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THE EFFECTS OF WORKING HOURS
ON WORKERS' WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION IN MALAYSIA

Dzurizah Ibrahim (PhD)

Universiti Malaysia Sabah, MALAYSIA
idzuri@ums.edu.my; dibrahim2011@yahoo.com

Abstract

Long work hours cultures are said to be pervasive and as such work is claimed to be ruining workers' lives instead of ruling (Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). The amount of time that people spend at work will have a strong influence on work-life integration. The more time spent at work the less time available for participation in non-working life. Long working hours reduce the opportunities for socially productive leisure by restricting time available 'for being an effective marriage partner, parent and citizen' (Golden & Figart, 2000: 26). Research indicates that it is the low control over work hours which leads to greater work-life conflict (Pisarski *et al.,* 2002). There is evidence indicating that work-life conflict arising from long or socially undesirable working hours, particularly in the evening or on weekends, has negative effects on health (Cowling, 2005; Bohle & Tilley, 1989). However, the extent to which longer working hours and managerial control over workers' working hours affect the way workers' manage their work/non-work life has yet to be empirically investigated in the Malaysian context. Hence, this paper aims to investigate to what extent the working hours can affect public sector workers' work-life integration in the context of Malaysia. Based on qualitative case studies in three public sector organisations with 71 in-depth interviews, findings show that the reactive nature of certain jobs required workers to work altruistically for the public good and also required workers to work long hours. Although the working time demand varied from one occupation to another, the long working hours culture in the study demonstrated that the nature of certain job types requires high work commitment. However, the high work demands in certain jobs in the organisational cases were not accommodated by adequate resources e.g. work-life arrangements. As such, the relationship between work demands and management's desire to control working time, and the absence of necessary work-life provisions (i.e. on-site crèches) was seen to create conflict.

Keywords: Working hours, work-life integration, work-life conflict, public sector, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to examine the effects of working hours on public sector workers' work-life integration in the context of Malaysia. It is important to study working hours as the amount of time that people spend at work will have a strong influence on work-life integration. The more time spent at work the less time available for participation in non-working life. Furthermore, research indicates that it is the low control over work hours which leads to greater work-life conflict (Pisarski *et al.,* 2002).

Work-life integration is important to organisations, individual workers, families and societies as they can affect organisational/worker performance as well as non-work life functioning (Noon & Blyton, 2007). Furthermore, it is an important markers of societal well-being and can be used as a platform for harmonious employment relationships (Noon & Blyton, 2007).

In Malaysia, as the largest employers in the country, public sector organisations have pioneered work-life arrangements which can be emulated by private sector organisations. Such arrangements are however still at the early stages, and organisational as well as workers' awareness of them and work-life related issues is also believed to still be at a rudimentary level. Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to investigate to what extent

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the working hours can affect workers' work-life integration in the Malaysian public sector organisations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE INTERACTION BETWEEN WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION AND WORKING HOUR

According to Blunsdon *et al.,* (2006:2), work-life integration is "individuals 'successfully' segmenting or integrating 'life' and work so as to achieve a satisfying quality of life, overall satisfaction and less strain or stress from not having to juggle conflicting role demands". Meanwhile, work-life conflict occurs as a consequence of having to fulfill different competing and conflicting roles – being a spouse, a parent, a carer – or simply being unable tp achieve satisfaction between work and leisure (non-work domain) (Aryee, 1992; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Ren & Foster, 2011). In other words, work-life conflict is regarded as 'a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect' (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985: 77).

The issue of work and non-work integration is influenced by the increase in women's labour market activity, dual-earner parents, childcare responsibilities conflicting with employment demands (MacInnes, 2008), the increase in long work hours and additional hours worked at home (MacInnes, 2008; Blyton & Dastmalchian, 2006), and unpredictable overtime to meet extended work schedules (Hyman *et al.*, 2003). There are many reasons for long work hours, for example, the need to earn a living, attachment to work, job commitments, job security, career advancements, an organisational 'long work hours' culture, an increase in workers' expectations, and a growth in workload and work pressure. Additionally, some working hours are not recorded as work time since they are worked at home. When work is brought home, this not only contributes to long working hours but also blurs the boundaries between work and non-work spheres (Blyton & Dastmalchian, 2006). Moreover, when roles in the work and non-work spheres are perceived as separate entities, the tendency for conflict between roles in both spheres is higher. In Asia, although studies by Ren and Foster (2011) suggest that work rather than family-related factors were the most influential causes of conflict for workers, Hassan *et al.*'s (2010) study found family interference with work is higher among workers. Malaysia is perceived as a high collectivistic society whereby work life is usually supported by family members.

