

Academic Employees' perceptions of Work - Life Balance practices: A Case Analysis of Private Universities in Ogun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates academic employees' perceptions and experiences of work-life balance (WLB) in private Universities in Ogun State. A descriptive research design involves in-depth interviews among 129 academic employees in private Universities in Ogun State. Specifically, the main objectives are to critically examine the practices of work-life balance in the Universities. The study assesses the types of WLB policies and practices within the Universities and factors which influence the employee's perception of work-life balance within the framework of employment relationship in the various Universities in Nigeria. Using spill-over theory, the findings reveal various dimensions in the academic employees' concept of WLB and show that academic employee experience the strain of work intensification and long hours of work. There is a wide gap between corporate WLB practices and the academic employee understanding of WLB. The paper suggests policy implications which would aid the implementation of WLB

policies within Private Universities and suggests directions for future research.

Keywords: employees, academics, perception, work life, job satisfaction and commitment

Introduction

The term Work-life balance is used to describe policies and initiatives that enable academic employee to combine paid work and non-paid work (Gamble, Lewis and Rapoport, 2006). The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of work-life balance policies and practices within the Private Universities in Ogun State. The choice of this sector is rooted in the fact that Private Universities are a fast growing sector in Nigeria. They are only a few research conducted in the context of Africa and in particular Nigeria on the concept of work life balance (WLB) (Mordi and Ojo, 2011; Mordi, Mmieh and Ojo, 2012). A few organizations in Nigeria have started initiating WLB initiatives in the workplace. However, the majority of the organizations are still indifferent in adopting WLB practices despite the benefits they stand to gain (Epie, 2011). This is a significant gap in the literature given the move towards the globalization of human resources management best practices. It is also important to note that WLB policies and practices cannot be diffused directly from developed countries to less developed countries without taking into consideration both, institutional and cultural difficulties (Mordi, Mmieh and Ojo, 2012).

As a result of the changing work milieu, many workers increasingly work long hours, feel more pressured in their jobs and there is increasingly a lean demarcation between work and non-work. Consequently, workers have increasingly struggled to maintain a healthy balance in their lives, making work and non-work aspects of life too difficult to manage (Redman and Wilkinson, 2009), and creating the necessity for WLB (Parris, Vickers and Wilkes, 2008), hence making work-life balance debate more important among governments, practitioners and the academic personnel.

Work-life balance affords employees the ability to “strive to achieve greater balance between work and home responsibilities” (Murphy and Doherty, 2011: 253). Kossek, Lewis and Hammer (2010) define work-life initiatives as both, structural mechanisms (reduced workloads, flexible leave arrangements, childcare assistance) and

cultural mechanisms (supportive organizational environment, support from management) aimed at improving the employees' lives.

This study focuses on WLB among academic employees' in private Universities in Ogun State, Nigeria to discover what the academic employees' think about WLB and their ability to achieve it. Findings provide an employee perspective on the existence, nature and scope of WLB practices in the Nigerian Private Universities. It is hoped that this study would provide a good starting point for serious discussion among academics, political influential leaders and employers of labor in Nigeria about improved WLB in labor-management relationships.

Specifically, the study proposes the following research questions: (a) What types of WLB policies and practices exist within the Universities and (b) What are the factors which influence the employee's perception of work-life balance within the framework of employment relationship in the various Universities in Nigeria.

To achieve the above objectives, this study is organised as follows. The second section presents the conceptual background of WLB. This is followed by an examination of the nature and features of the Nigerian labor market, research methods and presentation of main findings and discussion of the study. The final section considers the conclusions, implications and area for future research.

Literature Review

According to Guest (2002), boundary between work and outside work remains undefined and can be viewed as blurred. That is, both domains have permeable boundaries; therefore would at some point spill over on each other. This study utilizes the spill over theory. The spill over theory posits that work and non-work domains affect one another through a permeable boundary in either a positive or a negative way. This implies that spillover between family and work occurs when feelings, attitudes and behaviors in one domain (e.g., work) are affected by role participation in another domain (e.g. family). For example, happiness at work, leads to happiness at home and vice-versa. The main message of spillover model is that values, behaviors and skills learned in one domain might have effect or influence on the other domain (Edward and Rothbard, 2000). The next section covers the data and methods used to collect the empirical evidence.

Methodology and Context for the Research

The in-depth qualitative study using purposive sampling is investigative. This approach has also been taken as a result of the shortage of research studies which have been done to understand the concept, expressions and perception of current WLB policies and practices in the African work environment.

