emphasis on market forces, minimal regulation and valorisation of paid work. WLB also brings western assumptions of work as it originated in U.S. and quickly spread to the UK, Europe, Australia and New Zealand (NZ). Discussions within India raised what a focus on paid work does to families, communities and traditions (Lewis, et al., 2007). Consideration of the impact of an individualistic WLB discourse on collective cultures in NZ such as Maori and Pasifica is only beginning but in these situations of more collective self identity, women are not separated from their families and communities (Te Momo, 2007; Koloto, 2007).

Individuality is intertwined with assumptions of Human Resource policies which provide flexibility and enhance 'choice' but fail to recognise that choice is bounded within existing cultures and structures. Where policies are centred around individuals then failure to balance also becomes an individual's problem. 'Choice' is always socially embedded as illustrated in a New Zealand study of senior women managers (Pringle, Olsson and Walker, 2005) where they talked a lot about choice in their WLB and were able to buy time by hiring nannies for their dependent children.

The WLB discourse is posited as gender neutral, and the shift to work-life nomenclature has further masked the gendered roots of the WLB discourse (Lewis et al., 2007) and a deeply held conviction is that family (or life) is a woman's domain. Even in egalitarian Norway under work pressure couples retreat into traditional gendered ideology and practices (Lewis et al., 2007) which are linked with and reinforce the male work role in pay equity arguments. Notions of separate spheres of work and life ignores gendered and classist assumptions within the relationship between paid and unpaid work.

There is a profound class difference in exercising time sovereignty (Roberts, 2007). Across various organisational studies a commonly reported finding is that managers and professionals have greater flexibility and autonomy in their roles. Consequently WLB initiatives are more available to managers and professionals. In a recent survey by the EEOTrust member organisations, 54% of respondents stated that they provided the facility for part-time work at senior levels (McPherson and Reed, 2007: 22) but no mention was made of the lower levels of the organisation.

As Lewis et al., (2007) astutely ask, whose interests are promoted in a WLB version of reality? Who is the embodied 'balanced' worker. Why do advertisements for 'balanced' individuals feature agile folks in yoga positions, fit escapists walking in nature, or loving couples with well behaved children in large four wheel drive vehicles? Where are the images for those who enjoy spending their leisure time gambling on horses? The images for those who stay out partying until 5am fuelled by recreational drugs or for those who enjoy Play Station for hours in sedentary positions? Why do work life balanced individuals featured in advertisements tend to be white, fit, able-bodied, rich, happy, partnered, middle aged or younger, active professionals all happy and balanced?

The workplace can be argued to be one of the most powerful institutions in which to form friendships, especially in increasingly secular societies where the workplace gives a sense of

belonging that people formerly drew from their church, community, or extended family. Furthermore, for some being at work is a safer place than in the home; a haven away from domestic violence, family conflict, substance abuse, and loneliness. Conversely, a ‘dark side’ may exist in the form of dysfunctional workplace relationships (Morrison, 2004). At the extreme end, if workplace bullying exists then one hour at work a week will often be too much for the bullied individual. Quality assurance and workplace relationships need to be examined in conjunction with WLB to allow new perspectives to command research and policy attention beyond the preoccupation of ‘time at work’.

The pressure to demonstrate commitment or ‘face time’ plus increasing work in project teams provides a counterforce to balance. Ironically many of technological supports enabling flexibility such as telecommuting, email access at home, use of mobile phones etc., have exacerbated the interference of work into family, adding ‘work’ seamlessly into life. Thus workplaces, by offering a range of flexible work arrangements and leave arrangements to ostensibly accommodate family responsibilities actually result in an augmentation of the value of paid work in people’s lives. Organisational responses are ‘quick fixes’ leaving the status quo unscathed, while people manipulate their lives as jigsaws around paid work.

### Getting back to Basics

Generally, the WLB debate assumes that individuals have too much rather than too little work. High-level long hours employees tend to explain why they accept schedules consisting of long or odd hours in terms of job satisfaction; low-level employees tend to say that they need the money (Taylor, 2002, cited in Roberts 2007). For many minimum wage workers, their preference could actually be for more work, and/or higher paid work to increase income, as a path to improved WLB. Dupuis (2007) goes further arguing that for many workers at the margins WLB is an irrelevancy. Having a group of marginal and casual workers are important for the organisation to retain their fiscal balance. “Lower-paid non-standard workers had to fit in with employers’ requirements and permanent workers generally got the preferred shifts” (Dupuis, 2007:79).