In many developed countries, to support employees achieve a better fit between work and non-work lives, work/non-work arrangements have been established such as flexible working time, homeworking, part-time working hours and state assisted nursery places. According to OECD (2001), one of the key indicators used to indicate work/non-work integration is the opportunity for workers to elect to work less than full time. Thus, part-time hours are one option to deal with the double load of childcare responsibilities and work responsibilities. In Australia, it has, however, been reported that working part-time often brings with it a loss of control over working hours that does not confer work/non-work flexibility. It can, on the contrary, result in unpredictable long working hours (Pocock, 2001). This shows that despite efforts to design work/non-work arrangements to fit people's lives around work, such efforts may in fact result in workers working long hours.

For the individual, working long hours can mean an increase in stress, and potentially create work/non-work conflict. Long work hours cultures are said to be pervasive and as such work is claimed to be ruining workers' lives instead of ruling (Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). The amount of time that people spend at work will have a strong influence on work/non-work integration. The more time spent at work the less time available for participation in non-working life. Long working hours reduce the opportunities for socially productive leisure by restricting time available 'for being an effective marriage partner, parent and citizen' (Golden & Figart, 2000: 26). Existing research indicates that long weekly hours and involuntary overtime have a negative effect on work–life balance (Berg *et al.*, 2003) as it reduces the quality and quantity of workers' participation in family and social life (Pocock, 2001; Pocock & Clarke, 2004). People working long hours report lower levels of satisfaction with their hours of work and their work–life balance than other workers (Watson *et al.*, 2003: 87). However, closer examination of the central concern, lengthening working hours, indicates that this assumption is too simplistic. Importantly, it should be recognised that the premise of a harmful long hours culture is misconceived; even more so when worker attitudes to any long working hours are examined. Analyses of working hours suggest that work might be a source of satisfaction for some workers, or at least positive gain. Many workers who do work long hours do so

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because they want to, regarding work not as debilitating but affirming (Cowling, 2005; Isles, 2004). Hence, to what extent the interaction between work-life integration and hours worked in the Malaysian context has yet need to be investigated.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative case study research design of three organisations – higher learning institution (Unico), medical services (Hospico) and revenue services (Custco). The data collection was based on in-depth interviews with seventy one employees from Unico, Hospico and Custco. In-depth interviewing is a data collection method relied on extensively by qualitative researchers, and in this study it was used to gain insights into employees' attitudes to their work and non-work lives and how they managed their work/non-work lives and their experience of work. For ethical reason, the organisations and interviewees will remain anonymous and thus, pseudonyms are used. Unico is a higher learning institution with 1599 workforces. Meanwhile, Custco is a government agency responsible for administrating the nation's tax revenue policy and employed 752 people. Hospico, on the other hand, is a centre of specialist services for women and children and had 1076 workers. This study employed thematic analysis to analyse the data.

In this research context, provision for staggered flexible start and finish times was found to have been implemented nationwide in the Malaysian public sector workplaces. Additionally, in Unico, flexible working time for academics had been implemented alongside a punch card system for monitoring which resulted in restricting flexibility. It was found that a commonality in the three organisational cases was the requirement of long working hours. Despite the provision for flexible working times, the average number of working hours for academics in Unico was 47 hours per week, and 60 hours per week for some occupations in both Custco and Hospico whereby most of the workers work shift and inconsistent hours with 'on-call' duty.

Table 1 presents the profiles of the employee participants in the three case studies. As can be seen, they represented a diversity of backgrounds in terms of gender, age, marital status, religion, ethnicity, length of service and tenure.