The total sample used in this study was 129 respondents from three private Universities in Ogun State, Nigeria. Pseudonyms have been used to represent the various Universities covered by the study. The distribution of respondents is as follows: 47 University A, 51 University B and 31 University C. The semi-structured interviews were conducted between December 2014 and March 2015. The semi-structured interview were conducted in English and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The principal researcher commenced the interviews by explaining to the participants the aims and objectives of the research. The interviewees were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The sampling technique adopted was purposive because the researchers chose the Universities to carry out the research.

The interview questions were semi-structured and data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The interviews were semi-structured because as the study progressed, each of the researchers was allowed to change the questions (i.e. the questions were flexible) to probe further to get more details from the participants. Participants were solicited through a combination of email, existing personal contacts, referrals and a snowballing process. Bias was minimized by interviewing participants from various banks, both from the headquarters and branches. The participants had varied demographic profiles which are specified in Table no. 1. All the respondents were screened on the eligibility criteria that they were academic employees' of a private University in Ogun State.

Data were simultaneously analyzed and the analysis started at the outset of data collection and continued throughout the study. The data analysis involved the use of predetermined codes which were verified by a second coder to ensure reliability. The codes were generated from the themes which emerged during the analysis stage. The coding was done to look for evidence which covered three major sections: (a) What types of WLB policies and practices exist within the Universities and (b) What are the factors which influence employee's

perception of work-life balance within the framework of Employment relationship in the various Universities in Nigeria.

The next section provides the findings of the empirical evidence.

Table no. 1. Demography of Participants

Characteristic		University A	University B	University C
Gender:	Male	30	33	19
	Female	17	18	12
Age:	< 30	3	6	2
	31-40	20	22	15
	41-50	15	18	11
	>51	9	5	3
Marital Status:	Single	9	15	6
	Married	36	36	25
	Divorced	2	0	0
Highest Qualification:	Prof.	3	2	2
	Ass Prof.	4	4	1
	SL.	7	9	4
	L.	22	25	14
	AL.	11	11	10

Source: Field Survey, 2015

Findings

Work-life balance polices in the various Institutions

The findings from the study revealed a variety of initiatives which exist in the three Universities; some of the initiatives which were common to all three Universities include maternity leave, sick leave and annual leave. Some other leave arrangements which exist within the Universities are included in some of the responses:

“The leaves I know include the normal annual leave, then sick leave then study leave... which other one o?... there is another leave granted as a result of the death of a love one, that is condolence or compassionate leave that is all I know” (University A)

“There is annual leave we also have sick leave which is a twelve days leave, then there is maternity leave, there is also paternity leave, when the wife gives birth ... the man is given seven days” (University B)

The next section identifies the various initiatives in the three Universities.

The initiatives founded in Private Universities are: full time, flexitime, maternity leave, child care arrangement, career break, sabbatical leave and casual leave. Initiatives such as part time, job share, compressed hours, annualized hours, terms time, were not available in the Private Universities. Surprisingly, term time was not available in all the Universities, as long distance courses and part time course are in place when the full time students are on holidays.

Factors which influence employees’ perception of work-life balance in the various Universities in Nigeria

There are several factors which influence the perception of WLB in Nigeria - these factors include psychological, social, financial, organizational and technological.

(a) Psychological factors

The emotional wellbeing of the academic employees’ both at home and work was identified as one of the main psychological factors which affected workers from achieving work life balance. Some workers used words stated that:

“I would say not being able to arrive at a state of emotional rest is one of the main deterrents from achieving work-life balance. If you do not have this rest, it is difficult to even work properly and carry on with life”. (University C)

“I think that one of the main factors which affect achieving work-life would be an individual mental state of health. If either your work or your other commitments are stressing you or putting pressure on you, you would not be able to achieve any form of balance”. (University B)

Academic employees’ in the various Universities identified that health issues and stress influenced their ability or inability to achieve work-life balance. These findings are consistent with Blyton (2008) and Ford, Heinen and Langkamer (2007), who also found that health concerns and stress issues influenced individuals utilisation of work-life balance initiatives.

(b) Social factors

Relationship with their colleagues

Many of the workers were of the opinion that their relationship with their colleagues was a significant factor which influenced their choices to utilize work-life balance initiatives.

