

WORK-LIFE MANAGEMENT PATTERNS AMONG PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine how Malaysian public sector employees' approach their work and non-work lives. The research was based on the integration of semi-structured interviews and the use of organisational documents in an attempt to examine workers' work and non-work lives in the Malaysian context. Conducting qualitative case study inquiry as the main method, this paper focuses on examining the ways in which employees organise their work and non-work lives. Based on different facets of diversity from three public sector case studies in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, this paper demonstrates how structural factors are significant when examining how workers are either enabled or constrained in their ability to manage the relationship between work and non-work. Workers' commitment to their work/non-work responsibilities depend on the degree of support, both institutional and private, that they are able to draw upon and their life-cycle stage. In considering the management of work and non-work life as a continuum in this study, some workers were found to achieve partial to full integration, segmented to conflictual, whereas others either experience conflictual relations between work and home, or develop strategies to segment work and non-work. Thus, this paper identifies different degrees of satisfaction and dis-satisfaction with the relationship between work and non-work as well as their capacity to integrate both spheres whether dependent on their work position, life-cycle position and availability of organisational support (both formal and informal), family help and paid support or vice versa.

Keywords: Work-life integration; work-life conflict; qualitative case studies; organizational supports; Malaysia.

1.0 Introduction

Research on 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). Moreover, these entities are important markers of societal well-being and can be used as a platform for harmonious employment relationships.

As the largest employers in the country, public sector organisations in Malaysia 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. Further, as work-life management in Malaysia is an under-researched area, it is the aim of this study to gain better understanding of the present situation of the work/non-work lives of workers in the Malaysian public sector context. Moreover, since the Malaysian Government is focused on the implementation of work-life policies in the public sector, there is a need for more research on countries with diverse cultural contexts (Poelmans, 2005). Hence, the aim of this paper is to examine how Malaysian public sector employees' (particularly in Sabah) approach their work and non-work lives.

2.0 Literature Review: The Work-Life Conceptualization and Factors Influence Workers' Work-Life Integration

The notion of 'work/non-work' relations is extensively used in the literature with its different collocations, i.e. work-life balance (WLB), work-life conflict (WLC), work-life integration (WLI) (Duxbury & Higgins, 2001; Kossek &

Lambert, 2005; Milliken & Dunn-Jensen, 2005; Blyton *et al.*, 2005). The notion of 'work/non-work' relations recognises that there are more than work and non-work domains in people's lives.

Work is usually conceived of as involving paid work as Geurts and Demerouti (2003:280) note work is 'a set of (prescribed) tasks that an individual performs while occupying a position in an organisation'. One of the main issues, when looking at what constitutes work, is the inclusion or not of work performed in various contexts such as the home (housework) or, in voluntary association (community/voluntary work). 'Work' is normally perceived as 'formal paid employment' or 'market work' or 'work that is performed in return for a wage' (Ransome, 1996; Geurts & Demerouti, 2003). Meanwhile, one of the most used labels in the work/non-work field is work-family, indicating that there are two life domains, work and family. In most developed nations, family has primarily been defined as the nuclear family with two adults with children at home. The focus is mainly on how the working parent(s) manage to balance work and family responsibilities in terms of child development and of family functioning in house work tasks (see Poelmans, 2005). This view is not without limitations. First, the extended family is not systematically taken into consideration. Whereas the close family may be a well-functioning unit, work can impact the extended family relationship and vice-versa. Second, the focus is often on children at home so that having adult children is not fully considered. Nonetheless, the relationships between parents and children do not stop so that working couples with adult children may still have their adult children in mind when evaluating the functioning of their family. Third, the focus has been clearly on couples (single or dual-earner), but less on single parenting as well less on couples without children and even less on singles. Significantly, each one of these units may be perceived by the individual in focus as 'a family'. It is thus important to consider the context in which individuals see and define the family.

'Non-work' or 'life' is generally taken to be a thing that lies outside the realm of formal paid employment, but which falls inside the realm of family or home life (Ransome, 2007: 377) as well as to activities and obligations beyond one's own family situation (Geurts & Demerouti, 2003: 280). Thus, this paper defines non-work as life outside the formal paid employment and consisting of caring responsibilities for family/extended family, the activities outside paid work, including household and spiritual activities, activities with family and friends and community activities.