Table 1: Profiles of Employee Participants from the Three Case Studies

PROFILES	ORGANISATIONS			
	UNICO	**CUSTCO**	**HOSPICO**	**TOTAL**
Gender				
Female	10	8	16	**34**
Male	10	18	9	**37**
Age				
Below 29 years	2	3	6	**11**
30-39 years	10	4	11	**25**
40-49 years	7	10	6	**23**
50 years and above	1	9	2	**12**
Marital Status				
Single without dependant	2	2	3	**7**
Single with dependant	2	4	3	**9**
Married (with dependant)	15	20	18	**53**
Married (without dependant)	1	-	1	**2**
Religion				
Islam	15	15	12	**42**
Christianity	5	11	13	**29**

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Ethnic Background				
Sabah *Bumiputera*	13	20	24	**57**
Chinese*	2	2	1	**5**
Other *Bumiputera*	3	4	-	**7**
Indian	1	-	-	**1**
Other	1	-	-	**1**
Length of Service				
Less than 5 years	1	3	7	**11**
5-10 years	12	2	8	**22**
10-15 years	7	5	3	**15**
15-20 years	-	3	2	**5**
20-25 years	-	4	1	**5**
More than 25 years	-	9	4	**13**
Tenure				
Life-time (permanent) employment	18	26	25	**69**
Contract (renewable in every 2 years)	2	-	-	**2**

Notes: Bumiputera – 'son of the soil' (native).
Sabah bumiputera include the KadazanDusun, Rungus, Bajau, Suluk, Kadayan, Iban, Bisaya, Murut, Sungai, Lundayeh, Idahan, Malay Brunei ethnic groups etc.
Other Bumiputera include Malays from Peninsular Malaysia and other ethnic groups from Sarawak.
* Four respondents from Unico and Custco were of Chinese mixed heritage.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Workers in Malaysia's public sector normally work eight hours per day on average. However, due to job requirements in certain occupations, working hours can vary depending on work requirements and services needed. In the study, long working hours was the norm and work tends to gradually encroach on personal and family time. The findings of this study show that most employees in the study work long hours and therefore affect workers' work-life as discuss below.

4.1 Work-life conflict

Some workers in this study found themselves working continuous shifts. Since Hospico, for example, was experiencing an under-staffing problem at the time of the study, John, a Radiographer with five years of service, and married with a young child, found himself trapped in working one hundred hours per week due to the lack of staff. He had no choice but to carry on with his regular tasks in addition to his colleagues' tasks resulting in having to work extremely long hours. The quote below shows the predicament John had to face on a regular basis, working long hours in addition to being on on-call duty, the latter being based on a 'roster system'. Although every clinical worker working the midnight shift would normally be given a day off the following day, due to lack of staff, all radiographers in his department, including John, did not have this privilege. Continuously working longer hours was the norm:

"I work 100 hours a week. I work shift hours alternately with fixed office hours. For example, if today I work office hours 8.00 a.m. till 5.00 p.m., I will do shift duty from 8.00 a.m. until 2.00 p.m. the next day and then 2.00 p.m. until 10.00 p.m. The following day I will work from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. On the weekend I work from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. and another duty from 5.00 p.m. to 8.00 a.m. As this department is short-staffed, I don't have a day off after the night shift like clinical staff in other departments. We are on-call duty at any time based on a roster system and work weekends as well. I have to cover for and perform someone else's duty if they are unable to

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work."

John further explained how his long working hours affected his life in general:

"Long working hours can contribute to a stressful personal life and less time for the family. I don't have time for myself – no time to enjoy my life. Working longer hours is gradually taking away and eroding my personal life because my working life takes up so much time."

In John's case, the lack of organisational support resulted in work creep and conflict between work and non-work spheres. The experience of Nora, a Radiographer, married with a young child, showed how the strain from her work role made it difficult to fulfil her caring responsibilities. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) refer to this as strain-based conflict. Nora said:

"At the moment, it is difficult to work at night or during public holidays as I have a problem finding suitable childcare provisions. The childcare centre to which I used to send my child has closed. When I was single, I didn't have that problem, now my problem is the difficulty in finding appropriate childcare. If I send my child to a 24 hour childcare centre then I need to pay extra money. My husband works as an Assistant Medical officer so if both of us find ourselves having to work shifts, we have no alternative but to send our child to a 24 hour childcare centre. However, last Christmas holiday both of us worked at night and the childcare centre was closed. We had no other option but to bring our child here (to the workplace) and take turns to look after him in the rest room."

