CHAPTER 3

WORK LIFE BALANCE

- AN OVERVIEW
CHAPTER – 3
WORK LIFE BALANCE – AN OVERVIEW

The global competition has changed the workplace dynamics. In pursuit of improving the performance, increasing productivity, reducing costs and enhancing profitability in the workplace, organizations are evolving new ways and means to build psychological relationships with employees. Work life balance is a common challenge throughout the industrialized world.

Work life Balance (WLB) from an employee perspective is the maintenance of a balance between responsibilities at work and at home. It is the principle that elaborates that paid employment should be integrated with domestic life and community involvement in the interest of personal and social well-being. In the words of Morgenstern\(^\text{82}\) (2008), “WLB is not about the amount of time you spend working versus not-working. Its more about how you spend your time working and relaxing, recognizing that you do in one, fuels your energy for the other.” This is further illustrated by Morgenstern by an example that if one organizes one’s workday efficiently, staying focused and getting lots of things done, one feels a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that enables one to leave at the end of the day and relax at into one’s personal life. Similarly if one

mindfully plans the activities one does in their time off that may bring them pleasure, joy and rest then one is recharged and is able to perform well at work. This gives perspective, objectivity and adequate rest to perform well at the job. This is a WLB which is attainable by everyone”.

A good number of executives accept the cliché that success always demands a price and that the price is usually deterioration of private life. This cliché does not always reflect reality, however – some executives seem to be exempt. The executives whose private lives deteriorate are subject to negative effects of what is called the emotional spillover; work consistently produces negative feelings that overflow into their private lives. In contrast the other group of executives learns to manage their work and careers so that negative emotional spillover is minimized, and thus they achieve a balance between their professional and private lives. When an executive experiences worry, tension, fear, doubt or stress intensely, he or she is not able to shake these feelings off at home and they render him psychologically unavailable for a rich private life. An unhappy manager has a limited chance of being happy at home - no matter how little he travels, how much time he spends at home, or how frequently he takes a vacation. On the other hand a manager feels competent and satisfied in their work – not simply contended, but challenged in the right measure by what they
are doing – negative spillover does not exist. During these periods executives are open to involvement in private life; they experience positive spillover. Job and home can be harmony and mutually reinforce each other if and only if one avoids various pitfalls in the management of self and career and one copes satisfactorily with the emotions that arise at work. Conversely, executives who fail to manage the emotional side of work achieve professional success at the expense of private life. A balance between work and life can exist when there is a proper functioning at work and at home with a minimum role conflict. The incompatibility between the demands from the work and non-work domain give rise to conflict and consequently people experience a lack of WLB. There is a confirmation of the fact that people entering the workforce today are laying emphasis on the importance of WLB more than their predecessors. In spite of this, the extent to which this balance is being achieved is far less than what is desired.

Recent research work / life conflicts has provided new insights for managers to understand that people are worrying about personal problems at work and thinking about work at home. This suggests that, organizations should spend less effort helping employees with time management issues and more effort at helping them clearly segment their lives. Global organizations, today have adopted various WLB policies to overcome this issue. Mainly there are four theories that explain the rationale behind the adoption of work-life policies.

---

Each of these theories identifies a different set of predictive conditions (Felstead et al., 2002) and has received validation through adoption by other researchers. These theories derive their explanatory powers from the organizational theory, institutional theory, resource dependence theory and strategic choice theory. These theories are:

- **Institutional Theory**: this approach links management’s decision to adopt WLB practices to conform to normative pressures in the society (namely, organization size, ownership, industry, unionization levels and other factors that influence).

- **Organizational Adaptation Theory**: This theory connects the responsiveness of organizations to internal environmental factors (namely, proportion of female staff, skill levels, work processes and senior management values).

- **High Commitment Theory**: This theory regards the WLB practices as strategic HRM initiatives taken up in order to generate increased employee commitment to the organization.

- **Situational Theory**: This approach explains the adoption in terms of pressures to increase the profitability, productivity and to deal with the problems of employee recruitment and retention.
3.1 INTERNATIONAL SCENARIO OF WORK LIFE BALANCE

The ability of people to deal constructively with the needs of work and of family depends on the kind of work they do; the organizations that employ them and the economic, social and national context in which they live.