The structures and locations of jobs create different pressures to achieving WLB. Further research is required to understand the realities of WLB for those in precarious work situations, for example, on-call casual hospitality staff, or those who are required to work spilt shifts and then spend leisure time still at the workplace in-between shifts. These are examples of particularly invasive practices for workers’ WLB. Hence the suitability of typical WLB programmes needs to be explored in a wider array of environments. Is it that WLB is a more readily achievable state suited to those whose work is in a fixed physical location with specific hours of operation, for example, retail or manufacturing staff, rather than those whose work can be considered more portable such as academic research, or work that is conducted beyond ‘normal business hours’ such as nursing, cleaning, hairdressing, truck driving?

At the most basic level, it is vital that employees are educated on their rights within an employment relationship and primary legislation surrounding employment. Stories have emerged from employment lawyers of how vulnerable employees have been told that eight percent holiday pay is a *perk of the job*, that they *must sign* an employment agreement on the spot without the right to consultation, or told they are *not entitled to bereavement leave*. For WLB policies to be truly credible and inclusive, as a starting point workers should understand their basic employment rights versus what the negotiable conditions are in their employment relationships. Secure employment is often a base level requirement for optimal well-being. For workers that have insecure employment relationships without formalised employment

agreements, or are located in a workplace with a toxic culture, then just keeping/surviving a job may be of a more pressing concern than the organisation's WLB options such as subsidised gym memberships.

A holistic approach to WLB would posit individual well-being as a primary driver for policy. Optimal health includes physical and mental wellbeing, both of which can be undermined by workplace stress. Sustainability of the worker is a current issue, manifest in a variety of ways beyond personal fitness. A social sustainability approach questions assumptions of current forms of competitive capitalism valuing economic growth regardless of social factors and quality of life (Lewis et al., 2007). For example, recent trends highlight sustainability in the sense of physical reproduction, namely, the production of new workers. There is growing attention to the interconnectedness between fertility, birth rates and the ageing workforce in Japan and Finland (Meriläinen, Katila and Tienari, 2007).

Sustainability is also implicated in terms of workers overall health and ability to engage in work. Mental health issues and substance abuse commonly remains hidden in workplaces (Crooker et al, 2002). A recent survey showed that co-morbidity (co-occurrence of two or more disorders) of mental disorders and between mental and physical disorders is significant (Oakley Browne, Wells, and Scotts, 2006) with their workplace effects unresearched. Additionally, little is known about WLB and critical life incidents. For example, incidents such as the death of a loved one, divorce, terminally ill family members, domestic violence create inherently stressful periods in people's lives. Discussions of sustainability also can include the organisation's culpability<sup>1</sup> for workers' physical and mental health indicated by levels of stress, sickness and absenteeism.

### How Much Work is Ideal?

Associated with this pursuit of WLB, is the implication that the balance depends somewhat on an optimal distribution of time that can be monitored and altered (Bailyn et al., 1996; Hochschild, 1997). WLB agenda has fuelled an analysis catalogued activities through time use surveys that have meticulously measured (at 15 minute intervals within each 24 hour cycle) the distribution of activities over people's days. This utilitarian model means that work and family/'life' trade-offs become a zero sum game (Friedman, Christensen, Degroot, 1998; White, 2000). Bailyn (2000:2) dramatically outlines the spheres of work and home as pitting "a nurturing or responsibility rationality" embedded in a cyclical sense of time against a "technical-economic" time of the workplace. Work is patterned on a linear clock time, a commodity that can be sub-divided, bought and sold. Time and money is the commodity that is actively traded in each sphere; deals are cut, equivalences judged through some creative time accounting. The employees in Hochschild's study (1997) go so far as to signify quality time with the acronym - QT. But does two hours of playing outdoor games with a child equate to two hours responding to work emails? Can a meaningful comparison be made between Bailyn's (2000) suggested cyclical and linear time?