The fact that both John and Nora had to take their children to their workplace shows that there was limited or no childcare facilities available to them and also that the time they spent with their partners and children was fragmented.

The absence of on-site crèche provision and other social support from e.g. a full-time paid helper or nanny (not everyone who worked fulltime could afford a paid helper), spouse, other family member, contributed to conflict between work/non-work life demands. For example, as a high ranking officer, Madam Mary, a Custco Superintendent Officer in the Screening Baggage Section in the Airport Unit, married with three younger children aged eight years to eight months old, had to do two shifts that involved a morning shift from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. and an afternoon shift from 1.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m. every Monday to Friday alternately with her colleague. Additionally, both she and her colleague had to do the overtime roster shift over the weekend. Since they were the only two superintendent officers, one had to do all the shifts if the other was on leave. Over the weekend, one of these two officers needed to be in charge and to work a shift of 14 continuous hours. Consequently, Madam Mary's non-work life was almost non-existent. She experienced difficulty in integrating her work/non-work life spheres despite having a maid. The encroachment of long working hours on Madam Mary's non-work life was vividly described by her:

"Practically, my working hours are not suitable for me as I have a baby aged eight months. I work every day from Monday to Friday, and also over the weekend. So time spent with my family is little. That's why sometimes I don't go to work on Saturday and cannot claim overtime pay. It is also tiring. When I work from 8.00 a.m. till 10.00 p.m. straight and my husband who works for a private company has to go out, I have to find someone to look after my children (as my maid only works half a day), including my baby. I have to pick up my older children from school, take them back to the house, leave them with the child minder and then return to work. It's so tiring, working from morning until evening."

The ability to manage work/non-work interactions is crucially influenced by the availability or absence of provisions at work. Hence, organisational factors are important to ensure the integration of workers' work/non-work lives. These factors include how working time is organised.

4.2 Health issues

Working long hours can affect workers' well-being and contribute to 'work creep' which affects work performance (Milliken & Dunn-Jensen, 2005). Most importantly, it also affects workers' non-work life, as indicated by Sister

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Milla, the Senior Nursing Staff in the O&G ward, a single parent with grown up children:

"After a double shift, when you reach home you are so tired and stressed that you don't feel like spending time with the family."

Dr. Hannah, a Medical Officer (MO) and Head of the Emergency Unit in Hospico, married with young children, confirmed this scenario when she shared her experience of working longer hours in the unit.

"In general, we should in theory work a total of 49 hours per week but the working hours differ each week. There are MOs who work for more than 49 hours per week. For example, Dr. Jasse has already worked 60 hours this week… I once cried when I had to work non-stop every other shift. At the time there were lots of patients and they kept on complaining as they wanted to be treated quickly… Because I was working non-stop I lacked rest and this caused stress."

Continuously long working hour and working late nights also lead to low physical energy and mental exhaustion, which can be dangerous as pointed out by Madam Melly, 46 years old with 22 years of service and a Custco Superintendent Officer at the Airport Unit, married with four children:

"We work long hours and our workload is always heavy. For example, two of the officers have to work two shifts (8.00 a.m. – 5.00 p.m. and 5.00 p.m. – 10.00 p.m.) and a roster duty at the weekend when one officer will be in charge of seven workers between 6.00 a.m. till 3.00 p.m. and the other will be in charge of seven workers between 3.00 p.m. till 12 midnight. We are always working, we have very little rest time, and the long working hours affect my health and my concentration level. When it's my turn to do the midnight shift my family always worry about me as I have to drive back to my home which is 60 kilometres away when I am feeling very sleepy."

This is also supported by Chief David, a Senior Officer in Custco who noted:

"Working long hours ultimately affects work performance and quality of work, and increases stress."

