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**Cover Feature
Life Balance:
Are we any closer
to getting this
right?**

Special Articles:

ABC Learning in need of a deft response

Economics and Psychology: Two sides of the leadership coin

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If you don't know where you're going you won't know how to get there: Clarifying the importance of work-life balance

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An executive's face slowly darkened and her brow furrowed with indignation. Oh no. Here it comes. "Are you telling us that work-life balance is not important?"

Well, yes... and no. "Of course it's important" we reassure her, "but the question is, what is it important for?"

We are presenting the results of an employee survey of several thousand staff in this executive's organisation. The two key outcomes measured by our survey (and in Voice Project's research involving over 20,000 employees and 1500 organisations) were (1) staff en-

gagement - passion for their work, the organisation and their intention to stay, and (2) organisational performance - measured by staff perceptions of achieving organisational objectives, delivering high quality customer services and continual improvement. In our consulting reports and presentations we estimate the "importance" of a broad range of management systems and practices by how well they correlate with these outcomes. While openly acknowledging that correlation does not prove causality, our suggested priorities for action are those practices that appear to be important, but on which the organisation is scoring poorly. These priorities are not set by the organisation, or by

Voice Project's theoretical model, but by the pattern of survey responses of staff within the organisation.

As is usually the case, when this specific organisation compares work-life balance (WLB) against a broad range of other management practices, WLB shows only a weak positive relationship with staff engagement and organisational performance. This finding is consistent with Voice Project's research showing that work-life balance had the lowest correlation with employee engagement and intention to stay when compared to 27 other aspects of the work environment (Langford, in press).

Work-life balance had the lowest correlation with employee engagement and intention to stay when compared to 27 other aspects of the work environment

The primary documented consequences of poor WLB are for individuals, families and wider society, such as declining fertility and birth rates, marital stress, reduced community participation, and lower care for the young and elderly

This is not the answer the executive wants. As Communications Director for this large organisation, she tells us she is not about to write this message into the CEO's summary speech to staff. We agree with her – work-life balance, wellness and workload are all issues that need to be addressed in this organisation, but management need to be very clear about why they are doing it, how it can be achieved, and how to evaluate the outcomes. Because according to the data we've just collected in their organisation, WLB will not provide their biggest "bang-for-the-buck" if they are striving to improve engagement, retention and organisational performance.

Bardoel, De Cieri and Mayson (2008) have recently outlined a framework for evaluating how and why an organisation should implement WLB-friendly policies. The steps include planning and alignment, customization, culture and demonstrated value. It is a useful framework to help us think about some of the issues around WLB.

(1) Planning and alignment

Perhaps the most important question for organisations to face honestly is "What is the purpose of WLB policies in the organisation, and where do they fit with other organisational priorities and strategies?"

Abbott and De Cieri (2008) investigated influences on management decision-making in the area of WLB. It emerged clearly that management and employees perceived WLB as a reward for staff, and thus a drawback for attracting and retaining talented employees. The com-

mon belief is that WLB is particularly valuable for women, older employees, and the younger "work to live" generation Y. Hence, chief influences on the development of WLB policies were the perceived tightness of the labour market, and whether the economic position of the organisation allowed for and justified the cost of such policies. Indeed, we know from Voice Project research that employers are more likely to implement work-life balance practices if they think they are facing a shortage of skilled labour (Parkes & Langford, 2007).



Despite the overwhelming perception that WLB is a strategy to attract a diverse workforce, Parkes and Langford (2008) found that work-life balance was no more important for engaging women than men. Although not as exciting as the current debate about generational differences, our data also shows the unsurprising finding that work-life balance is harder to

achieve and more important for middle-aged employees with children, and less important for engaging single employees and generation Y. In fact, most employees (73%) reported being able to satisfactorily meet both their non-work and work responsibilities, and balance work with other aspects of their lives. In contrast, most employees were dissatisfied with the organisation's ability to provide career opportunities, to consult employees about decisions that affected them, or to share information and knowledge between different sections in the organisation.

Bardoel et al argue that the planning and alignment step includes establishing the business case for WLB. However, many researchers are starting to openly express scepticism around this 'business case', for example,

"Improving work-life balance is socially desirable – workers obviously like it and firm productivity does not suffer. However, our results do not give a green light for policy makers to regulate even more work-life balance. Even if productivity does not fall, work-life balance is costly to implement and maintain, and may result in significantly lower profitability" (Bloom, Kretchmer & Van Reenen, 2006 p2, in Brough, Holt, Bauld, Biggs & Ryan, 2008).