As an ideal, a universalising concept of WLB ignores the multiplicity of individual differences. As individuals negotiate working hours and flexible places for their work the division in time and space becomes increasingly blurred. The focus on time metrics can be somewhat of a red herring as it is not simply time occupied that is a concern for people but work intensification (Roberts, 2007) coupled with work fragmentation (augmented by technological assistance), into what was once 'home time' and 'leisure time'. Research over

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<sup>1</sup> In NZ the responsibility for healthy, safe and not unduly stressful workplace is legislated as the responsibility of the employer (Health and Safety in Employment Act, 1992).

the years “has revealed that only some workers experience work and life as separate and balanceable. For other workers, work and life are intertwined, even amalgamated, so that they cannot or do not want to distinguish and disentangle work and life” (Eikhof, Warhurst, and Haunschild 2007: 326). Consider those whose work interests are synonymous with their preferred leisure and life passions? Where are the boundaries then between their cognitive, behavioural and emotive experiences of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’? Beatty and Torbert (2003) posit that work and leisure are complements that in their highest states share core elements and are best understood in dynamic relation to each other.

In the remaining sections of this paper, four mini-cases are presented featuring groups that have not featured strongly in the WLB discourse to date: small-medium enterprise owner managers, singles, retirees and Chinese migrants. The mini-cases are used to challenge the dominant WLB discourse in terms of its ability to accommodate personal circumstances and work demands of some groups of people, and hence draw attention to gaps in the WLB research and policy agenda.

### **Small Medium Enterprise Owner-Managers and Work-Life Balance**

As already noted concepts related to WLB are often theoretically cloudy and empirically ill-defined (Felstead, Jewson, Phizackles and Walters 2002). These factors underpin the dearth of literature on WLB in the small-medium enterprise (SME) context, in which WLB policies are generally informal and individually negotiated (Evans, 2001; Galinsky and Bond, 1998). In the SME the traditional boundaries of work and life are often blurred. With current definitions of WLB, the predominate focus is on individuals, whereas both an organisational and individual perspective is necessary to gain a better understanding of balance in SMEs where there is a reciprocal relationship between business success and personal success for the owner-manager (van Eijnatten and Vos, 2002).

Existing accepted rhetoric of ‘WLB’ can be questioned for its appropriateness in understanding how SME owner-managers choose to manage their personal and business lives. Self-employed individuals negotiate multiple discourses and identities among which competitive individualism is not the most dominant (Fenwick, 2002). As Ghazi (2003) states, “it is not necessarily about working less, rather about having personal control and flexibility over when, where and how we work (p.xiii). Harris, Lewis and Massey’s (2005) study of SME firm life-cycles and ‘transitions’ revealed several personal and business constraints of owner-managers that defy stereotypical notions of WLB. An omission from the typical WLB discourse found in their study, is that several owner-managers spoke of purposive ‘imbalance’ chosen for various reasons, including their key skills and knowledge as central for the operation of the business; expertise that would be difficult and costly to replace.

*“I am the business and I am absolutely aware of that - if I go away for a week its taken me two weeks to plan it. If I go away for four weeks I close the place down... what I carry is the inherent knowledge of the business in my head and I drive it every day myself, which is good and bad, right?”*

Working long hours was also frequently described as a matter of personal choice, often correlated with business success, rather than a situation of imbalance from conditions imposed by others, as is the case in larger organisations. It was found that many owners consciously choose to invest substantial time and energy in their enterprise due to their passion for the business being a key part of their life:

*“I enjoy what I do. And I’ve got to the stage in my life where I only do what I enjoy. So I like making castings. I like running the business. We make a reasonable amount of money and I’m as happy as Larry. So, do I want anything more from it? No, not particularly.”*

SME owner-managers are very close to their businesses, mentally, physically, and emotionally. While it could be a conscious choice for them, care must be taken to maintain momentum and passion without tipping the balance into one of obligation, resentment and physical burnout. It is clear that new discourses are required that recognise the central place of the SME owner-manager and how this effects their business and life choices. The dominant discourse of WLB constructed from the large organisation sector offers little to the SME context which has fewer actors with multitudinous roles, tighter resource constraints, and a greater tendency for business operations to be shaped around lifestyle choices of the owner-manager.

### **Singles and Work-life Balance**

The discourse on WLB privileges married and partnered employees, stemming from previous framing of ‘work-family conflict’ and ‘family friendly programmes’. Just why single employees have not received a fraction of research attention is surprising, given the sheer number of them. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that unmarried households are a majority at 50.3 percent, and almost 42 percent of U.S. workforce is single (Conlin, 2007).