Kirana, 32 years old, a married lecturer in Unico and expectant mother, also pointed to her long working hours as a result of work demand and revealed that at times she found her job stressful:

'… the start and finish time may be flexible but in terms of working hours I may find myself working up to 9 to 10 hours a day. On one occasion, I started some work at work which had to be completed within a deadline and found myself working on it at home until midnight and I had to continue working on it the next day to finish it. If I cannot finish work at the office, I will take it home to complete. So far, I'm willing to work on demand because I like my job and feel a responsibility towards my students. At certain times, however, my job is stressful, especially during the final exam grading. I'm often so busy I don't have time to do my laundry."

Apart from teaching and other core-business tasks required by the management, workers in Unico also had other work demands such as administration. Such multi-tasking requires a high commitment from workers. Mamat, 34 years old, Head of Programmes, shared his experience of working continuously to ensure his work was completed on time:

'The maximum I can stay at the office is 10 hours. If management wants work done urgently I will work at home, often until midnight, working at my computer. I have experienced working 24 hours non-stop as Head of Programmes and it is exhausting."

Obviously, long working hours affect workers' health and leave very little time for family or personal interests.

4.3 Job Vocation

Generally, academics worked inconsistent and unpredictable long working hours due to work demand in Unico. Working hours varied across the year, due to pressure of marking and conducting research and resulted employees to work longer hours in order to complete important tasks. Rahim, 33 years old, an academic in Unico, married with children, marked students' papers and exam scripts and often took his work home to meet

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work deadlines:

"I will normally stay at the office until I finish all my tasks, but the latest I can stay is 10.00 p.m. Sometimes, therefore, I take my work home to finish it, especially when I have to mark final exam papers or assignments within a given deadline."

This quote suggests that the pressure of job demands imposes a degree of rigidity in terms of where and how long employee works for. Additionally, work demands also meant they had to be contactable by the management whenever required which was made possible with modern technology such as e-mails and mobile phone. This resulted in frequent interruptions of academics privacy and long, inconsistent working hours. Indirectly, these work practice increased the permeability of the boundary between work and home causing workers to conduct work-related activities in the time reserved for non-work or family activities (Milliken & Dunn-Jensen, 2005). Mike, 39 years old, a senior academic in Unico, married with young children commented:

"I can start work late, I can choose my own time when to go back to work after lunch or just disappear. I think it is most important that you are contactable and available. I (normally) switch on my mobile 24 hours and am available for any appointment (with students) at any time."

Similarly, Khalid, 45 years old, a senior academic who was single, indicated that flexitime gave him more freedom to do what he wanted. For some academics, flexible working hours was perceived as enabling them to gain some control over their working time:

"Flexible working practice is heaven to me. In contrast to other professions, being a lecturer and working flexi hours enables me to better manage my work and non-work life. For instance, when I'm not teaching I will be doing work on my computer at my own pace. I really like my present working arrangement – it is far better than that in my old job, when I worked fixed hours."

The demands on shift workers are higher than those on workers who need only to go to work at fixed regular hours. Inconsistent and prolonged working hours influence the way people manage their work and non-work domains. Dealing with emergency situations is difficult and the nature of such tasks requires high commitment, dedication, and personal sacrifice. It also means long working hours for most of the clinical workers. An interview with Sister Milla explained why Hospico strives to ensure the inculcation of the 'work first' ethic among its staff members. Sister Milla, a female Senior Nursing Staff in the Obstetrics and Gynaecology (O&G) ward with 23 years of service, a single parent with grown up children, states that although her job required her to work long hours, her working hours suited her:

"38.5 hours must be worked in a week, but sometimes I work up to 45 hours in a week. In a month I have three claimable hours if I work a weekend. Basically, I work 8 hours a day from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. and arrive home at 7.00 p.m. I don't have a problem with the working hours as they suit me."

This is also supported by evidences from Custco. An interview with Ramlee, an Officer, married with a baby son and working in the Custco Preventive Unit, a department known for its irregular hectic working hours, revealed that despite the inconsistent working hours limited the time he was able to spend with his family, he enjoyed his work:

"My working hours are inconsistent, sometimes I am on 24 hour standby. I don't work every night, it depends on the situation, so I have time to rest but very limited time to be with the family. The working hours are not a problem for me as I enjoy my job."