There is a significant body of literature detailing the work/non-work issues, based on the experiences of Western societies. Such studies include case studies on how workers manage their work/non-work lives: the influence of organisational cultures on work-life integration (Lewis, 1997; Lewis 2001; Callan, 2007), the implementation and implication of work-life practices (Manfredi and Holliday, 2004; Hall and Liddicoat, 2005). Researchers also show how workers' attempts at work-life integration are influenced by a number of factors including state provision of work/non-work policies (Abendroth & Den Dulk, 2011; Fagnani, 2005; Ackers, 2003; Taylor, 2002; Hardman, 1998), trade union involvement (Heery, 2006, Tailby *et al.*, 2005; Budd & Mumford, 2004; Glass & Fujimoto, 1995), increased women's participation in the labour market (CIPD, 2007; Dex & Smith, 2002) and organisations who have been interested in the 'business case' for work/non-work initiatives (Arthur & Cook, 2004; Coussey, 2000).

Many studies (Nord *et al.*, 2002; Coussey, 2000) have shown the positive effects of the integration of work/non-work spheres on employers and organisations, but how do workers successfully achieve such integration is still questionable. Moreover, literatures on work-life issues whether quantitative or qualitative approaches are dominated by human resource management mainstream with business case and employers' perspective. Focus on employee is still lack investigated. It is therefore the challenge for this paper to offer new insights on work-life integration issues from employees' perspective from widely scholarly contribution but also for the specific context of Malaysia. As the Malaysian labour force becomes more diverse, there will be an urgent need to ensure good employment relationship and fair treatment for all, including those working parents, individuals and families with crucial caring responsibilities. As this issue is such a new concept in the Malaysian workplace, therefore, this study is trying to fill the gap.

Range of supports familial (family and spouse), communal (neighbour and private help) and organisations (employer / immediate superior and provisions provided by the employer) were found to help workers cope with the pressures of integrating their work and non-work lives, thereby enabling them to work without distraction (Md-Sidin *et al.*, 2010; Van Daalen *et al.*, 2006; Abendroth & den Dulk, 2011;). Thus, 'supports' are important as

they can contribute to how workers experience potential conflict or a more integrated approach to work and non-work life (Abendroth & den Dulk, 2011; Warhurst *et al.*, 2008; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1988) and influence how workers' pattern their work and non-work lives. In order to understand how workers manage their work/non-work lives, it is necessary to examine workers' work/non-work patterns.

One of the consequences of the inability to integrate work and non-work demands is the increasing level of work-life conflict experienced by parents in employment (Erickson *et al.*, 2010) and workers who no longer have dependent children were associated with less work-life conflict (Baltes and Young, 2007). Work-life conflict occurs when an individual has to perform multiple roles that require time, energy and commitment (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In Malaysia, the impact of marital status on work/non-work life has not been thoroughly investigated, since studies often include married workers only (Md-Sidin *et al.*, 2008), single parents (Subramaniam & Selvaratnam, 2010), or workers with dependent children or a partner (Lu *et al.*, 2005).

3.0 Research 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 administering 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.

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
Ethnic Background				
Sabah <i>Bumiputera</i>	13	20	24	57

Chinese*	2	2	1	5
Other <i>Bumiputera</i>	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.

4.0 Findings

Work-life integration is perceived as “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” (Blunsdon *et al.*, 2006:2). The variation of ‘individuals successfully segmenting or integrating’ work/non-work life, therefore, can result people achieve partial to full satisfaction, and segmented to conflictual relations of their work/non-work lives. This section will discuss work/non-work patterns found in this study namely: work/non-work integration, work/non-work conflict and alternation to work/non-work life.

4.1 Work-life Integration

In order to achieve work-life integration, Friedman & Greenhaus (2000) found that some workers were fortunate to benefit from social support provided by other individuals and by institutions. In this study, social support i.e. family, spouse, employer / immediate superior, and other private help was found to help and accommodate workers cope with the pressures of integrating their work and non-work lives, thereby enabling them to work without distraction. Viewing work-life integration as a continuum, variations between workers can be identified – such that some are more successful and satisfied in achieving integration than others. As such, some workers found to be partially integrated their work/non-work lives leading to their satisfaction. This can be seen in the case of Siti, a Senior Lecturer and single parent with young children, who described the many non-work roles she had besides her work role and how Unico as an employer accommodated her role as a single parent. She said:

“Working in Unico suits my non-work life. As a single parent with two young children, my children depend on me. So, I need to take care of my needs as well as their needs. I find it relaxing working here because the flexi hours allow me to do what I need to do, like being their mother, being their driver, being their feeder. I also need to be home if my washing machine needs fixing. I’m the one who needs to be there to take care of that problem. And if anything else needs doing I can just go and do it. My colleagues and my superior are very understanding of my situation and are very supportive, which is a blessing... I might need to spend all day at my workplace but I can still deal with my personal affairs such as paying bills at the bank. Unico enables me to prosper and to function as a mother because of the flexible hours that I’m entitled to work. Flexitime helps me career wise.”

