Work-life balance is a major concern in the workplace today, as evidenced by a mounting number of websites, online news stories, and blogs devoted to the subject. As organizations are scrambling to find solutions to this growing employee demand, they often find themselves struggling to achieve their own state of balance between organizational productivity and employee well-being. Disappointment with existing programs may lead employees to conclude that work-life balance is a myth and lead organizations to conclude that work-life balance is a compromise. Fortunately, neither is true.

Dissatisfaction with work-life balance (WLB) practices largely stems from two fundamental errors:

- A misunderstanding of the work-life balance concept and
- A failure to differentiate among practices designed to promote work-life balance.

This article presents a working definition for understanding work-life balance and distinguishes between two broad categories of WLB practices designed to do one of two things: (1) promote flexibility in performing work (work flexibility) and (2) provide employees with sufficient non-work-related resources (e.g., time, money) to assist them in managing non-work demands (non-work support). Both types of practices provide employees with the ability to better regulate the way they allocate resources between work and non-work life. However, they warrant unique considerations with respect to their influence on employee and organizational outcomes, and distinguishing between them is vital for helping managers and practitioners to make more informed decisions about WLB programs and practices.

Work-Life Balance: Myth or Misconception?

Spurred by a litany of research articles, popular press stories, and advocacy groups, more and more employees are demanding work-life balance. However, in pursuit of this ideal state, many employees may become disillusioned because of misconceptions regarding what achieving work-life balance entails. It cannot be cured with vacation time. There are no secret time management techniques and skills to help them “have it all.” It does not even mean employees should divide their time and attention equally towards work and non-work demands.

We define work-life balance as the extent to which one’s perceived allocation of physical, mental, and emotional resources between the work and non-work domains matches one’s expectations (Hobfoll, 1989). The more one’s role demands a greater amount of resources than desired (as often happens when the work role conflicts with the non-work role), the more that person will experience a state of imbalance. Alternatively, the more one role can have a positive contribution to another role (by allowing an individual to achieve goals in multiple life domains), the more that person will experience a state of balance. Essentially, then, work-life balance occurs when individuals with a finite amount of mental, physical, and emotional resources allocate those resources in a way that corresponds to their personal and/or professional goals (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Jansen, Kant, Kristensen, & Nijhuis, 2003; Lapierre & Allen, 2006). The path to work-life balance requires employees to effectively regulate the way they allocate their limited resources by making choices and setting priorities.
Categorizing Work-Life Balance Practices

Although achieving work-life balance is ultimately in the hands of the employee, managers and practitioners play a critical role in facilitating this process by designing organizationally sanctioned practices that assist employees in achieving balance without having a detrimental impact on organizational performance. Unfortunately, many organizations do not consider the costs, benefits, and personal resource requirements that differentiate specific work-life practices. Yet, considering the implications of individual practices is important because each practice may serve a different purpose from a resource allocation perspective.

For example, flexible scheduling options permit employees to balance the requirement to come to work with resource demands from non-work life. Thus, employees still come to work, but they get to choose when. This can permit employees to effectively deal with non-work demands that take considerable time, but it does not permit employees to manage non-work demands that “pop up” during the day. On the other hand, telecommuting practices permit employees to work outside of the office, potentially adjusting the focus from work to non-work demands multiple times during the course of a day. Because they are not reporting to the office, employees have greater overall flexibility during a given day. However, this flexibility requires that employees effectively ignore or eliminate unimportant distractions. Thus, while both practices entail work flexibility, they each possess benefits and costs that have to be considered.

The actual practices that make up WLB programs subsequently fall into two broad categories: work flexibility and non-work support. Though there is no published research that distinguishes between or compares these two categories of practices, non-scholarly publications (i.e., Swiftwork and the Families and Work Institute) allude to this distinction. Both work flexibility and non-work support practices provide employees with increased autonomy over how non-work life interfaces with work life (Thomas & Ganster, 1995).

Work Flexibility Practices

Work flexibility practices are those practices that provide employees with flexibility in performing their work role functions (e.g., Grzywacz, Casey, & Jones, 2007; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). Flexibility in where employees work (e.g., telecommuting), in the number of hours that they work (e.g., reduced hours, part-time options, job sharing), in when employees work (e.g., flextime, compressed work weeks), and in how employees move in and out of work (e.g., phased retirement, phased return-to-work practices) are all examples of work flexibility practices. The primary assumption behind work flexibility practices is that employees can exercise autonomy and control in such a way as to allow them to meet their work demands while simultaneously meeting their non-work demands (i.e., employees can structure their work around non-work demands). From the perspective of resource allocation, when employees engage in work flexibility practices, they are choosing when to allocate resources to work life and when to allocate resources to non-work life, but they are still allocating resources to both domains.