In contrast to the lack of findings for a business case for work-life balance, the primary documented consequences of poor WLB are for individuals, families and wider society, such as declining fertility and birth rates, marital stress, reduced



community participation, and lower care for the young and elderly (Brough et al., 2008).

Thus WLB is an economic tool that organisations offer to satisfy employees' social goals. Whether these goals are in alignment depends on the economic and workforce environment of the organisation. Where the management and employee goals conflict, ethical dilemmas will emerge for organisational psychologists working with these organisations around who the "client" is, and whose interests they serve. The holy grail among psychologists has been to prove that WLB affects the bottom-line for organisations, thus neatly bringing into alignment management and employee interests. We're not convinced, however, that this goal will ever be fully attainable. What really needs to happen is for organisations to reflect upon their definition of the "bottom-line" and decide whether they wish to stand beside employees, unions and government to share responsibility for the welfare of staff and the well-being of the community. With the profile of corporate social responsibility continuing to rise, perceptions of organisational success are closely

linked to their reputation for being ethical. It would be more fruitful to consider work-life balance as a key performance indicator of ethical corporate behaviour, and a core strategy for constructing and managing work in a socially sustainable way.

(2) Customization, culture and demonstrated value

In the conversation after our presentation, the Communications Director admits that she works 60-70 hours a week, she loves her job and sees her role as critical in the organisation. She can understand that highly engaged employees will sometimes sacrifice work-life balance to achieve organisational goals, especially if the organisation provides support in other ways.

Beyond exploring planning and alignment, Bardoel et al.'s framework also examines whether work-family initiatives have been appropriately customized and developed to deliver outcomes for the specific organisation and individuals, whether steps have been taken to build a culture to support work-family initiatives, and whether the work-family initiatives are monitored to demonstrate value to all stakeholders.

If staff engagement is the goal, then as consulting psychologists we can find ourselves recommending work practices to engage staff that can, as a side-effect, impact negatively on work-life balance. These include practices focusing on individual performance such as appraisal (especially if performance is linked to pay), career development, and involvement in decision-making (Parkes & Langford, 2007). While these practices can bring financial and career rewards, they can also

induce pressure to work long and intensively.

It is this long and intensive work that appears to be the biggest enemy of work-life balance. Consistent with previous research, Parkes and Langford (2008) found that the strongest predictors of WLB are heavy workloads and long working hours. Work overload has a dual impact on WLB through longer work hours as well as the increased emotional and cognitive strain experienced during the work which flows over into the family environment (Skinner & Pocock, 2008). Hence, evaluating WLB policies in the context of organisational culture and other HR practices is essential.

For example, part-time work is probably the most common do-it-yourself approach to WLB. Parkes and Langford (2008) found an overwhelmingly positive association between part-time work and better WLB. Women reported a slightly higher satisfaction with work-life balance than men, but this effect was completely mediated by women's greater likelihood of part-time or casual employment. Nevertheless, while reducing hours, part-time work may increase emotional and psychological strain if workload is not adjusted to match the hours, and some negative relationships between part-time work and WLB have been found (Brough et al., 2008). Similarly, WLB policies such as flexible start and finish times, and work-from-home arrangements have been found to increase productivity, reduce costs, increase workforce participation, and improve WLB. However some employees use these policies to spend more time working! Hence organisational culture is a critical determinant in whether these practices translate into better WLB.



...some of the most significant cultural contributors to WLB include fair and supportive supervisors, good relationships with co-workers, support for diversity (such as the prevention of harassment and bullying), a concern for equal opportunity, and a priority placed on health and safety within the workplace

Our own research suggests some of the most significant cultural contributors to WLB include fair and supportive supervisors, good relationships with co-workers, support for diversity (such as the prevention of harassment and bullying), a concern for equal opportunity, and a priority placed on health and safety within the workplace (Parkes & Langford, 2008).

The overall conclusion from our research and practice is that there may forever be a trade-off between "work" and "life". The question "Are we getting it right?" feels a little like Alice asking the Cheshire Cat which way she should go. The return question inevitably is "Right for what?" Instead of seeking an even balance of work and life for all employees, we should perhaps focus more strongly on achieving work-life "alignment" – that is, congruence between values and behaviours. The objective should be for organisations to build flexible cultures that enable employees to choose how best to achieve this alignment. In such an environment, some employees can choose to tip the balance in favour of "work", and others can place a stronger emphasis on "life" while still contributing positively to organisational performance. If managed in a creative and socially responsible way, a more positive and diverse alignment of work and life should allow the cross-pollination of values, passions and abilities between life and work domains.

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