While WLB programmes began as a way to help parents balance the demands of families and jobs, many never grew beyond their family-friendly roots. The WLB issues of singles are often unappreciated and poorly understood. In a US study Casper, Herst, and Swanburg (2003) found that 35% of singles felt their non-work responsibilities were perceived as unimportant, although many provided financial assistance (6 %) or direct care to extended family and friends (24%) or pets (57%). Reported experiences of participants include: difficulties for a single woman getting time off to take her ageing mother to a friend’s funeral, a single woman having to take a vacation day rather than bereavement for the death of her dog; being *always the first ones called up to work overtime or relocate*.

This study found that singles perceived more inequity in work-life support from their organisations than did those with families. Because singles typically have one income, they may be more concerned about career development, work opportunities, and financial stability than those with partners. The conundrum is further complicated by class. Workers with higher incomes perceived more equal work expectations and access to benefits, consistent with findings that higher income workers have greater access to WLB support (Swanburg, Pitt-Catsoupes, and Drescher-Burke, 2005). Thus, singles on lower level jobs may be most sensitive to inequity in WLB support because of their single status and their lower social status in employment (Swanburg et al., 2005).

### **Retirees and Work-Life Balance**

There is a lack of information about ‘retired’ people who actually create work to improve their WLB. Most studies of WLB and retirement focus on recruiting retired workers back into large organisations such as banks, (see Jones, 2004) or the lives of mature workers who become retired through redundancy (Gardiner, Stuart, Forde, Greenwood, MacKenzie, and Perrett, 2007).

For those who create work in their retirement there is a high chance that their entrepreneurial endeavours will be based in the home. Home based business makes up the largest component of self-employed businesses in NZ, with more than two-thirds (214,000) of entrepreneurs home-based (Douglas, 2004). In a study by Harris and McIntosh (2007) examining the personal experiences of commercial home hosts in New Zealand, and specifically, the impact of operating a commercial home on WLB, many of the participants described themselves as 'retired'. A 'commercial home' refers to types of accommodation where visitors or guests pay to stay in private homes (Lynch, 2005), including bed and breakfasts, farm stays, guest houses. Commercial home owners recognise the fusion of the commercial, social and private domains (Lashley, 2000), thus provide an ideal context for the study of WLB.

The researchers interviewed 15 home hosts to explore the strategies hosts employed to meet their objectives and maintain a sense of home and WLB. All of the participants interviewed were aged over 40 years, with the large majority aged over 60 years, who described themselves as 'retired'. For many, the motivation for starting the commercial home enterprise was synonymous with a life stage change. They chose such a venture after their official career had ended and when the children had left home to create work to achieve better WLB in their retirement!

*“Well I’m retired so it gives me something to do. A very important thing with my life is that it’s given me a discipline like we’ve had four children and once they leave home it’s very easy I think to slip into a slovenly way...for me it gives me a reason for getting up and having a purpose for the day.”*

An interesting, and unexpected finding in this study is that the majority of participants (70%) are retired teachers/educators. For the few that were not, they also had earlier people oriented careers in caring and sales professions. The hosts clearly loved educating visitors about their region and country. Given that so many participants had careers in education, the motivation for hosting around the reciprocity of learning and sharing with guests was not surprising.

*“One of the best things is you meet such an array of different people, like brain surgeons and all sorts and people that have a different perspective and view on life. It might be something really little that they share with you that you wouldn’t think about, that sort of thing.”*

Many participants were candid in admitting that hosting provided them with wider social contact in their retired years. Commonly, participants spoke of having fairly small networks of friends and/or family and yet wanting to be in an environment that would provide them with frequent personal contact - the joining of 'kindred spirits' in quite a serendipitous way.

*“We don’t have a huge gaggle of friends. We’re not hugely social people. We’ve got a lot a friends but I’m ashamed to say not very many locally and we don’t have a huge family, so maybe we’re looking at it as a surrogate family! But we like people.”*

The creation of work by those in retirement includes a multitude of scenarios such as unpaid care of grandchildren to support working children, unpaid care of dependent partners, charity and community work, family trust work, temporary assignments at former full-time workplaces, and self-initiated private enterprise; all forums worthy of exploration for their intersection with the WLB of retirees.