A key organizational issue today is how to reconcile employee’s family needs with the organizational rules for career success. The issue has gained prominence with the entrance of women into the work force which has caused the boundaries between the work and family to become problematic for both men and women. The response to this emerging problem depends critically on social and ideological context in which it plays itself out. Different countries have different social infrastructures to deal with family issues and are ideologically at different places to deal with family roles and gender equity.

The researcher identified 3 western, industrialized, “first world” countries- United States, Britain and Sweden to study the concerns of career and families as dealt by organizations in these countries. All the above mentioned three countries to a certain extent share a common heritage and yet they represent instructive differences in their approach to deal with this issue of work life balance.

United States of America: The US differs from other countries both ideologically and institutionally which are anchored in the following cultural assumptions (Auerbachh 1988):
• **Families / children are private domain. The choice to have children is entirely personal and should neither be encouraged nor discouraged. Hence any kind of government help in this area is seen as a stigma, a sign of personal failure.**

• **Children/ elder care- i.e. Nurturance- is rightfully the province of women, either because they do it better or because it is somehow their specific job.**

• **In an individualistic, achieving society, balance in life- i.e. between work and personal life- is not seen as a high priority goal. Career and work success is more important.**

Given this set of assumptions and given the fact that more than 50% of the US women even with very young children are now in the work force, the locus of concern is the care taking. Women have entered the work force but the expectations for careers have not changed; career success is still dependent on primary priority to work. With this situation either the organization ends up losing a hard worker or the individual woman executive ends up giving up her dynamic career. According to traditional US career rules, personal needs need to be invisible at work, to be dealt with only at the margins. Women are welcome to work in organizational set-ups as long as they follow the rules. As long as society values the public economic spheres consistently higher than the private domestic one, family and caretaking will necessarily suffer.
Britain: In Britain the situation is different. The United Kingdom has a more universal social infrastructure, which provides for basic family needs, independent of employers. In contrast to the US, there is not the same underlying ideology of equality. Britain has always been more class–based than the United States and is ideologically less committed to denying the social differences. There has been a concerted effort to move towards equality between the sexes in the US, perhaps as a reaction to the sharper distinction between the sphere of work and family that evolved in the 19th century in this country and the overvaluation of the sphere of work and its consequent devaluing of the women who are expected to be involved only with family (Smelser, 1980).

In Britain educated women are less likely to be caught in the kind of ambivalence between involvement with work and involvement with family. This is because more of the women in Britain are willing to acknowledge their priority on family and to accommodate their careers to that priority. Britain for that matter has for a long time had more institutionalized working from home arrangements than most other countries (Huws, Korte & Robinson, 1990). Many companies in Britain have introduced a “career breaks” scheme designed to allow higher level employees to take unpaid leave from 2 to 5 years with some provision for keeping in touch with a guaranteed reinstatement at the end of the leave (Rapport & Moss, 1990). Also there have been efforts to provide lot
of flexi arrangements to accommodate the women work force in organizations. Though legally gender-neutral, both responses are primarily for women. The changed working arrangements are meant to accommodate the needs of women with children. The result is a re-affirmation to a certain extent of the gendered differentiation of spheres. British women can work- the nation needs them- but they do so, on a “mommy track” which means a continuation of male domination in the workplace. UK workplace agenda is poised easily between an American corporate thrust that drives its workers harder than ever before and a European approach where a variety of political culture ‘set great importance on the social fabric’- the welfare of children, the quality of life and the cohesion of communities and families’ (Bunting 2004).

Sweden: Sweden’s response contrasts with that of the US and Britain. Here the issue is anchored in a very different set of cultural assumptions (Galinsky, 1989). Sweden has for almost two decades been committed to equality between men and women who are to have the same rights, obligations and opportunities in all of the main fields of life. This combines with a basic commitment to economic self-sufficiency to the belief that every individual should have a job paid sufficiently to enable her or him to earn a living. On ideological level there is consensus in Sweden that women should have jobs and that fathers should be involved in the care of their children. There is legislation to support these aims in both areas. They also have some tax benefits for couples where the woman
earns as much as her husband. (Antal & Izraeli, 1993). By late 1980s, 85% of fathers took most of their 10-day post birth benefit, and about 25% took more than a month of leave during a child’s first year. (Farber & O’Ferber, 1991). Further, fathers’ and mothers’ utilization of Sweden’s very generous leave policy to take care of sick children is about equal (Pleck, 1989).

