

Work-life balance: towards a research and practice agenda for systemic change

5 July 2010 - 6 July 2010

Workshop Report

The UK working group on work-life balance convened an international workshop which took place on the 5th and 6th of July 2010. The workshop was jointly sponsored by the Institute of Advanced Studies, the British Psychological Society and Middlesex University. Below is a brief summary of the goals and key themes and our next steps.

What were the goals for our workshop?

Work-life balance concerns us all. Nonetheless, there is no consensus about key issues and priorities relating to the work-home interface for individuals and organisations and these are subject to variation between industries and geographic regions. In order gain insight into work-life balance, the aims of this two-day international workshop were to:

- Bring together researchers from the UK and abroad with an interest in work-life balance
- Review the state of the art literature, identifying gaps as well as ways of moving us towards a more coherent conceptual and theoretical understanding of the domain
- Further our understanding of how work-life balance can best be facilitated through processes and outcomes at an i) individual, ii) group/ team, iii) organizational and iv) community level
- Consider the international perspective, sharing best practice but also critically acknowledging diversity and cultural issues.

During the workshop, a number of invited speakers shared their views from a practitioner and academic perspective and stimulated debate.

Summary of Presentations

On day one of the workshop, [Suzan Lewis](#), Professor of Organisational Psychology at Middlesex University Business School, UK gave the opening address. Suzan discussed her preference for using the term "socially sustainable working" rather than "work-life balance", offering an in depth critique of the discourse around work-

life balance, and dispelling prevalent myths such as that the issue concerns individuals alone. This set the scene for Professor [Lotte Bailyn](#), Professor of Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management, USA who emphasised the importance of the "Dual Agenda": i.e. redesigning work structure and culture in order to enhance both work effectiveness and work-personal life integration -Head of Talent Management at Dell EMEA, Dr [Gene Johnson](#), as, presented data from an internal pilot project conducted by his organisation that aimed to advance remote ways of working. Gene J argued that, although working from home has clear benefits, it is not a panacea for work-life balance as teleworkers tend to spend less time on leisure activities and have less opportunity for mixing with others than resident workers. [Stephen Wood](#), Professor of Management and Director of Research at the School of Management, University of Leicester maintained that the "employer side of work-life balance" has tended to be neglected by researchers. Stephen presented findings from the WERS (workplace employee relations survey) which showed that flexible working practices have a greater positive effect on committed employees than those who are less committed. He also indicated that, whilst the term 'family-friendly' has been criticised, it nevertheless reflects what employers actually do in practice. [Nicola Smith](#), senior Policy Officer in the TUC Economic and Social Affairs Department, represented the Union perspective sharing her views on flexible working. More specifically, Nicola highlighted the significant change in policy and practice relating to flexible working that has occurred in recent years; she also noted that-the new Government has also recognised the importance of improving work-life balance in its recently developed Coalition Agreement.

On day two, Professor [Kaisa Kauppinen](#) from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) discussed Nordic approaches to family-friendly practice. The Nordic approach tends to be characterised by high female labour force participation and increased flexibility of parental leave schemes, which are increasingly targeted at fathers as well as mothers. Kaisa acknowledged, however, that there are signs of a 'system-based glass ceiling' where traditional gender roles prevail in everyday life and long periods of parental/child care leave can have a boomerang effect on women's positions in today's increasingly competitive and globalizing labour market. [Hayley Dunne](#) is a project officer for Chwarae Teg ('fair play!') which is a Welsh charity that advises the Welsh Assembly Government about work-life balance policy. Hayley discussed the Agile Nation Project, which focuses on gender equality in employment, providing women with the opportunity to gain qualifications and their employers with the chance to improve their working practices, specifically relating to work-life balance. Dr Sweta Rajan-Rankin is a lecturer in social policy at the School of Health Sciences and Social Care at Brunel University, UK. She presented data

from her recently completed DPhil thesis exploring emotional labour and work-life balance in Indian call centres.

Key themes from the workshop

The presentations outlined above were interspersed with interactive workshops, where key learning points were developed in smaller groups. Overall, the key messages were:

- 'Work-life balance' may be too narrow a term for redesigning work as effectively as we need to.
- There should be an explicit recognition in organizational practice that workers have a legitimate private life, too, and that performance needs to be measured by outcomes.
- In order to be successful, initiatives need to be developed that the organisational and wider cultural context Although good work-life balance policies are important, they are not in themselves a panacea, as availability is not always matched by uptake.
- If trends such as remote working continue, there are some fundamental questions that should be addressed , such as the impact on families and communities
- The research findings from psychological research need to be integrated in order to become more accessible to various stakeholders - particularly practitioners.

Next steps

Several outputs based on the workshop and other activities are planned by the working group. In between workshop sessions, we conducted interviews with our key speakers. These are currently being written up with a view to using this data to formulate research questions for a systematic literature review. The need for an up to date, state of the art literature review that integrates key issues of interest to employees and employers, researchers and practitioners is widely acknowledged. Work on this review has already begun. We are also developing the outline for an edited book to make psychological evidence and techniques accessible to a wider audience.

Acknowledgements

The organisers are grateful to the Institute of Advanced Studies, the British Psychological Society's Division of Occupational Psychology and the University of Middlesex for their sponsorship.

We would also like to thank the Division of Occupational Psychology, and in particular the chair Antonia Dietmann and the secretary Dr Gene Johnson for their support to fund a three month research internship through the University of Surrey.

Many thanks also to the head of the Psychology Department, Professor Annette Sterr, who is also supporting this initiative.

Our further thanks go to Helen Barnett at the British Psychological Society and Mirela Domic at the Institute for their hands on support with the organisation, Anna Allan for her continued commitment to the group and also our three volunteer stewards on the day.

Finally, a heartfelt thanks to all our presenters who all played their part in making this such a stimulating and refreshing event.

Dr Almuth McDowall

Email: a.mcdowall@surrey.ac.uk

4 October, 2010