“If your fellow staff doesn't agree to help you take your lecture you can't take any of these work-life balance programmes. Their support is very crucial because without it is nothing for you. You can't go anywhere” (University B)

“If the other colleagues are against a programme they would ensure it does not work. Some of my colleagues are especially the more senior members believe that some of these programmes especially paternity leave is for lazy or unserious people, so they would not let you take the time off “(University A)

It is important that academic employees' received the support from co-workers in the implementation of WLB initiatives, which are positive or negative (Hammer, Kossek, Anger, Bodner, Zimmerman, 2010; Kossek, Lewis and Hammer, 2010).

Marital status

The research revealed that most married professionals found it challenging to balance their work and family life. Some of them complained of spending so much time at work and struggled to care for their children and elderly relatives.

“I am married with two children. I am lucky that my boss allows me go on school runs (drop off and pick my children at closing time). My husband's office does not have such allowance. I don't know how I could have managed” (University C)

The single workers as well as the married academics acknowledged achieving WLB was a bit of a struggle. While most of the married academics identified spending quality time with their spouses and children was difficult, the single academics on the other hand, identified difficulty keeping a relationship because they spend all their time at work. Some of the single respondents noted that they found it more comfortable to be in a relationship with their colleagues because they were more accepting of their work schedule.

(c) Technological factors

Majority of the academic employees' indicated that they were still required to respond to either their mobile phones or emails after office hours or during their day offs.

“My boss does not understand the meaning of personal phone as he expects me to answer all my phone calls or text messages even when am not on shift. He gets so upset if I don't; it is unbelievable”.
(University B)

“Most of the academic employees were of the opinion that technology either in form of mobile phones or email had negative effects on their overall work-life balance. It's really difficult to completely dissociate yourself from work if you still have to receive call or reply emails at the close of work and more annoying on holidays”.
(University A)

Technology is a double-edged sword as it has positive and negative effect. Its benefits include the fact that business can be done twenty-four hours of the day and seven days in a week, which also results in flexible shifts. However, these opening hours cause work-life imbalances as the traditional working hours “8am to 5pm” are gradually fading away. Managers should therefore be mindful of the use of technology outside the academic employees' work times.

Discussion

This study has provided insights into academic employees' perception of work-life balance policies and practices in Private Universities in Ogun State. Evidence from the study revealed that work-life balance issues are of major concern to faculties in the Universities. Firstly, the academic employees' reveals the availability of work-life balance practices in the Universities. The absence of flexible work arrangements is a source of concern. Working arrangements that give academic employees' flexibility in organizing their work are keys to attainment of WLB. They are usually very effective at ensuring that academic employees' can harmonize work and personal activities. Sweden has a highly developed and flexible parental leave scheme, which has been extended, so parents can have more time to care for their children. In addition, there are measures to reduce the high incidence of sick leave and proposals to provide academic employees' with more annual leave and more flexible use of leave (Shockley and Singla, 2011). In Nigeria there are several WLB initiatives such as

compassionate and ceremonial leave and, in very limited cases, crèche facilities.

There is a need to inform academic employees' on issues regarding WLB; so, let them know their rights and the options offered in various institution. University management need to understand that having a healthy and less stressed workforce would contribute to improved mental and physical health, job satisfaction and ultimately, job performance (Webber et al. 2010). However, the findings of this study also confirm the importance of organizational culture, identified by Freeman (2009) as a key problem affecting the implementation of WLB practices. Organizational culture strongly influences people's attitude to WLB policies. Managers are in position to encourage or discourage academic employees' efforts to balance their work and family lives (Hudson, 2005). Colleague and co-worker support is one of the organizational factors predicted to affect positively or negatively, the use of WLB initiatives (Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner and Hansen 2009b; Kossek *et al.*, 2010). Co-workers can pressurize other academic employees' against using WLB initiatives, particularly when resources are stretched.

Conclusions

This is an exploratory study into work-life balance in Universities and conclusions can only be tentative. In summary, this study investigated the various dimensions of the concept of WLB among academic employees' of Private Universities in Ogun State. It shows the widespread nature of the limited forms and scope of WLB practices in Nigeria.

Job satisfaction and work commitment are twin brothers. For future research, the authors of this study suggest it would be useful to undertake a follow-up study with a longitudinal design, to establish the impact of new WLB policies and practices on both, public and private sector organizations. It would be interesting to compare similar work life balance polices in similar sectors in developed markets, such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Some methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The study focuses on only private Universities in Ogun State and one geographical region within Nigeria. Moreover, the social desirability bias of respondents cannot be ruled out: participants may respond in a manner that favors their personal interest. In spite of these limitations, this exploratory

study has contributed to the scarce literature on work–life balance issues in Africa by identifying context-specific variables in Nigeria that are potentially applicable to other African countries.

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