Final Question

How should companies define and measure success on work-life balance and employees' well-being?

Introduction

Based on employee feedback from annual surveys, organizations generally experience incremental improvements on work-life balance. Some teams experience breakthroughs, but a causal relationship is often difficult to establish with a specific program or initiative. This often reflects in a disconnect between organizational investment and employee feedback from surveys. To get at the root of the issue, we intend to visit the definition of work life balance from an employee perspective. We further note the scope for improvement in the design, delivery and measurement of corporate work-life balance (WLB) programs to align with employee perspectives and effectively cater to their needs.

Work Life Balance from an Employee Perspective

Balance suggests that two elements are in equilibrium because they have the same weight and if you take away the slightest bit of one element the balance is lost. This metaphor does not describe the reality. An individual can perfectly experience 'work-life balance', even though work 'weighs more' than life, and in a consistent way in the course of a whole lifetime. When individuals are inquired on what work-life balance means to them, we soon discover that each person experiences 'balance' in a different way. A hardworking executive can feel as balanced as a part-time student, as long as they have the feeling they can meet all demands and responsibilities satisfactorily[3].

Hence, work-life balance from an employee's perspective is more individualized as each person experiences balance in a different way[4]. The variables that impact a person's work-life balance include- demographic, personality, situational, sociocultural, and institutional characteristics[5]. In terms of policy, job satisfaction, autonomy, stress reduction, and health improvements are often highlighted as direct benefits of WLB policy.

Research Findings on the Design, Delivery and Measurement of Work Life Balance

Prior research in the field indicates that flexible work programs are positively related to employee well-being[1]. However, despite significant investments in flexible work and diversity, inclusion and belongingness programs, corporations tend to achieve consistent low or moderate scores on work life assessments in annual surveys. Additionally, considering the current shift in conversations from work-life balance to work-life integration or harmony, we believe it is important to pause and reflect on the construct of work-life balance and the design, delivery and measurement of associated corporate programs.

Greater role of individual differences- Design for individual use: While there may be higher consistency in terms of what employees experience at work, this fades significantly in non-work dimensions. According to the boundary theory, individual boundaries differ greatly in flexibility and permeability on a continuum from highly segmented to highly integrated approach to work and life. While this is intuitive, this significantly speaks to the variability and relatively low scores given by employees on WLB programs at work as it is difficult to cater to all different needs of an individual employee. Hence, the need to build variety (flexibility of work time, flexibility of workplace, support for care responsibilities, information and social support...etc[7]) and allow for hyper customization of these programs to cater to diverse employee groups and sub-groups.

Moderating effect of perceived organizational culture- Need for visible sponsorship, new measures: Changes such as technological advances, horizontal organizations, increasing competition, rapid change in consumer

preferences define today's complex nature of work. Despite availability of myriad programs, research has found that the norms and expectations within an organization significantly influence employees' actual use of these programs[2]. Research also shows significant positive association between work-life balance culture and social support from management in an organization[8].

Organizations need to recognize the three points of interventions during implementation. These include *reducing or modifying work demands, increasing resources and supporting the use of effective strategies and tactics* by employees. This approach enhances employee's perceived ability to take advantage of flexibility initiatives[9]. This approach also helps quarantine the effect of stress to avoid a contagion effect[8].

In this context it is important for HR leaders to help build visible sponsorship and organization wide managerial capability that enables managers to effectively model behaviors that increase adoption and use of WLB programs. It is also important for organizations to use scales such as the Work-Life Balance Culture Scale (WLBCS), to continuously assess all three levels of organizational culture- artifacts, espoused values and beliefs and basic underlying assumptions[8].

Sensitivity and Stability of Measurements: *Firstly,* longitudinal studies have found that while work-life satisfaction is moderately stable over time, life events, both positive and negative, experienced by employees have a significant impact on their perception of wellbeing. Secondly, research shows that instruments would be more sensitive to perceptual indicators of change compared to event measures. Thirdly, on average, negative changes tend to have a greater experience than positive changes[6]. Finally, researchers observed scales with more response options and multiple measures for a dependent criterion variable to be more reliable.

Implications: While this could mean lesser control because of events outside work, this also means that as organizations create more positive experiences consistently, they can succeed in creating upward momentum on work-life balance scores over time. Organizations can now also assign higher weights to negative experiences to better predict employee perception on work-life balance, establishing the need for employee experience (EX) centric human capital strategies. Finally, it is important to avoid where possible, and approach simplification of measurement tools with caution. It is also important to capture data on work-life balance at regular frequency.

At many global organizations such as Amazon and HP, employees are provided an opportunity to pause, reflect and signal the organization almost on a daily or weekly intervals through pulse surveys. Especially during the pandemic, these signals inform timely managerial interventions, both global and local, to contain workplace stressors. This also helps organizations assess leader and managerial capability in enabling work-life balance for their respective teams. Additionally there's the new challenge of workforces going remote. All Twitter employees will be allowed to work from home permanently and Facebook expects half its staff to do so within a decade. This calls for rethinking work-life balance from a static "before Coronavirus"(BC) understanding to a multi-dimensional "after domestication"(AD) variable[11].

