
Work - Life Balance of Woman Employees in IT Sector

*Dr. Ramesh Agadi

**Shilapa Arali

INTRODUCTION

Work and family are the two most important domains in a person's life and their interface has been the object of study for researchers world-wide. There is a felt need to balance and integrate family needs and career requirements (Sturges & Guest, 2004) and research in the field of work family interface has increased dramatically in the past two decades (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). The changing social structures arising out of dual career couples, single parent families, an increasing number of parents with dependent care responsibilities for children, and ageing parents have all contributed to increasing research in the area of worklife balance.

In a transitioning society like India, where the traditional roles of women as homemakers and caretakers are deeply entrenched, the work-family balance becomes a challenge for women and their employers. Over the last decade, Indian society has witnessed a surge in the participation of women in the workforce, especially in the software industry. The growing number of women in the Indian IT workforce has led to an increasing interest from academia and practitioners in the topic of worklife balance, specifically of working women in the IT industry. In the light of the increasing number of women in the IT industry, there is a need to examine the phenomenon of the worklife balance of Indian women IT professionals in greater depth.

Organizations are continuously looking for new ways of doing business in order to meet the challenges of today's dynamic business environment. Given the amount of time and energy people expend at the workplace, it is important for employees to be satisfied about their life at work. Time pressure is a serious problem in today's workforce, with ever-increasing numbers of workers bearing major responsibilities at home and meeting higher job expectations and heavier demands at work (Glass & Finley, 2002; Van der Lippe, 2007). A mismatch between family and work roles can be disadvantageous for both employees and employers.

In fact as early as 1960's researchers had begun to study and connect the dots between work and family. Numerous works on work life thereafter proved that what happened in the workplace have significant impact on individuals and their families (Greenhaus & Powell 2006, Kossek & Ozeki, 1998, Lewis & Cooper, 1987). The combination of a fluctuating work environment with competing job and family commitments has negatively affect employees in the form of lowered morale and motivation, reduced productivity, and increased burnout and turnover (Galinsky & Stein, 1990, Benedict & Taylor, 1995). Moreover the inability of employee to balance the equally challenging demands of their work and personal life has contributed to the escalating stress and conflict of today's workforce (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). This in turn leads to significant rise in stress related health problem, which translates to financial cost both to the employer as well as the government (Johnson, Duxbury & Higgins, 1997, Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997).

Jenkins (2000) observes that issues like child rearing, the need to balance multiple roles etc. have consequences on health and family relationships. Securely attached individuals experienced positive spill-over in both work and family. These are pointers that there are gender differences in coping with work family issues. Work based support to women is positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment and career accomplishment.

The work from home concept can lead to greater flexibility and independence, but it can make people work for longer periods of time, including weekends and evenings. Home working could be stressful, if young children have to be managed. Men feel more satisfied when they achieve more on the job even at the cost of ignoring the family. On the other hand, women emphasize that work and family are both equally important and both are the sources of their satisfaction. For them the former is more important. When work does not permit women to take care of their family, they feel unhappy, disappointed and

*Professor of Management, Gulbarga University, Kalaburagi.

**Research Scholar, Department of Studies & Research in Management, Gulbarga University, Kalaburagi

frustrated. They draw tight boundaries between work and family and they do not like one crossing the other.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

In the highly competitive global scenario, society and organizations are filled with conflicting commitment and responsibilities. Hence, work-life balance has become an important issue at workplace. This is further fuelled by the renewed interest in the personal life and family values. Work-life balance is a state of equilibrium in which the demands of both a person's job and personal life are equal. Over the years, there is a growing perception that the quality of an employee's personal life and family life impacts work quality and that it makes business sense to promote work and family integration (Lockwood, 2003). A conflict between work and family has real consequences and negatively affects the quality of family and career attainment of both men and women.

IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among the people, companies, and governments of different nations, a process driven by international trade and investment and aided by information technology. This process has effects on the environment, on culture, on political systems, on economic development and prosperity, and on human physical wellbeing in societies around the world. India has enormous opportunities emerging from globalization and consequent lowering of tariff barriers. Information Technology has given India formidable brand equity in the global markets. Indian BPO companies have a unique distinction of providing efficient business solutions with cost and quality as an advantage by using state of art technology. Through joint efforts of Government and the Industry, software development and IT enabled services have emerged as niche opportunities for India in the global context. The Government has been making continuous efforts to make India a front-runner in the age of Information revolution.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In view of the substantial contribution of the ITES-BPO industry in the global economy, a number of studies have been conducted and documented over the past few years. Srikanth and Tyagi (2007) in their study have placed India at a strategic place in outsourcing market but say that ever growing rate of attrition is a hurdle for this sector. As given by them, an average Indian call center employee works with a company for 11 months where as an average UK call center employee stays in a company for three years. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) emphasized that the working adults learn to build networks of support at home, at work, and in the community. Family- friends firms have a significant impact on the lives and careers of business professionals who work in them (Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000).

Rosabeth Moss Kanter's seminal book (1977), *Work and Family in the United States: A Critical Review and agenda for Research and Policy* brought the issue of work-life balance to the forefront of research in organization. Initially, the issue typically focused on support for women and children. But very soon it came to be considered as less gender specific.