The degree of integration of the workers' work-life integration was varied depending on the range of support available to them. For some workers in Hospico for example, the integration was achieved through informal flexibility, for instance, workers who worked on flexitime basis managed to integrate both their work and non-work spheres flexibly as in the case of Evan, an Assistant Senior Pharmacist in the Pharmacy Unit, who is married with five young children. Evan found flexitime working hours and other organisational work-life policies to be helpful in integrating his work and non-work responsibilities. He states:

"The flexi hour system is useful because if I start work at 7.30 p.m. I can take the children to school on the way and then when I finish work at 4.30 p.m. I can avoid the traffic jams on the way home. The flexi hour arrangement also enables me to go back home early and start preparing dinner (I do the cooking) while waiting for my wife to come back from work. In the morning, we normally don't have much time to do things such as tidy up the house or cook as we're always in a rush. The long Friday lunch break allows me to go to the bank to pay bills, etc. Working five days only also allows us to spend time together as a family during the weekend."

Although limited to those who worked fixed working hours in non-emergency departments, the flexitime privilege provided by Hospico appears to have assisted workers in managing their work/non-work spheres.

Apart from supports available that enhanced workers' work-life integration workers in the research context also found to experience work/non-work conflict due to insufficient support received by certain group of workers.

4.2 Work-Life Conflict

Work-life conflict occurs when work demands and non-work responsibilities clash. In their study, Erickson *et al.*, (2010) found that the group of workers with young children experienced a 'double bind' since they were not as established, both financially and occupationally and, thus felt pressure to provide for their families and work long hours. Consistent with studies by Erickson *et al.* (2010), Ngah *et al.* (2009), this study also found that work-life conflict tends to be mostly experienced by workers with young children. As John, a Radiographer, married with a young child, states:

"I don't think my work and non-work lives are integrated because at the moment I spend more time at work than I do with my family due to heavy work demands. The drawback of the roster duty is that I have to work longer hours. Thus, I have no time for myself or my family. If I want to deal with personal matters, for example, draw money from the bank, I have to take the day off to do so, and that day will be deducted from my annual leave... As my wife also works as a radiographer in this department and doesn't drive, and we live some distance away from the workplace, normally one of us has to wait for the other one to finish their shift duty. Sometimes we stay here at work 24 hours. Frequently, we have to bring our daughter who is three and a half years old here, as most of our time is spent at the workplace."

Due to the long and inconsistent working hour culture in Hospico, workers in certain departments had to bring their children to the workplace, especially if their spouse had to work during the same hours.

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.

Single employees with parent/siblings commitment is a group ignored in other studies. Research by Erickson *et al.* (2010) and Higgins *et al.* (1994) excluded single employees from their studies as they assumed that employees having no care commitment would be able to manage their work/non-work life. As such, workers were compared across the full spectrum of family life except those with parental/sibling care (Erickson *et al.*, 2010). This study found that workers with parental/sibling care commitment were found to be juggling between work and home responsibilities. Despite being young and single, Ayu, an Administration officer in Unico, experienced restrictions on her time due to both work responsibilities and family demands. Being the eldest in the family, she felt it her responsibility to look after and take care of her siblings in order to show respect and loyalty to her parents. She said:

“My time is always tight and is normally spent fulfilling work demands as well as fulfilling family needs especially those of my siblings. As the eldest in the family, I have to prepare meals first for my siblings as my parents are busy with their business. I would say that of my time, 10% is spent on myself, 10% on friends, 30% on family and 50% on fulfilling work demands. I don’t even have time to pamper myself with lotion due to my need to fulfil my job and family responsibilities as a child to my parents, as an elder sister to my younger siblings and as a worker to my employer.”

Ayu’s comment indicates that fulfilling work and family responsibilities was important to her. Work demands left Ayu exhausted and with little time for herself. Ayu also felt responsible for her siblings. In a society where the family institution is significantly important, caring for parents and siblings is viewed as a desirable quality to maintain good relationships in the family.

The evidence shows that workers with parental/sibling commitments were also concerned about their work/non-work integration. Without social and organisational support, workers will continue to struggle to integrate their work/non-work lives and experience conflict between work and family life responsibilities.

4.3 Alternation of Work-Life

At different life-cycle stages workers have different ways of managing and prioritising their work/non-work lives. In this study, when workers reached certain life-cycle stages i.e. ‘post-conflict stage’, such as when they had no care commitment or when their children were grown up, they did not show a tendency to seek a more integrated work and non-work lives, instead the alternation in work or non-work life was preferable.