Non-Work Support Practices

On the other hand, traditional family-friendly benefits fall under the category of non-work support practices. Non-work support practices provide employees with organizational resources (e.g., time, financial support, discounts) to assist them in better managing non-work demands. Examples of non-work support practices include personal time off (PTO), paid leave (e.g., maternity, paternity, adoption), childcare benefits, life management services (e.g., concierge services, discounts to local restaurants or health clubs, dry-cleaning services), and comp time (i.e., receiving time off as compensation for working extra hours; Kelly et al., 2008). The primary assumption behind non-work support practices appears to be that by providing employees with sufficient resources to manage non-work demands, they will remain with the organization (increased retention), they will avoid the negative outcomes that result when work demands spiral
out of control (negative spillover), and the organization will be seen as a good place to work (recruitment). From a resource allocation perspective, when employees utilize non-work support practices, they are choosing to either (a) utilize organizational resource (e.g., finances, materials) to assist them in meeting their non-work obligations (as in the case of childcare benefits) or (b) temporarily cease the allocation of resources into the work domain (as in the case of paid time off). Yet, non-work support practices can come with negative consequences for productivity and bottom-line performance (at least in the short-term). However, organizations put these work-life balance practices in place primarily due to the perceived indirect benefits associated with recruitment, retention, and positive well-being.

"The primary assumption behind non-work support practices is that providing employees with sufficient resources to meet their work and non-work demands will increase employee recruitment and retention and decrease negative spillover."

Work Flexibility versus Non-Work Support: Management Implications

The distinction between work flexibility and non-work support practices pose potential implications for managers and practitioners in terms of organizational assumptions, contextual influences on the existence and utilization of practices, overall practice effectiveness, and the costs/benefits of implementation. First and foremost, managers should test their organization’s assumptions about work-life balance and corresponding practices. Does the organization view work-life balance as something that holds value only for the employee, or does it view work-life balance as something that can produce win-win scenarios for the organization? Does the organization actually promote flexibility, or should employees that utilize work flexibility practices be concerned that their career potential will be negatively affected? The answers to these questions may be the reason that specific practices have or have not been implemented.

Second, there are a variety of organizational (e.g., strategy, culture, support, justice) and individual (e.g., personality, background, life situation) contextual factors that may positively or negatively influence the existence or utilization of different WLB practices. An organization can benefit from identifying the different contextual factors that serve as facilitators of or barriers to utilization. For example, offering employees a lot of personal time off means little if they seldom have a chance to use it. Furthermore, too much personal time off, if used, can increase absenteeism and decrease productivity (Libet, Frueh, Pellegrin, Gold, Santos & Arana, 2001). It is also important to consider how the organization’s and employees’ attitudes about work-life balance contribute to the existence/utilization of specific practices and the effectiveness of those practices for employee and the organization. The reality of organizational life is that employee attitudes toward work-life balance are likely to differ from organization to organization and the effects of those attitudes may play out differently across organizations. Thus, organizations need to determine, for example, what outcomes work-life balance attitudes are more likely to influence, whether the organization considers those outcomes to be important, and what changes might be made to improve employee perceptions of work-life balance (i.e., organizational changes, workgroup changes, or individual/job changes; Kelly et al., 2008).

Lastly, implementing new work flexibility and non-work support initiatives both come at a cost to organizations. For example, organizations that do not currently offer work flexibility practices may require interventions to make such practices feasible (e.g., training employees on the use of different types of practices, upgrading technology, changing the organizational culture to support flexibility). These types of interventions can be quite a large financial investment that temporarily strains organizational resources. However, non-work support practices (i.e., vacation, sick days, comp time, childcare benefits, etc.) can also produce a consistently sizeable payroll expense. Therefore, organizations need to have an understanding of the likely benefits those WLB practices will provide to offset these costs.
In conclusion, though work-life balance is a popular topic of discussion in contemporary organizations, it is much more complex that the online news stories and blog postings would have us believe. From an organizational perspective, it is important to remember that the ultimate goal of work-life balance practices should be to assist employees in making choices about the way they allocate their resources. To do that, organizations need to consider the unique characteristics of the organization and the unique characteristics of the people that organization employs. Perhaps most importantly, an organization needs to ensure that its practices are designed with an appropriate consideration of costs and benefits. Otherwise, practices are likely to be met with resistance and may perhaps go the way of the corporate pension.

References