Conclusion

It is feasible for organizations to sustainably improve work-life balance of employees by focusing on creating a conducive organizational culture, improving the quality and frequency of measures, to enable data driven and timely interventions. With steady organization wide listening and support, employee feedback can correlate significantly with organizational investments.

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APPENDIX 1

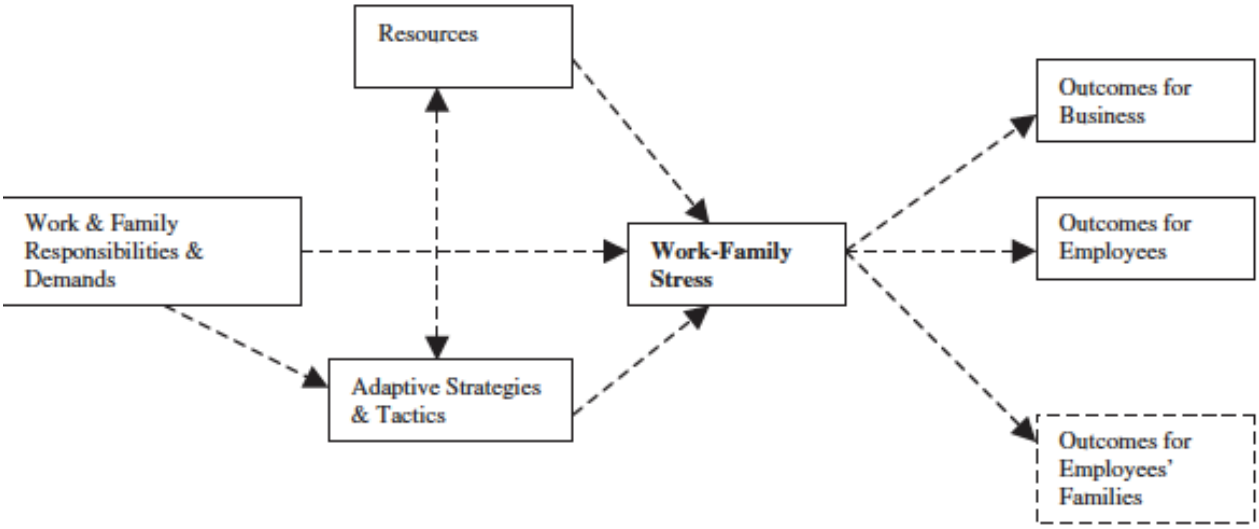

Figure 1: Work-Family Stress Bundles: Three points of intervention- modifying demands, providing resources and use of adaptive strategies and tactics[7]

APPENDIX 2

Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor loadings*	Item-total correlation**
1. Our company values measures to promote employee work-life balance.	6.74	2.63	0.79	0.63
2. Our company supports employees in balancing their professional and private lives.	6.88	2.48	0.82	0.67
3. Our company's management sets a good example of work-life balance.	5.44	2.77	0.77	0.61
4. Our company's management is trained to promote the work-life balance of employees.	2.96	2.93	0.72	0.59
5. At our company, employees are informed about programs promoting work-life balance.	3.82	3.38	0.77	0.64

WLBCS N = 498 (M = 5.17; SD = 2.19; Min = 0; Max = 10).
*Extraction method: principal component analysis; items with factor loadings > 0.5 were considered to load on a factor.
**Recommended minimum value ($r = 0.3$); values > 0.5 indicate high discrimination.

Table 1 : Items of Work-Life Balance Culture Scale(WLBCS) with factor loadings[8]

APPENDIX 3

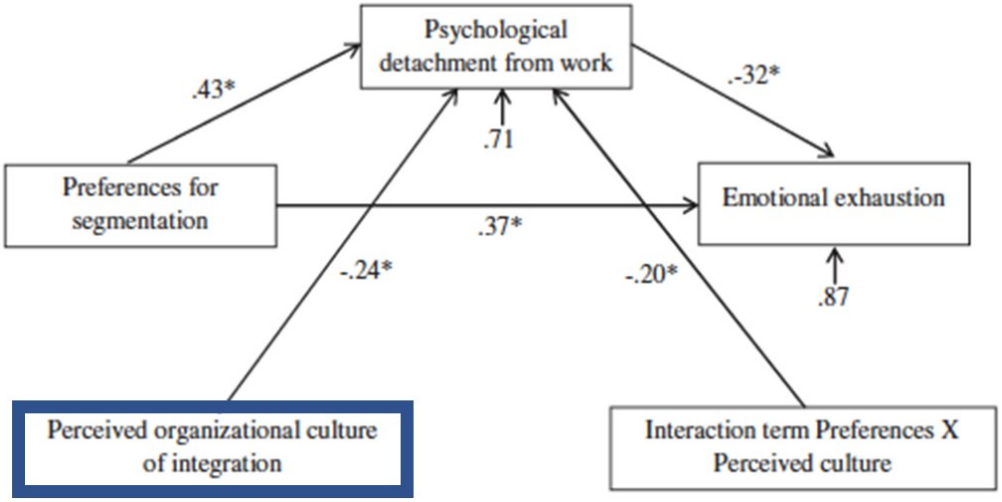

Figure 2: Path analysis model of preferences for segmentation, perceived organizational culture of integration, psychological detachment from work, and emotional exhaustion from work[2].