Another example of working inconsistent hours was provided by an officer working in the Intelligence Unit. Tuan[1] Talib's tasks included eliciting information from informants in order to monitor smuggling activity. He had been

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[1] In Custco, both female and male Custco officers with three pips and a crown are addressed as 'Chief'. 'Tuan' is a title addressed to a male high ranking officer and 'Puan' or Madam a title addressed to a female high ranking officer.

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working with Custco for 12 years, his job consisted of undercover duties as well as observation. As well as inconsistent working hours, he was expected to work fixed office hours from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. during non-operational activity. However, because of the varied nature of his work duties, Tuan Talib did not find the inconsistent working hours irksome, in fact, when interviewed he implied he found his job stimulating:

"I work inconsistent working hours. It is difficult to quantify my working time as we work 24 hours around the clock. We work based on information from informants and networking. We work anytime. So far I have no problem working like this. It is flexible and lively and it is not rigid working hours. "

This suggests that if a worker finds their job sufficiently stimulating and enjoyable, long and inconsistent working hours can be accommodated. This was supported by Chief Aled as he also perceived working long and inconsistent hours can be enjoyable for someone who loves the nature of the job. As a Senior Officer, married with grown up children, had been working 31 years for Custco, 10 of which had been spent working in the Preventive Unit, Chief Aled dealt with investigation cases and prosecutions, and was also involved in raid operations. He had worked unlimited hours since being assigned to the Preventive Unit. Chief Aled indicated that he needed to be ready to work at a moment's notice during the day or night. He commented:

"There is no limit to working hours in this unit. I am on standby 24 hours a day. If there is any public complaint or information, even in the middle of the night, I have to deal with it straight away. A raid operation is usually carried out outside official working hours… I actually find my job enjoyable in the Preventive Unit as I don't work in one place but move around to different locations to achieve the objectives of the job. It's a job full of the unexpected. There are no routine tasks since one has to react to continually changing situations. Other than regular scheduled operations, my job cannot be planned as it is based on information received from the public and this can come at any time. Mine is such an enjoyable job as I work everywhere in the state, the east coast, west coast, everywhere. I have got used to the nature of the job and love it."

The empirical evidence above suggests that workers had a strong work ethic and viewed their job as a vocation (Noon & Blyton, 2007). They were therefore willing to accept the long working hours imposed by management. The long working hours in the cases demonstrated that the nature of certain job types required high work commitment. A strong work ethic motivated workers' commitment to their work (Noon & Blyton, 2007). Workers worked long hours not only because of a strong work ethic but because working long hour was rewarding and enjoyable. It is evident that many of the workers enjoy their work and do not have difficulty with their working patterns. The fact that evidences found in this study suggests that if a worker finds their job sufficiently stimulating and enjoyable, long and inconsistent working hours can be accommodated. Additionally, this demonstrates that workers had a strong work ethic and viewed their job as a vocation.

5. CONCLUSION

According to Warhurst *et al.* (2008), work practices influence workers' work-life patterns. The culture of long working hours which characterises many organisations and occupations is one of the causes of work-life conflict (Lewis, 1997; Frone *et al.,* 1997; Piotrkowski *et al.*, 1987). Work-life arrangements are associated with reduced work-life conflict and enhanced organisational commitment (Lambert, 2000). However, these positive effects are achieved only when the organisational workplace is supportive of work-life programmes. In this study, the high work demands in certain jobs were not accommodated by adequate resources e.g. work/non-work arrangements. As such, the relationship between work demands and management's desire to control working time, and the absence of necessary work-life provisions (i.e. on-site crèches) was seen to create conflict. Alternatively, if work demands and management control were low and work-life provisions were high, conflict could be reduced and work-life spheres could be better managed. Additionally, the absence of a work time directive setting a maximum number of working hours in the national agenda has contributed to workers having to work long hours at the organisational level. The Malaysian Government as policy maker should consider providing guidelines for the maximum hours workers should work, for example, in a week, to enable individual workers to strategise their work and life spheres according to their needs in each sphere, rather than let the responsibilities in one sphere override those in the other. In addition, the employer will be able to ensure there is an appropriate relationship between 'demands' (i.e. work demand and management desire to control workers' working time) and 'resources' (i.e. work/non-work provisions provided to cater for the 'demands') so that the

unique Malaysian public sector ethos can be retained to the uppermost.

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