### **Chinese Migrants and Work-Life Balance**

New Zealand's ethnic make-up has continued to change. Europeans remain the largest of the major ethnic groups, 67.6 percent of the population in 2006 Census with Māori, the second largest ethnic group, (14.6 percent). Of the major ethnic groups, the Asian ethnic group grew the fastest between 2001 and 2006, increasing almost 50 percent to 354,552 people in 2006 (9% of the total population). From the 2001 to the 2006 Census results, Chinese numbers had increased by 40.5% to 147,570, making them the largest Asian ethnic group (Statistics New Zealand, 2007).

In contrast to earlier times, the Chinese migrants arriving in the last two decades included many well-educated professionals and relatively wealthy successful businessmen (Abbott, Wong, Williams, Au and Young, 1999). These new Chinese migrants tend to be well informed and communicative. Many are well-educated professionals or successful business people with internationally transferable skills and experiences. Most of them have chosen to come because they want to provide their children with a less competitive educational environment, and some would like to take a more leisurely lifestyle and to seek new employment opportunities (Ip, 2003). As Chinese migrants have made great contribution to the local workforce, it is worthwhile to address the issue of work-life balance in terms of Chinese culture in a NZ context and including a consideration of their culture.

*“Chinese are happy to work for their families especially for their children. The first priority they see would be providing the best education and commodities to their next generation. Under such a culture, they may choose to work rather than enjoy leisure activities” (Chan, 2006: 33)*

Chinese, as employers, employees and unpaid workers have been largely excluded from WLB research. A notable exception is the work of Wei (2007) who used a biographical method to investigate how Chinese female migrants deal with their work-life relationship focusing on the themes of immigration, employment, financial status and accommodation, care responsibility, social and leisure activities, and comparison and improvements in WLB. She found that Chinese women have a natural resilience that helps them cope with the changes that come with immigration. Culturally Chinese women put themselves last on the list, resulting in sacrifice and risk.

*“We prioritise work and occupation as more important than family or personal life. We would be criticised and made to feel selfish if we have concerns about work-life balance” (Wei, 2007:124)*

Given the increasing numbers of Chinese people in the New Zealand population, more research is required about them and how their choices around work-life balance are shaped by factors including culture, immigration, work, extended family, financial situation, personal goals, and gendered roles. For WLB programmes to be relevant and reflective of contemporary society, the cultural values of various ethnic groups need to be understood and appreciated.

### **Conclusions**

The concept of WLB has become cluttered with meaning but also a panacea for many workplace and ‘life’ ills. Until there is greater conceptual clarity and exposure of the assumptions underlying WLB, attempts to implement satisfactory actions for both employees and organisations performance will be fraught and unsuccessful. As Dupuis (2007: 83) wisely

warns a focus on WLB is “a diversionary tactic that serves to obscure the most fundamental issues faced in contemporary labour markets”. These fundamental issues run the gamut from underemployment, to exploitation and provide a smoke screen from continuing inequities. To what extent has WLB become an obsession for the privileged classes and another lever whereby organizations can control the activities of their employees whether at the workplace or at home? Fundamentally the economic and social equity goals of WLB are in conflict (Domett, 2006). As the four mini-cases illustrate, there is a much wider workforce (migrants, singles, and retirees) and more diverse workplaces (SMEs, and home businesses) for which WLB theorisation is required in order to gain greater conceptual clarity to assist the lives of those involved.

A whole consultancy industry has been built upon the work-life conceptual framework, with WLB programmes being sold to organisations as a magical solution to complex issues related to recruitment, retention, employee commitment, absenteeism and turnover. Some organisations with an attractive menu of WLB options have even gained notoriety as an ‘employer of choice’ through competitions and awards. Governments and unions have directed their attention at WLB equation for balancing national and organisational productivity levels with worker and societal well-being.

What real interest does an organisation have in the balanced life of individual employees, if it is at odds with them as dedicated workers? How can organisational culture and human resource management functions such as remuneration, performance management and promotion policies and practices serve to undermine WLB workplace initiatives? Flexible work schedules are undoubtedly welcomed by some employees for achieving personally relevant WLB, but there is unlikely to be any “one size fits all” best practice solution.

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