Past research has focused on job satisfaction as well as work-life balance from a dispositional (Arvey, Bouchard, Segal and Abraham, 1989; Ilies and Judge, 2003; Staw and Ross, 1985), situational perspective (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Loher, Noe, Moeller and Fitzgerald, 1985) or inter-actionist perspective. All perspectives have received support in literature.

A study was conducted by Landauer, 1997, with focus on work- life programs with a number of clients (e.g., DuPont, Johnson and Johnson, Hoechst Celanese, IBM and others). At DuPont, for example, employees who used the company's work-life programs were 45% more likely to agree strongly that they will "go the extra mile" and are least likely to feel overwhelmed and burnt out (Landauer, 1997). Work-life balance primarily affects five key areas: employee time saved; employee retention; increased motivation and productivity; absenteeism; and decreased health care costs and stress- related illnesses (Parus, 2000).

Karatepe, Osman, and Mehmet (2006) found that work family conflict increased emotional exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction among the front-line bank employees; this finding is in consonance with past research(Boles et al.1997; Boles and Babin, 1996; Hyman and Summers, 2004; Babakus et al., 1999; Low et al., 2001). Work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion are among the two critical variables that have adverse effects on job outcomes of front-line employees (Babakus et al., 1999,Boles et al., 1997, Netemeyer et al., 2004).

A survey revealed that the pressure on employees to work longer hours under inflexible work schedules is ever increasing (Department of Trade and Industry, 2002). The literature also suggests that lack of balance between work and non-work activities is related to reduce psychological and physical well-being (Sparks et al., 1997; Frone et al., 1997; Thomas and Ganster, 1995; Martens et al., 1999).

A study by Hughes and Bozzoneles (2007) on bus drivers indicated that work-life imbalance was not only a source of concern but also that it was the major source of dissatisfaction for the participants. Furthermore, the participants made a clear connection between problems with work-life balance and withdrawal behaviors, including turnover and no genuine sick absence.

According to Okpara (2004), job satisfaction in the IT sector can be predicted from personal variables, but not all variables contribute to the same degree of satisfaction as in earlier studies (Bigic, 1998; Brief and Aldag, 1975; Weaver, 1977). The findings of this study did not reveal clear gender differences in overall job satisfaction.

Studies related to gender and job satisfaction have reported inconsistent results. Studies indicating higher job satisfaction among women argue that women, compared to men, have lower expectations of the benefits they could receive from the labor market (Clark, 1997). On the other hand, other studies have shown that professional men have more job satisfaction than professional women (Chiu, 1998).

A recent study by Mishra, Chandargi and Hirevenkanagoudar (2007) of agriculture extension officers corroborated this study where the male officers had greater job satisfaction than the female officers. When work does not permit women to take care of their family, they feel frustrated. They draw tighter boundaries between work and family. A study by Valentine (2001) showed men perceive greater job responsibility in comparison to women. Research also shows that younger workers are consistently less satisfied with their jobs than older workers (Hall, 1994; Schultz, 1973).

Sharma (2007) has linked employee retention with a successful marriage. In both the relations it is important to maintain trust and faith, proper communication, feedback and motivation. Batra (2006) has also emphasized upon taking human capital building and sustaining as a major challenge for most of the BPO companies and as per him the solution lies in People Capability Maturity Model (People-CMM) developed by the Software Engineering Institute, USA. There is hardly any research on the different challenges faced by male and female employees with respect to work life balance in Indian call centers.

There is also a dearth of comprehensive studies linking odd working hours and work life balance in IT industry. After a comprehensive review of literature, it was found that there are very few studies which are addressing these very crucial issues pertaining to work life balance in IT industry.

Nature of the software services sector and its impact on the work-life balance

One of the significant changes witnessed in the labour markets in India in the last decade has been the entry of women professionals. The percentages of females in regular employment in urban India, increased from 25.8% in 1983 to 33.3% in 2000 and the labour force participation rates is projected to reach 361 per 1000 females in the year 2026 (McNay, Unni, & Cassen, 2004). In the organized sector, women workers constituted 18.4% as on March 31, 2003, of which about 49.68 lakh (4.96 million) women were employed in the public and private sectors (The Financial Express, 2006). In fact, the largest numbers of women employees are in the IT/ITES sector (Wakhlu, 2008). The 'phenomenon of Indian Women IT professionals is the term used to describe the enormous rise of women in the IT/BPO industry (The Indian programmer, 2000). Women accounted for 26.4% of the total India based workforce in the IT industry in 2007, up from 24% in 2005 and women comprise 25% of the employee strength of the major Indian IT companies (Ali, 2006). Women's participation in the IT workforce is seen as a critical enabling factor for the continued growth of the industry (The Economic Times, 2009).