The study in Unico found that workers with grown up children not seeking work-life integration and instead alternated to prioritise work. The study found that workers in the ‘post-conflict’ stage, represented by mature and middle-aged workers, had developed effective mechanisms to cope with work-life conflict. This was due to a lifetime of communicating, solving problems and integrating knowledge with practical experience (Baltes & Young, 2007; Sterns & Huyck, 2001). To some extent, when workers reached a certain number of years of service and had an established family, they had a tendency to view the current period as compensation for the time when they had been less able to focus on their career due to bringing up young children. Hence, in their current life-cycle, the focus was more on commitment to work. For example, Abu, Unico Senior Academic, married with grown up children commented:

“As my children are all grown up and independent, I don’t think I need the flexitime anymore. As I get older and career advanced, I am more committed to work because there are less things (at home and personal) to worry about.”

Similar passion and prioritisation towards work life was also supported by findings found in Custco.

"I don't feel stress although the workload is intensified and always under pressure. Working outside the typical office environment helps me to release tension as we can find new experience each time we go out to work. I love this job." (Chief Vince, a Senior Officer with 29 years of service).

"The working hour is inconsistent in this unit but it suits me as I used to this type of work. I like this job." (Jaideh, an Officer in Marine Prevention Unit, with 17 years of service)

The quotes above demonstrate that when workers reached senior positions in their work lives and have been working for a lengthy period of time whereby their jobs required an urgent response, they were happy to prioritise work and thus, segment home.

On the other hand, some workers in certain departments in Custco, who worked 'on-call duty', were found to prioritise their non-work life as soon as they transferred to 'less hectic' departments and when their children were all grown up and hence, segmented work. The impact of different work patterns on non-work life was vividly portrayed by Tuan Ashley, when he said:

"Previously, when I was attached to the Prevention department, there was a conflict between my work and non-work life. I didn't have time for my family as I worked 24 hours a day. During that time, my children didn't know their father; in fact, at one point, my son complained and said to me, 'from the time I was in Year 1 until high school, or even on Father's Day or when I was having an exam, you never took a day off for me.' When I worked in the Prevention Unit, I had no time for my wife or children. Only my wife was committed to parenting. But now, the scenario has changed. Not only are my children now grown up, I have transferred to the Import/Export unit and work flexi hours from 8.00 am to 5.00 p.m. I spend more time with the family, I go jogging and we go on family outings together. Since I was transferred to this unit, I can plan my holiday with my family. That is the advantage of working here. When I come to work, I'm in a good mood. I'm not stressed and my work flows more smoothly. For some people, if they have a problem at home, it affects their work performance. Working in this scenario, in this unit, I feel less burdened and less stressful and I'm more comfortable to be around."

Workers with different job vocations and with grown up children exhibited different ways of managing their work-life spheres. For some workers, having grown up children meant they could concentrate more on their work responsibilities than when their children were younger. They could now make up for 'lost time' and devote far more effort to their work sphere. The nature of work also influenced workers prioritisation and passion to work particularly when they reached senior positions in their work. On the other hand, some workers in Custco for example, found their work life far less demanding when their children were grown up. For such workers, it was as though they were discovering a 'lost life' and prioritising family life over paid work was more meaningful and rewarding.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The nature of the relationship between the work and non-work spheres of employees vary according to the strategies they adopt. This is also very much dependent upon the nature of their informal relationships such as having supportive colleagues and managers, their life-cycle position, the extent of work demands, and the degree of family support received. By viewing work-life integration as a continuum, variations between workers can be identified – such as that some are more successful and satisfied in achieving integration than others. Hence, work-life integration can be best thought of as a 'continuum', rather than as an 'on' (present) or 'off' (absent) phenomenon. Thus, the various patterns of work-life management found in this study demonstrate the importance of understanding how structural factors can support or impede Malaysian workers' integration of their work/non-work lives and how workers manage their work/non-work spheres differently at the micro level.

At the organisational level, policies and arrangements which promote the re-entry of women who have taken time off for childcare and more flexibility in the workplace need to be enforced by public sector organisations in a more serious and systematic manner. The research findings show that despite the Government's encouragement to establish on-site crèches, an on-site crèche was absent in all the organisational case studies,

indicating that they were not seriously engaged with government initiatives on work-life integration. Hence, supports and awareness from Government, organisations and unions, particularly in terms of on-site crèches and care of the elderly should be encouraged.

The management in public sector organisations needs to develop new strategies to resolve work-life conflict and dilemmas taking into account cultural characteristics, distinct economic situations, social institutions, and family structures. Management should also consider strategies to help workers with work/non-work conflict, particularly if they do not have the financial ability to get private supports. Finally, findings from this study can provide critical learning points for policy makers and employers aware of the need to find culturally appropriate ways to enhance work-life integration as well as to alleviate the harmful effects of work-life conflict.

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