Thus the Swedish government has mandated a comprehensive set of family policies and has tried to change social attitudes. As opposed to the United States where the effort has been to allow women to meet male work demands and in Britain where the emphasis has been on providing flexible arrangements for mothers who work, the effort in Sweden has been to try to equalize gender roles. Balance between work and family is encouraged for both men and women, and government supports it. Men are urged to be more involved in the family and are supported in this effort. The ideology and the policies exist, therefore, though the actuality lags behind. Swedish women, to be sure, have an easier time combining the conflicting demands of work and family, and they show less feelings of guilt than are seen in the US, but career rules for moving up in the industrial organizations have not changed significantly and women are seldom found in top positions. There is also even more occupational segregation by sex in Sweden than there is in US (Dowd, 1989). Still, what Swedish case makes clear is that without a positive value on family and children and without an effort toward equalizing gender roles in the family as well as in the work
place, organizational responses to this emerging problem will work either against the family and caretaking or against women who are designated as the ones to manage this conflict.

Therefore, both ideological and institutional differences very much determine the kind of responses that organizations can make and will make to the needs of employees’ families occasioned by the massive entrance of women into the workforce.

In US, forward looking companies are responding to the needs of their employees’ families by introducing family benefits that fall in two categories. First, there are benefits provided by employers- in the form of services, financial aid and information in obtaining services – that allow employees with family responsibilities to more easily meet the requirements of work as currently defined. Second there are policies that create flexibility in location and time and provide varying arrangements for personal leave. The aim here is to provide employees with sufficient control and discretion over the conditions of work to respond themselves to the needs of their families (Bailyn, 1992). Though helpful in the present set of circumstances, neither category deals adequately with the underlying dilemma. The first, particularly in the absence of a national policy, leaves care-taking in jeopardy; and second, by providing flexibilities that are primarily used by women, contributes to gender inequity in the work place.
Statistics show that American workers average about ten days of holidays a year, in contrast to Britain (25) and Germany (30). 26% of Americans take no holidays at all (Families and Work Institute, New York, 2001). Also average hours working week vary from country to country. Employees in Japan work approximately 35 hours a week; in U.K 43 hours; U.S.A. 47 hours; and in India, the truth is that most employees work around 55-60 hours a week - well over 48 hours one is expected to put in. In Europe the working time regulation with its ceiling of 48 hour working week has been readily implemented, apart from Britain with its opt-out waiver. Many European countries have chosen to have much lower hours. The Netherlands has a 32 hour week for public sector workers; France tried to introduce a 35 hour week and Finland experimented with a 30 hour week in 1996. Unlike Scandinavian countries which pursued a ‘humanization of work’ agenda with its emphasis on equal opportunity, child care, gender equality and central role of family, the U.K with its poor history of industrial relations, has often turned away from this consensual approach to dubious merits of party political factionalism (work-life balance.org). The result is that the British worker lags behind his European counterpart in achieving a more viable work life balance. His hours are longer; an average of 8 weeks more a year. Americans work twelve weeks more a year in total hours than do Europeans. Also America is one of the five countries that have no statutory maternity leave (Families and Work Institute, New York, 2001).
Thus, changing underlying values (as in Sweden) or introducing supportive national policies is not sufficient. A change in the career rules is also necessary particularly in those that govern movement to the top of the organizations. Moreover we need to re-examine the assumptions we have about the role of time in evaluation and development of high –level careers is needed (Hirschb. 1991)

For too long it has been assumed that long hours equate with productivity, an assumption anchored in assembly-line work. But “knowledge” work, which is in demand today, is different. In “knowledge work” the goal could be to work smart and not to work long. Long hours as an indicator of commitment and performance could instead be seen as indicating inefficiency. Further, in an era of communication and information technology, “face time”- visible time at work- is also no longer a valid basis for the judgement of high performance. In general, given current circumstances, it seems necessary to shift thinking about careers from life-long continuity to discontinuity. People differ in their needs; their requirements change over a life-time. Career rules must reflect these distinctions and these discontinuities, or they will not serve the needs either of the organizations or their employees.
Different countries represent a variety of contexts in which to resolve these issues. Though particular national solutions cannot be transferred in their entirety- but still the countries could adopt some of the policies of other countries and tune them to fit in their context.