The software industry in India is characterised by a project-oriented organisation and as the industry has matured, more complex and strategic projects have been outsourced to India. Software professionals are faced with an environment of uncertainty and instability with consequent pressures to work longer hours. This pressure is a result of two factors. First, the time differences with the West, US and Europe, necessitate employees to work at night in India. Furthermore, the concept of a 24-h knowledge factory the evolution of 24-7-365 help desk support requires software engineers to conduct team meetings and virtual work sessions, where team members need to adopt temporal flexibility, a more fluid approach to time whether holding conference calls outside the traditional 8 to 6 workday or fast-tracking a software project in shift. Second is the project based work with unpredictable workloads and the requirement to deliver

projects consistently within the stipulated time and without critical bugs, often involving extensive travel. The project orientation of the industry with rapid technology changes that make skills quickly obsolete requires software professionals to frequently reskill. Consequently, software professionals need to put in extra training and educational hours to keep up with these changes.

Women who aspire to play a bigger role in technology need to maintain a consistently high learning curve. With the constant innovation happening in this arena, it is not enough to be a good worker in the IT industry; one must keep updating technological skills. No other industry sees such significant changes in technology from time to time. The time required for professional development will have to come out of the personal time of the employees. Long working hours, unpredictable workloads and the constant pressure of updating skills all have a strong impact on the work family balance of software professionals.

However, it must be recognized that in Indian society, where a woman's role in relation to herself, her family and society is being redefined, the new and expanded role of women with a strong occupational identity is putting a lot of pressure on women's time and energy. Indeed, balance was one of the commonly cited challenges of IT work in a study on women in IT (Adya, 2008).

In summary, it can be concluded that well educated, highly skilled women software professionals in India have entered a rapidly growing and very demanding sector in which they want to pursue careers. The nature of the industry and the fact that women software professionals are in the crucial phase in their lives, 23-38 years, where women are drawn into marriage and motherhood, puts increasing pressure on maintaining a worklife balance (Perrons, 2003 and Rajalakshmi, 2003).

It is evident that the nature of the sector and the changing aspirations and roles of women in Indian society create challenges for their work family balance, which this study puts under further scrutiny. The present study was designed to explore, document and analyze the factors that influence the work-family balance of women software professionals in India and also to understand the support they receive both in their personal and professional lives.

Worklife balance challenges and strategies

The nature of the IT industry emerged as a general category within the theme of the work family balance challenges, with the majority of women emphasizing that the projects with tight deadlines, extensive travelling and long and/or odd working hours, affected the work family balance. This is consistent with the findings from Teagarden et al.'s (2008) study that identified holding conference calls outside the traditional 8-6 workday or fast-tracking a software project in shifts. Additional working hours were at the expense of home time, while high work intensity or work pressure may result in fatigue, anxiety or other adverse psycho physiological consequences that can affect the quality of home and family life.

Women also had their strategies to cope with the challenges to achieve the work-family balance. This evolved primarily around prioritising commitments and personal self-management. One of the coping mechanisms used by the women IT professionals was to prioritise commitments within the work and family domains, in the short term and the long term. Other women clearly prioritised their families over work and accepted that they would have to put their career aspirations on hold. These strategies enabled the women to achieve their desired work family balance. An emerging category was personal self-management, which appeared to be a strategy to achieve the work family balance. To achieve the work-family balance requires what Ibarra (2004, p. 15) calls 'reinvention': reconsidering not only the kind of work one wants to do but also the kind of person one wants to be and the sacrifices one is prepared to make to grow into that new self.

Organisation policies and practices

Employee morale, satisfaction, and performance are improved among employees who have received work/life programs such as onsite child care, time for elder care, opportunity to study, opportunities for telecommuting as these reduce the level and intensity of stress that employees experience (Bruck, et al., 2002; Harmon, 2001; Garvey, 2001; Gibson et al., 2006). Consequently, organizations are paying more attention to work and personal/family life friendly programs, and are developing other benefits and activities that may help alleviate workplace stress and conflict between work-life. Thompson (2002) classified these work-life initiatives into five (5) categories namely,

- (1) Time-based strategies like flexi-time, telecommuting and job sharing.
- (2) Information-based strategies like relocation assistance, elder care resources, company work/life balance intranet;

- (3) Money-based strategies like leave with pay, scholarships for dependents;
- (4) Direct services like onsite childcare, concierge services and takeout dinners; and
- (5) Culture-change strategies like training or focus on employee's performance not office face time.

Women reported the existence of work-family friendly policies and programmes that facilitated work-family balance: flexitime; work from home policy; leave of absence policy; one month leave a year; maternity leave; childcare facilities and sabbatical. These work-family friendly policies enabled women to attend to dependent care responsibilities, household activities or to pursue higher studies. Policies and programmes that are specifically aimed at enabling women to combine work and personal lives are also labeled as work family friendly policies.

CONCLUDING REMARK

Indian women IT professionals can achieve the work-family balance by setting priorities in their work and personal lives and by having support systems both at work, formally through HR policies and programmes. Work-life programs have the potential to significantly improve employee morale, reduce absenteeism, and retain organizational knowledge particularly during the difficult economic times. In today's global marketplace, as ITES firms aim to reduce cost, it is necessary to understand the critical issue of work-life balance and to champion work-life programs. This would offer a win-win situation for employers and employees.

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